



Chapter 4

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Chapter 4

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:45:19 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/1n79h886r>

Chapter 4

The calming effect of the tea Alice Manfred had given her did not last long. Afterwards she sat in the drugstore sucking malt through a straw wondering who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things. Where she saw a lonesome chair left like an orphan in a park strip facing the river, that other Violet saw how the ice skim gave the railing's black poles a weapon-y glint. Where she, last in line at the car stop, noticed a child's cold wrist jutting out of a too-short, hand-me-down coat, that Violet slammed past a whitewoman into the seat of a trolly four minutes late. And if she turned away from faces--inconsolably sad--looking at her through restaurant windows, that Violet heard the clack of the plate glass in mean March wind. She forgot which way to turn the key in the lock; that Violet not only knew the knife was in the parrot's cage and not in the kitchen drawer, that Violet remembered what she did not: scraping marble from the parrot's claws and beak weeks ago. She had been looking for that knife for a month. Couldn't for the life of her think what

she'd done with it. But that Violet knew and went right to it. Knew, too, where the funeral was going on, although it could not have been but one of two places[tk and tk] come to think of it. Still that Violet knew which of the two, and the right time to get there. Just before the closing of the casket, when the people who were going to faint fainted and the women in white dresses were fanning them. And the ushers, young men the same age as the deceased--from the dead girl's high school class, with freshly barbaled heads and ghost white gloves--gathered; first in a tight knot of six and then separated into two lines of three, they moved down the aisle from the back where they had assembled and surrounded the bier. They were the ones that Violet had to push aside, elbow her way into. And they did. Step aside, thinking maybe this was some last minute love desperate to make itself known before it couldn't see and might forget the sleeping face it treasured. The ushers saw the knife before she did. Before she knew what was going on, the boy ushers' hard hands--knuckle-tough from marbles and steelies, from snowballs packed to bullet strength, from years of sticks sending hardballs over the hoods of motor cars, into lots with high fences and even into the open windows as well as the closed of people

living four floors up, hands that had held the boy's whole body weight from the iron railings of the [tk] bridge let alone the monkey bars in [tk] park--these hands were reaching toward the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl's haughty, secret face.

It bounced off, making a little dent under her ear lobe, like a fold in the skin that was hardly a disfigurement at all. She could have left it at that: the fold under the ear lobe, but that Violet, unsatisfied, fought with the hard handed usher boys and was time enough for them, almost. They had to forget right away that this was a fifty year old woman in a fur collared coat and a hat pulled down so far over her right eye, it was a wonder she saw the door to the church not to speak of the right place to aim her knife. They had to abandon the teachings they had had all their lives about the respect due their elders. Lessons learned from the old folks whose milky light eyes watched every thing they did, commented on it, and told each other what it was. Lessons they had learned from the younger old folks (like her) who could be their auntie, their grandmother, their mother, or their mother's best friend who not only could tell on them, but could tell them; could stop them

cold with a word, with a "Cut that mess out!" shouted from any window , doorway or streetcurb in a two block radius. And they would cut it out, or take it downstairs, behind the trunks, or off in [tk] park, or better still, in the shadow of the el where no lights lit what these women did not allow, don't care whose child it was. But they did it nevertheless. Forgot the lessons of a lifetime, and concentrated on the wide, shining blade, because who knew? Maybe she had more than one cutting in mind. Or maybe they could see themselves hang-dog at the dinner table trying to explain to these same women or even, Jesus! the men, the fathers and uncles, and grown cousins, friends and neighbors, why they had just stood there like street lights and let this woman in a fur collared coat make fools of them and ruin the honorable job they had worn white gloves for. They had to wrestle her to the floor before she let go. And the sound that came from her mouth belonged to something wearing a pelt instead of a coat.

