



## Jazz Draft

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Violet/ July 11, 1989

Jchap 1

[formally Violet Revised] 9.23.90;10.16.90

Sth. I know that woman. She used to live on Lenox Avenue with her husband, a tall quiet man who worked in a warehouse and cried all the time. He fell for an eighteen year old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. The woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face, but they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment on Lenox Avenue she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you." The snow she ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it, so for a time nobody knew exactly where on Lenox Avenue she lived. But, like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband, Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl. There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it, and the dead girl's aunt didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything. Besides, she found out that



the man who killed her neice cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.

She was awfully skinny, Violet, but still good looking although only her back could see fifty when she broke up the funeral. You'd think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it--the shame and all--but it wasn't. Violet was mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house while her husband cried in the parlour. She thought it would dry the tears up and give her some satisfaction as well. It could have worked, I suppose, but the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here. Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's rewards were poor measured against his sympathy for the heaving man in the next room. But I do know that mess didn't last two weeks. Violet's next plan--to fall back in love with her husband--exhausted her before it got on a good footing. Washing his handkerchiefs and putting food on the table before him was the most she could manage. The days of tears and sobbing nights wore her down. So she decided to love--well, find out about--the eighteen year old whose face she tried to cut open even though nothing would have come out but straw. Violet didn't know anything about the girl at first except her name, her age, and that she was very well thought of in the legally licensed beauty parlor. She started going around gathering the rest of the information. Maybe she



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thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know. She questioned everybody starting with Melvonne, an upstairs neighbor <sup>the neighbors - her about Joe did not</sup> whose apartment <sup>she</sup> Joe and the girl used as a love nest. From Melvonne she learned the girl's address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out more: what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; saw the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair); listened to the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band ~~by singing like Kate Smith?~~); and when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do.

All that. When she had the steps down pat--her knees just so--  
<sup>the neighbors - her about Joe did not</sup> <sup>Leisa</sup> everybody got disgusted with her and I can see why. It was like watching an old street pigeon pecking the crust of a sardine sandwich the cats had left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no crack or ugly-eyed look stopped her. She haunted PS12 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. De Witt Clinton High School too, because the girl had quit there in the eleventh grade. And for a long time she pestered <sup>✓</sup> the girl's aunt, a lonesome woman who worked off and on as a seamstress in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and began talking to relieve her own sorrow. She began to look forward to Violet's visits for a chat about youth and misbehavior. The aunt showed all the dead girl's things to Violet and it was clear that this niece had been hard-headed as well as sly. One particular thing the aunt showed her,



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and eventually let Violet keep for a few weeks, was a picture of the girl's face. Not smiling, but alive at least and very bold. Violet had the nerve to put it on the fireplace mantle in her own parlour and both she and Joe looked at it and cried--for the same reasons: to hang on to what they had lost.

It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the city Violet saw, coming into the building with an OKEH record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to hear the record and that's how that <sup>ARMISTICE</sup> ~~clumsey~~ threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom.

Whatever you hear tell, the City wasn't so sure of itself in 1926. It was looking around at the rest of the world instead of its own face. It was a port, after all, surrounded by deep water to cross over if you wanted to get in or out. So it looked across and down into its waters and worked its loud harbors without a touch of smugness. What went on in its streets and neighborhoods was anything the strong could think of and the weak could admire. Armistice was half a dozen years old the winter Violet disrupted the funeral, and veterans on <sup>135</sup> 125th Street wore their army issue greatcoats, because nothing they could pay for was as sturdy or hid so well what they could not boast of. When snow came, it sat where it fell on Lexington and Park Avenue too, and waited for horse



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drawn wagons to tamp it down when they delivered coal for the furnaces cooling down in the cellars. Up in <sup>those</sup> the big five-story apartment buildings and <sup>the</sup> ~~in~~ narrow wooden houses <sup>in between</sup> people knocked on each other's doors to see if anything was needed or could be had. A piece of soap? A little kerosene? Some fat, chicken or pork, to brace the soup one more time? Whose husband was getting ready to go see if he could find a shop open? Was there time to add turpentine to the list drawn up and handed to him by the wives? The weather <sup>g</sup> was so cold it hurt to breathe, but whatever the problems of being winter-bound in the City they put up with them because it was worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue where the sidewalks, snow-covered or not, were wider than the main roads of the towns where they were born and perfectly ordinary people could stand at the stop, get on the street car, give the man the nickel, and ride anywhere you pleased, although you didn't please to go many places because everything you wanted was right where you were: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools, no hospital), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barber shops, the ice wagons, the rag collectors, the pool halls, the open food markets, the number runner, and every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood, or association imaginable. The City was not citified then. It was a clutch of islands, sporting villages (called neighborhoods) cheek by jowl, with unencumbered, if infrequent, trespass among them. The service trails, of course, were worn, and there

Rag and bone  
men ?



were paths that got slick from the foray of members of one group into the territory of another where it was believed something curious or thrilling lay. Some gleaming, cracking scarey stuff. Where you could pop the cork and put the cold glass mouth right up to your own. Where you could find danger or <sup>be it</sup> ~~hit~~; where you could fight til you dropped and laugh at the knife when it missed and when it didn't. It would make you wonderful just to see it. And just as wonderful to know that back in one's own building there were lists drawn up by the wives to give to the husband braving the icy walks to get to an open market, and that sheets impossible to hang out in snowfall draped kitchens like the curtains of Sunday School plays.

The young were not so young then, and there was no such thing as mid-life. Sixty years, forty, even, was as much as anybody felt like being bothered with. If they reached that, or got very old, they sat around looking at goings on as though it were a five cent triple feature on Saturday. Otherwise they found themselves butting in the business of people whose names they couldn't remember and whose business was none of theirs. Just to hear themselves talk and the joy of watching the distressed faces of those listening. I've known a few exceptions. <sup>Very much</sup> Some old people who didn't slap the children for being slappable; who saved that strength in case it was needed for something important. A last courtship full of smiles and little presents. Or the dedicated care of an old friend who might not make it through without them. Sometimes they concentrated on making sure the person they had



shared their long lives with had cheerful company and the necessary things for the night.

But up there on Lenox, in Violet and Joe Trace's apartment, the nights for the most part were like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. And a dead girl's face became a necessary thing for their nights. They each took turns to raise up from the sagging mattress and tip toe into the parlour to gaze at what seemed like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold unsmiling girl staring from the mantle piece. If the tip toer is Joe, driven by loneliness from his wife's side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from his sleep hungry for her company. No finger points. Her lips don't turn down in judgement. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tip toer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The face of someone who will never work for anything; some one who picks up things lying on other people's dresser's and is not embarrassed when found out. It is a face of a sneak who glides over to your sink to rinse the fork you have laid by her plate. An inward face--whatever it sees is its own self. You are there , it says, because I am looking at you, ~~and what you think about me is what I think about you.~~

Two or three times during the night, as they took turns to go look at that picture, one of them would say her name. Dorcus? Dorcus.



Such restless nights made them sleep late, and Violet would have to hurry to get a meal prepared before getting ready for her round of heads. Having a knack for it, but no supervised training, and therefore no license to do it, Violet could only charge 25 or 50 cents anyway, but since that business at Dorcus's funeral, many of her regular customers found reasons to do their own hair or have a daughter heat up the irons. Violet and Joe Trace didn't use to need that hairdressing pocket change, but now that Joe was missing work days to stay home and cry, Violet carried her tools and her trade into apartments where the women woke in the afternoon, poured gin in their tea and could not care less about what she had done. These women always needed their hair done, and sometimes pity darkened their shiney eyes and they tipped her a whole dollar.

"You need to eat you something," one said to her. "Don't you want to be bigger than your curling iron?"

"Shut your mouth," said Violet.

"I mean it," said the woman. She was still sleepy, and rested her cheek in her left hand while holding her ear with the right. "Men wear you down to a sharp piece of gristle if you let them."

"Women," answered Violet. "Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It's these little hungry girls acting like women. <sup>NOT</sup> ~~Ain't~~ content with boys their own age, no, they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what..."

"That's my ear, girl! You going to curl it too?"



"Sorry. I'm sorry. Really, really sorry." And Violet stopped to blow her nose and blot tears with the back of her hand.

"O, the devil!" said the woman. She took advantage of the pause to light a cigarette. "Now I reckon you going to tell me some old hateful story about how a young girl messed over you and how he's not to blame because he was just walking down the street minding his own business, when this little twat jumped on his back and dragged him off to her bed. Save your breath. You'll need it on your death bed."

"I need my breath now," said Violet.

"Did he move out? Is he with her?"

"No. We still together. She's dead."

"Dead? Then what's the matter with you?"

"He thinks about her all the time. Nothing on his mind but her. Won't work. Can't sleep. Grieves all day, all night...."

"O," said the woman. She knocked the fire from her cigarette, pinched the tip and laid the butt carefully into the ashtray. Leaning back in the chair, she pressed the rim of her ear with two fingers. "You in trouble," she said, yawning. "Deep, deep trouble. Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time."

Violet thought it must be so; not only was she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wondered if she weren't falling in love with her too. When she wasn't trying to humiliate Joe, she was worrying about his health; when she wasn't worrying about his loss of appetite, <sup>his</sup> insomnia, she wondered what color were Dorcus' eyes. Her aunt had said brown, <sup>the beauticians</sup> but ~~X~~ said black <sup>but</sup> and Violet ~~said she~~



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~~had never seen~~  
~~never~~ saw a light-skinned person with coal black eyes. One thing, for sure, she <sup>needed</sup> her ends cut. In the photograph and from what she could remember from the coffin, the girl needed her ends cut. Hair that long gets fraggely easy. Just a quarter inch trim would do wonders, Dorcus. Dorcus.

She left the sleepy woman's house feeling miserable, helpless, but grateful that the customer who was coming to ~~Violet's~~ <sup>her</sup> kitchen for an appointment was not due until three o'clock, and there was time for a bit of housekeeping before then. Some business that needed doing because it was impossible to have nothing to do, no sequence of errands, list of tasks. She might wave her hands in the air, or tremble if she could not put her hand to something with another chore just around the bend from the one she is doing. And while she sprinkles the collar of a white shirt her mind is at the bottom of the bed where the leg, broken clean away from the frame, is too split to nail back. When the customer comes and Violet is sudsing the thin gray hair, murmuring ha mercy at appropriate breaks in the old lady's stream of confidences, Violet is re-situating the cord that holds the stove to its hinge and rehearsing the month's plea for three more days to the rent collector. She thinks she longs for rest, a carefree afternoon to decide suddenly to go to the pictures, or just to sit with the birdcages and listen to the children play in snow. This notion of rest, it's attractive to her, but I don't think she would like it. They are all like that, these women. Waiting for the ease, the space that need not be filled with anything other than the drift of thier own thoughts.



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Or else, into a beat of time, and sideways under their breasts, slips a sorrow they don't know where from. A neighbor returns the spool of thread she borrowed, and not just the thread, but the extra long needle too, and both of them stand in the door frame a moment while the borrower repeats for the lender a funny conversation she had with the woman on the floor below; it is funny and they laugh--one loudly while holding her forehead, the other hard enough to hurt her stomach. The lender closes the door, and later, still smiling, touches the lapel of her sweater to her eye to wipe traces of the laughter away then drops to the arm of the sofa the tears coming so fast she needs two hands to catch them.

So Violet sprinkles the collars and cuffs. Then sudses with all her heart those three or four ounces of gray hair, soft and interesting as a baby's.

Not the kind of baby hair her grandmother had soaped and played with and remembered for forty years. The hair of the little boy who got his name from it: Golden. Maybe that is why Violet is a hairdresser--all those years of listening to her rescuing Grandmother, True Belle, tell Baltimore stories. The years with Miss Vera Louise in the fine stone house on [tk] street where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but raise and love the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his carefully loved hair.

I know folks were furious when Violet broke up the funeral, but I can't believe they were surprised. Way, way before that,



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before Joe ever<sup>g</sup> laid eyes on the girl, Violet ~~had~~<sup>J</sup> sat down in the middle of the street. She didn't stumble nor was she pushed: she just sat down. After a few minutes two men and a woman came to her, but she couldn't make out why or what they said. Someone tried to give her water to drink, but she knocked it away. A policeman knelt in front of her and she rolled over on her side, covering her eyes. He would have taken her in but for the assembling crowd murmuring "Aw, she's tired. Let her rest," and carried her to the nearest steps. Slowly she came around, dusted off her clothes and got to her appointment only an hour late, which pleased the slow-moving whores who never hurried anything but love.

