

BLACK BOTTOM SAINTS

A Novel

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AMISTAD

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

WEEK

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Fourth Sunday after Father's Day

☞ *Not every girl who walked into the Ziggy Johnson School of the Theatre came from a perfect home. Colored Girl and whole lot of other girls walked through the door knowing her mother was what the old women called “different.” Ziggy learned what he needed to know about “different” mothers from his friend Night Train.*

Every girl who walked into Ziggy's school learned a technique Ziggy deemed essential for dance and life, spotting, the trick dancers use spinning through turns. The key, according to Ziggy, was to keep returning head and eyes to a fixed distant point, a chosen spot, increasing the dancer's control and preventing dizziness. Ziggy's Ballet Babes spent hours twirling across a studio spotting to an invisible point on a wall—and to their future.

In 1974 Night Train was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He died in 2002. As of this writing his record of 14 interceptions in a single season, 1952, has yet to be broken.

Night Train Lane

PATRON SAINT OF: Junkmen, the Adopted, Widows, and Widowers

When it's time for me to go, I will only need one pallbearer: Night Train Lane. That particular six feet and one inch of Texas could hunch over, hike my casket onto his never-broken-back, and walk me solo to the cemetery soil. I won't need a hearse. Don't want six white horses, or a second line. Let the greatest defensive back who ever played the game, Richard "Night Train" Lane, tote me the last mile of my final trip.

Some say they called him Night Train because the NFL superstar was afraid to fly, so he took night trains to the next game. Some say it's because the song "Night Train" was popular when he was starting out in pro ball. None of that's right.

I called him "Night Train" because night trains are the most dangerous kind. They speed out of the cloaking dark and kill you. Delivered by my Night Train, the devil will be scared to see me coming. Everybody and everything is scared of Night Train, and Night Train is scared of nothing. That's why I love him.

I had a weekend gig in St. Louis, helping a fellow out who was dashing to Vegas to get married, at a time when there were a lot of stick-ups happening around Gaslight Square. At 2:00 a.m. when you're out of town, the walk from the club to the hotel can be a treacherous block. Not with Night Train. Fortunately, my gig was during the NFL off season. Night Train doesn't carry a gun, but there's a glint in his gaze that even jumpy young punks recognize, a glint that professional criminals cross the street to avoid faster than they avoid the shine on the barrel of a Smith & Wesson 60. The "I fear nothing" glint. The glint that says: "Nothing about moving on me, or my friend, will be easy."

Night Train throws an arm around my shoulder, and his courage is contagious. That's why I call him over to Kirwood Hospital anytime I suspect Bob Bennett is bringing bad news. I summoned Night Train today. If I wasn't in Kirwood, I wouldn't still be alive. They got a machine that's doing most of the work my kidneys should be doing that the

state of Michigan doesn't see fit to use on anybody who's not a veteran and white—but anything can fall off the back of a truck. Or maybe they rigged something up. They borrowed some time for me. I want to know exactly how much. Dr. Bodywork says there is no “exactly.” He's trying to balance helping out my kidneys with helping out my heart. When I press, Bodywork says, “A month, two months, Zig.”

Night Train drapes his arm on my shoulder, and I can't be afraid. Night Train says, “You ain't dying today. Today we smile. When you die, I'll do all the crying. You'll be upstairs with Nat King Cole and that pretty Elsie Roxborough you always telling me about, and you gonna have my Dinah on your lap.” That's what Night Train says. We laugh until it hurts my chest. I keep laughing 'cause it's pure joy to laugh with Night Train, pain or no pain.

He was born in Austin, Texas. His daddy was a mack man, a pimp, called Texas Slim. His mother worked for his father. Three months after he slid into the world, the woman he slid out of (or someone close to her) wrapped him in newspaper and put him out with the trash. Later that day, a different woman lifted an infant from a junk heap.

Ella Lane was strolling down East 9th Street when she heard a strained, high-pitched cry. She dug through scraps and filth, thinking she would find a cat that needed to be choked out of its misery. She found a brown baby boy. Thinking of the princess who picked Moses up from the bulrushes, Ella reached down for the babe who would be my last good friend. She took him home, named him Richard Lane, and raised him as her own. This meant she beat him hard with a leather strap to teach him right from wrong.

