



Chapter 2

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Jazz Chapter 2

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Chapter Two

empty birdcages Necessary things for the night. *insert* A night of noisy silence, birds wrapped in cloth, bold unsmiling girls staring from the mantle pieces of a sobbing man. 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 judgment 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.

[tk] For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based on her investigations, the girl's memory was a demon in the house; a potent, life sucking hatefulness, uncontestable because being dead, it was everywhere and nowhere. There was nothing to beat or hit and when you had to, just had to strike it somehow there was nothing left but straw or a sepia print. But for Joe it was different. That girl had been *his* a necessary thing for the night. He remembered his memories of her; how thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was how he

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entered sleep. He minded her death, was so sorry about it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness. And he knew it would continue to fade because it was already beginning to ^{the day} when he hunted ^{Darcus} her down. After she ^{said,} left him

telling him ~~she couldn't see him anymore, that she wanted Coney Island and house parties instead of Mexico.~~ ^{and more of} Even then, ^{knowing she was leaving him} when he was clinging to the quality of her ^{sugar-flavored} skin, the high wild bush of her

hair, her bitten nails, the heartbreaking way she stood, toes pointed in, even then ^{listening to her say talk} he felt he was losing the pitch of her voice

and what happened to her eye lids when they made love. ~~Maybe he was forgetting her before that; before she dumped him, while they were~~

~~still happy with afternoon sex--was he forgetting even then? Is~~

~~that why~~ ^{those} He lay in bed remembering every detail of the afternoon from start to finish, and over and over? Not just because it was

delightful but because he was trying to sear it into his mind, engrave it there against future wear. So that this at least would

not melt, vaporize the way Violet had. ^{For} When Joe tried to remember

the way it was when he and Violet were young, when they got married, decided to leave [x] and move to the city, ~~what it had~~

~~been like, felt like--~~ almost nothing came to mind. Of course he recalled dates, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But ~~he~~

had a tough time trying to figure out what it felt like. And he believed Violet had forgotten too. He had struggled a long time

with that loss, believed he had resigned himself to it, had come to terms with the fact that old age would be not remembering what

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things felt like. That you would say things such as, " I was scared to death," but you could not retrieve the fear. that you could re-play in the brain a scene of passion, of terror, of outrage, but it was drained of everything but the language to say it in. He thought he had come to terms with that but he had been wrong. When he called on [x] to deliver her order, he entered a roomful of laughing teasing women--and there she was, standing at the door, holding it open for him--the girl that had distracted him in the drug store; the girl buying candy and ruining her skin in the drug store and moved him so deeply his eyes burned. Then, in [x's] house, she stood, toes pointing in, hair braided, not even smiling but welcoming him in for sure. For sure. Otherwise he would not have had the audacity, the nerve, to assume it could happen and help it to. Or would he? It was an aggressiveness he enjoyed because he ^{had} not used or needed it before. Violet he met in his own hometown, ^{under a X tree in a meadow.} ~~in the front yard of [x's] house.~~ She had been ^{and stayed past picking time to live with} ~~visiting distant relatives from her own house not~~ twenty miles away and started working in the fields like everybody else. They knew people in common; and suspected they had at least one relative in common. They were drawn together because they had been put together, and all they decided for themselves was when and where to meet at night. ~~the books would not feel obliged to give extra help~~ When Violet and Joe left x and boarded the colored section of the Baltimore and Ohio clipper, the train trembled so entering the tunnel to New York, they thought it was like them: nervous at

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having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side. What could it be? The lights went out in the carriage cars as they shot through the tunnel and maybe there was a wall ahead to crash into or a cliff hanging over nothing. The train shivered at the thought⁺ but went on and sure enough there was ground up ahead and the trembling became the dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the handrail above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. They were hanging there, a young country couple, smiling and tapping back at the tracks, when the porter came through, pleasant but unsmiling now^{that} he didn't have to smile in this car full of colored people^o and ~~that was a good feeling.~~

"Breakfast in the dining car. Breakfast in the dining car. Good morning. Full breakfast in the dining car." He carried a carriage blanket over his arm and from underneath it drew a pint bottle of milk which he placed in the hands of a young woman with a baby asleep across her knees. "Full breakfast."

