



Chapter 5

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Chapter 5

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motorcars become black wet boxes gliding behind
hoodlights weakened by mist. Sidewalks and street

pavement 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 urges contradiction
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, branches are like wet fingers playing in wooly
green hair.uld stack up those handkerchiefs, take them
to th And in the evening as many as fifteen or even twenty

Chapter 5

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. Doctors have a name for Joe's kind of crying, but I doubt if they know its cause or cure. Strange as it was, people finally got used to him, wiping his face and nose with an engineer's red handkerchief while he sat, month after month, on the stoop, first in the snow and later in the sun. I'd say Violet washed and ironed those handkerchiefs because, crazy as she was, she couldn't abide dirty laundry. But it tired everybody out waiting to see what else Violet would do besides try to kill a dead girl and keep her husband in tidy handkerchiefs to cry in. My own thought was that one day, she would stack up those handkerchiefs, take them to the dresser drawer, tuck them in and then go light his

Chapter 5

hair with a match stick. She didn't but maybe that would have been better than what she did do. Meaning to or not meaning to, she got him to go through it again--at springtime when it's clearer then as at no other time that citylife is streetlife. Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk. They don't want to stand near and compete with the old uncles positioning themselves in the middle of the block to play a six string guitar. Blues man. 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 probably thinks that the song is about him. He'd like believing it. 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 fixes his hat when he leaves 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.

Chapter 5

The sweater under his suit jacket is buttoned all the way up, but I know his thoughts are not--they are loose. He cuts his eyes over to the sweetbacks lounging on the corner. There is something they have he wants. Very little in his case of Cleopatra is something men would want to buy--except for aftershave dusting powder, most 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? And if she gives him more than the time of day with a look, the watching eyes of the sweetbacks are more satisfying than hers. Or else he feels sorry about himself for being faithful in the first place. And if that virtue is unappreciated, and nobody jumps up to congratulate him on it, his sorrow turns to an anger which he has trouble understanding but no trouble focussing on the young sheiks, radiant and brutal, standing on street corners. Look out. Look out for a faithful man near fifty. Because he has never messed with another woman; because he selected that young girl to love, he thinks he is free. Not free to break loaves or feed the world on a fish. Nor to raise the war dead, but free to do something wild. Take my word for it, he is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That's the way the City spins you. Makes

Chapter 5

you do what it wants, go where the laid out roads say so. All the while letting you think you're free, that you can jump into thickets because you feel like it. There are no thickets here and 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: hungry for the one thing everybody loses--young loving. ~~bring it. Stuck would~~ That was Dorcus, all right. Young but wise. She was Joe's 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 Joe has been in the City twenty years and isn't young anymore. ~~ev~~ I imagine him as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. ~~Inside.~~ So even though he wears button up the front sweaters and round toes shoes, he's a kid, a strapping, and candy could still make him smile. He likes those peppermint things last the live long day, and thinks everybody else does too. ~~Passes them out to Gistan's boys clowning on the curb. like~~ You could tell they'd rather chocolate or something with peanuts. ~~show. Together. I needed to be there~~ Makes me wonder about Joe. All those good things he gets from the Windemere, and he pays good money for

Chapter 5

some stale and sticky peppermint? Maybe Dorcus liked it (or pretended she did) and wanted to be his private candybox. Whatever she was, it didn't have to end the way it did 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? and I showed them what I had while they laughed and did the things women do: "It's not a thing you tell to another man. Gistan would just laugh and try to get out of hearing it. Stuck would look at his feet, swear I'd been fixed and tell me how much high john I need to remedy myself. Neither one of them I'd talk to about her. 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 believe 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 in the drugstore 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. is two thirds down and fill

Chapter 5

"When I got to the apartment I had no name to put to the face I'd seen in the drugstore, and her face wasn't on my mind right then. But she opened the door, opened it right up to me. I smelled pound cake heavy on the lemon flavoring, female sweat, powder and disguised chicken. The women gathered around and I showed them what I had while they laughed and did the things women do: flicked lint off my jacket, pressed me on the shoulder to make me sit down. It's a way they have of mending you, fixing what they think needs repair. She didn't give me a look or say anything. But I knew where she was standing and how, every minute. She leaned her hip 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. I didn't hear much else, but I stayed there and showed them all my stuff, smiling, not selling but letting them sell themselves. I sell trust; I make things easy. That's the best way. Never push. Like at the Wendemere 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

Chapter 5

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 woman-sweat. Salty. Not bitter like a man's is. I believed that was what made me speak to her on the way out the door.

"I can guess what people say. That I treated Violet like a peice of furniture you favor although it needed somethng evry day to keep it steady and upright. I don't know. I don't know. 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 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. I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcus and I told her things I hadn't told myself. ^{with her} I was new. Again. Before I met her I'd ~~been~~ changed ~~new~~ seven times. Once, the first time, was when I named myself, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been.

"I was born and raised in Vienna, Vesper County. Rhoda and Frank Williams took me in right away and raised

Chapter 5

me along with their own six. Her last child was three months old when Mrss. Rhoda took me in , and me and him were closer than many brothers I've seen. Victory was his name. Victory Williams. 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 chores or favors she'd say "You are just like my own." That 'like' I guess it was made me ask her--I don't believe I was three yet--where my real parents 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. "Cause."

"Mamma be mad. Pappy too."

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

Chapter 5

mama." but they do better away from me; as long as they "If she ain't, who is?" good can come to them. The ones "Another woman. She'll be back. She coming back for me. My daddy too." That was the first time I knew I thought that, or wished it. Victory said, "They know where they left you. 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 the dirt in front of me. "They know you at Williams place, Williams 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 happened 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 counfoundest 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 so. I'm a good

Chapter 5

mother but they do better away from me; as long as they're by my side nothing good can come to them. The ones that left seem to flower; the ones that stay have such a hard 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.

