



"Daylight slants like a razor..."

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Forget it. History is over, you say, and everything's
 ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting
 around thinking future thoughts about projects and
 matters and feel clicking trains underneath. One has
 hired a colored clerk. Big legged women with pink kitty
 temples roll money into green tubes for later on; then
 they laugh and put their arms around each other. Regular
 people corner players in alleys for quick retribution

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 ^{that} ~~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 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, 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 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

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 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 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 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 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 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