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EDDIE FOR SHORT

BY WALLACE WEST

You've no doubt heard the old one: The last man on earth sat in his room and there was a knock on the door. Well, this one reads: The last woman on earth stood before a microphone singing a love song to a man who did not exist. Then how was the human race to be perpetuated? A tough problem, truly, but the gal we call Dame Nature is used to tough ones.

*"'Cause I ain't got nobody,
And nobody cares for me."*

LITA closed her eyes as she ended the old song. After a long moment she opened them to their dewy widest; smiled as though she knew a heartwarming secret; slid like a panther kitten from the top of the concert grand. Standing tall as a reed, she searched the floor with bare toes for her shoes.

That little-girl gesture always wowed the cash customers. They loved it, too, when she eased herself to the piano top as her turn began, displaying suntanned shoulders and a startling length of leg. They often cried into their Martinis as she cradled the microphone like a rag doll, kicked off her pumps because "I can't breathe right with shoes on, folks"



and sang torch songs of the '20's in that unbelievable contralto.

But tonight the cash customers were absent from the Copa'. Only an automatic, fixed-focus TV camera stared at her with detached lechery as a phonograph finished the accompaniment.

"Goodnight, kind friends, wherever you may be," the girl signed off in a beckoning whisper. "See you tomorrow . . . huhm?"

Just before the Off-The-Air tell-tale winked she turned and swayed out of the "spot" in calm defiance of the rule that no feminine performer ever turns her back to an audience. (Lita's flat, uncorseted hips could retreat without shame, Bill said.)

Bill!

She crumpled against the silk-brocaded wall of the night club; clung there a second in the semi-darkness. Then she snatched the studio phone; jiggled the hook madly. Please God Bill still could answer!

"Lita!" Her radio engineer husband's voice was as slurred as though he had been drinking heavily. "Caught your act after all. 'Swunn'erful as usual, honey. You're bes' li'l trouser in th' world . . . in whole wide world."

"Don't let go!" She kept her own voice steady with tremendous effort. "I'm coming right over."

"Stay 'way from here!" Bill gritted. "We've been over all that before. Can't do thing for me.

Nobody can. Ol' Demon Carbon 14 caught up with me at last, even if my granddaddy *was* a hoss."

"But there must be something!"

"Nothing. I'm nine-tenths dead right now. I'm not in pain . . . jus' messy. I don' want you see me this way or try move my body. I like it 'ere in Master Control, with th' lights winkin' an' shinin' down on me." For a moment the words came clear and sharp: "If you risk contamination by coming here, I'll haunt you, Lita, so help me. And I'll bring along a whole army of little red demons. Don't you know who you *are*, Mrs. William Howard Day?"

"I only know I love you."

"I love you too. But don't forget that, so far as we know, you're the last woman left alive on earth."

"What does that matter if you. . . ?"

"Matters helluva lot." His voice blurred again. "Maybe human race *has* tried its damndest commit suicide. Can't let it do stupid thing like that, can we? Can't jus' quit an' let th' croc's take over can we . . . so long as there's single chance?"

"No?"

"Course not. Know million good reasons why not. But time's runnin' out." She had to press the receiver tightly to her ear to hear him now. "Here's what I done. Leavin' th' WGBS carrier

wave on permanent'. It'll run until Miami's atomic power plant breaks down . . . maybe year or so. Hookin' in th' shortwave an' TV transmitters. Th' network's down but anyone, most anywhere, can spot a 50,000 watt carrier an' follow it . . . follow it . . . Wait a minute, honey. Gotta take some medicine . . . if I can fin' my damn mouth. Don't go 'way."

"I'll never go 'way, Bill," she sobbed. "I'll be right here always."

"Atta girl." He spoke clearly again for a moment. "Well, I figure carrier's not enough. World's in a mess. Gotta give more incentive have somebody find you. So you must keep singin', see? Rigged up a time clock thing. It'll switch in the Copa' ever' night at nine, jus' like always. An' ever' night you climb up on the roost an' sing, jus' like always."

"No! No, Bill!" This time she did scream. "Bill, I couldn't."

