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Daylight slants like a razor cutting these buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blase' thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream and copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible--like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things nobody could help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget it. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and

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bridges and fast clicking trains underneath. The A&P hires a colored clerk. Big legged women with pink kitty tongues roll money into green tubes for later; ^{on} then they laugh and put their arms around each other. Regular people corner thieves in alleys for quick retribution and, if he is stupid and has robbed wrong, thieves corner him too. Hoodlums hand out goodies, do their best to stay interesting, and since they are being watched for excitement, they pay attention to their clothes and the carving out of insults. Nobody says it's pretty here; nobody says it's easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can't hurt you.

I haven't got any muscles, so I can't really be expected to defend myself. but I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it's making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings long before they do. You have to understand what it's like, taking on a big city: I'm exposed to all sorts of ignorance and criminality. Still, this is the only life for me.

I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind. People say I should get out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing,

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as I have, while your partner overstays at another appointment, or promises to give you exclusive attention after supper, but is falling asleep just as you have begun to speak--well it can make you inhospitable if you aren't careful, the last thing I want to be. Hospitality is gold in this City; you have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time. When to love something and when to quit. If you don't know how you can end up out of control or controlled by some outside thing like that hard case last winter. Word was, that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe--not even the dead. Proof of this being the outright attack a woman black as soot made on the very subject of a funeral ceremony. Barely three days into 1926. A host of thoughtful people looked at the signs (the weather, the number, their own dreams) and believed it was the commencement of all sorts of destruction. That the entire event was a message sent to warn the good and rip up the faithless. I don't know who was more ambitious--the doomsayers or the soot black woman--but it's hard to match the superstitious for great expectations. Besides, sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen year old girl with one of those

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deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." The snow she ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it, so for a time nobody knew exactly where on Lenox Avenue she lived. But, like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it, and the dead girl's aunt didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything. Besides, she found out that the man who killed her neice cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.

Regardless of the mess Violet caused, her name was brought up at the monthly meeting of the Women's Club as someone needing assistance, but it was voted down because she had a more or less able husband (who needed to stop feeling sorry for himself) and because a man and his

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family on x street had lost everything in a fire. The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt out family's aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it.

She is awfully skinny, Violet; fifty, but still good looking when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it--the shame and all--but it wasn't. Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house while her husband cried in the parlour. She thought it would dry his tears up and give her some satisfaction as well. It could have worked, I suppose, but the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here. Anyway, Joe kept on crying and didn't pay Violet or her friend any notice. Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's gifts were poor measured against his sympathy for the heaving man in the next room. But I do know that mess didn't last two weeks. Violet's next plan--to fall back in love with her husband--whipped her before it got on a good footing. Washing his handkerchiefs and putting food on the table before him was the most she could manage. The days of

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tears and sobbing nights must have wore her down. So she decided to love--well, find out about--the eighteen year old whose creamy little face she tried to cut open even though nothing would have come out but straw. Violet didn't know anything about the girl at first except her name, her age, and that she was very well thought of in the legally licensed beauty parlor. She commenced to going around gathering the rest of the information. Maybe she thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know. She questioned everybody starting with Melvonne, an upstairs neighbor--the one who told her about Joe's dirt in the first place and whose apartment he and the girl used as a love nest. From Melvonne she learned the girl's address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out more: what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; saw the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair); listened to the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band). And when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do. All that. When she had the steps down pat--her knees just so--everybody, including the ex-boyfriend, got

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disgusted with her and I can see why. It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no wise crack or ugly look stopped her. She haunted PS12 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. De Witt Clinton High School too, because the girl had quit there in the eleventh grade. And for a long time she pestered the girl's aunt, a dignified lady who did fine work off and on in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and began to look forward to Violet's visits for a chat about youth and misbehavior. The aunt showed all the dead girl's things to Violet and it became clear to her (as it was to me) that this niece had been hard-headed as well as sly. One particular thing the aunt showed her, and eventually let Violet keep for a few weeks, was a picture of the girl's face. Not smiling, but alive at least and very bold. Violet had the nerve to put it on the fireplace mantle in her own parlour and both she and Joe looked at it and cried.