By then the usher boys were joined by frowning men who carried that kicking, growling Violet out while she looked on in amazement. She had not been that strong since Virginia, since she loaded hay and handled the mule wagon with a four lead rein. But twenty years doing hair

in the City had softened her arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers. Like shoes taking away the tough leather her bare feet had grown, the City took away the back and arm power she used to boast of. A power that Violet had not lost because she gave the usher boys, and the grown men too, a serious time. *well beneath the stoop, was a light yellow feather*

with That Violet should not have let the parrot go. He forgot how to fly and just trembled on the sill, but when she ran home from the funeral, having been literally thrown out by the hard-handed boys and the frowning men, "I love you" was exactly what neither she nor that Violet could bear to hear. She tried not to look at him as she paced the rooms, but the parrot saw her and squawked a weak "Love you" through the pane. Joe, who had been missing since New Year's Day, did not come home that night or the next for her black-eyed peas. Gistan and Stuck came by to ask for him, to say they couldn't play cards Friday and to linger with embarrassment in the halls while Violet stared at them. She knew the parrot was there because she kept going up and down the stairs from her apartment door to the front door to see if he was coming down the street or was sitting on the stoop. At two in the morning, again at four, she made the trip,

peered out into the dark street, solitary except for a pair of police and cats peeing in the snow. The parrot, shivering and barely turning his green and blonde head, told her each time "Love you."

"Get away," she told him. "Go on off somewhere!"

The second morning he had. All she saw, down in the cellar well beneath the stoop, was a light yellow feather with a tip of green. And she had never named him. Had called him "my parrot" all these years. "My parrot." "Love you." "Love you." Did the dogs get him? Did some night-walking man snatch him up and take him to a house that did not feature or keep a supply of ginger cookies for him? Or did he get the message--that she said "My parrot" and he said "Love you." and she had never said it back or even took the trouble to name him--and manage somehow to fly away on wings that had not soared for six years. Wings grown stiff from disuse and dull in the bulb light of an apartment with no view to speak of.

The malted was gone and although her stomach seemed about to lose its stitching, she ordered another and took it over to one of the little tables behind the [tk] that Duggie had placed there against the law that said if he did it, it made the place a restaurant. There she could sit and watch the foam disappear, the scoops of ice cream

lose their ridges and turn to soft, glistening balls like soap bars left in a dishpan full of water. She had meant to bring a package of [tk Ovaltine?] to stir into the malted milk shake, because they didn't seem to be doing any good. The hips she came here with were gone too, just like the power in her back and arms. Maybe that Violet, the one who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it, had the hips she had lost. But if that Violet was strong and had hips, why was she proud of trying to kill a dead girl, and she was proud. Whenever she thought about that Violet, and what that Violet saw through her own eyes, she knew there was no shame there, no disgust. That was hers alone, so she hid behind the [tk] at one of Duggie's little illegal tables and played with the straw in a chocolate malt. She could have been eighteen herself, just like the girl at the magazine rack, reading [tk magazine] and playing for time in the drug store. Did Dorcus, the dead girl, like [tk magazine]? did the blonde ladies with shingled hair capture her? Did the men in golf shoes, and V-neck sweaters? How could they if she found herself stuck on a man old enough to be her father? A man who carried not a golf club, but a sample case of Lucky Heart products. A man whose handkerchiefs were not lightweight cotton

poking from his jacket pocket, but red and large and spotted with white dots. Did he ask her to warm with her own body his spot in the bed on cold winter nights before he slid in? Or did he do it for her? He probably let her put her spoon into his pint of cream and scoop off the melty part, and when they sat in the dark of the Lincoln Theater he wouldn't mind a bit if she stuck her hand down in his box of popcorn and came up with a fistful of it the sonofabitch. And when "Wings Over Jordan" came on he probably turned the volume down so he could hear her when she sang along with the choir, instead of up so as to drown out her rendition of [tk]. Turned, too, his jaw to the light of the bulb so she could press out between her thumb nails the hair root caught in a pore the dog. And another damn thing. (The malt was soup now, smooth and cold.) The twenty-five dollar bonus prize of a blue shaded boudoire lamp or an orchid colored satin-like ladies robe that he won and was due to him for having sold all that merchandise in one month--did he give that to her the heifer? Take her to Indigo on Saturday and sit way back so they could hear the music wide and be in the dark at the same time, at one of those round tables with a slick black top and a tablecloth of pure white on it, drinking rough gin with

