

Bessie

Written by:
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White Shooting Script
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Wet cobblestone alleys echo with trembling supplication.

SINGER (O.S.)

*Kiss me sweet,
I need some inspiration
Kiss me sweet,
Thrill me with sensation...*

A hot moan skips across muddy puddles, lands flatly in the spilled lamplight of a propped open stage door. Two pairs of boots stumble and push into each other, careening from one side of the alley to the next.

SINGER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

*Honey when you press your lovin'
lips to mine,
I get a funny feelin' creepin' down
my spine!0*

STAGEHAND

Ooooh...yeah.

BESSIE pastes her body to the front of a STAGEHAND's overalls, his face buried in her neck. Bessie lifts his lips to hers, but he clamps back onto her neck. Bessie pulls his hand from the wall, places it on her waist. Stagehand misreads, gropes her breast instead. Bessie shoves his hand away, disappointment flattening her smile.

Bessie tries again, moves his hand to her face, cradles it. Stagehand leaves it there. Bessie sinks into it, closes her eyes. Savors the small tenderness. Stagehand sloshes beer from a half empty bottle.

STAGEHAND (CONT'D)

Lemme put it in.

Bessie's eyes flutter open with sudden awareness.

BESSIE

I think it's fine just where it is.

STAGEHAND

Just a little teensy bit, honey.
Not *all* the way.

BESSIE

No papa---

WHOP!! Stagehand smacks Bessie across the face, drops his beer bottle. Glass sings against the brick wall.

Bessie reels against the cobblestone street, righting herself with slippery fingertips. Blood screams into her eyes. Stagehand unzips his fly, wrenches Bessie up by the elbow.

STAGEHAND

It's gonna feel good to you bab--

REAM!! Bessie whips a fist across Stagehand's crotch. Stagehand doubles over yowling zigzag pain. Blood winks from a glass shard tucked between Bessie's knuckles.

SINGER (O.S.)

*Oh kiss me now
I can't wait much longer
Please show me how
Can't you feel my love grow
stronger?*

Stagehand cranes up at her in between huffs, Bessie lets the shard drop onto the street.

STAGEHAND

Wha--?!

BESSIE

That doesn't mean we can't mess around a little bit. I just didn't wanna do alla that.

Stagehand crumples, Bessie helps herself to his handkerchief and presses it to her bleeding forehead.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

C'mon now, it was just getting good.

The stage door flys open and CLARENCE springs out, traces of oily Blackface staining his neck and collar .

CLARENCE

The hell happened to you??!!

BESSIE

Clarence?

CLARENCE

Told you to be here nine, nine-thirty!!

Clarence jerks Bessie backstage.

2 INT. 81 THEATER BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS 2

BESSIE
Time is it?

CLARENCE
'Leven o'clock! Hell!

TITLE CARD: BESSIE

3 INT. 81 THEATER BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS 3

Clarence yanks the handkerchief from Bessie's gash, jams a sequined headband on her head.

BESSIE
Ow!

Clarence dabs at a trickle of blood, throws an embroidered shawl around her shoulders.

CLARENCE
Ready?

Bessie reels. Clarence waves at the GAFFER straddled above, and the lights go dark. A lazy trumpet slurs the tragicomic whine of **YOUNG WOMAN'S BLUES**. An impatient spotlight sears its oval invitation onto the wing. Clarence presses an oversized NOTE into Bessie's palm, pushes her into the light.

4 INT. 81 THEATER STAGE - CONTINUOUS 4

Bessie is a forlorn lover, wanders miserably to centerstage.

BESSIE
*Woke up this mornin'
when chickens was crowin' for day,
Felt on the right side of my pilla,
my man had gone away
By his pilla he left a note
Readin' "I'm sorry, Jane,
you got my goat--
No time to marry,
no time to settle down."*

Bessie shakes her head, crushes the note against her chest.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*I'm a young woman and ain't done
runnin' 'round
(MORE)*

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*I'm a young woman and ain't done
 runnin' 'round*

Bessie suddenly wheels, threatens the front row.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*Some people call me a hobo,
 some call me a bum--
 Nobody knows my name,
 nobody knows what I've done!
 I'm as good as any woman in your
 town*

Bessie swells, marches to the other side of the stage.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep
 killer brown
 I ain't gonna marry,
 Ain't gon' settle down
 I'm gon' drink good moonshine
 and run these browns down*

A RICH-LOOKING WOMAN huffs, covers her mouth with her hand.
 Bessie wads up the note, tosses it to the ground.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*See that long lonesome road
 Lawd, you know it's gotta end
 And I'm a good woman and I can get
 plenty men.^{0A}*

5 INT. 81 THEATER BACKSTAGE - LATER

5

81 OWNER
 You git what everybody else gits.

BESSIE
 We not everybody else!

Theater owner snaps his cash box shut.

CLARENCE
 You said *five* dollars, sir. A
 little extra? For me and my sister.

81 OWNER
 Two dollars is good enough, and two
 dollars is what you'll take.

CLARENCE
 For a week's work?

81 Owner bustles out of the office, a BODYGUARD shields his exit. Bessie hurls her dollar coin after him.

BESSIE

You feedin' us peanuts, we might as well stayed with the damn circus!!

6 INT. BOARDING HOUSE - MORNING

6

An early breeze plays with gauzy knit curtains, Bessie lazes against a pillow-turned-headboard staring at her bare toes. Dawn kisses Bessie's bare shoulders, a pile of heavy coins droop forgotten in her tented lap. The sleeping form next to her stirs, Bessie places a protective hand on the blanketed form, wiggles her toes.

A7 EXT. CHATTANOOGA YARD- FLASHBACK

A7

YOUNG BESSIE wiggles her bare toes into the warm earth, leans deeper into an aproned lap. A veined, WOMAN'S HAND caresses Young Bessie's shoulder. Young Bessie picks at a honeysuckle plant. The WOMAN'S HANDS encircle Bessie's, turn the plant over, point out the best place to pinch the stem. YOUNG BESSIE watches the deft fingers, starts to smile as she traces up the sturdy arm, into a crook of scarred elbow...

LUCILLE (O.S.)

Can you see her this time?

B7 INT. BOARDING HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

B7

Lucille pecks Bessie on the arm. Bessie's eyes drift back to the present. Lucille kisses Bessie again, this time on the shoulder. Bessie, lifts Lucille's lips to her mouth. Tastes her. Lucille collapses on Bessie's arm, eyes the coins.

LUCILLE

Good week, at least.

BESSIE

Good *month*. I know washwomen who make more.

LUCILLE

Don't be thatta way.

BESSIE

I'm telling you. Mama ain't satisfied. I'm finna quit the 81!

LUCILLE

You not!

BESSIE

Not if it means quittin' you.

Bessie pulls Lucille close. Giggles and squeals escalate to smooches as they wrestle. BAM BAM BAM!!

HOUSE MOTHER

Bessie! You come outta there right now! I told you about having all those men in the room!

BESSIE

Ain't no mens in the room, Miss Taylor!

Lucille stifles a giggle.

LUCILLE

Just us ladies, ma'am!

Disgusted silence from the other side of the door. Lucille and Bessie snigger. Bessie presses a dollar coin into Lucille's palm.

BESSIE

Gon' and take her her board, she'll cool down.

Bessie admires Lucille's lacy-slipped form as she sashays to the door.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Coming to work with you today. I need me a new act.

7

INT. 81 THEATER - DAY

7

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

Maxine, turn those hips all the way to the right when you kick your left leg. You're half-assing it. Georgette, good! Mary Watson if I have to tell you to smile one more time, we havin' words!! David let's go from the top.

The pianist belts out a jaunty intro, a flock of TAN GIGGLING GIRLS rearrange themselves in a line.

Bessie bops and shimmies behind them, weaves herself in and out of mocking formation as they flounce, kick, and wiggle their way across the stage.

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

Francine baby you cloppin' around up there like a horse. A horse!! And how long you had them shoes? A week! Get it together. Bessie get down, now! Stop teasin' 'em, it's not your rehearsal yet.

Director shakes his head, scribbles disgusted notes.

BESSIE

I been workin' on a new bit, Mr. Scandruck!

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

You sayin' you wanna be in my chorus line?!

BESSIE

Me and some of the girls put something together.

Bessie signals to the piano player. Lucille sets aside her sewing, smiles as the CHORUS GIRLS peel off behind Bessie.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*...Oh I got what it takes
And it breaks my heart to give it
away.*

The girls dance a syncopated circle around Bessie.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*...I've been saving it up
For a long, long time--!!**OB***

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

You just keep right on saving it.

The piano player jangles the chord.

BESSIE

You don't like it?

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR

It's all right.

Rehearsal Director mounts the stage, drags the girls back into their places.

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

But it's not hitting on all sixes.
Now. If you're finished blowing my
rehearsal--

CHORUS GIRL 1

What about the bag test,
James?!

CHORUS GIRL 2

Yeah, give her the test!

Rehearsal Director snaps a crisp brown paper bag.

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

You must be lighter than.

The whole room cracks up. Lucille wilts. Bessie slaps the bag
out of the director's hand and knocks him down.

REHEARSAL DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

I got half a mind to fire all of
you if I. Don't. See. Some. Asses.
Shaking! David!!

8

INT. 81 THEATER - NIGHT

8

The house is packed from stage to rafters. The air is a
melange of King Leo, Clubman aftershave, and DAX hair grease
as the well-buffed citizens of Atlanta signify, strut, and
shimmy their finest furs and feathers. Bessie daubs her face
and pushes her way offstage to polite applause.

HOST

And the top prize for tonight's
raffle is...a gold tooth! Hol' on
to your tickets, now!

Bessie shrugs past the stretching, preening, lipstick
freshening throng of castmates and slumps into a seat in the
back of the house. The crowd hushes and the house seems to
dim to a new depth of blackness.

HOST (CONT'D)

But first, that Queen of melody,
that empress of Rhythm, it's the
real Mother of the Blues...**Ma**
Rainey!!!!

The crowd shouts their affection, Bessie looks around
surprised at their reaction.

THEATERGOER 1

I seen her three times in
Carolina!!

THEATERGOER 2

This is the real blues here!

A lone trumpeter takes the stage and whines a baleful tune. The audience falls reverent. The curtain goes up and a squat, sparkling woman proceeds to dwarf the stage and all the people surrounding it. MA RAINEY is almost too bright to look at as she steps forward arms raised, her thick necklace of twinkling twenty-dollar gold coins chiming and flirting off the stage lights. Ma drops a brand new suitcase, tags still on it, in the middle of the spotlight and continues her deliberate march to the very front edge of the stage.

Wet-looking pearls condense on Ma's bodice, sequins thrill from her skirt, a hundred gold tassels shimmy from her hemline, and it is almost a full minute before Bessie notices the moan that has been vibrating in her chest. Ma takes a breath and moans again, the crowd moans with her-- some aware, some not-- hypnotized by the conviction in her gaze.

Ma puffs out her throat and stares a blessing into every eye before even opening her lips to intone her first word.

MA

I said Oooooooooohhhhhh!!!

AUDIENCE

Oooooooooohhhhhh!!!

A tear arcs from Bessie's eye, not because she's upset but because she hasn't blinked in two minutes. Another tear drops into her limp palms, this time her mouth twisted with unknown feeling. Bessie remembers to breathe.

MA

*If you see me weepin' and you hear
me cry...²*

The audience twists, rocks, and raises its hands in surrender as Ma reaches into every chest and wrings out unarticulated pain. The presence of Ma expands to fill every seat, float under every boot, rise against the rafters, and push its way on out the front door. When the audience finally inhales, Ma Rainey fills up their lungs.

9

EXT. TRAIN YARD - NIGHT

9

Bessie picks her way along a rail, Clarence trots to keep with her.

CLARENCE

Rehearsal's at 6AM! I could be sleeping. Or at least partying.

BESSIE

Gon' then. I just wanna meet her.

CLARENCE

You can meet her tomo--

Bessie stops short at the edge of the railyard. Ma's PRIVATE TRAIN CAR is a sleeping dragon against the horizon. Her custom painted PROMO TRUCK idles nearby, three-foot gold leaf letters proclaim "MA RAINEY'S 1916 BLACK BOTTOM REVUE." Baroque gold stenciling and turquoise leaves tattoo the length of the truck and silver curliques weave in and out of perception.

10

INT. MA'S PRIVATE CAR - NIGHT

10

A DANCER peels off a purple-sequined bustier and hangs it on a padded silk hanger. Topless, she leans into a lighted mirror and swabs off her eyeshadow. A BAND MEMBER tinkers on a polished upright piano at one end of the car, while a CHORUS GIRL in a sheer nightgown tiptoes a pail of steaming water across an island chain of fluffy white rugs and sets it carefully at Ma's feet. Ma, enthroned on a gold-embroidered, overstuffed Queen Anne chair and matching Ottoman jiggles her empty glass and PA RAINEY refreshes it from a winking silver whiskey flask before resuming his litany.

PA

Greenville, Mississippi. Mobile, Alabama. A week on the road. Then Gainesville, Florida...

The chorus girl lowers Ma's feet into the water.

MA

Slow, slow, slow...ewww, mercy.

PA

...contract's only four nights. Then, we could go to--

MA

But why we backtracking to Mississippi before going on to 'Bama? Seem like we should just gon' on from here. Do a longer run in Mobile, mebbe even *add* Huntsville 'steada going backwards and waste an extra week on the road doing nothin'.

PA

'Cause we'll miss the rest of cotton season there. Pickin' already started last week, we'll be making it just in time. Catch everybody with they paychecks. Besides, harvest don't start in Florida for another two weeks.

MA

I hate Mississippi.

Ma strokes the hair of the chorus girl.

PA

I can call the theater, see can we switch it around--

MA

(to CHORUS GIRL)

You been using that goober oil like I told you?

CHORUS GIRL

Yes ma'am.

MA

Nice and soft.

(to PA)

But what about Tennessee? There's Memphis, Chatta--

Bessie tumbles through the door. Ma's hand is a cobra darting into the silken folds of her dressing gown and unsheathing a custom turquoise-handled .22 Pistol. The piano player skips a note, the chorus girl's hands freeze in the water, the dancer stares past her reflection in the mirror.

PA

How'd you get in here?!

BESSIE

I want a necklace like that.

MA

Well you got two options: you can try and rob me or you can sing.

Bessie takes a step forward. Pa shoots up defensively.

BESSIE

Can I join your show?

PA
You can see yourself out.

MA
Where you from?

BESSIE
Blue Goose Hollow.

The piano player sniggers.

PA
A who what?

BESSIE
Tennessee.

MA
It's a street name?

BESSIE
Where I'm from they don't have
street names.

The topless dancer cackles, Bessie looks daggers at her. The
laughter dries instantly.

MA
That's where your people from too?

BESSIE
They died a long time ago.

MA
Well. That's too bad.

Ma vanishes her gun back into hiding, her necklace of twenty-
dollar gold coins clinking around her neck as she refluffs
herself and motions the chorus girl to lift out her feet.

MA (CONT'D)
Loneliest thing in the world is a
motherless child.

BESSIE
Got two brothers, and my sister
Viola she--

MA
Lemme shave you dry, they don't
'count for much do they? You on
your own.

The train lurches to a start, and the compartment springs back to life. Dancer steps out of her sequined panties, piano player picks up his tune, chorus girl dries Ma's feet.

MA (CONT'D)

Well Miss Blue Goose, I thank you
for calling.

Bessie looks over her shoulder at the scrubby landscape picking up speed. Clarence waves wildly, trots alongside.

CLARENCE

Bess! 'Ey Bess come down from
there! Quick!

Bessie spins back to Ma.

BESSIE

Do I audition or--

MA

I heard you in the show, I already
know you can sing. So stay or jump,
bitch!

BESSIE

The train is--

Ma heaves into her five-foot-three glory, her gold-wreathed neck and wrists tsk tsking. She snaps her fingers at the piano player, waves the chorus girl away.

MA

I don't give a damn about a train,
a thunderstorm, a shotgun, or what!
You just gotta decide for yourself!

