


SONGBOY



andriniki  
mattis





He was quiet as a corpse. I wouldn't say Carlyle was an asshole. He just radiated this constant ennui, endearing as it was disturbing. He was the kind of pretty that men were not supposed to be. His honey eyes rested on me as his hands laced mine, our skin brown loaves touching, as we waited for the traffic light to change at Broadway and Prince Street. I rolled down the tinted windows of the creamsicle-orange Porsche, and my cigarette ashes fell into the summer streets. I clasped his chin with my pink acrylics. My cherry-red lips glowed as his lips looked for mine, and together, there was peace.

"Luke's coming by. He said he's got something major to show me," said Carlyle, his Cartier watch gleaming as he turned the steering wheel.

"He's always talking about some cryptic shit. Why are you still talking to this dude?" I said, looking into the car's vanity mirror. "I don't care if you've known him since grade school. That white boy is sus as fuck. All you are to him is a token."


"Look, it'll be real quick, Zoe," said Carlyle, holding his silence, a signature of his apathy.


"You're lucky. Today was a spa day," I said.

I wouldn't say it was easy for him, like the wind to a wheel fast and sudden, a drop of water turning to

mist. Carlyle was always attentive with his words and time. He was always there, then suddenly he wasn't. It wasn't that he had forgotten something. It was the maddening loss he endured. His parents and twin sister went to the south of France and never came home. The stars of his world, the constellations of his life, violently ripped out of the sky. He drowned himself in a music obsession fueled by time-distorting pain and masochistic perfection. He was known for his rituals always set in concrete: Thursday 4pm tennis at the sports club, Saturday and Sunday fencing, and a couple of hours a day blazing through his jazz collection listening to Coltrane bend time like nostalgia. The last thing he shared with his father was a love of Floyd River. His father had given him a signed limited-edition record of Floyd River's first EP. Floyd had a voice that crooned and swayed in and out of lust and heartbreak. River being an openly Black queer artist meant everything to him.

Every day was planned 'til I ruptured his pattern. His time in the studio was endless, never allowing more than a producer in with him. Music was a salve. It filled the well of his body.





We entered Carlyle's Soho condo, a sleek and seductively clean loft apartment with charcoal and navy hues, glistening hardwood floors, and exposed brick. From the floor to the ceiling lived an awe-inspiring record collection, offset by enchanting sun-lit oak bookshelves. He was wealthy in ways that can't be quantified. The numbers skewed themselves into a delusional amount of power. His grandfather had crafted a patent to make cars safer, by using a life-changing method that forever altered the use of seatbelts and earned him millions of dollars, all bestowed to Carlyle.

Luke arrived, dressed as a Supreme poster boy with his ever-present California tan and prickly blue eyes, an electric drug-induced portal. He went from coast to coast monthly.

"You know how Floyd River lost his hard drives a while back? What if I were to tell you they found their way to me?" said Luke, while he slowly emptied his duffel bag onto the courtroom-brown leather couch.

"Who did you rob or fuck for this, or fuck over? I'm not getting wrapped up in this," I said.

"Well, we've got to give it a listen. Go ahead," said Carlyle.


Luke pulled out his laptop, and the song began. A river entered the room with each swell of River's voice slung against a tunnel of bass hitting the wall. We were stunned. Even Carlyle, who had a statuesque mold for a face, now revealed a look as bewildered as an open sky. Floyd River's inimitable falsetto, the flows and valleys of his trademark sound, a blown fuse quieting the room. Carlyle and I shared a love of Floyd River. His sad-boy crooning over electronic melodies. Piercingly smooth vocals with sublime lyrics, each line opening and closing a book, part manifesto, part movie, all-Black glory, and melancholy hand-in-hand. He was a fame-averse singer, which made him and his music all the more precious and alluring. Floyd had a voice that swayed in and out of lust and heartbreak.


To think about what we now possessed as "priceless" would not be indulging in sarcasm. Any lie was more believable.

"This stays behind closed doors," said Luke.

"Name your price," said Carlyle, as he stood from the granite kitchen island, pouring whiskey on the rocks.

Instinctively, I secretly turned the recorder on my phone while the sounds of Floyd River lingered in the background.