It never happened again--the street sitting--but <sup>as far as I know</sup> she did try <sup>just so she'd get</sup> to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it. What<sup>is</sup> known is this: the Dumfrey women--mother and daughter--weren't home when Violet arrived. Either they got the date mixed up or had decided to go to a legally licensed parlour--just for the shampoo, probably, because there is no way to get that deepdown ~~so good~~ hair washing at a bathroom sink. The beauticians have it beat when it comes to that: you get to lie back instead of lean forward; you don't have to press a towel in your eyes to keep the soapy water out because at a proper beauty parlour it drains down the back of your head into the sink. So, sometimes, even if the legal beautician is not as adept as Violet, a regular customer will go to her just for the pleasure of <sup>a</sup> ~~an~~ deep shampoo.

Doing two heads in one place was lucky and Violet looked forward to the 11:00 appointment. When nobody answered the bell,



she waited, thinking maybe they'd been held up at the market. She tried the bell again, after some time, and then leaned over the concrete bannister to ask a woman leaving the building next door if she knew where the Dumfrey women were. The woman shook her head but came over to help Violet look at the windows and wonder.

"They keep the shades up when they home," she said. "Down when they gone. Should be just the reverse."

"Maybe they want to see out when they home," said Violet.

"See what?" asked the woman. She was instantly angry.

"Daylight," said Violet. "Have some daylight get in there."

"They need to move on back to Memphis then if daylight is what they want."

"Memphis? I thought they were born here."

"That's what they'd have you believe. But they ain't. Not even Memphis. Cottown. Some place nobody ever heard of."

"I'll be," said Violet. She was very surprised because the Dumfrey women were graceful, citified ladies whose father owned a store on 116th street, and themselves had nice paper handling jobs: one took tickets at the Lafayette; the other worked in the counting house.

"They don't like it known," the woman went on.

"Why?" asked Violet.

"Hincty, that's why. Comes from handling money all day. You notice that? How people who handle money for a living get stuck -up? Like it was theirs instead of yours?" She sucked her teeth at the shaded windows. "Daylight my foot."



"Well I do their hair every other Tuesday and today is Tuesday, right?"

"All day."

"Wonder where they are, then?"

The woman slipped a hand under her skirt to re-knot the top of her stocking. "Off somewhere trying to sound like they ain't from Cottown."

"Where you from?" Violet was impressed with the woman's ability to secure her hose with one hand.

"Cottown. Knew both of them from way back. Come up here, the whole family act like they never set eyes on me before. Comes from handling money instead of a broom which I better get to before I lose this no count job. O, Jesus." She sighed heavily. "Leave a note why don't you? Don't count on me to let them know you was here. We don't speak if we don't have to." She buttoned her coat, then moved her hand in a suit-yourself-wave when Violet said she'd wait a bit longer.

Violet sat down on the wide steps nestling her bag of irons and oil and shampoo in the space behind her calves.

When the baby was in her arms, she inched its blanket up around the cheeks against the threat of wind too cool for its honey sweet, butter colored face. Its big-eyed non-committal stare made her smile. Comfort settled itself in her stomach and a kind of skipping, running light traveled her veins.

Joe will love this, she thought. Love it. And quickly her mind raced ahead to their bedroom and what was in there she could



use for a crib until she got a real one. There was gentle soap in the sample case already so she could bathe him in the kitchen right away. Him? Was it a him? Violet lifted her head to the sky and laughed with the excitement in store when she got home to look. It was the laugh--loose and loud--that confirmed the theft for some and discredited it for others. Would a sneak thief woman stealing a baby call attention to herself like that at a corner not a hundred yards away from the wicker carriage she took it from? Would a kind-hearted innocent woman take a stroll with an infant she was asked to watch while its older sister ran back in the house, and laugh like that?

The sister was screaming in front of her house, drawing neighbors and passersby to her as she scanned the sidewalk--up and down--shouting "Philly! Philly's gone! She took Philly!" She kept her hands on the baby buggy's push bar, unwilling to run whichever way her gaze landed, as though, if she left the carriage, empty except for the record she dropped in it--the one she had dashed back into the house for and was now on the pillow where her baby brother used to be--maybe it too would disappear.

"She who?" somebody asked. "Who took him?"

"A woman! I was gone one minute. Not even one! I asked her...I said...and she said okay...!"

"You left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?" The disgust in the man's voice brought tears to the girl's eyes. "I hope your mama tears you up and down."



Opinions, decisions popped through the crowd like struck matches.

"Aint' got the sense of a gnat."

"Who mis-raised you?"

"Call the cops."

"What for?"

"They can at least look."

"Will you just look at what she left that baby for."

"What is it?"

" 'The Trombone Blues.' "

"Have mercy."

"She'll know more about blues than any trombone when her mama gets home."

The little knot of people, more and more <sup>angry</sup> ~~furious~~ at the stupid, irresponsible sister, at the cops, at the record lying where a baby should be, had just about forgotten the kidnapper when a man at the curb said "That her?" He pointed to Violet at the corner and it was when everybody turned toward where his finger led, that Violet, tickled by the pleasure of discovery she was soon to have, threw back her head and laughed out loud.

The proof of her innocence lay in the bag of hair dressing utensils which remained on the steps where Violet had been waiting.

"Would I leave my bag, with the stuff I make my living with if I was stealing your baby? You think I'm crazy?" Violet's eyes, squinted and smoking with fury, stared right at the sister. "In



fact, I would have taken everything. Buggy too, if that's what I was doing."

It sounded true and likely to most of the crowd, especially those who faulted the sister. The woman had left her bag and was merely walking the baby while the older sister--to silly to be minding a child anyway--ran back in her house for a record to play for a friend. And who knew what else was going on in the head of a girl too dumb to watch a baby sleep?

It sounded unlikely and mighty suspicious to a minority. Why would she walk that far, if she was just playing, rocking the baby? Why not pace in front of the house like normal? And what kind of laugh was that? What kind? If she could laugh like that, she could forget not only her bag, but the whole world.

The sister, chastised, took baby, buggy and "Trombone Blues" back up the steps. Violet, triumphant and angry, snatched her bag, saying "Last time I do anybody a favor on this block. watch your own damn babies!" And she thought of it that way ever after, remembering the incident as an outrage to her character. The make-shift crib, the gentle soap left her mind. The memory of the light, however, that had skipped through her veins came back now and then, and once in a while, on an overcast day, when certain corners in the room resisted lamplight; when the red beans in the pot seemed to be taking forever to soften, she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well.



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Joe never learned of Violet's public crazinesses. His male friends passed word of the incidents to each other, but couldn't bring themselves to say much more to him than "How is Violet? Doing okay, is she?" Her private cracks, however, were known to him. I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globelight of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, place<sup>s</sup> entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. In between the ~~things~~ (the wavey string of well-lit scenes) is nothing, except getting to the next globelight. And right there, in the nothing-in-between, it's dangerous. The globelight holds and bathes each scene and it can be assumed that ~~in-between~~, at the curve where the light stops, is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. But the globelight is imperfect<sup>too</sup>. Closely examined it shows seams, ill glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet wasn't paying attention she stumbled onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street.

She didn't used to be that way. She had been a snappy, determined girl and a hardworking young woman, with the snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician. She liked, and had, to get her way.



She had chosen Joe and refused to go back home once she'd seen him come slowly into view at dawn. She had butted their way into an apartment promised to another family by sitting out the landlord, haunting his doorway. She collected customers by going up to them and describing her services ("I can do your hair better and cheaper, and do it when and where you want.") She argued butchers and wagon vendors into prime and extra ("Put that little end piece in. You weighing the stalks; I'm buying the leaf.") Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy, Violet had stumbled into a crack or two. [tk?] And the anything-at-all began in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment. "I don't believe an 8 has been out this month," she says, thinking about the daily number combinations. "Not one. Bound to come up soon, so I'm hanging a 8 on everything."

"That's no way to play," says Joe. "Get you a combo and stay with it."

"No. 8 is due I know it. Was all over the place in August-all summer, in fact. Now it's ready to come out of hiding."

"Suit yourself." Joe is examining a shipment of cosmetic products.

"Got a mind to double it with an aught and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you?" She looks up at Joe expecting an answer.

"What?" He frowns. "What you say?"

"Oh." Violet blinks rapidly. "Nothing I mean... nothing."



"Pretty girl?"

"Nothing, Joe. Nothing." She means nothing can be done about it, but it was something. Something slight, but troublesome. Like the time Miss Haywood asked her what time could she do her granddaughter's hair and Violet said "Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way."

Extricating herself from these collapses was not too hard, because nobody pressed her. Did they do the same? Maybe. ~~Quiet~~ <sup>Maybe</sup> ~~as it's kept~~ everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shut up. Spoke less and less until "um" carried almost all of her part of a conversation. Less excusable than a wayward mouth was an independant hand that tried to grab and turn the faded cabbage rose on a quilt as though it were a door knob. Violet got still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoyed her husband, then puzzled him and finally depressed him. He was married to a woman who spoke mainly to her birds. One of whom answered back. "I love you."



## Jazz Chapter 2

Jchap2

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Or used to. When Violet threw out the birds, it left her not only without the canaries' company and the parrot's confession, but also minus the routine of covering their cages, a habit that had become one of those necessary things for the night. The things that help you sleep all the way through it. back breaking labor might do it; or liquor. Surely a body--friendly if not familiar--lying next to you. Some one whose touch is a reassurance, not an affront or a nuisance. Whose heavy breathing neither enrages nor disgusts, but amuses you like that of a cherished pet. And rituals help too: door locking, tidying up, cleaning teeth, arranging hair, but they are preliminaries to the truly necessary things. Most people want to crash into sleep. Get knocked into it with a fist of fatigue to avoid a night of noisy silence, empty birdcages that don't need wrapping in cloth, of bold unsmiling girls staring from the mantle piece.

[tk] For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based on her careful investigations, the girl's memory was a demon in the house; a potent, life sucking hatefulness, uncontestable because being dead it was everywhere and nowhere. There was nothing for Violet to



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beat or hit and when she had to, just had to strike it somehow, there was nothing left but straw or a sepia print. But for Joe it was different. That girl had been his necessary thing for the night. He remembered his memories of her; how thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was the way he entered sleep. He minded her death, was so sorry about it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness. And he knew it would continue to fade because it was already beginning to the afternoon he hunted Dorcus down. After she said she wanted Coney Island and house parties and more of Mexico. Even then he was clinging to the quality of her sugar-flawed skin, the high wild bush the bedpillows made of her hair, her bitten nails, the heartbreaking way she stood, toes pointed in. Even then, listening to her talk, to the terrible things she said, he felt he was losing the timbre of her voice and what happened to her eye lids when they made love. Now he lay in bed remembering every detail of that February afternoon, from start to finish, and over and over. Not just because it was important but because he was trying to sear her into his mind, engrave her there against future wear. So that neither she nor the live love of her would melt, vaporize the way it had with Violet. For when Joe tried to remember the way it was when he and Violet were young, when they got married, decided to leave Vesper County and move up north to the city almost nothing came to mind. He recalled dates, of course, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But he had a tough time trying to catch



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~~out~~ what it felt like. And he believed Violet had forgotten too. He had struggled a long time with that loss, believed he had resigned himself to it, had come to terms with the fact that old age would be not remembering what things felt like. That you could say, "I was scared to death," but you could not retrieve the fear. That you could re-play in the brain the scene of ecstasy, of murder, of tenderness, but it was drained of everything but the language to say it in. He thought he had come to terms with that but he had been wrong. When he called on Sheila to deliver her order, he entered a roomful of laughing teasing women--and there she was, standing at the door, holding it open for him--the same girl that had distracted him in the ten cent store; the girl buying candy and ruining her skin had moved him so deeply his eyes burned. Then, suddenly, there in Alice Manfred's house, she stood, toes pointing in, hair braided, not even smiling but welcoming him in for sure. For sure. Otherwise he would not have had the audacity, the nerve, to whisper to her at the door as he left. It was a randy aggressiveness he had enjoyed because he had not used or needed it before. The ping of desire that surfaced along with the whisper through a closing door he began to curry. First he pocketed it taking pleasure in knowing it was there. Then he unboxed it to bring out and admire at his leisure. He did not yearn or pine for the girl, although longing became a pleading companion. Rather he thought about her, and decided. Except for the walnut tree that he and Victory sometimes slept in, Joe had decided nothing



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regarding his marriage to Violet; was grateful, in fact, that he didn't have to choose--that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the red wings in the county and the evil silence that accompanied them. They <sup>g</sup>met in his own hometown, under a walnut tree. She had been working in the fields like everybody else, and stayed past picking time to live with relatives twenty miles away from her own house. They knew people in common; and suspected they had at least one relative in common. They were drawn together because they had been put together, and all they decided for themselves was when and where to meet at night.