(beat)

The Saint Louis Blues, the Chicago
Blues, the Gin House Blues, the My-
Man-Left-Me Blues. They all the
same song, ain't they? With the
same three chords. And you done
heard 'em bout a dozen hundred
times from a dozen hundred people.
So now what makes folks wanna hear
them from you? You gotta put
something else *in it*. Blues is not
about the people knowing you, it's
about you knowing the people.

Ma pats the Ottoman, Bessie sits. Ma takes Bessie's chin in her hands, tilts her face for a better look at her forehead.

MA (CONT'D)

Who done you like this? Hmmm?

Ma unscrews a jar of cocoa butter, massages it into Bessie's now raised and shiny scar from end to end.

MA (CONT'D)

Big 'ol gal like you letting folks beat on you.

(beat)

This might stay forever.

The nude dancer materializes at Ma's elbow, eyes Bessie. Everything clearly visible under her gaping robe, her breast brushes Ma's arm.

MA (CONT'D)

Why you over here fanning yourself around? Shet the door good on your way out.

Dancer eyes Bessie again, huffs toward the door.

MA (CONT'D)

Where you goin' 'thout my sugar?

DANCER turns half-chastized, half-flattered and switches back up to Ma. She plants a long soft kiss on Ma's cheek. Ma turns her lips, the dancer deposits a long soft kiss there too. Bessie smirks. The dancer pulls her robe shut and sways off, beaming lust over her shoulder. Bessie is still smirking, Ma pinches her on the cheek.

MA (CONT'D)

Whatchu grinning at, Blue Goose?
Huh? Whatchu know about it?

BESSIE

Same thing you know.

Ma chuckles, resumes her tender work.

MA

What's your name, pretty lady?

Bessie's eyes flutter upward, disbelieving the queenly benefactor above her.

BESSIE

Bessie Smith.

11 INT. MA'S PRIVATE CAR - DAY 11

Bessie pores over the final stitch in her sequined top. She presses it against her body to admire her work in the mirror. Bessie sweeps her pincurls away from her face, beams at her new self.

ROADIE
We're switchin' over.

12 EXT. TRAIN YARD - DAY 12

Bessie marvels with a group of CAST as the "Tolliver's Circus" truck pulls away and Ma's dedicated PROMO TRUCK queues up behind a aqua-painted truck that reads "Rabbit Foot Minstrels 19-- Tour". A PAINTER stencils in the last two digits of the year over a freshly painted patch-- "1918". The Roadie hands her a flyer.⁴ Bessie scans the flyer, grins as she catches a banner at the bottom "...Featuring Miss Bessie Smith!"

13 INT. NIGHTCLUB OFFICE - DAY 13

Ma haggles with a theater owner, Pa stands ready with the "figure book". Bessie blends into the corner, cradling Ma's hat. Her eyes drink in Ma's every move.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER
So like we said--

MA
How many seats in the house?

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER
Two hundred.

PA
I counted two-fifty.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER
Uh--I meant two hundred *plus*. Give or take.

MA
And you sho' eager to take.

Theater Manager eyes Bessie.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER
Does she need to be here?

MA

She needs to understand why TOBA stands for Tough On Black Asses.

Nightclub owner squirms, winces at Bessie.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER

It's actually the Theater Owner's Booking Association. T-O-B--

PA

What's the cover?

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER

A nickel.

Ma unfolds a newspaper clipping.

MA

Hmmm. Newspaper ad say a dime.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER

Well we don't always--

PA

Twelve dollars and fifty cents.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER

Pardon?

MA

That's ten cents times two hundred and fifty seats. Our contract is 50/50 per head.

PA

Twelve dollars and fifty cents. In Advance. Every night.

NIGHTCLUB MANAGER

Well that's...we have no way of knowing how many people will actually show up.

PA

We'll refund your no-shows.

MA

Bessie will be counting the empty seats.

Bessie, enjoying the verbal ping pong looks stunned.

PA

Twelve dollars and fifty cents.

The theatre owner slams open his lock box, begrudgingly rations out singles.

MA

Boy aren't you gettin' a helluva deal! Now let's talk about the bar--

14

INT. NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

14

Bessie stomps off stage to weak applause. The restless NIGHTCLUB AUDIENCE shifts, sighs, laughs and otherwise goofs off. Bessie bellies up to the bar, still in costume.

BESSIE

Gin.

SPORTIN' MAN tosses a dollar coin on the table and edges closer to Bessie.

SPORTIN' MAN

I got that Clyde.

(to BESSIE)

Gin'll make you crazy. Lemme buy you a whiskey instead?

Bessie ignores him. The Bartender smirks as he serves her.

SPORTIN' MAN (CONT'D)

That stand and shout shit might work back home, but you gotta come with some "hoopdee-doo" to hold these city folks attention.

BESSIE

I 'ont give a damn what you think!
You don't know from nothin'.

Bessie downs her drink and slaps down her own dollar coin. She catalogues the man's silk lapels, velvet fedora, pointy toed shoes, 14K smile.

SPORTIN' MAN

That's alright gorgeous. I don't wanna fuss with ya.

Bessie's eyes hang on him at the word "gorgeous", he kisses her hand. Bessie pulls away.

BESSIE

Just 'cause you got a little sport
in your strut don't make you no
authority!

SPORTIN' MAN

I was just givin' you my opinion,
that's all.

Sportin' Man downs his whiskey, picks up his cane.

SPORTIN' MAN (CONT'D)

See you tonight.

BESSIE

Not hardly.

SPORTIN' MAN

Yeah you will.

Sportin' Man tips his hat and swaggers off toward the stage.
A chorus girl settles on the stool next to Bessie.

CHORUS GIRL

Hey.

BESSIE

Hey. You seen Ma around?

Chorus girl giggles and points at the stage.

CHORUS GIRL

You were just talking to him!

Bessie does a double-take. Sportin' Man climbs the stairs to
a swell of applause. Ma tips her hat, sings *PROVE IT ON ME.* ⁶

MA

*I went out last night
With a crowd of my friends
It must've been women,
'Cause I don't like no men*

Hoots and shouts from the audience, Ma winks at Bessie.

MA (CONT'D)

*...Wear my clothes just like a fan
Talk to the gals like any 'ol man
'Cause they say I do it
Ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me*

Ma chastises the audience.

MA (CONT'D)

Wait minute, wait minute now! I see
some of y'all eyes just a'rollin,
looking for my Johnson. That ain't
ladylike!

Bawdy yelps from the audience.

MA (CONT'D)

Trust me mama, I got everything you
need!

Cheers and catcalls.

MA (CONT'D)

*They say I do it
Ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me...*

15

INT. NIGHTCLUB - LATER

15

Ma, still in men's drag, has one chorus girl on her lap and another under her arm. Bessie, a roadie, and three other women booze, trash-talk, and laugh as a server brings a Chinese food feast to the table--mountains of lo mein, platters of sizzling meat, bowls of steaming dumplings. Ma tips her glass at Bessie.

MA

...I almost got her to go to bed
with me!!

BESSIE

You ain't "almost" nothing!

The group cracks up.

CHORUS GIRL

Ain't no *almost* right here, baby.

Chorus girl grabs Ma's face in both hands and kisses her.

ROADIE

Ohhhhh!!

ROADIE 2

Ma gets more tail than me!

Another chorus girl claims Ma's fedora, perches it atop her head in a play for attention. A third chorus girl squeezes Bessie's thigh beneath the table. Bessie laughs, looks around uneasily as she inserts herself under Bessie's arm.

MA

Whatchu' lookin' round for?! Who
gon' see you and so what if they
do?!

Ma raises up her bottle.

MA (CONT'D)

They got to prove *it on you* baby!!!

A sloshing tablewide toast and cheer.

16 SERIES OF SHOTS: MA INDUCTS BESSIE INTO THE SPORTIN' LIFE 16

--Ma fixes Bessie's tie, knocks on a back alley door. A
secret party unfolds through a peek hole.

--Ma and Bessie play poker in the back of a juke joint. Ma in
sequins talks the loudest and drinks the hardest, scoops up a
wad of money with ring studded fingers

--Ma tends Bessie's bedside, changes a cool cloth on her head
as she recovers from another hangover "sick"

--Ma bangs a note on the piano, coaches Bessie

--Ma's promo truck pulls up to a white-painted truck adorned
with sunshine and orange trees: "Florida Blossom Minstrels".
Clarence jumps out with a raggedy suitcase and first-class
grin. Bessie jumps into his arms.

17 INT. EMPTY THEATER - DAY 17

Ma, arms crossed, waits on an empty stage. Bessie clomps out
to the center.

MA

Why you standin' way back there
for?

Bessie takes a few steps forward.

MA (CONT'D)

Keep on going.

Bessie walks up two more steps.

MA (CONT'D)

I ain't said stop.

Bessie walks to the boundary of stage lamps.

MA (CONT'D)

Little more.

Bessie's toes crest the edge of the stage.

BESSIE

Ma!

MA

That's about right. Now you feel that?

BESSIE

Feel like I'ma fall!

MA

That's how it should feel every time. If you not risking nothing, neither will they.

Ma takes Bessie's shoulders, walks her back a few steps. Arm still around her, Ma scans the empty auditorium.

MA (CONT'D)

Now. Which one of these heifers stole your man?

BESSIE

Nobody's here--

MA

Pick somebody. How about her? On the left. Three rows back.

Ma's eyes narrow at the imaginary rival. Bessie frowns at the empty seat.

BESSIE

Yeah...yeah that look like her.

MA

Now what you got to say to that bitch?

BESSIE

I--

Ma points at an empty seat along a back aisle.

MA

And there! That's that pinchback man what stole all your money.

Bessie glares at the chair, her hand snaps to her hip.

BESSIE

That's him!

Bessie boils with imagined insult. Ma backs away.

MA

Now tell 'em about theyselves--

18 SCENE NUMBER SKIPPED 18

19 INT. ORNATE THEATER - NIGHT 19

Bessie waits in the wings, smooths her embroidered gown as she watches Ma suffer in the spotlight, wail the first verse of *WEEPING WOMEN'S BLUES*.⁷

MA

*Lord you see me weepin'
And you hear me cry,
Lord you see me weepin'
And you hear me cry,*

CLARENCE

(whispers)

You're gonna be great.

MA

*I ain't weeping 'bout no money
It's that man of mine...*

Ma, tapped into a genuine sorrow, extends a fervent hand to Bessie. Bessie emerges into the luminous circle of stage.

BESSIE

*Lord this mean old engineer
Cruel as he could be
This mean old engineer
Cruel as he could be*

Bessie and Ma hold hands. The crowd trembles.

MA & BESSIE

*Took my man away
And blowed the smoke back at me*

Ma leans in, confides to the front row

MA

*I'm going down South
Won't be back till Fall*

AUDIENCE 1
That's right!

AUDIENCE 2
Yes I am!

MA (CONT'D)
I'm going down South
Won't be back till Fall--

Bessie drops Ma's hand, hams up the punchline.

BESSIE
If I don't find my Easy Rider
Ain't coming back at all!

The house comes down. A woman jumps out of her seat. A muscled suit, JACK GEE, puts down his drink and leans in.

AUDIENCE 2A
You tell it, Bessie!!

Ma looks over at Bessie, but Bessie has disappeared behind a mask of arrogance. She waggles her head and roars.

BESSIE
Yeah, if I find my Easy Rider
Ain't coming back at all!!

Something breaks in Ma's eyes. She watches the flower of the audience's face turn toward Bessie like the sun.

20

INT. MA' PRIVATE CAR - LATER

20

Ma sulks over a glass of whiskey. Pa rubs her back, coos in hushed tones. Bessie bursts in jubilant, arms filled with four bouquets of flowers and a bottle of gin.

BESSIE
I mean, I ain't never heard 'em
like that!

Pa excuses himself with a sour nod, Bessie high on the moment, blunders on.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
We sung that song!!

MA
You remember what I tole you 'bout
the Blues being about you knowing
the people and not the other way
around?

BESSIE

Ha! Yeah I *knowed* everybody in there, and they *knowed* me.

MA

Well you shol' do love yourself! That Gin finally made you blow your top, huh?

An old switch flips in Bessie.

BESSIE

I did good!

MA

It's not a matter of being good--

BESSIE

You just busted 'cause they wasn't yelling for you like they was yelling for me!

MA

You better turn your damper down--

BESSIE

I ain't scared of you!

Ma rises, butts her five feet against Bessie's six.

MA

I never asked you to be! All I ask you for is respect. Respect for yourself. Respect for the song--

BESSIE

Yeah, I see you *respect* the extra money *I'm* bringin' in.

MA

Lemme git you told little gal, 'cause I see you ain't got your lesson yet! It's my name on this train. My name on them flyers. It's in my name that everybody in this company takes that stage. I'm older than you, these songs is older than me, and the blues is older than us both.

Bessie backs down.

MA (CONT'D)

Now until you can get over y'self, you better go back to dueceing. You not ready to *headline*.

BESSIE

Dueceing? No. I'm not second to nobody anymore. Best we shake hands and go.

Bessie quivers at the door, begs for Ma to stop her.

MA

Well. Take my goddamn shoes off!

Bessie steps out of the glittering heels.

21 EXT. MA'S PRIVATE CAR - CONTINUOUS

21

Bessie staggers away from Ma's trailer, weaves a teary zigzag toward the road. Clarence catches up to her, his face falls.

CLARENCE

S'wrong? What happened?

BESSIE

We startin' our own show.

Bessie unscrews the top of the gin and swigs deeply.

CLARENCE

Our own show?! This is *Ma Rainey!*
We just getting started.

BESSIE

I'm finished with starting.

CLARENCE

Bessie wait! Let's think about this here--I'ma go talk to Ma!

Bessie's path hardens into a line. Her bare feet kick up puffs of dust. Clarence scrambles for Ma's trailer.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

I'm coming! Don't leave!

A sequined dress against a long dusty road. Bessie doesn't look back.

22 SERIES OF SHOTS: BESSIE & CLARENCE BUILD THEIR OWN SHOW

22

--Bessie and Clarence meet the afternoon train, Lucille and a handful of MUSICIANS who we recognize from the 81 hop off with patched, tattered suitcases. LATER: Bessie circles a table serving up pinto beans.

The musicians smile their thanks and lean in closer to Clarence, who explains and gesticulates at the head of the table.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

What we're doing is bringing the
South to the North. A little taste
of home for all these homesick
Yankees.

A round of nods and smiles. Bessie disappears into the back where Lucille pours drinks, a "table for two" set on the bed.

--Clarence shakes hands with a THEATER OWNER, Bessie counts a stack of bills and deposits them into her titty bank

--A typesetter carefully lays printing plates into place
"Bessie Smith: Chattanooga Blues--At the NEW Royal Theater!
1921 Philadelphia, PA ". Bessie supervises.

--Bessie directs the production designer in the carpentry of elaborate set pieces. Curlicue clouds, an embroidered Sun, a Sunflower form is cut just so.

--Lucille covers Bessie's eyes, leads her to the curb. Clarence yanks the cloth off a gleaming two-tone Duesenberg Model J Convertible. A banner draped on one side brags "Bessie Smith and her Down Home Trio". Bessie hoots, Clarence beams. Lucille drags Bessie over for a ride.

23

INT. THEATER - DAY

23

Bessie lounges in the second row with her feet propped up. Lucille fans her. Clarence reads from a note card onstage.

CLARENCE

Next we have Miss Doreen Dupree
from Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

A very thin, LIGHT SKINNED GIRL sashays onto the stage, popping her gum. Bessie digs into her before she can even reach the big "X" taped center stage.

BESSIE

That a real name or a made-up one?

LIGHT GIRL 1

Hattiesburg is a real--

BESSIE

Not Hattiesburg, I know where the
hell Hattiesburg is.

(MORE)

BESSIE (CONT'D)

I'm talkin' bout "Doreen Dupree"
that sound like some made-up, store
bought shit to me.

(to LUCILLE)

Don't that sound like some
Vaudeville mess to you? Whose mama
and daddy gonna name 'em something
go together like that?

(to LIGHT GIRL)

You pick it out of a magazine or
something?

The girl plants her hands on her hips, and leans into the
assault still popping her chewing gum.