"The second time was when I was picked out and trained to be a man. To live independent and feed myself no matter what. 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 would do, how to fool snakes, bend twigs to catch birds and waterfowl--tricks you wouldn't believe. Whitefolks said he was a witchdoctor, but they said that so they wouldn't have to say he was smart. A hunter's hunter, that's what he was. Smart as they come. Taught me two lessons I lived by all my life. One was the secret of kindness from whitepeople (they had to pity a thing before they could like it). The other--well, I forgot it. Look my wife to x town and

Chapter 5

~~Dear~~ "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 a city. Piled up buildings? Cement paths? Me? Not me. ~~I cleaned x at night and fish in the day.~~ "Eighteen ninety-three, the third time I ~~was new,~~ ^{Changed} was when Vienna burned to the ground. Red fire doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish: cancelling every deed; vacating each and every field; emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the county to another--or nowhere. I walked and worked, worked and walked, me and Victory, fifteen miles to Palestine. That's where I met and married Violet. We moved out by Tyrell and worked x for a farmer who owned the worst land in the county. When that ran out, when rocks was the biggest harvest, we ate what I shot. then I got a job laying rail for the Southern Sky. I was twenty eight years old and used to being ^{Change} ~~new~~ made, so in 1901, when Booker T. had a sandwich in the President's house, I was bold enough to do it again: decided to buy me a piece of land. Like a fool I thought they'd let me keep it. They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed. I ^{Change up again} ~~got new~~ the fourth time in 1906 when I took my wife to x town and

Chapter 5

boarded the xx train for the City. They moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law. [tk nyc] We lived in a railroad flat in the Tenderloin and I worked everything from whitefolks shoe leather to cigars in a room where they read to us while we rolled tobacco. I cleaned x at night and fish in the day. [tk tk] Abd I thought I'd settled into my permanent self when we left the stink of Mulberry Street in Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third and could pay what they wanted to live in a fancy place uptown. *Bad time* Depression had hit then, and landlords white and black fought over colored people for the high rents that was okay by us because we got to live in six rooms, even if some of us rented out two. The buildings were like castles in the picture shows and we who cleaned up everybody's mess since the beginning, knew better than anybody how to keep them nice. We had birds and plants everywhere, me and Violet. And I made sure the front was as neat as the inside. I was doing hotel work by then. Bad pay but tips dropped in my palm fast as pecans in November. When the rents got raised and raised again, and the stores doubled uptown beef and let the whitefolks meat stay the same, I got me a little side line selling Cleopatra products in the neighborhood. What with Violet cutting out day work and just doing hair, we did fine.

Chapter 5

The long come a summer in 1917 [?] and after those whitemen took that pipe from around my head, I was ^{brand} new for sure because they almost killed me. I survived it though, and got ^{changed} to be new again in 1919 when I walked all the way, every goddam step of the way, with the three six nine. Can't remember no time when I danced in the streets but that time when everybody did. I thought that change was the last, and it sure was the best because the war had come and gone and the black troops that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two. Gistan got me a job at another hotel--the Windemere--where the tip was folding money more often than coin. I had it made. In 1925 we all had it made. [tk] [←] the best thing, the one

thing "You could say I've been a new Negro all my life. But all I knew, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcus. You would have thought I was twenty, back in Palestine satisfying my appetite for the first time under a walnut tree to talk to you,

give "Everybody was surprised when I left, me and Violet. They said the City makes you lonely, but since I'd been trained by the best woodsman ever, loneliness was a thing couldn't get near me. Shoot. Country boy; country man. How did I know what an eighteen year^d old girl might instigate in a grown man whose wife is sleepin' with a doll? Make me know a loneliness I never could imagine

Chapter 5

in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a riverbank with nothing but live bait for company. Convince me I never knew the sweet side of anything until I tasted her honey. They say snakes go blind for a while before they shed skin for the last time. ~~of realizing they~~ look "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 bourough to bourough. 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 penny 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

Chapter 5

yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without.

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 their dancing and the music which wouldn't 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

Chapter 5

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

Chapter 5

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. *sooty music and talk about...* 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 sweetbacks. 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,

Chapter 5

heads together, snapping fingers. City men, you know what I mean. Closed off to themselves, wise 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

Chapter 5

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 what I whispered at your door: 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

Chapter 5

treat, so I gave you a dollar to buy whatever you wanted with it. A whole day's pay in Vesper County. 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. Those old people, they knew it all. I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then,

Chapter 5

back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And let me tell you baby, in those days it was more than a state of mind."

The calming effect of the tea Alice Manfred had given her did not last long. Afterwards ^{P. 114} ~~Then~~ ^{Then} Everything was going along fine when Violet turned away from me. Started sleeping with a doll in her arms. ~~earth that other Violet was that walked about the City~~ Nothing neither one of us could do about that. Too late. ~~in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other~~ I understood in a way, but it didn't keep me from feeling things. ~~Where she saw a lonesome chair left like an~~ like a stranger.

"Don't get me wrong. This wasn't Violet's fault. All of it's mine. ~~Maybe I needed to talk it out.~~

~~poles a weapon-y ghost. Where she, last in line at the~~ ^{But} car stop, noticed a child's cold wrist jutting out of a too-short, hand-me-down coat, ^{TIL} ~~that~~ ^{didn't have} a whitewoman into the sea. ~~late.~~ ^{But I had to keep on} And if she turned away ~~looking at her through restaurant windows, that Violet~~ ^{but} ~~heard the clack of the plate glass in mean March wind.~~ ^{changing, any} 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