*date*  
When Violet and Joe left Vesper <sup>Country</sup> and boarded the colored section of the Baltimore and Ohio Clipper, the train trembled so entering the tunnel to the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side. The lights went out in the carriage cars as they shot through the tunnel and maybe there was a wall ahead to crash into or a cliff hanging over nothing. The train shivered with them at the thought but went on and sure enough there was ground up ahead and the trembling became the dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. They were hanging there, a young country couple, <sup>laughing</sup> smiling and tapping back at the tracks, when the porter came through, pleasant but unsmiling now that he didn't have to smile in this car full of colored people.



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"Breakfast in the dining car. Breakfast in the dining car. Good morning. Full breakfast in the dining car." He held a carriage blanket over his arm and from underneath it drew a pint bottle of milk which he placed in the hands of a young woman with a baby asleep across her knees. "Full breakfast."

He never got his way, this porter. He wanted the whole coach to file into the dining car, now that they could. Immediately, now that they were out of Delaware and a long way from Maryland there would be no green-as-poison curtain separating the colored people eating from the rest of the diners. The cooks would not feel obliged to pile extra helpings on the plates headed for the curtain; three lemon slices in the iced tea, two pieces of coconut cake arranged to look like one--to take the sting out of the curtain; homey it up with a little extra on the plate. Now, skirting the City, there were no green curtains; the whole car could be full of colored people and everybody on a first come first serve basis. If only they would. If only they would tuck those little boxes and baskets underneath the seat; close those paper bags, for once, put the bacon stuffed biscuits back into the cloth they were wrapped in, and troop single file through the five cars ahead on into the dining car where the table linen was at least as white as the sheets they dried on juniper bushes; where the napkins were folded with a crease as stiff as the ones they ironed for Sunday dinner; where the gravy was as smooth as their own, and the biscuits did not take second place to the bacon stuffed ones they



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wrapped in cloth. Once in a while it happened. Some well shod woman with two young girls; a preacherly kind of man with a watch chain and a rolled brim hat might stand up, adjust their clothes and weave through the coaches toward the tables, foamy white with heavy silvery knives and forks. Presided over and waited upon by a black man who did not have to lace his dignity with a smile.

Joe and Violet wouldn't think of it--paying money for a meal they had not missed and which required them to sit still at, or worse, separated by, a table. Not now. Not entering the lip of the City dancing all the way. Her hip bones rubbed his thigh as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling. They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that had already proved how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back. Some were slow about it and traveled from Georgia to Illinois, to the City, back to Georgia, out to San Diego and finally, shaking their heads and smiling surrendered themselves to the City. Others, ~~most I believe~~, knew right away that it was for them, this city and no other. They came on a whim because there it was and why not? They came after much planning, many letters written to and from, to make sure and know how and how much and where. They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short. (<sup>charged</sup> Disembarked from troop ships, hung around for a



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while and then could not imagine themselves anywhere else. Others came because a relative or hometown buddy said, man, you best see this place before you die; or we got room, now, so pack your suitcase and don't bring no high top shoes. However they came, or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement--there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, maleable toy designed for their play. Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. The sad anger of being veterans of the 27th Battalion dishonorably discharged by Theodore Roosevelt for whom they had fought like tigers. The furious hunger that gripped thousands imported to break strikes then dismissed for having done so in order to keep Mr. Armour and Mr. Swift from having to pay 18 cents the hour, or so Mr. Montgomery Ward need not improve the work life of his garment workers. The unmangeable disgust upon learning that Mr. Mallory would never pay 2,000 Negro longshoremen In Galveston Texas fifty cent an hour. The flat dead feeling of those that had escaped from Springfield Ohio, Springfield Indiana, Greensberg Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans, Louisiana, after raving whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home. [tr tk]



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while and then could not imagine themselves anywhere else. Others came because a relative or hometown buddy said, man, you best see this place before you die; or we got room, now, so pack your suitcase and don't bring no high top shoes. However they came, or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement--there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, maleable toy designed for their play.

Like ~~so many~~ others, Joe and Violet were country people, but I know how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn't love it. <sup>Soon as</sup> ~~Long before~~ they arrive at the train station or glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they ~~already~~ know they were born for it. There, in a City, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. And sometimes, in the beginning when they first arrive, they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like--if they ever knew, that is. I don't mean they hate them, no, just that what they start to love is the way a person is in the city; the way a schoolgirl never pauses at a stop light but looks up and down the street



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before stepping off the curb; how men accomodate themselves to tall buildings and wee porches, what a woman looks like moving in a crowd, or how shocking her profile is against the backdrop of the East River. The restfulness in kitchen chores when she knows the staple or supply is just around the corner and not seven miles away; the amazement of throwing open the window and being hypnotized for hours by people on the street below. Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire. The woman who churned a man's blood as she leaned all alone on a fence along a country road may not even catch his eye in the city. But if she was clipping quickly down the city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop with a cold beer in her hand, dangling her shoe from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, <sup>to</sup> soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing the delicate, dangling shoe, is captured. And he'd think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight. He would know right away the deception, the trick of shapes and light and movement, but it wouldn't matter at all because the deception was part of it too. Anyway, he could feel his lungs going in and out. There is no air in the city but there is breath, and every morning it races through him like laughing gas brightening his eyes, his talk and his expectations. In no time at all he forgets little pebbly creeks and apple trees so old they lay their branches along the ground and you had to reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. He forgets a sun



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that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky, and ~~they~~ <sup>we</sup> don't miss it, don't look up to see what happened to it or to stars made irrelevant by the light of thrilling, wasteful street lamps. That kind of fascination, permanent and out of control, seizes children, young girls, men of every description, mothers, brides, and barfly women, and if they have their way, and get to the city they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were. Nothing can pry them away from that; the city is what they want it to be: thriftless, warm, scarey and full of amiable strangers. No wonder they forget pebble-ly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely, think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night.

But I have seen the city do an unbelievable sky. Red caps and dining car porters who wouldn't think of moving out of the city some times go on at great length about country skies they have seen from the windows of trains. But there is nothing to beat what the city can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a city sky, presses and retreats, presses and retreats making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered. Looking at it, this night sky booming over a glittering city, it's possible for me to avoid dreaming of what I know is in the ocean, and the bays and



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tributaries it feeds: the two-seat aeroplanes, nose down in the muck, pilot and passenger staring at schools of passing bluefish; Money, soaked and salty in canvas bags, or waving gently at their edges from metal bands made to hold them forever. They are down there, along with yellow flowers that eat water beetles and eggs floating away from thrashing fins; along with the children who made a mistake in the parents they chose; along with slabs of camarra pried from the sides of unfashionable buildings. There are bottles too, made of glass beautiful enough to rival stars I cannot see above me because the city sky has hidden them. Otherwise, if it wanted to, it could show me stars cut from the lame' gowns of chorus girls, or mirrored in the eyes of sweethearts furtive and happy under the pressure of a deep touchable sky. But that's not all a citysky can do. It can go purple and keep an orange heart so the clothes of the people on the streets glow like dance hall costumes. I have seen women stir shirts into boiled starch or put the tiniest stitches into their hose while a girl straightens the hair of her sister at the stove, and all the while heaven, unnoticed and as beautiful as an Iriquois, drifts past their windows. As well as the windows where sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things. *Em*

Twenty ~~five~~ years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the city, they are still a couple but they barely speak to each other now, let alone laugh together or act like the ground is a dance hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days,



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and wants them back, aware of what it looked like but not at all of what it felt like, he couples himself elsewhere. He is in a room rented from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours he has purchased. Time for the citysky to move from a thin ice blue to purple with a heart of gold. And time enough, when the sun sinks, to tell his new love things he never told his wife. Important things like how the hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream at dusk; how he can barely see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers in that light, so what makes him think he can see her hand even if she did decide to shove it through the bushes and confirm, for once and for all, that she was indeed his mother? And even though the confirmation would shame him, it would make him the happiest boy in Virginia. If she decided, that is, to show him it, to listen for once to what he was saying to her and then do it, say some kind of yes, even if it was no, so he would know. And how he was willing to take that chance of being humiliated and grateful at the same time, because the confirmation would mean both. Her hand, her fingers poking out among the white [tk] blossoms, touching his; maybe letting him touch hers. He wouldn't have grabbed it, snatched it and dragged her out from behind the bushes. Maybe that's what she was afraid of, but he wouldn't have done that, and he told her so. Just a sign, he said, just show me your hand, he said, and I'll know don't you know I have to know? She wouldn't have to say anything, although nobody had ever heard her say anything; it wouldn't have



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to be words; he didn't need words or even want them because he knew how they could lie, could heat your blood and disappear. She wouldn't even have to say the word, 'mother.' Nothing like that. all she had to do was give him a sign, her hand thrust through the leaves, the white flowers, would be enough to say that she knew him to be the one, the son she had fourteen years ago, and ran away from, but not too far. Just far enough away to annoy everybody because she was not completely gone, and close enough to scare everybody because she creeps about and hides and touches and laughs a low sweet babygirl laugh in the cane. Maybe she did it. Maybe those were her fingers moving like that in the bush, not twigs, but in light so small he could not see his knees poking through the holes in his trousers, maybe he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he travelled with from then on, except for now when he had somebody to tell it to. Somebody with hooves tracing her cheek bones and who knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like. And who filled it for him , just as he filled it for her, because she had it too. Maybe worse since she knew her mother, and had even been slapped in the face by her for some sass she could not remember. But she did remember, and told him so: about the crack across her face, the pop and sting of it and how it burned. How it burned, she told him. And of all the slaps she got, that one was the one she remembered best because it was the last. She leaned out of the window of her best



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girlfriends's house because the shouts were not part of what she was dreaming. They were outside her head, across the street, Like the running. Everybody running. For water? Buckets? The fire engine, polished and poised in another part of town? There was no getting in that house where her clothespin dolls lay in a row. In a cigar box. But she tried anyway to get them. Barefoot, in the dress she had slept in, she ran to get them, and yelled to her mother that the box of dolls, the box of dolls was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama?

She cried again and Joe held her close. The Iriquois sky would pass the windows, and if they did see it, it crayon-colored their love. That would be when, after a decent silence, he would lift his sample case from the chair and tease her before opening it, holding up the lid so she could not see right away what he had hidden under the jars and perfume sweet boxes; the present he had brought for her. That was the little bow that tied up their day at the same time the citysky was changing its orange heart to black in order to hide its stars for the longest time before passing them out one by one by one, like gifts.

By that time she had cleaned his nails, pushed back the cuticle and painted the whole thing with clear polish. She had cried a little talking about East St. Louis, and cheered herself up with his fingernails. She liked to know that the hands lifting and turning her under the blanket had been done by her. Lotioned by her with cream from a jar of something from his sample case.



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They tried not to shout, but couldn't help it. Sometimes he covered her mouth with the palm of his hand so no one passing in the hall would hear her, and if he could, if he just could, he bit the pillow to stop his own yell. If he could. Sometimes he thought he had stopped it, that corner of the pillow was in his mouth all right, and then he heard himself breathing in and out, in and out, at the tail end of a shout that could only have come from his weary throat. She laughed at that, laughed and laughed before she straddled his back to pound it with her fists. Then when she was exhausted and he half asleep, she leaned down, her lips behind his ear, and made plans. Mexico, she said. I want to to take me to Mexico. Too loud, he said. No, no, she said, it's just right. How you know? he asked her. I heard people say, people say the tables are round and have white cloths over them and wee baby lampshades. It don't open till way past your bed time, he said. This my bed time, she said, Mexico people sleep in the day, take me. They're in there till church time Sunday morning and no whitepeople can get in, and the boys who play sometimes get up and dance with you. Uh, oh, he said. What uh , oh, she said. I just want to dance with you and then go sit at a round table with a lamp on it. People can see us, he said, those little lamps you talking about big enough to show who's there. You always say that, she said, like last time and nobody even looked at us they were having such a good time and Mexico is better even because nobody can see under the table cloth can they? Can they? If you don't want to



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dance, we can just sit there at the table, looking siditty by the lamplight and listen to the music and watch the people. Nobody can see under the table cloth. Joe, Joe, take me, say you'll take me. How you going to get out the house, he asked. I'll figure it, she said, just like always, just say yes. Well, he said, well, no point in picking the apple if you don't want to see how it taste. How does it taste, Joe, she asked. And he opened his eyes.