It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the city Violet saw, coming into the building with an OKEH record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher

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paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to hear the record and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom.

I'm crazy about this city. I like the way it makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it. I see them all over the place: wealthy whites and plain ones too pile into mansions decorated and redecorated by black women richer than they are, and both are pleased with the spectacle of the other. I've seen the eyes of Black Jews, brimful of pity for everyone not themselves, graze the food stalls and the ankles of loose women, while a breeze stirs the white plumes on the helmets of the UNIA men. A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone and below him, in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat. He touches her lip to remove a bit of something there. Suddenly she is quiet. He tilts her chin up. They stand there. Her grip on her purse slackens and her neck makes a nice curve. The man puts his hand on the stone wall above her head. By the way his jaw moves and the turn of his head I know he has a golden tongue. The sun sneaks into the alley behind them. It makes a pretty picture on its way down. Do what you

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please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what goes on on its blocks and lots and side streets is anything the strong can think of and the weak will admire. All you have to do is heed the design--the way it's laid out for you, considerate, mindful of what you might need tomorrow.

Armistice was half a dozen years old the winter Violet disrupted the funeral, and veterans on Seventh Avenue were still wearing their army issue greatcoats, because nothing they can pay for is as sturdy or hides so well what they had boasted of in 1919. Six years later, the day before Violet's misbehavior, when the snow comes it sits where it falls on Lexington and Park Avenue too, and waits for horse drawn wagons to tamp it down when they deliver coal for the furnaces cooling down in the cellars. Up in those big five-story apartment buildings and the narrow wooden houses in between people knock on each other's doors to see if anything is needed or can be had. A piece of soap? A little kerosene? Some fat, chicken or pork, to brace the soup one more time? Whose husband is getting ready to go see if he can find a shop open? Is there time to add turpentine to the list drawn up and handed to him by the wives? Breathing hurts in weather that cold, but whatever the problems of being winter-bound in the City they put up with them

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because it is worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue safe from fays and the things they think up; where the sidewalks, snow-covered or not, are wider than the main roads of the towns where they were born and perfectly ordinary people can stand at the stop, get on the street car, give the man the nickel, and ride anywhere you please, although you don't please to go many places because everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools) the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barber shops, the jook joints, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood, or association imaginable. The service trails, of course, are worn, and there are paths slick from the foray of members of one group into the territory of another where it is believed something curious or thrilling lies. Some gleaming, cracking scarey stuff. Where you can pop the cork and put the cold glass mouth right up to your own. Where you can find danger or be it; where you can fight til you drop and smile at the knife when it misses and when it doesn't. It makes you wonderful just to see it. And just as

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wonderful to know that back in one's own building there are lists drawn up by the wives for the husband hunting an open market, and that sheets impossible to hang out in snowfall drape kitchens like the curtains of Abyssian Sunday School plays.

The young are not so young here, and there is no such thing as mid-life. Sixty years, forty, even, is as much as anybody feels like being bothered with. If they reach that, or get very old, they sit around looking at goings on as though it were a five cent triple feature on Saturday. Otherwise they find themselves butting in the business of people whose names they can't even remember and whose business is none of theirs. Just to hear themselves talk and the joy of watching the distressed faces of those listening. I've known a few exceptions. Some old people who didn't slap the children for being slappable; who saved that strength in case it was needed for something important. A last courtship full of smiles and little presents. Or the dedicated care of an old friend who might not make it through without them. Sometimes they concentrated on making sure the person they had shared their long lives with had cheerful company and the necessary things for the night.

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But up there on Lenox, in Violet and Joe Trace's apartment, the ~~rooms~~ ^{rooms} are like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. And a dead girl's face has become a necessary thing for their nights. They each take turns to throw off the bed covers, rise up from the sagging mattress and tip toe ^{over cold linoleum} into the parlour to gaze at what seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold unsmiling girl staring from the mantle piece. If the tip toer is Joe Trace, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from his sleep hungry for her company. No finger points. Her lips don't turn down in judgement. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tip toer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail face of someone who will never work for anything; some one who picks up things lying on other people's dresser's and is not embarrassed when found out. It is the face of a sneak who glides over to your sink to rinse the fork you have laid by her plate. An inward face--whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, because I am looking at you.

