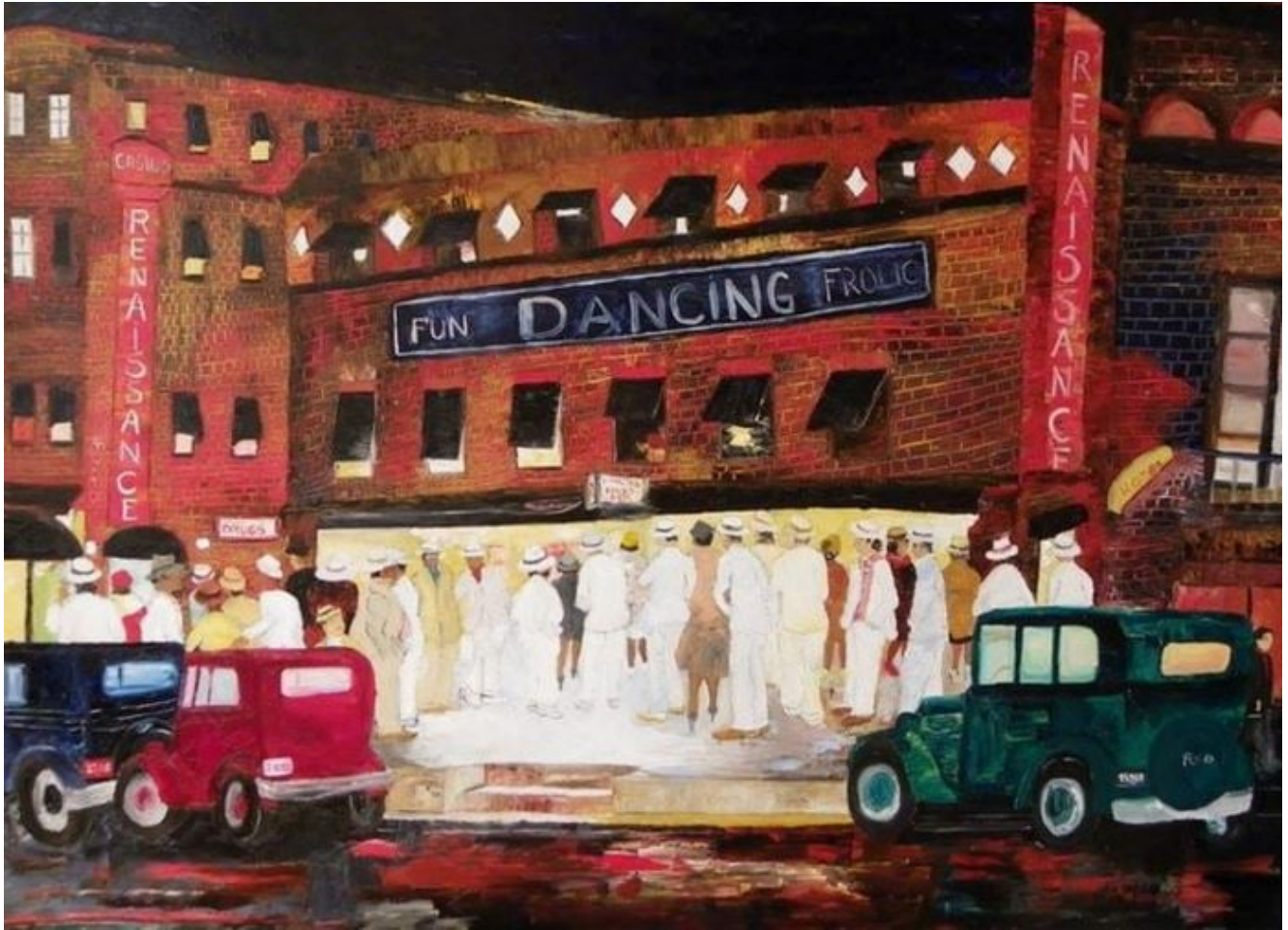


Slapstick Blues

by [DC Diamondopolous](#) (December 2024)



Harlem Renaissance (Bernard Beneito, 2013)

Booker La Croix liked nothing better than to put on his best hat, hitch a ride from Huddle Creek up to Baton Rouge, and spend his day off in a dark theatre watching the moving pictures. He paid his seven cents for the ticket, went around the side entrance, and climbed the steps to the balcony. The matinee featured his favorite, Buster Keaton, in *The Balloonatic* and *Our Hospitality*, and there would be short movies in-between. It'd be a whole afternoon of laughter, except when he looked over, wishing his sister to be sitting there next to him. With Lila Mae gone, his closest friends

were books and the flickers.

