

BILLIE HOLIDAY 3

30 LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR AND GRILL

PIANO PLAYER. Lady, we might want to take a little break about now.

BILLIE. (*Trying to put flowers in her hair.*) You know when I . . . when I first got out of the clammer bunch of friends of mine set up for me to sing in Carnegie Hall where all the big long-hair singers an' orchestras an' all that shit play, see.

(*The PIANO PLAYER takes the dog off-stage. BILLIE fastens the flowers in her hair as HE re-enters. HE sits at the piano.*)

BILLIE. An' . . . an' I never had sing in a place like that. I didn't even know if coloreds could buy a ticket let alone stand up an' sing on the stage. So, anyway, I was so nervous before I went on that my knees started knockin' together, see, and I had on this long dress that went all the way down to the floor so you couldn't see my legs, but I couldn't control my knees an' they was shakin' so bad nobody knew if I was gonna sing or dance. But it was wonderful. Wonderful. Sonny? You over there? Sittin' in the dark?

PIANO PLAYER. It's Jimmy, Lady. Jimmy Powers ticklin' the old ivories. You go backstage with Pepi an' have a short break while I entertain these good folks with a few of the old dance tunes.

(*HE faintly plays the piano as SHE talks through the following:*)

Start

BILLIE. (*Ramblingly, almost incoherently.*) Dance? I ain't never been no dancer, Sonny. You know that. Not since't I was sixteen in Harlem at this house run by a white bitch name Florence Williams. Mom had took me there to be a maid, see, but I knew as soon's I laid eyes on the lamp shades and what they called a "chaise lounge" what my duties was goin' to be, but I didn't say nothin' to Mom because she really thought what this bitch Florence wanted was a maid. So I got the job an' did good because I was the only colored bitch in the place, but it drove me crazy, see, and I just couldn't stand it, an' this one guy hurt me so bad I bled solid for a week, so I dragged myself outta there an' hit ever place on Seventh Avenue between 139th Street an' 133rd, askin' for work. An' I was all set to walk all the way down to the Battery an' jump in if nobody'd hired me when I got to this place called Pod's

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and Jerry's an' they had a sign in the window sayin' "Dancer Wanted" so I went in an' told 'em I was a great dancer an' I wanted the job. (*laughs*) I musta been a sight 'cause I was more'n 200 pounds an' weak from bleedin' all week an' sick an' tired an' hungry an' ever other damn thing too. So the piano player started to play an' I danced the only two steps I knew which was the time step an' the crossover. Danced 'em over an' over an' the piano player stopped an' asked me to please stop wastin' his time, but he must have felt sorry for me cause he said, "Can you sing?" an' I said, "Sure, but what's that? Ever damn body can sing." So I sang. An' they went crazy. An' after that come Benny Goodman to see me, an' the Apollo where I was so scared on openin' night I stuck the flowers in my hair with the pins still in 'em an' lost so much blood I nearly passed out durin' the intermission, but I didn't 'cause the whole place was screamin' "We want Billie! We want . . . Bill . . . Billie." (*Ramblingly, almost incoherently.*) They was like that at Alderson Prison, too. The girls in there was always callin' for me to sing 'em somethin'. Some of 'em even had my records. They all thought I should cheer 'em up by singin' the blues or jazz or some shit. But I couldn't sing in there. Singin' is how you feel. I couldn't sing in a place like that. In Alderson I was dead a year and a day. You ever hear a dead person singin'? That was what Philly did for me. They told me, my damn agent, plead guilty Billie, you get out on suspended sentence, so I stood flat footed up in front of that judge an' said the one word, "Guilty, your Honor," and they send me cold turkey to Alderson Prison. Being in prison in West Virginia is what's called double redundant. That was about ten or twelve years ago. '47, whenever the hell that was. And I was doin' the bad drugs heavy, see, an' they idea of treatin' a sick colored was to strap you to the bedposts so tight I still got the pains in my wrist and ankles when it comes a storm. But the worst was they didn't tell me about the card they call your cabaret card 'cause you got to have that in order to work in the clubs and it's really supposed to be for the folks who does the kitchen work to show they got no disease and shit like that — but for some damn reason ever damn body got to have one and they call it your work card. Only. Only the mens in the blue suits with the brass buttons and white damn socks is the only ones who can give it to you and if you got a felony even out of state they won't let you earn your daily bread. So they told me that after I got out of my year of hell in West Virginia. An' friends of mine set it up so I could sing in Carnegie Hall, see, but I can't ever sing in