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Two or three times during the night, as they take turns to go look at that picture, one of them will say her name. Dorcus? Dorcus. The apartment has no answer. It consists of two bedrooms, a parlour and a large dining room, but situated in the middle of the hall, the windows give no view. The bathroom has the best light since it juts out past the kitchen and catches the afternoon rays. Violet and Joe have arranged their furnishings in a way that might not remind anybody of the rooms in ~~the~~ ^{Homemaker Magazine}, but it suits the habits of the body, the way a person walks from one room to another without bumping into anything, and what he wants to do when he sits down. You know how some people put a chair or a table in a corner where it looks nice but nobody in the world is ever going to go over to it, let alone sit down there? Violet didn't do that in her place. Everything ^{is} was put where a person would like to have it, or would use or need it. So the dining room didn't have a dining table with funeral parlor chairs. It had ⁵ a sofa and big deep down chairs and a card table by the window covered with jade and doctor plants until the time they ^{have} had card games or played ~~ed~~ tonk between themselves. The front room, or parlour, ^{is} was not a wasted room, waiting for a wedding to be worthy of. It had bird cages and mirrors for the birds to look at themselves in, but now, of course, there are no birds, Violet having let

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them out on the day she went to Dorcus' funeral with a knife. Now there are just empty cages, the lonely mirrors glancing back at them. As for the rest, it's a couple of wooden chairs with small tables by them so you can put your coffee cup or a dish of ice cream down in front of you, or if you want to read the paper, you can do it easy without messing up the folds. The mantle over the fireplace used to have shells and pretty colored stones, but all of that is gone now and only the picture of Dorcus Manfred sits there in a silver frame waking them up all night long.

Such restless nights make them sleep late, and Violet has to hurry to get a meal prepared before getting ready for her round of heads. Having a knack for it, but no supervised training, and therefore no license to do it, Violet could only charge 25 or 50 cents anyway, but since that business at Dorcus's funeral, many of her regular customers found reasons to do their own hair or have a daughter heat up the irons. Violet and Joe Trace didn't use to need that hairdressing pocket change, but now that Joe is missing work to stay home and cry, Violet carries her tools and her trade more and more into the over heated ^{of} apartments where the women ^{who} wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and didn't care what she had done. These women always need their hair done, and sometimes

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pity darkens their shiney eyes and they tip her a whole dollar.

"You need to eat you something," one says to her.
"Don't you want to be bigger than your curling iron?"

"Shut your mouth," says Violet.

"I mean it," says the woman. She is still sleepy, and rests her cheek in her left hand while holding her ear with the right. "Men wear you down to a sharp piece of gristle if you let them."

"Women," answers Violet. "Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It's these little hungry girls acting like women. Not content with boys their own age, no, they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what..."

"That's my ear, girl! You going to ^{press} curl it too?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Really, really sorry." And Violet stops to blow her nose and blot tears with the back of her hand.

"O, the devil," the woman sighs and takes advantage of the pause to light a cigarette. "Now I reckon you going to tell me some old hateful story about how a young girl messed over you and how he's not to blame because he was just walking down the street minding his own business, when this little twat jumped on his back and

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dragged him off to her bed. Save your breath. You'll need it on your death bed."

"I need my breath now." Violet tests the hot comb. It scorches a long brown finger on the newspaper.

"Did he move out? Is he with her?"

"No. We still together. She's dead."

"Dead? Then what's the matter with you?"

"He thinks about her all the time. Nothing on his mind but her. Won't work. Can't sleep. Grieves all day, all night...."

"O," says the woman. She knocks the fire from her cigarette, pinches the tip and lays the butt carefully into the ashtray. Leaning back in the chair, she presses the rim of her ear with two fingers. "You in trouble," she says, yawning. "Deep, deep trouble. Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time."

