



JChap 5

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And when spring comes to the City people notice one another in the road; notice the strangers with whom they share aisles and tables and the space where intimate garments are laundered. Going in and out, in and out of the same door, they handle the handle; on trolleys and park benches they settle thighs on a seat in which hundreds have done it too. Copper coins dropped in the palm have been swallowed by children and tested by gypsies, but it's still money and people smile at that. It's the time of year when the City seems to contradict itself most, encouraging you to buy street food when you have no appetite at all; giving you a taste for a single room occupied by you alone and a craving to share it with someone you passed in the street. Really there is no contradiction--rather it's a condition: the range of what an artful City can do. What can beat bricks warming up to the sun? The return of awnings. The removal of blankets from horses' backs. Tar softens under the heel and the darkness under bridges changes

from gloom to cooling shade. After a light rain, when the leaves have come, branches are like wet fingers playing in wooly green hair. Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk. They don't want to be near the old uncles positioning themselves in the middle of the block to play a six string guitar.

Bluesman. Black and bluesman. Black therefore blue man.

Everybody knows your name

Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man

Everybody knows your name.

The singer is hard to miss, sitting as he does on a fruit crate in the center of the sidewalk. His peg leg is stretched out comfy; his other one carrying both the beat and the guitar's weight. Joe would believe that the song was about him. He'd have liked that. I know him so well. Have seen him feed small animals nobody else paid any attention to, but I was never deceived. The way he fixed his hate when he left the apartment building; how he moves it forward and a bit tot he left. Not a tilt exactly, but a definite slant, you could say. The sweater under his jacket coat is buttoned all the way up, but I know his thoughts are not--they are loose. He cuts his eyes over to the pretty boys standing on the corner. There is something they have he wants. Ver little in his case of Cleopatra is something men would want to buy--except for after save dusting powder, most all of it is for women. Women he can get to talk to, look at, flirt with and who knows wht else is on his mind? Look out. Look out for a faithful man near fifty. Because he had never messed with another woman; because he decided to love that gir., he thinks he's free. Not free to break loves or feed the world on a fish. Nor to raise the War dead, but free to do something wil.d Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove an x record. Round and round about the town. Hungering for the one thing everybody loses: young love. Dorcus.

She became his persona sweet--like candy. It was the best thing, if you were young and had just got to the city. That and the clarinets and even they were called licorice sticks. But Joe had been in the city twenty years and wasn't young. But I imagine him as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. Inside. So even though he wore button up the front sweaters and round toed shoes, he was a kid, a strapping, and candy could still make him smile. He liked those peppermint things that last the livelong day, and thought everybody else did too. Passed them out to Gistan's boys and the other ones that sat on the stoop. You could tell they'd rather chocolate or somethign with peanuts, but by his smile, passing that

crumpled white paper sack around, you would have thought he was Santa's Santa.

Maybe she was. Candy, I mean. Maybe she was something else.

If he had stopped blowing his nose long enough to tell somebody who might be interested, who knows how it would go?

"It's not a thing you tell except to a tight friend like Victory, but even if I had the chance I don't beleive I could have told him and if I couldn't tell Victory it was because I couldn't tell myself because I didn't know all about it. Candy. No. That's something you lick, suck on, and then swallow and it's gone. No. This was something else. More like blue water and white flowers, but together, somehow. Together. I needed to be there, where the two mixed and where that was was Dorcus.

"She had long hair and bad skin. A quart of water twice a day would have cleared it right up, her skin, but I didn't suggest it because I liked it like that. Little half moons clustered underneath her cheekbones, like faint hoofmarks. There and on her

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forehead. ~~X~~ I bought the ^{skin} stuff she told me to, but glad none of it ever worked. Take my little hoof marks away? Leave me with no tracks at all? In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, just like tracking Dorcus led me to that blue water next to those white flowers. I had no defense. Something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look. If the track's not talking to you you might get up out of your chair to go buy two or three cigarettes, have the nickel in your pocket and just start walking, then running and end up somewhere in Staten Island, for crying out loud, Long Island, maybe, staring at goats. But if the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without. ~~I wasn't there. Some women~~

~~CAND~~ I wanted to stay there. Right after the gun went thuh! and nobody in there heard it but me and that is why the crowd didn't

scatter like the flock ~~of redwing~~ they looked like but stayed pressed in, locked together by the steam of thier dancing and the music which would not let them go. I wanted to stay right there. Catch her before she fell and hurt herself. We should be together. Dorcus. Me and you. ~~Here's my hand, take it.~~ Take my hand, girl, please, and I'll let you do anything you want, anything, but I can't lose the feeling of you, where the blue is right next to flowers big as my hand.

