

Bulb

By Sruti Islam

At three-thirty a.m., the employees of Bulb huddled together in a dimly lit, otherwise empty basement. Janine stood with her shoulders slumped over the bar with a glass of wine from the bar's second-to-cheapest label. Soft light from a set of scattered candles continued to set the mood of the room. Janine had ended up at the bar that evening on a whim, after a starter vodka shot and concurrent drinks turned her into the kind of person that says, "Sure." Then, at one a.m., in the middle of closing up, someone asked, "Want to stick around?"

The bar was filled with a smokey gray cloud, its employees filled the seats at a semi-circle table and, with the cover of velvet curtains, indulged in after-hours illegal indoor smokes. Janine's conversation style had expanded from small talk with a mutual acquaintance at the start of the night to include a variety of in-depth conversations with the rest of the staff cohort, ultimately culminating in a pronounced desire to dance. When one of the bartenders had invited Janine out to their after-after night, her exuberant response came with the expectation that they were heading to a new place, surely this one with a DJ. Her disappointment never got time to settle, however. As Janine entered the dark, quiet basement room, she quickly became excited by the allure of a prohibition era-level experience—drinking with strangers in an otherwise closed bar.

Given that these were the sum of the factors that brought these people together, Janine was not really sure who she was hanging out with. Keenan, sitting next to her, seemed okay.

“My dad was a jazz musician,” Keenan said, nodding, before sipping on his next cigarette of the night.

“That’s sooo cool,” Janine responded. “Jazz is wild.”

“Yeah, you like jazz?”

“Like, beginner,” she warned bashfully, “but I totally think it’s wild.”

“Ha, beginner?” Keenan’s demeanour shifted. His lips curled, amused.

“You know, like, I’m not a real jazz *person*, like, I don’t know the things, but I played piano in high school, like, briefly,” Janine stumbled out. Were words starting to slur, she wondered.

“That’s cool,” Keenan nodded again, “playing an instrument is cool. I don’t know how to play anything,” Keenan mused.

Janine took a sip of her wine and said, “I barely remember any of it now. It’s not worth anything if you don’t practice.”

Suddenly, a pair of quick hands distributed shot glasses and began to pour glugs of vodka accordingly.

“Oh, wow, yeah, okay,” Janine said in response.

Then, suddenly, from across the bar, a voice belted out: “You’re fucked. You’re totally fucked.” The slurred speech in the surrounding bar began to dip down to a murmur, until there was total silence. All eyes were drawn to the source of a deep and appalled voice, sitting next to a very beautiful girl who blushed at the attention. She carried herself with a perfect poise that suggested that she was the kind of woman normally comfortable with attention, good attention, at least—the kind of attention that cushioned her beauty privilege. Yet, the blood rushing to her cheeks at that moment meant she was now squirming before an unintended audience. This time,

the attention directed towards her stung with disdain and shame. The source of the voice was a man of South-East Asian descent sitting next to her, fuming. He was the one insisting she was totally fucked.

The girl gulped, kept her eyes to the counter and said, “Look... I’m sorry... if I... offended you, or something... that was not my intent...” The man scoffed. The girl sighed. “All I’m saying is that a Black man still doesn’t have to be a woman, and like, so he’ll never know, you know... about the female experience, he just, like, can’t know. Maybe, you know, if he... they... are gender fluid, then ya, like, maybe, but it’s just, like...”

There hung a pause. The longer people ruminated on her words, the more the tension grew. The bar’s patrons sat in their discomfort, now scared of what had felt, a matter of minutes ago, like a safe environment. All the while, Pradeep was still fuming.

“I cannot believe you, I just cannot believe,” he said, “...that you are... literally... putting down the experience of the Black man with all the privilege you carry and everything—it’s so, ugh.”

“I’m not trying to do anything like that!” the girl insisted. “I’m just saying that we talk about race all the time, but things are gendered, too! As, like, an Asian woman, I *think* I have the right—”

Another scoff from Pradeep.

Janine, brutally aware of the paleness of her skin, squirmed, and whispered into Keenan’s ear. “This is killing my viiiiibe.” Keenan snorted, attempting to hold back a giggle.

Everyone in this room was either high or drunk, or both.

Pradeep shot a look directly at Keenan, forced a laugh on his end, and then said, “No, you’re right, man. This stuff is laughable.” Suddenly, all eyes were on Keenan.

“Oh, no, no, sorry, that was not about, um...” Keenan nervously sputtered. Everyone in the bar was looking to Keenan, the only Black man in the place, with a shadow of unwarranted concern on their faces, their eyes suddenly filled with the expectation that he, given the colour of his skin, taken with the gender he identified with, would surely say the right thing in this situation, and unequivocally resolve the mounting tension in the room. Keenan knew this look.

“Okay... let’s just keep the night moving, maybe? Janine was just saying that this was, like, tense-seeming, and maybe drunk at a bar after hours isn’t, like, the best time to talk about gender and racial dynamics, you know?”

