



## JChap 3: Alice and Dorcus

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JChap 3, Aug. 1990; revised Oct.

Alice and Dorcus

New Mrs  
Coppin 11.1

The beautiful men were cold. In typical July weather, sticky and bright, Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the marching men could not. What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated <sup>a couple of</sup> some promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums. The beautiful men were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. ~~Time altered~~ during the march; it was as though the day passed, the night too, and still she stood there, the hand of the little girl in her own, staring into each cold face that passed. The drums and the freezing men hurt her, but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time--first she was frightened of Kansas, then of Springfield, Massachusetts, then Eleventh Avenue, Third Avenue, Park Avenue. Recently she had begun to feel safe nowhere south of 110th Street, and Fifth Avenue was for her the most fearful of all. That was where whitemen leaned out of motor cars with <sup>the fads of dollar bills</sup> ~~dollars folded into~~ <sup>peeping from</sup> their palms ~~assuming, taking for granted...~~ It was where sales men touched her and only her as though she were part of the goods he had condescended to sell her; it was the tissue required if the



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management was generous enough to let you try on a blouse in a store. It was where she, a woman of fifty and independent means, had no sur name. Where women who spoke English said "Don't sit there honey, you never know what they have." And women who knew no English at all and would never own a pair of silk stockings moved away from her if she sat next to them on the trolley.

Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with thier own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. The hurt hurt her, but the fear was gone at last. Fifth Avenue was put into <sup>focus</sup> ~~perspective~~ <sup>now</sup> [tk] and so was her protection of the newly orphaned girl in her charge. From then on she hid the girl's hair in braids tucked under, lest whitemen see it raining round her shoulders and push dollar wrapped fingers toward her. She instructed her about deafness and blindness--how valuable and necessary they were in the company of whitewomen who spoke English and those who did not, as well as in the presence of their children. Taught her how to crawl along the walls of buildings, disappear into doorways, cut across corners in choked traffic-- how to do anything, move anywhere to avoid a whiteboy over the age of eleven. Much of this she could effect with her dress, but as the girl grew older, more elaborate specifications had to be put in place. High heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head



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with saucy brims framing the face, make-up of any kind--all of that was outlawed in Alice Manfred's house. Especially the coats slung low in the back and not buttoned, but clutched, like a bathrobe or a towel around the body, forcing the women who wore them to look like they had just stepped out of the bath tub and were already ready for bed. Privately, Alice admired them, the coats and the women who wore them. She sewed linings into these coats, when she felt like working, 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. But this envy-streaked pleasure Alice closeted, and never let the girl see how she admired those ready-for-bed-in-the-streets clothes. And she told the Miller sisters 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 Judgment for a dozen years, and expected its sweet relief any minute now. They had lists of every restaurant, diner and club that sold liquor and were not above reporting owners and customers to the police until they discovered that such news, in the Racket Squad Department, was not only annoying, it was redundant. When Alice Manfred collected the little girl from the Miller sisters, on those evenings her fine stitching was solicited, the three women occasionally sat down in the kitchen to hum and sigh over cups of Bosco at the signs of Emmminent Demise, Such as not just ankles but knees in full view; lip rouge red as hellfire; burnt matchsticks rubbed on eyebrows;



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fingernails tipped with blood--you couldn't tell the street walkers from the mothers. And the men, you know, 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 for sure, but they suspected that the dances were ~~unspeakably~~<sup>g</sup> nasty because the music was getting worse and worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make Himself known. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled 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 playing the low down stuff that signalled Emmineet Demise. Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived, as Alice Manfred and the Miller sisters did, on [tk] Place, with a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet, a quiet street with no less than five motor 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 ridiculous, unformed hips. ~~with her very best girlfriend, did not~~

Alice thought the low down music (and in Kansas it was worse than New York) had something to do with the silent black men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over thirty-seven dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. Some said the rioters were



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disgruntled veterans who fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the Y.W.C.A., over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honor. Others said they were whites terrified by the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live. A few thought about it and said how perfect was the control of workers none of whom (like crabs in a barrel requiring no lid, no stick, not even a monitoring observation) would get out of the barrel. Alice, however, believed she knew the truth better than everybody. 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 whiteman'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 Alice's sister had just got the news and had gone back home to try and forget the color of his entrails, when her house was torched and she burned crispy in its flame. Her only child, a little girl named Dorcus, sleeping across the road 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, because 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.



