



FRONT ROW  
REBEL

*a novel*

LORETTA REDD





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*To my tribe of family, friends and fellow writers who insisted this story  
be told. As the original front row rebel, I can only  
hope it would make my grandfather proud.*



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# 1.

SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN my neck and slid past my shoulder blades to soak through to my graduation robe. It was the only thing that moved in the summer sultriness other than the provost's jaw, his endless speech every bit as boring as his lectures on deflection of light and absorption of heat. Gold and white were the school colors at Atlanta's Georgia Institute of Technology, yet here we sat, draped in black.

I glowered at the professors seated comfortably on the shaded stage, nudged my head-bobbing classmate before he began to snore. He wiped the drool from the corner of his mouth, slipped a mechanical pencil from inside his robe and scribbled on the back of his commencement program. Always handy to have an engineer around, I thought.

*Got a job yet?* he wrote.

*Edison Labs, I replied, Menlo Park, NJ.*

I hadn't actually received an offer of employment, but only a matter of time before one of my endless letters of inquiry gained someone's attention. Each grew more bold as I neared my degree in electrical engineering. Went so far as to suggest improvements to some of Edison's inventions, especially the Vitascope moving picture machine.

I was no taller than a grown man's belt buckle first time I wove through a forest of legs to tuck myself under the ledge at the end of a bar. Safe from projectiles of chewing tobacco and spilled whiskey, I stared at an old sheet stretched between two poles and wondered what the excitement was all about.

Dimly illuminated figures finally appeared on the cloth, no different from the photographs on our mantle at home...until they began to move. That was where my dreams began—dreams that kept me awake at night, dreams that came to life on the simmering screen of my imagination.

“Walter Wilby.”

My name snapped me out of a humid daze. My legs almost buckled as I stood, numb from the edge of the wooden bleachers. Every grade, every class, two W’s put me at the end of the roll. Today it was a blessing, as lyrics to the alma mater were halfway finished by the time I made it to the stage. Sheepskin diploma secure in my sweaty palm, I flipped the mortarboard tassel right to left and joined the crush of freshly minted alumni, in search of my parents.

“Well,” my father said.

The one-word I’d heard for twenty years. Only a slight inflection distinguished its translation from one of delight to disappointment, even dismay. Today may have been all three. I scanned for a familiar smile behind the fluttering paper fans. “Where’s Mama?”

“In this heat? You’ll see her when we get back home. That is, unless you’ve got a job to get to?”

He let the question hang in the thick air. Listed various opportunities that awaited me in Selma, from his dry goods store to the Savings and Loan. The thought of standing at a teller window morning to night held no more excitement than selling his knickknacks and novelties. Wouldn’t have majored in engineering, or even gone to college, if that were the extent of my dream.

I’d managed to save most of the stipend I’d received as “equipment manager” for Georgia Tech’s athletic department. Fancy title for a guy who inflated pigskins, dug mud out of cleats and polished baseball bats, but the pay was sufficient to free me from living under my father’s roof.

“I’m waiting to hear back from Mr. Edison,” I said, as if my employment were a foregone conclusion.

“Well,” he repeated.

We heaved my trunk into the back of our Ford model T. I ran back to the Student Union one last time, gown flapping like wings of blackbird. The nameplate on my mailbox had already been changed to that of an incoming freshman. I used the pencil pilfered from my

snoozing classmate and wrote the forwarding address of Selma's only boardinghouse. No one around, I gave the card an added kiss for good luck.

"You know where to find me."



THE edges of the poster tacked to the building curled in the late August sun. Faded hand-painted letters across the featured films and vaudeville acts read *BROKE MUSHINE*. Mack Jackson's Bama Bar was an institution among the blue-collar crowd. Known for "cheap beer and cheap women," it thrived on day laborers, farmhands and traveling salesmen.

I'd never dared to venture inside, but I was down to my last dollar and rent was due. The sticky doorknob turned as a wave of dank air slapped me in the face. The sting and stink of lingering smoke stung my eyes. I stood there blinking, trying to adjust to the dark.

"You lost, son?" a voice boomed. "Get in or get out."

I crossed the cavernous, near empty room, too late to retreat unnoticed. The proprietor's greasy hair reflected the lone light fixture overhead. A smoldering cigar balanced on the edge of the bar. Judging from numerous burn marks, it was a common practice.

"Saw your poster out front," I said. "Thought maybe I could help fix your...machine?"