that sweet red stuff in it so it looked like soda pop, which a girl like her ought to have ordered instead of liquor she could sip from the edge of a glass wider at the mouth than at its base, with a tiny stem like a flower in between while her hand, the one that wasn't holding the glass shaped like a flower, was under the table drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh, and he bought her underwear with stitching done to look like rosebuds and violets, VIOLETS, don't you know, and she wore it for him thin as it was and too cold for a room that couldn't count on a radiator to work through the afternoon, while I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody's kitchen to do their hair? Huddled in a doorway out of the wind waiting for the trolly? Whereever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bedsheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears because it got that cold sometimes it did and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the ear lobe. That's why . And that's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and

determined to have and hold on to, NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no that Violet is me! The me that hauled hay in Virginia and handled a four mule team in the brace. I have stood in cane fields in the middle of the night when the sound of it rustling hid the slither of the snakes and I stood still waiting for him and not stirring a speck in case he was near and I would miss him, and damn the snakes my man was coming for me and who or what was going to keep me from him? Plenty times, plenty times I have carried the welts given me by a two tone peckerwood because I was late in the fieldrow the next morning. Plenty times, plenty, I chopped twice the wood that was needed into short logs and kindlin so as to make sure Mr. [tk] had enough and wouldn't go hollering for me when I was bound to meet my Joe Trace don't care what, and do what you will or may. He was my Joe Trace. Mine. I picked him out from all the others wasn't nobody like Joe he make anybody stand in cane in the middle of the night; make any woman dream about him in the daytime so hard she miss the rut and have to work hard to get the mules back on the track. Any woman, not just me. Maybe that is what she saw. Not the fifty year old man toting a sample case, but my Joe

Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, whose shoulders were razor sharp and who looked at me and never saw anybody else. Could she have looked at him and seen that? Under the table at the Indigo was she drumming on a thigh soft as a baby's but feeling all the while the way it used to be skin so tight it almost split and let the iron muscle through? Did she feel that, know that? That and other things, things I should have known and didn't? Secret things kept hidden from me or things I didn't notice? Is that why he let her scoop the melty part from around the edges of his pint of ice cream, stick her hand down in his salt and butter popcorn. What did she see, young girl like that, barely out of high school, with unbraided hair, lip rouge for the first time and high heeled shoes. And also what did he? A young me with high yellow skin instead of black? A young me with long wavey hair instead of short? Or a not me at all. A me he was loving in Virginia because that girl Dorcus wasn't around there anywhere. Was that it? Who was it? Who was he thinking of when he ran in the dark to meet me in the cane field? Somebody golden, like my own golden boy, who I never ever saw but who tore up my girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers? Help me god help me if that was it, because I knew him

and loved him better than anybody except True Belle who is the one made me crazy about him in the first place. Is that what happened? Standing in the cane, he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about, and me, holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy I never saw either. Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he.

I got quiet because the things I couldn't say were coming out of my mouth anyhow. I got quiet because I didn't know what my hands might get up to when the day's work was done. The business going on inside me I thought was none of my business and none of Joe's either because I just had to keep hold of him anyway I could and going crazy would make me lose him.

Sitting in the thin sharp light of the drugstore playing with a long spoon in a tall glass made her think of another woman occupying herself at a table pretending to drink from a cup. Her mother. She didn't want to be like that. O never like that. To sit at the table, alone in the moonlight, sipping boiled coffee as long as it was there, and pretending to sip it when it was all gone; waiting for morning when men came, talking low as though nobody was there but themselves, and picked around in our things, lifting out what they wanted--what was

theirs, they said, although we cooked in it, washed sheets in it, sat on it, ate off of it. That was after they had hauled away the plow, the scythe, the mule, the sow, the churn and the butter press. Then they came inside the house and all of us children put one foot on the other and watched. When they got to the table where our mother sat nursing an empty cup, they took the table out from under her and then, while she sat there alone, and all by herself like, cup in hand, they came back and tipped the chair she sat in. She didn't jump up right away, so they shook it a bit and since she still stayed seated--looking ahead at nobody--they just tipped her out of it like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don't want to touch it or pick it up in your arms. You tip it forward and it lands on the floor. No harm done if it's a cat because it has four legs. But a person, a woman, might fall forward and just stay there a minute looking at the cup, stronger than she is, unbroken at least and lying a bit beyond her hand. Just out of reach. Well, got things organized. And then Rose Dear

jump. There were five of them, Violet the third, and they all came in the house finally and said mama; each one came and said it until she said uh huh. They never heard her say anything else in the days that followed, when,

