



Dorcus

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Dorcus

n.b. "...There was no such thing as mid-life." Is this a reference to today, a looking back, which would mean that he bookvoice is in the now recalling and telling. Better to keep the bookvoice in the then as though it were the voice's now. Or not?

Dorcas's mother and father had been killed in East St. Louis during the 1917 race riots there. The mother's New York City sister, Alice, took Dorcus in. Alice also stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue listening to the drum beats of the ten thousand blacks who marched in silence there. All that was to be said was in print--a banner repeating some promises from the Declaration of Independence. But all that was meant came from the drums. The men were so beautiful, so coldy quiet, so built by the rolling, the muted, embrace of the drums, and defence too. Things altered during the march; it was as though she stood there for weeks, looking in each and every face that passed. Days passed, nights too. and still she stood there with the little girl Dorcus in her arms. It must have been weeks that she stood there because when it was over, although the clock on the [tk] window said 4:00, her fingernails had three weeks of growth.

Her protection of the little girl in her charge was total thereafter. She hid her hair in braids tucked under lest white men see it raining around her shoulders. High heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head

with saucy brims framing the face, make up of any kind--nothing but lemon cream at night--all that was forbidden. Especially the coats slug low in the back and not buttoned but clutched, like a bathroom or a towel around the body, forcing the women who wore them to look like they had just stepped out of the tub. In one way she admired them, the coats and the women who wore them. She sewed them with pleasure at her machine, and she had to look twice over her shoulder when the Gay Northeasters and the [tk,tk] strolled down Seventh Avenue, they were so handsome. Whatever was in her heart, however, she kept there and never let it be admired regarding Dorcus. And she told the Millwood sister who kept a few small children during the day for mothers who worked out of the house what her feelings were. They did not need persuading, having been looking forward to the Day of Judgement for years now, and expected its sweet relief in any minute. They had lists of every restaurant and diner and club that sold liquor and were not above reporting their owners and customers to the police until they discovered that the news, in the Racket Squad Department, was not only annoying, it was redundant. When Alice Manfred collected little Dorcus one evening, the three women occasionally sat down in the kitchen to grunt and sigh over cups of Bosco at the signs of Eminent Demise: ankles in full view; lip rouge red as hellfire; burnt matchsticks rubbed on eyebrows; fingernails tipped with blood. And the men! The things they thought nothing of saying out loud to any woman who passed by could not be repeated before children. They did not know, but suspected, the dances were

unspeakably nasty because the music was getting lower down with each passing season. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down , down to places below the sash and the buckle belts. Lower and lower until the music was so low down, you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirt sleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives and played the low down stuff that signalled Eminent Demise. Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived on [tk] Avenue with a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet, a quiet street with less than five cars parked at the curb, you could still hear it, and there was no mistaking what it did to the children under their care--cocking their heads and swaying.

Alice thought the low down music (and in East St. Louis it was worse than New York) had something to do with the thirty-seven dead, two of which were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. Some said it was the disgruntled veterans who fought in all colored units, were refused the services of the Y.W.C.A., and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted. Others said it was the outrage of whites at the wave of southern Negroes flooding the town and looking for work and places to live. Alice knew better. Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East St. Louis since before the War. Nor did he need a white man's job (he owned a pool hall on [tk] Street). As a matter of fact, he wasn't even in the riot; he had

no weapons, confronted nobody on the street. He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and her sister had barely got the news when her house was torched and she was burnt to a crisp in its flame. Dorcus, nine years old, sleeping next door with her very best girlfriend, did not hear the fire engine clanging and roaring down the street because when it was called it didn't come. But she must have seen the flames, must have, the whole street was screaming. She never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word.

No. It wasn't the War and the disgruntled veterans; it wasn't the droves and droves of coloreds flocking to paychecks and streets full of themselves. It was the music. The nasty, get on down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to--close and wild. Alice was convinced and so were the Millwood sisters as they blew into cups of Bosco in the kitchen. There had been none of it (the music) at the march. Just the drums and the Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to the whitemen in straw hats, who needed to know what the people weeping softly already knew. Alice read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcus. Looked at Dorcus and read the words. There seemed a great gap between them, between the print and the child, for days, she glanced between them struggling for the answer. At last something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery silver words came. Like a rope the drums spanned the distance, gathered them up and connected them Alice, Dorcus, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy

Scouts and the black unblinking faces, the watchers on the pavement and in the windows above--all. Then it was over and instead of days, only three hours had passed. She carried that gathering with her always after that, and it was secure and tight--except when the men sat on window sills fingering horns. The rope broke then, disturbing her peace, making her furiously aware of flesh and love and something so free you could smell its bloodsmell, its life below the sash and its red lip rouge. But most of all she was aware of its appetite. For the bash, the slit, the evil anger it disguised in flourish and seduction. It did not make her generous, this music, it made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent [tk] avenue apartment than to feel that yelping rage that might not know where or how to stop.

I have seen her, passing Betty Boop's Cafe or an uncurtained window on [tk]street when "[tk]" or "[tk]" drifted out, and watched her reach for the gathering rope thrown to her eight years ago on Fifth Avenue with one hand, and ball the other one into a fist in her coat pocket. I don't know how she did it: balance herself with two different hand postures. But she was not alone in trying. And she was not alone in losing To the girl she had raised since she was nine years old, who sat in the house with her aunt and the Millwood sisters every day after school until Alice picked her up

the music was not only inside her and for her; it was about her. Dorcus rested her cheek on her palm, and where the drums were not and the midnight flames were not was somebody licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins. blowing his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else.

She was marriagable for three years before Alice let her travel to [tk] with the YPBU where no dancing or dance music was allowed. But even YPBU couldn't control the world. After the boat ride, waiting in [tk]'s house for the parents, somebody brought an harmonica out of his shirt pocket; another boy picked up three spoons out of which they made ...