

Norma

by

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EXT. THEATER/STREET - NIGHT

NEW YORK CITY - 1933

The city street is surprisingly still, with the exception of a few passersby. The street is lined with 1930s cars of all types.

A theater marquee reads: "The Lottie Theater presents: The Return of the Godmother of Blues: Norma Ann Waters & Friends - Aug. 4-5"

EUGENE BUTLER, a black and ambitious twenty-something-year-old, bolts across the street toward the old theater as if he's late for a meeting. He's holding a leather folder with loose sheets of paper spilling out from the inside.

INT. THEATER/BALCONY - NIGHT

A well-put-together colored couple walks down the center aisle of an already crowded balcony filled with other colored folks. They find their section and slide past the people who are already seated. A wave of laughter travels the length of the balcony.

Eugene races down the steps of the balcony, folder in tow. He stops mid-way and looks out over the balcony, taking in the scenery.

INT. THEATER/FLOOR - SIMULTANEOUS

The floor seating of the auditorium is filled with lavishly dressed white folks. They laugh more hysterically than the colored folk on the balcony.

INT. THEATER/STAGE - SIMULTANEOUS

On stage, a white fast-talking comedy duo is mid-act. They are accompanied by a group of musicians who play sporadically to complement the comedians' routine. The duo includes some slapstick elements in their act.

INT. BALCONY - SIMULTANEOUS

Eugene snaps back to reality and spots an empty seat. He scoots his way down the row, causing a bit of a disturbance.

INT. THEATER/BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Backstage is bustling with other performers and stagehands.

NORMA ANN WATERS, a heavily guarded fifty-something-year-old with a no-nonsense attitude, emerges from a backdoor. She's dressed in clothing, jewelry, and a head garment that at one time may have been considered fine linen, but at a closer look is actually dated and tattered.

To her left is her fast-talking manager, RAY RUSSELL JR., a slim black man in a suit with a fedora and a winning smile.

The PROMOTER, an older heavyset white man, intercepts the pair. Norma and Ray stop in their tracks.

PROMOTER
You're late.

NORMA
(stern)
I'm here.

Ray intervenes. He removes his hat and holds his hand out to shake the promoter's hand.

RAY
I believe we spoke over the phone. I'm
Norma's manager, Ray Russell Jr. of
RJ's Entertainment and Co.

The promoter ignores his gesture. Ray retracts his hand.

RAY (CONT'D)
Anything you need to say to my client
you can direct to me.

PROMOTER
Well, Mr. "Ray Russell Jr. of RJ's
Entertainment and Co.," your client is
late. Maybe you should remind your
client that having a washed-up has-
been a part of my show puts my ass on
the line. Now I don't know how they do
it down in Louisiana, but up here that
prima donna attitude won't cut it.
Either you play by the rules, or you
can keep collecting those nickels and
dimes performing in hotel ballrooms.

Norma stands in silence and takes a drag of her cigarette. She exhales the smoke which travels carelessly into the promoter's face. She cuts her eyes and walks away.

Ray remains fixed before the promoter. Three young white

female singers rush past the pair and toward the stage. The band plays a staccato motif as heavy laughter pours in from the auditorium.

INT. THEATER/DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Norma's dressing room is dimly lit by a few crystal table lamps and a floor lamp and dressed with an assortment of antique furniture. A vanity and a cabinet topped with a lace table runner, crystal china, and liquor sit on opposite ends of the room. A single chair and side table sit on a rug in the middle of the floor. A clothes rack with a few articles of clothing stands at the back of the room.

Ray walks into the dressing room carrying a folder filled with sheet music. Norma stands in front of the clothes rack as she struggles to zip up a dress. She's wearing a brassiere, half slip, and the head garment she entered in with. Before Ray can get a word in Norma erupts in frustration.

NORMA

Goddamn it Ray. How many times do I have to tell you I need the zipper on this here dress fixed?

RAY

Let me help you with that.

Ray rushes by her side. He tugs on the material and pulls the zipper up the rest of the way.

RAY (CONT'D)

How about you wear that new piece I got for you? It's perfect for a show like this-- and the zipper works.

She turns toward the clothing rack facing away from Ray, removes her head garment, and hangs it on the railing.

NORMA

I ain't stuntin' no new piece. Ain't nothing wrong with the dress I got on. This here what I want to wear and this here what I'm gone wear. You let me tend to what I wear on my back. You just see to it that my band is set up like I like it. I keep telling yall I want Teddy to my right.