The door was locked and Melvonne would not be back from her fortieth street offices until way after mid-night, a thought that excited them: that if it were possible they could almost spend the night together. If Alice or Violet took a trip say, then the two of them could postpone the gift he gave her on into the darkest part of night until, smelling of Oxydol and paste wax, Melvonne came back from her offices. As it was, having made their plans for Mexico, Dorcus tipped out the door and down the steps before Violet had finished her evening heads and came home around seven to find that Joe had already changed the birds' water and covered their cages. One of the necessary things for the night.

Now Joe does not mind lying awake next to his silent wife because his thoughts are with this young good God young girl who both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born.

Malvonne lived alone with newspapers and other people's stories printed in small books. When she was not making her office building sparkle, she was melding the print stories with her keen



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observation of the people around her. Very little escaped the woman who rode the trolley against traffic at six p.m.; who examined the trash baskets of powerful whitemen, looked at photographs of women and children on their desks. Heard their hallway conversation, and the bathroom laughter penetrating the broom closet like fumes from her bottle of ammonia. She examined their bottles and re-situated the flasks tucked under cushions and behind books whose words were printed in two columns. She knew who had a passion for justice as well as ladies undergarments, who loved his wife and who shared one. The one who fought with his son and would not speak to his father. For they did not cover the mouthpiece when they talked on the telephone to ask her to leave as she inched her way down the halls, into their offices, nor did they drop their voices to a confidential whisper when they worked late doing what they called the 'real' business.

But Malvonne was not interested in them; she simply noticed. Her interest lay in the neighborhood people.

Before Sweetness changed his name from William Younger to Little Caesar, he robbed a mail box on 130th Street. Looking for postal notes, cash or what, Malvonne couldn't imagine. She had raised him from the time he was seven and a better behaved nephew no one could have wished for. In the daytime, anyway. But some of the things he got into during Malvonne's office shift from 6:00 to 2:30 am she would never know; others she learned after he left



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for Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O. One of the things she learned explained where her grocery bag had gone--the 20 pound salt sack she carried, nicely laundered and folded in her purse, to market. When she found it, behind the radiator in Sweetness' room, it was full of uncanceled letters. As she examined them her first impulse was to try to re-seal and re-fold their contents and get them quickly into a mailbox. She ended, however, by reading each one including those Sweetness had not bothered to tear open. Except for the pleasure of recognizing the signature, the reading turned out to be flatly uninteresting. Dear Helen Moore: questions about Helen's health; answers about the writer's own. weather. deceptions. promises. love and then the signer, as though Helen received so much mail, had so many relatives and friends she couldn't remember them all, identified her or him self in large, slanting script your devoted sister, Mrs. something something; or your loving father in New York, L. Henderson Woodward.

A few of them required action on Malvonne's part. A high school student had sent an application for (entrance to Marhsall College) along with the required, but now missing, dollar bill. Malvonne didn't have a dollar to spare for Lila Spencer's entrance fee, but she did worry that if the girl did not get to <sup>be a lawyer</sup> college she would end up with an apron job. So she added a note in her own hand, saying 'I do not have the one dollar right this minute, but as soon as I hear that you received this application and agreed

acceptance  
into a X  
correspondence  
law school.



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that I should come, I will have it by then if you tell me you don't have it and really need it.'

The sad moment came when she read the letter to Panama from Winsome Clark complaining to her husband who worked on the Canal about the paltriness and insufficiency of the money he had sent her--money of so little help, she was giving up her job, picking up the children and returning to Barbados. Malvonne could feel the wall of life pressed up against the woman's palms; feel her hands bashed tender from pounding it; her hips constrained by the clutch of small children. "I don't know what to do," she wrote, "Nothing I do make a difference. Auntie make a racket about everything. I am besides myself. The children is miserable as me. the money you senting can not keeping all us afloat. Us drowning here and may as well drown at home where your mother is and mine and big trees."

Oh, thought Malvonne, she dreams of big trees in Barbados? Bigger than those in the park? Must be jungle for sure.

Winsome said she was "sorry your good friend dead in the big fire and pray for he and you how come so much colored people dying where whites doing great stuff. I guess you thinking that aint no grown person question. Send anything else you get to Wyndham Road where I and babies be two pay envelopes from now. Sonny say he have shoe shining money for his own passage so dont worry none except to stay among the quick. your dearest wife Mrs. Winsome Clark."



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Malvonne didn't know Winsome or anybody on the [tk] block of [tk] Avenue, although one building there was full of West Indians who kept pretty much to themselves and from whose windows came the odor of seasonings she didn't recognize. The point now was to get Winsome's notice of departure, already two pay envelopes ago, to Panama before any more cash went to [tk] Avenue where the Aunt might get hold of it, and who knows, if she was as hateful as Winsome told it (watering down the children's milk on the sly and whipping the five year old for mishandling the hot, heavy pressing iron) she might keep the money for herself. Malvonne re-sealed the letter carefully and thought she would add another penny stamp in case that would help get it to Panama faster.

There was only one letter to sweat over and <sup>to</sup> wonder about the woman who could write down such words, let alone do what she had done and promised more of. The writer lived in the same building as her lover. Malvonne did not know what made her waste a three cent stamp other than the excitement of knowing the government was delivering her heat. Perspiring and breathing lightly, Malvonne forced herself to read the letter several times. The problem was whether to send on to Mr. M. Sage ( that was what he was called on the envelope; on the sheet of tablet paper he was called "daddy") his letter from "your always Hot Steam." A month has passed since it was written and Steam might be wondering if she had gone too far. Or had Daddy Sage and Steam done more of those low down sticky things in the meantime? Finally she decided to mail it with



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a note of her own attached--urging caution and directing daddy's attention to a clipping from <sup>Opportunity</sup> [tk] magazine [tk].

It was while she was preparing this anonymous advice that Joe Trace knocked on her door.

"How you doing, Malvonne?"

"Not complaining. How about you?"

"Can I step in? Got a proposition for you." He smiled his easy, country smile.

"I don't have a nickle, Joe."

"No," He held up his hand and walked past her into the living room. "I'm not selling. See? I don't even have my case with me."

"Oh, well, then." Malvonne followed him to the sofa. "Have a seat."

"But if I was," he said, "what would you like? If you had a nickle, I mean."

"That purple soap was kind of nice."

"You got it!"

"Went in a flash, though," said Malvonne.

"Fancy soap is fancy. Not meant to last."

"Guess not."

"I got two ~~pieces of it~~ left. I'll bring them up right away."

"What brings this on? You aint selling you giving away free for what reason?" Malvonne looked at the clock on the mantle, figuring out how much time she had to talk to Joe and get her letters mailed before leaving for work.



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"A favor you might say."

"Or I might not say?"

"You will. It's a favor to me, but a little pocket change for you."

Malvonee laughed. "Out with it Joe. This something Violet aint in on?"

"Well. She. this is. Vi is. I'm not going to disturb her with this, you know?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well. I'd like to rent your place."

"What?"

"Just a afternoon or two, every now and then. While you at work. But I'll pay for the whole week."

"What you up to Joe? You know I work at night." Maybe it was a trick name and a trick address, and Joe was "Daddy" picking up mail somewhere else and telling Steam his name was Sage.

"I know your shift's at night, but you leave at four."

"If it's nice enough to walk I do, Most time I catch the train at 5:30."

"It wouldn't be every day, Malvonne."

"It wouldn't be no day. I don't think I like what you proposing."

"Two dollars each and every week."

"You think I need your money or your flimsey soap?"

"No, no, Malvonne. Look. Let me explain. aint many women



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like you understand the problems men have with their wives."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well. Violet. You know how funny she been since her Change."

"Violet funny way before that. Funny in 1920 as I recall."

"Yeah, well. But now--"

"Joe, you want to rent Sweetness' room to bring another woman in here while I'm gone just cause Violet don't want no part of you. What kind a person you think I am? Okay there's no love lost between Violet and me, but I take her part, not yours, you old dog."

"Listen here, Malvonne--"

"Who is she?"

"Nobody. I mean, I don't know yet. I just thought--"

"Ha. If you lucked up on some fool you'd have a place? That's what you thought?"

"Sort of. I may not ever use it. But I'd like it in case. I'd pay <sup>the dollars</sup> two quarters whether I used it or not."

"Fifty cents in certain houses get you the woman, the floor, the walls and the bed. Get you a store bought scooter if you want it."

"Aw, no, Malvonne. No. You got me all wrong. I don't want no body off the street. Good Lord."

"No? Who do you think but a streetwalker go traipsing off with you?"



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"Malvonne, I'm just hoping for a lady friend. Somebody to talk to."

"Up over Violet's head? Why you ask me, a woman, for a hot bed. Seem like you <sup>would ask</sup> want some nasty man like yourself for that."

" I thought about it, but I don't know no man live alone and it ain't nasty. Come on, girl. You driving me to the street. What I'm asking is better, aint it? Every now and then I visit with a respectable lady."

"Respectable?"

"That's right, respectable. Maybe she's lonely though, or got children, or--"

"Or a husband with a hammer."

"Nobody like that."

"And if Violet finds out, what am I supposed to say?"

"She won't."

"Spose I tell her."

"You won't. Why would you do that? I'm still taking care of her. Nobody getting hurt. And you get two <sup>dollars</sup> quarters as well as somebody looking out for your place while you gone in case Sweetness come back or somebody come in here looking for him and don't care what he tear up cause you a woman."

"Violet would kill me."

"You don't have nothing to do with it. You never know when I come and you won't see anything. Everything be like it was when you left, except if there's some little thing you want fixed you



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want me to do. You won't see nothing but some change on the table there that I leave for a reason you don't know nothing about, see?"

"Uh huh."

"Try me, Malvonne. One week. No, two. If you change your mind any time, any time, just leave <sup>my</sup> ~~the~~ money on the table and I'll know you mean me t<sup>o</sup> stop and sure as you live your door key will be laying in its place."

"Uh huh."

"It's your house. You tell me what you want done, what you want fixed, and you tell me what you don't like. But believe me, girl, you won't know when or if I come or go. Except, maybe, your faucet don't drip no more."

"Uh Huh."

"Only thing you know is every Saturday starting now, you got two more <sup>dollars</sup> ~~quarters~~ to put in your sugar bowl."

"Mighty high price for a little conversation."

"You be surprised what you can save if you like me and don't drink, smoke, gamble or tithe."

"Maybe you should."

"I don't want nothing honary, and I don't want to be hanging out in clubs and such. I just want some nice female company."

"You seem mighty sure you going to find it."

Joe smiled. "If I don't, still no harm. No harm at all"

"No messages."

"What?"



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"No notes to pass. No letters. I'm not delivering any messages."

"Course not. I don't want a pen pal. We talk here or we don't talk at all."

"Suppose something comes up and you want or she wants to call if off?"

"Don't worry about that."

"Suppose she gets sick and can't come and needs to let you know."

"I wait, then I leave."

"Suppose one of the kids gets sick and can't nobody find the mama cause she holed up somewhere with you?"

"Who say she got kids?"

"Dont you take up with no woman if her kids is little, Joe."

"All right"

"It's asking too much of me."

"You dont have to think about none of it. You aint in it. You ever see me mess with anybody? I been in this building longer than you have. You ever hear a word against me from any woman? I sell beauty products all over town, you ever hear tell of me chasing a woman? No. You never heard that, because it never happened. Now I'm trying to lighten my life a little with a good lady, like a decent man would, that's all. Tell me what's wrong with that?"

"Violet's wrong with it."

"Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me."



