



Chapter 2

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Chapter 2

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:46:08 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/q811kq20g>

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Rev. July 19,'90/Sept. 23,'90;Oct. 16.Nov 6;Jan 20

Or used to. When Violet threw out the birds, it left her not only without the canaries' company and the parrot's confession, but also minus the routine of covering their cages, a habit that had become one of those necessary things for the night. The things that help you sleep all the way through it. Back breaking labor might do it; or liquor. Surely a body--friendly if not familiar--lying next to you. Some one whose touch is a reassurance, not an affront or a nuisance. Whose heavy breathing neither enrages nor disgusts, but amuses you like that of a cherished pet. And rituals help too: door locking, tidying up, cleaning teeth, arranging hair, but they are preliminaries to the truly necessary things. Most people want to crash into sleep. Get knocked into it with a fist of fatigue to avoid a night of noisy silence, empty birdcages that don't need wrapping in cloth, of bold unsmiling girls staring from the mantle piece.

[tk] For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based

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on her careful 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 for Violet to beat or hit and when she 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 necessary thing for ^{3 months of} the night. He remembered his memories of her; how thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was the way he 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 afternoon he hunted Dorcus down. After she said she wanted Coney Island and house parties and ^{rent} more of Mexico. Even then he was clinging to the quality of her sugar-flawed skin, the high wild bush the bedpillows made of her hair, her bitten nails, the heartbreaking way she stood, toes pointed in. Even then, listening to her talk, to the terrible things she said, he felt he was losing the timbre of her voice and what happened to her eye lids when they made love. Now he lay in bed remembering every detail of that October afternoon, when he first met her, from start to finish, and over and over. Not just because it was important but

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because he was trying to sear her into his mind, engrave her there against future wear. So that neither she nor the ^{live} love of her would melt, vaporize the way it had with Violet. For when Joe tried to remember the way it was when he and Violet were young, when they got married, decided to leave Vesper County and move up north to the City almost nothing came to mind. He recalled dates, of course, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But he had a tough time trying to catch 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 things felt like. That you could say, "I was scared to death," but you could not retrieve the fear. That you could re-play in the brain the scene of ecstasy, of murder of tenderness, 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 Sheila to deliver her ^{Cleopatra} order, he entered a roomful of laughing teasing women--and there she was, standing at the door, holding it open for him--the same girl that had distracted him in the drug store; the girl buying candy and ruining her skin had moved him so deeply his eyes burned. Then, suddenly, there in Alice Manfred's

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doorway, 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 whisper to her at the door as he left. It was a randy aggressiveness he had enjoyed because he had not used or needed it before. The ping of desire that surfaced along with ^{his} the whisper through ^{the} a closing door he began to curry. First he pocketed it taking pleasure in knowing it was there. Then he unboxed it to bring out and admire at his leisure. He did not yearn or pine for the girl, ~~although longing became a pleading companion.~~ Rather he thought about her, and decided. Except for ^{his name} the walnut tree that he and Victory sometimes slept in, Joe had decided nothing ^{in 8 years} regarding his marriage to Violet, ^{he had not chosen but} was ^{thankful} grateful, in fact, that he didn't have to choose--that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the red wings in the county and the evil silence that accompanied them. They met in his own hometown, under a walnut tree. She had been working in the fields like everybody else, and stayed past picking time to live with relatives twenty miles away from her own house. 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.

Joe As he had decided on
① name
② the walnut tree he & V slept in
③ a piece of bottom land
④ to head for
and the more to the City
he

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eyes burned. Then, suddenly, there in Alice Manfred's doorway, 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 whisper to her at the door as he left. It was a randy aggressiveness he had enjoyed because he had not used or needed it before. The ping of desire that surfaced along with the whisper through a closing door he began to curry. First he pocketed it taking pleasure in knowing it was there. Then he unboxed it to bring out and admire at his leisure. He did not yearn or pine for the girl, rather he thought about her, and decided. Just as he had decided on his name, the walnut tree he and Victory slept in, a piece of bottom land, and when to head for the City, he decided on Dorcus. Regarding his marriage to Violet--he had not chosen that but was grateful, in fact, that he didn't have to; that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the red wings in the county and the evil silence that accompanied them. They met in his own hometown, under a walnut tree. She had been working in the fields like everybody else, and stayed past picking time to live with relatives twenty miles away from her own house. 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,

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Tyrell - a railway stop in

When Violet and Joe left Vesper County in 1906 and boarded the colored section of the Baltimore and Ohio Clipper, the train trembled so entering the tunnel to the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side. 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 with them 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 baggage rack 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, laughing 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.

"Breakfast in the dining car. Breakfast in the dining car. Good morning. Full breakfast in the dining car." He held 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

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could. Immediately, now that they were out of Delaware and a long way from Maryland there would be no-green-as-poison curtain separating the colored people eating from the rest of the diners. The cooks would not feel obliged to pile extra helpings on the plates headed for the curtain; three lemon slices in the iced tea, two pieces of coconut cake arranged to look like one--to take the sting out of the curtain; homey it 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 on 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 ironed 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

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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.