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huddled in an abandoned shack, they were thoroughly dependent upon the few neighbors left in 1888--the ones who had not moved West to Kansas City, Oklahoma; north to Chicago or Bloomington Indiana. It was through one of the last to leave families, bound for Philadelphia, that the message of Rose Dear's distress reached True Belle. Those who stayed brought things: a pallet, a pot, some pan bread and a bucket of milk. Advice too: "Don't let this whip you, Rose. You got us, Rose Dear. Think of the young ones, Rose. He ain't give you nothing you can't bear, Rose." But had He? Maybe this one time He had. Had misjudged and misunderstood her particular back bone. This one time. This here particular spine.

Rose's mother, True Belle, came when she heard. Left her cushiony job in Baltimore and, with one hundred eagle dollars stitched separately into her skirts to keep them quiet, came to x to take charge and over. The little girls fell in love right away and things got put back together. Slowly but steadily, for about four years, True Belle, got things organized. And then Rose Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun. Two weeks after her burial, Rose's husband arrived loaded with ingots of gold for the childrn, two-dollar pieces for the women and snake oil for the men. For Rose Dear he

brought a silk embroidered pillow to comfort her back on a sofa nobody ever had, but would have been real nice under her head in the pine box--if only he'd been on time. The children ate the chocolate from the ingots of gold and traded the heavenly paper among themselves for reed whistles and fishing string. The women bit the piece of silver before knotting it tightly in their clothes. Except True Belle. She fingered the money and, looking back and forth, from the coin to her son-in-law, shook her head and laughed.

"Damn," he said. "Aw, damn," when he heard what Rose had done.

Twenty-one days later he was gone again, and Violet was married to Joe and living in the City when she heard from a sister that he'd done it again: arrived with treasures weighing his pockets and folded under the cap on his head. His trips back were both bold and secret for he had been mixed in and up with the Readjustment Party and when a verbal urging from landowners had not worked, a physical one did the trick and he was persuaded to transfer his self some place, any place, else. Perhaps he planned to find some way to get them all out; in the meantime he made fabulously dangerous and wonderful returns over the years, although the interims got longer

and longer, and while the likelihood that he was still alive grew fainter, hope never did. Any time any time, on another brittle cold Monday or in the blasting heat of a Sunday night, he might be there, owl-whistling from the road, the mocking, daring dollar bills sticking from his cap, jammed into the cuffs of his trousers and the tops of his shoes. Candy stuck in clumps in his coat pocket along with a tin of Frieda's Egyptian Hair Pomade. Bottles of rye, purgitive waters and eaux for every conceivable toilette made a companionable click in his worn carpet bag.

He'd be in his seventies now. Slower for sure, and maybe he'd lost the teeth that made the smile that made the sisters forgive him. But for Violet (as well as for her sisters and those who stayed in x) he was out there somewhere gathering and putting by delights to pass out among the homefolks. For who could keep him down this defiant birthday-every-day man who dispensed gifts and stories that kept them so rapt they forgot for the while a bone-clean cupboard and exhausted soil; or believed a child's leg would straighten itself out by and by. Forgot why he left in the first place and was forced to sneak into his own home ground. In his company forgetfulness fell like pollen. But for Violet the pollen never

blotted out Rose. In the midst of the joyful resurrection of this phantom father, accompanying the distribution of his bounty both genuine and fake, Violet never forgot Rose or the place she had thrown herself into--a place so narrow so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her prone in a wooden box. Rose. Rose Dear. ~~he could turn away from the door to step toward the~~

