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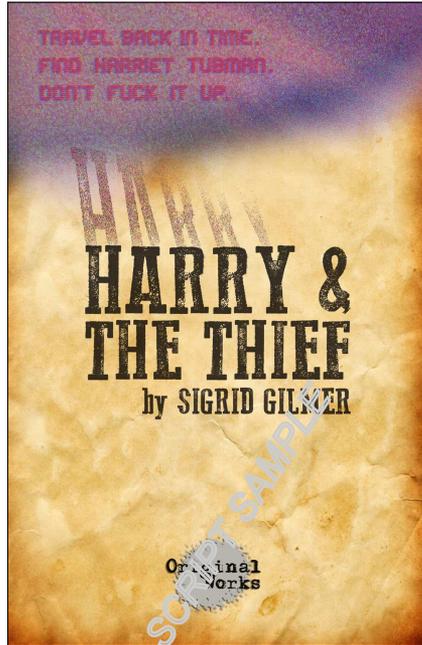
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**HARRY & THE THIEF**  
by Sigrid Gilmer

**Synopsis:** Mimi's cousin Jeremy has a PhD in physics, a brand new time machine and a plan. He's sending Mimi, a professional thief, back to 1863 to change history by providing Harriet Tubman with modern day guns. Lots and lots of guns.

**Cast Size:** Diverse Cast of 10 Actors

# VIVIAN'S MUSIC, 1969

A fantasia for two actors

by Monica Bauer

SCRIPT SAMPLE

## INTRODUCTION TO *VIVIAN'S MUSIC, 1969*

**Piper Kendrix Williams, Ph.D.**

Monica Bauer's play *Vivian's Music, 1969* gives life to a young black girl killed by the police in Omaha, Nebraska. The real Vivian Strong was 14 and attending a party at the Logan Fontenelle Housing Projects during the summer of 1969 when she was murdered. Much like the other innocent black people killed in America by police and others, Vivian's murder had been erased from history, virtually unknown to most Americans. Bauer's fictional play brings this event back to our consciousness resulting, I hope, in our being able to see "*Vivian's Music, 1969*" as a kind of reparation. "Reparation" comes from late Latin, where "reparation" appears as "reparare," meaning 'to make ready, again'; in Old English, it appears as "repair." In our contemporary English language reparations means "to make amends for a wrong one has done."

This play makes amends. It is a project of repair and recovery, because although a real girl was killed, shot in the back by a white police officer, little is known about her. Bauer describes her play as an "attempt at giving (Vivian) life." Monica Bauer is offering Vivian a kind of reparation, knowing that her death fell silently into the unacknowledged dust heap of American history. Vivian Strong fell into the abyss of white violence like so many before and so many after.

Bauer describes her play as “a fantasia for two actors, inspired by the death of a 14-year-old black girl.” Bauer does not create a documentary play. Instead, she uses facts from her family history and the history of her hometown of Omaha, weaving those facts with the creation of her two characters, Vivian and Luigi. She draws on her memories of her own African American drum teacher, Lewis “Luigi” Waites, on whom she bases the character of Luigi. She used African American friends from high school to help her create Vivian, as well as people she knew in “the white, Catholic, Polish part of the town” on the Southside. Fact, history, memory, fiction, imagination, and feeling are all a part of Bauer's fantasia.

Many people probably don't think of Nebraska and/or the city of Omaha as part of the history of white supremacy, as it is neither southern nor a former slave state as we imagine these. In the play, some characters are more aware of this history than others. Vivian asks her mother why there should have to be a race riot, as tensions are rising on their side of town and the police come “out every night these days, drivin' their cars so slow, they might as well be walking'. Drivin' back and forth, for no reason.” Vivian is aware of the inequity but can't understand her mother's fear of a race riot. Her mother, though, knows how history reverberates back and forth, past to present and present to past. Passing on the knowledge from her own mother, Vivian's mother tells her what happened when Vivian's

grandmother was ten years old and a white woman, “made up a story she was raped by a colored man... the white folks didn’t want to wait for no trial. So they broke into the County Jail and hung him from a light post.” This lynching is followed by the shooting and burning down on the Northside, the black side of town. Vivian’s mother wants her daughter to understand this past, “So you know what’s what around here. So you keep your eyes open.” This story passed down in this black family mirrors the stories black people know and white people generally do not.