Joe and Violet wouldn't think of it--paying money for a meal they had not missed and which required them 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 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. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back. Some were slow about it and traveled from Georgia to Illinois, to the City, back to Georgia, out to San Diego and finally, shaking their heads (and smiling) X surrendered themselves to the City. Others 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

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cotton or short. Discharged with or without honor, fired with or without severance, dispossessed with or without notice, they 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, ^{when} or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement--there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer'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. Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. The ~~poisonous~~ ^{sad} anger of ~~being~~ ^{the} veterans of the 27th Battalion betrayed by the Commander for whom they had fought like ^{lunatics} tigers. The ~~stupidified~~ ^{disgust} ~~poisonous~~ anger that gripped thousands imported by Mr. Armour, Mr. Swift, ^{and} Mr. Montgomery Ward to break strikes then dismissed for having done so. The ~~unmanageable~~ ^{broken} ~~disgust~~ upon learning that Mr. Mallory would never pay 2,000 Negro longshoremen in Galveston fifty cent an hour. The ~~flat dead feeling~~ ^{eyes} of those that had escaped from

(praying palms,
the aspy breathing,
the quiet children

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Springfield Ohio, Springfield, Indiana, Greensberg
Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans, Louisiana,
after raving whites had foamed all over the lanes and
yards of home. [tr tk]

The wave of Black people running from want and
violence or moving toward possibility, crested in the
1870's; the 80's; the '90's but was a steady stream in
1906 when Joe and Violent joined it. Like many of the
others, they were country people, and ~~I know~~ ^{hard, but} how soon
country people 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.

The minute they arrive at the train station ^{and} or glimpse
the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them,
they know they were born for it. There, in a City, they
are not so much new as themselves: their 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 a schoolgirl never pauses at a stop
light but looks up and down the street before stepping
off the curb; how men accomodate themselves to tall
buildings and wee porches, what a woman looks like moving

* or
get off the
ferry

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in a crowd, or how shocking her profile is against the backdrop of the East River. The restfulness in kitchen 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 hypnotized for hours by people on the street below. Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire. The woman who churned a man's blood as she leaned ^S all alone on a fence ~~along~~ ^{by} a country road may not even catch his eye in the city. But if she ^{is} 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 from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, to soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing the delicate, dangling shoe, is captured. And he'd think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight. He would know right away the deception, the trick of shapes and light and movement, but it wouldn't matter at all because the deception was part of it too. Anyway, he could feel his lungs going in and out. There is no air in the city but there is breath, and every morning it races through him like laughing gas brightening his eyes, his talk and his expectations. In no time at all he forgets little pebbly creeks and apple

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trees so old they lay their branches along the ground and you had to reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. He forgets 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 he doesn't miss it, doesn'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 fascination, permanent and out of control, seizes children, 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, warm, 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 unbelievable sky. Red caps and dining car ^{attendants} ~~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 night sky. It can empty itself of surface and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep,

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starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a citysky, 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 glittering 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 made 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 slabs of camarra pried from 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 lame' gowns of chorus girls, or mirrored in the eyes of 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

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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. As well as the windows where sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things.

Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the city, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days, and wants them back, aware of what it looked like but not at all of what it felt like, he coupled himself elsewhere. He rented a room from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours a week 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 hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream 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?

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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 through the 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 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

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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 slap across her face, the pop and sting of it and how 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?

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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 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?

She cried again and Joe ^{held} held her close. The Iriquois sky would ^{pass} pass the windows, and if they ^{did} 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 ^{was} 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 up with his fingernails. She liked to know that the hands lifting and turning her under the blanket ^{have} had been done by her. Lotioned by her with cream from a jar of something from his sample case.

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They tried ^{try} not to shout, but ^{Can't} 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 ^{can} could, if he just could, he ^{bites} bit the pillow to stop his own yell. If he ^{can} could. Sometimes he ^{thinks} thought he had stopped it, ^{because the} that corner of the pillow ^{is} 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 ^{is} was exhausted and he half asleep, she leaned down, her lips behind his ear, and ^{makes} made plans. Mexico, she said. I want to to take me to Mexico. Too loud, he said. No, no, she ^{says} 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 ^{says} said. This my bed time, she ^{says} 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 ^{says} said. What uh, oh, she ^{says} 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 ^{says} said, those little lamps you talking about big

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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 asked. And he opened his eyes.

The door was locked and Melvonne would not be back from her fortieth street offices until way after midnight, 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 evening heads and came home around seven to find that Joe had already changed the birds' water and covered their cages.

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One of the necessary things for the night. On those nights 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.

[tk: J w/ strategy re: M.] changed his name from William

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 ^{this} 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 their bottles and re-situated the 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

Present
tense

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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.