His brother Jeremiah thought him crazy to spend his day off watching white folks. The youngest of five boys, Booker was always picked on. His brothers nicknamed him Booker for preferring to read over playing ball and sneaking shots of moonshine. They teased him for working in the parish library and laughed at him when he tried to slick back his hair with brilliantine like Rudolph Valentino, but nothing straightened his thick coiled hair.

He opened the door to the dark interior. The theatre still reeked of sulfur from vaudeville days when the audience threw eggs and tomatoes at bungling performers. His pa took him and Lila Mae back in 1910, when he was six and Lila Mae eight, old enough to hoot and holler at the singers and dancers, acrobats, and magicians. He recalled his favorite, monkeys on roller skates and the sounds of feet thumping across the wooden stage—all of it replaced by the magic of moving pictures.

Since the Odeon became a moving picture theatre, not once did he see another colored person in the balcony. Lila Mae said it was important to see how ofays lived. "Why?" Booker had asked. "Just is." She hated white people and had good reason. But she loved the flickers as much as he did.

He looked over the ledge at the seats below. He saw children, women in gingham dresses with bow hats, and men in suits. A piano was in front of the stage where a woman would play background music while the pictures moved across the screen.

His shoes stuck to the tacky floor. He found his usual seat. It was a chair still hinged in the third row near the center. In the narrow gallery, he smelled the stench of stale piss. But as the lights dimmed, so did Booker's resentment of having to sit in the buzzard roost 'cause of his color. He tried to twist prejudice his way, that he was lucky to sit high above

the others, alone and uninterrupted. And for a couple of hours he could escape and leave his blues somewhere next to nowhere.

The curtains pulled away, revealing the white screen. Booker leaned forward. A title card appeared, and the piano player struck the keys in a ragtime ditty. Booker eloped into the high jinx of Buster Keaton. He laughed, slapped his skinny thigh, and wondered if Lila Mae had seen the same moving picture.

The Balloonatic ended and then came a short flicker, another comedy, that drew a few chuckles. He slouched in the chair, critical of the less-than-funny moving picture he had just watched.

Booker was starting to doze when a woman appeared on the screen. She was lakeside, dressed in a bathing suit and had shoulder-length hair with a ribbon tied around it. Booker sat up. A title card appeared: "Want to go for a swim?" Three other girls in bathing suits ran to the lake's edge. There was a close-up of the stunning woman who pushed one of the girls into the lake, and everyone, including the doused girl, doubled-over in laughter. Booker took off his hat and crushed it with his fists.

He sat through another showing of *The Balloonatic* just so he could see the short and the bathing beauty at the lake. He had to be certain—to make sure that it was his sister, Lila Mae.

For the second showing, he paid attention as the short opened. A card came on the screen with the words, "Famous Players-Lasky Corporation filmed in Hollywood, California." When each actress appeared, so did her name in the lower right-hand corner. Lila Mae La Croix was now Bessie Blythe and passing for white.

Images flashed across the screen just like his emotions. He juggled rage and sadness, longing and disgust. How could Lila Mae, who watched as white men dragged poor Henry away, live as

one of the very people she despised?

Booker yanked at the brim of his hat and slammed the side door as he went out the theatre. He ran down the steps and into the alley. He kept walking. Thinking.

Lila Mae was like the Mississippi. The tumultuous river flowed clear on top, but underneath was the muddy sludge of slavery not sixty years gone.

Booker and his family were a spectrum of colored hues ranging from dark to high yellow, but Lila Mae's skin was as pale as if she'd been adopted. Their pa had teased, "This child better darken up or they gonna think we stole her." "She jus' come up French Creole," their mama had said. "But she as African as me, ain't no one gonna take her and nothin gonna change that."

About the age of twelve, a change did happen. Outside of Huddle Creek, Lila Mae's color was too risky for Booker and his brothers to be seen with. So she walked alone.

Several years back, when they had gone to the Odeon, Booker's pride did him in. He insisted that they walk together like any brother and sister. They paid for their tickets and went around the theatre to the alley when two punks jumped him. Lila Mae hit the men, screaming, "He's my brother! You fuckers! Leave him alone!" When they were through with Booker, they turned to Lila Mae. Through swollen eyes, Booker saw her fear—a fear colored women knew well. He took coins from his pocket and threw them at the men. As they stooped to pick them up, Booker grabbed his sister and they ran up the stairs and into the theatre.

When they got home that night and his parents saw his face, he told them it was his doing, but Lila Mae got a good yelling. She shouted back, mad as any she-devil he had read about.

