

Bread and Butter

LyNae Golder

It's ten o'clock at night when Nia wakes, again as she does every night, to the loud *pops!* and *bangs!* surrounding the house. When she was a child, the sounds would scare her—are they fireworks? Now, a young woman in her late twenties, she doesn't bother to distinguish the sounds. For her, they're all fireworks. They must be, she thinks as she looks out of the window. Why else do they make the night come alive? Why else do they wake everyone to hear their song?

It's eleven o'clock at night when she stops watching the window and finally gets out of bed. She drags her feet because she knows she'll be up a while; she can't go back to sleep until Zion walks in the door and she knows he's safe. He's a big, strong man, more than able to care for himself, but she still doesn't trust the world with him. He's a tall, dark-skinned man, real good-looking and smart. She hates watching him leave every day to clean in those suburban White neighborhoods, even though she's grateful because it's their bread and butter. Because even though they're free of the colorful fireworks, they're full of silence, which is worse.

It's twelve o'clock in the morning when the pops! and bangs! are at an all-time high. It's almost melodic with its constant rhythm. *Pop! Bang! Bang! Pop! Bang! Bang!* She dances along to the beat as she sweeps the living room floor to keep her mind moving, to keep her from thinking about all the what ifs. What if he didn't use the right smile? What if he gets lost in all the silence? What if he doesn't come home? What if it's like that time a few years back, when he barely outran the White folks harassing him?

It's one o'clock in the morning when she stills her feet and sits in the old rocking chair. It was her father's, before he passed away two and a half years ago from anger and alcoholism and cardiac arrest. As she relaxes in the comfort of the worn leather, she thinks about how he hated Zion. He wanted her to marry a White man, so that her future kids would have White names and the privilege of a White future. She thinks about how wrong that was. He didn't respect that Zion grew up in a poor neighborhood just like her and was raised by a single mother, nor did he respect that Zion was a genuine, good man. She smiles. Zion's everything she wants and more. He may not work a white-collar job, but he's incredibly kind and makes sure she's taken care of.

It's two o'clock in the morning when Zion walks in. The fireworks have died down to a hum. Having napped beforehand, Nia's wide awake to greet him. He's tired and sweaty, his clothes dirtied from hours of scrubbing the floors and baseboards on his hands and knees. She rushes toward the door and pulls him in for a hug. "Welcome home, Zi, how're you?" she asks, and with a smile, he says, "I'm happy to see you."

“The fireworks have been keeping me company.”

“They’re not fireworks, Nia. You know that.”

“I know,” she says, “but a woman can pretend.”

He puts his arm around her and leads her toward the bedroom. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”