Before Sweetness changed his name from William Younger to Little Caeser, he robbed a mail box on 130th 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 Malvonne's office shift from 6:00 to 2:30 am 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 ended, however, by reading each one including those Sweetness had not bothered to tear open. Except for the pleasure of recognizing the signature, the reading turned out to be flatly uninteresting. Dear Helen

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Moore: questions about Helen's health; answers about the writer's 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 an application for acceptance to a correspondence law school along with the required, but now missing, dollar bill. Malvonne didn't have a dollar to spare for Lila Spencer's entrance fee, but she did worry that if the girl did not get to be a lawyer she would 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.'

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

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the wall of life pressed up against the woman's palms; feel her hands bashed 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 as well drown at home where your mother is and mine and big trees."

Oh, ^{think} thought Malvonne, she dreams of big trees in Barbados? Bigger than those in the park? Must be jungle for sure.

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 whites doing great stuff. I guess you thinking that aint no 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 ^{parent} 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

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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 ^{plans to} thought she would add another penny stamp in case that would help get it to Panama faster.

There ^{is} was only one letter to sweat over and to 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 ^{has} did not know what made her waste a three cent stamp other than the excitement of knowing the government was delivering her heat. Perspiring and breathing lightly, Malvonne forced ^{is} herself to read the letter several times. The problem ^{is} was whether to send on to Mr. M. Sage { that was what he was called on the envelope; on 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

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to mail it with a note of her own attached--urging caution and directing daddy's attention to a clipping from Opportunity 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."

"I got two 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

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on the mantle, 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."

Malvonee 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."

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"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 ever use it. But I'd like it

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in case. I'd pay two quarters whether I used it or not."

"Fifty cents in certain houses get you the woman, the floor, the walls and the bed. Get you a store bought scooter if you want it."

"Aw, no, Malvonne. 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'd want to ask 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."

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"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 quarters 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."

"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 some change 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 my money on the table and I'll know you mean me to 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."

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"Only thing you know is every Saturday starting now, you got two more quarters 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 hornerly, and I don't want to be hanging 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

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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 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

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around, plotted, and stepped out every night the girl demanded. They went to [tk and tk] and he was not alone. He became a Thursday man and Thursday men are satisfied. I can tell from their look some outlaw love is about to be, or already has been, satisfied. Weekends and other days of the week are possibilities but Thursday is a day to be counted on. I used to think it was because domestic workers had Thursday off and could lie abed mornings as was out of the question on weekends when either they slept in the houses they worked in or rose so early to arrive they had no time for breakfast or any kind of play. But I noticed it was also true of men whose women were not servants and day workers; but bar maids and restaurant cooks with Sunday-Monday free; school teachers, cafe singers, office typists, and market stall women all looked forward to Saturday off. The city thinks about and arranges itself for the weekend: the day before pay day, the day after payday, the pre-Sabbath activity, the closed shop and the quiet school hall; barred bank vaults and offices locked in darkness. So why is it on Thursday that the men look satisfied? Perhaps it's the artificial rhythm of the week--perhaps there is something so phoney about the seven day cycle the body pays no attention to it, preferring triplets, duets, quartets, anything but a cycle of seven that has to be broken into

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human parts and the break comes on Thursday. Irresistable. The outrageous expectations and inflexible demands of the weekend are null on Thursday. People look forward to weekends for connections, revisions and separations even though many of these activities are accompanied by bruises and even a spot of blood for excitement runs high on Friday or Saturday. But for satisfaction pure and deep, for balance in pleasure and comfort, Thursday can't be beat--as is clear from the capable expression on the faces of the men and their conquering stride in the street. They seem to achieve some sort of completion on that day that makes them steady enough on their feet to appear graceful even if they are not. They command the center of the sidewalk; whistle softly in unlit doors.

It doesn't last of course, and twenty-four hours later they are frightened again and restoring themselves with any helplessness within reach. So the weekends, destined to disappoint, are strident, sullen, sprinkled with bruises and dots of blood. The regrettable things, the coarse and sour remarks, the words that become active boils in the heart--none of that takes place on Thursday. I suppose the man for whom it is named would hate it, but the fact is, his day is a day for love in the city and the company of satisfied men. They make the women

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smile. The tunes whistled through perfect teeth are remembered, picked up later and repeated at the kitchen stove. In front of the mirror near the door one of them or more will turn her head to the side, and sway, enchanted with her waist line and the shape of her hips.

Up there, in that part of the City--which is the part they came for--the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool.

those necessary things for the night, the things that help you sleep all the way through it. Neck breaking, beer might do it; or liquor. Surely a body-friendly if not familiar--lying next to you. None one whose touch is a reassurance, not an affliction or a nuisance. Whose heavy breathing neither awakes nor disturbs, but amuses you like that of a cherished pet. And finally help too: hair brushing, tidying up, cleaning teeth, arranging hair, but they are preliminaries to the truly necessary things. Most people want to crash into sleep. Get knocked into it with a fist of fatigue to avoid a night of noisy silence, empty bedrooms that don't need wrapping in given, of cold unsmiling girls showing from the window place.

(tk) For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she possessed for her friend