

DAISIES ON HARLEM'S DOORSTEP
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SYNOPSIS

"Love is a dangerous desperation. Everybody gotta pay...sometime." It's Spring of 1929 in Harlem, a season before the stock market crashed and the world suffered what would be known as the Great Depression. The streets are filled with lights and glitter and for an innocent Daisy, who only wants to find her sister, four very different women show her how to grow in concrete.

SETTING

Spring of 1929. 1606 St. Nicholas Avenue Apt #3, Harlem, NY.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

DAISY – 18 year-old naive African-American woman desperate to find her sister, Rose.

GILLY – (pronounced with a “J” sound) Partially deaf and mute*, 20 years old, female cousin of CAN. Woman of color. Originally from Detroit, MI.

CHARLIE – Proud, glamorous and materialistic 20 year-old show girl, originally from Baltimore, Maryland. African-American.

CAN – Popular 25 year-old, stud female. Dresses as a male.* Runs numbers in Harlem, NY. Woman of color. Originally from Detroit, MI.

RED – 28 year-old African-American woman. Well known madam in Harlem, NY.

HENRY TAYLOR – 25 year-old man of color. Banker, prestigious with a high standing in society.

VO – A voice of a young male or female. (Can be played by any of the characters who are not in the same scenes.)

*Special notes:

When casting for the role of CAN, the actor should be able to convey a sense of confidence, fun, optimism and boyish-like charm. She identifies as female, but if CAN were born in the more modern era, she would be comfortable identifying as a stud or butch lesbian. She competes with men. She is also extremely dapper and well groomed. The name CAN is short for Candice.

When casting for the role of Gilly, the actor must create her own form of sign language. Facial expressions and movement are essential to delivering Gilly’s parts as she does not use her voice in the majority of the play.

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Scene 1
“Biscuits & Bacon”

A charming and quaint tenement apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem awaits the chaos the day will bring. GILLY bolts in full of smiles and hope as she assists DAISY, a newcomer to Harlem’s vibrant bustling streets. They met an hour ago at the train station when GILLY noticed a lost confused young DAISY holding a six-month old baby and an old worn suit case.

Sound of flowers breaking through soil in fast forward while VO poetically describes the beginning of the daisy life cycle. DAISY stands slumped and slowly grows to standing in an upright position. There’s a long timid pause, staring at a photo of CHARLIE and her sisters before she makes her way over to the sofa to sit.

VO

Approximately 4,000 species of daisies exist. They come in all different sizes, shapes, colors and survive in different habitats. These flowers usually inhabit grasslands, meadows, gardens, urban areas and areas near the roadsides. They can survive in both dry and wet habitats, but they prefer well-drained soils and a lot of direct sun. People cultivate daisies because of their simple yet attractive and innocent appearance. Unlike cultivated types of daisies, wild types easily reproduce and conquer new habitats. They are often resistant to pesticides and insects. Because of that, wild daisies occasionally act like weeds that cannot be eradicated easily.

DAISY

Smells like heaven in here!

GILLY nods and runs over to the basket of biscuits sitting on the iron stove. She brings over a glass of water, a jar of honey and breaks a piece of a biscuit, smearing the honey on it for DAISY to taste.

(Mouth full)

Mmmm. This is delicious. Where do you find--

GILLY smacks the top of DAISY’s hand twice and motions for her to slow down so she could read her lips. DAISY washes the biscuit down and takes her time speaking.

You’ve been very kind. I hope you know that I will keep my word and I will repay you for your kindness and hospitality. Me and baby Chrys, we gonna find my sister Rose very soon and I just know she will appreciate all of this.

GILLY pulls out her mini notepad and writes to DAISY. She reads it aloud.

“My cousin and Charlie will be happy to meet you. They rough at first but they will come around. You just worry about gettin on your feet. I will help you.” Charlie, is he your family too?

GILLY laughs and shakes her head “no”. She quickly changes the subject and has DAISY read the telegram she received from her fiancée Sam from the telegram boy at the train station. She giggles as this is the third time GILLY has had her read this.

