

But You Don't See Me

by Alysha Glasser

She could feel the concrete crunching underneath her high heels as she walked down the pitted sidewalk. The hem of her dark purple silk dress rubbed against her knees, and the straps dug into the flesh of her shoulders. Cars sped by on the left, stirring up dust and shreds of old tires as they passed. The view on her right remained still and she walked past it as quickly as the cars drove by her. The deserted buildings with their overgrown weed lawns stood so immobile she thought even the wind could not disturb their stillness. The chain length fence which separated her from them seemed appropriate, as did the ever present wall of wind, dust, and rubber between the sidewalk and the road.

The view remained seemingly unchanged as she continued to trek. She could feel blisters forming from the constant impact of her sole against the surface of her high heels. She did not know how long she had been walking down the cracked sidewalk. Time really did not matter. She would continue until she felt the need to stop, until something broke through the fog in her

mind. When the fog finally did break, some minutes or hours later, it was the music which drew her out. Her ears told her that the sound was coming from the right, and her body followed its directions, quickly discerning the source of the sound.

Across two lanes of concrete was the open door of a lounge. Pink neon lights spelled out the club's name above the doorway—*Starlight*. She had never particularly associated the color pink with star light, but singers and lounges always fit together in her mind.

She hesitated a moment before crossing the street. Her father had always told her she sounded like Billie Holiday, but parents could be over zealous in their pride. She knew another who had told her different. After a few seconds, her stomach made the decision for her. It was hungry and she needed money to eat.

She crossed the road quickly and stumbled a little as her heels hit the threshold. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the soft darkness in the interior of the building. The same amount of time it took for the single occupant inside to take notice of her.

“We don't open for two more hours, honey,” said the male voice.

Her eyes sought him behind the bar, but soon found him on the edge of the stage, sitting in front of the grand piano. He seemed to fit most of the lounge manager stereotypes—white long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, black pants, black shoes, black suspenders, dark, slightly long hair. But there the similarities ended. Although his voice was rough, there was no evidence of either a cigarette or a cigar. His hair hung in choppy layers around his face, rather than greased back against his head. His face was clean shaven and his shirt was buttoned, except for the last button hole.

“I'm looking for a job,” she said as she stood in the doorway, hesitant to move forward.

“You sing? Dance?”

“Sing.”

He stood up and took a sheet of music from the piano stand, then jumped off the stage and motioned her forward. She began to wind her way through the round black tables and chairs, placing her heels carefully on the ruby red carpet. The seats were arranged rather close together, but she was used to treading cautiously. In a few moments, she passed the last obstacle. The manager handed her the sheet, sat down, and said nothing more.

She quickly scanned the sheet and almost laughed at the song she encountered. Billie Holiday—if this wasn't divine sarcasm, she didn't know what was. She glanced at him for a cue and took the twitch of his pointer finger as a signal. When she opened her mouth, her voice reverberated throughout the lounge, carrying the vocals of Billie's "I Only Have Eyes For You".

Her words rang out with gusto, carried into the rafters by the power of her voice. The club manager sat at a table in front of her erect figure, tapping his white forefinger against his lower lip in time with the melody. The words were not very engaging, but her voice set the song apart, declared that these words were more than lyrics—they were irrepressible life in spoken form.

As the last note rang out, she returned her gaze from the surrounding tables to the manager, in time to see him attempt to school his face into boredom. The nervous action of his fingers now drumming on the table to his right belied the dull expression pasted upon the sharp features of his face. She could see the moment he realized a fake mask would not fool her. He slowly relaxed his features into their normal semblance but shifted himself into a more comfortable pose. She knew he was trying to lie with his body, trying to say she was the same, ordinary act he had seen time and time again.

She would not allow another man to treat her as less than she was. She straightened her back and rested her left hand on her hip. Lifting her chin, she looked at him down the raised slopes of her cheekbones. Her brown skin glowed with the anger she felt. If emotions had physical abilities, this one would be bursting through the confines of her dress.

