

THE FOOT

Jennifer I. Oliver

Man, I tell you this is a crazy place full of crazy people. Speaking of crazy, let me tell you what happened on May 1st. Clay Ray Morris went home for lunch about noon, and, Lord, what a mornin'! You see, Clay had gotten this posh job on the Avenue at Saks Fifth as a shoe department manager. Now Saks ain't Payless. We're talking quality shoes for high-class folks who have the bucks to pay. Clay dressed the part to the hilt. Today, he had on a gray pinstriped, double-breasted suit with a saucy maroon tie. He polished off the outfit with gray suede loafers. Man, Clay was sharp! His hair was cut low and fine, his black mustache nicely trimmed. He looked so good, you almost forgot he was just another street boy on the weekends.

There were rich witches flying in on their gold-plated broomsticks, and Clay was the only man on the floor that morning. His last customer before he booked was this obese Jewish lady, about 4 feet 11 inches, who had to top the 300-pound mark. She toddled off the elevator in a floor-length black mink and huffed her way into the shoe department. Clay knew she was trouble the minute she walked in. If there was one thing he could not stand it was a fat woman. They were always a bad omen, and this one took the prize.

After she squeezed (and I use the word in the fullest sense) into the chair, she demanded to see the newest and most expensive line of pumps in snake.

"What size, madam?" Clay asked in his suave, charming manner. She hissed out a size and flicked her diamond-bedecked hand at him to shoo him off to his duty.

"Cow!" Clay whispered under his breath as he walked back into the storeroom. He came out with a stack of the best snake imaginable and knelt down to help the lady off with her shoes. She had slithered out of her mink and sat there in a mint green dress, her gray-blond hair (bleached of course) pulled into a bun that emphasized her four chins. She eyed Clay like a cockroach she wanted to stomp and uttered not a word as Clay helped her into a nice blue gator. Her big toe barely made it in, but she grunted and pushed as if she knew she was gonna get into this baby.

"Uh, madam, maybe you should try a larger size," Clay suggested (I might add quite nicely).

"It's the style, I know what size I wear. You just do your job! Get me another style," she hissed again and flicked her rocks at him. Clay wanted to bite every finger off and spit the diamonds in her face, but that was Clay baby, cool to the end. After the third pair with no success, the woman finally decided to try a larger size. She gave a gigantic push. Clay was afraid she would fall out of the chair. But after two pushes she squeezed into a size eight, the fat on top of her foot sticking out over the edge.

"I'll take these," she hissed, huffing a little from exerting all that energy. Clay didn't bother to ask whether she wanted the shoes wrapped; he quickly put the pair she came in with in the box and rushed to the counter to ring the shoes up. When he got behind the counter, his assistant had just arrived. Clay had had about enough and booked.

When the boy hit the drive he felt about ten tons lighter and was in a hurry to

get home. You see, his sister, Dee, was cooking up some collard greens and hog mauls, Clay's favorite dish. After he parked in the driveway he hurried toward the house, in the mood to dine. His keys jingled in the lock as he opened the front door. His senses were immediately assailed by the smell of the aforementioned dish and the sound of the radio playing the noon "hot mix" on 'JPC. He followed the smell down the carpeted hallway that doubled as a picture gallery, then turned left into the kitchen.

He almost collided with Dee gyrating to the beat of the music. Her head and butt moved in about five different directions, her dark hair flying in her face. There were only two words to describe Dee, SHORT and FAT. Clay watched her strut across the floor with a dishtowel twirling above her head and almost lost his appetite. Before he did, he quickly walked over to the stove, took the soup ladle off the counter and dove into the bubbling black pot with hungry relish. Dee, her spasms finished, thrust a bowl and spoon in his face as he proceeded to eat directly from the pot.

"Don't be sick, man!" she berated him. "Eat like decent folk." There she goes again. He wanted to throw a ladle full of greens in her face. Instead, he snatched the bowl from her hand and scooped a generous portion of greens into it. Spotting a humongous piece of hog covered with greens, Clay scooped it out. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed adoringly, then slid it into the bowl, bundled contentedly over to the table, and plopped in his chair. Dee looked on in disgust as he drooled into the bowl and stuck one finger in to sample the juice. The boy was ready to dig in and take a plug out of that prize pork piece when he looked at it and saw a touch of red at the tip.

"Ain't nothin' worse than a half-cooked piece of poak!" he yelled over his shoulder while he scraped the greens off the meat with his spoon.

"You tryin' to knock my cookin', boy?" Dee yelled as she peered into the refrigerator. Clay knew better than to rile Dee about her cooking, but we'll chalk that up to his bad morning. The look on Clay's face changed from distaste to puzzlement and from puzzlement to horror as the tip of what he thought was a hog piece began to look more like a big toe. With his thumb and index finger he pulled the meat into full view.