He never got his way, this porter. He wanted the whole coach to file into the dining car, now that they could. Immediately, now that they were out of New Jersey a long way from Maryland and there would be no dark green curtain separating the colored people eating from the rest. The cooks would not feel obliged to pile extra helpings on the plates headed for the dark green curtain^{g'n}; three lemon slices in the iced tea, two peices^o of coconut cake arranged to look like one--to take the sting out of the curtain; homey it

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up with a little extra on the plate. Now, skirting the city, there were no green curtains; the whole car could be full of colored people and everybody on a first come first serve basis. If only they would. If only they would tuck those little boxes and baskets underneath the seat; close those paper bags, for once, put the bacon stuffed biscuits back into the cloth they were wrapped in, and troop single file through the five cars ahead into the dining car where the table linen was at least as white as the sheets they dried on juniper bushes; where the napkins were folded with a crease as stiff as the ones they made for Sunday dinner; where the gravy was ^{as} smooth as their own, ^{and} the biscuits did not take second place to the bacon stuffed ones they wrapped in cloth. Once in a while it happened. Some well shod woman with two young girls; a preacherly kind of man with a watch chain ^{and} a rolled brim hat might stand up, adjust their clothes and weave through the coaches toward the tables, foamy white with heavy silvery knives and forks. Presided over and waited upon by a black man who did not have to lace his dignity with a smile. *the toy designed for their play.*

Joe and Violet wouldn't think of it--paying money for a meal they had not missed ^{which required them} ~~and having~~ to sit still at, or worse, separated by a table. Not now. Not entering the lip of the city dancing all the way. Her hip bones rubbed his thigh ~~bones~~ as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling. ^They weren't even there yet ^{and} already the city was speaking to them. They were dancing.

~~They~~ Like one million more. Tentatively sometimes, traveling from

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Georgia to Illinois b^{ack} to Georgia and finally on to the city. Others, most I believe, knew right away that it was for them, this city and no other. They came on a whim because there it was and why not? They came after much planning, many letters written to and from, to make sure and know how and how much and where. They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short. Disembarked from troop ships, hung around for a while and then could not imagine themselves anywhere else. Others came because a relative or hometown buddy said, man, you best see this place before you die; or we got room, now, so pack your suitcase and don't bring no high top shoes. However, they came, or why, the minute the leather of their shoes hit the pavement--there was no turning around. Even if the room was smaller than the goat's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, maleable toy designed for their play.

Like ^{all the} ~~so many~~ others, Joe and Violet were country people, but country people soon forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn't love it. Long before they arrive at the train station or glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they already know they were born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their

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stronger, riskier selves. And sometimes, in the beginning when they first arrive, they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like--if they ever knew, that is. I don't mean they hate them, no, just that what they start to love is the way a person is in the city; the way you have to pause at a stop light and look up and down the street; how he accomodates himself to tall buildings and wee porches, what she looks like in a crowd, her profile against the backdrop of the East river. ^The restfulness in kithen chores when she knows the staple or supply is just around the corner and not seven miles away; the amazement of throwing open the window and being entertained for hours by the people on the street below. Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire. The woman who churned your blood as she leaned all alone on a fence along a country road may not even catch your eye in the the city. But if she was clipping quickly down the city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop with a cold beer in her hand, dangling her shoe with her foot, her posture, the weight of the building framing the delicate, dangling shoe would do it. And you'd think it was the woman you wanted ~~right away~~, and not some combination of curved stone, worn steps and a swinging, high heeled shoe. You would know right away the deception, the trick of shapes and light and movement, but it wouldn't matter at all ^{because} ~~the~~ the deception was part of it too. Anyway, you could feel your lungs going in and out. There is no air in the city but there is breath, and every morning it races through them

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like laughing gas brightening their eyes, their talk and their expectations. In no time at all they forget little pebbly creeks and apple trees so old they lay their branches along the ground and you had to 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 ^{children} 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: thriftless, wamr, scarey and full of amiable strangers. No wonder they forget pebble-ly 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 unbeleivable sky. Red caps and dining car porters who wouldn't think of moving out of the city some times go on at great length about country skies they have seen from the windows of trains. But there is nothing to beat what the city can make of a nightsky. 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 citysky, presses and retreats, presses and

