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Lewis: What My Last Man Did

WHAT MY LAST MAN DID

Andrea Lewis

Cate wriggles into the blue beaded dress. LaFitte's kitchen reeks of boiled mullet, old cabbage, burnt onions. The cook Josiah hacks pork ribs and tells his boy to feed the stove. The blue beaded dress is a gift from Huston—God knows where he found it. Robin's-egg *soie de chine* with cobalt beads clicking all down its length. "Blue for blues singing." That's what Huston said when he gave her the package, nervous, like a boy in a brothel. She hasn't told him yet she's pregnant. She's almost sure. The mullet makes her want to heave. But no doctor in Slaughter is going to check a fifteen-year-old high yellow for pregnant, so she'll have to wait and find a midwife.

A cockroach crawls across the calendar—July 1917—woodblock of a Shreveport & Texas locomotive gushing steam. Out front, in the saloon, the band warms up. Only Huston on piano is any good. The drummer, Franklin, hopped up on Raleigh Rye, keeps rushing the beat. The bass man, Alphonse, harbors the notion he can improvise.

The saddest Cate can feel is to conjure up her father wondering where the hell she is. She balls up all that sadness in her stomach, going through the kitchen to the saloon and out to the upright piano. Small applause. Huston beams to see her in the dress. She keeps the sadness in her stomach with the baby and starts "Chain Gang Blues."

If only she could sing it like LuLu. When LuLu sang "Chain Gang Blues" it wasn't so much a singer singing a song as it was the naked soul of a girl carving up her heart for a roomful of strangers. LuLu taught her the moans, curving slurs, bent blue notes. "Like a willow drooping." Everything else has to come from your gut. Most girls singing blues grew up poor. Cate figures nobody would listen if they saw her parents' house on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. Near the end of "Chain Gang Blues" she notices Duval is here again. Even in the gaslight she can see his parted hair and Sunday suit.



Wilson Duval sweats inside his best twill, tilts his chair against the wall, and watches Cate in her new blue dress that looks like a gift from Satan. At twenty-five, Duval—the youngest-ever sheriff of East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana—knows his mission: return Slaughter to the righteous. Some thought he was a joke until he cleaned up The Haze, where all the hoboes lived. Raided the place in April with his idiot deputy. Hauled in offenders, including Cate. First time Duval ever saw her. They thought she was a boy until the deputy knocked off her cap and all this hair spilled out.

Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show rolled into Slaughter that same day. As if the action in The Haze weren't enough for one lawman in a single day, Pawnee Bill's vast canvas tent burst into flames at sundown, funnel of sparks twisting heavenward and red reflecting off the clouds. From half a mile away, Duval could smell the burning flesh and hear the horses tethered up inside. Pawnee Bill himself proved a hero, pulling women—white women, colored women—from the flames, going back time after time until he didn't come out.



I stole Cate's dress off a high-nose white lady at the station. Stole her trunk and fenced the jewelry and a coat and alligator shoes. But the jiggly beads and shiny blue are Cate. Not just for the way she sings. Blue I'll bet you anything is the color of her soul. I never knew a girl so happy and so sad at once. Smiling, crying, yelling, loving, eating, singing. She's a runaway train no matter what.

Take my word, I won't be in Slaughter forever. Chicago. That's where the hot music and the smart niggers are. Me, I'm Chickasaw by blood, Huston by name. But it's niggers took me in and Uncle Midas taught me how to play. Chicago's where

we'll make the real money, make Cate famous. Me as manager. Bookings. Contracts. The business side. I'm not good enough on piano, I know that. I'm just honky-tonk.



Cate hated Sister Magdalene, her silent glide down corridors, her halitosis and her fleshy nose, her sagging chin pinched in a wimple stiff with starch. On Cate's first day at Sisters of the Holy Family, Sister Magdalene rooted through her suitcase and threw away a bottle of *Nuit de France* perfume, an ivory silk chemise and a pamphlet of love poems in French, which Sister Magdalene called filth. In the next bunk was LuLu. They joined in hatred of Sister Magdalene, hatred of five A.M. Mass, hatred of their parents who sent them there. Leaning over cornmeal mush and biscuits, LuLu talked about her fellow, Benedicte. Cate talked of where the walls were lowest and what time the abbess went to bed.