As Lila Mae grew into her teens and as pretty as any moving picture star, she met Henry. One day, they went on a picnic

along the bayou. A gang of men came upon them and lynched Henry for being with a white girl, so they said, or maybe they didn't need a reason. Lila Mae had screamed and shouted, "I'm colored. Leave him alone!" She said Henry had yelled, "Run, Lila Mae, run. I'll be coming, baby." She did. She ran all the way home sobbing, tearing into the house and telling her brothers to go help Henry. By the time they got there, he'd been strung up. Wasn't enough to hang him, they had to set him afire too. When told what happened, Lila Mae went hysterical, ranted for days, cried for weeks. She clutched Henry's pendant that hung on a chain around her neck like it was part of him. Nothing consoled her and not one thing was done to the men for lynching Henry.

Lila Mae had enough hurt to set the world off its axis. It wasn't her fault, but the neighbors, the relatives and his own family, looked on her like a troublemaker.

One morning a couple of months after the lynching, Booker heard screaming, bawling, and drawers slamming. It sounded like the whole house would come down from the pain within. He dressed and went out on the porch to see his sister crying, suitcase in hand. Mama sobbed. Pa wiped tears off his cheeks. Stoic Jeremiah tried to keep his mouth from twitching.

Booker picked up the luggage and walked with his sister down the dirt road along the railroad tracks that led out of Huddle Creek to the train depot. Lila Mae cursed something fierce. She was furious at Mama and Pa, livid with the white world, angry at her kin, angry at God, just plain angry.

She was so heartbroken that she left him at the parish limits without saying good-bye. He told her he loved her, but her temper was so vicious he didn't think she heard.

She was walking the dusty road when she dropped her suitcase, turned, and ran back to Booker. She hugged him and kissed him on the forehead and cheek. "Get out of the South, Booker. Go

to Harlem. Join our brothers. Keep your nose clean." "Is that where you're going?" he asked. "Maybe, maybe not." Lila Mae was as double-edged as her color. She left, leaving him with a hurt as big as hers.

Before paved streets turned to dirt roads, Booker thought about hitching a ride home, but the walking stretched his muscles, and his reflections stirred compassion.

He trudged along marshy roads that ran along the swamps. Birds sang to each other, and insects hissed and swarmed. He came upon a group of men hauling logs onto trucks, sweat gleaming off their dark skin, making it shine something beautiful.

Booker planned one day to leave, join his brothers in New York, get a job, go to college, hang out at speakeasies, and listen to jazz. He would join the New Negro Movement and had dreams of becoming a writer.

Booker would keep his sister's secret. When he had enough money, he'd be leaving, but going west to Hollywood, California.

It was genuine lemon meringue pie, not a bowl of shaving cream in the face. *Well, how about that*, Lila Mae thought. Bessie Blythe was coming up in the world of moving pictures, but her nose hurt, and her cheeks stung. She wiped pastry from her eyes and glared at Reginald.

"Did you have to throw it that hard?" She took a gob of meringue dangling from her bangs and flung it at the actor.

The crew laughed. William, the violinist, played a fast, lively tune.

"Ah, it wasn't so hard," Reginald said, licking his upper lip.

"Keep going," the director shouted. "I like your gutsiness,

Bessie.”

Mr. Jasky wants gutsy? Lila Mae picked up the plate from the table and threw it at Reginald’s head. He ducked. The crew applauded. Reginald darted away but not fast enough. With pie dripping down her chin, Lila Mae hopped on his back.

“Keep it going. Good, Bessie. Now slide down. Slowly. Reginald, turn and kiss her.”

William struck high and low notes on the fiddle. When they kissed, he slowed the tempo.

“All right. That’ll get some laughs,” the director said. “We’ll pick up Monday on the bandstand.”

Lila Mae marched up to Horace Jasky.

“You tell that flat tire to go easy on the face or I’m going to sock him in the kisser.”

“Now look here, Bessie, be a good girl. The audience will love it. You’re not a bit player, but you’re no Clara Bow, either.”

Lila May wanted to sling the pie in Jasky’s face, hard, see how he liked it. Instead, she smiled, “Why I’d slip on a dozen banana peels for a laugh. You know that now, don’t you honey chile?” In less than a year she’d gone from bit player to supporting roles, and the pay increase didn’t hurt either.

“Attagirl.”

She sashayed away, swaying her supple hips off the outdoor set to a side table where she dipped a cloth into a bowl of water and wiped the goop off her face and short, wavy hair.

If Reginald knew he had kissed a colored girl, he would choke to death trying to spit out the black.

Outside of Huddle Creek, no one questioned her race. In Baton Rouge, men tipped their hats. Women smiled and nodded. Once,

she was at a newspaper rack reading *Picture-Play Magazine* when a man bought it for her. Lila Mae resented yet found opportunity in losing herself from one world while slipping into the other.

Workers arrived to take down the set. She took her time cleaning herself and hoped to see the tall colored man who reminded her of everything she'd left behind.

