



Joe/Dorcus

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Joe/Dorcus

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...necessary things for the night.

[how will you get 1873 into this story? the past lives of Joe and Violet and the ubiquitous Golden Gray, not to speak of the hand that pokes out of the mimosa?]

Necessary things for the night. A night of noisy silence, birds wrapped in cloth, bold unsmiling girls staring from the mantle pieces of sobbing men. Staring without hope or regret, but it is the absence of accusation that draws up the tears. No finger points. The lips don't turn down in judgement or approbation. It is a face in which curiosity is directed inward--whatever it sees is a glorious self that extends its boundaries to the observer. You are wonderful because I am looking at you, and what you do to me is interesting precisely because I am experiencing it.

I have seen the city do an unbelievable sky. People go on at great length about country skies, but there is nothing to beat what the city can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a city sky, presses and retreats presses and retreats making me think of the free but illegal love of

sweethearts before they are discovered. Looking at it, this night sky [tk] over a [tk] city, it's possible for me to avoid dreaming of what I know is in the ocean, and the bays and tributaries it feeds: the two-seat aeroplanes, nose down in the muck, pilot and passenger staring at schools of passing bluefish; money, soaked and salty in canvas bags, or waving gently at their edges from metal bands designed to hold them forever. They are down there, along with yellow flowers that eat water beetles and eggs floating away from thrashing fins; along with the children who made a mistake in the parents they chose; along with marble cornices pried from the sides of unfashionable buildings. There are bottles made of glass beautiful enough to rival the stars I cannot see above me because the city sky has hidden them. Otherwise, if it wanted to, it could show me stars cut from the nipples of chorus girls, or mirrored in the eyes of the sweethearts furtive and happy under the pressure of a deep touchable sky. But that's not all a city sky can do. It can go purple and keep an orange heart so the clothes of the people on the streets glow like dance hall costumes. I have seen women stir shirts into boiled starch or put the tiniest stitches into their hose while a girl straightens the hair of her sister at the stove, and all the while heaven, as beautiful as an Iriquois, drifts past their windows. And the windows where the sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things. They are in a room rented from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours they have purchased.

Time for the city sky to move from a thin ice blue to purple with a heart of orange. And time enough to tell each other important things: the smell of mimosa at the edge of a cane field at dusk; how you can barely see your own knees poking through the holes in your trousers in that light, so what makes you think you can see her hand even if she did decide to shove it through the bushes and confirm, for once and for all, that she was indeed your mother? And even though the confirmation would shame you, it would make you the happiest boy in Virginia. If she decided, that is, to show you it, to listen for once to what you were saying to her and then do it, say some kind of yes, even if it was no, so you would know. And how you were willing to take that chance of being humiliated and grateful at the same time, because the confirmation would mean both. Her hand, her fingers poking out among the white [tk] blossoms, touching yours, perhaps, letting you touch hers. He wouldn't have grabbed it, snatched it and dragged her out from behind the bushes. Maybe that's what she was afraid of, but he wouldn't have done that, and he told her so. Just a sign, he said, just show me your hand, he said, and I'll know don't you know I have to know? She wouldn't have to say anything, although nobody had ever heard her say anything; it wouldn't have to be words; he didn't need words or even want them because he knew how they could lie, could heat your blood and disappear. She wouldn't even have to say the word, mother. Nothing like that. All she had to do was give him a sign, her hand thrust through the leaves, that she knew

him to be the one, the son she had [tk] years ago, and ran away from but not too far . Just far enough away to annoy everybody because she was not completely gone, and close enough to scare everybody because she creeps about and hides and touches and laughs a low sweet babygirl laugh in the cane. Maybe she did it. Maybe those were her fingers moving like that in the bush, not twigs and in light so small he could not see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers, maybe he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he travelled with from then on, except for now. Now when he had somebody to tell it to, somebody with hooves tracking her cheek bones and who knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like. And who filled it for him just as he filled it for her, because she had it too. Maybe worse since she knew her mother, had even been slapped in the face by her for some sass she could not remember. But she remembered the crack across her face, the pop and sting of it and how it burned. How it burned, she said. And of all the slaps she got, that one was the one she rememberd best b ecause it was the last. She leaned out of the window of her best girlfriend's house because the shouts were not part of what she was dreaming. They were outside her head, across the street. Like the running. Everybody running. For water? Buckets? The fire engine, polished and poised in another part of town? There was no getting in that house where her clothespin dolls lay in a row. In a cigar box. But she tried

anyway to get to them. Barefoot, in the dress she had slept in, she ran to get them, and yelled to her mother that the box of dolls, the box of dolls was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama?

The Iriquois sky would pass the windows, and if they did see it, it crayon colored their shame. That would be when, after a decent silence, he would lift his sample case from the chair and tease her before opening it, holding up the lid so she could not see right away what he had hidden under the jars and perfume sweet boxes; the present he had brought for her. The little bow that tied up their Saturday at the same time the city sky was changing its orange heart to black in order to withhold its stars as if they were secrets hidden on the floor of the Harlem River.

She cleaned his nails, pushed back the cuticle and painted the whole thing with clear polish. The door was locked and Melvonne would not be back from her fortieth street offices until way after mid-night, a thought that excited them: that if it were possible they could almost spend the night together. If Alice or Violet took a trip say, then the two of them could postpone the gift he gave her on into the darkest part of night until, smelling of Oxydol and paste wax, Melvonne came back from her offices. As it was, she tipped out the door and down the steps before Violet had finished her weekend heads and come home to find that Joe had already changed the birds' water and covered their cages for the night.