Luke and Carlyle sat across from each other, ready for chess. I knew this was way bigger than us. The hard drives were, to some, worth more than our lives. My mind raced, leapt, and dived through the reality of it. I knew this was a secret too big for me to carry without it crushing my neck. So, when I got a text from Amari, I knew it was time to go.

“200k, and I won’t press you for the details of how this happened into your hands,” said Carlyle.

“You think I don’t know how much it’s worth, regardless of how it came into my hands? Don’t waste my time: a million, and it’s yours,” Luke replied.

“Alright. Done,” said Carlyle. I gather my bags.

“I’m out, Carlyle,” I said. The last thing I wanted was to be caught up in the murkiness of the exchange, like a slug stuck in its slime. I clutched the shoulder of my patent leather Telfar bag and walked towards the door. My heels piked the floor with my nerves. I left with the entire recording.

“You just got here, but alright,” said Carlyle, his voice trailing out the door.


I pulled out from the parking lot and headed to my Bedstuy brownstone. The cool night breeze dried the weariness out of my eyes. My apartment


was jarringly in place: it felt like something had shifted. I had changed. The secret I held made a new me. My home was foreign. I tried to weed through the white noise in my head. Should I intervene? Floyd River would want to know where his hard drives were. What good were they solely as a pawn of ego in the hands of Carlyle or anyone but Floyd River?

“Hey Zoe!” yelled Amari, his muscles gleaming copper in a canary yellow tank top, stretching every vowel of my name, hollering from outside my front-facing window: a gift, and a curse.

“Sure, tell everyone on the block my name. It’s cool, don’t worry about it,” I said dryly, the sarcasm biting at my throat sharp as ginger.

Amari kept the clock in my head moving, a power I would sometimes try to rescind. I would hold his head close, tick-tocking to the rhythm of my being. The music we made together surpassed our bodies. Time begged me to think of my life in two chunks: before Amari, and with him. On the days without him, my stomach would knot and open with want, striking a match between my legs; I shut the fire often with chocolate melting on my tongue. My love for Amari was an anti-gravity pull roping me





out of my once deeply boundaried and meticulously planned life of independence. He became a star up close, my sun in every storm that life brewed. The death of my brother, his body blued from the violent end of a rain of bullets as he screamed of fire, how his death trampled the sunshine out of every day. Amari brought the stars back, brought the stars to the front of the room, and held the sun up in his ivory-white smile. My eyes were the only thing he found worth looking at in any room.

I threw my keys down to him below. He let himself in and pulled me into a bear hug and a swift kiss once inside, his guitar strapped to his back. I always felt like what I had with Amari was so tender and light, my body giving way to the cushion of his love, grounding me, holding my body like goose feathers.


We met at AfroPunk a couple of years back and fell in love casually, the way a season shifts right before your eyes, slow and steadfast, then fast as a flicker of light. He lived a few blocks away from me, and soon weekend plans turned into weekly dates. Our love of music kept us up late at night. We would talk about the moments of perfection of our favorite songs and the ripple effect of '90s pop to


contemporary sound. Amari and Carlyle both knew I had an aversion to monogamy, that I didn't want to be tied down to anyone, and that the conditioned motherly itch was not an itch for me. I loved kids, but from a distance. I enjoyed being the cool aunt to my brother's children, filling my heart with all the youthful energy I needed in my life. Amari and Carlyle had to be cool with the other or find the door, because I would not bend to any other arrangement between the two.

"Amari, Amari, you know I want to work on this EP, so don't distract me," I said with a smirk. "I've got this song that needs a hook with a bigger bite." We fell into a jam session and a bottle of Pinot. We talked about the best chord progressions 'til I found him striking the chords of my desire. His lips buttered my mouth, and his hands reached for the softest parts of me. I fell into my bed, and he bloomed into me, the petals of each moan leaving my mouth.

"Can you keep a secret?" I said as I folded my body into his warmth, the bed moist with excitement.

"Sure, must be big with that grin of yours," he said as he gripped his beard.





“Floyd River has a hard drive of lost music, a whole album, and tracks that were never found or released. It turns out Carlyle was able to get his hands on it,” I said.