*Vivian’s Music, 1969* offers an important way to bridge the gap between white and black Americans. Echoing Vivian’s mother, what do we need to keep our eyes open to? What don’t we know about how central racial violence was and is to America? The play not only revisits racial violence in 1969, but reminds us all that violence and race riots swept through America in 1919. Bauer shared a memory of this in her own family, when I interviewed her for this Introduction. “The 1919 lynching of a black man after a white woman accused a black man of rape. My father, who was born in 1912, talked about seeing the body of the black man was lynched, hanging from a lamp post outside the Country Courthouse.” When we look back with clear eyes, clarity of minds, and willingness of our hearts, we can know lynching was normative and rampant in the 100 years after America got tired of Reconstruction. One fact stands out to me: lynchings were on postcards and sent through the US

mail! Bauer also shared with me that her research showed “there are historical accounts in the archives of the Nebraska Historical Society in Lincoln about the 1919 riot where white men took over the North Side and burned black business to the ground.”

Reading the play is like stepping into the time loop of history, looking back from 1969, Vivian stands alongside all the other murdered children, like Emmet Till in 1955, and Trayvon Martin in 2013. In *Vivian's Music, 1969*, Vivian sneaks out one night to a gathering of young people, including her boyfriend Duane and other teens at a Black Panther Party in Omaha. They were dancing and playing music, like thousands of teenagers, black and white for over a century before and after. While reading this play, I was reminded of the video from 2015 of the 15-year-old girl in her bathing suit being thrown to the ground by an out-of-control policeman when she was at a party celebrating the end of school. Black teens were congregated, having fun and then someone called the police.

In the video, the officer is seen running to the scene, tripping, falling over, getting up, not stopping and, seemingly with no time to judge the situation, tackling the first black person he sees as out of place. The girl is in a bikini and in just seconds the officer is on top of her in a way that suggests sexual assault and yet somehow the black girl is the criminal. He has his gun out, waving it to ward off the people around who can see the scene for what it is

and what it could tragically become. There is an overreaction on the policeman's part, familiar to many videos of white police officers reacting to the presence of black people ... think Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castille, Alton Sterling and so many more.

In all of the stories I could find about Vivian Strong's murder it happened just as fast as in these videos: her presence is registered, "suffered" and then she is shot, never seeing the face of her murderer. Bauer captures this in her play, in Vivian's final thoughts: "It was like a push, like somebody come from behind me and pushed me hard in the back of my head. My feet weren't on the ground anymore. It didn't hurt. I wasn't alive long enough for it to hurt."

For me, as the black mother of three black children (two teenagers) there is always the underlying threat that they will be caught in the "wrong" place, seen/not seen by some well-intended though, most likely blind white person, who can only register their black presence and begin their altogether false judgment. And will the police who respond shoot first, and never ask questions later? It's my prayer, like every other parent of a black child, like Vivian's mother, that our children come home safe.

Bauer's play has two actors playing the key roles of Vivian and Luigi as well as the other characters who fill in the story. The play is staged so that visibly there are never more than two people on

stage. Vivian's struggles to be seen and feeling "invisible." Vivian is invisible to history, not unlike the ghosts of history that haunt us all. White supremacist violence, occurring repeatedly over time, links black experience over the centuries. Bauer's recovery of Vivian's story is key to seeing black people as human, wrenching them out of the loop of violence and granting them humanity. Bauer's play confronts the past of violence and terror falling on black people, upending the notion of the violence being limited by geography. Violence is central to America. Both characters sit on the precipice of time past and time to come. Bauer offers a building urgency and reveals a deeper connection between Vivian and Luigi as the play reaches its tragic conclusion.