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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 ^kmuch, pilot and passenger staring at schools of ^spassing 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 ^wfloors 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 ^{too}made of glass beautiful enough to rival 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 sweethearts furtive and happy ¹under 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, unnoticed ¹and as beautiful as an Iriquois, drifts past their windows. And the windows where sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things. ¹

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Twenty-five years after Joe and Violet danced with the train into the city, they are still a couple but they barely speak to each other now, let alone laugh together or act like the ground is a dance hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days, and wants them back, he couples himself elsewhere. He is in a room rented from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours he has purchased. Time for the citysky to move from a thin ice blue to purple with a heart of gold. And time enough, when the sun sinks, to tell his new love things he never told his wife. Important things like how the mimosa smells at the edge of a cane field at dusk; how he can barely see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers in that light, so what makes him think he 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 his mother? And even though the confirmation would shame him, it would make him the happiest boy in Virginia. If she decided, that is, to show him it, to listen for once to what he was saying to her and then do it, say some kind of yes, even if it was no, so he would know. And how he was 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 his; maybe letting him 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

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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, the white flowers, would be enough to say that she knew him to be the one, the son she had fourteen 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 when he had somebody to tell it to. Somebody with hooves tracing 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, and had even been slapped in the face by her for some sass she could not remember. But she did remember, and told him so, ^{about} the crack across her face, the pop and sting of it and how

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it burned. How it burned, she told him. And of all the slaps she got, that one was the one she remembered best because it was the last. She leaned out of the window of her best girlfriends'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 doll^s lay in a row. In a cigar box. But she tried anyway to get 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 doll^s was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama?

She cried again and Joe ^{held} ~~cried with~~ ^{close} her. The Iriquois sky would pass the windows, and if they did see it, it crayon-colored their love. 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. ^{That} ~~The~~ was the little bow that tied up their day at the same time the citysky was changing its orange heart to black in order to hide its stars for the longest time before passing them out one by one by one, like gifts.

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

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up with his fingernails. She liked to know that the hands lifting and turning her under the blanket 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. Sometimes 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 corner of 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. She 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 made plans. Mexico, she said. I want to to take me to Mexico. Too loud, he said. No, no, she said, it's just right. 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 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

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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 asked. 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, ^{Doreus} she tipped out the door and down the steps before Violet had finished her evening heads and came home around seven to find that Joe had already changed the birds' water and covered their cages. One ~~more~~ of the necessary things for the night.

Now Joe does not mind lying awake next to his silent wife because his thoughts are with this young good God young girl who both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born.

Malvonne ~~estness~~ changed his name from [tk] to [tk], he robbed

Malvonne

Malvonne lived alone with newspapers and other people's stories printed in small books. When she was not making her office building sparkle, she was melding the print stories with her keen observation of the people around her. Very little escaped the woman who rode the trolley against traffic at six p.m.; who examined the trash baskets of powerful whitemen, looked at photographs of women and children on their desks. Heard their hallway conversation, and the bathroom laughter penetrating the broom closet like fumes from her bottle of ammonia. ^{She examined} Re-situated their bottles and flasks tucked under cushions and behind books whose words were printed in two columns. She knew who had a passion for justice as well as ladies undergarments, who loved his wife and who shared one. The one who fought with his son and would not speak to his father. For they did not cover the mouthpiece when they talked on the telephone to ask her to leave as she inched her way down the halls, into their offices, nor did they drop their voices to a confidential whisper when they worked late doing what they called the 'real' business.

But Malvonne was not interested in them; she simply noticed. Her interest lay in the neighborhood people.

[delete and/or revise above text] her or his self in large, slanting script your devoted sister, Mrs. something something; of your loving father in New York, L. Henderson Woodward.

A few of them required action on Malvonne's part. A high school student had sent an application for entrance to Marshall College.