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Rest of the time, she's cooking pork I can't eat, or pressing hair I can't stand the smell of. Maybe that's the way it goes with people been married long as we have. But the quiet. I can't take the quiet. She don't hardly talk anymore, and I aint allowed near her. Any other man be running around, stepping out every night, you know that. I ain't like that. I ain't."

Of course he wasn't, but he did it anyway. Sneaked around, plotted, and stepped out every night the girl demanded. They went to [tk and tk] and he was not alone. He became a Thursday man and Thursday men are satisfied. I can tell from their look some <sup>outlaw</sup> ~~illegal~~ love is about to be, or already has been, satisfied. Weekends and other days of the week are possibilities but Thursday is a day to be counted on. I used to think it was because domestic workers had Thursday off and could lie abed mornings as was out of the question on weekends when either they slept in the houses they worked in or rose so early to arrive they had no time for breakfast or any kind of play. But I noticed it was also true of men whose women were not servants and day workers; but bar maids and restaurant cooks with Sunday-Monday free; school teachers, cafe singers, office typists, and market stall women all looked forward to Saturday off. The city thinks about and arranges itself for the weekend: the day before pay day, the day after payday, the pre-Sabbath activity, the closed shop and the quiet school hall; barred bank vaults and offices locked in darkness. Still it is on Thursday the men look satisfied. Perhaps it's the artificial rhythm of the week--perhaps



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there is something so phoney about the seven day cycle the body pays no attention to it, preferring triplets, duets, quartets, anything but a cycle of seven that has to be broken into human parts and the break comes on Thursday. Irresistable. The outrageous expectations and inflexible demands of the weekend are null on Thursday, even though people make liaisons and connections and disconnections and revisions during the weekend, many of which are accompanied by bruises and even a spot of blood for excitement runs high on Friday or Saturday. But for satisfaction pure and deep, for balance in pleasure and comfort, Thursday can't be beat--as is clear from the capable expression on the faces of the men and their conquering stride in the street. They seem to achieve some sort of completion on Thursday that makes them steady enough on thier feet to appear graceful even if they are not. They command the center of the sidewalk and whistle softly in unlit doors.

It doesn't last of course, and twenty-four hours later they are frightened again and restoring themselves with any helplessness within reach. so the weekends, destined to disappoint, are strident, sullen, sprinkled with bruises and dots of blood. The regrettable things, the coarse and sour remarks, the words that become active boils in the heart--none of that takes place on Thursday. I suppose the man for whom it is named would hate it, but the fact is, his day is a day for love in the city and the company of satisfied men. They make the women smile. The tunes whistled through perfect teeth are remembered, picked up later and



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repeated at the kitchen stove. In front of the mirror near the door one of them or more will turn her head to the side, and sway, enchanted with her waist line and the shape of her hips.

Up there, in that part of the City--which is the part they came for--the right tune <sup>is played in the air</sup> can change the weather. [tk re gilding, ✓ chiseling--animating--something seen with the ears]

When I see them they are not sepia still, or losing thier edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are clicking, and I wonder if they know it. 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 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



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Roseland, to [tk, tk] ; boardwalks by the sea. In 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. <sup>A</sup>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. It bunches on the curbstone, wrists crossed, and hides its eyes 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.

I think the up-town people know it. They must. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same size so you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap.



JChap 3, Aug. 1990; revised Oct. 19,30,31,

Alice and Dorcus

The beautiful men were cold. In typical July weather, sticky and bright, Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the marching men could not. What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums. The beautiful men were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. During the march it seemed to Alice as though the day passed, the night too, and still she stood there, the hand of the little girl in her own, staring into each cold face that passed. The drums and the freezing men hurt her, but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time--first she was frightened of Kansas, then of Springfield, Massachusetts, then Eleventh Avenue, Third Avenue, Park Avenue. Recently she had begun to feel safe nowhere south of 110th Street, and Fifth Avenue was for her the most fearful of all. That was where whitemen leaned out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms. It was where sales men touched her and only her as though she were part of the goods he had condescended to sell her; it was the tissue required if the management was



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generous enough to let you try on a blouse in a store. It was where she, a woman of fifty and independent means, had no sur name. Where women who spoke English said "Don't sit there honey, you never know what they have." And women who knew no English at all and would never own a pair of silk stockings moved away from her if she sat next to them on the trolley.

Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them, and what they had seen with thier own eyes and through the eyes of others the drums described to a T. The hurt hurt her, but the fear was gone at last. Fifth Avenue was put into focus now and so was her protection of the newly orphaned girl in her charge. From then on she hid the girl's hair in braids tucked under, lest whitemen see it raining round her shoulders and push dollar wrapped fingers toward her. She instructed her about deafness and blindness--how valuable and necessary they were in the company of whitewomen who spoke English and those who did not, as well as in the presence of their children. Taught her how to crawl along the walls of buildings, disappear into doorways, cut across corners in choked traffic-- how to do anything, move anywhere to avoid a whiteboy over the age of eleven. Much of this she could effect with her dress, but as the girl grew older, more elaborate specifications had to be put in place. High heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head with saucy brims



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framing the face, make-up of any kind--all of that was outlawed in Alice Manfred's house. Especially the coats slung low in the back and not buttoned, but clutched, like a bathrobe or a towel around the body, forcing the women who wore them to look like they had just stepped out of the bath tub and were already ready for bed. Privately, Alice admired them, the coats and the women who wore them. She sewed linings into these coats, when she felt like working, and she had to look twice over her shoulder when the Gay Northeasters and the [tk tk] strolled down Seventh Avenue, they were so handsome. But this envy-streaked pleasure Alice closeted, and never let the girl see how she admired those ready-for-bed-in-the-street clothes. And she told the Miller sisters who kept small children during the day for mothers who worked out of the house, what her feelings were. They did not need persuading, having been looking forward to the Day of Judgment for a dozen years, and expected its sweet relief any minute now. They had lists of every restaurant, diner and club that sold liquor and were not above reporting owners and customers to the police until they discovered that such news, in the Racket Squad Department, was not only annoying, it was redundant. When Alice Manfred collected the little girl from the Miller sisters, on those evenings her fine stitching was solicited, the three women occasionally sat down in the kitchen to hum and sigh over cups of Bosco at the signs of Emmminent Demise, Such as not just ankles but knees in full view; lip rouge red as hellfire; burnt matchsticks rubbed on eyebrows;



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fingernails tipped with blood--you couldn't tell the street walkers from the mothers. And the men, you know, the things they thought nothing of saying out loud to any woman who passed by could not be repeated before children. They did not know for sure, but they suspected that the dances were beyond nasty because the music was getting worse and worse with each passing season the Lord waited to make Himself known. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so low down, you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirt sleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the low down stuff that signalled Emmineet Demise. Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived, as Alice Manfred and the Miller sisters did, on [tk] Place, with a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet, a quiet street with no less than five motor cars parked at the curb, you could still hear it, and there was no mistaking what it did to the children under their care--cocking their heads and swaying ridiculous, unformed hips.

Alice thought the low down music (and in Kansas it was worse than <sup>here</sup> ~~New York~~) had something to do with the silent black men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over thirty-seven dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. Some said the rioters were



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disgruntled veterans who fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the Y.W.C.A., over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honor. Others said they were whites terrified by the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live. A few thought about it and said how perfect was the control of workers none of whom (like crabs in a barrel requiring no lid, no stick, not even a monitoring observation) would get out of the barrel. Alice, however, believed she knew the truth better than everybody. Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East St. Louis since before the War. Nor did he need a whiteman's job--he owned a pool hall on [tk] street. As a matter of fact, he wasn't even in the riot; he had no weapons, confronted nobody on the street. He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and Alice's sister had just got the news and had gone back home to try and forget the color of his entrails, when her house was torched and she burned crispy in its flame. Her only child, a little girl named Dorcus, sleeping across the road with her very best girlfriend, did not hear the fire engine clanging and roaring down the street because when it was called it didn't come. But she must have seen the flames, must have, because the whole street was screaming. She never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word.



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Alice thought, no. It wasn't the War and the disgruntled veterans; it wasn't the droves and droves of colored people flocking to paychecks and streets full of themselves. It was the music. The dirty, get on down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild. Alice was convinced and so were the Miller sisters as they blew into cups of Bosco in the kitchen. It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law. There had been none of that at the Fifth Avenue march. Just the drums and the Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to whitemen in straw hats who needed to know what the freezing men already knew. Alice had picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcus. Looked at Dorcus and read the words again. What she read seemed crazy, out of focus. Some great gap lunged between the print and the child. She glanced between them struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words. Then suddenly, like a rope cast for rescue, the drums spanned the distance, gathering them all up and connected them: Alice, Dorcus, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the frozen black faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above. Alice carried that gathering rope with her always after that day on Fifth Avenue, and found it reliably secure and tight-most of the time. Except when the men sat on window sills



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fingering horns. The rope broke then, disturbing her peace, making her aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its bloodsmell; made her aware of its life below the sash and its red lip rouge. She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music--just colored folks stuff, harmless, decorative, simple fun--not real, not serious. <sup>Yet</sup> But Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something evil that disguised itself as flourish and laughing seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a careless longing for a fight or a red ruby stick pin for a tie--either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this cafe music. It made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent [tk] Place apartment than to risk a broken window or a yelping that might not know where or how to stop.

I have seen her, passing Betty's Cafe or an uncurtained window on [tk] Street when "[tk]" or "[tk]" drifted out, and watched her reach with one hand for the safe gathering rope thrown to her eight years ago on Fifth Avenue, and ball the other one into a fist in her coat pocket. I don't know how she did it--balance herself with two different hand gestures. But she was not alone in trying, and



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she was not alone in losing. It was impossible to keep the Fifth Avenue drums separate from the belt buckle tunes spinning on every victrola. Impossible. Some nights are silent; not a motor car turning within earshot; no drunks or restless babies cry through the walls and Alice opens any window she wants to and hears nothing at all. Wondering at this totally silent night, she can go back to bed but as soon as she turns the pillow to its smoother, cooler side, a melody she doesn't remember where from plays by itself, alone and unsolicited, in her head. It is greedy, reckless, the fragment she hears but underneath it, holding up the looseness like a palm are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus.

Dorcus, of course, didn't have the problem. Alice had raised her carefully since she was nine years old, and although her earliest memory when she arrived from East St. Louis was the parade her aunt took her to, a kind of funeral parade for her mother and her father, Dorcus remembered it differently. While her aunt worried about how to keep the heart ignorant of the hips and the head in charge of both, Dorcus lay on a sheneille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else. Resisting her aunt's protection and restraining hands, Dorcus thought of that life-below-the sash as



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the part that made her alive. The drums she heard at the parade were only the first part, the first word, of a command. For her the drums were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence. She remembered them as a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete. Her remembrance of the flames shooting high in the night consumed her just as they had consumed her mother. The fire burned in her still. Rather than the grief of not dying and burning with her mother, of being an observer to it, she took it in, swallowed it to keep and hold--never let it out and never put it out. It was all she had and all she needed. At first she thought if she spoke of it, it would leave her, or someone would take it away, or she would lose it through her mouth. And when they took her on a train to the City, and crushed her in a long parade, and she watched the black unblinking men, the drums assured her that fire would never leave her, that it would be waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to let it loose. And whenever she wanted to be touched by it, whatever happened would be quick. Like the dolls. They would have gone fast. Wood, after all, in a wooden cigar box. The red tissue paper skirt on Rochelle immediately. Sst, like a match, and then Bernadine's blue silk and Faye's white cotten cape. The fire would eat away at their legs, blacken them first with its hot breath and their round eyes with the tiny lashes and eyebrows she had painted in so very carefully would have watched themselves disappear. Dorcus avoided thinking about the huge coffin just there in front, a few feet to her left,



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and about the medicinal odor of Aunt Alice sitting next to her by concentrating on Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye who would have no funeral at all. It made her bold. Even as a nine year old in Ps [tk] she was bold. However tight and tucked in her braids, however clunky her high-topped shoes that covered ankles other girls exposed in low cut oxfords, however black and thick her stockings, nothing hid the boldness swaying under her cast iron skirt. Eye glasses could not obscure it, nor could the pimples on her skin brought on by hard brown soap and a tilted diet.