As I was writing this introduction, I considered what it meant for a white woman to tell this story and voice black and white characters. In my co-authored book, *The Toni Morrison Book Club*, one of the authors, Juda Bennett is my friend and colleague and is also white (my two other co-authors are black women). In our writing process we pushed him to write about his whiteness and his own racist family, knowing that it is a necessary task for any white person interested in writing about race generally and black people specifically to acknowledge their own racial positioning. Monica Bauer knows and lives this necessity, thinking and writing about her hometown's racism, segregation, racialized terror and violence, owning up to the truth that so

many white Americans cannot admit. Like other white writers who want to give voice to black people and our experiences, listening is essential. As she told me: “I’ve been very sensitive about listening to my African American actors, Russell Jordan and Kailah S. King, who have been with me from the very first staged reading in 2017.” Both actors were a part of “all the play’s performances Off Broadway at 59E59 Theaters, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, performances at the Anacostia Playhouse in DC.” Bauer hasn’t just listened, she continues to listen: “These actors have been my sounding board for all things in terms of the cultural appropriation issue for three years. They’re very proud of our work together.”

As I was finishing this introduction in March of 2020, I read a Washington Post article, “A white Republican mayor seeks the truth about Tulsa’s race massacre a century ago” by DeNeen L. Brown. The article describes a moment when a white woman was yelling at G.T. Bynum, Mayor of Tulsa, Oklahoma, while he was eating breakfast with his family at a local restaurant. “You’re doing this to make white people feel bad.” She was reacting to the news that he was opening an investigation into a century old Tulsa massacre and destruction of “Black Wall Street.” Bynum said he never heard the story, not in school, not in his family: “I thought that was insane. No way something like could have happened in Tulsa. And I started looking into it and found it had been true. It was a big shock. You don’t think you

could live in a place, and no one would talk about it at all. They never brought it up in our history course in high school. It never came up in meetings at the historical society.” He let her rant; this was not the first time someone had come up to him and anger “ranting:” “‘Usually, my M.O. in a situation like that is to listen to the person and let them vent,’ Bynum recalled. ‘After it went on for five or six minutes, I felt I had to interject and point out the history of what happened. I pointed out my family were white people who lived here in 1921. I’m not trying to make white people look bad. I’m just trying to find the truth. I said, ‘If your ancestors had their entire neighborhood burned down, and your neighbors were murdered, wouldn’t you want to find out what happened to them?’”

Here is the beginning of answering the why of reparations for another murderous and riotous and destructive moment in American history. This country owes black people amends but until that happens, individuals can work to offer reparations. *Vivian’s Music, 1969* tells the story of Vivian Strong, 14, who was murdered in cold blood for no other reason than she was black and in the wrong place at the wrong time. By the end Monica Bauer’s play Vivian has been given life, words, an interiority, dreams, and connections to family she never knew she had. Bauer has repaired Vivian to history, making amends, and in doing so shows reparations can be made by individuals, institutions, communities, and maybe one day, a nation.

By Dr. Piper Kendrix Williams, PhD, Associate Professor of African American Studies and English at The College of New Jersey in Ewing, NJ.

Co-Editor of *Representing Segregation: Toward an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division*. SUNY Press, 2010.

Co-Author of *The Toni Morrison Book Club*. by Juda Bennett, Winnifred Brown-Glaude, Cassandra Jackson, Piper Kendrix Williams. University of Wisconsin Press, 2020

For a start on the idea of reparations and black people's role in American history:

- Ta-Nehisi Coates's 2016 Atlantic article *The Case for Reparations*
- NY Times *1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones

In 1969, a young black girl in Omaha, Nebraska named Vivian Strong was killed by a white cop firing a single bullet to the back of her head, setting off one of the worst race riots of the 1960's. Nobody knew anything about her, except her age and the circumstances of her death. This play is my attempt at giving her a life.