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Alice thought, no. It wasn't the War and the disgruntled veterans; it wasn't the droves and droves of colored people flocking to paychecks and streets full of themselves. It was the music. The dirty, get on down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild. Alice was convinced and so were the Miller sisters as they blew into cups of Bosco in the kitchen. It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law. There had been none of that at the Fifth Avenue march. Just the drums and the Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to whitemen in straw hats who needed to know what the freezing men already knew. Alice had picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, 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 again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some great gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words. Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcus, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the <sup>frozen</sup>freezing black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above. Alice carried that gathering rope with her always after that day on Fifth Avenue, and found it reliably secure and tight-most of the time. Except when the men sat on window sills

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fingering horns. The rope broke then, disturbing her peace, making her aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its bloodsmell; made her aware of its life below the sash and its red lip rouge. She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music--just colored folks stuff, harmless, decorative, simple fun--not real, not serious. But Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something evil that disguised itself as flourish and laughing seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a careless longing for a fight or a red ruby stick pin for a tie--either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this cafe 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 else she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent [tk] Place apartment than to risk a broken window or a yelping that might not know where or how to stop. ~~and happy knowing that there was no place to be where~~

~~now~~ I have seen her, passing Betty's Cafe or an uncurtained window on [tk] Street when "[tk]" or "[tk]" drifted out, and watched her reach for the safe 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 gestures. But she was not alone in trying, and



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she was not alone in losing. It was impossible to keep the Fifth Avenue drums separate from the belt buckle tunes spinning on every victrola. Impossible. Some nights are silent; not a motor car turning within earshot; no drunks or restless babies cry through the walls and Alice opens any window she wants to and hears nothing at all. Wondering at this totally silent night, she can go back to bed <sup>but</sup> and as soon as she turns the pillow to its smoother, cooler side, a melody she doesn't remember where from plays by itself, alone and unsolicited, in her head. It is greedy, reckless, the fragment she hears but underneath it, holding up the looseness like a palm are the drums that put Fifth Avenue in <sup>focus.</sup> perspective.

Dorcus, of course, didn't have the problem. Alice had raised her carefully since she was nine years old, and although her earliest memory when she arrived from East St. Louis was the parade her aunt took her to, a kind of funeral parade for her mother and her father, Dorcus remembered it differently. While her aunt worried about how to keep the heart ignorant of the hips and the head in charge of both, Dorcus lay on a sheneille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off 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. Resisting her aunt's protection and restraining hands, Dorcus thought of that life-below-the sash as



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the part that made her alive. The drums she heard at the parade were only the first part, the first word, of a commande<sup>g</sup>. For her the drums were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence. she remembered them as a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete. ~~And~~ her remembrance of the <sup>flames</sup> ~~falms~~ shooting high in the night consumed her just as they had consumed her mother. The fire burned in her still. Rather than the grief of not dying and burning with her mother, of being <sup>on</sup> ~~an~~ observer to it, she took it in, swallowed it to keep and hold-- never let it out and never put it out. It was all she had and all she needed. At first she thought if she spoke of it, it would leave her, or someone would take it away, or she would lose it through her mouth. And when they took her on a train to the City, and crushed her in a long parade, and she watched the black unblinking men, the drums assured her that fire would never leave her, that it would be ~~worth~~ waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to let it loose. And whenever she wanted to be touched by it, whatever happened would be quick. Like the dolls. They would have gone fast. Wood, after all, in a wooden cigar box. The red tissue paper skirt on Rochelle immediately. Sst, like a match, and then Bernadine's blue silk and Faye's white cotton cape. The fire would eat away at their legs, blacken them first with its hot breath and their round eyes with the tiny lashes and eyebrows she had painted in so very carefully would have watched themselves disappear. <sup>(</sup> ~~dorcus~~ avoided thinking about the huge coffin just