Over time and pain, he grew hard and long. And he *did* learn right from wrong. His worst day had happened, and he had survived it. The one who rescued him was the one who beat him, was the one who loved him. He was coming on sixteen years old and six feet tall and still growing when he embraced that complexity.

He played Texas high school football. That's saying something. And he played it like you can only play with an unworried mind.

When you're not worried about pain, not worried about receiving it, not worried about inflicting it, not worried about when it will come again, because you know pain will always come again, you play Night Train's way. Accepting pain when it came, as a teaching tool, doling it out, when necessary, dispassionately, this was the essence of his maturity and the engine of his kinetic genius. He played like nobody with a worry or a fear, and that was almost everybody else. The local papers took notice.

Ella Lane kept a thickening scrapbook full of Richard Lane's clippings on her lap and a thin strap by her side.

The boy tried to make it in a junior college; he didn't hack it. Soon he was in the military, wishing he was on a football field. Then he was discharged and in California, working on an aircraft assembly line, wishing he was on a football field. He took his old high school scrapbook out of the back of his closet, tucked it under his arm, and rode a bus across town to where the Los Angeles Rams practiced.

He talked his way onto the practice field with the help of his Mama-made scrapbook. Then he caught and blocked his way onto the team with the help of Mama-made memories of Mama's strap.

He had come up all kinds of hard, but his ambition was green and vibrant, the way ambition can only be when the inside of a heart is soft. In the third month of his life he had been the center of a miracle: He had found the sweet in a hard woman's love, and he was ready to make the best of what he had been given, ever after. He never meditated long on the moment of being thrown away; he saved all his attention for the moment of rescue. He didn't focus on the mama who put him down in the trash; he focused on the mama who picked him up from the trash. He won for her.

The first year Night Train played for the Los Angeles Rams, he set records that are yet to be broken. He invented a kind of tackle that was so effective that they first gave it a name, the "Night Train Necktie," but then the NFL commissioners outlawed it. Said it was too vicious. Yet his opponents rose in respectful awe of him. They knew: You have to be a

man to wear Night Train's tie. When you felt his hit, there was no hate in it—just the will to win for Ella, his mama.

I loved to watch him intercept. The ball will be going in one direction from the hands of a quarterback to a receiver, and Night Train gets between those two men, puts his huge body in vertical motion, arches his torso, and curves his arm high, eclipsing even the famous ballet dancer Nureyev, and plucks that ball out of the sky. Suddenly the game is going in a new direction.

Other men played out of rage, and anger, and desperation. Night Train played out of love and ambition.

He was a man who wasted no time on self-pity. But more than this, he was a man who never got numb to pain, or took pleasure in inflicting pain, but rather a man who refused to be distracted by it.

Night Train never made pain the focus or the locus of connection, except on a football field. And with Ella Lane as his mama and Texas Slim as the closest thing he had to a daddy, that was no small achievement. I loved the man. Not for how he played a game but for how he taught me to think in new ways about living when I thought I was full-wise to life.

He was a small part of the reason I finally got married. Night Train insisted that wedded bliss was the highest high ever.

It was 1960 when I met him, after one of his first games as a Lion. My School of the Theatre was eight years old. I was forty-seven years old and Night Train was thirty-two.

I was dazzled from jump. Night Train was different than anyone I ever knew—tougher and more vulnerable—and I knew Joe Louis. I knew Sugar Ray Robinson. Night Train was wild wind blowing from the shore of hard Texas love, and he revived me. To thank Night Train, I introduced him to the most passionate woman I have ever known, Ruth Lee Jones, aka Dinah Washington.

Ruth Lee came up from Alabama. Like me, she entered the Chicago scene when she was a child. She was one of the original Sallie Martin Gospel Singers. I didn't pay too much mind to that. The first time I heard her, and paid attention, it was at Dave's Rhumboogie. Next time I saw her

she was upstairs at the Garrick, and Billie Holiday was downstairs and she wasn't Ruth Jones anymore; she was Dinah Washington. By '46 she had a hit with "Ain't Misbehavin'."

Now *that* was just a lie. Dinah Washington never behaved. Always armed with a pistol, always immaculate, cussing and fussing and fist fighting. The woman sang like Night Train intercepted—brilliantly—but she didn't behave. At a time when people didn't get divorced, Dinah got divorced six times.