*Vivian's Music, 1969* was first produced by Good Works Productions at 59859 on July 26, 2018 before heading to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where it ran from August 3 - 26, 2018. The production was directed by Giory Kadigan. The cast was as follows:

VIVIAN - Kailah S. King

LUIGI - Russell Jordan

ACTORS, each one playing multiple characters, but primarily:

LUIGI WELLS, 50, black, a jazz drummer and drum teacher stuck with an inheritance he doesn't want, which has brought him back to his hometown. He walks with a pronounced limp.

VIVIAN STRONG, black, just turning 14, a bundle of emotions  
TIME: beginning in the winter of 1968, through the summer of 1969.

PLACE: Omaha, Nebraska; half a million people, a smaller version of Chicago, and one of the most segregated cities in the United States at the time.

SETTING: preferably bare stage. A chair. A faded red velvet curtain is draped across the back of half of the stage. Vivian and Luigi each occupy half the stage.

SOUND: Sound design is crucial here, with music between many of the monologues, a lot of it from the Dave Brubeck Quartet. Sound design for the riot should be bebop, mixed with the sounds of gunshots, glass breaking, police sirens.

PRODUCTION NOTE: The play is written in a specific dialect. That may make it a challenge to read, but it comes to life readily in the mouths of skilled actors. The play unfolds simply and powerfully in a series of alternating direct address monologues. Within these monologues, many characters appear, and they should all have their own distinctive voices and physicality.

## VIVIAN'S MUSIC, 1969

*(MUSIC: Something from the Motown era, circa 1968, then lights up on Vivian, a 14 year old bundle of energy, dancing. She speaks to the audience in direct address throughout.)*

### VIVIAN

Used to be, I didn't think much about music. What came into my ears day and night was either the kind of "ooh-ooh baby" Motown shit, or the choir at church hollerin' and screamin' and carryin' on like the Holy Ghost be dead. My sister Earlene gets all the solos, and she thinks it's on account she has talent. But I seen what she and Brother James been doin' in the church basement. Brother James, he's the organist, pianist, choir director, and the leader of the Children's Church. Brother James, he's a busy man! I see things other people don't see, on account of I can be anyplace and nobody sees me. It's my talent. Helps me figure out what's what pretty quick.

Mommy, she got a collection of records of real music. That means jazz music. But she won't let me touch them records. Keeps 'em in a box with a lock on it. Plays 'em in her bedroom. Says she needs those records for when she's feelin' low, so we girls ain't allowed to come near it. This is the most unfair thing in our whole apartment, besides the fact I gotta share a room with Earlene.

Mommy was the one who used to tell me about the Dreamland Ballroom. She worked there, before I was born. Used to talk about it like it was the true heaven, back in the day. The Dreamland, where all the great jazz cats came to play, right here in Omaha, 'cause they'd be on their way between Chi Town and K.C. and need a place to stay in between. They get to Omaha, and they know they can get a hot audience at the Ballroom. And a hot steak afterwards.

We got all the cow meat in the world here. I never seen it, 'cause it's on the South Side of town, where all the Polacks live, but Duane seen it once. He told me:

“One side of the street, it’s the Stockyards. Mile after mile of meat on the hoof. Just standin’ around, waitin’ to die. On the other side of the street, they got the slaughter houses. The smell comes from there: blood and guts and bone. Cousin Joe work down there, but mostly Polaks, ‘cause they don’t mind the smell.”

I ask him, “How do you know the Polaks don’t mind it? You ever talk to one?”

And that kinda stopped him up some. Duane hates it when I stop him up some like that. He thinks a minute, then he says; “Because if they minded it, they wouldn’t do it no more.”

And I laughed so hard I spit milk out through my nose. I said to Duane, “My Mommy sure as hell minds the smell of burnin’ Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, but she goes to that stinky cereal factory every single night anyway.”