“I’ll be home in three weeks, my sweet. I will be so happy when I can look you in those beautiful eyes and say, you my wife. I found a good location outside of the city to start our new life. Please be waitin for me at the station. I love you so. Sam.”

Noises trail through the hallway as CHARLIE and CAN charge into apartment mid - argument.

CHARLIE

That man wrapped so tight around my finger you’d think he choke from the pressure!

CAN

Ha! You see so much yet you just as blind as a big ol’ bat. That fool be lookin at the band members like they Sunday dinner after church! I guarantee somebody leave him lone wit one of em he’d be a whole girl slidin up and down that trombone—

CHARLIE

So fresh, just can’t stand you Can! Just cause’ he enjoy good music don’t mean he likin the boys.

CAN

Hmph! Here you go...ask that Sonny what better...biscuits or bacon. See what he say.

CHARLIE

You a coon-fool! Ain’t listenin to this non-sense any longer. Longs I keep gettin my dresses and Red’s money so I can be done with her I could give a goddamn. (Beat) Will you look at this. Gilly up to it again. Another helpless soul for Miss Gilly to fix up.
Who you?

DAISY

Oh...my. You must be the sweet cousin Miss Gilly tell me about.
(Extends her hand to shake, gets no response.)

-My name is Daisy.

(To CAN) And you must be Charlie. It is very nice to meet you all.

CHARLIE huffs and puffs as they continue business as usual. CAN stares her down, puffing a cigar and reading through the newspaper.

CAN

Name’s Can. What’s your business here? You from down south?

DAISY

Oh? (confused) I come up from Atlanta. Atlanta Georgia. This is my baby sister Chrys. We here searchin for my oldest sister, Rose. Miss Gilly say we could stay for a while till we find her and—

CAN
(to GILLY)

What we say? Last project a' yours lef here wit two bottles and not even a thank you. Nevamind the fact she ain't put a red cent on this place. Plus, she ain't get along good wit Charlie, though don't nobody really get along good wit Charlie, but that not the point. We don't got room for no babies in here.

DAISY

I do understand. Baby Chrys is a good and quiet baby. I promise we won't be in y'all's way. I'ma be lookin for Rose and I'ma get a good job at the same time. I'm good with cleanin and I get along good wit most everybody. I got eight other brothers and sistas and I used to gettin along good—

CAN

To make it in Harlem, you gotta get a sense of mean about you. Do you understand what I say? You gotta get tough skin, the kind that a tiger can't even rip apart. (Gets close to DAISY) You gonna get roughed up around here, you know dat? That innocent ol' lil southern accent. That country lookin getup. Those pretty white teeth and those rosy lips...they gonna get at you. You ready for that, little Daisy?

DAISY is not sure if she's blushing because she's embarrassed or because CAN is charmingly handsome. She gulps. GILLY runs to CAN with the telegram. CAN pacifies her with a nod. GILLY sits back down and holds the baby.

DAISY

I made it this far. I think we can handle it.

CHARLIE

Girl, you gonna need a whole lot more than tough skin when Harlem done wit you. Ha!

CAN

(Kisses DAISY on the cheek)
For luck. You sure as hell gon' need it!

CAN and CHARLIE roar with laughter. GILLY shakes her head, but knows it's true.

DAISY

If you're not Charlie and she Charlie, who is the gentleman that lives here?

They laugh louder.

CHARLIE

(Scoffs) Ain't no mens live here.

CAN starts to take off her hat and suspenders. She unbuttons her shirt. Her breasts have been flattened down with a bra and cloth tucked around the sides. She removes the cloth and walks around in only her bra, slacks, cigar and newspaper. DAISY is stunned.

CAN

Listen, you get one month, if you can keep it proper around here. We not home much, but when we is, you be sure to keep it clean and quiet. Then you go to the church and make a friend if you don't find your sister, ya hear? You want to continue residence, you gon need to pay your fair share like everybody else. I suggest you help be assistance for GILLY. She sell all kindsa concoctions, potions and she sure could use a hand sometimes. (Looks to GILLY) She your project. Remember that. We ain't babysittin, we ain't cleanin up no mess, and you gon' be in charge, ya hear?

