



Replace Jazz End

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Rev. July 5, 1990

Rev. July 12, 1990

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I thought I knew them and wasn't worried that they didn't really know about me. Now it's clear that they knew me all along. Out of the corners of their eyes they watched me. And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. They knew how little I could be counted on; how poorly, how shabbily my know-it-all self covered helplessness. That when I invented stories about them--and doing it seemed to me so fine--I was completely in thier hands, managed without mercy. I thought I'd hidden myself so well as I watched them through windows and doors, took every opportunity I had to follow them, to gossip about and fill in their lives, they were watching me. Sometimes they even felt sorry for me and just thinking about their pity I want to die.

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable--human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my loneliness into thinking my space,

my view was the only one that was and that mattered.[fx] I got so excited with my meddling, with shaping, I over-stepped and missed the obvious things. I saw the three of them, Marie, Joe and Violet, and they looked to me like a mirror image of Dorcus, Joe and Violet. I believed I saw everything important they did, and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn't. It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting thier lives together in ways I never dreamed of. I walk down [tk] street and across [tk] avenue and if they [tk] Marie still buys Okeh records with her lunch money at [tk], and walks so slowly home from the butcher shop the meat turns before it hits the pan. But [tk] they might saunter over to [tk] and Joe found work at [tk] a night job which lets him see the city do its unbelievable sky and run around with Violet in afternoon daylight. On his way home, just after sunrise, he will descend the steps of the Elevated and if a milk wagon is parked at the curb, he might buy a pint from the second day crate to cool the evening's hot cornbread supper. When he gets to the apartment building, he picks up the bits of night trash the stoop dwellers have left, drops them in the ashcan and gathers up the children's toys to place them under the stairwell. He climbs the stairs and before he gets to his own door he can smell the ham Violet will not give up frying in its own fat to season the hominy swelling in the pot. He calls loudly to her as he closes the door behind him and she calls back: "Vi?" "Joe?" As though it might be another, a

presumptuous neighbor, or a young ghost with a friendly smile might be there instead. They eat breakfast then and, more often than not, fall asleep. Because of Joe's work --Violet's too--and other things as well, they have stopped night sleeping--exchanging that waste of time for short naps whenever the body insists, and were not surprised by how good they felt. The rest of the day goes however they want it to. After a hairdressing, for example, he meets her at the drug store for her vanilla malt and his cherry smash. they walk down [tk] street and across [tk] avenue and if they get tired they sit down and rest on any stoop they want to and talk weather and youthful misbehavior to the woman leaning on the sill of the first floor window. Or they might saunter over to [tk] and join the crowd listening to the men with the long distance eyes. [They like these men, although Violet is worried that one or another of them will tip the wood box or the broken chair he stands on, or that somebody among the group will shout something that hurts the man's feelings. Joe, loving the long distance eyes, is always supportive and chimes in at appropriate moments with encouraging words.] Once in a while they take the A train all the way to [tk] to watch [tktk]. A lot of the time though they stay home figuring things out, telling each other those little personal stories they like to hear again and again, or fussing with the bird Violet bought. She got it cheap because it wasn't well. Hardly any peck to it. Drank water but wouldn't eat. The special bird mix Violet prepared didn't help either. It looked just past her

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face and didn't turn its head when she tweeted and purred through the bars of the little cage. But, as I said all that time ago, Violet is nothing if not persistent. She guessed the bird wasn't lonely because it was already sad when she bought it out of a flock of others. So if neither food, nor company nor its own shelter was important to it, Violet decided, and Joe agreed, that nothing was left to love or need but music. They took the cage to the roof, one Saturday, where the wind blew and so did the young men in shirts billowing out behind them. From then on the bird was a pleasure to itself and to them.

Since Joe had to be at work at midnight, they cherished after supper time. If they did not play bid whist with Faye and Stuck, or promise to keep an eye out for somebody's children, or let Malvonne in to gossip so she wouldn't feel bad about pretending loyalty and betraying them both, they played poker just the two of them until it was time to go to bed under the quilt they plan to tear into its original scraps right soon and get a nice wool blanket with a satin hem. Powder blue, maybe, although that would be risky with the soot flying and all, but Joe is partial to blue. He wants to slip under it and hold on to her. Take her hand and put it on his chest, his stomach. He wants to imagine, as he lies with her in the dark, the shapes they make the blue stuff do. Violet doesn't care what color it is, so long as under their chins that avenue of no-question-about-it satin cools and excites them forever.

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It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way downunderneath tissue. They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they never sailed on. The pears they let hang on the limb because if they plucked them, they would be gone from there and who else would see that ripeness if they took it away for themselves? How could anybody passing by see them and imagine for themselves what the flavor would be like? Breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916 Complete Funk and Wagnalls, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses for His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispewring, old time love. They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie glance to undo them. They are inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers.

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But there is another part, not so secret. The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. The part that closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolly; and brushes lint from his blue serge suit when they come out of the movie house into the sunlight.

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it--to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer--that's the kick.

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.