Then Duane starts talkin’ his Black Panther bullshit, when the Black Man be in charge, no black folks has to work anyplace that smells. Duane says; “Black folks gonna live where they want, do what

they want... Black folks not gonna bleed for the white man in Viet Nam no more, 'cause we are makin' REVOLUTION.' Nothin' more borin' than a sixteen year-old black boy talkin' revolution. So to shut him up, I tell him I walked by the Dreamland Ballroom the other day. That place be boarded up, empty, for long as I can remember. But now. there was music comin' out of it. Real music. Jazz music. Not on no record. Live. I ask Mommy, and she say:

“Luigi Wells come back, that’s who’s playin’ down at the Ballroom.”

And Duane’s eyes get real big. Live jazz music, two blocks from the Projects. And he say: “Girl, we gotta get ourselves some of that.”

*(MUSIC: Jazz. Brubeck. Lights up on a middle-aged black man, dressed in a dark suit and tie. He speaks to the audience in direct address throughout.)*

## LUIGI

It was just like her to die at an inconvenient time. My Momma. Now, that may seem harsh to you, but fact is, she spent most of my childhood tellin' me she was about to die any minute, and it would be my fault if she did.

“Lewis! Don’t you go off with that girl. That girl is capital T Trouble. You go off with her, you are gonna kill your Momma. Is that what you want, Lewis? Is that what you want?”

You got no sense for these things, bein’ a boy, and boy’s go wherever that thing in their pants tells ‘em to go. Don’t you look at me like I can’t talk about what’s in your pants, boy; I been starin’ at your little pecker from the day you was born. I wanted me a baby girl, but I got you, and your little pecker, so I had to try to bring you up right. You go with that

girl, she is capital T trouble. And she gonna be In Trouble if you let that little pecker do what it want to do. And when that happens, it's gonna kill your Momma. You want to kill me, Lewis? Is that what you want? Then go ahead. Go on. Only kindness is, I ain't gonna be around to see the consequences. On account of I will be DEAD."

Of course, she was right. That was always the worst part; she was always right. About the girl. About the Trouble. About all of it, except that it didn't kill her. No sir. She just kept right on tellin' me what to do.

"You marry that girl, you gonna be stuck here for the rest of your life. That might be the Christian thing, but Christ Almighty, even Jesus would look the other way. On account of the music in you. It's your Daddy's music. I can't carry a tune in a bucket with both hands, and I got the worst sense of rhythm ever given to an American Negro, but you; you can be a professional. Now I am a professional, I am a professional owner of this here Ballroom, and that's a good thing, but you can be a professional musician. To do that, you got to get your ass out of Oma-

ha, down to Kansas City, where the blues lives, or to New Orleans, where the Creole jazz come from, or to New York City, where the bebop be cool. If you marry that girl and stay here, that's gonna kill me. You gonna make that girl happy, but you gonna kill your Momma. Is that what you want Lewis? Is that what you want?"

So I left, and went to New York City, because I needed to feel cool. Landed with half a drum set, just the snare and a cymbal and two pairs of sticks. I sold the rest of it to get me the bus ticket. I would've sent that girl money, if I ever made any, to help her with that baby, except Carol Lee, she told me to drop dead. Women and death, man. One way or another, that's all they wanna talk about. What's gonna kill them, and how soon you gonna make them die.

Momma kind of made a career out of dyin'. Every few years, I'd get a letter from her sayin' I better come home soon, or it's gonna be too late. Every damn time, I get on a bus and come out, turns out she just had some bad fish, or a bad case of missin'

her only child, that's what the ladies at church would say. "Now, Lewis, if you'd come to see her regular, she wouldn't have to get sick! She'd take care of herself better, if you come out here regular."

Church ladies. Man, what they'd say if they knew why I didn't want to even visit this one horse town! Every single time, some young thing would find me sittin' in at the Ballroom, eyes as big as sugar cookies;

"Tell me about New York. Did you really play with John Coltrane?"

Every damn time I come back to Omaha to visit Momma, some girl gets into capital T Trouble. And Momma has a talk with them, and offers them a little money to go to the special doctor who takes care of such things, so I can just go back to New York.

I built myself a life in New York City. Toured some. Sent Momma back a lot of post cards. And Momma loved getting them post cards.