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there in front, a few feet to her left, and about the medicinal odor of Aunt Alice sitting next to her by concentrating on Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye who would have no funeral at all. It made her bold. Even as a nine year old in Ps [tk] she was bold. However tight and tucked in her braids, however clunky her high-topped shoes that covered ankles other girls exposed in low cut oxfords, however black and thick her stockings, nothing hid the boldness swaying under her cast iron skirt. eye glasses could not obscure it, nor could the pimples on her skin brought on by hard brown soap and a tilted diet.

When she was <sup>eight</sup> nine, and Alice Manfred agreed to sew for a month or two, Dorcus was watched over after school by the Miller sisters. Often there were four other children, sometimes one other. Their play was quiet and confined to a small area of the dining room. The two-armed sister, Frances, gave them ~~butter~~ <sup>jelly</sup> <sup>apple-butter</sup> sandwiches to eat; the one-armed one, Neola, read them Psalms. The strict discipline was occasionally lightened <sup>when</sup> with frances fell asleep in the chair. Then Neola might grow tired of the constraints the verses imposed on her own voice and select a child to light a match for her cigarette. She would take fewer than three puffs, and something in the gesture lit something inside her, and she told her charges cautionary stories. Her tales however, of the goodness of good behavior, collapsed before the thrill of the sin they deplored. The <sup>truth is that the</sup> message <sup>of</sup> her instructions ~~may have~~ failed because a week after he put the engagement ring on Neola's



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finger, the soon-to-be-groom at her wedding left the state. The pain of his refusal was <sup>physical</sup> ~~permanent and~~ severe, for over her heart, curled like a shell, was the hand on which he had positioned the ring. As though she held the broken pieces of her heart together in the crook of one gracefully frozen arm. No other part of her <sup>a</sup> ~~was~~ touched by this paralysis. Her right hand, the one that turned the tissue thin pages of the Old Testament, or held a Philip Morris to her lips, was straight and steady. The stories she told them of recklessness, of the wicked who preyed on the good were made more poignant by this clutch of arm to <sup>g</sup> ~~her~~ breast. She told them how she had personally advised a friend to respect herself and leave the man who <sup>w</sup> ~~was~~ no good to (or for) her. Finally the friend agreed and in two day<sup>s</sup>, two, she went right back to him God help us all, and Neola never spoke to her again. She told them how a very young girl, no more than fourteen, had left family and friends to traipse four hundred miles after a boy who joined the army only to be left behind and turn to a life of complete dissolution in a camptown. So they could see, couldn't they, the power of sin in the company of a weak mind? The children scratched their knees and nodded, but Dorcus, at least, was enchanted by <sup>frail melty disposition of the flesh and</sup> the paradise that could make a woman go right back after two days, two; make a girl travel four hundred miles to a camptown, and fold Neola's arm, the better to hold the pieces of her heart in her hand. Paradise. All for Paradise.

By the time she was seventeen her whole life was unbearable.



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And when I think about it, I agree. It is terrible when there is absolutely nothing to do or worth doing except to lie down and hope when you are naked, she won't laugh at you. Or that he, holding your breasts, won't wish they were some other way. Terrible but worth the risk, because there is no other thing to do, although you do it. Study, work, memorize. bite into food and the reputations of your friends. Laugh at the things that are right side up and those that are upside down--it doesn't matter because you are not doing the thing worth doing which is lying down somewhere in a dimly lit place enclosed in arms, and supported by the core of the world. Think how it is, if you can manage it, just manage it. Nature freaks for you, then. Turns itself into shelter, by ways. Pillows for two. sends a bastard red rose through a clump of others that are shell pink. And the city, in its own way, gets down for you, cooperates, smoothing its sidewalks, correcting its curbstones, offering you melons and green apples on the corner. Racks of yellow head scarves; strings of Egyptian beads. Kansas friend chicken and something with raisens calls attention to an open window where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that's not enough, doors to speakeasys stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key. She makes up her mind and in forms your back that she is daddy's little angle child. The City is smart at this: smelling and good and looking raunchy; sending secret messages disguised as public signs: this way, open here, danger to let



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colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room out to lunch stop dog on premises absolutely no beer. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own.