I wasn't looking for the trail. It was looking for me and when it started talking at first I couldn't hear it. I was rambling, just rambling all through the city. I had the gun but it was not the gun--it was my hand I was holding out to touch you with. Five days rambling. First High Fashion on 131st street because I thought you had a hair appointment on Tuesday. First Tuesday of every month it was. But you wasn't there. Some women came in with fish dinners from Salem Baptist, and the blind twins were playing guitar on the corner, and it's just like you said--

only one of them's blind; the other one is just going along with the program. Probably not even brothers, let alone twins. Something their mamma cooked up for a little extra change. They were playing something sooty, though; not the gospel like they usually do, and the women selling fish dinners frowned and talked about their mother bad, but they never said a word to the twins and I knew they were having a good time listening because one of the loudest ones could hardly suck her teeth for patting her foot. They didn't pay me no mind. Took me a while to get them to tell me you weren't on the book for that day. Minnie said you had a touch up Saturday and how she didn't approve of touch ups not just because they were fifty cents instead of a dollar and a quarter for the whole do, but because it hurt the hair, heat on dirt she said, hurt the hair worse than anything she knew of. Except, of course, no heat at all. What did you have the touch up for? That's what I first thought about. Last Saturday? You told me you were going with the choir on the el out to Coney Island to ride the chute, and

you had to leave at nine in the morning and wouldn't be back till night and that's why. And that you'd missed the last trip, and your aunt found out about it so you had to go on this one, and that's why. So I didn't wait for Violet to leave and unlock Melvonne's apartment. No need. But how could you have a touch up the Saturday before and still make it to the el station by nine o'clock in the morning when Minnie never opens up before noon on Saturday because she's open till midnight getting everybody readied up for Sunday? And you didn't need to keep the first Tuesday regular appointment, did you? I dismissed the evil in my thoughts because I wasn't sure that the sooty music the blind twins were playing wasn't the cause. It can do that to you, a certain kind of guitar playing. Not like the clarinets, but close. If that song had been coming through a clarinet, I'd have known right away. But the guitars--they confused me, made me doubt myself, and I lost the trail. Went home and didn't pick it up again until the next day when Melvonne looked at me and covered her mouth with her hand.

Couldn't cover her eyes though; the laugh came flying out of there.

...I sat on the stoop a while. Nobody there but Mrs [tk] rubbing her knees. Across the street, leaning up against the iron railing, I saw three roosters. Not even ten in the morning and they shone like patent leather. Smooth. Couldn't be more than twenty, twenty-two. Young. The City, I thought. That's the City for you. Each one wore spats, and one had a handkerchief in his pocket same color as his tie. Had his hat pushed over a tad much. They were just leaning there, laughing and so on and then they started crooning, leaning in, heads together, snapping fingers. City men, you know what I mean. Closed off to themselves, smart, young roosters. Didn't have to do a thing--just wait for the chicks to pass by and find them. Belted jackets and handkerchiefs the color of their ties. You think Melvonne would have covered her mouth in front of them? Or made roosters pay her in advance for the use of her place of a Thursday? Never would have happened because roosters don't need Melvonne. Chickens find the roosters

and find the place too and if there is tracking to be done, they do it. They look; they figure. Roosters wait because they are the ones waited for. They don't have to trail anybody, look ignorant in a beauty parlor asking for a girl in front of women who couldn't wait for me to leave so they could pat on to the sooty music and talk about what the hell did I want to know about a girl not out of high school yet and wasn't I married to old hateful Violet? Only old cocks like me have to get up from the stoop, cut Mrs.[tk] off in the middle of a sentence and try to walk not run to the little park on Convent where we sat the first time and you crossed your legs at the knees so I could see the green shoes you carried out the house in a paper sack so your aunt wouldn't know you tapped down Lenox and Riverside Drive and St. Nicholas Place in them instead of the oxfords you left the house in. While you flicked your foot, turned your ankles for the admiration of the heels, I looked at your knees but I didn't touch. I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left

Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart.

You looked at me then, right there on the park bench like you knew me, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks.