Then she actually up and dies, just after I finally get a record out! Like she knew when would be the worst time for her to actually, finally die, and she up and did it. God rest her. She never even got to hear it. That record. Brought it with me, we played it at the wake. Had the wake right here, in her Ballroom. Maybe she heard it then.

After the funeral, Mister Jacks, her lawyer, he comes up to me and says, “What you gonna do with the Ballroom now?” She left it to me. The Dreamland Ballroom. And the tax bill that come with it.

## VIVIAN

My boyfriend Duane thinks he's a big cheese, now that Luigi Wells lets him play at the Dreamland when they got jam sessions there, every Friday night. Got hisself a saxophone, thinks he's John Coltrane or somethin'. He's the only one sees me at the Ballroom. He kinda tips his head back and gives me a little nod with his horn. Every other girl thinks he's makin' eyes at her, but I know.

Makin' eyes. I can see why, the wrong man makin' eyes at you could make you feel... like you been robbed of somethin'. But the right man makes eyes at you, that's music.

And speakin' of music, I got news about that, too. The best day of my life was yesterday, when I turned fourteen. Mommy bought me my very own jazz record album, so I could start my own collection. I wanted to start my collection long time ago, but Mommy said I had to be grown up enough to take care of it, keep it clean and make sure it don't get broken.

“Doesn’t” get broken... Miss Emeline, our English teacher, she spends a lot of time correctin’ our grammar. Don’t know where she thinks we’re goin’, we gonna need to know how to talk like Sandra Damn Dee, but she says we in high school now, we got to learn to speak real English.

Duane, he sits in the back of the class playin’ with a pick in his big old ‘fro, he told her we speak just fine. But Miss Emeline says; “Any of you young people think Mister Duane is going to give you a job when you graduate, then please feel free to speak like he do.”

Now Duane doesn’t come to school no more. He do spend all his daytime hangin’ out on the corner talkin’ ‘bout Black Power. Man, he looks funny hangin’ on the corner with these guys with their jackets and little hats. I saw him down on 24<sup>th</sup> and Lake, and I asked him, “What that on your head? Look like some sissy girl hat!”

That hurt his feelings, I guess, because Duane stayed away from me for awhile. Didn’t think he’d

show up for my birthday. But I guess he missed me, or he didn't want to miss out on the cake, 'cause he was there when I opened my present from Mommy.

Mommy said it was the best new jazz piano album ever. The Dave Brubeck Quartet. She said, it's so cool it oughta be refrigerated! I put it on the record player right away, and Duane liked it, until he seen the picture on the back of the album. "You fool! This here's not real jazz! This cat is white!"

And I say, "so what? The cat can play. The coolest hot piano ever. And if you don't like it, you can make like the wind and blow!"

Now he's poutin' like a baby. Pretendin' he don't like me no more. That's not gonna last. Me and Duane, we are a "thing." In Ebony, they are all the time writing about successful black couples, and they always say that "it was meant to be." That's what it means, when you are a "thing." Means you were meant to be.

## LUIGI

Now if I want to sell the Ballroom, I got to pay the tax bill first, which means I got to get me an actual job that pays money. In Omaha.

Who's gonna hire a 50 year old black man with no experience? I was drinking and smoking myself into oblivion over this very fact, to give me the courage to pick up the Men Wanted section of the Omaha World Herald just to look, you know, just in case. And there it was.

WANTED: teachers of rock and roll instruments. Guitar, bass, and drums.

I 'bout fell off my chair! For a minute, it felt like Momma was up in heaven pullin' some strings for me. Now, granted, it was for rock and roll. But if you're a jazz drummer, rock and roll is like moving from fourth gear into first. Like if you can run a four minute mile, you sure as hell can run an eight minute mile. Same skills, just... less interesting. Everything is in four four time, and loud as blazes. But hell... it's music.