Keenan watched as disappointment fell over everyone’s faces. This had not been what they wanted to hear. They had wanted Keenan to educate everyone on the perils of gender essentialism and the significance of colourism. They had wanted Keenan to find a way to heal them of their moral impurities. They wanted his recognition, his forgiveness, he was their priest and they were ready to be absolved of their sins. Instead, all he had offered was a metaphorical shrug.

At that moment, Janine empathized with Keenan. She watched as his coworkers insisted he stand on a pedestal, and forced him to sober back to reality. This upset her. They were killing his buzz, she decided. Annoyed on behalf of them both, Janine stood up and proclaimed, “I’m going for a smoke!” She had expected more of a reaction to this, but then remembered nearly everyone in the bar, including herself, was already pulling on a cigarette. “Like, a fresh air smoke thing!” she said. She slipped off her coat from the back of her chair, shot Keenan a look, and then

headed towards the door. The room remained silent, and the palpable unease slowly morphed into yet another elongated awkward pause. Janine scraped along the sides of everyone else's jackets as she squeezed her way towards the exit. Keenan quickly followed her out, shrugging to the crowd, and earnestly waving a nearly empty pack of cigarettes in the air.

Janine pushed the heavy brass door at the back of the bar open, and was immediately met with the sting of the Canadian winter wind. Relieved to see Keenan had followed after her, she watched him shut the door behind him, and then, after locking eyes once more, the two burst into laughter.

"I'm sorry, man," Janine shook her head. Keenan laughed.

"No, no, it's fine," Keenan said. "Thank you for the exit, hahaha."

Janine tugged on her cigarette and nodded.

"I have no idea what they were talking about, by the way," Keenan said.

"Oh, I have no idea. Both of them might legit be smarter than me, you know, I just... literally, they were just so... ugh...."

Keenan nodded. "Bitch, don't kill my vibe" he sang.

"Exactly!" Janine responded. "Like, can we just not right now." She inhaled another puff of smoke and then shot an earnest look at Keenan, "Not that I know anything, I'm white. You know, I'm not saying—"

"Dude, dude, don't start," Keenan chided.

"Right, sorry, I'm just saying I'm not *insensitive*, I'm just, like..."

"Very drunk and very stoned?" Keenan offered.

“Yes. Very much yes.” Janine broke into a wide grin and fluttered her lashes to match. It was at this moment that Keenan decided that he was quite fond of the dark smudge and glitter around Janine’s eyes. It was pretty. This realization tugged at Keenan, and the softness under his jeans began to harden.

“Yeah, I’m not going back in there,” he said.

“Yeah, no, me neither,” Janine confirmed.

“Not like we can move bars, though, nothing’s exactly open.”

“Ugh, yeah.”

Janine was still very drunk, and the buzz that had so appallingly been disrupted just a short moment ago was quickly resurfacing. She remembered she had whiskey and an apartment, which, it turned out, was really not far at all. Janine expressed this to Keenan, which seemed to startle him, or so she thought. Was it really such a bold offer, she wondered—that is, between two people having a drunk smoke on an empty street in the middle of the night. In this particular context, was it really so bold? In fact, Keenan, a bartender, was not remotely startled by the proposition to drink *more* after a night of drinking, but was instead displaying the age-old surprise of a heterosexual man. Despite his pervasive belief in the meekness of his gender, here was the opposite sex, offering him the opportunity to further captivate his attention.

“Yeah, sure, why not!” Keenan eventually fumbled out. Janine lead them through the streets, the conversation naturally ebbing back to the theme of jazz, and away from the tense energy of the bar. They were both glad to leave it behind. Janine felt sorry for Keenan, he had no choice but to eventually return to the very same room in the eventual light of day—it was his

workplace after all. Janine felt the relief of knowing she would never see those people again. Or privilege, she briefly pondered.

By the time they stumbled into her small, cozy and totally unaffordable apartment, the two found themselves back on route to their original high, having smoked another joint along the way. Keenan maintained the respectful distance one does when entering a stranger's home, taking off his shoes, eyeing where best to leave his jacket, while Janine, in the comfort of her own home, kicked off her boots, ran straight towards the half empty bottle of whiskey, found two glasses, and guided them both to the couch.

"Nice place," Keenan said as he took a seat.

Janine responded by climbing on top of him. Keenan immediately stiffened. She smiled her smile again, leaned her body into his, grazing his face with her fingers, and leaned in for a kiss. First light, sentimental, then wet with expectation. Here, Keenan felt himself relax, sinking his body into hers as she did the same, and gliding his hands towards her behind. Together, they built a mutual appetite. He wanted her just as much as she wanted him, or was it possible, Keenan wondered, that he detected more excitement on her end? She was so hot, though. He unzipped her jeans, and slipped his hands in, feeling the confirmation of wetness. She moaned.

Soon he was unclasping her bra and she was pulling down his underwear. She stared, and then said, "I love it." And just like that, Keenan knew he was not the first Black man she had been with, and that part of her wetness was in fact directly related to the conversations they had both giddily left behind at the bar. She loved it. He could have cared less. Her breasts were perfect, her nipples a beautiful shade darker than the backdrop of her skin, and then suddenly he was in her mouth. It was fine. It was good, even, very good.