



Chapter 3

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Chapter 3

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If I remember right, that October lunch in Alice Manfred's house, something was off. Alice was vague and anybody in her company for thirty minutes knew that wasn't her way. She was the one who with a look could cut good gossip down to a titter when it got out of hand. And maybe it was her head-of-a-seamstress head that made what you thought was a cheerful dress turn loud and tatty next to hers. But she could lay a table. Food might be a tad skimpy in the portions, and I believe she had a prejudice against butter, she used so little of it in her cakes. But the biscuits were light and the plates, the flatware--sparkling and arranged just so. Open her napkins wide as you please and not a catface anywhere. She was polite at the lunch of course; not too haughty either, but not paying close attention to things. Distracted she was. About Dorcus, probably. I always believed that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years, even if her dress wasn't. Maybe back in October, Alice was beginning to think so too. By the time January came, nobody had to speculate. Everybody knew. I wonder if she had a premonition when Joe Trace knocked on her

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Chapter 3

those newspapers stacked neatly along the baseboard in her bedroom. Everybody needs a pile of newspapers: to line shelves, to peel potatoes on, serve bathroom needs, wrap garbage. But not like Alice Manfred. She must have read them over and over else why would she keep them near her like that? And if she read anything in the newspaper twice she knew too little about too much. If you have secrets you want kept or want to figure out those other people have, a newspaper can slop your mind. The best thing, to find out what's going on, is to watch how people maneuver themselves in the streets. What sidewalk preachers stop them in their tracks. Do they walk right through the boys kicking cans along the sidewalk or holler at them to quit. Ignore the men sitting on car fenders or stop to exchange a word? If a fight breaks out between a man and a woman do they cross in the middle of the block to watch or run to the corner in case it gets messy? One thing for sure, the streets won't confuse you like newspapers. Streets teach you or break your head. But Alice Manfred wasn't the kind to give herself reasons to be in the streets. She got through them quick as she could to get back to her house. If she had come out more often, sat on the stoop or gossiped in front of the beauty parlor she would have known more than what the paper said. Peculiar, though, that the woman who

Chapter 3

avoided the streets let into her living room the woman who sat down in the middle of one. she feel truly unsafe because the brutalizing man and thier brutal women were not. Toward the end of February, Alice Manfred put her needles aside to think again of what she called the impunity of the man who killed her neice just because he could. It had not been hard to do; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting himself in. He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous, because you had seem him with children, bought his products and never heard a scrap of gossip about him doing wrong. Felt not only safe but kind in his company because he was the sort women ran to when they thought they were being followed, or needed someone to have the extra key just in case you locked yourself out. He was the man who took you to your door if you missed the trolly and had to walk night streets at night. Who warned young girls away from hooch joints and the men who lingered there. Women teased him because they trusted him. He was one of those men who might have marched down Fifth Avenue--cold and silent and dignified--into the space the drums made. He knew wrong wasn't right, and did it anyway. Alice Manfred had seen

Chapter 3

and borne much, had been scared all over the country, in every street of it. Only now did she feel truly unsafe because the brutalizing men and thier brutal women were not only out there, they were in her block, her house. A two-eyed man had come in her living room and destroyed her neice. His wife had come right in the funeral to nasty and dishonor her. She would have called the police after both of them if everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider. To actually volunteer to talk to one, (black or white) to let him in her house, watch him adjust his hips in her chair to accomodate the blue steel that made him a man. something.

Knock Idle and withdrawn in her grief and shame, she whittled away the days making lace for nothing, reading her newspapers, tossing them on the floor, picking them up again. She read them differently now. Every week since Dorcus' death, during the whole of January and February a paper laid bare the bones of some broken woman. Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman and girl victims of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted. Five woman caught. Woman says man beat. In jealous rage man. Defenseless as chicks, she thought. Or were they? Read carefully the news accounts revealed that most of these women, subdued and broken, had not been entirely defenceless. Or, like Dorcus, easy