LIGHT GIRL 1

It's on my *birth certificate*.

BESSIE

They *have* birth certificates in
Hattiesburg, Mississippi? And take
that damn gum out your mouth,
nobody wanna see you up there
chewing like a cow!

LIGHT GIRL 1

Where do I--

BESSIE

Hol' it in your damn hand,
Hattiesburg!!

Light Girl spits the gum into her hand as daintily as
possible. The girl whispers a 5,6,7,8 count under her breath
and twitches out a gangly, robotic one-two shuffle.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Wait, hol', hol' hol', hol', hol'!!
What is that?!

LIGHT GIRL 1

I'm...um...dancing ma'am? I wanna
be in your chorus line?

BESSIE

You better sing something first.

LIGHT GIRL 1

I don't know how to sing, I just--

BESSIE

You don't know how to sing?! If you
wanna be in my show, you gotta be
able to sing, dance, and tell a
damn joke or two.

The girl takes a breath, squeaks out a wobbly first verse.

LIGHT GIRL 1

Well I woke up this morning--

BESSIE

That's enough!! Clarence give her
the bag test!

Clarence holds a crisp brown paper bag up to the girl. The
girl notes her lighter-than complexion, beams at Bessie.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

The hell you grinnin' for?! You
failed!

The girl's face drops.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

You must be darker than the bag to
be in my show! Get gone with your
high yella ass! NEXT!

CLARENCE

Etta Johnson. Bellbuckle,
Tennessee.

BESSIE

Bellbuckle? Looord...

Another skinny girl, lighter than the first waltzes out
onstage. Bessie balls up the bag and hurls it at the girl.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

No Yella Bitches! NEXT!!

A24 INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A24 *

Bessie dozes in Lucille's lap, Lucille massages her arms. *

LUCILLE *

What if I didn't pass your bag
test? *

Bessie tightens her arms around Lucille, doesn't answer. *

Lucille nudges her. *

LUCILLE (CONT'D) *
Hmm? *

BESSIE *
What? *

LUCILLE *
You heard me. *

BESSIE *
Heard you say what? *

LUCILLE *
What if I didn't pass your bag *
test? *

BESSIE *
I never give you no test. *

LUCILLE *
Oh, you *test* me. *Daily*. *

Lucille ejects Bessie from her lap. Bessie swipes at her. *

LUCILLE (CONT'D) *
No, you tell *me*. *

BESSIE *
C'mon now Lucy. *

Bessie reaches for Lucille, Lucille slaps her hand. *

LUCILLE *
No, I want to know. Would you still *
love me? *

BESSIE *
You'd still be you. *

LUCILLE *
And how would you know that? Would *
you even give yourself a chance to *
know that? *

Bessie forces her way back to Lucille's lap, folds Lucille's *
arms back around her. *

BESSIE *
You know how I feel. *

LUCILLE *
I need you to say it. *

Bessie pulls Lucille's hand in for a kiss. Lucille resists. *

BESSIE *
You know. *

LUCILLE *
No I don't know. *

Bessie pulls Lucille down for a real kiss. *

BESSIE *
You *know*. *

LUCILLE *
Then say it. *

Bessie holds Lucille's gaze, sighs at the question in her eyes. *

BESSIE *
It wouldn't matter. *

LUCILLE *
It wouldn't matter what? *

BESSIE *
It wouldn't matter about your color. *

LUCILLE *
And? *

BESSIE *
And... You know I...I *cares* for you. *

LUCILLE *
You *cares* for me? *

Lucille bops Bessie with a pillow. Bessie flips over, topples Lucille with a flurry of kisses. *

LUCILLE (CONT'D) *
You *cares* for me? Is that all? *

BESSIE *
No it ain't all! Why you actin' up today? *

Bessie and Lucille are a tangled giggling knot. *

LUCILLE *
You better tell me something. *

BESSIE *
I'm gonna show you instead... *

24 EXT. DETROIT THEATER - NIGHT 24

A "SOLD OUT" strip guards Bessie's Headline Marquee . A stream of shiny shoes, razor sharp pants creases, and lacy hems flood out the door. Catcalls and outstretched palms push at Bessie in the center of the flood as she bubbles toward her waiting car. A glittering Bessie waves back, shoos Lucille into the car ahead of her. Jack Gee shoulders his way through the crowd, is stopped by Clarence fending off other well-heeled patrons. Bessie's car peels off, Jack smiles as the tide of waving fans spills into the street.

25 INT. BESSIE'S HOTEL ROOM - DAY 25

Bessie lounges on the bed counting her money. A knock on the door, Bessie stashes her cash box beneath her pillow and signals Clarence to answer it. Clarence, a hand behind his back on a gun in his waistband bellows through the door.

CLARENCE

Who is it?!

JACK GEE (O.S.)

I come to audition for Miss Bessie Smith.

CLARENCE

I ain't ask you what you want, I asked you who you are.

JACK GEE (O.S.)

Open the door and see, big man.

Bessie, intrigued by the tough talk smirks, nods to Clarence. JACK GEE is silky smooth and limestone rugged all at once. His fine stenciled brows and baby doll lashes accent cold, dead eyes. His soft, clean shaven skin clashes with the hard boxer's jaw beneath. His thickly muscled chest and legs contradict his narrow, graceful gait. He pours into the room, his eyes only on Bessie as he takes off his hat.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

My name is Jack Gee, Ma'am. I'm thrity-two years old, from Titustown, Virginia. Finished school through the tenth grade, I'm nobody's husband and nobody's daddy. I make Thirteen Dollars and Seventy Five Cents a week working as a security guard at the five and dime and I make another two dollars and eighty cents working weekends at the Top Hat.

(MORE)

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

I have my own two-bedroom apartment and drive a brand-new 1921 Davis Touring. I don't believe in church, but I do believe in God. And I know for the God's honest truth that you're the most beautiful woman that ever sung the blues, or any other woman period. And I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance this fine afternoon.

BESSIE

Can you sing?

JACK GEE

Oh yes.

BESSIE

Can you dance?

JACK GEE

Oh yes.

BESSIE

Auditions for the show are over.

JACK GEE

I'm not auditioning for the show, I'm auditioning to be your man.

BESSIE

You look a little small.

JACK GEE

I'm built for speed.

Clarence rolls his eyes, gives JG the stink-eye. Bessie is thrown against the pillow with amusement.

BESSIE

Really now?

JACK GEE

Or maybe you only audition *women*?

Bessie bristles.

BESSIE

I audition *whosoever* I please. I can give it as hard as I can take it and I don't mind goin' to jail.

26 INT. DETROIT SPEAKEASY - NIGHT

26

JG pushes past a BOUNCER, Bessie purring on his shoulder. JG glides up to a "reserved" booth, deposits Bessie into a seat. JG nods to a milling WAITER.

JACK GEE

Bottle'a Gin for the lady. And a glass for me.

A nearby table of GANGSTERS whisper and stare. GANGSTER 1 takes a long sensuous drag of joint, offers it to Bessie.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

The lady don't smoke.

BESSIE

The hell she don't.

Bessie snatches the proffered reefer and drags--the felonious table guffaws. Bessie passes the joint back. Jack stiffens.

GANGSTER 1

He your man?

BESSIE

Naw, he's still *auditioning*.

More guffaws from the table. Jack becomes granite.

GANGSTER 1

Let's dance, then.

Gangster 1 glides to his feet, extends a hand.

JACK GEE

Touch her hand 'Cholly, you'll draw back a nub.

BESSIE

And what if I touch his?

SWIP! Jack is a panther up on the table. Swipes a razor across Gangster's jaw. Gangster tackles Jack onto the table before he even knows he's cut. SWIP! Jack's razor across the other side of Gangster's face. Chaos.

27 INT. CAR - NIGHT

27

Clarence tears out of the parking lot. JG and Bessie go at it in the backseat.

BESSIE
You was so brave, Papa!

JACK GEE
See? See how crazy I am 'bout you?

JG presses Bessie into a furious kiss. Bessie shoves his hand under her dress.

BESSIE
Your audition ain't over yet.

Bessie unzips JG's pants, Clarence frowns in the rearview.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
Keep your eyes on the road!!

28 INT. MANAGER OFFICE - DAY

28

A MANAGER clamps his cash box shut. A BODYGUARD flexes. Clarence sweats. Jack leans in a corner.

BESSIE
We still fifteen dollars short.

MANAGER
Ten is what everybody gets.

CLARENCE
We--we had a contract sir--

Manager slings the box in the safe, starts to close it, Jack stops the door with his toe. Bodyguard flexes. SCHICK. Jack's straight razor whispers, his voice is a cool edge.

JACK GEE
I'll cut you every way but loose.

Bodyguard shrinks. Manager swallows, re-opens the cash box. Bessie beams, Clarence shrinks.

29 EXT. "BIG NINTH" STREET CHATTANOOGA - DAY

29

STAGEBOYS smooth jubilant posters into place "Bessie Smith! Tonight Only! LIVE for the first time in Chattanooga". A theater marquee shouts in all Caps "WELCOME HOME!"

30 INT. BESSIE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

30

Bessie is a bubbling explosion of energy. She cranes her neck at the WELCOME sign, jabs her finger at familiar sights.

BESSIE

--And, and remember when we did that show at Don's place?!

CLARENCE

You don't remember that.

BESSIE

Yeah I do! Lookit!!

Bessie jabs the window, drags Jack Gee over to see.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

And that's our corner! Our corner!!

CLARENCE

A penny a song!

BESSIE

And see that gin joint? That's where I made my first whole dollar.

CLARENCE

And spent it, too.

BESSIE

Ooh ohhh and lookit JG!! It's all still here. It's it's--

Bessie points at something-- her voice chokes up with memory. Jack folds his arm around her, pecks her cheek.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Nothing's changed...

31 EXT. SHACK/BESSIE'S CAR - DAY

31

A swarm of tattered CHILDREN trails Bessie's car like lazy exhaust. Clarence eases the car to stop in front of a dusty tin roofed shack. Dark smoke curls from a crooked stack. A giant WASH POT boils in the hard scabble yard. A web of overlaid clotheslines wave limp greeting.

SWARM BOY 1

See? It's her, it's her!

SWARM BOY 2

Naw it ain't--

Bessie rises from the car--her shimmering bodice, winking Gold jewelry, and feathered hat making her an exotic bloom against the desolate landscape.

Clarence and Lucille unfold from the car. Jack pops his collar, extends his elbow to Bessie.

Bessie takes it, they start toward the house when a WILD SIX YEAR OLD GIRL elbows her way to the front of the swarm. Starts belting:

WILD CHILD

*A good man
Is hard to find
You always get
Another kind--*

Wild child pops her frayed dress above dusty, scabby knees.

WILD CHILD (CONT'D)

*So if your man is nice
Take my advice
Hug him in the morning
Kiss him every night
Give him plenty lovin' --7A*

Wild child grinds her non-existent hips in clumsy emulation.

BESSIE

Come here right now!

The swarm scampers away, but Wild Child steps up, brazen. She shudders but her eyes wink fire, tiny fists on her sides.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

You know all those words?

WILD CHILD

Yeah?

BESSIE

You know what you singing?

Wild Child shrugs, looks down at her bare feet.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Hol' out your hand right now!

The little girl extends a trembling palm, braces herself for a blow. Bessie places a ten dollar bill in it. Wild Child is stunned, her fist snaps shut around the bill, she steps back.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Keep singing 'em. Make sure that
all you're doing is singing them.

Wild child dashes off. Stops, looks back at Bessie.

WILD CHILD

You pretty.

Wild child darts down an alley, flits around a corner. Bessie watches until she's gone.

32

INT. SHACK - LATER

32

A showdown. VIOLA bores a silent hole into Bessie's forehead and Bessie bores right back. Bessie's glittering clothes, feathers, crowd out the entire room. A cluster of silent, OVERDRESSED RELATIVES lean from the thin walls like peeling wallpaper. Viola, conspicuously under-dressed, drills smoke out her nose, breaks the standoff.

VIOLA

Well.

Viola's eyes flick over Bessie from head to toe.

VIOLA (CONT'D)

I guess you think you're something.

BESSIE

How you?

VIOLA

You care?

Clarence sputters.

CLARENCE

I think I'ma--uh-- show Lucille and Jack around.

Clarence leads Lucille out, Jack follows. Jack checks in with Bessie as he passes, Bessie nods. Viola clocks it.

VIOLA

That your man?

BESSIE

You got somethin' to eat? Drink?

Viola shrugs, lights another cigarette. The heat in the room is oppressive, sucks out all the air. A line of sweat forms on Bessie's lip, she ignores it. Viola chuckles.

VIOLA

Old city gal, huh? Cain't stand to be in regular folks houses no more.

Bessie springs to her feet, pounces on the Icebox. CLANK. Bessie yanks again, the door won't budge. Bessie spots the rusty PADLOCK clamping the door shut. Viola chuckles.

Lifts a key out of her bosom on a leather strap. The key sparkles a dare on her bosom.

BESSIE

You *still* keeps the food locked up.

VIOLA

Y'all was like little rats. How else was I 'sposed to keep food in the house? Feed six people?

Bessie unfolds a five dollar bill, beckons two gaunt COUSINS.

BESSIE

Go get us a case of Coca Cola. Lots of ice. And as many 'tata chips and peanuts as you can get.

The dutiful boys grab a galvanized tub, race off the porch.

VIOLA

Oh golly! A whole case of Coca Cola. After fifteen years. Ain't you a saint?

Bessie slings a fat roll of money on the table, Viola is silenced. Viola eyes the roll like a trap. Bessie circles.

BESSIE

Don't drink it up.

VIOLA

You one to talk.

Bessie regains her seat, Viola still eyeing the roll.

BESSIE

You the one locking up food and such.

VIOLA

You don't look like you missed no meals.

BESSIE

I shol' didn't eat 'em here, did I?

Touché. Viola snatches the roll, vanishes it in her lap like a magic trick. She doesn't meet Bessie's gaze.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

I got some tickets for tonight--

VIOLA

I got somewhere else to be.

Viola catalogues Bessie, her lips forming and reforming a thousand different insults. Instead she smiles.

VIOLA (CONT'D)

You been by Mama's grave yet?

33 EXT. CHATTANOOGA STREET - NIGHT

33

Bessie and her entourage yelp, skip, and cavort through shadowy unnamed streets. High on gin, reefer, and the triumph of the night, Bessie is impervious. She herds her phalanx of DANCERS down an alley. Echoes of distant piano and laughter.

DANCER 1

How you know where you going?

LUCILLE

Ain't no street signs, no lights, or nothing!

BESSIE

I tol' you mama, this is Blue Goose
Hollow! I know these streets better
than JG's ding-a-ling!

Hoots and laughter. Bessie bends another corner, a lit-up house jangles and sways in front of them. PARTYGOERS on the balcony raise a cheer at the sight of Bessie and her crew.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

This is my town!!

34 INT. HOUSE PARTY - LATER

34

Bessie machines through an overladen plate. Porkchops, rice and gravy, string beans. As soon as she makes a clear spot, the HOSTESS fills it with more food. A frosty glass of Gin at her elbow never empties.

Merry couples grind and twist back and forth across the living room turned dance floor. A group of MEN play Bid Whist in a corner. Bessie's girls giggle and drink, a SHARKISH MAN crowds and harasses them.

DANCER 1

Easy Papa!

LUCILLE

Leave room for the Holy Ghost, now!

SHARKISH MAN

I just never seen so many fine
women in one place.

Sharkish man pinches Dancer 1's bottom. Dancer 2 swats him.

LUCILLE

Mind yourself!

SHARKISH MAN

I cain't help it, honey.

Dancer 1 gets up to leave, Sharkisk Man pulls her back down.

SHARKISH MAN (CONT'D)

Gimmie sugar.

DANCER 1

Hey!!

BESSIE

Leave them girls be.

Bessie's booming monotone cuts through the din. Bessie doesn't miss a bite, doesn't bother to turn around, her back to the action. Sharkish Man snorts. Dancer 2 gets up, tries to drag Dancer 1 with her. Sharkish Man clamps her wrist.