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There was a night in her sixteenth year when Dorcus stood <sup>in</sup> behind her body and offered it to either of the brothers for a dance. Both boys were shorter than she, but both were equally attractive. More to the point, they out-stepped everybody so completely they were forced on <sup>the</sup> many occasions <sup>when they needed the competition</sup> to dance with themselves. Sneaking out to this party with her friend x ought to have been hard to arrange, but Alice Manfred <sup>that</sup> was <sup>had business</sup> in Springfield overnight, and nothing could have been easier. The only <sup>difficulty</sup> pain was in finding something <sup>wonderful</sup> to wear[tk].

Before the lights went out, and before the sandwiches and the spiked soda water disappeared, the one managing the record player chose ~~the~~ fast music suitable for the brightly lit room, where furniture obstructing movement had been pushed into the hallway and shoved against the walls of bed rooms. Under the ceiling light pairs moved like twins born with, if not for the other, sharing a partner's pulse like a second jugular. They believed they knew before the music did what their hands, their feet were to do, but that illusion was the music's secret drive: the control it faked them into believing was theirs; the anticipation it anticipated. In between record changes, while the girls fanned blouse necks to <sup>cool</sup> air damp collarbones or <sup>anxious</sup> corrected with fearful hands the damage done to their hair, the boys pressed folded handkerchiefs to their



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foreheads. Laughter covered indiscreet glances of welcome and promise, and took the edge off gestures of betrayal and abandon.

Dorcus and X were not strangers at the party--nobody was. People <sup>none of them</sup> ~~nobody~~ had ever seen before joined the fun as easily as those who had grown up in the same apartment <sup>g</sup> building. But both girls had expectations made higher by the trouble they'd had planning the escapade. Dorcus, at 16, was yet to wear silk hose and her shoes were those of someone much younger or very old. X had helped her loosen two braids behind her ears and her fingertip was stained with the rouge she had stroked across her lips. With her collar turned under, her dress was more adult-looking, but the hard hand of a warning grown-up showed everywhere else: in the hem, the waist-centered belt, the short, puffy sleeves. She and X had tried removing the belt altogether, then fixing it at her navel. Both strategies proved hateful. They knew that a badly dressed body is nobody at all, and X had to chatter compliments all the way down X Avenue to get Dorcus to forget about her clothes and focus on the party. "tk" soared to the ceiling and through the door wide open for circulation as they entered. Immediately both girls were snatched by a male hand and spun into the dancing center of the room. Dorcus recognized her partner as X who had been in her elocution class for a hot minute--which was as long as it took for the teacher to realize he would never relinquish 'ax' for 'ask.' Dorcus danced well--not as fast as some others, but she was graceful, in spite of those shaming shoes, and <sup>she was</sup> carelessly



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provocative.

It was after <sup>two</sup> four subsequent dances, that she noticed ~~teh~~ brothers commanding the attention of a crowd in the dining room. On the street, in vestibules as well as house parties, they were spectacular, moving like taut silk or loose metal. The stomach jumps Dorcus and X had agreed was the Sign of real interest and possible love, surfaced and spread as she watched the brothers behind her partner's back. The sandwiches were gone now, the potato salad too, and everybody knew that the time for lights out music was approaching. The unbelievable agility, the split-second timing the brothers were putting on display announced the culmination and exhaustion of the fast dancing segment of the party. At a pause, Dorcus moves into the hall which parallels the living and <sup>dining #</sup> dining room. From its shadows, through the archway, she has an unrestricted view of the brothers as they <sup>b</sup>ring the performance to its rousing close. Laughing, they accept the praise that is due them: adoring looks from girls, congratulating punches and slaps from the boys. They have wonderful faces, these brothers. Their smiles, more than <sup>flawless</sup> beautiful teeth, are amused and inviting. Someone fights with the victrola; places the arm on, scratches the record, tries <sup>again</sup> again, then exchanges the record for another. During the lull, the brothers notice Dorcus. Taller than most, she gazes at them over the heads of her friends. Their eyes seem wide and welcoming to her. She moves forward out of the shadow <sup>and</sup> slips through the group. The brothers turn up the wattage of the their smiles. The