What was the thing, I wonder, the one and final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat? Had the last washing split the shirtwaist so bad it could not take another mend and changed its name to rag? Perhaps word had reached her about the four day hangings in Rocky Mountain: the men on Tuesday, the women two days later. Or had it been the news of the young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to an x, his grandmother refusing to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse. They buried him in his brother's pants and the old woman pumped another bucket of clear water. Might it have been the morning after the night when craving (which used to be hope) got out of hand? When longing squeezed, then tossed her before running off promising to return and bounce her again like an india rubber ball? Or was it that chair they tipped her out of? Did she

fall on the floor and sit there deciding right then that she would do it. Someday. Delaying it for four years while True Belle came and took over but remembering it as a door, closed and locked, with pointless hours and days on the other side? Biding her time until the moment returned --with all its mewing hurt or overboard rage-- and she could turn away from the door to step toward the limitlessness beckoning from the well. What could it have been, I wonder?

True Belle was there, chuckling, competent, stitching by firelight, gardening and harvesting by day. Pouring x tea on the little girls' cuts and bruises, and keeping them at their tasks with spell binding tales of her Baltimore days and the child she had cared for there. Maybe it was that: knowing her daughters were in good hands, better hands than her own, at last, and Rose Dear was free of time that no longer flowed, but stood stock still when they tipped her from her kitchen chair. So she dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun.

The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?

As she grew older, Violet could neither stay where she was or go away. The well sucked her sleep, but the notion of leaving frightened her. It was True Belle who forced it. There were bully x crops in x and people for twenty miles around were going to pick it. Rumor was the pay was ten cents for young women, a quarter for men. Three double seasons in a row of bad weather had ruined all expectations and then came the day when the blossoms jumped out fat and creamy. Everybody held his breath while the landowner squinted his eyes and spat. Two laborers [x and x] walked the rows, touching the tender flowers, fingering the soil and trying to puzzle out the sky. Then four days of light, fresh rain and all of x was downy with the cleanest cotton they'd ever seen. Softer than silk, and out so fast the weevils, having abandoned the fields years ago, had no time to get back there.

Three weeks. It all had to be done in three weeks or less. Everybody with fingers in a twenty-mile radius showed up and was hired on the spot. X\$ a bale, some said, if you grew your own; X\$ if you had a white friend to carry it up for pricing. And for pickers, ten cents a day for the women and a case quarter for the men.

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True Belle sent Violet and two of her sisters in the fourth wagon load to go. They rode all night, assembled at dawn, ate what was handed out and shared the meadows and the stars with local people who saw no point in going all the way home for five hours sleep.

Violet had no talent for it. She was 17 years old but trailed with the twelve year olds--making up the last in line or meeting the others on their way back down the row.. For this she was put to scragging, second picking the bushes that had a few inferior puffs left on the twigs by swifter hands than hers. Humiliated, teased to tears, she had about decided to beg a way back to x when a man fell out of the tree above her head and landed at her side. She had lain down one night, sulking and abashed, a little way from her sisters, but not too far. Not too far to crawl back to them swiftly if the x trees turned out to be full of spirits idling the night away. The spot she had chosen to spread her blanket[?] was under a handsome black walnut that grew away from the woods next to the meadow strip bordering the acres of cotton.

The thump could not have been a raccoon's because it said ow. Violet rolled away too scared to speak, but raised on all fours to dash.

"Never happened before, " said the man. "I've been sleeping up there every night. This the first time I fell out."

Violet could see his outline in a sitting position and that he was rubbing his arm then his head then his arm again.

"You sleep in trees?"

"If I find me a good one."

"Nobody sleeps in trees."

"I sleep in them."

"Sounds soft-headed to me. Could be snakes up there."

"Snakes around here crawl the ground at night. Now who's soft-headed?"

"Could've killed me."

"Might still, if my arm ain't broke."

"I hope it is. You won't be picking nothing in the morning and climbing people's trees either."

"I don't pick cotton. I work the gin house."

"What you doing out here, then, Mr. High and Mighty sleeping in trees like a bat?"

"You don't have one nice word for a hurt man?"

"Yeah: find somebody else's tree."

"You act like you own it."

"You act like you do."

"Say we share it."

"Not me."