Ray hesitates.

RAY

Actually, the band won't be joining us this weekend. You're going to be singing with the house band.

Norma turns around to face Ray.

NORMA

The house band? Don't no house band know my music. Ray, don't start this shit with me today.

RAY

The promoter made some changes to the set.

Ray walks over to Norma and hands her the folder of sheet music.

NORMA

And you knew about this?

RAY

Knew about it? It's the only way they'd add you on the ticket. I didn't have a choice.

She throws the unexamined folder on the chair.

RAY (CONT'D)

I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to try out that new sound we've been talking about.

NORMA

You mean the new sound you've been talking about. I don't need a new sound, I need my band. What, them saditty white folk too good for the blues?

RAY

Them saditty white folks are the ones you need to appeal to if you want to crossover to a mainstream market--

Ray gestures to the folder.

RAY (CONT'D)

And this is how we're going to do it. Now I know blues is your thing, but
(MORE)

RAY (CONT'D)
it's a new era and swing is in. That's
your way back in the door. Not that
old jug-band music.

NORMA
That jug-band music is what made me a
star. And it's what kept money in your
pocket, and food on your table.

RAY
(sharp)
You're not a star anymore, Norma-
you're a goddamn liability! Now this
is your opportunity for a comeback. We
can't afford to mess this up.

There are three swift KNOCKS at the door. A voice penetrates
the room.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)
Eight minutes until showtime, Ms.
Waters.

The room remains still.

RAY
You've been gone for a while and
you're a bit nervous. Hell, we all
are, but this is the moment we've been
waiting on. This is our last chance...
this is your last chance. You have to
go on that stage and remind these
people of what you can do.

Norma glares at Ray.

NORMA
Looks like we got a show to do.

INT. STAGE - NIGHT

The three young women sing the final notes of their last
song. The crowd cheers as they curtsy and exit the stage.

The HOST, a white man dressed in a tuxedo, steps out in front
of the curtains before they are completely closed.

INT. STAGE - CONTINUOUS

The band is set up behind the curtain. Norma approaches the

PIANO PLAYER.

NORMA
Put me in Eb.

PIANO PLAYER
I only know the song in A.

Norma cuts her eyes at the piano player and looks at Ray standing just off stage. Ray motions for her to hang in there. She rolls her eyes and mumbles to herself as she makes her way to the microphone stand.

NORMA
(sarcastically)
And I'm the liability-- ain't this
'bout a bitch.

INT. STAGE - CONTINUOUS

HOST
Ladies and Gentlemen, it's my pleasure to introduce to you, for the first time in almost a decade, the "Godmother of Blues," Norma Ann Waters.

The crowd applauds. Eugene sinks into his seat and clings to his folder as if to brace himself. He smiles.

Norma closes her eyes, lifts her head to the sky, and whispers a quick prayer as the curtain rises. The music cues and Norma sings.

The white audience members seated on the floor are attentive. Their smiles and claps seem to almost taunt Norma.

A low chatter spreads throughout the colored audience in the balcony. Norma looks up and notices their disinterest. Eugene looks around in confusion.

A white woman on the third row covers her mouth and whispers to the woman sitting next to her. She alludes to Norma's sleeve by pointing at her own. They giggle and continue to clap. Norma looks down at her left shoulder and notices a patch of beads missing from her dress. She instinctively puts her right hand over her shoulder to hide the imperfections. The smiles, claps, and laughs from the white audience become more and more haunting.

Norma looks back at the piano player. He absentmindedly bangs

away at the piano keys. The music is bland and colorless. She looks into the balcony. A man and woman get up from their seats and leave. Eugene overhears the woman seated in front of him whispering into her husband's ear.

WOMAN
This ain't the Norma Waters I remember.

Eugene gets up from his seat and darts for the exit.

Norma looks over her shoulder at Ray. A concerned look is all he can offer.

Norma hesitantly sings one more line, takes a few steps away from the mic, and storms off. The curtains quickly close.

INT. BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Norma rushes past Ray.

NORMA
Is that your idea of a comeback?

RAY
Norma!

He attempts to stop her but is unsuccessful. He follows behind but can barely keep up as she weaves through the stagehands and other performers.

She spots the promoter and darts toward him.

RAY (CONT'D)
Norma wait!

NORMA
(to Ray)
Wait my ass.
(to the promoter)
Just what kind of games are y'all
playing here?

PROMOTER
I beg your pardon.

Ray interjects himself between Norma and the promoter.