Chapter 3

prey. All over the country, black women were armed. That, thought Alice, that, at least, they had learned. Didn't everything on God's earth have or acquire defense? Speed, some poison in the leaf, the tongue, the tail? A mask, flight, numbers in the millions producing numbers in the millions? A thorn here, a spike there. Natural prey? Easy pickings? "I don't think so." Aloud she said it. "I don't think so." Alice was examining linen and waiting with less hesitation than before and none of the scarey angry feelings she had in January when a woman saying she was Violet Trace had tried to see her, talk or something. Knocked on her door so early in the morning Alice thought it was the law. "I don't have a thing to say to you. Not one thing." She had said it in a loud whisper through the chained opening in the door and slammed it shut. She didn't need the name to be afraid or to know who she was: the star of her neice's funeral. The woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcus's death and in the process had changed the woman's name. Violent they called her now. No wonder. Alice, sitting in the first seat in the first aisle had watched the church commotion stunned. Later, and little

Chapter 3

by little, did feelings, like sea trash expelled on a beach--strange and recognizable, stark and murky--return. Chief among them was fear and--a new thing--anger. At Joe Trace who had been the one who did it: seduced her neice right under her nose in her very own house. The nice one. The man who sold ladies products on the side; a familiar figure in just about every building in town. A man store owners and landlords liked because he set the children's toys in a neat row when they left them scattered on the sidewalk. Whom the children liked because he never minded them. And liked among men because he never cheated in a game, egged a stupid fight on, or carried tales, and he left their women alone. Liked among the women because he made them feel like girls; like by girls because he made them feel like women--which, she thought, was what Dorcus was looking for. Murderer. But Alice didn't wasn't afriad of him nor, now, his wife. For Joe she felt trembling fury at his snake-in-the grass stealing of the girl in her charge; and shame that the grass he had snaked through was her own--the watched and guarded environment where unmarried and unmarriagable pregnancy was the end and close of livable life. After that--zip. Just a wait until the baby that came was old enough to warrant its own watched, guarded environment. She passed it on to

Chapter 3

Waiting for Violet, with less hesitation than before, Alice heated the pressing irons and wondered why it was so. At fifty-eight with no children of her own, and the one she had access to and responsibility for dead, she wondered about the hysteria, the violence, the damnation of pregnancy without marriageability. It had occupied her own parents' mind completely for as long as she could remember them. They spoke to her firmly but carefully about her body: sitting nasty (legs open); sitting womanish (legs crossed); breathing through her mouth; hands on hips, slumping at the table; switching when you walked. The moment she got breasts they were bound and resented, a resentment that increased to outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities and it never stopped until she married Manfred when suddenly it was the opposite. Even before the wedding her parents were murmuring about grandchildren they could see and hold, while at the same time and in turn resenting the tips showing and growing under the chemises of Alice's younger sisters. Resenting the blood spots, the new hips, the hair. That and the necessity for new clothes. "Oh, Lord, girl!" The frown when the hem could not be taken down further; the waistband refused another stitch. Growing up under that heated control, Alice swore she wouldn't, but she did, pass it on. She passed it on to

Chapter 3

her sister's only child. And wondered now would she have done so, had her husband lived or stayed or if she had had children of her own. If he had been there, by her side, helping her make decisions, maybe she would not be sitting there waiting for a woman called Violent and thinking war thoughts. Although war was what it was. Which is why she had chosen surrender and made Dorcus her own prisoner of war. ~~More the women fondled in kitchens and~~ Other women, however, had not surrendered. All over the country they were armed. Alice worked once with a Swedish tailor who had a scar from his ear lobe to the corner of his mouth. "Negress," he said. "She cut me to the teeth, to the teeth." He smiled his wonder and shook his head. "To the teeth." ~~ha~~ The iceman in Springfield had four evenly spaced holes in the side of his neck from four evenly spaced jabs by something thin, round and sharp. Men ran through the streets of Springfield, East St. Louis, and the City holding a red wet hand in the other, a flap of skin on the face. Sometimes they got to a hospital safely alive only because they left the razor where it lodged. Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose. ~~once who thought~~ Who were the unarmed ones? ~~da~~ Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose

