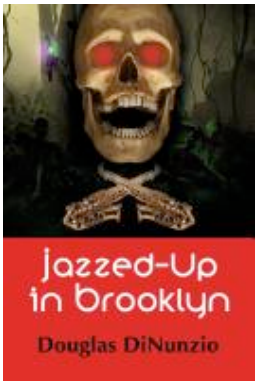
Jazzed-Up in Brooklyn

an Eddie Lombardi Mystery

Douglas DiNunzio



Brooklyn private eye Eddie Lombardi thinks he knows his way around. He thinks he knows evil. But, when he offers to help a retired sanitation man who's just confessed to the horrific Cut-'Em-Up murders, he enters a world beyond his wildest experience: a world of the purest evil. Will he find the evil - and the real killer - before they get to him?

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For Jean,
and for Margaret, Letty, and Fran

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Watusi was waiting outside on Centre Street. Thomas' neighbor Henry, slight and slope-shouldered, was with him. They stood stiffly, side by side, like a pair of mismatched peppershakers.

"No luck, Tooss," I said. "Sorry."

An audible sigh slipped past Watusi's lips. "All right, then," he said, turning to Henry. "You go on home now. Eddie and I will take care of things."

"But..."

"I know you want to help, Henry, but none of us can do Thomas much good out here on the sidewalk. I'll call you, I promise."

Henry looked up at Watusi with sad, disbelieving eyes. His desolation was almost too painful to witness. He nodded a crimped, silent goodbye to each of us and shuffled toward the bus stop at the corner. Watusi watched him protectively until he disappeared like a lost child into the throng of pedestrian traffic.

Watusi turned to me. "Henry's taking this very hard," he explained. "He doesn't understand what's happening."

"Neither do I."

"Did Thomas say anything at all?"

"Plenty. All of it incriminating."

"I was hoping, perhaps, he might have listened...to you."

"Sorry again, Tooss. Whatever his reasons, he's very deliberately setting himself up for the electric chair."

"We need to talk, then," Watusi said, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead with the back of his broad, ebony hand. A blazing, late summer sun was straight overhead.

"Over lunch?"

As always, that was decided by the toss of a coin. Whenever I won, we went to Jack Dempsey's at Broadway and 49th. When Watusi won, it was Joe Louis' on West 125th Street in Harlem. White or black, black or white? We crossed and re-crossed that borderline into each other's no-man's-land like practiced interlopers. At times, our friendship was like dry grass waiting for lightning.

I pulled my liberty quarter from my pocket and flipped it into the air. Watusi called "heads".

"The fish platter at Joe Louis' is excellent," he said when the toss went his way.

"How come you call 'heads' all the time?" I asked.

"Because I suspect your new coin has two of them. And our transportation?"

I stuffed the quarter back into my pocket before he could examine it and poorly hid a scowl. "My car's parked around the corner."

"Hopefully not *double*-parked." Watusi's broad lips parted slowly to display two lines of fine, grinning white teeth.

He was still at it when we reached my yellow Chevy convertible parked a perfect six inches from the curb.

"You can flash those big ivories all you want, Tooss, but next time it's going my way," I grumbled.

"Tomorrow, perhaps?" Watusi's immense, taunting grin was almost too broad for his face to contain.

"Tomorrow may be
a thousand years off:
two dimes and a nickel only
says this particular
cigarette machine.
Others take a quarter straight.
Some dawns
wait."

"Langston Hughes again?"

"The poem is titled 'Tomorrow'."

"Don't you ever read anybody else?"

He offered a peacemaking smile and stifled the rebuke he'd decided not to offer. That was one thing about Watusi. He wouldn't kick you when you were down, and he wouldn't push you beyond what

he figured you could take. Unless, of course, you were the enemy. I slammed the car door anyway, set the choke, and turned the ignition key.

"I have high hopes that someday you'll become a more graceful loser, Eddie," he said, still smiling.

"Want to know what *I'm* hoping, Tooss? I'm hoping one of these days ol' Langston Hughes opens himself a restaurant."

"Oh?"

"Just *once*, I'd like to see you eat some words."

Joe Louis' did have an excellent fish platter, but neither of us had much of an appetite. We did, however, have an isolated corner table near the big plate-glass window that faced 125th Street, where we could talk.

"Tell me about the Benny Jupiter Quintet," I said, picking at my fresh halibut with my fork. Even with the floor fans going, I could feel the early September heat rippling through the glass. Thomas was right about that much. It was probably cooler inside the Tombs.

Watusi took a bite of his flounder and eyed me with mild disdain. "I take it you're not an aficionado of jazz."

"Hit Parade. Sinatra. The Andrews Sisters."

"The Benny Jupiter Quintet was the quintessence of jazz in those days, Eddie. Improvisational, supremely eclectic, groundbreaking. They were among the very earliest and best practitioners of the style

known as bebop. Bird himself is known to have visited the Onyx Club regularly just to hear them perform."

"Bird?"

"Charlie Parker."