She knew what he was about. Men had always been telling her that she was less than she was. She used to believe them, but she knew better now. They didn't see the person inside her, the person who fueled her voice and turned simple lyrics into dancing flames. They saw a woman. They saw something less. But they don't see me.

She thought about Robert as she watched the manager contemplate her performance. Robert with his easy smiles and quick temper—which inevitably led to his shouted words and angry fists. She remembered believing his words for a while, believing the lies he told with his smiling mouth, then his grimace and his fists. It had taken her too long to stop believing him. She had let him control her every action. Almost a year had passed where her thoughts were her only refuge. Today, she had walked out of his life. She refused to go back to a cage.

She had walked out with nothing more than a few dollars and the dress with its matching high heels. Had walked until blisters grew and burst on the soles of her feet. Walked until she stood where she stood now, attempting to obtain a job by the merit of her voice and her figure. Her experience for this type of work was lacking, but she knew her worth did not lie in the past.

“I'll give you a trial tonight,” he stated abruptly. “You will have to wait tables until Sandra takes her break, then you can try those pipes out on the crowd. If they like you, then I may ask you back. If they don't, you'll have to find some other avenue of work. ‘Cus, baby, show business is only for the crowd pleasers.”

Her chin lowered a bit when she spoke, allowing her eyes to meet his full-on, “They will.”

“A lot of sass for such a slender package,” he said when she turned to go. “Bet you have never had a hard day in your life, sister.”

She barely halted her progress towards the door when she threw back, “The name is Jacquie.”

The door closed behind her as he chuckled portentously, “Jacquie: the silk draped diva of *Spotlight!*”

Jacquie let out the breath she had been holding since her parting remark, barely believing everything she had accomplished today. Her throat choked on the tail end of her sigh, and she slowly sank down against the outside wall of the lounge. She tilted her head against it and closed her eyes, allowing the thoughts battering at her mind their release.

This morning, she had woken up the same as any other morning—the same nightgown, the same bed, the same time, the same man. She had stumbled out of bed and gotten dressed as quickly as she could, sliding her shirt carefully over the bruises on her stomach and back. Robert was always careful not to hit her face, or bruise her arms or legs where anyone could see. He said he only hit her when he was angry, but Jacquie knew better. If he was angry enough to hit, then he would have been angry enough not to care where he hit her. He hit her because he liked it—she knew that now.

She pulled up the zipper on her jeans, holding her breath when he grunted and rolled over in his sleep. He never woke up this early, but fear had been so ingrained within her that even the thought caused her nerves to scatter every which way like a startled rabbit. When

he settled into a new position and sighed, she eased her way out of the bedroom and into the skinny hallway. She walked quietly and swiftly to the kitchen.

Robert liked waking up to the smell of pancakes and bacon, but he did not like waking up to the sound of clattering pots and pans. Jacquie had become an expert on silent movement—she thought even mice would envy her if they could. In thirty minutes, she had his plate and coffee ready at the table—she herself stood by his chair, ready to assist him. Like clockwork, he stumbled out of bed five minutes later, trailing his untied robe around him, unashamed of his nakedness beneath it. She continued to stand by the table until he was through with his meal, then she cleaned the dirty dishes while he took a shower.

She would not be able to eat until he let her. Sometimes she snuck a piece of bacon before he got out, but he had caught her the last time, and she was unwilling to risk the pain for a bite of food. Robert came out of the shower, dripping water in the hallway as he crossed to the bedroom. Knowing him as well as she knew the feel of her shirt rubbing against her healing bruises, Jacquie waited for him outside of the bedroom door.

Thirteen minutes passed by, and he remained in the room. Sometimes he tested her. She could remember standing there attentive and starving for hours. Today he did not make her wait very long, and he did not hit her. He simply walked by like she was invisible. Walked right out the front door. Jacquie wanted to slide to the floor right then but she made herself keep standing. He had done this before too. She never knew if it was a test or if he was really gone. It was usually safe by nine. Another hour and she could move from her position. This morning she could not stop the silent tears from trickling out of the corners of her eyes. She dared not move to wipe them away.