"Could too. Gotta! If there's a single man alive anywhere who's near a workin' radio, he'll hear you sooner, later. He'll come to that voice. Even if he has to walk through boilin' pitch. He'll come, jus' like I came alla way from . . . where I come from, honey?"

"From China," she husked. "Oh Bill. For God's sake . . ."

"Yeah. I keep forgettin' now. God's sake . . . 'Manity's sake, too. An' I don't care whether he's

yellow, or black, or pea-green and has bat ears an' cross eyes. If he comes you, uh, marry him. See? Show mus' go on. All that."

"No!" The girl sank to her knees on the parqueted floor.

"Yes!" The voice was so weak now it seemed coming already from the other side of the grave. "Promise. Quick! 'Scomin' up signoff time for . . . for . . ."

"I promise, sweetheart." She knelt, slim and proud again, as though in the light from some unearthly "spot." "I promise."

"Knew you would . . . hon." The receiver rattled and choked.

A green-eyed, long-legged, empty-hearted girl walked the streets of "America's Playground."

The streets were empty, too. When the radioactive gas cloud swept across the nation it had sterilized the city of all but insect life.

Where were the piled corpses, the wrecked cars, the evidence of last-minute frenzied looting that prophets of doom always had warned of? Miami's City Fathers had been clever about that. Fearing that an epidemic would follow wide-scale radiation deaths, they spread the word early that Hell Bomb gas tended to concentrate in the canyons of city streets. There might be a chance to escape, or recover, they said, if one went out into the country.

So the wretched Miamians, as they sickened and watched the pale blood start oozing through their sun-varnished skins, fled to the Keys, to the 'Glades, even to the despised and frigid North. They fled in their shiny Cadillacs and Jaguars, their picture-windowed house trailers or their beaten-up Jeeps; via their aerial Route of the Stars and their Seaboard Airline Railway. Even as they fled, they died.

"And civilization fell upon the young men," Lita paraphrased the Book of Job, "and they are dead: And I only am escaped to tell you."

A pity, she thought as she walked the shining, antiseptic streets, that the Fathers had not lived to appreciate the success of their greatest publicity stunt.

Sometimes, when the sun was high, she delighted her woman's heart by wandering through cool shops where the wealth of nations lay heaped and forgotten. Or, in a book store, she brushed aside stacks of murder mysteries and "light summer reading" in vain search of some volume containing a key to the catastrophe.

It had been such a neat little war, over in a far corner of Asia. New weapons had been tested and perfected there. Beardless boys had been hardened into reckless killers, and surplus products disposed of without the necessity for cutting prices. The neat little war

had gone on for almost a generation. Everyone except the boys and their parents had come to take it for granted. Something to be deplored, like sin, but nothing to fret about, really.

Then, one still winter night, someone, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an European capital. (The bomb fragments, they said, bore Latin characters.) And someone else, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an American industrial center . . . Detroit, wasn't it? (Those fragments, the experts said, bore Cyrillic characters.)

The next day . . . Christmas Day, 1964 . . . the Hell Bombs fell. Thirteen spaced evenly along the Pacific Coasts of North and South America and, by coincidence, thirteen more along the Atlantic Coast of Europe and Africa.

The West Wind did the rest.

Lita, who read poetry over the air now and then, remembered how men had scattered before that wild west wind, "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

Ghosts! She would hurry her steps when that thought came, never looking behind her.

Sometimes, instead of walking, she would take her car . . . a Cambridge blue MG . . . and drive to a beach. It was less lonely near the water. There was life there. Would the sharks, or the

croc's, as Bill had suggested, some day climb out of that water as men had once done? She shuddered. Nevertheless she missed Bill less while she was swimming.

She swam well, as all singers do, thanks to her splendid chest development. At first she wore a suit, true to her prim upbringing in the orphanage. One day she forgot to put it on. And after that she didn't bother much with clothes in the daytime and became golden brown all over in the warm spring sunshine.

