

Monster's Ball

By Guy Lillian III

Recently a piece of mail was forwarded to me from my old job in St. John Parish. It was an anomaly – instead of circular announcing legal seminars and Bar magazines I usually received at the office, it was delicate, personal – a wedding invitation. The date had already passed for the ceremony, and of course we'd moved away, but just receiving it was satisfying.

I didn't like the movie, **Monster's Ball**. It seemed a clumsy collection of cliches about Southerners culled from a shallow misunderstanding of Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. But it did have three virtues: Halle Berry acting like a black woman for once in her career, and two exterior shots of greasy spoon restaurants where she was supposed to work. As the flick was filmed in New Orleans and LaPlace, Louisiana, where I (1) lived and (2) worked, I knew both.

Neither joint could possibly hold the interior actions depicted in the movie, but the place in LaPlace (haha, I made a funny) was of professional interest. I knew it not only as a seedy local landmark, but as a crime scene in one of my most notorious trials.

Once upon a time Louisiana Motors was an auto dealership, just like it sounds. Later it morphed into a combination bar and café, attracting a clientele of lower middle class working folk. I'd had a sandwich there once or twice myself. Like many another such establishment, it became a locus of its patrons' lives – and the scene of serious tragedy. An example was the January 2003 suicide, outside its front doors, of a young man we'll here call **Skeeter**. Gunshot wound. That's all I knew.

Skeeter had a girlfriend we shall call **Cassie**. After Skeeter's demise she continued to haunt Louisiana Motors – mostly, the bar. On May 7, 2003, she was there.

She was not alone. **Darryl**, the manager/owner of the establishment was there. A bartender worked there named **Karen**, waitresses named **Lily** and **Joy**, a cook named **William** and my client, **Duane**, who was eating dinner with his fiancée **Tina** and her son, **Trey**. Other customers present were **Dorothy** and her husband **Raymond**, and a fellow named **Larry**.

From the statement of Tina G.:

On the evening of May 7, 2003, I was sitting eating dinner at Louisiana Motors with Duane T. and my son Trey. At approximately 6:00 PM a customer, Cassie, entered the restaurant from the lounge. She proceeded to sit at the counter to order dinner. After a few minutes, Cassie started screaming through the restaurant, "Y'all need to turn the fucking air conditioner on." Duane advised Cassie that if she used any further language as above that he would put her out as he worked as security. We continued eating dinner and Cassie remained at the counter. At 6:30 we completed continued eating dinner and Duane went into the office to say goodbye.

to the boss and owner, Darryl. Tina gets up to pay the bill, and in doing so, passes Cassie. Who jumps on her like a wildcat.

Before anyone can react, Cassie has Tina on the floor and is dragging her by the hair, screaming incoherences. Various customers and employees leap upon Cassie and drag her off. Among those freeing Tina from Cassie's clutches is **Lily**, a 20-year-old waitress.

Darryl and Lily escort Cassie into the storeroom. Duane takes Tina into the ladies room to help her clean up. Or does he? Cassie later tells the cops that he, too, took her into the back

room; and there beat the hell out of her. Lily's story is that Cassie popped her in the chops in the storeroom and she hit her back, knocking her down and causing her injuries. Which is true?

If there was a quality to this case, it was the wealth of witnesses. In addition to Tina, and Darryl, who had his own lawyer, I had customers, bartenders, and best of all, Lily ... or did I?

Lily was 19, and judging by the photos of the incident's aftermath given me by Tina, righteously cute. She was also righteously *scared*. – of something. My investigators couldn't find her. When he knocked on her front door, her own mother denied even knowing her. I've seen witness stage fright before, but this was *ridiculous*.

She finally showed up on the ultimate trial day – we'd tracked her down through her employer, an outfit which sent her to courthouses throughout the area doing title searches. She was impressively gorgeous. Rather sweet, and indeed, scared silly — but not of Duane. Of *Darryl*.

I kept her in the IDB office at the courtroom while we selected a jury and heard Duane's testimony. The chief assistant D.A. handled the case for the prosecution. He introduced photos of Cassie's bruised and beaten face and put on a couple of restaurant customers who claimed they'd seen Duane accompany Darryl into the back with Cassie. One elderly gent was deaf as a post and the other, who claimed to know everyone involved well, didn't recognize Tina's photo. Both said Cassie had attacked Tina and dragged her by the hair – just as she'd said herself

Cassie, however, denied it – denied any wrongdoing. Denied being drunk. And even though cocaine had been found in her system, denied taking it *that day*.

Don't mess with an old dope ... lawyer. I was ready for her. When my turn came, I had my expert standing by – head of a state facility devoted to treatment of addiction. He testified that cocaine stays in the body only a short time – unlike marijuana, the residue of which lingers for literally, years. (The grass you may have ingested in college – surely the last time you would have partaken – is *still* in your fat cells.) I put on Tina, the bartender, and a couple of other customers, giving our perspective – that Duane had been with Tina the whole time Cassie was getting her face pushed in. And finally, I put on Lily.

The tall, slender, beautiful 20-year-old girl – are there sweeter words in our language? – was nervous, but she told her story. She and Darryl alone had taken Cassie to the rear. Cassie had punched her in the face and been punched in return. Cassie had fallen onto her face on the floor.

“And then what happened?” I asked.

And as she'd left, she'd turned – and found Darryl straddling Cassie – *pistol-whipping* her.

The D.A. actually jumped in his seat. He'd been looking forward to pooh-poohing the idea that such a blossom could have caused the damage shown in Cassie's hospital photos. Now he could only demand to know why she hadn't come forward before now. She answered that she'd been frightened of Darryl, who always carried a gun and who was a very violent and dangerous man.

After that, it was a matter of rhetoric, and I'm better at that than the D.A. He made fun of our expert – or tried to – and tried to regain the ground Lily had cost him – but no way. *Not guilty*. Darryl still awaits trial.

A few days later, the D.A.'s secretary caught Duane, Tina and Lily laughing together at a bar, and reported the fact to me, as if it meant something. Sure it meant something, I said. It meant they'd *won*.