She wanted to hear his deep voice, the Southern drawl that reminded her of steam rising off swamps. She missed the slow-moving beauty of the bayous and longed for her family, especially Booker. Most of all she missed Henry.

Lila Mae looked at William holding his violin like a child as he laid it in its case. He saw her watching him and smiled. She wondered if he had something to hide too. He was handsome—in a pretty way—and had the tender-hearted quality of her baby brother, Booker. He never tried to get her alone or pestered her to neck. She could flirt and play while knowing that William would always be a gentleman. Because they would never be lovers, he was the only white man she would go out with.

William carried his violin case and walked over.

“Want to go to a swanky party?”

“Want to have one now?” Lila Mae glanced around then slid the hem of her dress up her shapely thigh, stuck her thumb and forefinger into her garter belt and pulled out a flask. She uncapped it and offered it to William.

“After you, doll.”

“I insist,” Lila Mae said, looking over at the set.

William took the silver bottle and tossed back his sleek helmet-looking head. “Ah, thank you, Bessie.”

"My pleasure, honey chile." She took the hootch, drank, and slid the flask into her garter. "What party? When?"

"Tonight. Some big cheese producer is throwing. His assistant said there'll be a jazz band. Told me to bring my violin, maybe play with them." William took the rag from Lila Mae's hand and rubbed piecrust off of her neck. "He said I could bring someone, long as she's gorgeous." He gave her the rag.

As a white woman, she was invited. As a colored woman she'd be working in the big cheese's kitchen.

Lila Mae never saw one colored woman in the moving pictures except once, and she wasn't even negro; it was a woman in black make-up. It galled her that they wouldn't hire a colored girl even for the role of a maid.

She finished wiping pastry from her hair when the tall handyman appeared, carrying a ladder to the set. She watched him climb the rungs, his muscles flexing under his sweat-stained work shirt.

"You know him?" William said.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Why else would you be staring at him?"

"Of course we don't know each other."

"You're Southern." William shrugged. "You must have seen negroes before."

"Course I have." She threw the rag on the table.

"Hey, doll, they don't mean anything to me one way or the other. Sometimes I gig with them."

"You play together?"

"In Chicago—speakeasies. Some joints here."

Henry's pendant felt heavy where it made its home against her breast.

"Bessie? How come you look so blue?" He took her hands. "Why don't you get dolled up and we go to this big shot's house? Could help your career. Who knows, maybe we'll see Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford."

"Sure, honey."

"Let me walk you home." William raised his elbow for Lila Mae. "I'll be bringing the best looking Sheba in all of Hollywoodland."

William held the passenger door of the Model T and helped Lila Mae onto the running board and into the car. When she had stepped onto the porch and saw William's bugged eyes and intake of breath, she thought maybe she didn't look as homespun as she felt.

There were so many beautiful women in Hollywood. When Lila Mae got her picture in *Photoplay*, she couldn't believe she was right alongside the likes of Lillian Gish and Norma Talmadge. It was a proud lie. Not being able to tell Booker and her kin plum near turned it into nothing.

Lila Mae's mood was like a pot of grits that sat on her mama's stove, simmering, right in the seat of her happiness. No matter how famous she got, she'd always be running, looking over her shoulder, wondering when she'd be caught.

The worry gave her headaches. Liquor helped.

When William had walked her home, she could have sworn she saw Booker. The Red Car stopped at Sunset and Vine. She caught a glimpse of a slim, young colored man who wore a hat, low on his brow the way Booker wore his. He climbed the steps, and the Red Car took off.

"A penny for your thoughts," William said, sitting behind the steering wheel.

"How old is this Tin Lizzie?" Lila Mae shouted over the roaring engine.

"Ten years." William made a U-turn and took off for Sunset Boulevard.

"Where is this shindig?"

"Beverly Hills." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strikes and matches.

"Want one?"

She took the pack, shook one loose, and put it between ruby-red bow lips. She lit it, inhaled, and gave it to William. She did the same for herself and handed everything back.

Nights in Los Angeles were cold, and Lila Mae's roommate let her borrow her coat. It didn't have the fur bands, but when rolled at the cuffs, it showed off the satin lining. Her other roommate had loaned her a peacock headband with sequins. They gussied her up as best they could. The three of them shared often, and more than clothes, also food and news about casting. She wanted to tell them the truth. But the truth was no more her friend than they were. The lie kept her stuck in a closet that had no doorknob or hinges to bust out of. But why live as a servant when she could pass as a moving picture star?

The Ford rumbled along Sunset. The wheels bounced across trolley tracks. Lila Mae held on to her seat. She kept her clutch purse in the coat pocket and the flask in her garter belt.

"You look extra beautiful tonight, Bessie."

Lila Mae laughed.

"I mean it. You've got *it*."

"You're sweet to say so."