"He's a drummer, right?"

"Saxophonist," he answered with a small hiss of annoyance.

"This Parker guy, does he sing, too?"

"Not often."

"Hell, even Satchmo sings."

The waiter arrived with our check. Watusi gave it a cursory glance, then leaned forward, a conspiratorial gleam in his dark eyes. "There was something else about the band that should interest you, Eddie. One of them was a white man. His name was Jack Janus. Supposedly, he was from Chicago, but no one has ever been able to pin down his origins. He simply appeared one night at the Minton up in Harlem where Benny Jupiter's band was performing, and, as the story goes, played an extended set with them. Their entire approach to music is said to have changed that night. Jack Janus played the saxophone, like Bird, but he was white. The only white musician in a non-white band. He was in his fifties when he joined the band, considerably older than the others; and not one jazzman had ever heard of him. Not in New York, not in Chicago, not anywhere."

"Interesting."

"I was certain you'd think so."

"Thomas said the band was evil. Think that came from Janus, too?"

"White man's evil, you mean."

"If you want to put it that way."

"Jack Janus was charismatic, manipulative, hypnotic in the same way that your Hitler was."

"*My* Hitler?"

"The paragon of white man's evil, was he not?"

"That he was, Tooss."

"*Your* Hitler, then."

Watusi offered a challenging look, ready as always to dispute the merits of Caucasianism. I decided not to take him up on it this time.

"This Janus guy, was he one of the four who were murdered at the Onyx?"

"Had he been, it would certainly have simplified the identification of body parts. No, he was last seen playing a midnight set with the band the night before. A legendary performance. Legendary and final. Until Thomas surrendered himself to the police two days ago, Jack Janus had always been the most logical suspect in the Cut-'Em-Up Murders. As far as I'm concerned, he still is."

"But why would he knock off -- and cut up --the band?"

"That is the enigma inside the mystery."

"Which we're now obliged to solve, right?"

Watusi smiled warmly. "I *was* hoping you'd take the case."

"I've got a few things cooking, but they can wait."

"The gesture is appreciated."

"I didn't tell you what Thomas said when I left him, Tooss. It's been bothering me some. He said that if I went looking into the case, the band's evil would go looking for me, too. I'm not sure, but I think he meant it literally."

"*When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks long into you*."

"Langston Hughes again?"

"Nietzsche."

"Doesn't sound comforting."

"Nor should warnings be."

"So, where do we start?"

"With the mysterious and still missing Jack Janus, I imagine. But, might I engage you in a small mission of mercy first? Thomas has a son, Christian, who lives on MacDonough Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He doesn't know that his father's been arrested."

"Doesn't he read the papers?"

"Staying in touch with the real world has never been one of young Christian's priorities."

"Does Thomas *want* him to know?"

"Probably not, but he needs to. You'll go with me?"

"Sure."

Watusi took the check as we stood up from the table. "Since I know you won't allow me to pay for your services, am I permitted to pay for your lunch?"

"It's your restaurant, Tooss."

"Mr. Louis', actually."

"Next time we go to Dempsey's."

"Only if your coin acquires a second side."

We took momentary shelter from the midday sun under Joe Louis' big neon sign, watching the sidewalk traffic move in sleek, sinuous waves up and down 125th Street. Watusi wiped his brow again and struck a philosophical pose, offering a smile that was both brief and cryptic. "*Wherever God erects a house of prayer, the devil always builds a chapel there*."

"More Nietzsche?"

"Daniel Defoe."

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The looking wasn't easy. Nobody in Jimmy Ryan's or the Three Deuces had seen him in years. Nobody could trace his whereabouts at the Famous Door, either, or at Downbeat, or Leon & Eddie's, next door to 21, which wasn't a jazz club anyway. Troubadour Records didn't exist anymore, no doubt due to the ice-pick murder of its chief executive officer. Its few former employees were all long-gone as well. Only at Club Samoa did anyone vaguely remember him, and even then they really only remembered the stripper with whom he'd been familiar at the time of the murders. Club Samoa, just across the street from the Onyx, had been a palace of pulchritude since '43. Musicians played there only in accompaniment to whichever lady was taking her clothes off on stage. The one who'd known Tyrell was named Sherri. She didn't work there any more, I was told by the burly bouncer on duty, hadn't for years, ever since Club Samoa's forward-thinking management had found a younger and more accomplished strip artist to replace Sherri in the hearts and loins of its customers. She did, however, have a forwarding address that I knew well: the Pom Pom Club in Borough Park.

The only stripper I had known there was Betty Barbera, and she was dead now, the victim of a neighborhood psycho named Carlo Cattalanotte, one-time chief hit man for Jimmy Santini, a capo of some renown whose path I had crossed only rarely and with great trepidation. It had been about a year and a half since that last occasion at the Pom Pom Club. A gambler named Pinky Pearlman owned the place and operated it *in absentia* from a steak house in Flatbush. The bartender was a regular font of information, however, and set me straight right away about Tyrell and Sherri.