When she was eight, and Alice Manfred agreed to sew for a month or two, Dorcus was watched over after school by the Miller sisters. Often there were four other children, sometimes one other. Their play was quiet and confined to a small area of the dining room. The two-armed sister, Frances, gave them apple butter sandwiches to eat; the one-armed one, Neola, read them Psalms. The strict discipline was occasionally lightened when Frances fell asleep in the chair. Then Neola might grow tired of the constraint the verses imposed on her own voice and select a child to light a match for her cigarette. She would take fewer than three puffs, and something in the gesture lit something inside her, and she told her charges cautionary stories. Her tales however, of the goodness of good behavior, collapsed before the thrill of the sin they deplored. The truth is that the message in her instructions failed because a week after he put the engagement ring on Neola's finger, the soon-to-be-groom at her wedding left the



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state. The pain of his refusal was <sup>visually</sup> irrevocably physical, for over her heart, curled like a shell, was the hand on which he had positioned the ring. As though she held the broken pieces of her heart together in the crook of one gracefully frozen arm. No other part of her was touched by this paralysis. Her right hand, the one that turned the tissue thin pages of the Old Testament, or held a Philip Morris to her lips, was straight and steady. The stories she told them of recklessness, of the wicked who preyed on the good were made more poignant by this clutch of arm to breast. She told them how she had personally advised a friend to respect herself and leave the man who was no good to (or for) her. Finally the friend agreed and in two days, two! she went right back to him God help us all, and Neola never spoke to her again. She told them how a very young girl, no more than fourteen, had left family and friends to traipse four hundred miles after a boy who joined the army only to be left behind and turn to a life of complete dissolution in a camptown. So they could see, couldn't they, the power of sin in the company of a weak mind? The children scratched their knees and nodded, but Dorcus, at least, was enchanted by the frail, melty disposition of the flesh and the paradise that could make a woman go right back after two days, two! or make a girl travel four hundred miles to a camptown, or fold Neola's arm, the better to hold the pieces of her heart in her hand. Paradise. All for Paradise.

By the time she was seventeen her whole life was unbearable.



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And when I think about it, I know just how she felt. It is terrible when there is absolutely nothing to do or worth doing except to lie down and hope when you are naked, she won't laugh at you. Or that he, holding your breasts, won't wish they were some other way. Terrible but worth the risk, because there is no other thing to do, although, being seventeen, you do it. Study, work, memorize. Bite into food and the reputations of your friends. Laugh at the things that are right side up and those that are upside down--it doesn't matter because you are not doing the thing worth doing which is lying down somewhere in a dimly lit place enclosed in arms, and supported by the core of the world. Think how it is, if you can manage, just manage it. Nature freaks for you, then. Turns itself into shelter, by ways. Pillows for two. Sends a bastard red rose through a clump of others that are shell pink. And the city, in its own way, gets down for you, cooperates, smoothing its sidewalks, correcting its curbstones, offering you melons and green apples on the corner. Racks of yellow head scarves; strings of Egyptian beads. Kansas friend chicken and something with raisens calls attention to an open window where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that's not enough, doors to speakeasys stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key. She makes up her mind and as you pass by informs your back that she is daddy's little angel child. The City is smart at this: smelling and good and looking raunchy; sending secret messages disguised as



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public signs: this way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room out to lunch stop dog on premises absolutely no beer. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own.

There was a night in her sixteenth year when Dorcus stood in her body and offered it to either of the brothers for a dance. Both boys were shorter than she, but both were equally attractive. More to the point, they out-stepped everybody so completely that when they needed tough competition they were forced to dance with themselves. Sneaking out to that party with her friend x ought to have been hard to arrange, but Alice Manfred had overnight business in Springfield, and nothing could have been easier. The only difficulty was in finding something wonderful enough to wear.

Before the lights went out, and before the sandwiches and the spiked soda water disappeared, the one managing the record player chose fast music suitable for the brightly lit room, where obstructing furniture had been shoved against walls, pushed into the hallway and bed rooms piled high with coats. Under the ceiling light pairs moved like twins born with, if not for, the other, sharing a partner's pulse like a second jugular. They believed they knew before the music did what their hands, their feet were to do, but that illusion was the music's secret drive: the control it ~~faked~~ <sup>tricked</sup> them into believing was theirs; the anticipation it anticipated. In between record changes, while the girls fanned blouse necks to air damp collarbones or corrected with anxious



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hands the damage done to ~~their~~ hair, the boys pressed folded handkerchiefs to their foreheads. Laughter covered indiscreet glances of welcome and promise, and took the edge off gestures of betrayal and abandon.

Dorcus and ~~X~~ <sup>Felicia</sup> were not strangers at the party--nobody was. People none of them had ever seen before joined the fun as easily as those who had grown up in the same apartment building. But both girls had expectations made higher by the trouble they'd had <sup>the outfit for</sup> planning the escapade. Dorcus, at 16, was yet to wear silk hose and her shoes were those of someone much younger or very old. X had helped her loosen two braids behind her ears and her fingertip was stained with the rouge she had stroked across her lips. With her collar turned under, her dress was more adult-looking, but the hard hand of a warning grown-up showed everywhere else: in the hem, the waist-centered belt, the short, puffy sleeves. She and X had tried removing the belt altogether, then fixing it at her navel. Both strategies proved hateful. They knew that a badly dressed body is nobody at all, and X had to chatter compliments all the way down X Avenue to get Dorcus to forget about her clothes and focus on the party. "tk" soared to the ceiling and through the door wide open for circulation as they entered. Immediately both girls were snatched by a male hand and spun into the dancing center of the room. Dorcus recognized her partner as X who had been in her elocution class for a hot minute--which was as long as it took for the teacher to realize he would never relinquish 'ax' for 'ask.'



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Dorcus danced well--not as fast as some others, but she was graceful, in spite of those shaming shoes, and she was carelessly provocative.

It was after two subsequent dances, that she noticed the brothers commanding the attention of a crowd in the dining room. On the street, in vestibules as well as house parties, they were spectacular, moving like taut silk or loose metal. The stomach jumps Dorcus and X had agreed was the Sign of real interest and possible love , surfaced and spread as she watched the brothers behind her partner's back. The sandwiches were gone now, the potato salad too, and everybody knew that the time for lights out music was approaching. The unbelievable agility, the split-second timing the brothers were putting on display announced the culmination and exhaustion of the fast dancing segment of the party. At a pause, Dorcus moves into the hall which parallels the living and dining room. From its shadows, through the archway, she has an unrestricted view of the brothers as they bring the performance to its rousing close. Laughing, they accept the praise that is due them: adoring looks from girls, congratulating punches and slaps from the boys. They have wonderful faces, these brothers. Their smiles, more than flawless teeth, are amused and inviting. Someone fights with the victrola; places the arm on, scratches the record, tries again, then exchanges the record for another. During the lull, the brothers notice Dorcus. Taller than most, she gazes at them over the heads of her friends. <sup>brothers</sup> Their eyes seem wide and



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welcoming to her. She moves forward out of the shadow and slips through the group. The brothers turn up the wattage of their smiles. The right record is on the turn table now; she can hear its preparatory hiss as the needle slides toward its first groove. The brothers smile brilliantly; one leans a fraction of an inch toward the other and, never losing eye contact with Dorcus, whispers something. The other looks Dorcus up and down as she moves toward them. Then, just as the ~~right~~<sup>s</sup> music loads up the air, <sup>smotely</sup> his smile bright as ever, he wrinkles his nose and turns away. Dorcus has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove. The stomach-jump of possible love is nothing compared to the ice floes that block up her veins now. The body she inhabits is unworthy. Although it is young and all she has, it is as if it had decayed on the vine at budding time. No wonder Neola closed her arm and held the pieces of her heart in her hand.

So by the time Joe Trace whispered to her through the crack of a closing door her life had become almost unbearable. Almost. The flesh, heavily despised by the brothers, held secret the <sup>live</sup> appetite soaring inside it. I've seen swollen fish, serenely <sup>^</sup>blind, floating in the sky. Without eyes, but somehow directed, these airships swim below cloud foam and nobody can be turned away from the sight of them because ~~they are~~ watching a private dream. That was what her hunger was like: mesmerizing, directed, floating like a public secret just under the cloud cover. Alice Manfred had



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worked hard to privatize her neice, but she was no match for a City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day: "Come," it said. "come and do wrong." Even the women sweeping the stairs closed their eyes and shook their heads as they sang out a phrase of sweet desolation. In the year that passed between the dancing brothers' dismissal and Alice Manfred's club meeting where Dorcus met Joe, the yoke Alice had knotted <sup>around Dorcus' neck</sup> frayed til it split.

(No one who ever knew her forget her laugh.) Other than the clubwomen, very few knew where Joe Trace met her. Not at the candy counter of Duggie's where he first saw her and wondered if that, the peppermint she bought, was what insulted her skin, light and creamy everywhere but her cheeks. And not at YPBU meetings either, because Joe left church going to Violet, except for Easter and Woman's Day when it would shame her not to have her husband there. Joe met Dorcus in Alice Manfred's house right up under her nose and right before her very eyes.

He had gone there to deliver an order to Malvonne Edwards's cousin, Sheila, who said if Joe came to 237 [tk] Avenue, apartment 4c, before noon, he could deliver her order, the #2 Nut Brown and the vanishing cream, right there and she wouldn't have to wait til next Saturday or walk all the way down [tk] to [tk] pick it up, unless, of course he wanted to come on her job.... Joe had decided he would wait till next Saturday because not collecting the dollar and thirty-five cents wasn't going to strap him. But after he left Miss [tk's] house and stood for a half hour watching Bud and C.T.



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abusing each other at checkers, he decided to check Sheila out right fast and quit for the day. His stomach was a bit sour and his feet hurt. He didn't want to be caught delivering or writing orders in the rain either, rain that had been threatening all during that warm October Saturday. And even though getting home early meant the extended company of a speechless Violet while he fussed with the sink trap or the wheel that turned the clothes line on their side of the building, the Saturday meal would be early too and satisfying: late summer greens cooked with the ham bone left over from last Sunday. Joe looked forward to the lean scrappy end of week meals, but hated the Sunday one: a baked ham, a sweet heavy pie to accompany it. Violet's determination to grow an ass she swore she once owned was killing him. Once upon a time, he bragged about her cooking. Couldn't wait to get back to the house and devour it. But he was fifty, now, and appetities change, we know. He still liked candy, hard candy--not divinity or caramel--sour balls being his favorite. If Violet would confine herself to soup and boiled vegetables (with a bit of bread to go along) he would have been perfectly satisfied. That's what he was thinking about when he found 237 and climbed the stairs to 4C. The argument between C.T. and Bud had been too good, too funny: he had listened to them longer that he thought, because it was way past noon when he got to the door marked 4C. Woman noise could be heard through the door. Joe rang anyway.

The peppermint girl with the bad skin answered the door, and



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while he was telling her who he was and what he'd come for, Sheila poked her head into the vestibule and shouted, "CPT! Surprise me for once, Joe Trace." He smiled and stepped in the door. Stood there smiling and did not put his sample case down until the hostess, Alice Manfred, came and told him to come on in the parlor.

They were thrilled to have him interrupt their social. It was a luncheon meeting of the [tk] to plan for the Thanksgiving fund raiser for [tk] , They had settled what they could, tabled what they had to, and begun the <sup>Chicken ala King</sup> lunch over which Alice had taken the greatest pains. Pleased, happy even, with their work and with each other's company, they did not know they missed anything until Alice sent Dorcus to answer the ring, and Sheila, remembering what she had said to Joe, jumped up when she heard a male voice.

They made him feel like the singing men in spats. The young ones who clustered on the corners wearing ties the color of handkerchiefs sticking out of their breast pockets. The young roosters who stood without waiting for the chicks who were waiting-for them. Under the women's flirty appraising eyes, Joe felt the spats cover his shoe tops and the pleasure of his own smile. They laughed, tapped the table cloth with their fingertips and began to tease, berate and adore him all at once. They told him how tall men like him made them feel, complained about his lateness and insolence, asked him what else he had in his case besides whatever it was that made Sheila so excited. They wonderd why he never rang thier doorbells, or climbed four flights of double flight stairs



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to deliver anything to them. They sang their compliments, their abuse, and only Alice confined herself to a thin smile, a closed look and did not join the comments with one of her own.

