



Chapter 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 as well as 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, trees are like wet fingers playing in wooly green hair.

And in the evening as many as fifteen or even twenty motorcars become black wet boxes gliding behind hoodlights weakened by mist. Sidewalks and street pavement are satin; figures move shoulder first, the crowns of their heads angled shields against the light buckshot that the raindrops are. The faces of children glimpsed at windows appear to be crying, but it is the glasspane dripping that makes it seem so.

In the spring of 1926, on a rainy afternoon, anybody passing a certain apartment house on Lenox might have looked up and seen, not a child but a grown man's face crying along with the glasspane. A strange sight you hardly ever see: men crying so openly. It's not a thing they do. Makes me wonder about Joe. It couldn't be just that girl. Something else had rocked him, broken something in him and if he had stopped blowing his nose long enough to tell Stuck or Gistan or somebody who might be interested, who knows how it would go?

"It's not a thing you tell to another man. Gistan would just lower his eyes and try to get out of hearing it. Stuck would laugh, swear I'd been fixed and he knew the prefect remedy. Neither one of them I'd talk to. It's not a thing you tell except maybe to a tight friend, somebody you knew from before, long time ago 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. All I know is I saw her buying candy and the whole thing was sweet. Not just the candy--the whole thing and picture of it. Candy'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, and sugar in the air, but together, somehow. Together. I needed to be there, where it was all mixed up together just right, 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 forehead. I bought the 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, and I tracked Dorcus from borough to borough. I didn't even have to work at it. Didn't even have to think. 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.

So, 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. ~~more than anything~~

~~she~~ 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 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. 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 even he looked up to and he was the best there ever was. Ever."

Well, he's right about that last part. Joe was taught by the best woodsman in x county. [tk]

Joe was raised by Rhoda and Frank Williams along with their six children, one of whom, Victory, had been born three months before Rhoda agreed to take in a

seventh child. She was the one who named him Joseph, after her own father, and did not think to give him a last name. None at all. Nor did she pretend he was her natural child. Parcelling out chores or favors she often told him "You are just like my own," and it was the 'like' that made him ask her--he was not even four years old--where his real parents were. Rhoda looked over her shoulder in genuine sorrow and told him they had disappeared without a trace. Joe understood her to mean the 'trace' they disappeared without was him, and because he had to have two names in school, he told the teacher 'Joseph Trace.'

"Why you tell her that?" Victory asked him.

"I don't know. Cause."

"Mamma be mad. Pappy too."

Joe examined the sole of his foot. "No they won't. Your mama ain't my mama."

"If she ain't, who is?"

"Another woman. She'll be back. She coming back for me. My daddy too."

"They know where they left you. They come back to our place. Williams place is where they know you at." Victory trying to walk double-jointed like his sister who bragged about how good she was at it, cast a darting shadow on the ground where Joe sat fascinated by a fresh cut in his foot.

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

Victory laughed and put his arm around Joe's neck to wrestle him flat on the ground.

It was a long wait Joe had in front of him made possible by a solitary man who lived just off x Road and surprised everybody one day by inviting Joe and Victory to hunt x with him. It was regarded as a favor to be so chosen for not only was that old man known to like his privacy, he was so legendary a hunter that the least interesting and useful tool he used was his gun. Because he knew in advance what his prey would do, how to fool snakes, to bend mere twigs to catch fowl and so much more, he was known as a hunter's hunter. Under his eye and with his instruction both boys became comfortable only in the woods and got nervous if a fence or a rail was anywhere in view.. Especially Joe. He was the one to be counted on never to run off to a city because he would never be able to live in it. Piled up buildings? Cement paths? Joe? Not Joe. And if he did happen to find himself there, passing through, his country ways would stand him in good stead until he got out of there: his common sense, his independent way. No one could cheat him because he was honestly honest. And because of the training given to him by that old man, Joe, of all

people, would be incapable of experiencing loneliness.

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 know a loneliness he could not imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a river bank. Convince him he had never known the sweet side of anything until he met Dorcus who became not only his protection from loneliness, she became his personal 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 when Joe took up with Dorcus he had been in the city twenty years and wasn't young. 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 kids that grouped around them on the stoop like grapes. You could tell they'd rather chocolate or something with peanuts, but by his smile, passing that crumpled white paper sack around, you would have thought he was Santa's Santa.

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 hat when he left the apartment building; how he moves it forward and a bit to the 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. Very little in his sample case is something men would want to buy--most all of it is for women. Women he can get to talk to, look at, flirt with and who knows what else is on his mind? Look out. Look out for a faithful man near fifty. Because he has never messed with another woman; because he decided to love that girl, he thinks he's free. Not free to break loaves or feed the world on a fish. Nor to raise the War dead, but free to go do something wild. Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of 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 canefields again once she got to Balitmore.

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