William flicked cigarette ash out the window. "We've known each other for over a month. I don't know anything about you."

"We Southern girls like a little mystery."

They passed the Hollywood Athletic Club. As they traveled west, she saw open fields and fewer buildings.

"Where's your fiddle?"

"In the back seat."

She turned sideways to look at him. He was handsome in his high collar, and his brown hair slicked to shine. "That's your real lover, now, isn't it?"

"You could be my lover," William said.

With tapered fingers, she stroked his lapel. "Why ruin a good friendship?"

He sighed. She hurt him. Lila Mae didn't want all the meanness done to her become something she did to others. William no more wanted to be lovers than she did. What a charade they were playing.

She turned forward in the seat. "Can we get on with being friends?"

He nodded.

The Model T clanked and jostled along Sunset into twilight's shifting shadows.

Lila Mae slid up her coat and took out the flask. They drank until it was empty.

William ducked his head and peered into the dark at a street

sign. "What's that say?"

"Benedict Canyon."

"That's it." He made a right turn where oaks and tall grasses grew on low slopes. William changed gears, and the Model T backfired.

"We going to make it up this hill?"

"Think so. I just don't want her to stall."

The nearness of the Pacific clouded the front window.

The automobile sputtered and chugged up a road that was more mountain than hill.

"How far to this shindig?"

"Don't know."

They continued to a driveway that zigzagged and climbed until it looked like the heavens were ablaze in lighted splendor.

"Well, slap my head and call me silly," Lila Mae said, staring at the mansion.

"Look at all those ritzy cars," William said. "Let me drop you off. I'll park in the woods."

"Oh no you don't. I'm proud to be walking in with the fiddle player. Now, honey chile, once we're inside, no one's going to know we chug-a-lugged up Mount Everest in a baby buggy."

"You're funny."

She winked at him and undid all her buttons on the coat, revealing a low-cut Chantilly lace dress.

A man in a dark uniform and knee boots held up his hand and walked toward them.

“Follow the driveway to the end.”

As William made a loop, Lila Mae gaped at the expensive cars.

William parked, reached into the back seat, and grabbed the violin case.

They walked toward the white Spanish-style mansion. Bougainvillea with red blossoms climbed to the second-floor balcony with wrought-iron railings.

In the center of the grounds was a fountain with cherubs.

Oh Lordy, did she want a drink. She hoped no one would look at the scuffed heels of her T-strapped shoes.

A butler greeted them at the front door.

“May I take your coat, madam?”

“Thank you.”

The entrance hall was as large as her bungalow. The centerpiece was a twenty-foot waterfall surrounded by lush palm trees. A man chased a woman up a circular staircase. She squealed. He lunged for her, stumbled, and spilled his drink. The woman turned and kissed him on the mouth.

“We’re in for a wild night,” William said.

“I hope so.”

A waiter approached them with a tray of champagne glasses. William handed one to Lila Mae and took one for himself. Lured by the jazzy rhythm coming from the ballroom, Lila Mae headed toward the music.

They passed jeweled women with bobbed hair and men in arrow collars with trimmed mustaches. She breathed in perfume and cigar fumes—everyone was smoking and drinking.

She drained the champagne glass, and a waiter offered her another.

"You're supposed to sip champagne," William said.

"This is the real McCoy. I'm going to get pie-eyed," she said, guzzling her drink and handing the empty glass to a passing attendant.

She led William through an archway with a life-sized nude statue of a female archer and into an enormous, smoke-filled ballroom.

"Well, shut my mouth," Lila Mae said. A flapper was swinging from a chandelier as a group of men waited to catch her. "How did she get up there?"

"Beats me," William said.

Fascinated by the female Tarzan, Lila Mae watched as the ossified woman thrust her bare legs apart to give herself momentum.

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit," Lila Mae said when she saw the woman's ace of spades.

The flapper let go and fell into the men's arms. The crowd roared.

William took Lila Mae's hand and used his violin case to nudge people aside dancing the breakaway. She couldn't see the band, but what she heard made her want to fast kick her blues away and join in the fun.

When they neared the stage, she let go of William. White and colored musicians, together, were making music. This was no speakeasy but a big Hollywood party. The piano man, drummer, and horn player were colored. It was a more beautiful sight than the sunsets over the Pacific. The future of her people rode the coattails of jazz.

“Put your strings down, honey chile, and let’s pick up our heels,” she said, feeling an edge from the booze.

William went to the stage, talked to the bass player, and set his case on a stand.

They danced the Charleston close to the platform—forward and a tap and back and a tap—swinging their arms. Rubber brassiere couldn’t flatten Lila Mae’s breasts, so she did away with the fashion and let her voluptuous figure jiggle like pudding. She backed William to the side of the dance floor in front of the piano man.

