



Joe/Dorcus

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reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. They forget a sun that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky, and they don't miss it, don't look up to see what happened to it or to stars made irrelevant by the light of thrilling, wasteful street lamps. That kind of love, permanent and out of control, seizes babies, young girls, men of every description, mothers, brides and barfly women. and if they have their way and get to the city they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were. Nothing can pry them away from that; the city is what they want it to be--thrifless, warm, scarey and full of amiable strangers. no wonder they forget pebbly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely, think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night.

But I have seen the city do an unbelievable sky. Red caps and dining car porters who wouldn't think of leaving the city some times 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 booming 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 citysky 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, unnoticed and as beautiful as an Iriquois, drifts past their windows. And the windows where the sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things. ~~happen. She wouldn't even dare~~ 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 gold. And time enough to tell each other important things: like how the mimosa smells 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, but 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.

By that time she had cleaned his nails, pushed back the cuticle and painted the whole thing with clear polish. She had cried a little, talking about east St. Louis, and cheered herself up with his fingernails. She liked to know that the hands lifting and turning her under the blankets had been done by her. Lotioned by her with cream from a jar of something from his sample case. They tried not to shout, but couldn't help it. Some times he covered her mouth with the palm of his hand so no one passing in the hall would hear her, and if he could, if he just could, he bit the pillow to stop his own yell. If he could. Sometimes he thought he had stopped it, that the pillow was in his mouth all right, and then he heard himself breathing in and out, in and out

at the tail end of a shout that could only have come from his weary throat. Dorcus laughed at that, laughed and laughed before she straddled his back to pound it with her fists, Then when she was exhausted and he half asleep, she leaned down, her lips behind his ear, and make plans. Mexico, she said. I want you to take me to the Mexico. Too loud, he said. No, no, she said, it's just rihgt. How you know. he asked her. I heard people say, people say the tables are round and have white cloths over them and wee baby lampshades. It don't open till way past your bed time,he said. This my bed time, she said, Mexico people sleep in the day, take me. They're in there till church time sunday morning and no whitepeople can get in, and the boys who play sometimes get up and dance with you. Uh, oh, he said. What uh oh, she said. I just want to dance with you and then go sit at a round table with a little lamp on it. People can see us, he said, those little lamps you talking about big enough to show who's there. You always say that, she said, like last time and nobody even looked at us they were having such a good time and Mexico is better even because nobody can see under the table cloth can they? Can they? If you don't want to dance, we can just sit there at the table, looking siditty by the lamplight and listen to the music and watch the people. Nobody can see under the table cloth.Joe,Joe, take me, say you'll take me. How you going to get out the house, he asked. I'll figure it, she said. just like always, just say yes. Well, he said,well, no point in picking the apple if you don't want to see

how it taste. How does it taste, Joe, she said, and he opened his eyes.

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, having made their plans for Mexico, Dorcus tipped out the door and down the steps before Violet had finished her weekend heads and came home around seven to find that Joe had already changed the birds' water and covered their cages , one of the necessary things for the night.