



## "How does a book sound..."

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How does a book sound when it is speaking as itself and taking the prerogative of being both a voice, the narrator's voice, and the voice of a talking book?

It made me wonderful to see them.

To see them makes me wonderful.

Everybody got used to him, wiping his face and nose with an engineer's red handkerchief on his way to work or sitting on the stoop in the snow. I'd say she washed and ironed those handkerchiefs, Violet, because crazy as she was she couldn't misbehave. But it tired everybody out waiting to see what else Violet would do besides try to kill the dead girl and keep her husband in tidy laundered handkerchiefs to cry in. My own feeling was that one day, she would stack up those handkerchiefs, take them to the dresser drawer, tuck them in and then go light his hair with a match stick. She didn't after all, but that would have been better than what she did do. Meaning to or not meaning to, she got him to go through it again. In good weather, too, on the prettiest day of the year it started. A day so pure and steady trees chuckled. Standing in the middle of a concrete slab, scared for their lives, they chuckled. Reckless, yes, but it was that kind of day--Lenox Avenue widened, and the men came out of their shops to look at it, to stand with their hands under their aprons or stuck in their back pockets and just look around at a street that spread itself wider just to hold the day. Veterans in half uniform



and half civilian stopped looking gloomy at working men ; they rolled cigarettes and settled down on the curb as though it was a Duncan Fyfe. And the women tip tapping their heels on the pavement tripped sometimes on the sidewalk cracks because they were glancing at the sky {something nobody ever did in the city once you'd been hear a few weeks}, but the women did this day to see where that pure soft, but steady light was coming from. The rumbling of the M 11 and the M2 was distant, it seemed, far away and the Packards too;even those loud Fords quieted down, and nobody felt like blowing his horn or leaning out of the driver's side window to try and embarrass somebody taking too long to cross the street or to holler "I give you everything I got! you come home with me!" to one of the women tripping in their shiney black heels over the cracks in the sidewalk. Young men on the rooftops changed what they were playing; spit and fiddled with the mouthpiece for a while and when they put it back in and blew out their cheeks it was just like that light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind. You would have thought everything bad had been forgiven the way they played. The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not low down the way they love to do it, but high and fine like a young girl singing by the side of a creek, passing the time, her ankles cold in the water. The young men with brass probably never saw such a girl, or such a creek, but they made her up that day. On the rooftops ,some on 254 where there is no protective railing, another at 131, the one with the apple green water tank, one more right next to it, 135, where lard cans of tomato plants



are kept, and a pallet for sleeping at night for coolness and a way to fool mosquitoes unable to fly so high and unwilling to leave the tender neck meat down below near the street lamps. So from Lenox to St. Nicholas and across 125th Street, Lexington, from Convent to the park you could hear them playing out their maple sugar hearts, cooking it\ tapping it from 400 year old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn't have a bucket to hold it and didn't want one either. They just wanted to let in run that day, slow if it wished, or fast, but a free run down trees so old they thought they could contain their syrup forever. That's the way they sounded that day and sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the rooftops, facing each other at first, but when it was clear that they had beat the clarinets out; turned their backs away from them, lifted those horns straight up and joined the light just as pure and steady and kind of kind.

No day to wreck a life already splintered like a cheap window pane, but Violet, well you had to know Violet. She thought all she had to do was drink malts and eat pork and she'd put on enough weight to fill out the back of her dress. She wore a coat on warm days to keep the men at the curbside from shaking their heads in sorrow when she walked by. For years she and Joe never had a Sunday without ham, and she'd stop at Duggie's Drugs every time she passed it for one of his malteds--double--chocolate. But on this day, this kind, pretty day, there was no point. Nobody cared what her behind lacked, and neither did she because she came out of the front door and stood on the porch with her elbows in her hands and

her stockings rolled down to her ankles. She had been listening to the sobs of her husband for a while, watching him stuff his red handkerchief back into his pocket only to have to snatch it out again as his face broke up with crying. On the mantle was the framed picture of Dorcus Violet had borrowed from the girl's aunt. A face she knew too well, not only because it stood on the mantle over the fireplace, but also because she tried to stab it deader than it was in the coffin. Which is why, standing there on the porch, unmindful of her behind, weary of her crying man, she could not believe what was coming up the steps toward her. Dorcus. The very spitting, splitting image. Not just the face but the four marcelled waves on the side of her head. Her name was Marie and she carried an Okeh record under her arm and a half pound of stewmeat wrapped in pink butcher paper in her hand.

"You a Manfred? You look like one."

The girl said so, so he said.

"You ain't kin to Alice Manfred?"

"No, ma'am. Garrett, Ky--"

Violet didn't let her finish. "Used to be a girl near here named Dorcus Manfred. You the picture of her but prettier."

The girl smiled. "Thank you."

"You want to see a picture of her? You'll see what I mean when you see it. Let me show you. I'm right up the stairs on two. You won't believe it, same hair, same eyes, everything. Only difference is the way you smile. The picture don't have a smile..."