GILLY nods. She excitedly runs to CHARLIE with the telegram. CHARLIE reads it to herself.

CHARLIE

(Sarcastically) My, my...ain't that somethin. Miss Gilly ol' man makin good on his promise to come back and marry her. Good for you. I hope he got some good sense and pick him out a fine house for you two cause you sure been practicin for that blasted marriage.

CAN

She sure has. Cookin every goddamn thing she can get her hands on. Bringin in stray cats and dogs and dressin em up like babies. Hell, I can't wait for her to get her a Sam so she can truly do it.

DAISY thinks it's an odd conversation but tries to fit in. She changes the subject.

DAISY

Is there anything I can do to make myself useful to you all this evening?

CHARLIE

Absolutely. You can start by color coordinatin my dresses and you can put all my hats and head pieces away neatly in the closet. Oh wait, on second thought, baby steps. How about you just worry about how you gonna earn your keep and stay quiet while you here.

CHARLIE starts to undress and puts a shower cap on. She puts on her robe and stretches out on the ground in preparation for tonight's show.

CAN

See what I mean? Mean. That's how you gotta be. Don't nobody respect or take kindly to no sweethearts here. It don't work. Trust me. (Beat) Your sister.
Why you don't know where she at?

DAISY

Oh, uh, it a long story but she been gone since I five years old. She ran away, came up here. All I got is some mail from some years back, no return address, I know she up here cause she told us this where she goin, but that it. We come up now cause' we can't live back home no more. It got too much to bear and I figure it time. Since I'm eighteen years old and all.

CHARLIE starts to listen in. She moves her way to the couch with a confidence in her gait.

CHARLIE

You got a photo?

DAISY

No, miss. I wish we did. Mama never spent money on such important things. Everybody oughta have photos, don't they? But us? We do not.

CHARLIE

(Skeptical, but listening)
How much older is she?

DAISY

By now she be twenty-eight years old. She got a burn mark the shape like a triangle on her right wrist. She got that when she cooked us some pork chops for supper. Made it permanent on her wrist. She beautiful. She strong, she got long straight Indian hair, skin like cinnamon, she got a hot temper, and she real smart. I always wish I coulda had the fire she got in her eyes...she want something, she get it. Simple as that.

CHARLIE

She been out here for eight years, she real tough. That if she stayed. Well, I do hope you find her. People come from all over in the thousands just tryna get a opportunity. It all lights and glitter, but what you gotta do to keep up wit it ain't for everybody. She a needle in a hay stack, I say. Hell, Can, you probably know the girl. Can been wit every woman in the city. EVERY single one. It like she honey and they honey bears on the prowel.

CAN

You tell too much wash. I ain't been wit everybody now. Not everybody can get the *Can* now. Not everybody make the cut.

CHARLIE

Ha! I seen some ugly ducklings now. You know how low you go after a couple a good drinks at Pearls.

CAN

Gal, please. I only do the best. And I spect' nothing less. All that's left is my dream girl. Now when I get to her...the gates gonna open up and I'ma settle her down wit me. All them other little girls gonna hafta go.

DAISY is still in shock. Never has she met a full-blown bull dagger in all of her life.

CHARLIE

Ugh, we know. The damn white girl that don't exist. The day that happens is the day you goin to hell. Not heaven. Only way that happen if you slip her something in a drink or she delusional. We know you the most handsomest bull dagger in all of New York City, but even you can't pull no mess like that. No ma'am.

DAISY

White people live out here too?

CHARLIE

They make visits. Like we some damn animals in the zoo. Should see em' sneak up at Pearls to watch us show our chocolate caramel legs and they get up...try to dance to the music. You see em at the parties around town. Hell, sometimes I used to get some as clients. But those days over now. I gets my own clientele.

CAN

These kind different from down South. They more open.