Before Sweetness changed his name from [tk] to [tk], he robbed

Malvonne

a mail box on [tk] Street. Looking for postal notes, cash or what, Malvonne couldn't imagine. She had raised him from the time he was seven and a better behaved nephew no one could have wished for. In the daytime, anyway. But some of the things he got into during Malvlonee's office shift from 6:00 to 2:30 she would never know; others she learned after he left for Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O. One of the things she learned explained where her grocery bag had gone--the 20 pound salt sack she carried, nicely laundered and folded in her purse, to market. When she found it, behind the radiator in Sweetness' room, it was full of uncanceled letters. As she examined them her first impulse was to try to re-seal and re-fold their contents and get them quickly into a mailbox. She ending^{ed}, however, by reading each one including those Sweetness ha^d not bothered to tear open. Except for the pleasure of recognizing the signature, the reading turned out to be flatly uninteresting. Dear Helen Moore: questions about Helen's health; answers about the writers own. weather. deceptions. promises. love and then the signer, as though Helen received so much mail, had so many relatives and friends she couldn't remember them all, identified her or him self in large, slanting script your devoted sister, Mrs. something something; or your loving father in New York, L. Henderson Woodward.

A few of them required action on Malvonne's part. A high school student had sent^t an application for entrance to Marhsall College along with the required, but now missing, dollar bill.

Malvonne

Malvonne didn't have a dollar to spare for Lila ^Spencher's entrance fee, but she did worry that if the girl did not get to college she ^vould end up with an apron job. So she added a note in her own hand, saying 'I do not have the one dollar right this minute, but as soon as I hear that you received this application and agreed that I should come, I will have it by then if you tell me you don't have it and really need it.'

^{who} The sad moment came when she read the letter to Panama from Winsome Clark complaining to her husband who worked on the Canal about the paltriness and insufficiency of the money he had sent her--money of so little help, she was giving up her job, picking up the children ^and returning to Barbados. Malvonne could feel the wall of life pressed up against the woman ^spalms; feel her hands ^{bashed} ~~rubbed~~ tender from pounding it; her hips constrained by the clutch of small children. "I don't know what to do," she wrote, "Nothing I do make a difference. Auntie make a racket about everything. I am besides myself. The children is miserable as me. the money you senting can not keeping all us afloat. Us drowning here and may ^fas well drown at home where your mother is and mine and big trees."

^{as h} Oh, thought Malvonne, she dreams of big trees in Barbados? Bigger than [tk] park? Must be jungle for sure.

^{Mal} Winsome said she was "sorry your good friend dead in the big fire and pray for he and you how come so much colored people dying where whies ^t doing great stuff. I guess you thinking that aint no

Malvonne

grown person question. Send anything else you get to Wyndham Road where I and babies be two pay envelopes from now. Sonny say he have shoe shining money for his own passage so dont worry none except to stay among the quick. your dearest wife Mrs. Winsome Clark."

Malvonne didn't know Winsome or anybody on the [tk] block of [tk] Avenue, although one building there was full of West Indians who kept pretty much to themselves and from whose windows came the odor of seasonings she didn't recognize. The point now was to get Winsome's notice of departure, already two pay envelopes ago, to Panama before any more cash went to [tk] Avenue where the Aunt might get hold of it, and who knows, if she was as hateful as Winsome told it {watering down the children's milk on the sly and whipping the five year old for mishandling the hot, heavy pressing iron} she might keep the money for herself. Malvonne re-sealed the letter carefully and thought she would add another penny stamp in case that would help get it to Panama faster.

There was only one letter to sweat over and wonder about the woman who could write down such words, let alone do what she had done and promised more of. The writer lived in the same building as her lover. ^{Malvonne did not know} What made her waste a three cent stamp other than the excitement of knowing the government was delivering her heat. Malvonne, perspiring and breathing lightly, forced herself to read the letter several times. The problem was whether to send it on to Mr. M. Sage { that was what he was called on the envelope; on

Malvonne

the sheet of tablet paper he was called "daddy") his letter from "your always Hot Steam." A month has passed since it was written and Steam might be wondering if she had gone too far. Or had Daddy Sage and Steam done more of those low down sticky things in the meantime? Finally she decided to mail it with a note of her own attached--urging caution and directing daddy's attention to a clipping from [tk] magazine [tk].