Shaking her head to clear it, Jacquie stood, aware enough once more to realize that she was slumped against *Starlight's* brick exterior. She had no idea how far she had walked, but since the lounge opened at six it must be four o'clock now. He would be coming home soon. He would expect her to be standing by the front door waiting for him. Robert would tear the apartment apart looking for her, and then tear apart the neighborhood. She had to find a place to hide until six, and after that she could hide in the lounge, masked in its smoky interior.

Her stomach rumbled again. The best idea for now would be to find a diner she knew he did not frequent. She had enough money for one good meal. She had not asked the manager about breaks or how long her shift would be, so it was probably best if she ate now anyway. It would depend on her tips tonight whether or not she would be able to afford breakfast in the morning.

She heard that some managers paid in cash at the end of the night to avoid filing entertainment as employees, but that was another thing she had not taken the time to ask. Her head was pounding, and the lack of food was making her a little unsteady on her feet. Jacquie passed back by the lounge door so that she could head the opposite way from the one she had come. The farther she was away from Robert, the better her chances would be.

She did not notice the manager standing back in the shadowed doorway at first, or feel his eyes as they followed her down the sidewalk. It was not until she turned the corner that she felt the difference. She did not spare it a moment's thought. Jacquie was used to being watched, and he probably had a good reason for it. Who wouldn't worry a little bit when the person they had just hired loitered outside the building for a while before leaving.

The most important thing right now was standing just a building off from the corner, Wells' Restaurant. She had never heard Robert mention that name. It should be a safe place to sit, eat, and wait. Jacquie did not hesitate here.

She walked through the double doors of the restaurant and was slightly surprised when she noted the sparse occupation. A family sat at a booth in the back corner, and she could see a few employees scattered throughout, but the rest of the place sat empty. When she saw the stage, she realized why. This was no simple restaurant—it was a club as well. She had heard about this place. It was famous for the jazz musicians who played here, and the chicken and waffles dinner served in the twilight hours.

Jacquie barely restrained herself from running out the door. It was a recent memory, the addition of this place within her mind. Robert must have told her about it. She wanted to live a life free from fear, but it was not as easy as she had hoped. She could not be afraid simply because he might have been here before. From this moment on, she had to prepare for the eventuality of seeing him again. Jacquie refused to run anymore. For all she knew, Wells' might even be the place he had been planning to take her tonight.

He had come home at lunchtime today, carrying two white boxes with department store logos. Robert had not bothered telling her what they were. He had simply thrown the boxes at her feet and told her to be ready at four o'clock—they were going out. She had waited until he left to open the boxes. Inside was the dark purple dress with its matching high heels. For a split second, she had become overwhelmed with excitement; then, the reality had hit her. If he was willing to let her out of the house for the first time in nine months, Robert must believe he had her truly beneath his thumb.



Beneath him. Less than him. Ignorant woman. Trained pet. Her rage built as she showered, dressed, and put on her make-up. She was a woman, but she wasn't less, wasn't trained, wasn't beneath him. Her eyes had closed as she struggled to hold back their moisture. She refused to offer any more sacrifices to his altar.

Jacque recalled sniffing a little bit as she gathered up the few dollars she could find and placed them within the only purse she had—a small, black clutch. She rolled her shoulders vigorously and stepped further into the restaurant, choosing a booth about halfway down the first aisle. She deliberately sat down with her back facing the door. If he came inside, she would have to maintain the strength of will she knew she had inside and defy him to his face. She refused to cower to him anymore. She was free and would remain free.

She placed her elbows on the tabletop and rested her head on her hands. Looking through splayed fingers, she tried to place the red color of their vinyl. Jacque knew she had seen that color somewhere before. The thought hit her with an almost physical force—it was the exact same shade as her mother's blouse.