DANCER 1

Get offa me--

BESSIE

I SAID!! LEAVE 'EM BE!!!

Bessie's head turned in angry profile, glass frozen mid air.

SHARKISH MAN

Shet up you fat bitch.

BESSIE

What'd that fucker say to me?

Silence. The room is frozen as Bessie lowers her glass.

SHARKISH MAN

I said--

Bessie explodes across the room in two steps. Sharkish Man looks up at her, snorts.

SHARKISH MAN (CONT'D)

Whatchu--

Bessie crumples. Lucille screams. Darkness.

36

SERIES OF SHOTS: BESSIE'S DELIRIOUS DREAMS

36

--Young Bessie in the Chattanooga yard again. The WOMAN'S HANDS encircling hers. The hands pinching out the stem of the honeysuckle, drawing it backwards out the flower. A bead of nectar trembles on its tip. Young Bessie tastes it, smiles. Looks past the scarred elbow up the arm to a warm brown neck...

--A GRAVEYARD. Sunken in, unmarked graves. Bessie looks to her right, Clarence is there in Blackface. Clarence is a sad clown. He doesn't look up.

BESSIE

You gotta get her outta there!

Clarence shakes his head, cries silently. He wipes at the tears, smears his face into a mess.

--Young Bessie trying all the kitchen cupboards. They are padlocked shut.

YOUNG BESSIE

You let my momma outta there!

Viola appears. The key dangling around her neck. Viola hunting Young Bessie round and round through the little rooms. Young Bessie screaming, crying for her mother.

37

INT. HOSPITAL COLORED WING - NIGHT

37

BESSIE

GET OFFA ME!! GET HER OFF ME!

Bessie twisted and thrashing in the covers.

JACK GEE

Baby! Baby? It's okay! She's okay!

Lucille and Clarence rushing to her side.

LUCILLE

Thank God!

CLARENCE

Sis!

BESSIE

Where was you? You let her get me!

JACK GEE

No, no, honey I'm right here!

Bessie clings to Jack, pulls him in bed with her.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)
 I'm not going nowhere. I love you
 love you love you Baby!

Bessie winces, pulls open her gown looks at the blood stained bandage. She presses Jack's hand to it, Jack holds back.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)
 You gotta let it heal--

BESSIE
 We got a show at the Liberty!

Bessie yanks the curtain away from the bed.

CLARENCE	LUCILLE
Wait, wait, no!	Bess!

JACK GEE
 Bess--

Bessie pushes Jack away, snatches on her dress, the stab hole still gaping.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)
 We cain't--

Bessie snaps on a glittering brooch, pins the hole shut. Jack and family give fruitless chase. Bessie staggers out the room...

38

INT. LIBERTY THEATER - NIGHT

38

...and onto a giant stage. A smile covers the pain, sequins cover the wound, and her spirit covers it all. Bessie rules the stage, heckles the crowd.

BESSIE
 How much y'all paid to get in here?

AUDIENCE (O.S.)
 Twenty five cents!

BESSIE
 Twenty five cents?! I wouldn't pay
 twenty five cents to go in nowhere!

The crowd roars. They are hers and she is theirs. Bessie doubles over with laughter, rubs her side as she drinks in the medicine of their adoration.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
 I guess I better sing something,
 huh? Y'all paid all that money?

The audience cheers. Bessie's limp lessens. She straightens.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
 Well...
*I was with you baby, when you
 didn't have a dime
 I was with you baby, when you
 didn't have a dime*

The crowd sways in Bessie's grip. Bessie straightens up, her hand drops from her side.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*Now since you got plenty money
 You have thrown your good gal
 down! **7B***

Jack is mesmerized backstage. He slumps in teary-eyed awe of Bessie's power. Bessie throws her arms wide, gold bracelets winking from her arms, jewels winking from her neck. Bessie is supreme. Bessie is transformed. Bessie has transcended Ma.

39	SCENE DELETED	39
40	SCENE DELETED	40
41	SCENE DELETED	41
42	FULL SCREEN: An embossed Black Swan emblem flexes atop a swank ivory letterhead missive filling the frame.	42

HARRY PACE (V.O.)
 "Dear Mrs. Smith, My name is Harry
 Herbert Pace, President of the
 newly formed Black Swan Records
 based in Harlem New York City..."

CUT TO:

43	EXT. ROYALE THEATER - NIGHT	43
----	-----------------------------	----

A "SOLD OUT" banner over Bessie's Poster: "Empress of the Blues!!" A line of FANS stretches around the block.

HARRY PACE (V.O.)

"...I am a great admirer of your work having seen you perform at the Royale Theater in Baltimore, Maryland. News of your great talent continues to precede you..."

CUT TO:

44 INT. KOPPIN THEATER NIGHT

44

Bessie shimmies across the stage, snapping her fingers with her seven piece band. The entire thousand seat AUDIENCE is on its feet, wraps around her like a glittering shawl.

CULTURED VOICE (V.O.)

"...and we would like to invite you to audition at our offices in Times Square, New York City to be our--"

CUT TO:

45 INT. BUFFET FLAT - NIGHT

45

CLARENCE

--*first* recording artist signed to the Black Swan label!!" Whoo-wee!

BESSIE

This is it! I always wanted to live in New York City, you know!

CLARENCE

You gon' be the biggest thing since Mamie Smith! Know how many records she sold last year?

BESSIE

A million!

JACK GEE

A colored outfit? Ain't nobody ever heard of no *Black Swan*. What we need is a *national* label. Big time.

CLARENCE

W.E.B DuBois's company wanna record you, sis! This is big-time!!

JACK GEE

So? I read his book--

CLARENCE

I doubt you read his book--

JACK GEE

I read his damn book! But what's
that got to do with music?

Clarence snaps the letter in Jack's face.

CLARENCE

This is the big ticket. *This* is..is
what they calling *Pan-Africanism*.

JACK GEE

What about Pan-Americanism? Can
she sell more tickets that's all I
wanna know--

Bessie snatches the letter and reads.

BESSIE

"The Only Genuine Colored Records.
Others Are Only *Passing* for
Colored". That's they motto.

CLARENCE

I like that!

BESSIE

I like it too. "Yours in Negritude,
Harry Herbert Pace".

JACK GEE

The fuck does "Negritude" mean?

Jack snatches the letter from Bessie.

BESSIE

It just means they real, real
Black. My kinda people!

CUT TO:

46

INT. BLACK SWAN OFFICES - DAY

46

Three very fair skinned, straight-coiffed EXECUTIVES,
including HARRY HERBERT PACE sit stonily around a polished
conference table. A pale RECEPTIONIST smiles at Bessie as she
sets a cup of tea in front of her, her eyes are blue. Awkward
silence as Bessie directs a smile around the table.⁸

BESSIE

Talk about passin'. Y'all is fried,
dyed, and laid to the side!

Executive 2 pats his hair self-consciously.

HARRY PACE

Let me first say that we are so honored to have you here--

CLARENCE

And we're very excited to be here!

EXECUTIVE 1

We were a bit surprised that you could schedule the audition so quickly. Given your busy tour schedule--

JACK GEE

We *cancelled* the rest of our tour to be here.

Jack growls around his toothpick.

HARRY PACE

That's very, uh--

BESSIE

You wanna hear me sing, right?

HARRY PACE

Yes, yes, yes of course. Is there anything else that you need--

BESSIE

I need something for this tea.

The blue-eyed receptionist springs forward.

RECEPTIONIST

Honey? Sugar? Milk?

BESSIE

Splash of Old Tom'll be just fine.

RECEPTIONIST

Old Tom?

EXECUTIVE 1

Gin?

HARRY PACE

I'm sorry. I-I don't know that we have any or where we could find any. It...I mean..it's...*illegal*.

CLARENCE

Nevermind, it's okay--

JACK GEE

It ain't okay. Y'all want her at
her best, give her what she needs--

Jack starts to pull out a flask, Bessie stops him.

BESSIE

I'm okay, papa.

Bessie downs the rest of her tea and closes her eyes. She
hums a lilting melody.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

(hums)

Hmmmmmmmmmmmm
*Ohhhhhhhhhh.*The power and beauty that is Bessie fills the room. The
Executives relax into their seats, their pinched faces go
limp as they float on the current of Bessie's melody. Jack
smiles. Bessie stops short, rubs her throat.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Hol' up. Something don't feel
right.Bessie coughs deep in her chest, rubs her throat a few times,
spits in the empty teacup. The executives are mortified.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

That's better.

EASY COME, EASY GO swells into soundtrack.

47 SCENE NUMBER SKIPPED 47

48 FULL SCREEN: Rejection Letter. Each word like a gunshot. 48

HARRY PACE (O.S.)

"Dear Mrs. Smith, While we
appreciate your down-home sound--

FULL SCREEN: Publicity Photo of Bessie Smith

HARRY PACE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

"--we do not feel that it will be a
fit for Black Swan Records.

(MORE)

HARRY PACE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 We have chosen to record instead
 one Miss Ethel Waters--"

FULL SCREEN: Publicity Photo of Ethel Waters

HARRY PACE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 "--who we unanimously agree has a
 more compatible sound--"

CUT TO:

49 INT. BUFFET FLAT - DAY

49

Bessie hunched over a plate, shoveling angry forkfuls.

CULTURED VOICE (O.S.)
 --and is a bright, shining example--
 of the Harlem Renaissance and an
uplift to the race."

Jack wads up the letter, hurls it at Clarence.

JACK GEE
 I told you those fools don't know
 nothin' about nothin'!

CLARENCE
 I don't understand--

JACK GEE
 You let her go in there make a damn
 fool out herself!!

BESSIE
 Pour me another glass of this corn!
 Ain't nobody cryin'!

Bessie's eyes smoulder as she slams her empty mason jar.

CLARENCE
 It was a good--

JACK GEE
 Never again, Baby. Those niggas
 don't 'preciate real talent! I'ma
 get you a real recording deal.

BESSIE
 Said I 'ont wanna hear nothing else
 about it!!

CLARENCE

The hell know you about anything?
We been in the business more than
twenty years--

JACK GEE

I think it's time she start taking
advice from a nigga don't wear
stage makeup.

Jack jams his hat on, shoves past Clarence. Bessie murders a
forkful of greens.

CLARENCE

Bess?
(beat)
Listen Bess--

Angry hammering of fork against plate. Clarence caves, slumps
out. Lucille watches a moment, lays her hand across Bessie's.
Bessie continues shoveling food with the other.

BESSIE

Go get me some more. Gimmie more of
all this stuff.

Lucille slides the plate aside, Bessie's fork strikes table.
Lucille removes the trembling fork from Bessie's hand. Bessie
lifts her eyes to Lucille's. Bessie suddenly exhales. A rush
soundless heaving. Bessie clutches at her side. Lucille
cradles Bessie's head, strokes it.

LUCILLE

It's gonna pass. It'll pass.

50 EXT. RECORD STORE - DAY 50

Bessie drifts past the window front, watches the clerk mount
a Black Swan display. "Black Swan is proud to introduce!"
Ethel Water's smiling picture urges Bessie to keep walking.

51 EXT. BUFFET FLAT BACKYARD - DAY 51

Bessie dances and jokes with a group of FRIENDS at a picnic.
Bessie twirls and rocks with Clarence, spins laughing into a
groove with Lucille. Food is served, drinks are passed, Jack
escorts FRANK WALKER into the fray.

JACK GEE

Bess! Hey Bess! This is Mr. Walker
wanna meet you?

Bessie collapses in a chair, Lucille presses a frosty Mason jar into her hand.

BESSIE

Whatchu bring him here for?

JACK GEE

'Member I told you about him? I brought him out to a couple of your shows, and he wants to talk about a recording deal. A real recording contract.

The record executive removes his hat, steps forward.

FRANK WALKER

Miss Smith, my name is Frank Walker and I'd like to record you for Columbia Records.

The previously dismissive din goes silent. Jack puffs, smirks at Clarence who deflates.

FRANK WALKER (CONT'D)

I'd like to record you for our new race records division.

BESSIE

What is a "race" record? The ones they put a coon on the front?

FRANK WALKER

Well no ma'am, we at Columbia are taking a different approach--

Bessie holds up a damning Okeh race records ad, the grinning Blackface mascot promising "True Tone" sound.

BESSIE

I'm not interested in your "race" records. And I'm not wastin' no more of my time signin' store-bought blues.

FRANK WALKER

But we want your sound, the Bessie Smith sound. And we'd put your face on the record. Nothing...nothing like that other ad.

BESSIE

I already sell out every show from Philly to Chicago. Nobody's doing it like I'm doing it.

FRANK WALKER

Yes, but we're a larger outfit--a,
a prestige label you see? You
could attract bigger audiences.

BESSIE

Been doing just fine without 'em.

Bessie picks up her glass and strolls away.

FRANK WALKER

I-I can offer fifty dollars a side!
No royalties, of course!

BESSIE

Ha!

JACK GEE

Say--let's you and me get something
on paper and I'll talk to her.

52

INT. THEATER DRESSING ROOM- NIGHT

52

A jangle of trumpets, tuba, and clarinets parade the end of
an ACT BREAK. Bessie clips on jewelry, readies herself for
her finale. Jack comes in with both hands behind his back,
takes a knee.

BESSIE

Don't play with me now--

Jack presents a velvet box. Bessie is stunned, takes it.
Inside the box is a roll of money.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

JG--

Jack presents another velvet box. Bessie snatches it. Another
roll of money inside. Bessie snorts. Jack jams one hand in
his pocket, the other in his jacket.

JACK GEE

You want what's in my pocket or
what's in my jacket?

Bessie looks from JG's chest to his pocket.

BESSIE

I already know what's in your
pocket.

JACK GEE

Maybe you do, maybe you don't. Now
whatchu want? This or this?

Bessie cracks, smiles in spite of herself.

BESSIE

I want another velvet box.

Jack smiles, removes his hand slowly from his jacket to reveal a third velvet box. He opens it for her. A hunking heap of diamond ring screams inside. Bessie chirps.

JACK GEE

Will you marry me?

Bessie hesitates.

BESSIE

What's in that other pocket?

JACK GEE

Marry me and find out.

Jack kisses Bessie, Bessie kisses him back. Softly.

BESSIE

You cain't put me on no shelf.

JACK GEE

And I cain't be no hen-pecked man.
(beat)
Take a chance on me.

Bessie slips the ring on her finger. She cups Jack's face with both hands. Kisses him slowly for an answer.

BESSIE

Now...what's in your pocket?

Jack unfolds a piece of paper, holds it up like a plaque.

JACK GEE

A recording contract with Columbia
Records. One twenty five a side.
That there's the advance for your
first record.

BESSIE

That's double what that man said.

JACK GEE

That's cause I'm fightin' for you.

BESSIE
 Maybe we should talk to Clarence
 about it--

Jack produces a pen.

JACK GEE
 It's me and you now.

53

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDING STUDIO - DAY

53

A STUDIO ENGINEER adjusts a gigantic RECORDING CONE in front of Bessie. Bessie backs away from it. The engineer moves the cone lower, Bessie backs off again. Clarence wringing his hands, JG arms crossed, toothpick working.

FRANK WALKER (O.S.)
 Everything alright Bessie?

BESSIE
 Yeah soon's you move this thing out
 the way we can go.

FRANK WALKER
 Well that's the recording
 apparatus. It's bigger than what
 you're used to--

BESSIE
 It's crowding me.

FRANK WALKER
 Well we--

BESSIE
 I don't need it!

CLARENCE
 Bessie you got to--

JACK GEE
 I'll help her.

JG rushes over. Clarence shifts from foot to foot as he watches JG through the risers. JG wraps an arm around Bessie, tries to walk her closer to the cone. Bessie balks. JG turns his back on the group altogether, hides Bessie from view.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)
 What's wrong?

BESSIE
 It's 'gon be just like last time.

JACK GEE
 No it's not.

BESSIE

It's not gon' go. It's not gon' go,
JG. I know it, I know how they do--
they act like they your pal then it
always comes alose. Cain't make a
silk purse out a sow's ear, like
Viola always say--

JACK GEE

Damn Viola. You hear me? Damn her
and damn Black Swan and damn that
whole room of crackers in there.
They don't know you. This ain't
about them.