She watched the musician as his fingers ran the black-and-white keys. He saw her and did a double take. Lila Mae shimmied making sure he couldn’t look away.

William grabbed her. “You’re corked.”

“Leave me alone,” she said, shoving him aside. “I’m feeling good for a change.”

The song ended, and the musicians took a break.

“What is it with you and the negroes?”

“Nothing with me and the negroes,” she said, feeling her tongue grow fat. “Go play your fiddle-de-dee.”

“You’re a strange bird, Bessie Blythe. I’ll just be a minute,” William said and climbed on the stage.

Lila Mae looked up at the piano man.

“I like the way you play.”

“Thank you. But ain’t you playin’ with fire?”

His voice carried her home to wet swampy riverbanks, Cypress trees, the backwoods—she didn’t care that her naked arms trembled.

"Just looks that way."

He studied her for a minute then took a glass off the piano lid and drank.

"How come a beautiful woman like you is lonely?"

"Who says I'm lonely?"

"Where in the South are you from?"

"Near Baton Rouge," she said, longing for his fingers to play all over her.

"I'm from New Orleans."

"I can tell. Your accent is smooth, like my mama's homemade ice cream."

His eyebrows raised.

She didn't care that she was brash. Loneliness and love had so much in common.

"Your boyfriend," he said.

"He's a friend."

"Still. Much as I'd like to, best we don't talk no more." He pushed the stool from the piano and joined the drummer and horn player.

She started shaking. The burden from her sorrow had nowhere to go. Sweat ran into her headband as she tried to sashay away but instead wobbled to a group of small tables and collapsed on a chair.

"Bessie. Bessie."

She heard the phony name and looked up at the chandelier. She imagined herself swinging from the lights with no one to catch her, falling splat on the floor, red blood oozing, in the act

of dying—oh Lordy, did she need a drink.

“Are you okay?” William said.

“Feeling sorry for myself is all.”

“What about?”

“Nothing honey.”

“Sorry about back there,” he said.

William would always apologize, didn't matter if he was right or wrong. He carried a torch for her, even if he did prefer his own sex.

“If I told you something, William...” She gulped air.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, nothing, honey. Just get me a drink.”

“No, doll,” he said. “You've had too much. You're going to be a big star. Don't ruin your chances with hootch.”

“Then go. I'll be all right.”

The room twirled in a lubricated blur. She wanted a cigarette, but William was gone.

“May I join you?”

Lila Mae looked up to see a tall, balding man with glasses.

“Suit yourself.”

“My name is Sidney Reid,” he said, sitting across from her.

She knew the name. He was a big-shot director, but she was too drunk to sit up and act interested.

“You're Bessie Blythe, aren't you?” He ogled her cleavage.

"My eyes are up here," she said, blinking.

He chuckled. "Women nowadays look like boys. Flat chests, short hair." He waved his hand in annoyance. "I'm glad to see a real woman for a change. I saw your last moving picture. For a girl, you're a decent comedian." He hunched forward. "I think you'd be perfect for *The Lost World*."

"Really?"

"Let's leave. I have a wine cellar at home, not far from here. We can talk. Be alone." He moved his hands toward hers. "Did I mention the part is for the leading lady?"

"Well, aren't you kind, Mr. Reid. I'll be glad to audition for the part at the studio Monday."

"Oh. My schedule is full," he mumbled, "for the next couple of weeks." He stood.

"Of course it is." Everything was fake. She'd come to the right town to hide in, while exposing herself to the world. The irony was downright hysterical, but she was too miserable to laugh.

"Nice talking to you, Bessie."

She looked away, too broken to care about anything.

Unable to sleep, Booker dressed, grabbed his hat, and left the boarding house basement.

He walked up Vine Street, brooding about Lila Mae. The first time he saw her was outside the studio, walking with two girls. He had wanted to run to her, tell her how proud she made him and that he'd seen all of her moving pictures. He needed to get her alone, so he wouldn't risk her cover.

Booker had followed them, keeping his distance so not to be

caught or look to be lusting after white women.

He could hear their laughter a block away. Lila Mae's hair had been cut to a wavy bob, she smoked, and of the three of them, his sister did most of the talking. Being white gave her confidence. He reckoned happiness could do that.

At Fountain Avenue, he headed east until he came to the Nighthawk. He opened the door.

"Thought you were an early bird," Al said, wiping a dish, his blond hair poking out like birch twigs under his chef hat.

"Can't sleep." Booker took the stool at the end of the counter next to the window. Lila Mae's house was across the street and three doors down.

"I'll have the usual."

"Don't you eat anything other than eggs? No wonder you're so skinny," Al said, turning to the grill.

Booker glanced around the dingy cafe.

"Quiet for a Friday night."