Then I look at the address, and my heart sinks. South Omaha. Polak Town. The cats in New York, they think that segregation's just a Southern thing, but if you've ever been to Omaha... There's a white part of town and a black part of town. And the rich white part of town, too. South Omaha wasn't even the rich white part. Stockyards. The smell of dead cow hangs over that part of town like a blood-soaked blanket. That's why the rich white people, they live on the West Side. The Polaks, they are the ones stuck in South O.

But hey, it's a job. So I drive down there in Momma's 1959 Oldsmobile Coupe, all dressed up, suit and tie. If I was white, I'd just wear regular clothes, but I ain't white, so I am dressed up ready for Sunday morning. I park in front of this sad-looking thing, it's a store front seen better days, big old accordion painted on the front. Jesus Christ. These aren't just white people. These are gonna be real Polaks. Real accordion-playin', polka-dancin' Polaks.

First person I see is the lady of the house, in her 60's, hair in one of them braided buns. I tell her I'm the one she talked to on the phone. Then it gets real... interesting.

“You sounded different on the phone.” “Really? How did I sound?”

“You sounded... younger. We need a... younger... person. To teach the rock and the roll. That's for the... younger... people.”

Then this big man, about six feet four, broad shoulders stooped but you can still see what he used to be when he was a young man. But weathered, like an old barn left in the sun. Sad around the edges. But still... something.

“Helen, is this the man you talked to on the phone?”

“Yes sir. My name is Luigi. Luigi Wells.”

“I'm George Hollewinsky. This here's my wife, Helen. Helen here, she thought you was Eye-talian.”

Then I go into my routine about how I got the nickname. White people love to hear that story. These are the best “impress the white folks” lies that I got. I look real sincere, and I say, “I got that nickname in the Army, WW2, fighting my way up the boot. You know, Italy, country shaped like a boot? Got me a medal or two, fightin’ my way up the boot. Took out a whole nest of snipers. That’s how I got this here limp. They call me Luigi ever since.” And the wife, she is skeptical, but the husband, George, he is eating it up.

“I got me a medal too, but just for good conduct. Nothin’ like what you done. Helen, isn’t that something?”

But the wife, she is still... skeptical. I had just about run out of all my “impress the white folks” lies when this little white girl steps out from behind the counter. Tiny thing, maybe 14 years old. And she asks me what instrument I teach, and when I say “drums”, she just... beams with happiness. Now I think, this is my angle. I see the way they look at her, the way they pay attention to her, and I figure, she’s their little girl. And she obviously has a thing for the drums.

She starts talking a mile a minute about how she's been wanting to switch from the accordion to the drums, ever since she saw the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. I see my opening and I take it. "I played with the Beatles once. In England. They were on tour with Little Richard."

I explain that Little Richard was the Negro recording artist that the Beatles copied. This little white girl is about to die from excitement! Now the old man wants to hire me, the little kid thinks I walk on water, but the wife... she is still skeptical. So the kid moves in for the kill:

"Mrs. H., you know you always said that I tap my feet, and snap my fingers, and do all sorts of nervous things. Sister Luke says that girls with nervous habits can get into big trouble, if they don't have an outlet."

The wife wants to nip this in the bud, and she says "The accordion can be an outlet, too. And it's more appropriate... for a girl. Isn't that right, George?"

“Now, Helen, you know when Mary Margaret wants something, she usually gets it.” And then this little Mary Margaret, she proved it. She fixes Mrs. H with a look, and goes for it.

“It was just after my Mom died. When I first heard the Beatles. My Mom died, and there they were. They sang “She Loves You.” You know, “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.” I know it’s a song about a girlfriend. But I thought it was about my Mom, too. For a while, I thought God brought the Beatles to Ed Sullivan just to cheer me up. And the thing that really cheered me up was Ringo. On the drums.”

Turns out this little Mary Margaret ain’t their daughter at all, but she might as well be. And as George tells me all this, how little Mary Margaret practically lives at that music store since her mother died, he warms up to me, and I warm up to him, and we are all warmin’ up to each other. Except the wife, who remains... skeptical. Skeptical of the little girl playing drums, and even more skeptical about a big black man teaching that little white girl.