Raw wasn't the point for Dinah. Unexpected was the point. If she loved you, taking care of you before she took care of herself was the point.

She loved Katie Basie. After Basie married his Katie, she became one of the sidditiest of siddity sisters. Katie, aka Mrs. Catherine Morgan Basie, never met a social or civic club she didn't want to join, never was invited on a club trip she didn't want to take, and never chaired a gala without setting out to break its fund-raising record. Sometime in the fifties, or maybe it was the late forties, Katie decided Dinah was the perfect person to record a specialty number for one of her pet charities. Dinah said yes. Then Dinah heard the call time for the recording session. Dinah said no. She and the world were attending a birthday bash the night before Katie's scheduled 9:00 a.m. session. Katie signed on some lesser singer not invited to the party. Katie arrived at the studio at 8:45 a.m. She was led into the dark control booth by the engineer, who flicked on the light. There, sprawled on a couch, sleeping in her mink, was Dinah. Ready. At nine she was at the mike, helping Katie shine.

Dinah was a falling star when Night Train came to Detroit town to play for the Lions in 1960. She had as many enemies as friends and a speckled reputation, except among those of us who had—like Katie—been the beneficiary of her speckled generosity. And those of us who appreciated what it meant to bend a note so that it bent time. Night Train appreciated the bending of notes as much as Dinah appreciated the way he arched his back to love her. A few years after I introduced Night Train to Dinah in Detroit, they got married in Las Vegas.

It was his second marriage. It was her seventh. I had known Dinah

with all her husbands, and this was the one. They were so good together.

Dinah wasn't intimidated. And Dinah didn't have her hand out. Night Train wasn't intimidated, and Night Train didn't have his hand out. They were on their way to happily-ever-after when fate intercepted.

The first year they were married, just before Christmas, Night Train was sleeping peacefully beside his wife when she stopped breathing. Sec-
onal and something. Dinah went to sleep and didn't wake up. She died younger than Bessie, younger than Billie. She was thirty-nine years old. From Alabama. A big girl. Big and brown and beautiful. And dead.

All the presents, carefully chosen by Dinah, were wrapped and waiting under the Christmas tree.

Night Train sent her upstairs in a bronze casket, wearing a mink. His tears rained down on that fur. In this life I have never seen anything sadder than Night Train's face as he leaned, weeping, over his wife's open casket.

He would have run into a brick wall for Dinah Washington. But he couldn't stop her from taking diet pills because she feared she wasn't small and pretty enough to be a big star again and to keep him forever. She didn't know she was so much more than good enough. She was his best of the best. She hadn't been with Night Train long enough to see herself through eyes sharpened by loving and being loved.

Christmas swirled around and into the funeral. A dazed Night Train watched her children and sisters open gifts and notes she had prepared for them. What was it someone said at the wake? "He took care of her and she took care of them." And someone else said, "At long last, someone was taking care of her." Someone bigger and stronger than Dinah was big and strong, indeed. What did she write in *Sepia* magazine? "I have been hurt, humiliated, kicked around, robbed, maligned by lies. Name it, it has happened to me, but I refuse to give up. . . . I'll go on giving, loving and searching for the happiness I want. And if everything else fails, as that famous song said, I'll give my heart to the junkman."

In her own way, she did just that. Night Train started off life wrapped in a newspaper set down into the trash. Sometimes these days, after his football season is over, not just after a game, if he gets deep in his cups Night Train will say, “I am the junkman.”

LIBATION FOR THE FEAST DAY OF NIGHT TRAIN LANE:

The Junkman’s Julep

1 jigger of Copper & Kings American brandy

1 bar spoon of Smith & Cross Jamaican rum

1 sugar cube

½ pony of water

Mint

In the bottom of a metal julep cup, place the sugar cube and water and slightly muddle. Next add 6 or 7 mint leaves and the brandy, then stir briefly. Top with crushed ice. Using a spoon, slowly churn the crushed ice to chill the julep cup. Be careful not to pull the mint out of the bottom of the cup. With clean hands place a final mound of crushed ice atop the drink. Onto this ice pour your rum. Decorate lavishly with mint. Serve with a straw.