It was while she was preparing this anonymous advice that Joe Trace knocked on her door.

"How you doing, Malvonne?"

"Not complaining. How about you?"

"Can I step in? Got a proposition for you." He smiled his easy, country smile.

"I don't have a nickle, Joe."

"No," He held up his hand and walked past her into the living room. "I'm not selling. See? I don't even have my case with me."

"Oh, well, then." Malvonne followed him to the sofa. "Have a seat."

"But if I was," he said, "what would you like? If you had a nickle, I mean."

"That purple soap was kind of nice."

"You got it!"

"Went in a flash, though," said Malvonne.

"Fancy soap is fancy. Not meant to last."

"Guess not."

Malvonne

"I got two pieces of it left. I'll bring them up right away."

"What brings this on? You aint selling you giving away free for what reason?" Malvonne looked at the clock on the mantel, figuring out how much time she had to talk to Joe and get her letters mailed before leaving for work.

"A favor you might say."

"Or I might not say?"

"You will. It's a favor to me, but a little pocket change for you."

Malvonne laughed. "Out with it Joe. This something Violet aint in on?"

"Well. She. this is. Vi is. I'm not going to disturb her with this, you know?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well. I'd like to rent your place."

"What?"

"Just a afternoon or two, every now and then. While you at work. But I'll pay for the whole week."

"What you up to Joe? You know I work at night." Maybe it was a trick name and a trick address, and Joe was "Daddy" picking up mail somewhere else and telling Steam his name was Sage.

"I know your shift's at night, but you leave at four."

"If it's nice enough to walk I do. Most time I catch the train at 5:30."

"It wouldn't be every day, Malvonne."

Malvonne

"It wouldn't be no day. I don't think I like what you proposing."

"Two dollars each and every week."

"You think I need your money or your flimsey soap?"

"No, no, Malvonne. Look. Let me explain. ^{aint} many women like you understand the problems men have with their wives."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well. Violet. You know how funny she been since her Change."

"Violet funny way before that. Funny in 1920 as I recall."

"Yeah, well. But now--"

"Joe, you want to rent Sweetness' room to bring another woman in here while I'm gone just cause Violet don't want no part of you. What kind a person you think I am? Okay there's no love lost between Violet and me, but I take her part, not yours, you old dog."

"Listen here, Malvonne--"

"Who is she?"

"nobody. I mean, I don't know yet. I just thought--"

"Ha. If you lucked up on some fool you'd have a place? That's what you thought?"

"sort of. I may not every use it. But I'd like it in case. I'd pay ^{the} two dollars whether I used it or not."

"Two dollars ^{in certain houses} get you the woman, the floor, the walls and the bed. Get you a store bought scooter if you want it."

Malvonne

"Aw, no, Malvone. No. You got me all wrong. I don't want no body off the street. Good Lord."

"No? Who do you think but a streetwalker go traipsing off with you?"

"Malvonne, I'm just hoping for a lady friend. Somebody to talk to."

"Up over Violet's head? Why you ask me, a woman, for a hot bed. Seem like you want some nasty man like yourself for that."

"I thought about it, but I don't know no man live alone and it ain't nasty. Come on, girl. You driving me to the street. What I'm asking is better, aint it? Every now and then I visit with a respectable lady."

"Respectable?"

"That's right, respectable. Maybe she's lonely though, or got children, or--"

"or a husband with a hammer."

"Nobody like that."

"And if Violet finds out, what am I supposed to say?"

"She won't."

"Spose I tell her."

"You won't. Why would you do that? I'm still taking care of her. Nobody getting hurt. And you get two dollars as well as somebody looking out for your place while you gone in case Sweetness come back or somebody come in here looking for him and don't care what he tear up cause you a woman."

Malvonne

"Violet would kill me."

"You don't have nothing to do with it. You never know when I come and you won't see anything. everything be like it was when you left, except if there's some little thing you want fixed you want me to do. You won't see nothing but two dollars on the table there that I leave for a reason you don't know nothing about, see?"

"Uh huh."