“Floyd River? Ok, that wine hit you hard, huh?” he said, letting out a two-toned riotous laugh.

“No, stop. I’m serious. Carlyle has it at his place in his studio! I even have a recording of it on my phone. Listen.”

I reached for my phone, and we listened to the first twenty minutes of Carlyle negotiating and then playing the albums.


“You have any idea how much it’s worth? That million-dollar exchange doesn’t cut it. What do you think he plans on doing with it?” said Amari. I nodded off silently into his arms.


I used to think the best part of a song was like the eye of a hurricane, the calm building from the inside of destruction, a simple peace peering in and out of danger. That’s what I’ve always wanted my songs to do: confess what relief looks like in the middle of a storm. That’s the music Amari and I make with each other, a compromise to the wind of land forced to disown us, never to bear our names. In each song, a

tremor I cry out from inside an immense dream that did not factor us in, a consequence I know of America, the second layer of skin disowning the first, how America loves my capital, my labor, but not me. The story of every Black person ends in the same scene, without any agency. I learned at an early age the truth doesn’t always get you what you want, but it gets you to where you need to be. I’ve always been a dancer. I’ve always known how to work the arena of eyes vying for my attention. I know what it is to be a story left to be discovered, hiding in plain sight. How easy it is to succumb to this contract that America hopes to cling to my skin and my being, that I will not lie down for. I will never be the wounded animal this country hopes to make me.

I am up before the sun. I wake to the sound of construction slicing the air outside my window. Amari no longer beside me, I head to the kitchen to brew coffee and find a flimsy note on the fridge. It reads, “Sorry, had to run. See you soon. Love, Amari.”

The next day, I text my college friend Araceli, a reporter, telling her I have a story she needs to know about.





“I don’t know what to do. I’m unsure if leaking it is right,” I tell her. We are seated in the corner of a rooftop bar in Union Square.

“What you’ve got on your hands is huge: Floyd River’s unreleased music!”

“Let me play you a bit of the recording,” I say, as I pull my phone out and rest it softly on the table like a precious glass. We lean in together closely, to hear it over the chatter and thrumming music in the bar.

“I don’t have it. I know who does, but that’s all I can tell you for now.”

“No need to worry: this will stay between you and me. Pleaseeeee, keep me posted on whether or not you’re willing to come forward,” Araceli replies.

It is a summer night, and the city is a live wire, sparks of people moving through the night with an urgency only the streets of Manhattan can provide. I make my way to the train to go home. A woman hums to herself, standing before Whole Foods at Union Square. A constant stream of people flows in and out of the store. The woman is singing a Floyd River song. “Why, why, why,” she says. My phone buzzes in my pocket with a new alert that reads:


“Floyd River, 33, dies of an aneurysm at his Los Angeles home; a community of fans mourn.”

“Holy shit!” I exclaim uncontrollably, as all the air leaves my body. I immediately call Carlyle. “Did you hear about it?”

“I know. It’s nonstop on my feed.”

“I can’t,” I say.

“Come over. I’ll put on a rerun and make a little chantilly cake for us and Floyd,” he says.





## CARLYLE

Zoe arrives at my door in her disappear-me outfit of black, her hoodie cresting her unruly brown fro. I find her eyes and kiss away the steel frosting over her insides. I love her like the sun loves the trees and the planets, like the animals who hide for seasons and eat sleep. She hugs me tightly and folds into the arches of my body. I am wearing the peach apron she bought me the weekend after we said our first “I love you,” with my name embroidered in green calligraphy. I return to the mixer.

The sound pounds the room, and a bit of cream flies out onto the creak of my neck. Zoe creeps up behind me. I feel her body power over me. Her want hits me like lead from the back. She licks the cream from my neck. I moan a gasp from the surprise of it all. My body clenches like one big muscle. She cups my ass and squeezes, then presses my back down over the sink and slips her hand into the back of my black Calvins. She slips the guns of her fingers into me. I squirm. She motions me to sit on the kitchen stool. I obey. She sucks me like a lid. I lose the earth below my feet. I regain my breath and smooth my mind, brushing the palm of my hand across my

spiky, cropped haircut. I lead Zoe’s hand into mine, pull her into my arms, tilt her off the ground, and gently carry her to the bedroom.