Evelyn Walker had arrived at the rundown brownstone apartment while Jacque paced its narrow confines in her new finery. She had not knocked but had simply strolled through the front door like an inescapable breeze.

“Jacqueline Shalya Walker. Just because you have your own adult life doesn't mean you can ignore your parents. I waited for you to come see us for the past eleven months, and I refuse to wait any longer child.”

Jacque had stood in shock for all of a second before she collapsed into a puddle on the floor. The cocktail dress forced her legs to splay out to the same side, and the absurdity of the pose struck her mother as funny. When the tears started coursing down Jacque's face, Evelyn's

laughter stopped. She walked across the stained carpet and knelt down to wrap her arms around her only child.

As her mother cradled her within the soft cage of her arms, Jacquie told her everything. How Robert had changed after they moved in together. How it had started out with insinuations and expanded to angry words. How those words had grown louder until they exploded into her side with the pounding of his fists. The fact that he had spent most of the past year breaking her to his will. Her tears became choking sobs as she revealed her healing bruises to her stunned mother.

Silence stretched out for a few minutes while Evelyn soaked it in—the fact that her daughter had withstood this violence and she had known nothing about it. Jacquie could see the moment when her mother had started blaming herself, and she had rushed to reassure her that no one could have known.

“Momma,” Jacquie whispered, “he is going to be back at four. I have to get out of here. I had already made up my mind to leave today.”

“Yes. You should start packing. I am going to go get your father. I’ll be back within a half hour and we can get you out of here.”

“But, it should just take me—“

“Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

Her mother had rushed out quickly. By the time Jacquie reached the door, her mother’s car was already pulling out of the rutted apartment parking lot.

Jacquie took a deep shuddering breath then squared her shoulders. Start packing her mother had said. What was there to pack? Everything in this apartment had his touch on it. He had forced her to burn all of her things a few months ago, just to show how much he did control

her. The memory sent her to the floor again. She was unable contain the dry heaves racking her body again and again.

By the time her stomach settled, she had been beyond thought. Jacquie could not wait any longer. She stumbled out the door, leaving it wide open behind her. There was nothing left for her here.

“Miss?”

Jacquie raised her head and looked at the young waiter standing beside her table.

“Do you know what you want miss?”

“Hot chocolate.” The words were out of her mouth before she had time to think.

Chocolate. Oh, she had been craving it for so many months. “I’ll also take a coke and whatever the special is today.”

“That would be the seafood gumbo. I’ll get those out to you in a jiffy.”

Jacquie’s head managed a thankful nod before she rested it against the cold surface of the table. She wanted to stop thinking. Every time she allowed herself to think her mistakes came up to slap her in the face. She wondered if her mother had really gone to get her father. If they had come back to find she was gone. If they were sick with worry, searching for her as she sat here waiting on her meal.

She sighed and straightened up against the back of the booth’s vinyl seat. Once she had a chance to speak to *Starlight*’s manager again, she would ask if she could use his phone to call her parents. Even if her mother had simply walked out on her, she had to call to let them know she was fine. Whatever that meant.

Jacquie registered waking up but could not remember falling asleep. The waiter finished setting her order on the table and left after wishing her a good meal. The spicy fish scent of the

seafood gumbo wafted up in the steam from the bowl, and Jacquie burned her tongue on the first spoonful. She welcomed this pain—it had a purpose. The bowl was half-empty before she remembered the hot chocolate. The tastes did not mix very well, but they satisfied two separate hungers—the physical hunger of her stomach and the mental hunger of a woman under stress.

Having blunted the edge of her cravings, Jacquie savored the rest of her meal. Each spoonful felt like a patch sealing her wounds. She knew she would never fully heal but felt more like herself now than she had in months. The waiter brought her bill to the table, and she paid it quickly. It satisfied her in a way she had never felt before, to pay for her own meal. She had at least an hour before she had to be back at the lounge. Jacquie nursed her Coke and allowed herself to relax. She refused to think for the rest of her time in this booth.