At night things were different, of course. She dressed in the loveliest evening gowns she could find in the shops — a new one each day. She put a hibiscus flower behind her left ear. She made up with the same care she had used when the club was packed to the doors and waiters were jamming little tables between the knees of the ringsiders. And she sang to all those who would never hear her again.

"Bill," from Show Boat, was her theme song. It had been ever since that night when the real Bill, still in uniform, had committed the unpardonable sin of threading his way among the ringside tables, lifting her from the piano after she had finished that number, and kissing her soundly while the customers cheered.

How long ago had that been?

Why, only a month! They had been married a week later, as soon as Bill was sure he could return to his old job at WGBS. Another week of bliss, apartment hunting, buying a few sticks of furniture, getting settled, lovemaking . . . And then the Hell Bombs fell.

Sunk in a dream that added poignancy to her singing, Lita cradled the mike and wandered, as the spirit moved her, through the favorites nobody ever got enough of: "I'm Falling in Love with Someone," "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and, for a change in pace, "Summertime."

*"One of these mornin's you goin'
to rise up singin',
Then you'll spread yo' wings an'
you'll take the sky.
But till that mornin' there's a
nothin' can harm you
With Daddy an' Mammy standin'
by."*

Why, she wondered, had so few songs like that been written in recent years? Perhaps Daddy an' Mammy had turned their backs on children who never stopped squabbling among themselves. Certainly there had been no singin' as all humanity took to the sky that mornin' when the gas came.

Stop it, she told herself. Don't get cynical. So the orphanage *had* been a poor substitute for her physicist father who had died a year-long death after an early

atomic test bomb had exploded prematurely out on the New Mexican desert. It had been a poor, prim substitute, too, for the mother she had never known. But the Sisters *had* let her sing at that recital where the manager of the Copa' had heard her. That had led to Bill. And maybe, as he thought, some mutation in her father's irradiated germ plasm had made her, and perhaps her children, immune to the after-effects of alpha, beta and gamma rays.

Her children!

For long moments she sat silent on the piano top, staring into the glazed eye of the TV pickup. Well, if Bill hoped there was a chance that a few others had survived . . . She owed him that, dear soul, up there across the street with the lights of Master Control winkin' and shinin' down on him as he lay across the console as though asleep.

She jerked her mind away. Three times in as many days since his death she had found herself standing with her hand on the knob of the WGBS Master Control Room door. And three times the winking ON THE AIR! KEEP OUT! sign had stopped her.

Inside that door lay madness. And there was no time for madness.

She shook herself savagely. As the Standby light beside the

Copa' microphone flickered another kind of warning she swept, heartbroken and magnificent, into her last number:

"Some enchanted evening

You may see a stranger . . ."

On and on she drove herself, white-faced, to the climax:

"Once you have found him,

Never . . . let . . . him . . . go."

In a state of near-collapse she slid to the floor, searched for her shoes, and bade the ghosts farewell. She fled from the dim club out into the bright street.

What would happen, she wondered as she pulled herself together, on that final night when the power plant failed as it was bound to do eventually. . . ? When the streets would be darkened forever? She clenched her teeth and ran all the way home . . . home to the apartment she and Bill had chosen because it was so cheerful and so close to the club and the station.

But the street lights, as well as the Nemo signal on the orchestra stand, remained faithful. At dusk, electric eyes turned on the tall standards bordering the boulevards and Biscayne Bay. They switched on the proud Cadillac signs and the glow in grimy store windows. And at dawn they extinguished them all in thrifty fashion.

Bulbs were beginning to burn out. A short circuit had started a

fire that gutted several blocks in the northern part of town. But, on the whole, Miami still turned its impersonal, white-toothed smile of welcome to an empty sea. Palm fronds blew, whispering, about the streets sometimes. That was offset by accumulating dust that made Lita's footsteps almost inaudible.

Then, one night as she was walking just a little faster than necessary through a dark spot, she heard the echo.

Startled out of a reverie, she stopped short. There was no sound except her rapid breath. Laughing a little, she went on. Was she really expecting that man with the bat ears and cross eyes to accost her?

The echo had returned!