BESSIE

Let's just go home.

JACK GEE

Okay we going. We going right now,
honey. Right now. Just sing one
song baby, how you sing it. Don't
sing it for me or for them or for
nobody. Sing this song just for
you, like you always do.

Bessie's breathing calms. Jack cups her face, kisses her.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

What you say?

Bessie nods. Jack gives Bessie a squeeze, Bessie squeezes
back. His arm still around her, they toddle a few steps
closer to the cone. JG nods to the men.

FRANK WALKER

Okay here we go Bessie. Mister Gee
if you would just step out--

BESSIE

He's stayin' right here!

FRANK WALKER

Uh--okay....

Backed by a band, Bessie sings the hell out of **DOWNHEARTED
BLUES** ¹⁰, nails it in a single take.

BESSIE

*Gee, but it's hard to love someone
when that someone don't love you!
I'm so disgusted, heart-broken, too
I've got those down-hearted blues*

(MORE)

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Once I was crazy 'bout a man
He mistreated me all the time,
The next man I get has got to
promise me to be mine, all mine!*

CUT TO:

A54 INT. HARLEM CLUB - NIGHT

A54

Bessie bursts into the back room. JG plays poker with a group of FRIENDS. A trim, LIGHT-SKINNED LOVER wiggles on JG's lap. Bessie flips the card table over, punches the LOVER onto the floor. Money, fists, curses go flying. The friends scatter. JG pushes Bessie into the wall. A tangled fury of slaps, tears, and kisses from both sides.

54 EXT. HARLEM SPEAKEASY LOUNGE - DAY

54

BESSIE (V.O.)

*Trouble, trouble, I've had it all
my days,
Trouble, trouble, I've had it all
my days
It seems like trouble going to
follow me to my grave.*

A tall, strapping bootlegger, RICHARD, unloads crates of moonshine from his trunk. Bessie makes sure no one is looking, sashays over to sample his wares.

BESSIE

Hey now.

RICHARD

Hey.

BESSIE

I see I done traced the lightnin'
back to its source.

Richard shrugs and smiles.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

What's your name?

RICHARD

Not too smart to be giving out
names in my business. You can just
call me your bootlegger.

(beat)

And what can I call you?

BESSIE

You don't know who I am?

RICHARD

Oh I know who you are...but what
you want me to call you?

Smiles and flirtation as Richard unscrews a jar for her.
Bessie sips, and a smile warms her lips.

BESSIE

You can call me your biggest
customer.

A55

INT. RICHARD'S APARTMENT BEDROOM - DAY

A55

BESSIE (V.O.)

*I ain't never loved but three mens
in my life
I ain't never loved but three mens
in my life:
My father, my brother, the man that
wrecked my life.*

Bessie astride Richard in clumsy, wall-thumping sex.

RICHARD

RICHARD!! Ohhh baby my name is
Richard!! Agghhh--

Richard tries to yank his wedding ring off, Bessie jams it
back on, laughs wildly as she climaxes.

CUT TO:

55

SCENE MOVED AND RENAMED AS A54

55

CUT TO:

56

SERIES OF SHOTS: BESSIE GOES ON A SHOPPING SPREE

56

BESSIE (V.O.)

*It may be a week, it may be a month
or two,
It may be a week, it may be a month
or two,
But the day you quit me, honey,
it's comin' home to you.*

--Bessie throws open an armoire, furs spill from every rack.
Vibrant silks and glittering dresses droop from shelves.

Bessie floats into the hangered embrace of a fur coat, wraps the sleeves around her. Jack steps in with her, kisses her deeply. Bessie presses a wad of money in his hand.

BESSIE (V.O.)

*It may be a week, it may be a month
or two,
It may be a week, it may be a month
or two,
But the day you quit me, honey,
it's comin' home to you.*

--Bessie and Lucille are giddy, surrounded by a floatilla of department store boxes. Bessie opens a jewelry box, drapes a gold necklace around Lucille. Lucille opens a hat box, presses a velvet and jeweled hat onto Bessie.

CUT TO:

57

INT. COLUMBIA RECORDING STUDIO - DAY

57

BESSIE

*I got the world in a jug, the
stopper's in my hand,
I got the world in a jug, the
stopper's in my hand,
I'm gonna hold it until you meet
some of my demands.*

A frown trembles at the crest of Bessie's brow. She smiles melancholy optimism and leans into the lie.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Yeah, I got the world in a jug, the
stopper's in my hand,
I got the world in a jug, the
stopper's in my hand,
I'm gonna hold it until you meet
some of my demands.*

Bessie deflates, an emptied soul. The SESSION MUSICIANS and COLUMBIA EXECS burst into applause. Bessie wipes at her eye, lifts her head.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

So is that it? Or what?

FRANK WALKER

That was perfect Bessie. Let's do it one more time everybody, this time without the clapping.

Bessie plants a hand on her hip, leans in for take two.

A58 INT. TELEPHONE SWITCHBOARD OFFICE - DAY

A58

Clarence labors into a receiver.

CLARENCE

How about "Gertrude Rainey"?

Anybody under that name?

(beat)

No? Yeah but... I don't know his name we just usta call him 'Pa'.

Yeah, yeah I'll take it.

Clarence scribbles a number on a scrap of newspaper. Clarence hands the receiver back to the SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR, wanders out of the office.

58 EXT. TRAIN YARD - DAY

58

Wrapped in fur and dripping with pearls, a blindfolded Bessie wriggles impatiently while Jack Gee postures and shouts instructions at the RAILYARD WORKERS.

Her surprise puffs onto the tracks, Bessie gapes as she takes in the huge bright yellow and green TRAIN: "Jack Gee presents:" Bessie Smith and her All Star Revue".

JACK GEE

Looks good, huh?

Bessie's smile battles a frown.

BESSIE

Yeah but...why is your name on it?!

JACK GEE

Why is my *name* on it? Because I put your *face* on a million records. Somebody somewhere right now is putting on a record, listening to you. You making money right now, and you ain't had to sing a word this morning.

BESSIE

It *is* fine. A whole train.

CLARENCE

That was my idea! I told you we should get a train six months ago!

JACK GEE

We gonna be saving money--never
have to rent a third-rate "go
through the back" room again--

CLARENCE

That's what *I* told you!!

JACK GEE

--my baby moves, eats, sleeps
in nothin' but first class
all the time.

Jack pops the rocks in his jaws at Clarence.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

Yeah? Well some men are thinkers,
and some men are doers.

(to BESSIE)

And I'ma doer, Mama. And I done
done it.

BESSIE

Jack Gee presents...

JACK GEE

Jack Gee presents the most
demonstratin, syncopatin',
electrifyin' woman in the world!

Jack Gee offers his elbow, Bessie takes it--she hoots and
does a little cakewalk to the train. Clarence sulks by the
Duesenberg, pitifully dwarfed by the new train. He yanks off
the old sunbeaten promo banner, throws it in the back.

59 SCENE MOVED AND RE-NUMBERED AS A58 59

A60 INT. BESSIE'S TRAIN CAR - NIGHT A60

Jack traces the scar of Bessie's stab wound with his pinky.
Bessie is banked on a pillow, lost in thought.

JACK GEE

Does it hurt?

BESSIE

Does what hurt?

JACK GEE

This.

Bessie looks down, clocks what Jack is doing.

BESSIE

I didn't even know you were
touching me.

JACK GEE

You can't feel me anymore.

BESSIE

I can feel. Just not there.

Jack takes Bessie's hands in his, lift it to the scar along his cheekbone. *

JACK GEE *

Now see mine are just the opposite.
I can feel every little thing.
'Member how I got this one? *

Bessie lets her fingers relax along his face. *

BESSIE

Down south you told me. Some
paddyrollers? *

Jack pilots Bessie's hand to a keloidal scar on his chest.
Bessie fights a smirk. *

JACK GEE

And this one?

BESSIE *

Steak knife. *

JACK GEE *

Yeah I thought you had me that
time. You was going for my heart.
And...I know I put a few on you.
That ain't right. Wasn't how we was
supposed to be. *

Jack kisses the scar on Bessie's forehead. Bessie demurs.

JACK GEE (CONT'D) *

And I woulda never let that happen
to you if I had been around. But it
healed. We always-- *

BESSIE

Yeah and your little gals you go
with, they gon' heal too? And your
name all over every damn thing?

JACK GEE *

I'm sorry, stop, stop, stop. I'm
sorry Bess. *

Bessie trembles in JG's gaze. *

JACK GEE (CONT'D) *
 I never said I was perfect, and I'd *
 rather feel a little pain with you
 than feel nothing at all.

BESSIE *
 JG-- *

JACK GEE *
 Lately it's been like... we numb to
 each other. Like sometimes we
 hurting each other just to *feel*. I
 don't want that.

Bessie traces the scar on JG's chest. Jack cups her hand. *

JACK GEE (CONT'D) *
 I don't ever want to hurt you *
 again. Inside or out. I love you. *

BESSIE
 Say it again.

JACK GEE *
 I. Love. You. *

BESSIE *
 Okay. *

JACK GEE
 Can you say it back to me?

Bessie shakes her head, leans into Jack.

60 INT. BESSIE'S TRAIN CAR - NIGHT

60

Bessie tumbles in, stuffing her wad into her titty bank. She stops short at the sight of Viola beached at her make-up table. Viola tumbles through Bessie's make-up tray, trying one lipstick after another.

VIOLA
 They said you had your own train.

Viola spritzes herself generously with perfume. Bessie becomes very still, sidles along the wall. Viola dabbles in Bessie's powder.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
 I didn't believe 'em.

Viola smears on a garish swatch of golden eyeshadow.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
But godddamn sis!

Viola spins from the mirror to face Bessie.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
You're high post, huh?
(beat)
You ain't tell me about all this.

BESSIE
You get the money I sent?

VIOLA
Aww yeah. I get your little wires.
They're nice.
(beat)
Feeding four kids and all.

Bessie slips to the dresser, lets her hand rest on a pair of tailor's shears. The gesture is not lost on Viola.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
I know we uh...I know we bump heads
most all the time. But I'm just
here to show my support.

Viola helps herself to another spritz of Bessie's perfume.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
Real nice. This is not from the
drugstore, huh? This is from Europe
and what have you.

Viola rises, glides overs to Bessie. Bessie's fingers tense around the shears. Viola offers Bessie a small newspaper-wrapped bundle.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
I got you something. Probably not
fancy enough for you now, but...I
thought you'd want it.

Bessie doesn't move to take it. Viola places the bundle on the dresser next to the shears.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
I'm proud of you.

Viola moseys for the door, Bessie watches from the sides of her eyes. Viola opens the door.

BESSIE
You stayin' around or what?

VIOLA

You think Clarence can get me tickets?

BESSIE

He's in the box office.

VIOLA

Thank you.

Viola vanishes as abruptly as she appeared. Bessie's eyes stay on guard until the door slams shut. Bessie unwraps the package, handles it like poison. A picture frame. Cautiously, Bessie turns it over. A group family photograph. At the center, a woman whose face is obscured by creases and damage. Her mother. In her mother's arms, a baby. Bessie.

61 INT. MA'S PRIVATE CAR - NIGHT 61

An ERRAND BOY hands Ma a brown paper wrapped package. Ma tears into it, caresses the fresh label: "Columbia Records 1923 Bessie Smith..." Ma puts the record on a phonograph. Bessie's "*DOWNHEARTED BLUES*" kicks into the room. Ma smiles, dances and sings around the room with the paper sleeve.

62 EXT. SOUTHERN THEATER COURTYARD- DAY 62

Motley PERFORMERS enjoy a rare day off. A BBQ grill is going, dancers, comedians, and actors in their street clothes eat, gamble, talk shit, and practice their acts. Jack leads a light skinned, SKINNY WOMAN through the crowd. The gang turns to admire her as she passes. Jack pins a feather in Skinny Girl's hair, we recognize it as one of Bessie's.

63 INT. DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS 63

Bessie hums a new tune, writes lyrics. Jack pokes his grinning head in.

JACK GEE

Got somebody I want you to meet!

Bessie huffs, keeps working. Jack opens the door wider, drags in the skinny woman, GERTRUDE. Gertrude keeps her head down, trembles in the doorway.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

This here's Gertrude! She's a singer and she can write too!

Bessie's silence is smouldering. Jack refreshes his watery smile.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

You know uh, Claudine got pregnant, had to drop out in Cincinnati? So I hired Gertrude here to replace her.

BESSIE

The fuck is you showing her to me for?

JACK GEE

I thought you might--I mean, you know like have anything to say? A sorta-like welcome?

BESSIE

What kinda fucked up name is Gertrude? You a half-breed?

Gertrude flushes, wilts. Impossibly, Jack flushes harder.

JACK GEE

(to GERTRUDE)

Uh. 'Scuse us please. Go uh, get somethin' to eat.

Jack waits for the door to close, huffs over to Bessie.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

What's wrong with you?

BESSIE

I know you got your side-pieces, why you wanna rub 'em in my face? You want me to sniff 'em for you?

JACK GEE

Hey, I'm just trying to build up the show!

BESSIE

You got her wearin' my things?! I know you think I'm big and ugly. You think I'm blind and dumb, too?

Jack bristles, flexes, contains it.

JACK GEE

Look! It's not..it's not like you don't tip around too! I know that! Tell me any different!

Bessie is silent, resumes her writing. Jack pulls up a chair.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

I promise you babe, cross my heart.
I don't love anybody but you. And I
know that you don't love anybody
but me. So the rest really don't
matter, do they? Plus, this is
strictly about the show.

Bessie meets his eyes.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

I *promise*. Maybe we...you know,
maybe we could both clean a little
house. Start over?

Bessie shrugs. Jack takes her hand.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

You know I don't think what you
said. You're my fine woman.

Jack squeezes her, Bessie lets herself be squeezed.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

C'mon, let's try.

64

INT. RICHARD'S APARTMENT BEDROOM- DAY

64

Two pint jars of moonshine on the dresser.

RICHARD

Always a pleasure.

Bessie pulls on her dress, Richard lounges naked in bed.

BESSIE

You gonna hafta start deliverin',
Richard . I'm a married woman now,
ain't fittin' for me to keep doing
these *pick ups*.

Richard leaps out of bed, tucks the jars under his arms.

RICHARD

No problem, ma'am! Where you want
'em? I'll follow you home just like
this!

Bessie giggles. Richard shelves the jars, pulls Bessie into
bed with a flurry of kisses.

BESSIE

Yeah, you trot yourself outside
swangin' and danglin', see what
happens.

RICHARD

Suits me fine. I don't want you for
a customer anymore nohow.

BESSIE

Why not?

Richard shrugs, traces Bessie's shoulders.

RICHARD

Every man in your life is a
business relationship. Your brother
is your partner, your man is your
manager, your wo-man is your
dancer...

BESSIE

And you my bootlegger.

RICHARD

Nuh-unh. Not anymore. Matter fact--

Richard takes a roll of money, places it Bessie's palm.

RICHARD (CONT'D)

I'm giving you a full hundred
percent refund.

BESSIE

Richard--

RICHARD

I don't want to be "in business"
with you...

(beat)

I just wanna be "in love" with you.

Too much intimacy for Bessie to bear. She stands to leave,
stuffs the jars in her purse.

BESSIE

I'm taking the 'shine.

RICHARD

Fine. Take it. Because I'm giving
it to you. Not selling it.

Richard sits up, kisses Bessie's hand. Kisses her knuckles, Bessie softens. Hardens. Softens. Pulls away, throws the roll of money back at Richard.

BESSIE

I gotta get home to JG.

Bessie opens the door--hesitates between worlds. Richard holds her with his gaze.

RICHARD

You don't have to pay for what I'm offering for free.

BESSIE

Nothing is for free.

SLAM. Bessie is gone. Richard deflates, perks back up, yells:

RICHARD

I'm just gonna spend it on you anyway!!

65 INT. BIG TENT - NIGHT

65

A revival style atmosphere as hundreds of sharecroppers, farmers, and maids dressed in their Sunday best crowd an oversized tent on rows of church-borrowed benches. The cheers of the crowd drown out the sound of approaching engines. Headlights zoom past both sides of the tent in an eerie wash.