Of the four saloons in Slaughter, Cate picked LaFitte's when she heard the piano from the street. Even in bright day, he played like midnight in New Orleans. Dark. Drenched. Sad and hopeful both, like setting out, like LuLu and the rails.

Cate walked in quickly, before cowardice could stop her. Sawdust floor, smell of bad tobacco, bluebottles sifting heavy air. "You need a girl to sing." She didn't say it like a question. The drummer Franklin laughed so loud Josiah peered in from the kitchen. Cate gripped her hands behind her, let her eyes plead her case with the copper-colored piano player, his strange high cheekbones. Her audition consisted of twelve bars of "Wildcat Blues," repeated twice, and the piano player Huston nodded solemnly each time.



Duval can't pry his eyes from Cate. A slithering blue flame up there in her shiny dress, she starts "Stingaree Blues." She drops her voice to a growl for the part that says *You can't do what my last man did*. Inside Wilson Duval's Sunday suit, his apparatus strains against the twill.

He wants to know what the hell's a Chickasaw from Oklahoma Territory doing in his parish anyway? And who ever heard of one of them playing piano like a colored? And why did this Huston stand and watch that night while the tent burned down?

When they raided The Haze and hauled Cate in, she had on a man's flannel shirt of dove gray and a waist-bunched pair of dockworker pants. She excited Duval more profoundly than his wife ever had in proper skirts—or out of them. Cate looked like she might spit when he asked her where her people were. What he meant was "How much Negro blood?" and she knew it. With those oval eyes, she could be a princess from a South Sea isle. He let her go when the alarm bell clanged—the tent ablaze at Pawnee Bill's.

Three days later she was with the 'breed. Huston.



From the start, she felt safe with Huston. They have a room on Cypress Street. Huston's five years older and he's been around. He kisses like he's been to every world inside her. For a week he slept in clothes and kept a sheet between them. Asked if she'd ever done it. Now they do it every night and day, and Cate's afraid she'll get too happy for the blues. She's never planned one day into her future. Now she has a baby coming and a man to love.

Huston acts the boss around the boys but with her he's empty, scared. Wants to know how a little girl can sing so big. LuLu taught her. The twelve-bar blues, the rhymes, the chords. And why is she in Slaughter? LuLu's fellow Benedicte got them out of Holy Family on the freights. They ended up in Baton Rouge, LuLu singing in a barrelhouse. They were safe there for

a while. One night a man came in and asked for "Catherine." Within the hour Cate was in disguise and on a freight. Got off in Slaughter, in The Haze.



Duval remembers every moment of that first time he saw Cate. She said she was twenty, from Knoxville, surname Paradiso. All lies, Duval is certain. She is sixteen at most. He knows New Orleans talk and a fake name when he hears them. Still he wanted to kiss her sunburned mouth. When the idiot deputy knocked her cap off he got three scarlet scratches down his cheek for the favor. She smelled like a hobo's cook-fire, which was maybe why her voice makes Duval think of smoke. Smoke and twilight and that time of day a man should feel good about going home.



Cate could lie forever in the narrow bed with Huston. He's the only one she's told about her family. How her father used to bring his opera singers home to teach her voice. His singers all adored him. Maestro Rainer Schofeld of the New Orleans Symphonic and Operatic Orchestra.

Her mother? Her mother, the hypocrite, owned the Basin Street bagnio called El Paradiso and always wanted Cate to be on stage. Well, now she is. Her mother, the hypocrite, the too-beautiful octoroon, pretended no part of Africa could reside within her veins. Or her daughter's veins. All the Ursulines, priests, French teachers, dressmakers, tutors, cotillions, governesses, and European husbands in the world cannot deny the legacy of blood. On the street they didn't treat Cate white, so why pretend? The night she snuck into a barrelhouse on Perdido Street and heard a girl sing "Black Alfalfa's Jailhouse Shouting Blues," she decided the way off the slave ship was to get back on.