“Carlyle,” she says in a breathy giggle, hooking her hand into my traps and rubbing each curvature. I lay her softly on the black sheets.

“I love it when you take control,” she says, falling onto the bed playfully.


“Is this okay?” I ask, as she unzips her hoodie. I reach for the edges of her snug black crop top, and she enthusiastically pulls it over her head.

“Yes, cutie,” she answers, smiling seductively. I kiss her at the warmest parts of her body. She lies back. I tease her legs open and reach for the lace around her waist.


“Is this okay?”

She nods deeply. I make use of my mouth and fingers. She thanks me with a staccato of gasps and jolts her body till she crumbles into pieces on the bed. We fall back against the walnut Japanese platform bed. She cozies up to the crook of my underarms and leans in, savoring the smell.

“Nice pheromones,” she says, cheeky. A silence passes between us.







We remember Floyd River is gone. The air in the room hangs heavy with our chewed-up grief.

“This is what the best artists do, right? Die young,” I say, the blistered words leaving my mouth.

I think of my battles with mortality, the depression always looming over my head like a lattice of cobwebs. I lay in the spider’s web of grief, always there parallel to the living, exhaling spurts of joy I find on my days with Zoe, on days blending my emotions over a drum beat in my studio, or sober, losing my body on the dancefloor. Sometimes, I sweat out the doom in my bloodstream by aggressively running on a treadmill, or around blocks and blocks of concrete, or carrying my body like a lamb to dampen the violence painted onto me, my Blackness always a threat to someone somewhere. On the days I find it hard to surface, to leave the convenience of my apartment, my blues a heavy tarp around my neck, I think of my parents and their doomed end. What have I known more intimately than loss, my closest enemy, my masochistic teacher, who made me his captive, his wind-up doll, so many days pasted to my bed, ugly crying, hiding from the sun, running in circles while standing in place, wondering if the grief would ever subside

and realizing it was a new skin I would always carry with me, a waxen exterior I could not hide.

“What’s it even worth, snatched from the world like loose threads unraveling a shirt?” I ask.

“You know you don’t have to be alone in this,” she said.

“Alone in what?”

“This life.”


“You know what it’s like, Zoe: your brother, my sister, your parents.”


“But we’re in this together, right? You won’t leave me hangin’ with all that stardust in your mouth,” she said.

“I just want to hole up and become a monk and not say another word, keep my words to myself, and just be.” I hang my head. “And then times, I want to just bang loose the keys of my piano with sound or shoot a silent movie on 35mm walking through Central Park, Greenwood Cemetery, or Paris along the River Seine in the 11th.” I thrust the life back into my body.

“What’s keeping you?” she said.

I look off into the blank wide open of my room and become still and silent as the black leopard print wallpaper of my accented wall.





“What keeps you? Keeps your soul?” I ask her back.

“I want to make music that drips with joy and melancholy, the terrains of an out-of-body experience standing still; not for the likes, but to cast a net into this wonky-ass void of existence we were thrust into,” she replies, softly.

I rise with the sun peeling through the loft windows. Zoe lies sweet and plump with brightness like a stone fruit I have devoured, leaving my mouth dripping. I wake up wishing more days were like this. The sun within reach, and life iridescent with possibility. How strange it is to have Floyd River’s music. He will never have a say in where it goes. I know it needs to be shared with the world, or at least given the light he may have wanted it to have.

I walk over to the ebony chest of drawers to pull my duffle bag out, but it’s missing. I tear the room apart for what feels like hours.


“Fuck,” I mutter slowly under my breath, becoming louder and louder each time I fumble through emotions. Disbelief takes over.


“No fucking way,” I murmur, growing red inside and out.

Zoe lifts from her slumber, and the words

“What’s wrong?” flutter out her mouth as she yawns, her brown eyes half open.