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right record is on the <sup>t</sup>urn <sup>now</sup>table; she can hear its preparatory hiss as the needle slides toward its first groove. The brothers smile brilliantly; one leans a fraction of an inch toward the other and, never <sup>losing</sup> eye contact with Dorcus, whispers something. The other looks Dorcus up and down <sup>as</sup> and she moves toward them. Then, just as the right music loads up the air, his smile bright as ever, he wrinkles his nose and turns away. Dorcus has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove. The stomach-jump of possible love is nothing compared to the ice floes that block up her veins now. The body she inhabits is unworthy, <sup>Although</sup> it is young and all she has. ~~Yet~~ it is as though it had decayed on the vine at budding time. No wonder Neola closed her arm and held the pieces of her heart in her hand.

So by the time Joe Trace whispered to her through the crack of a closing door her life had become unbearable. <sup>①</sup> The City seeped ~~that begged and challenged her: Come, it said. Come and do wrong.~~ music through its doorways and windows; women sweeping the stairs closed their eyes and shook their heads as they sang out a phrase of sweet desolation. In the year that passed between the dancing brothers' dismissal and the <sup>club</sup> meeting in Alice Manfred's house, Dorcus moped and dreamed and tended her fire. <sup>Alice's joke, already frayed, split.</sup>

<sup>No one who knew her</sup> I ~~will never~~ forget her laugh. It sounded private sometimes but it was always ~~unchained and ended up being a secret laugh~~ made so public it startled me. <sup>had hard</sup> Knowing how hard Alice Manfred worked to privatize her niece I ~~almost split open when I found out where~~ Joe Trace met her. Not at the candy counter of Duggie's where he

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I will never forget her laugh. It sounded private sometimes but it was always unchained and ended up being a secret laugh made so public it startled me. Knowing how hard Alice Manfred worked to privatize her neice I almost split open when I found out where Joe Trace met her. Not at the candy counter of Duggie's where he first saw her and wondered if that, the peppermint she bought, was what insulted her skin, light and creamy everywhere but her cheeks. And not at YPBU meetings either, because Joe left church going to Violet, except for Easter and Woman's Day when it would shame her not to have her husband there. No. Joe met Dorcus right in Alice Manfred's house right up under her nose and right before her very eyes.

He had gone there to deliver an order to Malvonne Edwards's cousin, Sheila, who said if Joe came to 237 [tk] Avenue, apartment 4c, before noon, he could deliver her order, the #2 Nut Brown and the vanishing cream, right there and she wouldn't have to wait til next Saturday or walk all the way down [tk] to [tk] pick it up, unless, of course he wanted to come on her job.... Joe had decided he would wait till next Saturday because not collecting the ~~dollar~~ and thirty-five cents wasn't going to strap him. But after he left Miss [tk's] house and stood for a half hour watching Bud and C.T. abusing each other at checkers, he decided to check Sheila out