Violet agrees that it must be so; not only is she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too. When she isn't trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl's hair; when she isn't cursing Joe with brand new cuss-words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head; when she wasn't worrying about his loss of appetite, his insomnia, she wonders what color were Dorcus' eyes. Her aunt had said brown; the beauticians said

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black but Violet had never seen a light-skinned person with coal black eyes. One thing, for sure, she needed her ends cut. In the photograph and from what she could remember from the coffin, the girl needed her ends cut. Hair that long gets fraggely easy. Just a quarter inch trim would do wonders, Dorcus. Dorcus.

Violet leaves the sleepy woman's house, ~~feeling~~ miserable, ~~helpless~~, but grateful that the customer who is coming to her kitchen for an appointment is not due until three o'clock, and there is time for a bit of housekeeping before then. Some business that needs doing because it is impossible to have nothing to do, no sequence of errands, list of tasks. She might wave her hands in the air, or tremble if she can't put her hand to something, with another chore just around the bend from the one she is doing. ^{She lights the oven to warm up the kitchen.} And while she sprinkles the collar of a white shirt her mind is at the bottom of the bed where the leg, broken clean away from the frame, is too split to nail back. When the customer comes and Violet is sudsing the thin gray hair, murmuring ha mercy at appropriate breaks in the old lady's stream of confidences, Violet is re-situating the cord that holds the stove door to its hinge and rehearsing the month's plea for three more days to the rent collector. She thinks she longs for rest, a carefree afternoon to decide suddenly

The slush at the curb is freezing again and although she has seven icy blocks ahead, she is

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to go to the pictures, or just to sit with the birdcages and listen to the children play in snow.

This notion of rest, it's attractive to her, but I don't think she would like it. They are all like that, these women. Waiting for the ease, the space that need not be filled with anything other than the drift of their own thoughts. But they wouldn't like it. They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down. No fields of cowslip will rush into that opening, nor mornings free of flies and heat when the light is shy. No. Not at all. They fill their mind and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in a suddenly idle moment, is the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow moving. Mindful and particular about what in its path it chooses to bury. ^{ro} else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, slips a sorrow they don't know where from. A neighbor returns the spool of thread she borrowed, and not just the thread, but the extra long needle too, and both of them stand in the door frame a moment while the borrower repeats for the lender a funny conversation she had with the woman on the floor below; it is funny and they laugh--one loudly while holding her forehead, the other hard enough to hurt her stomach. The lender closes

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the door, and later, still smiling, touches the lapel of her sweater to her eye to wipe traces of the laughter away then drops to the arm of the sofa the tears coming so fast she needs two hands to catch them.

So Violet sprinkles the collars and cuffs. Then sudses with all her heart those three or four ounces of gray hair, soft and interesting as a baby's.

Not the kind of baby hair her grandmother had soaped and played with and remembered for forty years. The hair of the little boy who got his name from it. Maybe that is why Violet is a hairdresser--all those years of listening to her rescuing Grandmother, True Belle, tell Baltimore stories. The years with Miss Vera Louise in the fine stone house on [tk] street where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but raise and love the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his carefully loved hair.

Folks were furious when Violet broke up the funeral, but I can't believe they were surprised. Way, way before that, before Joe ever laid eyes on the girl, Violet sat down in the middle of the street. She didn't stumble nor was she pushed:she just sat down. After a few minutes two men and a woman came to her, but she couldn't make out why or what they said. Someone tried to give her water to drink, but she knocked it away. A policeman

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knelt in front of her and she rolled over on her side, covering her eyes. He would have taken her in but for the assembling crowd murmuring "Aw, she's tired. Let her rest," ^{They} and carried her to the nearest steps. Slowly she came around, dusted off her clothes and got to her appointment an hour late, which pleased the slow-moving whores who never hurried anything but love.

It never happened again as far as I know--the street sitting--but quiet as it's kept she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it. What is known is this: the Dumfrey women--mother and daughter--weren't home when Violet arrived. Either they got the date mixed up or had decided to go to a legally licensed parlour--just for the shampoo, probably, because there is no way to get that deepdown hair washing at a bathroom sink. The beauticians have it beat when it comes to that: you get to lie back instead of lean forward; you don't have to press a towel in your eyes to keep the soapy water out because at a proper beauty parlour it drains down the back of your head into the sink. So, sometimes, even if the legal beautician is not as adept as Violet, a regular customer will go to her just for the pleasure of a deep shampoo.