Of course he stayed to lunch. Of course. Although he tried not to eat anything much and spoil his appetite for the late summer greens he was sure were simmering in the pot for him. But the women touched his hair and looked right at him. Ordered him. "Come on over here man and sit yourself down. Fix you a plate? Let me fix you a plate." He protested; they insisted. He openend his case; they offered to buy him out. "Eat, baby, eat," they said. "You not going out in that weather without something sticking to your bones dont' make no sense with all we got here, Dorcus, girl, bring this man a empty plate so I can fill it for him hear?"

They were women his age mostly, with husbands, children, grandchildren too. Hard workers for themselves and anyone who needed them. And they thought men were ridiculous and delicious and terrible, taking every opportunity to let them know that they were. In a group such as this one, they could do with impunity what they were cautious about alone with any man, stranger or friend, who rang the doorbell with a sample case in his hand no matter how tall he was, how country his smile or however much sadness was in his eyes. Besides, they liked his voice. It had a pitch, a note they heard only when they visited stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards and overworked fields to come to the City. It reminded them of men who wore hats



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to plow and to eat supper in; who blew into saucers of coffee, and held knives in their fists when they ate. So they looked right at him and told him any way they could how ridiculous he was, and how delicious and how terrible. As if he didn't know.

Joe Trace counted on flirty laughing women to buy his wares, and he knew better than to take up with any of them. Not if he wanted to be able to lean over a pool table for a shot exposing his back to his customers' husbands. But that day in Alice Manfred's house, as he listened to and returned their banter, something in the word play took on weight.

I've wondered about it. What he thought then and later, and about what he said to her: "You are what Adam gave up the garden for, and strutted on out of it." He whispered it to her when she let him out the door, and nobody was more pleased and surprised than he was.



chap4A  
~~Chapter 5~~

Jchap4

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She sat there sucking malt through a straw wondering who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things. Where she saw a lonesome chair left like an orphan in a park strip facing the river, that other Violet saw how the ice skim gave the railing's black poles a weapon-y glint. Where she, last in line at the car stop, noticed a child's cold wrist jutting out of a too-short, hand-me-down coat, that Violet slammed past a whitewoman into the seat of a trolley four minutes late. And if she turned away from faces--inconsolably sad--looking at her through restaurant windows, that Violet heard the clack of the plate glass in mean March wind. 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 for a month. Couldn't for the life of her think what she'd done with it. But that Violet knew and went right to it. Knew, too, where the funeral was going on, although it could not have been but one of two places[tk and tk] come to think of it. Still that Violet knew which of the two, and the right time to get there. Just before the closing of the casket, when the people who



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were going to faint fainted and the women in white dresses were fanning them. And the ushers, young men the same age as the deceased--from the dead girl's high school class, with freshly barbed heads and ghost white gloves--gathered; first in a tight knot of six and then separated into two lines of three, they moved down the aisle from the back where they had assembled and surrounded the bier. They were the ones that that Violet had to push aside, elbow her way into. And they did. Step aside, thinking maybe this was some last minute love desperate to make itself known before it couldn't see and might forget the sleeping face it treasured. The ushers saw the knife before she did. Before she knew what was going on, the boy ushers' hard hands--knuckle-tough from marbles and steelies, from snowballs packed to bullet strength, from years of sticks sending hardballs over the hoods of motor cars, into lots with high fences and even into the open windows as well as the closed of people living four floors up, hands that had held the boy's whole body weight from the iron railings of the [tk] bridge let alone the monkey bars in [tk] park--these hands were reaching toward the blade she had not seen for a month at least and was surprised to see now aimed at the girl's haughty, secret face.

It bounced off, making a little dent under her ear lobe, like a fold in the skin that was hardly a disfigurement at all. She could have left it at that: the fold under the ear lobe, but that Violet, unsatisfied, fought with the hard handed usher boys and was



time enough for them, almost. They had to forget right away that this was a fifty year old woman in a fur collared coat and a hat pulled down so far over her right eye, it was a wonder she saw the door to the church not to speak of the right place to aim her knife. They had to abandon the teachings they had had all their lives about the respect due their elders. Lessons learned from the old folks whose milky light eyes watched every thing they did, commented on it, and told each other what it was. Lessons they had learned from the younger old folks (like her) who could be their auntie, their grandmother, their mother, or their mother's best friend who not only could tell on them, but could tell them; could stop them cold with a word, with a "Cut that mess out!" shouted from any window, doorway or streetcurb in a two block radius. And they would cut it out, or take it downstairs, behind the trunks, or off in [tk] park, or better still, in the shadow of the el where no lights lit what these women did not allow, don't care whose child it was. But they did it nevertheless. Forgot the lessons of a lifetime, and concentrated on the wide, shining blade, because who knew? Maybe she had more than one cutting in mind. Or maybe they could see themselves hang-dog at the dinner table trying to explain to these same women or even, Jesus! the men, the fathers and uncles, and grown cousins, friends and neighbors, why they had just stood there like street lights and let this woman in a fur collared coat make fools of them and ruin the honorable job they had worn white gloves for. They had to wrestle her to the floor



before she let go. And the sound that came from her mouth belonged to something wearing a pelt instead of a coat.

By then the usher boys were joined by frowning men who carried the kicking, growling Violet out while she looked on in amazement. She had not been that strong since Virginia, since she loaded hay and handled the mule cart with a four lead rein. But twenty years doing hair in the City had softened her arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers. Like shoes taking away the tough leather her bare feet had grown, the City took away the back and arm power she used to boast of. A power that Violet had not lost because she gave the usher boys, and the grown men too, a serious time.

That Violet should not have let the parrot go. He forgot how to fly and just trembled on the sill, but when she ran home from the funeral, having been literally thrown out by the hard-handed boys and the frowning men, "I love you" was exactly what neither she nor that Violet could bear to hear. She tried not to look at him as she paced the rooms, but the parrot saw her and squawked a weak "Love you" through the pane. Joe, who had been missing since New Year's Day, did not come home that night or the next, so she knew the parrot was there because she kept going up and down the stairs from her apartment door to the front door to see if he was coming down the street or was sitting on the stoop. At two in the morning, again at four, she made the trip, peered out into the dark street, solitary except for a pair of police and cats peeing in the



snow. The parrot, shivering and barely turning his green and blonde head, told her each time "Love you."

"Get away," she told him. "Go on off somewhere!"

The second morning he had. All she saw, down in the dark cellar well beneath the stoop, was a light yellow feather with a tip of green. And she had never named him. Had called him "my parrot" all these years. "My parrot." "Love you." "Love you." Did the dogs get him? Did some night-walking man snatch him up and take him to a house that did not feature mirrors or keep a supply of ginger cookies? Or did he get the message--that she said "My parrot" and he said "Love you." and she had never said it back or even took the trouble to name him--and manage somehow to fly away on wings that had not soared for six years. Wings grown stiff from disuse and dull in the bulb light of an apartment with no view to speak of.

The malted was gone and although her stomach seemed about to lose its stitching, she ordered another and took it over to one of the little tables behind the [tk] that Duggie had placed there against the law that said if he did it , it made the place a restaurant. There she could sit and watch the foam disappear, the scoops of ice cream lose their ridges and turn to soft, glistening balls like soap bars left in a dishpan full of water. She had meant to bring a package of [tk Ovaltine?] to stir into the malted milk shake, because they didn't seem to be doing any good. The hips she came here with were gone too, just like the power in her



back and arms. Maybe that Violet, the one who knew where the butcher knife was and was strong enough to use it, had the hips she had lost. But if that Violet was strong and had hips, why was she proud of trying to kill a dead girl, and she was proud. Whenever she thought about that Violet, and what that Violet saw through her own eyes, she knew there was no shame there, no disgust. That was hers alone, so she hid behind the [tk] at one of Duggie's little illegal tables and played with the straw in a chocolate malt. She could have been eighteen herself, just like the girl at the magazine rack, reading [tk magazine] and playing for time in the drug store. Did Dorcus, the dead girl, like [tk magazine]? did the blonde ladies with winged hair capture her? Did the men in golf shoes, and V-neck sweaters? How could they if she found herself stuck on a man old enough to be her father? A man who carried not a golf club, but a sample case of Lucky Heart products. A man whose handkerchiefs were not lightweight cotton poking from his jacket pocket, but red and large and spotted with white dots. Did he ask her to warm with her own body his spot in the bed on cold winter nights before he slid in? Or did he do it for her? He probably let her put her spoon into his pint of cream and scoop off the melty part, and when they sat in the dark of the Lincoln Theater he wouldn't mind a bit if she stuck her hand down in his box of popcorn and came up with a fistful of it the sonofabitch. And when "Wings Over Jordan" came on he probably turned the volume down so he could hear her when she sang along with the choir,



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instead of up so as to drown out her rendition of [tk]. Turned, too, his jaw to the light of the bulb so she could press out between her thumb nails the hair root caught in a pore the dog. And another damn thing. (The malt was soup now, smooth and cold.) The twenty-five dollar bonus prize of a blue shaded boudoire lamp or an orchid colored satin-like ladies robe that he won and was due to him for having sold all that merchandise in one month--did he give that to her the heifer? And took her to Indigo on Saturday and sat way back so they could hear the music wide and be in the dark at the same time, at one of those round tables with a slick black top and a tablecloth of pure white on it, drinking rough gin with that sweet red stuff in it so it looked like soda pop, which a girl like her ought to have ordered instead of liquor she could sip from the edge of a glass wider at the mouth than at its base, with a tiny stem like a flower in between while her hand, the one that wasn't holding the glass shaped like a flower, was under the table drumming out the rhythm on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh, and he bought her underwear with stitching done to look like rosebuds and violets, VIOLETS, don't you know, and she wore it for him thin as it was and too cold for a room that couldn't count on a radiator to work through the afternoon, while I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody's kitchen to do their hair? Huddled in a doorway out of the wind waiting for the trolly? Whereever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bedsheets early to warm up a spot for me



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or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck or even my ears because it got that cold sometimes it did and maybe that is why the butcher knife struck the neckline just by the ear lobe. That's why . And that's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no that Violet is me. The me that hauled hay in Virginia and handled a four mule team in the brace. I have stood in cane fields in the middle of the night when the sound of it rustling hid the slither of the snakes and I stood still waiting for him and not stirring a speck in case he was near and I would miss him, and damn the snakes my man was coming for me and who or what was going to keep me from him? Plenty times, plenty times I have carried the welts given me by a two tone peckerwood because I was late in the fieldrow the next morning. Plenty times, plenty, I chopped twice the wood that was needed into short logs and kindlin so as to make sure Mr. [tk] had enough and wouldn't go hollering for me when I was bound to meet my Joe Trace don't care what, and do what you will or may. He was my Joe Trace. Mine. I picked him out from all the others wasn't nobody like Joe he make anybody stand in cane in the middle of the night; make any woman dream about him in the daytime so hard she miss the rut and have to work hard to get the mules back on the track. Any woman, not



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just me. Maybe that is what she saw. Not the fifty year old man toting a sample case, but my Joe Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, whose shoulders were razor sharp and who looked at me and never saw anybody else. Could she have looked at him and seen that? Under the table at the Indigo was she drumming on a thigh soft as a baby's but feeling all the while the way it used to be skin so tight it almost split and let the iron muscle through? Did she feel that, know that? That and other things, things I should have known and didn't? Secret things kept hidden from me or things I didn't notice? Is that why he let her scoop the melty part from around the edges of his pint of ice cream, stick her hand down in his salt and butter popcorn. What did she see, young girl like that, barely out of high school, with unbraided hair, lip rouge for the first time and high heeled shoes. And also what did he? A young me with high yellow skin instead of black? A young me with long wavy hair instead of short? Or a not me at all. A me he was loving in Virginia because that girl Dorcus wasn't around there anywhere. Was that it? Who was it? Who was he thinking of when he ran in the dark to meet me in the cane field? Somebody golden, like my own Golden Gray, who I never ever saw but who tore up my girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers? Help me god help me if that was it, because I knew him and loved him better than anybody except True Belle who is the one made me crazy about him in the first place. Is that what happened? Standing in the cane, he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to



see, but his heart knew all about, and me, holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy I never saw either. Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he.

I got quiet because the things I couldn't say were coming out of my mouth anyhow. I got quiet because I didn't know what my hands might get up to when the day's work was done. The business going on inside me I thought was none of my business and none of Joe's either because I just had to keep hold of him anyway I could and going crazy would make me lose him.