I ran there, to the very spot, same bench. Two whitemen were sitting there, but I sat right next to them until they got nervous and moved to another bench and off of ours. D. and J. Carved on the third slat from the edge. But that was later on. After we had a routine. When I brought you treats, worrying each time what to bring that would make you smile and come again the next time. How many phonograph records? How many silk stockings? The little kit to mend the runs, remember? The purple metal box with flowers on top full of Schrafft's chocolates. Cologne in a blue bottle that

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smelt like a whore. Flowers once, but you were disappointed with that treat, so I gave you a dollar to buy whatever you wanted with it. Half a week's rent. A whole day's pay. Just for you. Anything just for you. To bite down hard , chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of my life. It could have stopped there, but not after I felt the feeling, the place where the water met the fowers, where one was mixed up with the other, the blue all over the petals big as my hand. In Melvonne's nephew's room with the ice man's sign in the window. Your first time. And mine, in a manner of speaking. For which, and I will say it again, I would strut out the Garden, strut! as long as you held on to my hand, girl. Dorcus, girl, your first time and mine. I chose you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. Or fell in love with you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind.

When I got to the apartment I had no name to put to the face and her face wasn't on my mind right then. But she opened the door, opened it right up. I smelled pound cake heavy on the lemon flavoring, female sweat, powder, and disguised chicken. The woman gathered around and I showed them what I had while they laughed and did that things women do--flicked lint off my coat jacket, pressed me on the shoulder to make me sit down; ^{It's a way they have of} ~~they were~~ mending you fixing what they think needed repair. She didn't give me a look, or say anything. But I knew where she was standing and how every minute. Leaned on the back of a chair in the parlor, while the women streamed out of the dining room to mend me, and joke me. Then somebody called out her name, Dorcus. Dorcus, she said bring us a plate to feed him with. Dorcus. I didn't hear much else, but I stayed there and showed them all my stuff, smiling, not selling but letting them sell themselves. That's the best way. Never push. Like at the Wendemare when I wait tables, I'm there but only if you want me. Or when I work the rooms, bringing up the whiskey hidden so it looks like coffee. Just there when you need me and right on time. You get to know the woman who wants four glasses of something, but doesn't want to ask four times, so you wait till her glass is two thirds down and fill it up again. That way, she's drinking one glass while he is buying four. The quiet money whispers twice: once when I slide it in my pocket; once when I slide it out.

I was prepared to wait, to have her ignore me. The lightheadedness I thought came from the heavy lemon flavoring, the face powder and that light salty sweat. Not bitter like a man's is. I beleive that was what me speak to her on the way out the door.

People will say I treated Violet like a peice of furniture you favored although it needed something every day to keep it steady and upright. I don't know. I don't know. I sell trust; I make things easy. But since Victory, I never got too close to anybody. Gistan and Stuck, we close, but not like it is with somebody knew you from when you was born and you got to manhood at the same

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time. I would have told Victory how it was. Gistan, Stuck whatever I said to them would be something near, but not the way it really was. ~~How~~ I told Dorcus things I hadn't told myself. I was new.

pound cake heavy on the lemon flavoring. Female sweat, powder, and disguised chicken. The woman gathered around and I showed them what I had while they laughed and did that things women do--flicked lint off my coat jacket, pressed me on the shoulder to make me sit down; ~~they~~ sending you fixing what they think needed repair. She didn't give me a look, or say anything. But I knew where she was standing and how every minute. Leaned on the back of a chair in the parlor, while the women streamed out of the dining room to mend me, and joke me. Then somebody called out her name, Dorcus. Dorcus, she said bring us a plate to feed him with. Dorcus. I didn't hear much else, but I stayed there and showed them all my stuff, smiling, not selling but letting them sell themselves. That's the best way. Never push. Like at the Wendemare when I wait tables, I'm there but only if you want me. Or when I work the rooms, bringing up the whiskey hidden so it looks like coffee. Just there when you need me and right on time. You got to know the woman who wants four glasses of something, but doesn't want to ask four times, so you wait till her glass is two thirds down and fill it up again. That way, she's drinking one glass while he is buying four. The quiet money whispers twice: once when I slide it in my pocket; once when I slide it out.

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My mind. And I made up my mind to follow you too. That's something I know how to do from way back. Maybe I didn't tell you that part about me. My gift in the woods that eve he looked up to and he was the best there ever was. Ever.