Doing two heads in one place was lucky and Violet looked forward to the 11:00 appointment. When nobody

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answered the bell, she waited, thinking maybe they'd been held up at the market. She tried the bell again, after some time, and then leaned over the concrete bannister to ask a woman leaving the building next door if she knew where the Dumfrey women were. The woman shook her head but came over to help Violet look at the windows and wonder.

"They keep the shades up when they home," she said. "Down when they gone. Should be just the reverse."

"Maybe they want to see out when they home," said Violet.

"See what?" asked the woman. She was instantly angry.

"Daylight," said Violet. "Have some daylight get in there."

"They need to move on back to Memphis then if daylight is what they want."

"Memphis? I thought they were born here."

"That's what they'd have you believe. But they ain't. Not even Memphis. Cottown. Some place nobody ever heard of."

"I'll be," said Violet. She was very surprised because the Dumfrey women were graceful, citified ladies whose father owned a store on ¹³⁶116th street, and themself-

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ves had nice paper handling jobs: one took tickets at the Lafayette; the other worked in the counting house.

"They don't like it known," the woman went on.

"Why?" asked Violet.

"Hincty, that's why. Comes from handling money all day. You notice that? How people who handle money for a living get stuck -up? Like it was theirs instead of yours?" She sucked her teeth at the shaded windows. "Daylight my foot."

"Well I do their hair every other Tuesday and today is Tuesday, right?"

"All day."

"Wonder where they are, then?"

The woman slipped a hand under her skirt to re-knot the top of her stocking. "Off somewhere trying to sound like they ain't from Cottown."

"Where you from?" Violet was impressed with the woman's ability to secure her hose with one hand.

"Cottown. Knew both of them from way back. Come up here, the whole family act like they never set eyes on me before. Comes from handling money instead of a broom which I better get to before I lose this no count job. O, Jesus." She sighed heavily. "Leave a note why don't you? Don't count on me to let them know you was here. We don't speak if we don't have to." She buttoned

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her coat, then moved her hand in a suit-yourself-wave when Violet said she'd wait a bit longer.

Violet sat down on the wide steps nestling her bag of irons and oil and shampoo in the space behind her calves.

When the baby was in her arms, she inched its blanket up around the cheeks against the threat of wind too cool for its honey sweet, butter colored face. Its big-eyed non-committal stare made her smile. Comfort settled itself in her stomach and a kind of skipping, running light traveled her veins.

Joe will love this, she thought. Love it. And quickly her mind raced ahead to their bedroom and what was in there she could use for a crib until she got a real one. There was gentle soap in the sample case already so she could bathe him in the kitchen right away. Him? Was it a him? Violet lifted her head to the sky and laughed with the excitement in store when she got home to look. It was the laugh--loose and loud--that confirmed the theft for some and discredited it for others. Would a sneak thief woman stealing a baby call attention to herself like that at a corner not a hundred yards away from the wicker carriage she took it from? Would a kind-hearted innocent woman take a stroll with

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an infant she was asked to watch while its older sister ran back in the house, and laugh like that?

The sister was screaming in front of her house, drawing neighbors and passersby to her as she scanned the sidewalk--up and down--shouting "Philly! Philly's gone! She took Philly!" She kept her hands on the baby buggy's push bar, unwilling to run whichever way her gaze landed, as though, if she left the carriage, empty except for the record she dropped in it--the one she had dashed back into the house for and was now on the pillow where her baby brother used to be--maybe it too would disappear.

"She who?" somebody asked. "Who took him?"

"A woman! I was gone one minute. Not even one! I asked her...I said...and she said okay...!"

"You left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?" The disgust in the man's voice brought tears to the girl's eyes. "I hope your mama tears you up and down."

Opinions, decisions popped through the crowd like struck matches.

"Aint' got the sense of a gnat."

"Who mis-raised you?"