So I say: “Look, I agree with Mrs. Hollewinsky here, that the drums are not an instrument for a girl. But we can give it a try, and see how it goes.”

Now that child is happy as Christmas morning. George gives me the thumbs up. I am hired. I say to Mrs. Hollewinsky after the girl leaves, “I tell you what. I’m going to give her some really hard lessons. She’s gonna find out real fast she should stick to the accordion.”

Now the Mrs. is no longer skeptical. And Mister Hollewinsky, George, he takes me aside and says, “I spent my whole life playing polka music. I got me a band, George Hollewinsky and the Polka Kings. Band ain’t doing any business no more, outside of wedding season. I taught every kid in the neighborhood how to play the accordion, but now... the rock and the roll. I don’t know anything about that. If I pay you extra, maybe you help me in the store too? I got to buy guitars, and amplifiers, and... do you think you could help?”

We shake on it. I just got me a job! But on the way home, I start to wonder: have I gotten myself into a whole different kind of... trouble?

## VIVIAN

I been fightin' with my sister Earlene so much these days, because she's just so stupid. I can live and let live with somebody just plain different, but I never had much patience with stupid. She's so old, almost twenty: she supposed to be smarter than me, but in her case, I think brains fallin' out her head just as fast as they grow in. She was tellin' her girlfriend all kinds of nonsense, like:

“My voice is just a gift from the Lord, and it would be goin' against God's will to put my light under a bushel basket.”

And I can't ever resist an openin' like that, so I went for it:

“Earlene, what you need to do is put that bushel basket over your head and leave it there, permanent!”

“Don't you insult me, you insult me you be insultin' the Holy Ghost.”

“Every time you open your mouth to sing, the Holy Ghost be cryin’ his little dove eyes out! You so bad the women pull their big hats down over their ears.”

“At least I got some talent! You can’t sing, dance, recite poetry, you can’t do nothin’!”

“Oh yeah? Your biggest talent be spreadin’ your legs for Brother James, the day you stop doin’ that be the day your singin’ career is over!”

“Oh yeah? At least I got a Daddy. I know who my Daddy is. And thank God he ain’t the same man as your Daddy!”

And I stopped hard on that. She never said nothing like that before. Not ever. “Take that back, take it back before I hit you upside the head!”

“I ain’t takin’ anything back. Your Daddy’s that no-account Luigi Wells.”

Mommy wouldn't say a word. Not one word. Not a yes, no, maybe, she just went in her bedroom, locked her door, started playin' her records.

Now I'm stuck tryin' to decide if I want to know for sure. If he was really my Daddy, I'd have to hate him, 'cause he didn't stay with Mommy. It was easy hatin' Daddy Earl. We enjoyed hatin' him on a regular basis. But Luigi... maybe there's some things it's better you never figure out, you know? Some things best left... open... to interpretation. Learned all about that this week in English. Lotsa things, they's open to... interpretation.

After Earlene said my Daddy was Luigi Wells, it got a little testy in the apartment. Earlene and me weren't speakin', and Mommy kept herself busy workin' double overtime just so she didn't have to talk to me about Luigi. All of a sudden, Earlene ups and quits the church choir.

She told Mommy she was goin' to Detroit to become a singing sensation. So last week Mommy gave her eighteen dollars for the bus and a bag full of sandwiches, and we all went down there to wave good-bye. Now that I got my own bedroom, it's easier to

sneak out and get myself down to the Ballroom on Saturday nights. Duane thinks I'm comin' to see him. And I am. Sorta.

I got this idea, maybe I find the right time to ask Luigi about... see, that's the thing. I still haven't figured out how to say it. So I just keep goin' down there, waitin' for the words to come find me.

I sit way in the back, so nobody even knows I'm there. Luigi don't even see me. I can completely disappear. It's the truth. People go by me, I hold my breath, I'm part of the wall, or an extra chair. Sometime they hear the breath go in and out of me, and they say shit like, "Did you hear somethin'?" And I just smile, and breathe as soft as I can.

**END OF SAMPLE**