For her sins she went to Holy Family. Now she has the family she wants. LuLu—somewhere—Huston, the unborn baby, the band.



Two A.M. Duval sips cold tea at his table in the back. LaFitte's steams with every shade of sweaty skin—black, brown, yellow—copper if you count the 'breed. Amber honey if you look at Cate. No white women of course, but two white monte throwers from St. Helena Parish who keep a loud game going in the corner. On the other side of Slaughter, he'd have to bust it up.

He recognizes Daphne, the nigger girl who irons for his wife. She has given Cate an ostrich plume and fixed it in her hair. Cate starts "Bleeding Heart Blues" and Daphne dances by herself—or writhes like a heathen in a cheap cotton dress. A big buck gets up to grab her by the waist and grind against her. Cate groans the line, *Not a soul to ease your mind*. Duval's soul has not been easy since the night he questioned Cate. Sacrilegious dreams. Putting a gold ring on her finger. She wears an ivory satin gown. He carries her into a yellow clapboard house where rosewood banisters curve toward shadows and heaven.

Up on the stage, Huston stamps the beat with one foot while his fingers flick across the keys. Where does that 'breed get his money? LaFitte pays him a dollar a night and a few folks throw nickels. Yet Huston's always buying rounds or sporting a vulgar silver watch-chain on his vulgar white vest. He plays piano with those insinuating fingers, a nasty brown cigarette stuck in his slit of a mouth. No doubt those fingers have explored every inch of Cate. No doubt she's cradled his thick Chickasaw head and let his slit of a mouth slobber on her breasts.



I'll take a piss before we start "Evil Man Blues." There's a spot out back where all the men shoot it to the petunias. Funny how the stars looked the same in Oklahoma. Yes, I set the fire. That bastard Duval calls me 'breed but all my blood is Chickasaw. We didn't belong in Oklahoma. They removed us. You ever been removed? Men like Pawnee Bill—an Irishman from Pittsburgh,

the bastard—take Chickasaw and pay them pennies to demean themselves. They pretend to be Comanche. You ever seen Comanche and Chickasaw side by side? I set the fire. I didn't know the canvas would go up that fast. Next day, Cate comes to LaFitte's and tells us she can sing. Jesus Christ can she sing. I would not have done it if I knew her first. Loved her first. A girl like Cate, you treat her different. Yes, I set the fire. Doesn't mean I don't love Cate.



Daphne's proud Cate sits beside her for the break. The boy brings Cate her Coca-Cola with fresh-chipped ice. Daphne opens her Chinese paper fan.

"You are built for that dress, child." She touches the blue beads, adjusts the ostrich plume. "Are you gonna do 'Black Snake'?"

"Shit, it's hot." Cate holds her hair up off her neck.

Duval, out of nowhere, out of shadows in the back, pulls up a chair and sits like he's invited. "Ladies."

Cate lets her hair drop. Daphne says, "Why Sheriff, how's your wife?"

"I need to talk to the Indian," he tells Cate.

Daphne intervenes. "Then talk to him."

Cate stares into her drink. "He's out back."

"That's too bad. I'll have to talk to you."



Duval has never dared to take the dream beyond the rosewood banisters. He carries Cate forever up and up the curving flight of stairs.

He's ashamed he's struck his wife. She nags him like a banshee. Why does he go to LaFitte's? Why must he carry a pistol off-hours? Why can't she join Ladies' Aid? Why did the tent catch fire? Why can't she wear earrings to church?

He prays to God that he might love his wife again. He prays to God to guide his hand in being fair and helping folks. Didn't he assess a white man cheating coloreds out of indigo? Didn't he disarm the crazy mulatto by the tracks who swung a pitchfork and screamed of Armageddon? Isn't he fulfilling every aspect of his oath of office?



Daphne hears the whole room hush because Duval sits down with girls. This sheriff will do anything. He beat that poor mulatto to a bloody mess beside the tracks. A simpleton who went to Lamb of Our Redeemer Baptist. The old men in The Haze weren't hurting anyone. Duval just makes a show of helping coloreds. His wife's a frightened rabbit in their fancy house. But he better watch out with Daphne. She'll backtalk God if she gets mad enough. For some reason Duval says to Cate, "I know police in New Orleans." Cate sips her Coca-Cola, sweat-shine on her upper lip.