"Call the cops."

"What for?"

"They can at least look."

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"Will you just look at what she left that baby for."

"What is it?"

" 'The Trombone Blues.' "

"Have mercy."

"She'll know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home."

The little knot of people, more and more furious at the stupid, irresponsible sister, at the cops, at the record lying where a baby should be, had just about forgotten the kidnapper when a man at the curb said "That her?" He pointed to Violet at the corner and it was when everybody turned toward where his finger led, that Violet, tickled by the pleasure of discovery she was soon to have, threw back her head and laughed out loud.

The proof of her innocence lay in the bag of hair dressing utensils which remained on the steps where Violet had been waiting.

"Would I leave my bag, with the stuff I make my living with if I was stealing your baby? You think I'm crazy?" Violet's eyes, squinted and smoking with fury stared right at the sister. "In fact, I would have taken everything. Buggy too, if that's what I was doing."

It sounded true and likely to most of the crowd, especially those who faulted the sister. The woman had left her bag and was merely walking the baby while the

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older sister--to silly to be minding a child anyway--ran back in her house for a record to play for a friend. And who knew what else was going on in the head of a girl too dumb to watch a baby sleep?

It sounded unlikely and mighty suspicious to a minority. Why would she walk that far, if she was just playing, rocking the baby? Why not pace in front of the house like normal? And what kind of laugh was that? What kind? If she could laugh like that, she could forget not only her bag, but the whole world.

The sister, chastised, took baby, buggy and "Trombone Blues" back up the steps. ¶ Violet, triumphant and angry, snatched her bag, saying "Last time I do anybody a favor on this block. watch your own damn babies!" And she thought of it that way ever after, remembering the incident as an outrage to her character. The make-shift crib, the gentle soap left her mind. The memory of the light, however, that had skipped through her veins came back now and then, and once in a while, on an overcast day, when certain corners in the room resisted lamplight; when the red beans in the pot seemed to be taking forever to soften, she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well.

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Joe never learned of Violet's public crazinesses. Stuck, Gistan and other male friends passed word of the incidents to each other, but couldn't bring themselves to say much more to him than "How is Violet? Doing okay, is she?" Her private cracks, however, were known to him.

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globelight of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globelight holds and bathes each scene and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops, is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. But the globelight is imperfect too. Closely examined it shows seams, ill glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet wasn't paying attention she stumbled onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street.

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She didn't used to be that way. She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician. She liked, and had, to get her way. She had chosen Joe and refused to go back home once she'd seen him taking shape in early light. She had butted their way out of the Tenderloin district into a spacious uptown apartment promised to another family by sitting out the landlord, haunting his doorway. She collected customers by going up to them and describing her services ("I can do your hair better and cheaper, and do it when and where you want.") She argued butchers and wagon vendors into prime and extra ("Put that little end piece in. You weighing the stalks; I'm buying the leaf.") Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy, Violet had stumbled into a crack or two. [tk?] Felt the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment. ¶ "I don't believe an 8 has been out this month," she says, thinking about the daily number combinations. "Not one. Bound to come up soon, so I'm hanging a 8 on everything."

"That's no way to play," says Joe. "Get you a combo and stay with it."

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"No. 8 is due I know it. Was all over the place in August--all summer, in fact. Now it's ready to come out of hiding."

"Suit yourself." Joe is examining a shipment of Cleopatra products.

"Got a mind to double it with an aught and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you?" She looks up at Joe expecting an answer.

"What?" He frowns. "What you say?"

"Oh." Violet blinks rapidly. "Nothing. I mean... nothing."

"Pretty girl?"

"Nothing, Joe. Nothing." She means nothing can be done about it, but it was something. Something slight, but troublesome. Like the time Miss Haywood asked her what time could she do her granddaughter's hair and Violet said "Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way."

Extricating herself from these collapses is not too hard, because nobody presses her. Did they do the same? Maybe. Maybe everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until "um" or "have mercy" carry almost all of her part of a conversation. Less excusable than a wayward mouth

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is an independant hand that can find in a parrot's cage a knife lost for weeks. Violet is still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back. "I love you."