"Far as I know, the man's in Cleveland," he said. He had a big, round face, almost like Gino's, and thick, bushy hair that reminded me of a younger Harpo Marx. Mid-thirties, on the chubby side.

"And Sherri?"

"She's right back there in her dressing room," he said, pointing. When I turned in that direction, he stuck out his palm for a gratuity and said, "Knock first."

She was better looking than Betty Barbera, even Betty Barbera in her prime. Tall, dark-haired, dark skinned. Mixed parentage for sure, but colored wasn't part of it. Spanish, maybe, Puerto Rican, or dark Italian. Very deep eyes. She was fully dressed, a fairly conservative skirt and blouse, nylons, flats; but then it was early.

"So, you want to know about me and Tyrell?" she asked. Her attitude was only marginally defensive, considering the motives and mores of most of the people she probably knew.

I offered an innocuous shrug of the shoulders and said, almost like a schoolboy, "I'm really looking for information about Jack Janus."

"And how would I know about him?" She lit a cigarette, stared wide-eyed at the lit match for a moment, then snuffed it between her fingers.

"Learn that trick from Jack?...With the match?" I added when she offered a puzzled look.

"I think I met him once or twice is all. Tyrell, he didn't like him."

"Easy to understand. He took Tyrell's spot in the band, relegated Tyrell to playing for strippers at Club Samoa, no offense to present company." I smiled when I realized she understood the meaning of "relegated"; but she didn't smile back.

"Tyrell had lots of other gigs in town. He just played for my strip tease because he *liked* me."

"None of the other clubs on the Street said he played there after Janus took his spot with Benny Jupiter."

"He played *plenty* of clubs. The Royal Roost for one, Hickory House for another, not always on the Street, that's all. And nobody *pushed* Tyrell out. He went because he wanted to. He was a better sax man than Jack Janus anyway, better than most of them, 'cept Bird, maybe. He just didn't dig bebop. I didn't, either. I mean, you couldn't even dance to it."

"And Troubadour Records?"

"Didn't have nothin' to do with that, either. If ol' Tinker'd kept his pecker in his pants, would've never got that ice pick in his neck."

"So, why *did* Tyrell dislike Janus, if it wasn't from being kicked out of the quintet?"

"Don't know. Never asked. I just know he didn't like him. I can tell you why *I* didn't like him, those couple times we met. It was like talking to somebody who could be somebody else to anybody and everybody."

"I don't follow."

"He was a *chameleon*. You could meet him five times, and he'd be five different people. He was an *actor*, you understand, playin' parts all the time."

"For what reason?"

She laughed. "For whatever reason advanced the present situation of Jack Janus. The man was the king of phonies. If he told you anything 'bout himself, you could be damn sure enough it was a lie."

"He could also be a mass murderer -- Benny Jupiter *et al* -- but you don't seem to be afraid of him."

"Why should I be? Jack ain't scary lest you *make* him scary. Kinda like the boogie man. You got to *believe* in him before he can scare you. One thing, though."

"Yes?"

"Don't you ever let him light a match in front of you."

"I know," I said, smiling.

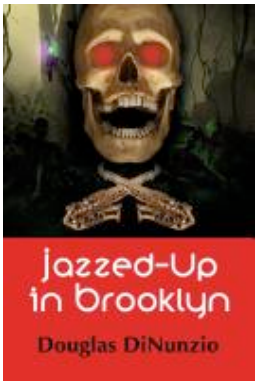
"No, you *listen* to me, mister. Don't you ever let him light a match."

My house on 16th Avenue was dark and empty when I got home. The remains of the lasagna were cold, not even enough to re-heat as leftovers. I made a pot of A&P coffee and sat for a while behind the big oak desk in my office downstairs. Sat and thought. A framed photograph of my parents on their wedding day occupied a prominent corner of that desk, and I found myself staring at it between slow sips. They were both gone now. My father had died of a heart attack delivering coal in a blizzard when I was a teenager. Cancer had taken my mother just before I joined the Airborne in '43. I didn't blame either of them for going away when I needed them the most. I just wished they hadn't done it so soon.

I tried Watusi's number again just before dark, but there was still no answer. For an hour or so I matched my socks, I drank coffee, and I brooded. Fear crept into my bones from all the dark, unfathomable places where I had hoped to banish it. Fear of the unknown, which now included the specter of Jack Janus. As a first sergeant in the Airborne I had taught myself not to show fear. A soldier needed fear, the gift of it, to survive; but if he led men into battle, he couldn't allow those men to see it. They depended too much on his courage to support their own. Like the evil that was always out there, waiting, the fear waited on the inside, eager to show its twisted face, to frighten and demoralize. But,

then again, Sherri the stripper was right: you had to *believe* in the boogie man before he could hurt you.

I tried the radio for a while, drank another black cup, but they were no help. Deep down in the shamus blues, I was getting ready for a long, sleepless night when Watusi called from a pay phone just around midnight. He was in Harlem, he explained, and how soon could I get there?



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