66 EXT. BIG TENT - CONTINUOUS

66

A flock of shotgun toting KLANSMEN in cars and trucks circle the corner of the tent. Two of them hop down, hack at the ropes staked to the ground with a dull hatchet. Another holds a torch. A driver in a homemade hood revs his engine.

67 INT. BIG TENT - CONTINUOUS

67

Bessie holds out her arms like a preacher, the crowd hushes.

BESSIE

This reminds me of church!

AUDIENCE 3

Go on Bessie!

BESSIE

I see y'all trying to carry me back home this evening!!

AUDIENCE 4
Preach!

AUDIENCE 5
Sing it now!!

Bessie looks back at her band, bolts her hands to her hips.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
Boys I think we might have to
PREACH THEM BLUES tonight!!

The band shouts their agreement, the crowd roars. The horn section launches into full swing, Bessie takes a breath to belt out the first verse, is stopped short by eerie shadows at the back of the tent. The corner of the tent lurches. Bessie storms off the stage and marches right down the aisle. Heads turn and folks get to their feet as Bessie rages out the back flap. A few BRAVE MEN follow her, armed with nothing but fists and a feeling. Nervous murmurs.

AUDIENCE 5
...paddyrollers...?

AUDIENCE 4
...them Nightriders!

68 EXT. BIG TENT - NIGHT

68

Bessie shouts at the nearest Klansman hacking at the rope. The horseman swings the torch at Bessie, her shadow looms monstrous. **16**

BESSIE
WHAT THE HELL Y'ALL THINK Y'ALL
DOING???!!!!

The Klansmen flexes, glowers. The Brave Men fan out behind her.

KLANSMEN 1
You list--

Bessie picks up the dropped hatchet, clenches it in her fist. The Klansmen telegraph confusion to each other.

BESSIE
YOU BETTA PICK UP YOUR SHEETS AND
RUN!!

The flock of Klansmen back off slowly, wheel away.

KLANSMEN 1
Oh, we'll git you.

One of the Klansmen hurls a torch toward the tent in clumsy last-minute vandalism.

Two of the Bessie's brave men stomp it out. Bessie relaxes her hatchet. Her men look at her with new eyes, part for her to re-enter the tent.

69

INT. BIG TENT - CONTINUOUS

69

The crowd erupts into cheers as Bessie storms through the flap. Everyone is on their feet. Eyes are wide, arms are up, and the legends fly. Bessie is a deity and the tent is transformed into her holy-of-holies. Bessie roars *PREACHIN' THE BLUES* ¹⁷ as she charges the stage.

BESSIE

*Down in Atlanta, GA
Under the viaduct every day
Drinking corn and hollerin' hooray
Pianos playin till the break of day
But as I turned my head
I loudly said:
Preach 'em blues, sing them blues
They certainly sound good to me!*

The audience is evangelical, spills into the aisle. A sea of hands clamoring to shake Bessie's hand. Bessie shakes as many as she can, mounts the stage to a ravenous standing ovation.

AUDIENCE 6

That's right!!

AUDIENCE 7

You tell it!!

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*I've been in love for the last six
months
And ain't done worrying yet
Moan 'em blues, holler them blues
Let me convert your soul!*

An OLD WOMAN rushes to the edge of the stage, fans her handkerchief at Bessie's feet--a visceral reflex of respect. More WOMEN condense in a dancing queue behind the old woman. One by one, they shake hands with Bessie, wag their fingers at the truth of her song, while others simply hold their hands up in silent surrender.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*'Cause just a little spirit of the
blues tonight
Let me tell you, girls,
If your man ain't treating you
right
Let me tell you I don't mean no
wrong*

(MORE)

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*I will learn you something
If you listen to this song
I ain't here to try to save your
soul
Just want to teach you how to save
Your good jelly roll!!*

Bessie takes two of the women's hands and they usher her down off the stage. Bessie sings into every face, the naked piano rhythm possesses the crowd, MEN "get the spirit" and stomp dance in Bessie's wake. Bessie lays on hands and froths the crowd like a televangelist.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Going on down the line a little
further now
There's many a poor woman down
Read on down to chapter nine,
Women must learn how to take their
time!*

*Read on down to chapter ten,
Taking other women's men,
You are doing a sin
Sing'em, sing'em, sing them blues
Let me convert your soul!!*

Bessie dances with a TOOTHLESS OLD MOTHER who smiles and struts with her caved-in smile. Bessie drapes her glittering feather boa around the woman. The woman takes Bessie's face in both hands and kisses her cheek.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Now one old sister by the name of
Sister Green
Jumped up and done a shimmy
You ain't never seen
Sing'em, sing'em, sing them blues
Let me convert your soul!!*

70 EXT. BIG TENT - CONTINUOUS 70

The tent shakes with the adulation of newly freed voices. It wobbles and billows with the breath of a hundred answered prayers. It glows with the blaze of newfound dignity.

71 EXT. COUNTRYSIDE - DAY 71

Bessie's triumphant yellow-green train bullets through the land, CHILDREN race alongside her car cheering and throwing flowers.

A group of SHARECROPPERS working a field raise their hoes and pump their fists at the blur of Bessie's defiance.

City after city, town after town, jubilant brown faces turn toward Bessie's train and clap their gratitude.

CLARENCE

This is...I never thought it'd be like *this*. You woke us up.

A squadron of REDNECKS squat beside a "Mississippi Welcomes You" sign and blast vain shotgun shells at Bessie's now legendary heroism. Their impotent rage leaves pockmarked cowardice along the roaring steel of Bessie's name.

72

INT. MANHATTAN APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

72

Bessie trundles across a dimly lit marble lobby, Lucille clinging to one arm and an attractive MALE DANCER clinging to the other. A uniformed ELEVATOR OPERATOR moves to intercept the trio's path, an observant DOORMAN intervenes.

DOORMAN

Miss Smith! So wonderful that you came! You're one of our last arrivals.

(to ELEVATOR OPERATOR)

Edgar! Mr. Van Vechten, 4th floor!

Bessie pushes into the elevator, plants a luscious kiss on the male dancer's lips. The male dancer kisses her back. Elevator operator tries to get in, Bessie stops him.

BESSIE

Little tight isn't it?

The male dancer pulls the doors shut and the elevator operator tries not to stare as Lucille pulls Bessie close, kissing and sucking at her neck as the car ascends.

73

INT. CARL VAN VECHTEN APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

73

Bessie is trading greedy kisses with Lucille when Carl Van VECHTEN'S WIFE opens the door.

VECHTEN'S WIFE

Carl! She's here! She's here!

Van Vechten's wife squeals, bats her eyes.

VECHTEN'S WIFE (CONT'D)

I'd *heard* that you were *wild*.

Vechten's wife flings herself at Bessie, lips raised. Bessie shoves her away.

BESSIE

Get the fuck offa me.

(to ROOM)

Now! where is the good food and the good music, and the good liquor? Thought y'all New Yorkers 'sposed to know how to ball?

Lucille piles a china plate high with roast beef. Bessie pulls a flask from her fur coat, and surveys the room catching eye contact with a tall, well-dressed Black Man.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Glad we ain't the only flies in the buttermilk. Pleased to meet you!

Bessie juts a many-ringed hand at the black man. The man warms but shrinks at the gaze of the room suddenly upon him.

LANGSTON

I'm so...it's uh an honor to meet--

CARL VAN VECHTEN sails in.

CARL

Bessiiiiieee!!! Bessie Smith!!!!

Carl swoops an arm around Bessie.

CARL (CONT'D)

Did you see Fred Astaire over there? And this is Langston Hughes! The best poet--er--the best *Negro* poet of our time.

BESSIE

Oh! Who's the best *regular* poet?

CARL

Langston, this is Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues! Langston is the vanguard of the "Harlem Renaissance".

BESSIE

You putting together a Renaissance for colored folks? I'll be in it!

LANGSTON

Well, I personally think the Blues are very significant and should be recognized. I--I'm trying to make the case, but my colleagues don't--

BESSIE

I write most of my own songs.

CARL

I saw her at the Orpheum! Bessie is Amazing! *Titillating!*

BESSIE

You're too sweet to know anything about anybody's *tits*.

Carl and Bessie guffaw. The constellation of guests slowly draws closer to their magnetism. Lucille returns with an over-laden plate, feeds Bessie. Langston rolls his eyes, shrinks further away. Carl yanks an orbiting OPERA SINGER into their circle.¹⁴

CARL

Bessie! I want you to meet Marguerite D'Alvarez. You remember, from tonight's show at the Metropolitan Opera?

OPERA SINGER

A pleasure!

Bessie pats Marguerite's arm.

BESSIE

Don't let anybody tell you that you can't sing.

The Opera singer's smile flattens. Carl diffuses.

CARL

Marguerite? Langston? You were going to maybe perform something?

LANGSTON

I'm not feeling up to it...

OPERA SINGER

Oh Carl, I have to beg off--

BESSIE

I'll sing a little note or two!

LANGSTON

Miss Smith, this crowd isn't--

Bessie shoves her half-eaten tower at Langston, Lucille dabs her lips with a napkin.

CARL

Quiet everyone! Quiet!! The
incomparable Bessie Smith is going
to sing!

Carl bounces up and down on his toes and claps like a child. Tepid clapping and murmurs of delight. Mascaraed eyes and waxed moustaches turn their sarcastic curiosity on Bessie. Bessie, summons a haunting, acapella rendition of **WORKHOUSE BLUES**.¹⁵

BESSIE

*Everybody crying
The Work House Blues all day,
Oh Lord, Oh Lord
The Work is so hard
Thirty days is so long,
Oh Lord Oh Lord
I can't plow,
I can't cook
If I'd run away
Wouldn't that be good?*

Wine glasses are lowered. Smirks disappear. Carl's clasped hands go from exaggerated to earnest.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*I'm going to the Nation
Going to the territor'
Yeah, I'm bound for the Nation
Bound for the territor'
I got to leave here
I got to get the next train goin'*

Langston's shoulders melt. He gazes at Bessie, ignores the whispered heckling from the fop next to him.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Work House sets way up
On a long old lonesome road
The work house sets way out
On a long old lonesome road
I'm a hard luck gal
It's the devil everywhere I go*

The room is frozen in Bessie's spell.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Yeah I wish I had me a Heaven of my
own*

(MORE)

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*Yeah I wish I had a Heaven of my
own
I'd give all the poor girls
A long old happy home.*

The room breaks from its trance, bursts into deep reverent applause. Langston claps furiously. Bessie nods, swoops up Lucille and accepts a fresh drink from her male dancer.

CARL

That was so beautiful.
So...soulful!

VECHTEN'S WIFE

Perfect!

CARL

--this is exactly the kind of dusky pathos that I want to capture in my new book, "Nigger Heaven"!

BESSIE

Say what?

CARL

Nigger--

Sloosh! Bessie slings her drink in Van Vechten's face. The glass slips crashing to the floor. A collective gasp.

BESSIE

Y'know the *only* difference between white folks down South and white folks up North, Carl?

(beat)

White folks down South don't care how close you get, just as long as you don't get too big. And White folks up North don't care how big you get...

Bessie grabs his hand. Carl fights a flinch.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

...just as long as you don't get too close.

Carl gulps, sweat breaks on his brow. Bessie flings him loose, grabs her "dates" and charges out the door. VANITY FAIR EDITOR rushes over with a kerchief.

VANITY FAIR EDITOR

Are you alright?

Carl takes it, dabs his face.

CARL

"If Bessie Smith is *crude* and *primitive* she represents the true folk spirit of the race."

Vanity Fair editor laps this up, scribbles onto a notepad.

VANITY FAIR EDITOR

"Soon doubtless, the homely Negro songs of lovesickness known as the "Blues" will be better known and appreciated by white audiences."¹¹ Your book will surely be a top seller and we at Vanity Fair are so excited to do this series with you!

74 SCENE DELETED AND COMBINED WITH SCENE 73 74

75 EXT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - DAY 75

Bessie swigs from a silver flask, breezes out of the car and does a flourish at her palatial new residence. Her sister Viola and a motley flock of siblings gawk at the green lawned, manicured wonder.

VIOLA

Stairs don't look level. Shutters too fat. Paint is already fading--

Bessie squares off in the walkway.

BESSIE

You ain't got to go in. Carry your ass right on back to Chattanooga.

Viola takes the flask from Bessie, drains it. She pours a little sunshine into her voice.

VIOLA

I mean. It's *suitin'*. It's just not...it's alright I 'spose.

Viola offers the flask back to Bessie, a peace treaty. Jack pulls Bessie aside.

JACK GEE

Listen here, we didn't talk about buying no house.

BESSIE

I don't see your name on my
bankbook.

Jack flares, Bessie backtracks.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

I mean, I did it for us, Papa. I
knew you'd like it.

JACK GEE

If it's just for us, then why alla
them got to move in?!

Viola sashays past inspecting the walls, Jack sneers.

JACK GEE (CONT'D)

And especially why is she here?

BESSIE

Aww baby, she gon' be way to the
back of the house, you'll hardly
ever see her.

VIOLA

I don't know why certain peoples
got they lip turned up! Must be
smelling something!

JACK GEE

Yeah I sure do smell somethin'.
Must be a dead rat in the walls.

VIOLA

Must be!

BESSIE

Baby, stop.

Bessie pivots between them. Viola stabs Jack with her eyes.

JACK GEE

You shoulda asked me about this
first. Wait till I was ready--

BESSIE

Well, I'm ready now. I want a real
family, not no road family. I want
the whole thing, you know? A big
house with everybody in it--

JACK GEE

Everybody ain't gonna be in it, you
don't start giving me some respect.

Bessie turns her back, disappears into the oohs and ahhs of her family.

BESSIE

I'm gon' put a piano over there.
And the dining table in here. Nice
rug for the parlor. Ohh, and I'ma
get a baby too, put him in there--

76 INT. PHILLY THEATER - NIGHT 76

Bessie is onstage, her eyes closed. A muted roar throbs around her. A trickle of sweat glides down her temple, Bessie's breathing fills her awareness. The roar grows sharper, closer. Bessie breathes again, opens her eyes. A thousand FANS on their feet stomping and cheering. From the stagelights to the balcony, a sea of adoration just for her. The roar now lapping and buzzing, Bessie can't tell the difference between it and her breath. It fills her fills her fills her--a tide of infinite love. But underneath, something shallow. Bessie takes a bow and floats offstage, the million electric tendrils of the admiring crowd holding her up, lifting her.

77 INT. BACKSTAGE PHILLY THEATER - CONTINUOUS 77

Hundreds of CASTMATES whistling and clapping. Warm fingers brushing her arms, her shoulders, her back. Mustached lips on her hand, a lipstick kiss on her cheek. The sea narrowing to a stream that bobs her along on currents that whisper love, love, love.

78 EXT. PHILLY THEATER - CONTINUOUS 78

Dozens of DIEHARD FANS clapping. The individual cadence of each fan's ardor distinct. Bessie, Bessie, Bessie they cry and her skin prickles with the chill of the night. She coasts on the dying cheer into the back of a car.

79 INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS 79

The goddess glow, the vows of love receding in the back window. But still, the warm eyes of the driver in the rearview.

80 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - LATER 80

CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP. A darkened living room. The off cadence clanging of the radiator the only greeting.

BESSIE
Anybody home?

CLAP CLAP CLAP . Bessie alone. A silhouette in shadowy silence. Bessie holds herself, rubs her side.

81 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY BEDROOM - LATER

81

Bessie visits herself in the dressing table mirror. She meets her gaze, holds silent conversation with other self as she takes off jewelry, wipes makeup away. Herself and her Other self, alone together. Bessie treats herself with a melody, a hum that brightens into song.

BESSIE
*It's a Long Old Road
But I'm gonna find the end
It's a Long Old Road
But I'm gonna find the end
And when I get back
I'm gonna shake hands with a friend*

Bessie rocks herself, her eyes brightening as her voice builds.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
*On the side of the road
I sat underneath a tree
On the side of the road
I sat underneath a tree
Nobody knows
The thoughts that came over me*

Bessie's other self smiles, and Bessie feels the warmth filling her. A knowing smile plays the corner of her lips.