Daphne says, "Yeah; I know the King of Chicago, but what of it?"

"You think anyone in New Orleans would want to know about this fellow Huston?"

Even Daphne knows to shut up now.

"You think anyone in New Orleans would want to know about Cate 'Parra-dee-zo'?"



The baby's name will be Louis Paradiso. He will have the copper skin of Huston, Cate's abundant black hair, her father Rainer's Austrian green eyes. He will be so beautiful even Cate will concede she sees her mother there. He will be born January 30, 1918 in Charity Hospital on Tulane Avenue in New Orleans and return with his mother to her parents' mansion on St. Charles Avenue. Cate will inherit her parents' fortune, invest it

in a recording company, lose it in '29. She will take her life at thirty, leaving Louis on his own.



Daphne kicks Cate's foot beneath the table. Get away. Cate sets down her Coca-Cola and tries to stand. Duval stays her with one hand. He seems a middling white man, but he won arm wrestling and target practice both at Parish Fair. Some folks gasp to see him clamp her amber arm.

Huston strolls in from the kitchen. Daphne sees him read the room. He feels the thickness of the room and sees Duval and Cate. He doesn't change his walk. He comes through the thickness of the room like nothing's different.



"Huston, stay with me." The last thing my mother said. Then I watched her die. In a hell-on-earth called Sulfur, Oklahoma, when I was four years old I watched my mother die from liquor—curl up in a ball, white foam bubbling from her lips. We didn't belong in Oklahoma. She rolled into a ball at my feet on the dirt floor, her stomach blown up like a pig bladder full of water. I curled up with her, shit all over, she was naked, but I curled up with her, dead for a day, maybe two. The stench is with me still. The only thing good from Oklahoma was the Negro woman, Mrs. Lovett, took me in. And her brother, Uncle Midas. She had six black children of her own, and still she took me in.



Daphne's heard all the versions. Some folks said the bass man Alphonse put the dirk in Huston's hand. Others said he had it in his shoe and Alphonse merely pulled Cate to the side. No one knew Duval inside his fancy suit would have a pistol. Even when he took it out, no one thought he'd shoot. He was smiling.

He smiled at Huston and his little shiny knife.

Cate said, "Stop it," but it came out like a whisper. Daphne put herself in front of Cate.

Duval was smiling. "This is for the tent and not the girl," he said. Whatever that meant. Daphne never knew.

Two explosions. So loud Daphne thought Armageddon was upon them, like the simpleton said.

Two holes in Huston, one in the arm—it would have healed—and another right above the silver chain. As he stood there, puzzled, a crater of blood opened on his white vest. He took a table and five whiskey glasses with him when he fell. From his knees, he looked at Cate. She went to him. Helped him stretch out as if to sleep. No one spoke. No doctor in Slaughter would come to LaFitte's for a copper-colored man. Duval ordered everyone out. They all stared at him. He pocketed the gun and left.

Huston took till dawn to die. His eyes rolled up and his feet scrabbled in the sawdust. Josiah packed the wound with a poultice of honey, garlic, and cayenne. The bleeding would not stop. You could smell it when his bowels gave way. Cate stayed with him on the floor, knees crushing the cobalt beads into his blood.



Wilson Duval, the youngest-ever sheriff of East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, walks down the hard-packed clay of Main. The monte throwers, if he needs them, can testify the 'breed waved a knife. A 'breed who by the way belonged in Oklahoma.

Chuff of locomotive and the crossing whistle ride the breeze from north of town. Must be the freight out of Baton Rouge, the three A.M.



Cate wonders what happens to a girl when her body tries to make a baby and mourn the father all at once. Her body contains the

whole world. Her body contains nothing. Her body could be the iron-colored clouds that press heat into Slaughter on summer afternoons but refuse to rain.

She sees a skinny girl, far off, in a wrecked landscape of trains, tents, burnt sky. That girl grieves, rages, spits, scratches, strangles. But Cate remains alone on Cypress Street, hoarding energy for Huston's child.