

It's like he was getting air through his ears from listening to Bird. He finally stops and nods to Danny who starts breathing again like it's no strain at all. Bird hugs both of us and there're tears in his eyes. He looks at me and says, 'Don't feel bad that you couldn't do what Danny did. It's not that you love the music less. He just needs it more. When I have a bad day, even the music's not enough. But it's all Danny ever needs. Maybe some of what he's got will rub off on me... You be careful, now. Because that'll help you to be good.' Then he and Danny walk off, leaving me standing there."

"Sarah said I was a civilian," Anna said. "I guess you're one too."

"What does that make Danny?"

"Not a civilian."

"Maybe so. But he can't dance like we do," Wardell said.

That night they went to the Savoy, and Anna felt the heat that dancing always generated between them. But it wasn't just the sweat that kept them hot. It was anger, keeping their temperatures rising even after they left for the evening. They walked without really knowing where they were going, and ended up near Wardell's apartment building in the San Juan Hill section of Manhattan. They sat on a park bench, not talking or looking at each other. A few people walked by but they paid no attention to them.

"Well now!" a familiar voice said. "What have we here?"

Anna and Wardell jumped at the sight of Billy Eckstine.

"I'm sorry I startled you," he said with a grin that wasn't sorry at all. "You know, I've seen you two dance at the Savoy, and you're usually the ones surprising everybody else. It's not a good sign to be out here at this late hour, looking like you been caught doing something you're not sure you ought to do."

Anna could feel his chilly stare that always made her uncomfortable.

"Get up for a minute," he said, in a tone that wasn't a request. They got up and stood on either side of him. Eckstine put his arms around them, resting his huge hands on their shoulders. He spoke just above a whisper and Anna smelled alcohol on his breath.

"It's not easy finding a special place where you can always count on having a good time with people you care about. But if you're lucky enough to find such a place, you don't want to ruin it by shitting where you eat."

Eckstine took his arms away and walked off without another word.

"I guess that's the voice of experience," Wardell said.

"I guess."

"Your father would probably agree."

"What do you mean?" Anna asked, but already knew the answer.

"Come on, Anna! You've seen the way he looks at me."

"But he's never said anything to me."

"Why should he? He's getting what he wants without having to."

"What's that, Wardell?"

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to get into that right in front of my building."

"You're right. We should be careful. Because like Bird told you, that'll help us to be good."

They didn't speak. But something in Wardell's face told Anna that, like her, he wasn't in the mood to be careful or good. And then, as if on cue, they reached out to each other and lindy-hopped into the building.

Like Anna and Wardell, Dizzy and Bird fade out the same way they began, creeping along and hesitating as they grope in the dark for another moment for everyone listening to dream in.

Wesley Brown is the author of the novels *Tragic Magic*, *Darktown Strutters*, and *Push Comes to Shove*, and the produced plays *Boogie Woogie* and *Booker T*, *Life During Wartime*, and *A Prophet Among Them*. He is co-editor of the multicultural anthologies *Imagining America* (fiction) and *Visions Of America* (nonfiction), and editor of *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*. He also wrote the narration for a segment of the PBS documentary, *W.E.B. Dubois: A Biography in Four Voices*. He is Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University, currently teaches literature at Bard College at Simon's Rock, and lives in Spencertown, New York.

RHONEL ROBERTS

John Handy, 2012
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24



COURTESY THE ARTIST