"Two o'clock, they stagger in. Prohibition's been great for business."

Booker chuckled.

Lila Mae's house was dark. Earlier that day he had watched her leave the studio on the arm of a white man. That sight sickened him. A couple of hours later, as he was eating dinner in the Nighthawk, he heard a car sputter and backfire. It stopped in front of Lila Mae's house, and out dashed the ofay, all spruced up looking fit for a night of fun. Booker saw his sister dressed in fine clothes and her hair done real pretty. He understood her new life, but not that—not taking a white man as a sweetheart. It got him all twisted inside, but what

else was she to do? Yet how could she do it? How long did she think she could get away with passing before someone back home recognized her?

It was over. No reason to see her now.

Al put down the Coca-Cola and went back to making eggs.

Booker sipped the drink. When he had taken the train west and crossed the border from Texas into New Mexico, the porter told him he was free to sit anywhere on the train. At first, he didn't move. But then he grabbed his hat and suitcase and walked through the cars until he sat among white folks. Accepted, that was the feeling. Looking out the window at the beautiful rose-colored desert, he darned near let his feelings roll down his cheeks.

Al set the plate of eggs and toast in front of him, and Booker ate. He remembered that feeling on the train, when he moved from the colored section and how he sat at a table with clean linen and water glasses. Maybe that's how Lila Mae felt, like clean linen.

"Sunday I'll be making ribs."

"I'm leaving tomorrow morning."

"Where you going?"

"Harlem, New York."

"Well, you ever come this way again I'll make you a plate of ribs."

"Thanks Al. I'll be sure to drop by if I do."

Booker looked at the clock behind the counter. It was one-fifteen. He finished eating and drained the rest of the Coca-Cola.

Al gave him the receipt, and Booker paid with a dime tip.

“Good luck in New York.”

“Thanks for your hospitality,” Booker said and left the Nighthawk.

He headed west in the opposite direction of Lila Mae’s house. At the corner, he heard a car rattling toward him. He pulled the hat low on his brow, watched the jalopy turn down Fountain and stop in front of his sister’s house. He saw her stumble out of the car and into the arms of the ofay. Lila Mae was as lost to Booker as Henry was to Lila Mae.

A crowd of people waited for the Red Car at the corner of Sunset and Vine. Booker held a suitcase in one hand and smoothed down the beginnings of a mustache with the other. He might have liked Los Angeles. Its booming ways appealed to him, with ornamental street lamps and telephone poles lining the sidewalks. Homes sprouted everywhere, even in the hills. It was a city free of hunger. You could pick plums, peaches, and oranges right off the trees. But for Booker, it would always be cursed with Lila Mae’s passing.

The Red Car’s metal wheels screeched along the tracks. As it neared, the conductor rang the bell. The doors opened. Booker climbed the steps, paid his fare, and walked down the aisle. He put his luggage on the window seat and sat down.

The Red Car moved, and the suitcase fell forward. Booker snatched it. When he looked up, he damned near pissed his pants.

Lila Mae charged down the aisle. She had dark smudges under her eyes. Her hair tangled, and her mouth curled in a scowl.

“Move over,” she said.

Booker gaped.

“I said, move over.”

He held the suitcase and took the window seat.

"Yesterday—I knew it was you," she said in a loud whisper. "You been spying on me? What the hell, Booker."

He was tongue-tied. She wore a sweater jacket over her dress. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"You sure you want to be seen sitting by me?"

"Why you spying on me?"

"I wasn't going to snitch. I was hoping to get you alone," he said in a low voice. People stared at them. "I missed you was all."

"Where you going?" she said.

"Central Station. Where you going?"

"Hair appointment. Downtown."

Lila Mae opened her handbag, took out cigarettes, and lighted one. She smoked as if taking oxygen and exhaled like it was poison. Booker noticed her chewed fingernails and that her hands shook.

"How's Mama and Pa?" she said.

"Fine. Brothers send them money every week."

"Jeremiah?"

"The same."

He glared at people watching them.

They bounced along not saying anything. Booker held his suitcase while Lila Mae sucked and puffed, wagging her leg like it was gearing to sprint off.

"I'm proud of you, Sis," he whispered. "I've seen all your

moving pictures.”

“How’d you find me?”

“At the Odeon.”

She stopped shaking her leg. “You’re a real private dick.” She dropped the cigarette, stepped on it and looked sideways at him. “That mustache needs some work.”

Booker touched his fingers to it. “Just started growing it.”

“Oh, Baby,” she said, her voice breaking, “I’m so glad to see you.”

Overcome by sudden affection, all Booker could do was shake his head.

“Thought you might go all hellcat on me,” he said.

“I still might.”

“Sure you want to be seen talking to me?”

“You don’t exist, then I don’t exist.”

