



## Chapter 10

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know 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 Pain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweet-tooth for it. Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I the eye of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on roof tops. Figuring out what can be done to save them since they cannot save themselves without me because--well, it's my storm isn't it? I break lives to prove I can mend them back again. And although the pain is theirs, I share it, don't I?. Of course. Of course. I wouldn't have it any other way. But it is another way. I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false. What, I wonder, what would I be without a few brilliant spots of blood to ponder? Without aching words that set, then miss, the mark?

I ought to get out of this place. Avoid the window; leave the hole I cut through the door to get in lives instead of having one of my own. It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound ~~human~~ and, thereby, be human. I missed the people altogether.

I thought I knew them and wasn't worried that they didn't really know about me. Now it's clear that they

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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, and all the while they were watching me. Sometimes they even felt sorry for me and just thinking about their pity I want to die. ~~thought he was looking for Dorcas, not~~ 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 <sup>by</sup> in my loneliness into thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. I got so excited with my meddling, with



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shaping, I over-stepped and missed the obvious things. I was watching the streets, thrilled by the buildings pressing and pressed by stone; so glad to be outside and in on things, I dismissed what went on in the heart. I saw the three of them, Felice, 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: how exotic they were, how driven. That's what I wanted to believe. It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of. Like Joe. All the while he was running through the streets in bad weather I thought he was looking for Dorcus, not Wild's chamber of gold. That home in the rock; that place sunlight got into most of the day. Nothing to be proud of, to show anybody or to want to be in. But I do. I want to be in a place already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed, a view slanted for light and bright autumn leaves but not rain. Where moonlight can be counted on if the sky is clear and stars no matter what. And below, just yonder, a river called Treason to rely on. *lying in its own* I'd love to close myself in the peace left by the woman who lived there and scared everybody. Unseen

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because she knows better than to be seen. After all, who would see her--a playful woman who lived in a rock? Who could, without fright? Of her looking eyes looking back? I wouldn't mind. Why should I? She has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me. Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret.

Now I know. Now I know how to do it. Felice 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] 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

*later on /*

*\* He comes (??) home humming down.*



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she calls back: "Vi?" "Joe?" As though it might be another, as though 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

\* The Savoy (?) come tumbling down.

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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 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 musicians 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 Gistan and Stuck, and Stuck's new wife, Faye, 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



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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 their bodies 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.

Lying next to her, his head turned toward the window, he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing. Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts (lead pencils, x) to distribute to them all.

There was an evening, back in 1906, before Joe and Violet left for the City, when Violet walked into their little shotgun house, the heat of the day still stunning. She was wearing coveralls and a sleeveless faded shirt and slowly removed them along with the cloth from her head. On a table near the cook stove stood an enamel



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basin--speckled blue and white and chipped all round its rim. Under a square of toweling, placed there to keep insects out, the basin was full of still water. Palms up, fingers leading, Violet slid her hands into the water and rinsed her face. Several times she scooped and splashed until, perspiration and water mixed, her cheeks and forehead cooled. Then, dipping the toweling into the water, carefully, she bathed. From the windowsill she took a white shift, laundered that very morning, and dropped it over her head and shoulders. Finally she sat on the bed to unwind her hair. Most of the knots fixed that morning had loosened under her head cloth and were now cupfuls of soft wool her fingers thrilled to. Sitting there, her hands deep in the forbidden pleasure of her hair, she noticed she had not removed her heavy work shoes. Putting the toe of her left foot to the heel of the right, she pushed the shoe off. The effort seemed extra and the mild surprise at how very tired she felt was interrupted by a soft wide hat, as big and dim as the room she sat in, descending on her. Violet did not feel her shoulder touch the mattress. Way before that she had entered a safe sleep. Deep, trustworthy, feathered in colored dreams. The heat was relentless, insinuating. Like the voices of the women in houses nearby singing "Go down, go down, way down in Egypt land...." Answering each

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other from yard to yard with a verse or its variation.

When Joe got there and stood in the doorway, he saw Violet's dark girl-body limp on the bed. She looked frail to him, and penetrable everyplace except at one foot, the left, where her man's workshoe remained. Smiling, he took off his straw hat and sat down at the bottom of the bed. One of her hands held her face; the other rested on her thigh. He looked at the fingernails hard as her palm skin, and noticed for the first time how shapely her hands were. The arm that curved out of the shift's white sleeve was muscled by field labor, awful thin, but smooth as a child's. He undid the laces of her shoe and eased it off. It must have helped something in her dream for she laughed then, a light happy laugh that he had never heard before, but which seemed to belong to her. "Pharaoh," sang the women, "Oh you Pharaoh."

When I see them now they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real. Sharply in focus and clicking. I wonder, do they know they are the sound of snapping fingers under the sycamores lining the streets? When the loud trains pull into their stops and the engines pause, attentive listeners can hear it. Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks down town and acres of lawned



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neighborhoods in Sag Harbor (?) can not see them, the clicking is there. In the t-strap shoes of Long Island debutantes, the sparkling fringes of daring short skirts that swish and glide to music that intoxicates them more than the champagne. It is in the eyes of the old men who watch these girls, and the young ones who hold them up. It is in the graceful slouch of the men slipping their hands into the pockets of their tuxedo trousers. Their teeth are bright; their hair is smooth and parted in the middle. And when they take the arm of the t-strap girls and guide them away from the crowd and the too bright lights, it is the clicking that makes them sway on unlit porches while the victrola plays in the parlor. The click of dark and snapping fingers drives them to Roseland, to [tk, tk]; boardwalks by the sea. Into places their fathers have warned them about and their mothers shudder to think of, both the warning and the shudder come from the snapping fingers, the clicking. And the shade. Pushed away into certain streets, restricted from others, making it possible for the inhabitants to sigh and sleep in relief, the shade stretches--just there--at the edge of the dream, or slips into the crevices of a chuckle. It is out there in the privet hedge that lines the avenue. Gliding through rooms as though it is tidying this, straightening that.

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It bunches on the curbstone, wrists crossed, and hides its smile under a wide brim hat. Shade. Protective, available. Or sometimes not; sometimes it seems to lurk rather than hover kindly, and its stretch is not a yawn but an increase to be beaten back with a stick. Before it clicks, or taps or snaps its fingers.

The lucky ones know it: Felice, her daddy; Joe and Violet. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same size to you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap.

I started out believing that the universe made life in order to have some way to think about itself, but that it had gone awry with humans because the violated body, pinioned by its misery, hangs on to it with pleasure. Hangs on to wells and a boy's golden hair; would just as soon inhale sweet fire caused by burning cane as hold a maybe-yes maybe-no hand. I didn't figure in jazz.

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



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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 dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispering, 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.

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

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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.

END