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right fast and quit for the day. His stomach was a bit sour and his feet hurt. He didn't want to be caught delivering or writing orders in the rain either, rain that had been threatening all during that warm October Saturday. And even though getting home early meant the extended company of a speechless Violet while he fussed with the sink trap or the wheel that turned the clothes line on their side of the building, the Saturday meal would be early too and satisfying: late summer greens cooked with the ham bone left over from last Sunday. Joe looked forward to the lean scrappy end of week meals, but hated the Sunday one: a baked ham, a sweet heavy pie to accompany it. Violet's determination to grow an ass she swore she once owned was killing him. Once upon a time, he bragged about her cooking. Couldn't wait to get back to the house and devour it. But he was fifty, now, and appetities change, we know. He still liked candy, hard candy--not divinity or caramel--sour balls being his favorite. If violet would confine herself to soup and boiled vegetables (with a bit of bread to go along) he would have been perfectly satisfied. That's what he was thinking about when he found 237 and climbed ~~to~~<sup>he</sup> stairs to 4C. The argument between C.T. and Bud had been too good, too funny: he had listened to them longer that he thought, because it was way past noon when he got to the door marked 4C. Woman noise could be heard through the door. Joe rang anyway. The peppermint girl with the bad skin answered the door, and while he was telling her who he was and what he'd come for, Sheila



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poked her head into the vestibule and shouted, "CPT! Surprise me for once, Joe Trace." He smiled and stepped in the door. Stood there smiling and did not put his sample case down until the hostess, Alice Manfred, came and told him to come on in the parlor.

They were thrilled to have him interrupt their social. It was a luncheon meeting of the [tk] to plan for the Thanksgiving fund raiser for [tk] , They had settled what they could, tabled what they had to, and begun the lunch over which Alice had taken the greatest pains. Pleased, happy even, with their work and with each other's company, they did not know they missed anything until Alice sent Dorcus to answer the ring, and Sheila, remembering what she had said to Joe, jumped up when she heard a male voice.

They made him feel like the singing men in spats. The young ones who clustered on the corners wearing ties the color of handkerchiefs sticking out of their breast pockets. The young roosters who stood without waiting for the chicks who were waiting-for them. Under the women's flirty appraising eyes, Joe felt the spats cover his shoe tops and the pleasure of his own smile. They laughed, tapped the table cloth with their fingertips and began to tease, berate and adore him all at once. They told him how tall men like him made them feel, complained about his lateness and insolence, asked him what else he had in his case besides whatever it was that made Sheila so excited. They wonderd why he never rang thier doorbells, or climbed four flights of double flight stairs to deliver anything to them. They sang their compliments, their



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abuse, and only Alice confined herself to a thin smile, a closed look and did not join the comments with one of her own.

Of course he stayed to lunch. Of course. Although he tried not to eat anything much and spoil his appetite for the late summer greens he was sure were simmering in the pot for him. But the women touched his hair and looked right at him. Ordered him. "Come on over here man and sit yourself down. Fix you a plate? Let me fix you a plate." He protested; they insisted. He openend his case; they offered to buy him out. "Eat, baby, eat," they said. "You not going out in that weather without something sticking to your bones dont' make no sense with all we got here, Dorcus, girl, bring this man a empty plate so I can fill it for him hear?"

They were women his age mostly, with husbands, children, grandchildren too. Hard workers for themselves and anyone who needed them. And they thought men were ridiculous and delicious and terrible, taking every opportunity to let them know that they were. In a group such as this one, they could do with impunity what they were cautious about alone with any man, stranger or friend, who rang the doorbell with a sample case in his hand no matter how tall he was, how country his smile or however much sadness was in his eyes. Besides, they liked his voice. It had a ~~rough~~<sup>a</sup> pitch, ~~some~~ note they heard only when they visited stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards and overworked fields to come to the City. It reminded them of men who wore hats to plow and to eat supper in; who blew into saucers of coffee, and

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held knives in their fists when they ate. So they looked right at him and told him any way they could how ridiculous he was, and how delicious and how terrible. As if he didn't know.

Joe Trace counted on flirty laughing women to buy his wares, and he knew better than to take up with any of them. Not if he wanted to be able to lean over a pool table for a shot exposing his back to his customers' husbands. But that day in Alice Manfred's house, as he listened to and returned their banter, something in the word play took on weight.

<sup>about</sup> I've wondered about it. What he thought then, and later, what he said to <sup>the girl</sup> her: "You are what Adam gave up the garden for, and strutted on out of it." He whispered it to her when she let him out the door, and nobody was more pleased and surprised than he was.