In just a moment now she would turn and look to see where it was coming from. Ten more steps . . . Fifteen . . . Fifty . . . But that street light had burned out, too, since last night.

Maybe it was a shark, or a croc', coming out of the sea or the swamp to survey its new kingdom? So soon?

For heaven's sake, Lita. Turn and look right now. You're acting like a child. You're acting . . . The poem came unbidden:

*"Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round,
walks on,*

*And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread."*

Lita kicked off her pumps and fled, like a benighted Diana, through the dust. The echo footsteps speeded, too, but could not match her. Only when the girl had reached the entrance to her apartment building, a vantage point that somehow gave her a feeling of security, did she dare look back.

Far down the street a black shadow pursued her. She gripped the doorhandle; stood her ground panting, heart drumming against her ribs. Whatever it was that came, she must see it clearly or live in terror forevermore.

A huge dog? No! It ran on its hind legs.

Then it crouched low for a moment and her misgivings returned.

It rose to its feet again. Even in the spotty lighting she could see, now, that it was human. A man? Coming in answer to her songs? Bill had been right! Would he be yellow or green as a vegetable?" She tried to smile but only made a face.

No! Not green! Her hands were pressing against her smooth throat now to stifle a scream.

Black! Black as a broken street light!

And old . . . incredibly, crookedly old.

And not even a man! She let out her held breath in a great sigh.

Another woman! Thank God!

"Doan need be afeared o' me, honey," a cracked voice called from somewhere among the rain-bows that had started wheeling before her eyes. "See, I picked up yer shoes an' brung 'em along . . . Lawdy! Whatsa matter with you, chile!"

Lita recovered consciousness to find herself lying in her own bed upstairs. Beside her sat an old Negro woman. Her eyes, in an incredibly wrinkled face, were as sharp and excited as if she had just seen the glory of the Lord.

"Who are you? How did you get here? What do you want?" Lita sat up, to find that she had been undressed and put properly to bed.

"Name of Verna Smith," the crone grinned, snaggletoothed and benevolent. "Ah come from down Key West way. My man was a shrimp fisher, till . . ." She shuddered and held out her fists to something invisible, the thumbs thrust between the first and second fingers.

"One night Ah hears you singin' when Ah jus' happens to turn on one o' them battery radios in a store down theah. Ah recognize you right off 'cause mah man usta lissen to you a lot w'en he was blue. Firs', Ah figure dat Miami ain't been hit. An den Ah knows it has been or you wouldn't be a singin' so lonesome like. Ah figure you need somebody take care o'

you. An' here Ah am. Took more time'n Ah counted on, what with th' busses not runnin' an' ever'-thing."

"That was awfully nice of you . . . Mrs. Smith." Lita felt warm clear down to her toes, so warm that she broke the old Southern taboo against calling Negroes "Mrs."

"Jus' call me Verna, ma'am."

"And you call me Lita. I'm sorry I ran away from you. And fainting like that! I can't imagine what got into me."

"You can't ma' . . . Lita, honey?" The old woman's eyes became even brighter and her smile spread almost from ear to ear."

"No. I'm strong as an ox."

"You doan know you gonna have a baby, chile?"

"A baby!" For a moment Lita seemed about to faint again. "How do you know?"

"Ol' Verna ain't been a midwife all these years fo' nothin'."

"Oh no!" Lita began to laugh wildly. "Next week 'East Lynne'! But you're wrong, Verna. I'm not going to have a baby. I'm going to have twins — a boy and a girl — and we'll call them Adam and Eve."

Sunlit days flowed by. Hushed days when no bird sang. Days when only the chirping of crickets and the perfume of flowers testified that a part of the world still

lived. Nights punctuated by the brief, brave, useless night club interval. For Lita knew it was useless. If only one person had answered her call by this time it would not be answered again.

Yet she clung to the ritual, putting her heart and magnificent throat into the old repertoire . . . even adding new numbers. Somewhere Bill must be listening.

For weeks after Verna came and insisted on taking over the few household chores, Lita did little else but swim, or drive along the shore through haunts of the wealthy dead in Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach. There the marble pools already were encrusted with algae, the Afromobiles were idle, the Fountain of Youth dried up. Or she would sit in the spring sun and dream, like a brown female Buddha with a poodle cut.