I was born and raised in Vienna. Rhoda and Frank William took me in right away and raised me along with their own six. Her last child was three months old when she took me in, and me and him were closer than many brothers I've seen. Victory was his name. Victory William. Miss Rhoda named me Joseph after her father, but neither she nor Mr. Frank either thought to give me a last name. She never pretended I was her natural child. When she parcelled out chors or favors she say "You are just like my own." That 'like' I gues it was made me ask her--I don't belive I was three yet--where my real paretns were. She looked down at me, over her shoulder, and gave me the sweetest smile, but sad someway, and told me they disappeared without a trace. The way I heard it I understood her to mean the 'trace' they disappeared without was me. The first day I got to school I knew I had to have two names. I told the teacher Joseph Trace. Victory turned his whole self around.

"Why you tell her that?" he asked me.

"I don't know, I said. "Casue."

"Mamma be mad. Pappy too."

We were outside in the school yard. It was packed dirt but a lot of nails and things were all in it. Both of us barefoot. I was struggling to pull a bit of glass from the sole of my foot sao I didn't have to look up at him. "No, they won't." I said. "Your mama aint my mama."

"If she ain't, who is?"

"Another woman. She be back. She coming back for me. My daddy too." That was the first time I knew I thought that; wished it.

Victpory said, "They know where they left yo. They come back to our place. Williams place is where they know you at." He was trying to

walk double-jointed like his sister. She was good at it and bragged so much Victory practised every chance he got. I remember his shadow darting in front of me on the dirt. "They know you at William place, William is what you ought to call yourself."

I said, "They got to pick me out. From all of you all, they got to pick me. I'm Trace, what they went off without."

Victory laughed and wrapped his arm around my neck wrassling me to the ground. I don't know what happend to the speck of glass. I never did get it out. And nobody came looking for me either. I never knew my own daddy. And my mother, well, I heard a woman in the hotel restaurant say the confoundest thing. She was talking to two other women while I poured the coffee.

"I am bad for my children," she said. "I don't mean to be, but there is something in me that makes it soo. I'm a good mother they they do better away from me. as long as they're by my side nothing good can come to them. The ones tha left seemed to flower; the ones that say have such a har d time. You can imagine how bad I feel knowing that, can't you?" I had to sneak a look at her. It took strength to say that. Admit that.

I didn't miss having a daddy because first off there was Mr. Frank. Steady as a rock, and showed no difference among any of us children. But the big thing was I was picked, Victory too, by the best man in Vesper County to go hunting with. Talk about proud-making. He was the best in the county and he picked me and Victory to teach and hunt with. He was so good they say he just carried the rifle for the hell of it because he knew way before what the prey woudl do, how to fool snakes, bend twigs to catch fowl--tricks you wouldn't believe. ^{*}A hunter's hunter, that what he was. Smart as they come.

Taught me two lessons I lived by all my life. ONe was the secret of kindness fronwhitepeople (they had to pity a thing before they could like it.) the other I forgot.

** whitefolks said he was a witchdoctor - but they said that so they wouldn't have to say he was smart.*

city carriage - 1873

It was because of him, what I learned from him, made me more comfortable in the woods than in a town. I'd get nervous if a fence or a rail was anywhere around. Folks thought I was the one to be counted on never to be able to live in acity. Piled up buildings? Cement paths? Me? Not me. Everybody in Vienna was surprised when I left, me and Violet. They said the City make you lonely, but since I'd been trained by the best woodsman ever, loneliness was a thing couldn't get near me."

Shoot. Country people. How could they know what an eighteen year old girl might instigate in a grown man in a crowded city. Make him knnow a loneliness he could never imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a river bank with live bait for company. Convince him he had never know the sweet side of anything till he met

It's hard figuring people out, but irresistible. They lie so much.

you have to depend on your own wit to get beneath disguise. One thing I've got that's more than sufficient is a mind that fills in gaps. Give me the bare bones, I'll show you the whole thing; give me a word, I'll produce a page out of nothing but my own imagination. And you can bet to win on what I come up with.

Watch,

Country people. How could they know that an eighteen year old girl might instigate in a grown man in a crowded city. Make him know a loneliness he could not imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a river bank with nothing but live bait for company. Convince him he had never known the sweet side of anything until he tasted her honey. an x record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the city spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid out roads say so. No jumping into thickets because you feel like it; if mowed grass is okay to walk on the city will let you know. You can't get off the track a city lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age you always end up to where you started.

Joe should know that because when his home town disappeared, he couldn't leave without going back to the place where his mother was sometimes known to hide. Or like True Belle who thought she'd never have to see