no club like this and this is heaven to me. An' I tried then to tell 'em no it ain't me, see. I wasn't even at the hotel. I was here at the club when the policemen broke into the room, an' it was you, Sonny, who put the stuff in my suitcase because you said you couldn't make it to the toilet, so you stashed it all in my suitcase 'cause you thought me bein' Billie Holiday an' all that shit the damn cops wouldn't do nothin' to me, an' they already had a police file on you as long as your dick, so I said, "Okay, Sonny." An' I got my chauffeur to drive me back to Philly so's I could plead guilty, an' I was standin' there in my big fur coat an' all an' everybody lookin' cause they never seen no colored woman in a limousine with no damn fur coat on her back before so the Judge takes one look at me an' says a year an' a day. An' I didn't tell no damn body I didn't know nothin' about any of that shit till I met you, Sonny. An' how you cried so bad when I wouldn't have none of it, an' said nobody ever loved you enough to try a little bit of a hit or two with you an' I said I would but not heroin, an' you was so lonely an' scared an' said nobody who didn't try it couldn't know what it was like for you. An' so . . . I said to myself Sonny'll know there's one damn bitch in this world that loves him.

Stop

[MUSIC # 16: HUSH NOW]

(BILLIE starts singing "DON'T EXPLAIN.")

BILLIE. (singing)
 HUSH NOW, DON'T EXPLAIN.
 JUST SAY YOU'LL REMAIN.
 I'M GLAD YOU'RE BACK. DON'T EXPLAIN.
 SMILE. DON'T EXPLAIN.
 WHAT IS THERE TO GAIN?
 SKIP THAT LIPSTICK. DON'T EXPLAIN.

YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU AND WHAT LOVE
 ENDURES.
 ALL MY THOUGHTS ARE OF YOU
 FOR I'M SO COMPLETELY . . . SO COMPLETE . . .

(SHE stops singing and hums along. SHE looks about, hunting the lyrics.)

BILLIE. (singing)
 RIGHT OR WRONG DON'T MATTER. SMILE TO
 HEAR FOLKS . . . FOLKS . . . (pause)
 OOO, WHAT A LITTLE MOONLIGHT CAN DO! (The
 PIANO PLAYER switches to "WHAT A LITTLE
 MOONLIGHT CAN DO.")
 OOO, WHAT A LITTLE MOONLIGHT CAN DO TO YOU!
 YOU'RE IN LOVE, YOUR HEART'S AFLUTTER
 'CAUSE ALL DAY LONG YOU CAN ONLY
 STUTTER . . .

BILLIE. You know what I want? I want me a beautiful home. An' . . . an' some kids. An' . . . an' I want to cook. An' somethin' else. I want a club. My own club. Very small. Very cozy. Where I can sing to all my friends. That's all. What else is there?

[MUSIC # 17: DEEP SONG]

(BILLIE sings "DEEP SONG." The PIANO PLAYER follows her. Everything should appear normal until BILLIE sings the line, "Love lives in a barren land where there's no helping hand to understand.")

BILLIE. (singing)
 LONELY GRIEF IS HAUNTING ME
 LIKE A LONELY SHADOW HAUNTING ME.
 IT'S ALWAYS THERE JUST OUT OF SIGHT
 LIKE A FRIGHTENING DREAM ON A LIGHTNING
 NIGHT.
 LONELY WINDS CRY OUT MY NAME
 SAD AS HAUNTED MUSIC IN THE RAIN.
 IT'S GONNA BE BAD, THAT I KNOW.
 BUT I HEAR IT CALL AND I'VE GOT TO GO.

WHERE CAN I BE HEADED FOR?
 THE BLUES CRAWLED IN MY DOOR TO LICK MY
 HEART ONCE MORE.
 LOVE LIVES IN A BARREN LAND WHERE THERE'S
 NO HELPING HAND TO UNDERSTAND.