But, as months passed and she felt life stirring within her, the girl became subtly worried. It wouldn't be enough to bring a brace of young savages into the world. (She knew she would bear twins. God couldn't be cruel enough to ordain otherwise!) The children would have to be educated to rebuild civilization, a better civilization. Yet their mother knew so little . . . so little. A smattering of high school; never completed.

She literally hurled herself at the City Library and, when its endless stacks confused and fright-

ened her, at the texts she found in The University of Miami. She began with the grandiose idea that she somehow must ground herself in science . . . in physics . . . and find the magic to ward off another atomic cloud.

The equations remained hen tracks. She left them; turned to economics, to sociology, to psychology. Lita was nobody's fool. Yet, without a teacher, she lost her way in endless bypaths to knowledge. So much learning! And she but one small woman!

History was better. But it justified everything — murder, war, famine, fascism and pestilence — all were for the best in the best possible of worlds. All, from the viewpoint of history, were inevitable, even as the Hell Bomb had become inevitable, once atomic fission and fusion had been left in the hands of the merchants of death.

One of the bypaths she followed led her, though, to the bright world of Greek drama and poetry. Here was music expressed in words . . . expressed in a way that she could comprehend. She dropped her other studies and, all through the hot summer months read the ancient authors — Homer, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles. But especially Herodotus, with his prose songs of how it was the custom for brothers and sisters to marry in Egypt; of the curse that the wealth of Croesus

brought upon its owner; of how, during the Persian War, Themistocles made the craven Greeks into a nation of heroes by the simple, brutal process of beating their stupid heads together.

Often she read snatches aloud to Verna, at first not dreaming that the Negro would understand anything more than the rhythm of the words. The old woman amazed her by rocking back and forth, arms around her shrunken knees and grizzled head nodding in glee.

"Doan tell me, chile!" she would exclaim. "Doan tell me! 'Way back three thousand years, an' soon as folks get a little money in de bank dey start cuttin' up. Dat's firs' thing you gotta teach the twins. Money made to be spent, have good time with, not to save an' fight fo' with razors."

"You do think I'll have twins, Verna?"

"Lands sakes alive, chile. You still worritin' about dat? I gotta wanga . . . dat's Voodoo charm my man brung from Haiti once. Wanga says you gonna have twins."

"Do you believe in Voodoo?"

"Course Ah doan. Jus' th' same, Ah doan make no faces at Papa Legba when it's dahk!"

Came the time, in mild September, when Lita found she could not lift herself to the top of the Copa' piano with her old lithe grace. Came the time when she

would have much preferred to go to bed at nightfall than sing for all the ghosts in Christendom.

And yet she sang . . . lullabies mostly, now, to get in training . . . as she would continue to sing so long as the telltale light beckoned her to the mike. She was not superstitious. Yet she knew that disaster would strike, did she break her word to Bill. Voodoo? Well, so be it!

Came a day, late in September, that was humid and hot and still.

"Hurricane weather," muttered Verna, making a sign. "You better stay home tonight, honey. You is near your time an' they's a big bull blow headin' dis way, mark my word."

Evening crept in sullenly. Sharp gusts of wind whipped the palms and rattled the jalousies. Verna wrung her worn hands but Lita insisted on making her shapelessness as presentable as possible in a sequinned black evening dress made for a dowager.

"I have to go," she whimpered stubbornly, even as a shout of wind heralded the near approach of the storm. "We'll drive, though. We'll be home before it gets really bad."

She was wrong. Hardly had they reached the club when the storm leaped yowling at them like a great cat. It whisked the top off the MG with one paw and slammed the little car over the curb and against the side of a

building with the other. As they dragged themselves out of the wreck and under the protection of the club portico, rain descended like a theater curtain, so dense that the few remaining street lights seemed extinguished.

"You hurt, honey chile?" panted the black woman as she guided the other inside and fought to close the foyer door.