“You could lose everything.”

“Oh, Baby, you don’t know nothing.”

“I don’t get it,” he said.

She crossed her arms and pressed her hand to her mouth.

“You all right, Miss?” the conductor shouted above the clacking trolley.

Booker saw him staring at Lila Mae in the rearview mirror.

“Just fine, Mister,” she said—and then, turned to Booker, “Baby, why you leaving without seeing me?”

“I saw you—with your white boyfriend. No reason to stay after

that.”

Lila Mae snickered. “He’s a puff.” She glanced at Booker. “Didn’t you see that?”

“All I saw was his color.”

“I cover for William. Without him knowing, he does the same for me. He’s nice. So are my roommates.”

“Long as they think you’re white,” Booker said.

Lila Mae reached up and pulled the bell cord. “We’re getting off.” She stood, holding on to the seat in front.

The Red Car stopped, and she hurried down the aisle. Booker grabbed his luggage and followed.

When he stepped from the trolley, they were in the hustle of automobiles, streetcars, and people. He saw tall buildings that hid the sun. A blast of exhaust from a passing truck made Booker’s eyes water.

“Central Station is close by,” Lila Mae said, crossing the street. “We can talk in Pershing Square.”

They entered the park. Booker passed exotic plants, fruit trees and banana palms.

Lila Mae sat at a secluded bench surrounded by bamboo and flowering trees.

“Put your suitcase between us.”

Booker set it on the bench.

“Tell me about home.”

“Not much to tell. With you not there, Mama and Pa don’t laugh so much.” It was still morning. Several people strolled across the square. “The Juneaus moved. All of them. To Detroit.”

Booker rested his arm on the suitcase. "I thought you'd be happy, being a moving picture star and all."

"How do our brothers like Harlem?"

"They like it fine. Marvin has a girl. Says she could pass. Like you. Works as a showgirl at a nightclub called the Cotton Club." Booker leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Marvin said she makes more money than he does."

He heard Lila Mae sniff and glanced over his shoulder. She was crying.

"Hey, Sis," he said, taking out his handkerchief. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, grasping the cloth.

Booker wasn't one for digging into other folk's business, except Lila Mae, she seemed to invite it. "Then why are you crying? Afraid of being found out?"

She dabbed her eyes. "No, it's nothing like that. I just made me a pile of loneliness."

"How?" Booker said. "You're a moving picture star. You wear fine clothes, make lots of money. Damn, you pass."

She took out her cigarettes. "It don't mean a damn thing."

Her hurt and anger reminded him of when she left home, walking alone down that dirt road.

"My image on the screen—everything, fake. Tell me Booker," she said, "how was this all supposed to end happy? I don't fit anywhere."

He felt tenderness toward her—wanted to put his arm around her.

"You fit with me. Our family. Maybe those showgirls who could

pass." He sat against the bench as Lila Mae smoked. "With your looks, you could be a showgirl, too."

He watched his sister scan Pershing Square with its palm trees and landscaped walkways and wondered what she was thinking.

"You know what I saw, Booker? I saw a jazz band with white and colored musicians playing at a ritzy Hollywood party."

"No kidding."

Lila Mae seemed to be drinking in a happiness not found in a bottle.

"Tell me about the Cotton Club."

"Marvin said they have singers and comedy skits. It's where rich white folks go. For entertainment."

She started sniffing.

Booker saw the chain that held the pendant Henry had given her. He set the suitcase on the ground and turned to her.

"Come with me to Harlem." He took off his hat and twirled it in his hands.

Lila Mae stubbed her cigarette out on the bench and let it fall through the slats.

"Baby, I sure pulled one over on them. It's the queerest thing. People loving you one minute and hating you the next." She looked at him. "I had a strange sense of power knowing that. But I was the one left hurting."

"Come with me," he said. "Join our brothers in Harlem."

"I wonder how long it would have lasted? Well, my terms. Not theirs."

Booker gazed at the trees with sunlight and shadows passing

through the leaves, not quite believing how it all turned out.

"I've saved a little nest egg," Lila Mae said. "I need to get that and my clothes."

Booker's joy swept away his own loneliness. He put his hat on and beamed at his sister.

Lila Mae glanced around the park. "Here," she said, taking a wallet from her sweater and placing a wad of money in his hand. "Take a sleeper. I'll meet you in Harlem."

"Ah, no, Sis. I have me some money of my own."

"Keep it," she said.

"You sure?"

Lila Mae nodded.

"Bessie Blythe is going to pull a Houdini," she said, giving him a wink.

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DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with hundreds of stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: *Sunlight Press*, *Progenitor*, *34th Parallel*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Lunch Ticket*, and others. DC was nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and twice for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals. dcdiamondopolous.com

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