“I don’t know where the hard drives are. I woke up, and they were gone.” I say, my voice trembling with disbelief. I fall to my knees and sob for everything that has become too heavy to hold and the people I will never hold again: my sister who was taken from her youth, my parents who never saw me age into my adulthood, every inch of this life that I have been hoodwinked to believe would be easy because of my bank account, my degrees of separation, or my degrees framed on the wall alongside the degrees of my dead parents. I emerge from my grief, a hermit crab naked without its shell. Why, why, why. Zoe comforts me and holds the man frail with loss that I have become. The grief hurts my stomach and chokes the water from my eyes. I fall into the timeless void of sadness, the colors of the day all one gray hue. I can’t help but feel blue.





AMARI  
(18 hours earlier)

It is morning. My brain finally quiets down as I strike up a plan for today. The sun is oppressive as my Nikes hit the steps outside Zoe's building. Thoughts of Floyd River's hard drives with Carlyle disrupt me. I love Zoe more than rap loves black people. I love her in ways that are intergalactic. Sometimes I am the sun, and sometimes she is the moon, our love a complementary hue. Her laughter pulls me into an endless spiral of adoration. She has freed me into the person I have always aspired to be. Her eyes trick me into love like a lullaby, a pop song in the summer, calling my body to rejoice and hold happiness in each vessel under my skin. I leave before she wakes because there is a weight on me that I must part from, a sea bringing me to my knees.

I enter the sports club, racket in hand. There are two courts, and there are four middle-aged white men playing tennis on one of them. I see him in the corner of the next court, his body glossy with sweat. He is bulky from every angle. His shorts are shorter than most would go for, in a pastel pink hue paired with a white Lacoste polo shirt. He is

stretching his quads. I know it's him immediately. It's not hard to decipher his look of poise and entitlement, and his thick chain gleaming in its golden shine. I strike up a conversation with him.

"I hope I'm not interrupting. I noticed your immaculate stretches. Would you mind showing me?"

"Sure, man," he says, as he bent down to tie his tennis shoes. I notice his glutes, firm and plump like two small moons. He catches my eyes lingering. I glance over him as he rises.

"So, you wanna make sure your knees are softening the blow on your calves," he says.

"I've been feeling the pain right here," I said as I put pressure on the underside of my calves. "Let me show you," I say, and grasp his.

We begin to do squats side by side.

"How about a quick game?" I suggest.


"Sure, I'll serve." He moves swiftly to the opposite end of the court.

We finish a rousing game, and he beats me thoroughly with a score of six love.

"Good game," I say, as we shake hands softly. "I need a drink! How about I buy you a beer? A thanks for the workout."

"I live not too far from here. Why don't you





come over? We can have drinks there.” I lean into him, and we speak so closely that I taste the peppermint heat of his breath. I give him a swift wink and make my intentions clear.

After exiting the locker room, we walk to his apartment, and he puts on his sunglasses immediately. I see his bad boy antics. He has the swag of a true native New Yorker. I can’t read him as well in the sun. The heat is a bitter pill we must swallow. His apartment is lavish as he is handsome and well-suited. He offers me a drink. “I’ll have what you’re having,” I answer, our eyes locking and holding the air between us. I join him on the handsome couch.

“Fuck, forgot it’s shot day. I’ll be back,” he says. He returns with his shirt hanging half off his body. I notice the scars below his pecs. “Just my weekly t-shot. The transition never ends,” he chuckles.

I give him a gentle nudge on the shoulder with my fist. He nudges back, and we wrestle the heat between us, and it grows like a fire. We have fallen into a stalemate. He notices the excitement has spread to the seat of my pants. He grins, and soon, our lips meet with an urgency reserved for only a few. He is a cavern I have mined. Our moans battle the other. He rolls over and lies on the couch, face-up, his face so moist he is glowing.

“I’m beat!” he says, tucking himself into the couch. I grab my drink and find my way to the bathroom. I return to the living room, and he is fallen on the sofa. I see why Zoe is so fond of him. Carlyle’s routines are as precise as a carpenter’s hands. Every week, he is on the court at the same time. I use the opportunity to enter his studio while he sleeps, and there it is. I find the hard drives sitting on the chair, which I toss into my backpack. I move through the condo furtively until I walk outside to my caramel-brown two-door car.