That time lasted only a few minutes before nature came calling. Jacquie made her way to the restroom to relieve herself. Washing her hands at the tiny sink after exiting the stall, she took a few moments to study her appearance. Her hair had come undone from its tight bun, but she felt the wisps added more to her look than they detracted. The dress had a few dirty patches which Jacquie quickly cleaned and patted dry. Once that task was completed, she stepped back as far from the mirror as the small bathroom would allow and took a final look. She felt confident that she could walk up on stage tonight without a single doubt plaguing her mind.

Jacquie decided this was as good a time as any to see if the manager would allow her to use his phone. If she called now, perhaps her parents would pick her up and let her stay at their house until she got back on her feet. Looking back, she could see that she had judged her mother unfairly. Jacquie knew that her mother would not have left her in that situation. Evelyn might have needed to get away quickly, but she was probably tearing up the streets looking for her now.

She exited Wells' Restaurant and walked back around the corner to *Starlight*. When she passed the threshold for the second time, the lounge was much busier than it had been before. Several waiters were cleaning off the table tops and chairs. The bartender was already set up behind the bar, wiping down the glasses and stopping frequently to straighten the liquor bottles on the back wall. Jacquie searched for the manager in the bustle, but she could not see him. After a few moments, she stepped further inside and scanned the walls for an office door. Locating a promising option, Jacquie made her way across the red carpet to the far side of the room.

The activity slowed down as she crossed to the door. Jacquie ignored the lull and kept her eyes on her goal. She knew she could have easily asked one of them for assistance, but she wanted to find her own way today. A few feet away from the door, she noticed another one located in a niche beside the bar; this one had a "Manager" nameplate attached to the front. She veered toward it, trying to look like she had been headed that direction from the start. The lounge had gone completely silent by the time she reached the door.

Jacquie could feel their eyes on her, needling insecurity into her spine. She refused to feel intimidated anymore. Today, she had the strength to leave Robert; she could face up to five men who had no chains tying her down. Turning to face the curious crowd, Jacquie placed her left hand on her hip and scanned the men in the room. All of them had paused in their work to watch her.

"Something you want to say, boys?"

Her voice echoed through the lounge, and the waiters all went back to work. Jacquie smiled with a feeling a satisfaction; she could hold her own. Spinning back toward the door, she

stumbled into someone. Jacquie straightened back up as fast as she was able to on her high heels.

The manager stood before her with his eyebrows drawn to a point over his nose and his mouth scrunched up in a corner.

“Sandra called in tonight. Looks like you are the only act, sister.”

“I can handle it.”

“Just make sure you don’t handle my boys. If you have a problem, bring it to me.”

“Right now, my only problem is that I need to use the phone. You mind?”

“Don’t take more than a few minutes. I need you on the stage to warm up those pipes.”

The manager ushered her into his office and pointed out the phone before settling behind his desk.

Jacquie sat at one of the plush guest chairs in front of the desk and reached for the phone. She dialed her parent’s home number and examined the room while the phone rang. The furniture was new and well kept, suggesting that the lounge had the money to buy new furniture and the manager took care of his possessions. She hoped he would not consider her a commodity, but, if he valued her employment as much as the use of his furniture, then she should do well here.

On the third ring, her father picked up the phone. Jacquie rushed to reassure him that she was okay and let him know where she could be reached. Gregory Walker had always been a man of few words and he kept to that now.

“Your mom just pulled into the driveway. I’ll let her know. Call us when you need a ride home.”

“Thanks daddy. I love you.”

Jacque hung up the phone and looked at the manager. She could tell by his expression that he had been listening to the call, but she was not going to give him any information he did not ask for.

The manager exited the office, and Jacquie followed him out the door and across the lounge to the stage. He took his place on the piano bench and started up the opening cords. Jacquie grasped the handle of the microphone in one hand and the stand in the other and greeted her new life with a song.