"Don't exactly strike me as the handyman type," he growled. Straightened a make-believe tie, gave the lapels of his pretend suit a yank before crushing my outstretched hand.

"Walt Wilby," I said. "Degree in engineering, Georgia Tech."

I stepped back quickly when he bent down behind the bar. College rivalries were intense in the South. He didn't strike me as a graduate of anything but hard times, but this was the *Bama Bar*, which meant I could get walloped for nothing more than seeking higher education in Georgia.

He straightened up with a loud grunt, arms around a large, heavy object wrapped in a dirty bar towel. "Name's Mack," he said, yanked the cloth away like a clumsy magician to reveal a decrepit looking projector. "This here's what's broke, college boy."

I hauled it over to the window, used what little sun could penetrate the grime for a better inspection. A chewed-up piece of celluloid was stuck between rusted gears. A broken flywheel and a burned-out condenser bulb left me doubtful there was any hope of resurrection.

My stomach growled, every bit as empty as my pockets. "What's it worth to you?" I asked.

He offered a chit for a night of free beer. I countered with four bits, just enough to cover two weeks' room and board. His "Hell no" response softened when I turned my back on the half-dissected contraption and wished him luck. Told me to sit down and get to work, not in the nicest of terms.

"I'll need an oiled rag and a screwdriver" I said. "And any spare parts you've got squirreled away. No guarantees."

I wanted to take my time, use the methods of assessment I'd learned at school, but the place was too full. Tobacco juice, spit through gaping dentures, missed my head by inches. One drunken jostle and the disassembled parts would be lost beneath the soles of heavy work boots. Up at the bar, rowdy customers scratched their unshaven chins, lifted their mugs in my direction and shook their heads like I didn't have sense to get out of the rain. I caught the words "Georgia Tech" and "purdy boy" more than once.

"You're Wilby's kid, ain'tcha?" The body odor arrived before the man did, a decided limp on uneven legs, years of grimace carved in his face. "They call me Shorty. I built yore pa's display cases. The man just wouldn't shut up 'bout you." I wondered if we were talking about the same person. "I got a day's pay riding on ya," he said. Pointed over at Mack, busy taking bets on my repair skill.

Shorty held one of the rusted parts between his calloused fingers and eyeballed it. I figured he wouldn't know a flywheel from a flyswatter, 'til he flipped his pen knife open and freed it with a simple flick of the blade.

I gestured to an empty chair, figured I could breathe through my nose if it improved the odds of a roof over my head.

"Did ya like Mack's moving pictures?" I asked.

He leaned over close enough for me to see the roadmap of broken vessels in his nose. "Like 'em? ...I loved 'em!" Pulled up the leg of his coveralls and pointed to what was left of his knee.

“Them pictures was the only thing ever took my mind off this pain. We all ’bout cried when Mack done broke it.”

I tinkered with a few more adjustments, gingerly removed the half-melted condenser bulb like a skilled surgeon. Covered the new bulb with my handkerchief, careful not to touch the glass, and pressed it into place. “Let’s give her a try,” I said.

Shorty elbowed a path to the bar, shoed the crowd back a little as I gently set the projector down in front of Mack. “You got a socket back there?” I asked, with a quick prayer that an overloaded circuit wouldn’t rob me of my rent money.

The raucous crowd quieted as the projector’s clatter turned to a hum. Rusted screws jerked free, cogwheels meshed and the dim lamp steadily grew more intense.

“We did it!” Shorty beamed with far more credit than his one flick of a blade deserved, but I didn’t mind.

I opened my palm and waggled my fingers to summon the payment due. Mack’s expression made it clear which side of the bet he’d taken, and it wasn’t in my favor.

“So ya got the motor runnin’...how do I know it works? Ain’t got no films to show.” He pulled the plug, patted his wager-filled pockets and sauntered away.

Shorty worked the crowd into a chant, fists pounding on the bar, “*Pic-tures, pic-tures, we want pic-tures!*”

I extracted the new bulb, wrapped it in my handkerchief and slipped it in my pocket. “I’ll be back for my money, soon as you get a decent film strip,” I said.

“That may take a while; not like I’m some picture palace,” he replied, sparking a groan of disappointment from his patrons. “I’ll send word tomorrow to the film distributor for these parts.”

I tucked what passed for a clean apron around the projector and set it in the corner.

“Problem is, folks don’t drink much when a picture’s playin’.”

I left the Bama Bar no richer than when I’d entered, but I had a plan worth far more than the two bits Mack owed me—or the money in Mack’s pockets.