"Try me, Malvonne. One week. No, two. If you change your mind any time, any time, just leave the money on the table and I'll know you mean me t^o stop and sure as you live your door key will be laying in its place."

"Uh huh."

"It's your house. You tell me what you want done, what you want fixed, and you tell me what you don't like. But believe me, girl, you won't know when or if I come or go. Except, maybe, your faucet don't drip no more."

"Uh Huh."

"Only thing you know is every Saturday starting now, you got two more dollars to put in your sugar bowl."

"Mighty high price for a little conversation."

"You be surprised what you can save if you like me and don't drink, smoke, gamble or tithe."

"Maybe you should."

"I don't want nothing hon^oery, and I don't want to be han^ging

Malvonne

out in clubs and such. I just want some nice female company."

"You seem mighty sure you going to find it."

Joe smiled. "If I don't, still no harm. No harm at all"

"No messages."

"What?"

"No notes to pass. No letters. I'm not delivering any messages."

"course not. I don't want a pen pal. We talk here or we don't talk at all."

"Suppose something comes up and you want or she wants to call if off?"

"Don't worry about that."

"Suppose she gets sick and can't come and needs to let you know."

"I wait, then I leave."

"Suppose one of the kids gets sick and can't nobody find the mama cause she holed up somewhere with you?"

"Who say she got kids?"

"Dont you take up with no woman if her kids is little, Joe."

"All right"

"It's asking too much of me."

"You dont have to think about none of it. You aint in it. You ever see me mess with anybody? I been in this building longer than you have. You ever hear a word against me from any woman? I sell beauty products all over town, you ever hear tell of me chasing a

Malvonne

woman? No. You never heard that, because it never happened. Now I'm trying to lighten my life a little with a good lady, like a decent man would, that's all. Tell me what's wrong with that?"

"Violet's wrong with it."

"Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me. Rest of the time, she's cooking pork I can't eat, or pressing hair I can't stand the smell of. Maybe that's the way it goes with people been married long as we have. But the quiet. I can't take the quiet. She don't hardly talk anymore, and I aint allowed near her. Any other man be running around, stepping out every night, you know that. I ain't like that. I ain't."

Of course he wasn't, but he did it anyway. Sneaked around, plotted, and stepped out every night the girl demanded. They went to [tk and tk] and he was not alone. [love choices] (over)

When I see them they are not sepia still, or losing thier edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are clicking, and I wonder if they know it. do they know they are the sound of snapping fingers under the sycamores lining the streets? When the loud trains pull into their stops and the engines pause, attentive listeners can hear it. Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks down town, and acres of lawned neighborhoods in Sag Harbor can not see them^h the clicking is there. In the t-strap shoes of Long Island debutantes, ⁱ the sparkling fringes of daring short skirts that swish and glide to music that intoxicates them more than the champagne. It is in

Insert "Thursday man" here with
ff. tr. I've joined the army of Thursday men

Malvonne

the eyes of the old men who watch these girls, and the young ones who hold them up. It is in the graceful slouch of the men slipping their hands into the pockets of their tuxedo trousers. Their teeth are bright; their hair is smooth and parted in the middle. And when they take the arm of the t-strap girls and guide them away from the crowd and the too bright lights, it is the clicking that makes them sway on unlit porches while the victrola plays in the parlor. The click of dark and snapping fingers drives them to Roseland, to [tk, tk] ; boardwalks by the sea. In places their fathers have warned them about and their mothers shudder to think of, both the warning and the shudder come from the snapping fingers, the clicking. and the shade. Pushed away into certain streets, restricted from others, making it possible for the inhabitants to sigh and sleep in relief, the shade stretches--just there--at the edge of the dream, or slips into the crevices of a chuckle. It is out there in the privet hedge that lines the avenue. Gliding through rooms as though it is tidying this, straightening that. It bunches on the curbstone, wrists crossed, and hides its eyes under a wide brim hat. Shade. Protective, available. Or sometimes not; sometimes it seems to lurk rather than hover kindly, and its stretch is not a yawn but an increase to be beaten back with a stick. Before it clicks, or taps or snaps its fingers.

I think the up-town people know it. They must. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same

size so you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap.

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