



Three Lost Souls: Stories about race, class and loneliness

Woody Lewis

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In his essay “The Talented Tenth,” W.E.B. Du Bois called on the best and brightest African-Americans to distinguish themselves “from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.” He encouraged separation from the lower elements of black society, but in the second half of the twentieth century, some of the Tenth’s descendants distinguished themselves by disavowing their race entirely. These were not tortured souls who passed for white, but social climbers who acted white to improve their chances. For this group of men and women, the road to assimilation ended in purgatory: they were conditionally accepted by the white race as they turned away from their own. We call them the Tormented Tenth.

Du Bois died in 1963, several months before JFK’s assassination. While the social climate had improved, encouraging African-Americans to celebrate their race, some members of the Tormented Tenth apparently believed that the more you acted white, the better your chances were of fitting in, particularly in the Northeast. If you were smart enough, you could be admitted to an Ivy League college or one of the Seven Sisters, graduate with discreet fanfare and land a job that paid your way into a white neighborhood. Your liberal white friends would accept you socially, sometimes sexually. You could embrace their culture while ignoring your own, but in reality your achievements in business and those sectors of academia and the arts that forgave this behavior would enhance the torment you failed to acknowledge, or even recognize.

Here are three stories about such torment. The first concerns an idealist masquerading as a rock musician. Next, we see a writer in Los Angeles, caught in the grasp of what passes for friendship in that town. Finally, an academician tries to sedate her personal demons with professional ambition.

Three lost souls: stories of race, class and loneliness. See if you recognize anyone.

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