RAY
We talked about this. It's the new sound.

Norma's eyes stay locked on the promoter.

NORMA
No, it's the white sound.

PROMOTER
You better get your ass back on that stage.

RAY
(to the promoter)
Now wait just one minute---

NORMA
That's alright, Ray.

Norma moves Ray to the side.

NORMA (CONT'D)
You listen here, I don't know how yall do it up here in New York City, but I'm not going to sell out against my own because you're afraid of some race music.

Eugene sneaks backstage, careful not to be seen. He spots Norma.

EUGENE'S P.O.V. - NORMA, RAY, AND THE PROMOTER

Norma storms off towards her dressing room. The promoter locks eyes with Ray.

PROMOTER
Fix it!

Ray follows Norma.

BACK TO SCENE

Eugene follows Ray.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Norma tears through the dressing room door. She paces the floor as she hyperventilates. She quickly pours the liquor sitting on the cabinet into the whiskey glass and takes a shot the way a person who suffers from asthma would rush for their inhaler.

Ray walks through the door with purpose but slows his stride

once he sees Norma. Norma's back is turned.

NORMA

Who in the hell do I think I am?
They're right about me. I'm just a
washed-up has-been. I was a fool to
come out here.

RAY

Do you remember when I first met you?
You were singing in your grandfather's
church. You had those folks jumping
and shouting all over the place. That
kind of thing don't just go away. It
lives on the inside of you.

NORMA

What's the point of singing if I can't
relate to the folks in that balcony?
Those are the people who got me where
I am.

RAY

Maybe so, but those white folks are
the ones who are going to take you to
the next level.

NORMA

(sharp)

Those white folks are the ones who
took my music from me in the first
place. You think they give a damn
about me?

Ray remains silent. Norma makes her way to the chair in the center of the room and sits, whiskey glass in hand.

NORMA (CONT'D)

To them, I ain't nothing but a show pony. Their prize possession as long as I'm making them money, but the moment I ain't singing I'm just another troublesome nigger. They took my music away from me once. I won't let them do it again.

EUGENE

I think I have what you're looking for.

Norma and Ray's focus shifts to Eugene who is standing in the

door frame.

NORMA
Who the hell are you?

EUGENE
Name's Eugene Butler. I'm a songwriter
and a huge fan.

NORMA
A fan? Boy, you look like you're still
wet behind the ears. What you know
bout the blues?

Eugene pulls a sheet of paper from his folder.

EUGENE (CONT'D)
Take a look for yourself.

NORMA
No offense, Mr. Butler, but I've had
enough new writers for one night.

Ray walks over to escort Eugene out of the room.

RAY
Com'on kid.

EUGENE
It's the new sound you're looking for.
Only you can sing it. The soul and
sass of Norma Ann Waters meets the
swing of the thirties.

She gives Ray a nod. He proceeds to escort Eugene out.

EUGENE (CONT'D)
Wait. Please.

RAY
Let's go.

Ray continues to escort Eugene out of the door. Eugene's folder drops to the floor. Sheet music scatters across the floor. Among the scattered papers is an old Norma Ann Waters flyer signed by Norma herself.

The flyer catches Norma's attention. Norma places her glass on the side table, walks over, and picks up the flyer.

NORMA
Where'd you get this?

Both Ray and Eugene turn to Norma. Ray's hand is still gripping Eugene by the collar.

EUGENE
It was my mother's. You were all she listened to. She used to always sing your songs to me as a little boy.

NORMA
Is your mother here tonight?

EUGENE
My mother passed away a few years back.

Norma softens as she glances up at Ray. She files through the rest of Eugene's papers.

NORMA
You wrote all this?

Eugene pokes out his chest with pride.

EUGENE
Yes ma'am. Just for you.

Ray bends down, picks up Eugene's folder, and pushes it into his chest as if to deflate it.

RAY
Alright son, times up.

NORMA
Now just hold up a minute, Ray.

RAY
You gotta be kidding me. He's a kid, Norma. A kid- what does he know?

EUGENE
I know that watered-down mess you had her singing back there almost cleared the entire balcony.

RAY
Now you listen here boy--

NORMA
I say what it is I'm going to sing.
Me. Nobody else.

RAY
Norma--

Norma gives Ray a stern look. He lifts his hands surrendering Eugene's collar and takes a few steps back. Eugene snatches away from him and fixes his clothes.

NORMA
Can you teach me one of these songs?

EUGENE
Well, I'd need a piano.