He stood up and shook his leg before trying his weight on it., then limped toward the tree.

"You not going back up there over my head."

"Get my tarp," he said. "Rope broke. That's what did it." He scanned the night for the far reaches of the branches. "See it? There it is. Hanging right there. Yep." He sat down then, his back resting on the trunk. "Have to wait til it's light, though," he said and Violet always believed that because their first conversation began in the dark (when neither could see much more of the other than silhouette) and ended in a green and white dawn, that night time was never the same for her. Never again would she wake, struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small.

His name was Joseph and even before the sun rose[?], when it was still hidden in the woods, but freshening the world's green and dazzling acres of white cotton against the gash of a ruby horizon, Violet claimed him. Hadn't he fallen practically in her lap? Hadn't he stayed? All

through the night, taking her sass, complaining, teasing, explaining, but talking, talking her through the dark. And with daylight came the bits of him: his smile and his wide watching eyes. His buttonless shirt open to a knot at the waist exposed a chest she claimed as her own smooth pillow. The shaft of his legs, the plane of his shoulders, jawline and long fingers--she claimed it all. She knew she must be staring, and tried to look away, but the music in his voice brought her eyes back each and every time. She grew anxious when she heard workers begin to stir, anticipating the breakfast call, going off in the trees to relieve themselves, muttering morning sounds--but then he said, "I'll be back in our tree tonight. Where you be?"

"Under it," she said and rose from the clover like a woman with important things to do.

She did not worry what could happen in three weeks when she was supposed to take her two dollars and ten cents back to True Belle. As it turned out, she sent it back with her sisters and stayed in the vicinity working x. The straw boss had no faith in her, having watched her working hard to fill her sack as quickly as the children, but she was highly and suddenly vocal in her determination. She lived with a family of six in x and

worked x to be with Joe whenever she could. It was there she became the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man. It was there where the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet grew shields no gloves or shoes could match.

All for Joe Trace, a [x] nineteen year old who lived with an adopted family, worked gins and lumber and cane and cotton and corn, who butchered when needed, plowed, fished, sold skins and game--and who was willing. He loved the woods. Loved them. So it was shocking to his family and friends not when he agreed to marry Violet, but that he agreed to take her to Baltimore where she said all the houses had separate rooms and water came to you--not you to it. Where colored men worked harbors for x\$ a day, pulling cargo from ships bigger than churches, and others drove up to the very door of your house to take you where you needed to be. She was describing a Baltimore of twenty-five years ago and a neighborhood neither she nor Joe could rent in, but she didn't know that, and never knew it, because they went to the City instead. Their Baltimore dreams were displaced by more powerful ones. Joe knew people living in the City and some who'd been there and come home with tales to make Baltimore weep. The money to be earned for doing light

work--standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning stranger's shoes--got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one whole harvest. Whitepeople literally threw money at you--just for being neighborly: opening a taxi door, picking up a package. And anything you had or made or found you could sell in the streets. In fact, there were streets where colored people owned all the stores; whole blocks of handsome colored men and women laughing all night and making money all day. Steel cars sped down the streets and if you saved up, they said, you could get you one and drive as long as there was road. *either so all these*

also For years Joe listened to these stories and laughed. But he resisted them, too, until, abruptly, he changed his mind. No one, not even Violet, knew what it was that permitted him to leave his fields and woods and secret lonely valleys. To give away his fishing pole, his skinning knife--every piece of his gear but one, and borrow a suitcase for their things. Violet never knew what it was that fired him up and made him want--all of a sudden, but later than most--to move to the City. She supposed that the dinner that tickled everybody that year must have played a part in Joe's change of mind. If Booker T. was sitting down to eat a chicken sandwich in

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the President's house in a city called capitol, near where True Belle had had such a good time, then things muyst be all right, all right. He took his bride on a train ride exciting enough to pop their eyes and danced on into the City.

Violet thought it would disappoint them; that it would be less lovely than Baltimore. Joe believed it would be perfect. When they arrived, carrying all of their belongings in one valise, they both knew right away that perfect was not the word. It was better than that.