Chapter 3

wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them, He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them, it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? O yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores? Uh uh. Did police put their fists in women's faces so the husbands' spirits would break along with the woman's jaw? Did men (those who knew them as well as strangers sitting in motorcars) call them out of their names every single day of their lives? Uh huh. But in God's eyes and theirs, every hateful word and gesture was the Beast's desire for its own filth. The Beast did not do what was done to it, but what it wished done to itself: raped because it wanted to be raped itself. Slaughtered children because it yearned to be slaughtered children. Built jails to dwell on and hold on to its own private decay. God's wrath, so beautiful, so simple. Their enemies got what they wanted, became what they visited on others. ~~were dangerous. The husband~~ ~~shot.~~ Who else were the unarmed ones? The ones who thought they did not need folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass taped to their hands. Those who bought

Chapter 3

houses and hoarded money as protection and the means to purchase it. Those attached to armed men. Those who did not carry pistols because they became pistols; did not carry switchblades because they were switchblades cutting through gatherings, shooting down statutes and pointing out the blood and abused flesh. Those who swelled their little unarmed strength into the reckoning one of leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease. Bail out, dress the dead, pay the rent, find new rooms, start a school, storm an office, take up collections, rout the block and keep their eyes on all the children. Any other kind of unarmed black woman in 1926 was silent or crazy or dead. "There's no such."

Alice tested the iron on a folded cloth and waited for the woman with the knife. The woman people called Violent now because she had tried to kill what lay in a coffin. She had left notes under Alice's door every day beginning in January--a week after the funeral, and Alice Manfred knew the kind of Negro that couple was: the kind she trained Dorcus away from. The embarrassing kind. More than unappealing, they were dangerous. The husband shot; the wife stabbed. Nothing. Nothing her neice did or tried could equal the violence done to her. And where there was violence, wasn't there also vice? Gambling.

Chapter 3

Cursing. A terrible and nasty closeness. Red dresses. Yellow shoes. And, of course, race music to urge them on. "Hello, Felice. Nice of you to come...."

But Alice was not frightened of her now as she had been before and as she was the first time she let her in. Then she'd thought the woman would end up in jail one day--they all did eventually. But easy pickings? Natural prey? "I don't think so. I don't think so."

At the wake, Malvonne gave her the details. Tried to, anyway. Alice leaned away from the woman and held her breath as though to keep the words at bay.

"I appreciate your concern," Alice told her. "Help yourself." She gestured toward tables crowded with food and the well-wishers circling it. "There's so much."

"I feel so bad," Malvonne said. "Like it was my own." "I'm having trouble with my head," said Violet

"Thank you." on the crown of her hat.

"You raise other people's children and it hurts just the same as it would if it was your own. You know about Sweetness, my nephew...?"

"Excuse me." have to look to know what she was

"Did everything for him. Everything a mother would." the long pause that followed, while Violet examined

"Please. Help yourself. There's so much. Too much." Before she got up the courage to ask the woman

Chapter 3

"Those old reprobates, they live in my building, you know...." "I'm not the one you need to be scared of."

"Hello, Felice. Nice of you to come...."

She did not want to hear or know too much then. And she did not want to see that woman they began to call Violent either. The note she slid under Alice's door offended her, then scared her. But after a while, having heard how torn up the man was and reading the headlines in the Age, the News, the Messenger, she steeled herself and let the woman in.

"What could you want from me?"

"Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair," Violet said.

"I'm sorry. I just can't think what good can come of this."

"I'm having trouble with my head," said Violet placing her fingers on the crown of her hat.

"See a doctor why don't you?"

And Violet walked past her, drawn like a magnet to a small side table. "Is that her?"

Alice didn't have to look to know what she was staring at. "Yes."

The long pause that followed, while Violet examined the face that loomed out of the frame, made Alice nervous. Before she got up the courage to ask the woman

Chapter 3

to leave when she turned away from the photograph saying, "I'm not the one you need to be scared of." "No? Who is?" "I don't know. That's what hurts my head."

"You didn't come here to say you sorry. I thought maybe you did. You come in here to deliver some of your own evil."

"I don't have no evil of my own."

"I think you'd better go."

"Let me rest here a minute. I can't find a place where I can just sit down. That's her there?"

"I just told you it was."

"She give you a lot of trouble?"

"No. None. Well. some."