CHARLIE

No, they ain't no different. Just different clothes.

CAN

They is too. You just gotta pick out the right ones like you do biscuits. Some soft. Some burnt.

CHARLIE

Make no sense. Like I said.

DAISY

If you don't mind me askin...what you like about the white womens?

CAN

Didn't I just say it? (As if squeezing two breasts) BISCUITS.

CHARLIE

Girl, you too new to be askin questions. You gotta learn to sit, observe, and keep your mouth shut.

GILLY taps her on the hand and shows her the telegram again. DAISY smiles, but keeps her attention on the conversation at hand.

(In a rush) Ok, we gotta get on up outta here. (She claps to get GILLY's attention) Can I get a "All-nighter?" I got two tonight.

(To CAN) And for your good news, one of em is Sonny! (sticks her tongue out).

CAN

(Laughs) Ha! Sonny the bum bunny. Oh! You know what you could do for me, honey? Get him to pick up some numbers from me. I don't know why I never thought it!

CHARLIE

He don't do numbers. He don't know how. Sides...he a doctor. He all old and slow. He ain't tryna learn. Make enough money for ten houses, what he need to do numbers for?

CAN

Hell, I could talk him up. I'ma do it tonight! He comin by or you meetin him at the tel later?

CHARLIE

He comin. You could try.

CAN and CHARLIE get ready for work. CHARLIE heads to the bathroom to shower and CAN puts on a different shirt and hat.

CAN

That sucka' gonna make me rich. You just watch, Ha!

DAISY

Miss Charlie...I will gladly arrange your wardrobe if you want me to. I want to earn my keep.

CAN

See, just what 'm talkin about. Don't go around bein like sweet tea. People just gonna run you dry—

CHARLIE

I wasn't tryin to have you do that. I was makin a point. But since you willin to work, you can organize my papers. I would prefer to have them all sorted by date, but I've never got the time.

DAISY

Gladly. I will get right to it. Where are they?

CHARLIE

(Runs out of the bathroom and pulls out a box from under a chair)

They all here. Look to the corner for the date. Start by January. And don't snoop. Not everything in em' true, just events the fortune lady told me was gonna happen. You get eight years of bad luck you read through em' so I suggest mindin ya business.

(Runs back to the bathroom and finishes washing up).

DAISY starts organizing the papers.

CAN

One day she gonna wake up and see that hustle for what it really is. That lady and that crystal ball don't see a goddamn thing but some change for her pocket.

CHARLIE

Like I said, she not always right, but she is for the most part. She say I can't have babies and it true. I never got pregnant. Not once.

CAN

Got three whole married men dancing on you prayin everyday they wives don't find out—

CHARLIE

Everybody get what they want. They get their simple little lives to feel normal with their (air quotes) "wives," and children, they get their fun with me, I have fun with them, I keep my figure, AND I get to collect my gifts and financial rewards. I'm happy wit it. Hell...no children! Most women wish they could be me. Hm!

CAN

(To DAISY) That lady say somethin about one of them (clears throat)
Sonny, bein a swish?

CHARLIE

(Tries to hold back a laugh) Don't you read through them. I just said you get bad luck.

DAISY

I won't read them. I don't believe in digging in people business.

CHARLIE

Good girl. Cause if you do, you gonna get eight years a bad luck, meaning, you gonna get stuck somewhere and you'll never be able to get out. And chil'!...nobody want that.

DAISY

You got really really nice handwritin. I wish I wrote as nice as this.

CHARLIE

Don't suck up. Nobody like that neither. Make you look desperate.

DAISY

I mean what I said. I truly believe it so.

CHARLIE hurries. CAN is smoothing her hair back looking in the mirror admiring herself.

CAN

Alright, now. Lookin like a slick one. Gotta get some suckas to strike these numbers cause I'ma need me a bad suit for that party comin up. Ha! Be back tomarrah. (Starts to exit) Oh, and don't forget what I said. Stop bein so sweet. Bein like that only cause you to never find your sister. (Exits.)