Joe didn't want babies either so all those miscarriages--two in the field, only one in her bed--were more inconvenience than loss. And city life would be so much better without them. Arriving at the train station back in 1906, the smiles they both smiled at the women with little children, strung like beads over suitcases, were touched with pity. They liked chilren. Loved them even. Especially Joe who had a way with them. but neither wanted the trouble. At forty, however, Violet was already staring an infants, already hesitating in front of toys displayed at Christmas. Quick to anger when a sharp word was flung at a child, or a woman's hold of a baby seemed awkward or careless. The worse burn she

ever made was on the temple of a customer holding a child across her knees. Violet, lost in the woman's hand patting and her knee-rocking the little boy, forgot her own hand holding the curling iron. The customer flinched and the skin discolored right away. Violet moaned her apologies and the woman was satisfied until she discovered that the whole curl was singed clean off. Skin healed, but an empty spot in her hairline....Violet had to forego payment to shut her up.

By and by longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving. She was limp in its thrall or rigid in an effort to dismiss it. She began to imagine how old that last miscarried child would be now. A girl, probably. Certainly a girl. Who would she favor? What would her speaking voice sound like? They would sing together, Violet taking the alto line, the girl a honeyed soprano. "Don't you remember a long time ago, two little babes their names I don't know, carried away one bright summer's day, lost in the woods I hear people say that the sun went down and the stars shone thier light. Poor babes in the woods they laid down and died. When they were dead a robing so red put strawberry leaves over their heads. Aw. Aw. Then Violet would dress her hair for her the way the girls wore it now: short,

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Bangs paper sharp above the eyebrows? Ear curls? Razor-thin part on the side? Hair sliding into careful waves marcelled to a T? ~~let did her hair.~~

Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming. Just when her breasts were finally flat enough not to need the binders the young women wore to sport the chest of a soft boy, just when her nipples has lost their point, motherhunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out. When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter whose hair she had dressed to kill. Who lay there asleep in that coffin? Who posed there awake in the photograph? The scheming bitch who had not considered Violet's feelings one tiniest bit, who came into a life, took what she wanted and damn the consequences? Or mama's dumpling girl? Was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb? Washed away on a tide of soap, salt and castor oil. terrified, perhaps, of so violent a home. Unaware that, had it failed, had she braved mammymade poisons and manny's urgent fists, she could have had the best dressed hair in the City. Instead, she hung around in the fat knees of strangers' children. In shop windows, and baby carriages left for a moment in the sun. Not realizing that, bitch or dumplin, the two of them, mother and

daughter, could have walked Broadway together and ogled the clothes. Could be sitting together, cosy in the kitchen, while Violet did her hair.

"Another time," she had said to Alice Manfred, "another time I would have loved her too. Just like you did. Just like Joe." She was holding her coat in her lap too embarrassed to let her hostess hang it up lest she see the lining.

"Maybe," said Alice. "Maybe. You'll never know now, though, will you?"

"I thought she was going to be pretty. Real pretty. She wasn't."

"Pretty enough, I'd say."

"You mean the hair. The skin color."

"Don't tell me what I mean."

"Then what? What he see in her?"

"Shame on you. Grown woman like you asking me that."

"I have to know."

"Then ask the one who does know. You see him every day."

"Don't get mad."

"Will if I want to."

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"All right. But I don't want to ask him. I don't want to hear what he has to say about it. You know what I'm asking."

"Forgiveness is what you're asking and I can't give you that. It's not in my power."

"No, not that. That's not it, forgiveness."

"What, then? Don't get pitiful. I won't stand for you getting pitiful, hear me?"

"We born around the same time, me and you," said Violet. "We women, me and you. Tell me something real. don't just say I'm grown and ought to know. I don't. I'm fifty and I don't know nothing. What about it? Do I stay with him? I want to, I think. I want...well, I didn't always ...now I want. I want some fat in this life."

"Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it."

"You don't know either, do you?"

"I know enough to know how to behave."

"Is that it? Is that all it is?"

"Is that all what is?"

"Oh shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?"

"Oh, Mama." Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth. Violet had the same thought: Mama.