INT. STAGE - NIGHT

The auditorium is empty with the exception of a few colored venue workers sweeping around the seats.

Norma and Eugene walk on stage. Norma motions towards the piano.

Eugene sits at the piano. He attempts to play the opening of the tune but messes up. He tries again, but he messes up again.

EUGENE
You have to excuse me, Ms. Waters. I'm a bit nervous.

NORMA
Now let me get this straight. You done waltz ya lil fast ass in my dressing room, ranting and raving about this here music you done wrote, and now you're hollering about you nervous?

She laughs.

NORMA (CONT'D)
Let me tell you something. Nervousness ain't gone cut it in this business. These folks will chew you up and spit you out. If you really believe in the music on that paper at some point you have to stop giving a damn what people think and do what feels right in here.

Norma points to her heart. Eugene sits and reflects.

EUGENE

Ms. Waters, if you don't mind me
asking... what happened? Why'd you
stop makin' music?

NORMA

As a matter of fact, I do mind.

Norma sits down on the piano bench next to Eugene.

NORMA

What was your mother's name?

EUGENE

Elizabeth. If she knew I was sitting
next to THE Godmother of Blues she
would lose it. I learned how to play
from listening to your old records she
left me. "Prove Me Wrong."

NORMA

Uh oh!

EUGENE

"You See Me Coming."

NORMA

Alright now!

EUGENE

"Talk to Me Baby."

NORMA

Ohhh!

Norma playfully sings the lyrics.

NORMA

"Baby talk to me—"

Eugene joins in.

NORMA & EUGENE

"—Let me know you're doing fine."

They share a laugh.

A hush falls over them as they catch their breaths.

NORMA

I lost my mother when I was a little girl. She was the one who started me singing. She would make me sing to the point where I was sick of it. When I'd finish she'd say "Ann, your voice is your superpower- can't nobody ever take that from you." (beat) I remember my first sold-out show-- a tent show down in Baton Rouge. Honey, I sang my heart out that night. I ain't never seen that many folks all at once like that. They felt me-- they understood me. It was like we been through the same heartaches-- felt the same pains. It was at that moment I understood what my mother said to me all those years ago. (beat) One sold-out show turned into two, two into three. Before long there wasn't a tent that could hold us. White folks knew it, too. Used it as a way to make money off of me. Funny how when they started making money I stopped. That's usually how that goes. Soon my name was on every auditorium and theater marquee in the south and yet I didn't have two nickels to show for it. I tried to get out-- go back to my tent shows-- they told me if I didn't sing on their stages I wouldn't sing at all. Ten years- ten years they silenced me. They robbed me of more than my music. They took my power. Now I'm taking it back.

Norma quickly pats tears away from her cheeks.

NORMA (CONT'D)

And it's high time that you embraced yours. Now, are you gone teach me this song or what?

Eugene bangs the keys of the piano, this time his fingers faultlessly dance across the ivory. He sings the opening lyrics to the song. There are noticeable imperfections in his voice, but he sings with the fervor and spirit of a veteran.

Norma catches on quickly, adding her own flair. Eugene continues to play. The venue workers stop their chores and watch and listen in amazement.

360 DOLLY: AROUND NORMA

INT. STAGE - NIGHT (LATER)

It's the next night and the seats are filled with people.

Norma stands center stage singing the lyrics to Eugene's song. Eugene plays on an upright piano to the right of Norma. They are accompanied by a full band.

The white folks on the first floor are clapping and smiling.

Norma looks up into the balcony. The colored folk in the balcony are getting up from their seats and leaving. She looks over at Eugene who also sees the balcony clearing out. He motions for her to keep going.

The ground-level doors to the auditorium open and the colored folk from the balcony pour in. Ushers and security attempt to stop them but they are quickly overwhelmed. The black folks congregate at the front of the stage and dance.

Norma's performance is bold and energetic.

The song ends. The response from the crowd is overwhelming. The cheering and chanting are almost deafening.

INT. BACKSTAGE - SIMULTANEOUS

Ray and the promoter stand just off-stage. The promoter attempts to scream over the cheering crowd but is drowned out.

PROMOTER

What the hell is she doing out there?
That's not what we agreed to. If you
think you're getting a dime from this
show you have another thing coming.
I'll be contacting my lawyer...

Ray ignores the promoter and continues to stare off onto the stage in awe. He smiles.

RAY

She's back.

CUT TO TITLE CARD OVER BLACK: NORMA

THE END.