"No." Lita answered through clenched teeth. "I can go on." She gasped, bent forward in agony and snatched at a chair for support.

The hurricane was screaming like a banshee tangled in the tops of the skyscrapers. Palms splintered, crashed and skidded along the sidewalks. A sign toppled into the street and rolled, a monstrous cartwheel.

"Stay outside, you Papa Legba," Verna shouted back at the storm as she set her thin shoulder to the door. "Doan you go botherin' dis pore gal tonight. She got enough on her min'."

The door inched into its frame and latched. The brocade hangings, which had been flapping like wings, folded along the walls.

"We're late," Lita gasped. "See. The light is on. Bill's waiting!"

She stumbled toward the piano. Halfway across the floor she moaned and crumpled.

"Here. Ah help you." Verna lifted the stricken girl and half-led, half-carried her toward the

Ladies' Lounge. "Jus' doan you be skeered. Verna take care o' you."

"But I'm on the air," Lita whimpered. "Please . . . The show . . ."

At that moment the full force of the storm was unleashed. The glass in the foyer door smashed inward. Water poured after it, as though sprayed from a fire hose."

The house lights dimmed, flickered and went out. The Nemo tell-tale lingered, an accusing green eye. Then it, too, was gone. Lita screamed.

Verna dragged her the rest of the way to the Lounge.

The pain ebbed at last and flowed away. Lita roused to full consciousness, utterly spent. She caught the gleam of a flashlight out of the corner of her eye.

"Verna?" she called against the muted thunder of the storm.

"You feel better, honey chile?" The crone hovered over her.

"I . . . Yes, I guess so . . . How are the . . . twins?"

Verna stood silent, the flash trembling in her hands.

"There are twins?" Lita struggled to sit up but was pushed firmly back among the cushions of what must be a divan.

"No'm." Despite her efforts, the Negro's voice rose to a wail. "Not twins, honey."

Lita turned her face to the wall and let slow tears smear her

cheeks. Again she was a little girl in pigtails, back at the orphanage. She had been punished by being shut in a dark closet for some infraction of the mysterious, inflexible rules. Illogically, savagely, she blamed herself. God, or that impersonal Fate the ancient Greeks believed in, had turned a cold back upon her because she had broken the troupers' code that the show must go on.

"It's a girl," she said at last. Obviously the brat must be a woman child; one who would stare accusingly at her in her old age; one who would hate her for having been brought into a dead world.

"No'm," Verna soothed her. "It's a boy. Healthy as a cricket, too, honey. Must weigh all o' nine pound."

A boy! Lita's world turned over once more. The tears stopped flowing. She stared up at the dim ceiling in abject terror and listened to the wind which was shaking the building and the rain that lashed it with whips.

A boy? Under her wet eyelids she was witnessing the destruction of a great city which no one had battened down against the storm. Trees uprooted. Windows smashed and the baubles behind them soaked to trash. Sheet-iron and aluminum roofs ripped off in long strips, rolled into monstrous cylinders and tossed into the streets to charge up and down like juggernauts . . .

No. Not juggernauts. Like flapping Furies in pursuit of Oedipus. Scourging Oedipus because he had committed incest with his mother? Nonsense! Scourging the world for daring to commit suicide, leaving the altars of the gods empty of incense and sacrifices.

She began laughing hysterically . . . laughing like a Fury herself.

Verna, thinking to quiet her, brought the child kicking in its swaddling of torn brocade; held it under the flashlight beam for her to see.

"What you gonna call yo' son, Miz Lita?" she pleaded.

"Does he need a name, poor thing?" The girl fought her hysteria down.

"Sho' do," the old woman whispered as a dazzle of lightning outlined the lounge door. "Have baby in a hurricane, better name him quick or mebbe you doan have a chance."

Lita stared at the door as though waiting for the crackling flashes to illuminate her future. Perhaps, in spite of everything, someone, somewhere, was coming to her over the rim of the dead world.

And if not? Well, she was young . . . barely nineteen. There was still time . . . plenty of time to keep her promise to Bill . . . Furies or no Furies.

"We'll call him Eddie," she said. "Eddie for short."