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Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn't do it no more? The place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it? Where everything is over but the talking?

They looked away from each other then. The silence went on and on until Alice Manfred said, "Give me that dress. I can't look at that sleeve another minute."

Violet stood up and took off her dress, carefully not to disturb her hat. Then she sat down and used the terrible coat to wrap herself in. "All I could think of was to step out on him like he did me."

"Fool," said Alice and broke the thread.

"Couldn't name him if my life depended on it."

"Bet he can name you"

"Let him."

"What did you think that was going to solve?"

Violet didn't answer.

"Did it get you your husband's attention?"

"No."

"Open my neice's grave?"

"No."

"Do I have to say it again?"

"Fool? No. No, but tell me, I mean, listen. Everybody I grew up with is down home. We don't have children. He's what I got. He's what I got."

"Doesn't look so," said Alice. Her stitches were invisible to the eye.

The last time she visited Alice, it was early in the morning. Chore time and Violet wasn't doing any.

"It's differnt from what I thought," she said. "Different."

She meant twenty life in a City better than perfect, but Alice did not ask her what she meant. Did not ask her whether the City, with its streets all laid out, aroused jealousy too late for anything but foolishness. Or if it was the City that produced a crooked kind of mourning for a rival young enough to be a daughter. By this time the women had become so easy with each other, talk wasn't always necessary. Alice ironed and Violet watched. From time to time one murmured something--to herself or to the other.

"I used to love that stuff," said Violet.

Alice smiled, knowing without looking up that Violet meant the starch. "Me too," she said. "Drove my husband crazy."

"Is it the crunch? Couldn't be the taste."

Alice shrugged. "Only the body knows."

The iron hissed at the damp fabric. Violet leaned her cheek on her palm. "You iron like my grandmother. Yoke last."

"That's the test of a first-class ironing."

"Some do it yoke first."

"And have to do it over. I hate a lazy ironing."

"Where you learn to sew like that?"

"They kept us children busy. Idle hands, you know."

"We picked cotton, chopped wood, plowed. I never knew what it was to fold my hands. This here is as close as I ever been to watching my hands do nothing."

Eating starch, choosing when to tackle the yoke, sewing, picking, cooking, chopping. Violet thought about it all and sighed. "I thought it would be bigger than this. I knew it wouldn't last, but I did think it'd be bigger."

Alice re-folded the cloth around the handle of the pressing iron. She glanced at Violet and then back at her work. "Oh. It's big all right. If it gets any bigger.... You want a real thing? I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it."

Violet raised her head. "Don't mind what anybody say?"

"Mind what's left to you."

That was when Violet asked her, "Then I should fight for him?"

Alice put her iron down, hard. "Fight what, who? Some woman wearing the same yoke you do? God save us all, you want a battle? You want an enemy? There's plenty out there. You can pick any one. But why would you pick yourself? She's just another you and you not your enemy! Goddam, woman, shit!" Alice Manfred, honorary chairman of everything, sewer of stitches too fine to see with the naked eye, had cursed. Like a streetwoman and it startled them both. Violet was the first to smile, then Alice smothered her own giggle. Finally they had laughed, both Alice Manfred and Violet Trace--laughed at themselves laughing, at themselves cursing, and laughed at themselves feeling good enough to do it. Both knew they had age; neither was sure she was a grown up, but the laughter was long and for Alice Manfred, surprisingly loud and well. Violet was reminded of True Belle who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor, hungry and

irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall to keep her laughter from pulling her down to the floor with them. They should have hated her. Gotten up from the floor and hated her. But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better. They laughed too, even Rose Dear shook her head and smiled, and suddenly the world was right side up. Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter was serious. More complicated, more serious than tears. Whitepeople thought colored folks did it because they were amused or simple-minded. You'd have to be really simple-minded to think that.

Crumpled over, shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something blue-sy, something hep, struck her as the saddest, funniest thing in the world. She laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them both a cup of settling tea.

Committed as Violet was to hip development, even she couldn't drink the remaining malt--watery, warm and flat-tasting. She buttoned her coat and left the drugstore and noticed, at the same moment as that Violet did, that it was spring. In the City.