"I was a good girl her age. Never gave a speck of trouble. I did everything anybody told me to. Till I got here. City make you tighten up."

Odd acting, thought Alice, but not bloody-minded. And before she could think not to let it happen, the question was out. "Why did he do such a thing?"

"Why did she?"

"Why did you?"

"I don't know."

The second time she came, Alice was still pondering over those wild women with their packets of lye, their

Chapter 3

honed razors, the keloids here, here and there. She was pulling the curtain to cut off the light that smashed right into her visitor's eyes when she said, "Your husband. Does he hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" Violet looked puzzled.

"I mean he seemed so nice, so quiet. Did he beat on you?"

"Joe? No. He never hurt nothing."

"Except Dorcus."

"And squirrels."

"What?"

"Rabbits too. Deer. Possum. Pheasant. We ate good down home."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Landowner didn't want rabbit. He want soft money."

"They want money here too."

"But there's a way to get it here."

[tk I did housework etc.]

"Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff."

Violet came in the same dress each time and Alice was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve, as well as the coat lining ripped in at least three places she could see. Violet sat in her slip with her coat on, while Alice mended the sleeve with the tiniest stitches. At no time did Violet take off her hat.

Chapter 3

"At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that is it, is it?"

"I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. That you would let me and you did. I know I didn't give Joe much reason to stay out of the street. I wanted to know what kind of girl he'd rather me be."

"Foolish. He'd rather you were eighteen that's all."

"No. Something more."

"You don't know anything about your own husband, I can't be expected to help you."

"You didn't know they were seeing each other no more than I did and you saw her every day like I did Joe. I know where my mind was. Where was yours?"

"Don't chastize me. I won't let you do that."

Alice had begun the first shirtwait when Violet knocked on the door. [tk]

"City tightens you up, but then I got to feeling loose."

"If you had found out about them before he killed her, would you have?"

"I wonder." "Maybe not. If she dug down deep enough and I don't understand women like you. Women with

Chapter 3

knives." Of course, said the mortician. Socks, of

"I wasn't born with a knife." make that one of the

"No, but you picked one up." easy laying white roses

"You never did?" away one the color of her dress.

"No I never did. Even when my husband ran off I

never did that. And you. You didn't even have a worthy

enemy. Somebody worth killing. You picked up a knife

to insult a dead girl." pressing iron down. "You don't

"But that's better ain't it? The harm was already

done." she was saying as did the woman sitting by her

"She wasn't the enemy." morning.

"Oh yes she is. She's my enemy. Then, when I

didn't know it and now too."

"Why? Because she was young and pretty and took

your husband away from you?"

"You said it. Wouldn't you? You wouldn't fight for

your man?"

Seeded in childhood, watered every day since, alarm

had sprouted through her veins all her life. Thinking

war thoughts it had gathered, blossomed into another

thing. Now as she looked at this woman Alice heard her

question like the pop of a toy gun.

Somewhere in Springfield only the teeth were left.

Maybe the skull, maybe not. If she dug down deep enough

and tore off the top, she could be sure that the teeth

Chapter 3

socks?" Of course, said the mortician. Socks, of course. And what difference did it make that one of the mourners was her sworn and hated enemy laying white roses on the coffin, taking away one the color of her dress. For thirty years he was turning into teeth in Springfield, and neither she nor the mourner in the inappropriate dress could do a thing about it.

Alice slammed the pressing iron down. "You don't know what loss is," she said, and listened as closely to what she was saying as did the woman sitting by her ironing board in a hat in the morning.

Chapter 3

would certainly be there. No lips to share with the woman she had shared them with. No fingers to lift her hips as he had lifted others. Just the teeth exposed now, nothing like the smile that had made her say, "Choose." And he did. Seven months later she was the one choosing. The suit, the tie, the shirt he liked best. They suggested she not waste the shoes. No one would see them. "But socks? Surely he has to have socks?" Of course, said the mortician. Socks, of course. And what difference did it make that one of the mourners was her sworn and hated enemy laying white roses on the coffin, taking away one the color of her dress. For thirty years he was turning into teeth in Springfield, and neither she nor the mourner in the inappropriate dress could do a thing about it.

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