"My God! It's a foot!" he whispered as he stood up, mouth wide as a hooked fish.

"Clay? You never did answer me!" Dee yelled from inside the refrigerator. She came out butt first and turned to face him with a plate in her hand.

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!!!" she screamed, and dropped the plate. Clay, startled by the scream, dropped the foot at the same time the plate shattered on the floor. The foot hit the bowl and toppled its contents all over the table.

"You, you, you sickie! You scuzzbag! You vermin! I knew this would happen, all those pictures of women's feet on your wall. Scuzz! I hate your guts!" Dee yelled at Clay, her voice getting louder at every word.

Clay plopped down into his chair and scratched his scalp, totally dumbfounded. Green juice dribbled over the side of the table and soaked into his gray suede shoes. The foot sat there in the middle of the table and dripped and congealed with the rest of the mess. It looked half cooked, Clay thought, as he stared at the brightly painted toenails. A minute diamond and gold ring was on the baby toe. Clay recognized immediately who the foot belonged to—that fabulous dancer who came in on Tuesdays and Thursdays to buy cobalt blue

alligator pumps.

Lana Lynette was her name, and she had the best looking feet this side of the Avenue (and the rest of her wasn't too shabby either!). Yeah, Clay remembered that babe. She'd come in with a flourish of mink, her black hair pulled back in a French braid that emphasized her high cheekbones and olive complexion. And she had the biggest almond eyes, the woman was a brick-house! She would walk in and ask for every alligator pump in the place, especially in cobalt blue. She was Clay's A-number-one customer. The man looked forward to Tuesdays and Thursdays. He even marked it on his calendar in red. After she cased the place she would set her petite little body in the chair and would almost drive Clay crazy wriggling her toes in his face. He would sneak a tickle and caress her foot every chance he got. And she would just giggle and say, "Oooh sir, if I didn't know better I would think you had something for my feet!" Then she would laugh uproariously as if she didn't mean a syllable.

But wait, Clay man! We've got to get back to reality. Her foot was cooked in a pot of collard greens and hog mauls, and you don't know how it got there! Clay wiped the smile off his face and broke out of his daydream. He tried to think what he could do, but couldn't come up with anything. Then Dee made him take swift action.

"You better get that foot the heck outta here now! You's an idiot, I don't know how Mamma birthed the both of us and how you got that job of yours 'cause you just incompetent!"

"Naw, Deena, wait, we can toss it in the garbage disposal." You knew Clay was bitin' tall when he called her by her full name, but Dee wouldn't have any of that stuff.

"Get the heck outta here afore I lose my 'ligion and say somethin' I'm gonna have to repent about! And take the foot with ya! Sweet Laud, I'll never eat greens again!" Dee threw her hand on top of her head in a mock swoon and leaned over the counter as if she was going to drown. This consummate piece of acting undid Clay. He grabbed a dishtowel from the table, wrapped the foot in it and booked in a hurry! The man was totally doused. He didn't know what was going on, he just knew that he had to get rid of the thing and fast. He hopped in his vehicle and prepared to take a short run before returning to work.

But where are my manners! I haven't told you all I know about Clay Ray Morris. Clay, like any American black boy that lived on the street, had a fetish, and Clay's happened to be feet. He had a camera hidden behind the desk at work and with the help of his assistant manager, he had the best feet on film. Yeah, Clay had it bad, and it had finally caught up with him. But poor Clay had had it bad from the beginning, how would you folks like to live with Dee? I mean the poor fella assumed he'd get a little peace and live his own life once his mamma died, but Mamma was a crafty sister. She'd left a stipulation in her will that him and Deena had to share the house for two years or until she got married (as if any decent man would). Otherwise Clay couldn't inherit anything—including the house. He dreamed of the day when he could kick her out on her ear and have the house all to himself.

Anyway, the boy was doing sixty on LSD in his red Fiero. He rolled down the window and decided he'd toss the foot in the harbor and give the fishies a good dinner. He just happened to look in the rear view mirror and saw the

familiar blue lights of a police vehicle (Clay didn't play with the fuzz, the boy had too much sense). He pulled over and opened the door real slow, then dropped the foot. He stepped out of his ride and smoothly kicked it underneath the car. He felt quite pleased with himself.

Then the police pulled in front of him. The first cop was a brother, tall and decked in his policeman's blue with Foster Grants in place on his nose.

"Goin' sixty on the Drive, eh? How about we see your license, bro'," he said as he pulled out his citation book. His partner, a short dumpy white dude, bumbled up next to him and looked my man Clay from tip to toe.

"Eh, I was sure he dropped somethin', Lee," the dumpy one said to the brother. "What ya drop, buddy?" Both cops stared at Clay and waited for an answer. My man turned white (well, for a black boy, maybe an ash gray).

But wait now, things are kind of getting fuzzy here and I can't rightfully say what happened next. . . .