82 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - DAY

82

Bessie tucks a price tag under the tiny collar of a new tweed suit. She adjusts a miniature bowtie, pushes a body forward.

BESSIE
Everybody! I want y'all to meet
Jack Junior!

Clarence, Lucille, JG and an assortment of family members gawk from an over-laden dining table. Viola huffs, sips her cocktail. JG is frozen rage, his fork hanging mid-air.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
Junior, this is my family. Your new
family. There's your uncle
Clarence, your Aunt Viola, and--

Bessie tightens, rubs her side. The scared shitless seven
year old squirms and pulls closer to Bessie.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
--And this is your new Daddy, Jack.
(to Jack)
JG, come meet your son Jack Junior.

All eyes swivel on Jack. Jack harrumphs. Viola pushes his
still levitating fork down to the plate. Jack stares hard at
Bessie before speaking. Bessie urges him on with her brow.

JACK GEE
How old are you boy?

JUNIOR
Seven years old, sir.

JACK GEE
Where you come from?

JUNIOR
Shelby County children's home, sir.

JACK GEE
An orphanage?!

Junior shrugs his shoulders.

JUNIOR
I don't know about that, sir.
That's what the name on the
building said.

Jack chuckles in spite of himself.

JACK GEE
And what's your real name?

JUNIOR
My name is Jack Gee Junior, sir.

The room cracks up, Jack melts.

JACK GEE
C'mon here give ya daddy a hug.

83

SERIES OF SHOTS: JUNIOR IS A BAND-AID ON THE MARRIAGE

83

--Bessie, JG, and Junior are all dressed up in summery linens and pastels enjoying the back yard. JG chases and plays with Junior. Bessie joins in, becomes "it" and chases them both. Bessie catches Junior, scoops him up in a flurry of kisses. JG catches Bessie, pulls them both into a hug.

--Bessie gives Junior a piggyback ride around the house, deposits him at the dining table where he starts in on his homework. Bessie pours him a glass of milk, sits by encouragingly as he tries to read aloud

--Bessie supervises as a RELATIVE receives a surreptitious delivery of moonshine at the back door. Atop the case is a velvet box. Bessie snatches it, moves to a corner to open it. Inside, a pair of diamond earrings and a note "Love, R". Bessie presses it to her chest and smiles.

--Jack is knocked out on his favorite section of sofa. Junior, sticky-faced and snaggle-toothed is knocked out with him. Bessie in her party clothes tiptoes past with Lucille, slips out.

A84

INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - DAY

A84

Bessie and Clarence compose a new song at the piano. JG and Junior box and weave through the frame, JG barking strategy with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

JACK GEE

Jab boy, jab!! Cross! That's it!

Junior grunts and hurls clumsy punches with all his 50 pound might. JG winks at Bessie. Bessie smiles and jumps in, puppets Junior's arms in mock punches at JG.

BESSIE

You ain't gonna stop nobody like
that! Get in there baby! Pop, pop!
Let's get 'im! Cain't give a lick
if you 'fraid to take one!

Bessie connects Junior's fist to Jack's jaw. Jack wobbles in mock stun. Junior trips giggling out of frame. Bessie laughs, trades her own playful punches with JG.

JUNIOR

Get 'im Mama! Get 'im Ma! Yeah!

Bessie swings. Jack dodges, tackles Bessie in a hug.

B84 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOUSE BATHROOM- NIGHT

B84

Lucille gingerly sets Bessie's hair in pincurls. Bessie's face is heavy and she unconsciously massages her side as she dozes in a steaming tub. Lucille lays the final curl in place, rubs Bessie's arms. Bessie catches a hand kisses it. Kisses the other. Lucille closes her eyes, lets the warmth wash over her. Bessie tries to pull her into the tub, Lucille resists. Bessie looks a question.

LUCILLE

Me and Louis gettin' married.

BESSIE

You and who?

Bessie doesn't let go, tries to pull Lucille close.

LUCILLE

I can't no more.

(beat)

I wanna have a family--like you.

Something in Bessie's eyes breaks, she releases Lucille's hands. Lucille circles, pulls a chair to the tub.

LUCILLE (CONT'D)

Showbiz life can't go on forever.

I just want to have a *normal* life.

Bessie nods to herself, blinks back tears.

BESSIE

Louis seems like a good man.

LUCILLE

Thank you.

Lucille takes Bessie's face in both of her hands, kisses her sweetly, softly, slowly on the forehead. Bessie pulls away, a tear falls into her bathwater.

84 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY BEDROOM - MORNING

84

Empty gin bottles on the floor. Overflowing ashtrays. Heaps of clothes everywhere. Bessie sobs quietly into her pillow, a pajamaed Junior rubs and shakes her arm.

JUNIOR

Mama? Mama what's wrong?

Bessie tries to mute her sobs.

JUNIOR (CONT'D)
Mama? You sick?

BESSIE
I'm okay.

The threat of tears clouds Junior's voice.

JUNIOR
Mama please get up!

VIOLA
C'mon now Junior. Mama needs her
rest.

JUNIOR
But Auntie, what's wrong?!

Viola gathers Junior up, carries him from the room.

JUNIOR (CONT'D)
Mama's cryin'!!

VIOLA
She's alright, she just has spells
sometime.

Junior kicks and frets as Viola shoos him outside.

VIOLA (CONT'D)
Want me to get your medicine?

Bessie heaves. Viola closes the bedroom door, materializes a flask from her bosom. Viola pours some into Bessie's glass.

BESSIE
What'd you say to me?

VIOLA
Your medicine?

Viola hands the half-full glass to Bessie.

BESSIE
Don't think I don't know what you
be saying.

VIOLA
I don't know what--

BESSIE
GET OUT!!!!

Viola backs out the room, slams the door.

85 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOUSE HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 85

Bessie continues to rant to herself. Viola listens at the door, looks concerned.

86 SCENE DELETED 86

87 EXT. PHILLY STREET - DAY 87

A drunken Bessie drifts home on Viola and Clarence's shoulders. She stops short outside a Theatre. Viola tries to hurry her past. Too late. A smiling fingerwaved face teases: "JACK GEE presents...Gertrude! The most beautiful blues-signing sensation!" Bessie yelps. She rips the poster from the wall.

88 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - NIGHT 88

Bessie hurls an armory of clothes hangers and small furnishings at a ducking Jack. Jack parries, makes his way to her, fells her with one shove. Bessie kicks him in the gut. Bessie wads the poster in her fist, holds JG's face in it like a bad puppy.

BESSIE

You spent my money on this bitch?!
Huh?! You backing her with my
money?!

Bessie shoves the wad into Jack's mouth.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Huh? You want this yellow bitch?!
Eat her then! Eat her!

Jack catches Bessie's fists, pushes Bessie onto the couch.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

You promised me Jack! You promised!

JACK GEE

Yeah?! You promised too!! Where you
got those earrings from, huh? I'll
tell you who you got 'em from! That
damn bootlegger, that's who!

BESSIE

Don't you touch me!

JUNIOR

Mama n' Deddy stop!

Lucille scoops Junior, drags him from the room. Jack storms the hallway with his suitcase, Bessie blocks the exit.

BESSIE

Now you're leaving me?! You're leaving me? I shoulda left you! No!

JACK GEE

I ain't ask for all this. You got what you wanted. So have it.

Jack moves her. Bessie grabs his hand, pleads. Jack shakes his head, disappears out the front door. Bessie melts into the wall.

89	SCENE DELETED	89
90	SCENE MOVED AND RENAMED A84	90
A91	EXT. CHATTANOOGA YARD - FLASHBACK	A91

Young Bessie pushing against the lap of her mother. Bessie holds the honeysuckle stem up past the warm brown neck, a chin, to smiling lips...she stands on tiptoes, strains to lift it higher but can't. All she can see are the lips. Smiling lips.

91	INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME BEDROOM/HALLWAY - MORNING	91
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A sharp stomach pain kicks Bessie awake. Bessie winces and rubs her side.

BESSIE

Lemme 'lone.

Bessie blinks blearily at the hallway where Jack darts past carrying a double armload of suitcases.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

JG? Hey!

Bessie scrambles to her bare feet, trips over an empty Gin bottle as she labors toward the hallway.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Whatchu' doin here? How you get in?!

A SHADY DUDE carrying an overflowing box of furnishings rushes past Bessie in the background. Bessie spins.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
 Who the hell are you?! What the
 hell is going on?!!

Bessie tears down the hallway. Urgent stage whispers and the
 cough of a revving engine.

92 EXT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOME - MORNING

92

Bessie tumbles out the side door into the driveway, JG slaps
 the side of a pickup truck.

JACK GEE
 Let's go!!

Shady Dude revs the truck, peels out. Junior wails from the
 back window of the cab.

BESSIE
 Junior!!! NO!!!

Bessie charges full steam at the truck.

JACK GEE
 SHIT!!

Bessie grasps at JG through the window, pops the door open.
 Junior squeals, reaches for Bessie.

JUNIOR
 Mama!! Mama get me!!

JG slams the brakes, sends Bessie tumbling. Bessie regains
 her feet, yanks Jack from the cab and rains hell on him. JG
 tries to fend her off. Junior climbs down out the cab,
 blubbers toward Bessie.

JUNIOR (CONT'D)
 Maaaaa--

JACK GEE
 Get in the truck!! Get Junior back
 in the truck now!!

BESSIE
 You tryin' to kill me!! Stealin' my
 baby. You tryin' to kill me!!!

Shady Dude tackles Junior and shoves him back into the truck.
 Jack pins Bessie down. Bessie chokes on her sobs.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
 DON'T YOU STEAL HIM FROM MEEE!!

JACK GEE
NO! NO! STOP!! You ain't fit to be
a mother!!

Jack hops to his feet, keeps Bessie pinned down. She kicks
and flails.

BESSIE
Leave my baby here! JG LEAVE HIM!!!

JACK GEE
You wild!! You drunk! You ain't
fit!!

BESSIE
THAT AIN'T WHY YOU TAKIN HIM!! THAT
AIN'T WHY! You just tryna kill me!

Bessie wrenches up. Jack shoves her back down, backpedals for
the truck.

JACK GEE
Doesn't really matter, does it?
You'll never see him again.

Bessie regains her feet.

BESSIE
You a LIE!! YOU A LIE JG!! I'll
kill you!! I'll kill myself!!

The truck lurches off, Bessie chases it down. She catches up
to the tailgate, and yanks open the hatch. An avalanche of
her own belongings sends her tumbling to the ground. The
truck zooms off, dropping another easy chair on the way.
Bessie wails in the pile of detritus.

93 INT. BESSIE'S PHILLY HOUSE SUNROOM - DAY 93

Bessie plods into the doorway. A nervous Viola sips her tea.

BESSIE
You let him in.

Viola avoids Bessie's eyes. Bessie zombies down the hallway.

94 SERIES OF SHOTS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION 94

--A billboard warns "Jobless Men Keep Going, We Can't Take
Care of Our Own".

Hundreds of worn-looking DISPLACED PEOPLE shuffle past a boarded up theatre in a bickering three-deep bread line.

--A Low-Rent Tenement. A potbellied BUILDING MANAGER hands Bessie and Clarence a single key. Bessie drops her lone suitcase in the center of the small studio room, plops down on an abandoned chair. Clarence rushes to open the curtains, bring light in.

--Bessie lays inert on the bed. Clarence comes in with a tray food, tucks a few dollars under the plate.

--Bessie pawns her jewelry and expensive costume pieces. An APPRAISER pores over a pearl necklace and beautiful gold rings with his magnifying glass. He hands Bessie a very thin pile of bills. Bessie accepts the paltry wad, drifts out.

--Bessie drinks, dozes in a chair. Clarence puts on a record, tries to pull Bessie to her feet. Bessie is despondent. **WASTED LIFE BLUES** swells from diegetic to score.

BESSIE (V.O.)

*I've lived a life
but nothin' I've gained
Each day I'm full of
sorrow and pain
No one seems to care enough for
poor me
To give me a word of sympathy*

95

INT. PHILLY TENEMENT BEDROOM - DAY

95

BESSIE (V.O.)

*Oh me! Oh my!
Wonder what the end will be?
Oh me! Oh my!
Wonder what will become of poor me?*

Clarence throws Bessie's empty gin bottles away, pours fresh water into her washbasin. He cups handfuls of water over Bessie's swollen face. Pats it dry. Bessie breathes, shifts.

CLARENCE

We're going on a trip.

96 INT. PHILLY TENAMENT BEDROOM - LATER

96

BESSIE (V.O.)

*No father to guide me, no mother to
care
Must bear all my troubles alone
Not even a brother to help me share
This burden I must bear alone*

Bessie puts a few clothes in a small suitcase. She unrolls a sock, reveals a diamond necklace. Her last vestige of wealth. Bessie caresses the necklace, stuffs it back into the sock.

CLARENCE

Ready?

97 INT. CAR - DAY

97

The urban landscape opening into a rural one. Squat row houses give way empty lots, empty lots give way to untamed fields, untamed fields give way to open country road and land. Bessie watches her life in reverse unfold in the whirring geography outside the window. She inhales, her puffy eyes seem to clear with recognition.

BESSIE

I know where we going.

Clarence looks a question at her.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

But I need to stop by somewhere
else first.

Clarence pilots the car down a new fork of road.

98 EXT. COUNTRY ROAD/MA RAINEY'S HOUSE - DAY

98

A long dusty road undulates against the countryside. A shiny, speeding car crests the horizon, disappears down a hill, crests again. A squat woman in a colorful housecoat emerges from a tidy farmhouse, her breath puffing against the chilly air. She waits by the mailbox, shades her eyes toward the horizon.

The shiny car pulls to a stop in front of the farmhouse with a plume of flurries. Bessie leaps out of the car, comes running. The housecoat woman throws her arms wide. The women embrace in a long rocking, sobbing, laughing hug. Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith toddle into the house wrapped in each other's arms.

99

INT. MA RAINEY'S HOUSE - DAY

99

A barefooted Ma props her feet up, reading a worn copy of Vanity Fair.

MA

"Of the artists who have communicated the Blues to the more sophisticated Negro and white public..." What the hell does he know about being sophisticated? *"...I think Ethel Waters is the best. In fact to my mind, Miss Waters is superior to any other woman stage singer of her race."* Superior?? See how they love to instigate, set us against each other? Them's graveyard words!

Ma slings the magazine to the floor.

MA (CONT'D)

Don't worry honey, no decent colored folks read that silly magazine. It ain't for us, anyway. He's got no business low-rating you! "Nigger Heaven" Huh! Finna write my own book, "Cracker Hell"!

Bessie tumbles over with giggles.

MA (CONT'D)

If Vechin' is the *nigger expert*, then I'm dam sho' the cracker authority!!

BESSIE

Stop! It hurts too much to laugh!

MA

Yankee Blacks cut you up, Yankee Whites tryin' to cut you down.

Bessie falls onto Ma. Ma folds an arm around her. Bessie sinks into Ma's embrace, her eyes are full.

MA (CONT'D)

Gettin' harder and harder to make a penny these days, folks hardly listening to the blues nomore anyhow. You ever get two nickels together again, you make sure you buy you some land. Own some buildings like me.

BESSIE

They talking about this new style.
Called "swing" music.

MA

Ain't nothin' new.

BESSIE

I like it. I might try it.

MA

It's still the blues, baby.
Understand me. Everything is the
blues.

BESSIE

(beat)

JG took Junior and...and...

MA

Shhhh. You just take care of you
right now. Get your head right.

100

INT. MA RAINEY'S HOUSE - DAY

100

Bessie looks better, her eyes no longer swollen. Her complexion bright. Ma digs through a trunk of old costumes, slings a sequined headband across the room.

BESSIE

Things never come out straight.

Ma parachutes a silk slip at Bessie's head.

MA

Cain't hit a straight lick with a
crooked stick. And you as crooked
as they come. Now!

Ma smooths an ivory tasseled dress against her bosom, stretches it across her too big waist.

MA (CONT'D)

This usta be my favorite! See how
it's done drawn up three sizes!?

BESSIE

You grew three sizes.

MA

Just like you outgrewed your life.

Bessie's smile dries up.

MA (CONT'D)

At first you didn't leave room for nobody else. That's what I saw up onstage that night. I wasn't jealous, but I saw you were greedy. Had a hole in your stomach. Or maybe it was more like a worm. And that you wasn't gonna stop until you ate up everything around you.

(beat)

Then you swung back way the other way, kept leaving room for a man that wasn't coming. Or didn't deserve it. You got to fill that hole yourself, sweetheart. Nothing or nobody else'll fill it.

Ma tips over to Bessie with a cloth bundle. Bessie unwraps a corner of the bundle. Ma's sequined heels.

MA (CONT'D)

I know *these'll* still fit.

Bessie stares at the shoes in her limp hands. Ma clips a feather in her head, stomps around the living room.

MA (CONT'D)

You done heard the rest now I'ma show you the best! Ma's gonna show you her...Black Bottom!

...I wanna learn that dance

Don't you see the dance you call your big black bottom

That'll put you in a trance **19**

Bessie fights a smile. Ma turns around, shaking her hips and popping her slip hem.

MA (CONT'D)

*All the boys in the neighborhood
They say your black bottom is
really good*

*Come on and show me your black
bottom*

I want to learn that dance

Ma pulls Bessie up and dances her in a bawdy orbit, her bare feet beating out percussion around Bessie's.

BESSIE

*Early last morning 'bout the break
of day
Grandpa told my grandma, I heard
him say
Get up and show your old man your
black bottom
I want to learn that dance*

MA & BESSIE

*...Wait until you see me do my big
black bottom
It'll put you in a trance*

BESSIE

*Ah, do it Ma, do it, honey! Look
out now Ma, you gettin' kinda rough
there!*

Ma and Bessie outdo each other, wiggling in sloppy circles. Bessie collapses onto the couch, laughing. Laughing truly, laughing deeply, laughing fully for the first time in a long while. Ma collapses beside her, nods at the shoes.

MA

You put 'em on.

Bessie slips the sequined heels on. Her eyes water as she summons courage, looks over at Ma.

MA (CONT'D)

Now get yourself back out there,
you ain't hardly finished yet.

101 EXT. PHILLY STREET/TENEMENT - DAY

101

Bessie hurries past a ratty "Hovertown" of shacks that has sprung in an empty lot next to her building. She tromps from door to door in Ma's heels chatting up her tenement mates.

BESSIE

Rent shake this Saturday!

Bessie shoves a flyer under a door, knocks on another.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Bring whatchu can!
(to other NEIGHBOR)
Party this Saturday!

NEIGHBOR 1

We'll be there.

NEIGHBOR 2

You singin'?

BESSIE

You know I am!

Bessie raps another door.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Rent shake this Saturday!

102 INT. PHILLY TENEMENT APARTMENT - NIGHT

102

Steaming plates of food are ladled out. Bessie puts another record on the phonograph. Her scant furnishings are pushed to the edges of the room as her NEIGHBORS eat dance, and cavort. Clarence collects money at the door in an old hat.

CLARENCE

That's right Gilbert! Don't be stingy now! Hey Clara! Help y'allselfes to the kitchen.

Bessie takes the hat from Clarence, hands him another.

103 INT. PHILLY TENEMENT BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

103

Bessie dumps the haul of mostly coins onto the bed, starts sorting them into stacks. As she pushes through a pile of pennies, she discovers two diamond earrings. She cups the earrings, allows herself the beginnings of a smile.

104 INT. PHILLY TENEMENT APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

104

Earrings twinkling in her ears, Bessie pushes through the crowded room, looking for her benefactor. She looks in corners, scans faces, turns back and forth in the jolly crowd. She finally sees him. Richard. Sipping from a glass in the kitchen. He winks at her. Bessie is frozen in disbelief. Richard sets the glass aside, comes to her. He wraps his arms around her in the middle of the dance floor. Bessie holds him back, buries her face in his neck.

The embrace becomes a sway, the lovers dancing without meaning to. Richard presses his cheek close to Bessie's.

RICHARD

How you gon' have a rent shake without inviting a bootlegger?

Bessie smiles, tightens her arms around his neck.

BESSIE

You're not my bootlegger, remember?

Richard smiles and closes his eyes. Other couples orbit around them in tender dance.

105 INT. PHILLY TENEMENT APARTMENT - DAY

105

Bessie counts coins into stacks. Clarence lounges and picks over leftovers.

BESSIE

Three dollars seventy three cents...

Clarence slaps two dollars on the table.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

Still twenty seven cents short.

CLARENCE

That cheap-ass Maynard didn't put in nothin'.

Bessie shakes her head, sweeps the money into an envelope and hands it to Clarence.

BESSIE

If he had it, he woulda gave it. Here. This oughta tide Viola 'nem over 'till next month. Tell her if she run through this, that's it. I cain't help any more. Barely making my own board.

CLARENCE

Wanna know how to really make some money nowadays? Now, I'm serious. This is only for grown folks, now!

Clarence lifts a record on the turntable. Holds the arm.

CLARENCE (CONT'D)

If you planning on going to church this morning stop me now!

BESSIE

Just play the damn record!

Lucille Bogan's tinny "'TILL THE COWS COME HOME"²⁰ (DIEGETIC CUE) scratches into the room.

PHONOGRAPH

*"I've got a man I love
I've got a man I like
Everytime I fuck them mens
I give 'em the doggone claps!"*

Clarence howls, Bessie covers her ears.

BESSIE

Oh my lord! She's so nasty!

PHONOGRAPH

*"Rough cock, Tough cock,
Cock without a bone
You can fuck my cock, suck my cock
Leave my cock a bone awww--"*

Bessie tips over spews her drink, waves Clarence off.

BESSIE

That's too much, unh-unh that's too rough!

CLARENCE

These party records goin' much farther now.

BESSIE

I cain't go that far!

CLARENCE

Well maybe you can dust something off, do one of your old numbers. This is what's selling. Plus we can gig 'em in cabarets and...

"KITCHEN MAN" 21 (BG CUE) swells.

BESSIE (O.S.)

*"His frankfurters are oh so sweet
How I like his sausage meat
I can't do without my Kitchen Man!"*

106

INT. PHILLY CABARET - NIGHT

106

BESSIE

*Oh how that boy can open clam,
No one else can touch my hams
I can't do without my Kitchen Man!"*

A small audience guffaws and claps. Bessie smiles back, enjoys the joke with them.

Dressed simply and seated on a stool, she flows in easy conversation with the crowd. Like old friends stopped over for a drink.

From a corner booth, a lone white guy smiles over his whiskey. He is conspicuous yet at ease with the scene. Bessie oozes into another insinuation, JOHN HAMMOND leans in.

107

INT. PHILLY CABARET - LATER

107

Bessie shakes hands with the CABARET OWNER, and he passes her an envelope. John swoops in with a drink.

JOHN HAMMOND
Gin with no ice. Right?

Bessie takes John in, accepts the drink.

JOHN HAMMOND (CONT'D)
Saw your name on the sign out front, thought it had to be some mistake. Or an imposter. I can't believe it's you. I'm so honored to meet you Miss Smith!

Bessie is amused as John stammers and gushes in run-on enthusiasm.

JOHN HAMMOND (CONT'D)
Alhambra Ballroom. 7th and 126th Street. Harlem New York 1927. I stand by it, you changed my life.

BESSIE
That was six years ago, sugar. Change doesn't last that long.

JOHN HAMMOND
It does. Sorry--I'm John Hammond by the way. I'm a music lover, used to play a little violin way back and now I write. But I'm a producer. And now that you're back--

BESSIE
I didn't know I was gone.

JOHN HAMMOND
--I want to produce your comeback tour. You're the best blues singer I've ever heard and you changed my life, And I want everybody to hear you.

(MORE)

JOHN HAMMOND (CONT'D)

And this is only just beginning!
See, I'm putting together a concert
-- "From Spirituals to Swing"?
Nothing but the best musicians--
Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson,
little girl by the name of Billie
Holiday--she loves you, you know
and---

BESSIE

Slow down, now.

JOHN

Gonna build a new venue especially
for it--the "Cafe Society". The
first integrated nightclub. No
color line, no balconies. Everybody
in the same place just swinging.

BESSIE

You're dreaming John.

JOHN

Will you dream it with me? Sing
some of that old stuff?

BESSIE

I'm going in a different direction
now. Tryin' on some new shoes.

JOHN

Well--well whatever you think--I'd
be happy to be a part of anything
you're doing--

Bessie looks into her drink, an enigmatic smile. Richard
joins them, wraps an arm around her and they drift away.

BESSIE

We'll see.

John yells after her.

JOHN

Please? Will-- will you give me a
line? A cable, a ring, anything!
Whenever you're ready I'd love to
be a part--

A108 EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - SUNSET

A108

The remains of a cold picnic litter the back of Richard's pick up truck. Bessie lounges in Richard's arms, the pair watch the sun blaze a dusty exit on the horizon.

BESSIE

Where are we going?

RICHARD

Wherever you want to go.

BESSIE

Maybe I don't know.

RICHARD

Yeah you do.

BESSIE

It's kinda nice, just being still.

Richard gives Bessie a squeeze.

BESSIE (CONT'D)

But then again, I wanna know.

RICHARD

Know what?

BESSIE

What's over that next hill? Around that corner?

RICHARD

When you decide to find out, sweetheart you'll chose your own way.

BESSIE

I'm so tired.

RICHARD

You can't go back, but you can always stop.

Bessie gazes at the shimmering road.

BESSIE

No I can't stop.

RICHARD

Then let's go.

Bessie smiles, kisses Richard softly.

BESSIE

Let's go.

B108 EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - SUNSET B108

Richard's truck climbs a hill, the silhouetted lovers lean closer. The truck spits a plume of dust, disappears around a bend.

108 SERIES OF SHOTS: BESSIE REBUILDS HER CAREER 108

--Bessie and Richard's living room floor. Bessie and Richard nibble at a smorgasbord of dishes scattered around, sort through a group of photos for cover art. Bessie slings the ones she doesn't like across the room. Richard holds up a nice one, pecks Bessie on the cheek. The "yes" pile grows.

--John introduces Bessie to a group of well-dressed tastemakers. Handshakes all around, the group clearly defers to Bessie. John never leaves her side. There is a genuineness, a comfort here. Someone asks a question, and Bessie answers. The group listens, rapt and respectful.

--Bessie sits with a PIANIST, sets her lyrics. She plays a note on the piano, the pianist nods and makes a notation on the score. Richard brings Bessie a glass of water, checks in.

109 INT. POSH RECORDING SUITE - DAY 109

John leads Bessie into the room, ASSISTANTS spring to their feet, stand at attention.

JOHN HAMMOND

We've got everything you might need. Not those old weights and pulleys, we've got the latest in--

An ASSISTANT materializes with a silver tray laden with hot tea, water, and snacks-- Bessie demurs. Her eyes are fixed on the bevy of MUSICIANS beyond.

BESSIE

You got all five parts.

John rushes to open the door to the inner studio, waits for Bessie to enter first.

110 INT. POSH RECORDING STUDIO - CONTINUOUS 110

The musicians leap to their feet, nodding and bowing.

JOHN HAMMOND
We got Buck Washington, Chu Berry--

BESSIE
Is that you Fletch!?

Fletcher rushes over to kiss her hand.

JOHN HAMMOND
He was just in session next door,
wanted to stop by. And this is
Benny Goodman--

BENNY GOODMAN
Such an honor.

BESSIE
Well, well!

Bessie shakes hands with the men, they can't get enough. Smiles and backslaps all around. An inch-thick book bound in crisp navy, cardstock waits on a podium. Bessie gravitates to it, strokes it.

JOHN HAMMOND
I didn't know where you'd want to
start...so I put together
everything you ever wrote. Well at
any rate, *most* of them and that
doesn't even include--

BESSIE
It's so *thick*.

JOHN HAMMOND
Baby Doll, Backwater Blues, Safety
Mama...they're all there. And
that's only what we could get down
in the short amount of time. You
just give us a few more weeks--
we'll get 'em all--

BESSIE
No, no, it's fine.

Bessie leafs through the book. Her eyes dance over the lyrics. She smiles, groans, sighs as she re-lives them. Remembers the many loves and pains. Bessie shakes her head, slightly in awe of her own prolificness. She lays a sheath of her own papers on top of the book.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
You did good. And you can add these
to it.

JOHN HAMMOND
New music!

BESSIE
Four new songs.

John bursts with excitement, bounces from toe to toe.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
So when do we start recording with
this fine band you put together?

JOHN HAMMOND
Whenever you're ready.

BESSIE
I been ready.

Admiring laughter around the room. The musicians take their places with all seriousness--horns poised, drumsticks raised, fingers at the ready above piano keys. All eyes on Bessie, waiting for her cue. Bessie positions herself in front her microphone, straightens her back. She is a maestro before the first note. A conductor in possession of her symphony. All eyes on Bessie.

111 EXT. PHILLY THEATER - INTERCUT 111

Vibrant new Bessie Smith posters boast new performances. An ERRAND BOY pastes "SOLD OUT" notices on all of them.

BESSIE (O.S.)
It's a Long Old Road
But I'm gonna find the end
It's a Long Old Road
But I'm gonna find the end 22

112 INT CAR.- FLASHBACK 112

BESSIE
I know where we going.

Clarence looks a question at her.

BESSIE (CONT'D)
But I need to stop by somewhere
else first.

Clarence pilots the car down a new fork of road. A road sign says "CHATTANOOGA: 50 MILES."

BESSIE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

*And when I get back
I'm gonna shake hands with a friend
On the side of the road
I sat underneath a tree
On the side of the road
I sat underneath a tree
Nobody knows
The thoughts that came over me*

113 INT. THEATER - INTERCUT 113

Bessie closes her eyes and summons another verse.

BESSIE

*Weepin' and cryin'
Tears fallin' on the groun'
Weepin' and cryin'
Tears fallin' on the groun'
When I got to the end
I was so worried down*

114 INT./EXT. CHATTANOOGA PAWN SHOP- DAY 114

Bessie watches as her diamond necklace is mounted in the display window. Bessie stuffs a thick wad of bills in her bra. Clarence waits by the car, opens the door for her.

BESSIE (O.S.)

*Picked up my bag, baby, and I tried
it again
Picked up my bag, baby, and I tried
it again
I've got to make it, I've got to
find the end*

114A EXT. CHATTANOOGA YARD - FLASHBACK 114A

Young Bessie still straining on her tiptoes, her mother finally leans into the frame. Chin, lips, nose, eyes. Smiling eyes only on Bessie. Bessie's mother hugs her close. Young Bessie smiles into her mother's face...

115 INT. THEATER - INTERCUT 115

The audience quivers in Bessie's grip.

BESSIE

*You can't trust nobody
You might as well be alone
(MORE)*

BESSIE (CONT'D)

*You can't trust nobody
 You might as well be alone
 Found my long lost friend
 And I might as well stayed at home.*

116 EXT. CHATTANOOGA CEMETARY - DAY

116

Bessie watches as a newly carved, marble headstone is set in place. "LAURA SMITH. A Beloved Mother Always. 1850-1903" Bessie kneels, wipes freshly drilled dust from the lettering. She places a bouquet of red roses against the headstone. Rests against it. Clarence helps Bessie to her feet. Arms around each other, the siblings absorb their mother's resting place. No longer unmarked, forgotten.

117 INT. THEATER - NIGHT

117

Bessie opens her eyes, absorbs the weight of the collective gaze. Joy wrinkles her eyes, her words wring out truth from the communal heart. Black, brown, tan, white. Bessie's voice transcends, binds, illuminates the variegated faces of the rapt audience.

BESSIE

*It's a Long Old Road
 But I'm gonna find the end
 It's a Long Old Road
 But I'm gonna find the end.*

An avalanche of praise tumbles from the back of the balcony to the front of orchestra pit. A standing ovation from the INTEGRATED crowd. Bessie throws back her head, smiling. Triumphs.

FREEZE FRAME:

THE END.