Sitting in the thin sharp light of the drugstore playing with a long spoon in a tall glass made her think of another woman occupying herself at a table pretending to drink from a cup. Her mother. She didn't ever want to sit at the table, alone in the moonlight, sipping boiled coffee as long as it was there, and pretending to sip it when it was all gone; waiting for morning when men came, talking low as though nobody was there but themselves, and picked around in our things, lifting out what they wanted--what was theirs, they said, although we cooked in it, washed sheets in it, sat on it, ate off of it. That was after they had hauled away the plow, the scythe, the mule, the sow, the churn and the butter press. Then they came inside the house and all of us children put one foot on the other and watched. When they got to the table where our mother sat nursing an empty cup, they took the table out from under her and then, while she sat there alone, and all by herself like, cup in hand, they came back and tipped the



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chair she sat in. She didn't jump up right away, so they shook it a bit and since she still stayed seated--looking ahead at no one--they just tipped her out of it like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don't want to touch it or pick it up in your arms. You tip it forward and it lands on the floor. No harm done if it's a cat because it has four legs. But a person, a woman, might fall forward and just stay there a minute looking at the cup, stronger than she is, unbroken at least and lying a bit beyond her hand. Just out of reach.

There were five of them, Violet the third, and they all came in the house finally and said mama; each one came and said it until she said uh huh. They never heard her say anything else in the days that followed, when, huddled in an abandoned shack, they were thoroughly dependent upon the few neighbors left in 1888--the ones who had not moved West to Kansas City, Oklahoma; north to Chicago or Bloomington Indiana. It was through one of the last to leave families, bound for Philadelphia, that the message of Rose Dear's distress reached True Belle. Those who stayed brought things: a pallet, a pot, some pan bread and a bucket of milk. Advice too: "Don't let this whip you, Rose. You got us, Rose. Think of the young ones, Rose. He ain't give you nothing you can't bear, Rose." But had He? Maybe this one time He had. Had misjudged and misunderstood her particular back bone. This one time. This here particular spine.

Rose's mother, True Belle, came when she heard. Left her



cushiony job in Baltimore and one hundred eagle dollars stitched separately into her skirts to keep them quiet, came to x to take charge and over. The little girls fell in love right away and things got put back together. Slowly but steadily, for about four years, True Belle, got things organized. And then Rose jumped into the well and missed all the fun. Two weeks after her burial, Rose's husband arrived loaded with ingots of gold for the childrn, two-dollar pieces for the women and snake oil for the men. For Rose he brought a silk embroidered pillow to comfort her back on a sofa nobody ever had, but would have been real nice under Rose's head in the pine box--if only he'd been on time. The children ate the chocolate from the ingots of gold and traded the heavenly paper among themselves for reed whistles and fishing string. The women bit the piece of silver before knotting it tightly in their clothes. Except True Belle. She fingered the money and, looking back and forth, from the coin to her son-in-law, shook her head and laughed.

"Damn," he said. "Aw, damn," when he heard what Rose had done.

Twenty-one days later he was gone again, and Violet was married to Joe and living in the City when she heard from a sister that he'd done it again: arrived with treasures weighing his pockets and folded under the cap on his head. His trips back were both bold and secret for he had been mixed in and up with the Readjustment Party and when a verbal urging from landowners had not worked, a physical one did the trick and he was persuaded to



transfer his self some place, any place, else. Perhaps he planned to find some way to get them all out; in the meantime he made fabulously dangerous and wonderful returns over the years, although the interims got longer and longer, and while the likelihood that he was still alive grew fainter, hope never did. Any time any time, on another brittle cold Monday or in the blasting heat of a Sunday night, he might be there, owl-whistling from the road, the mocking, daring dollar bills sticking from his cap, jammed into the cuffs of his trousers and the tops of his shoes. Candy stuck in clumps in his coat pocket along with a tin of Frieda's Egyptian Hair Pomade. Bottles of rye, purgitive waters and eaux for every conceivable toilette made a companionable click in his worn carpet bag.

He'd be in his seventies now. Slower for sure, and maybe he'd lost the teeth that made the smile that made the sisters forgive him. But in Violet's mind (as well as the minds of those who stayed in x) he was out there somewhere gathering and putting by delights to pass out among the homefolks. For who could keep him down this defiant birthday-every-day man who dispensed gifts and stories that kept them so rapt they forgot for the while a bone-clean cupboard and exhausted soil; or believed a child's leg would straighten itself out by and by. Forgot why he left in the first place and was forced to sneak into his own home ground. In his company forgetfulness fell like pollen. But for Violet the pollen never blotted out Rose. In the midst of the joyful resurrection



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of this phantom father, accompanying the distribution of his bounty both genuine and fake, Violet never forgot Rose or the place she had thrown herself into--a place so narrow so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her prone in a wooden box. Rose. Rose Dear. What was the thing, I wonder, the one and final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat? Had the last washing split the shirtwaist so bad it could not take another mend and changed its name to rag? Perhaps word had reached her about the four day hangings in Rocky Mountain: the men on Tuesday, the women two days later. Or had it been the news of the young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to an x, his grandmother refusing to give up his waste-filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse. They buried him in his brother's pants and the old woman pumped another bucket of clear water. Might it have been the morning after the night when craving ( which used to be hope) got out of hand? When longing squeezed, then tossed her before running off promising to return and bounce her again like an india rubber ball? Or was it that chair they tipped her out of? Did she fall on the floor and sit there deciding right then that she would do it. Someday. Delaying it for four years while True Belle came and took over but remembering it as a door, closed and locked, with pointless hours and days on the other side? Biding her time until the moment returned --with all its mewing hurt or overboard rage--and she could turn away from the door to step toward the limitlessness



beckoning from the well. What could it have been, I wonder?

True Belle was there, chuckling, competent, stitching by firelight, gardening and harvesting by day. Pouring x tea on the little girls' cuts and bruises, and keeping them at their tasks with spell binding tales of her Baltimore days and the child she had cared for there. Maybe it was that: knowing her daughters were in good hands, better hands than her own, at last, and Rose Dear was free of time that no longer flowed, but stood stock still when they tipped her from her kitchen chair. So she dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun.

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As she grew older, Violet could neither stay where she was or go away. The well sucked at her dreams, but the notion of leaving frightened her. It was True Belle who forced it. There were bully x crops in x and people for twenty miles around were going to pick it. Rumor was the pay was ten cents for young women, a quarter for men. Three double seasons in a row of bad weather had ruined all expectations and then came the day when the blossoms jumped out fat and creamy. Everybody held his breath while the landowner squinted his eyes and spat. Two laborers [x and x] walked the rows, touching the tender flowers, fingering the soil and trying to puzzle out the sky. Then four days of light, fresh rain and all of x was downy with the cleanest cotton they'd ever seen. Softer than silk, and out so fast the weevils, having abandoned the fields years ago, had no time to get back there.



Three weeks. It all had to be done in three weeks or less. Everybody with fingers showed up and was hired on the spot. X\$ a bale, some said, if you grew your own; X\$ if you had a white friend to carry it up for pricing. And for pickers, ten cents a day for the women and a case quarter for the men.

True Belle sent Violet and two of her sisters in the fourth wagon load to go. They assembled at dawn, ate what was handed out and shared the meadows and the stars with local people who saw no point in going all the way home for five hours sleep.

Violet had no talent for it. She was 17 years old but trailed with the twelve year olds--making up the last in line or meeting the others on their way back down the row.. For this she was put to scragging, second picking the bushes that had a few inferior puffs left on the twigs by swifter hands than hers. Humiliated, teased to tears, she had about decided to beg a way back to x when a man fell out of the tree above her head and landed at her side. She had lain down one night, sulking and abashed, a little way from her sisters, but not too far. Not too far to crawl back to them swiftly if the x trees turned out to be full of spirits idling the night away. The spot she had chosen to spread her blanket[?] was under a handsome black walnut that grew away from the woods next to the meadow strip bordering the acres of cotton.

The thump could not have been a raccoon's because it said ow. Violet rolled away too scared to speak, but raised on all fours to dash.



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"Never happened before, " said the man. "I've been sleeping up there every night. This the first time I fell out."

Violet could see his outline in a sitting position and that he was rubbing his arm then his head then his arm again.

"You sleep in trees?"

"If I find me a good one."

"Nobody sleeps in trees."

"I sleep in them."

"Sounds soft-headed to me. Could be snakes up there."

"Snakes around here crawl the ground at night. Now who's soft-headed?"

"Could've killed me."

"Might still. If my arm ain't broke."

"I hope it is. You won't be picking nothing in the morning and climbing people's trees either."

"I don't pick cotton. I work the gin house."

"What you doing out here, then, Mr. High and Mighty sleeping in trees like a bat?"

"You don't have one nice word for a hurt man?"

"Yeah: find somebody else's tree."

"You act like you own it."

"You act like you do."

"Say we share it."

"Not me."

He stood up and shook his leg before trying his weight on it.,



then limped toward the tree.

"You not going back up there over my head."

"Get my tarp," he said. "Rope broke. That's what did it." He scanned the night for the far reaches of the branches. "See it? There it is. Hanging right there. Yep." He sat down then, his back resting on the trunk. "Have to wait til it's light, though," he said and Violet always believed that because their first conversation began in the dark (when neither could see much more of the other than silhouette) and ended in a green and white dawn, that night time was never the same for her. Never again would she wake, struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from finding Rose in the morning twisted into space much too small.

His name was Joseph and even before the sun rose[?], when it was still hidden in the woods, but freshening the world's green and making acres of white cotton dazzle against the gash of a ruby horizon, Violet claimed him. Hadn't he fallen practically in her lap? Hadn't he stayed? All through the night, taking her sass, complaining, teasing, explaining, but talking, talking her through the dark. And with daylight came the bits of him: his smile and his wide watching eyes. His buttonless shirt open to a knot at the waist exposed a chest she claimed as her own smooth pillow. The shaft of his legs, the plane of his shoulders, jawline and long fingers--she claimed it all. She knew she must be staring, and tried to look away, but the music in his voice brought her eyes



back each and every time. She grew angry when she heard workers begin to stir, anticipating the breakfast call, going off in the trees to relieve themselves, muttering morning sounds--but then he said, "I'll be back in our tree tonight. Where you be?"

"Under it," she said and rose from the clover like a woman with important things to do.

She did not worry what could happen in three weeks when she was supposed to take her two dollars and ten cents back to True Belle. As it turned out, she sent it back with her sisters and stayed in the vicinity working x. The straw boss had no faith in her, having watched her working hard to fill her sack as quickly as the children, but she was highly and suddenly vocal in her determination. She lived with a family of six in x and worked x to be with Joe whenever she could. It was there she became the powerfully strong young woman who could handle mules, bale hay and chop wood as good as any man. It was there where the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet grew shields no gloves or shoes could match.

All for Joe Trace, a [x] nineteen year old who lived with an adopted family, worked gins and lumber and cane and cotton and corn, who butchered when needed, plowed, fished, sold skins and game--and who was willing. He loved the woods. Loved them. So it was shocking to his family and friends not when he agreed to marry Violet, but that he agreed to take her to Baltimore where she said all the houses had separate rooms and water came to you--not



you to it. Where colored men worked harbors for x\$ a day, pulling cargo from ships bigger than churches, and others drove up to the very door of your house to take you where you needed to be. She was describing a Baltimore of twenty-five years ago and a neighborhood neither she nor Joe could rent in, but she didn't know that, and never knew it, because they went to the City instead. Their Baltimore dreams were displaced by more powerful ones. Joe knew people living in the City and some who'd been there and come home with tales to make Baltimore weep. The money to be earned for doing light work--standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning stranger's shoes--got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one whole harvest. Whitepeople literally threw money at you--just for being neighborly: opening a taxi door, picking up a package. And anything you had or made or found you could sell in the streets. In fact, there were streets where colored people owned all the stores; whole blocks of handsome colored men and women laughing all night and making money all day. Steel cars sped down the streets and if you saved up, they said, you could get you one and drive as long as there was road.

Suddenly something changed Joe's mind, something that seemed to anger him in a way, and permitted him to leave his fields and woods and secret lonely valleys. To give away his fishing pole, his skinning knife--every piece of his gear but one, and borrow a suitcase for their things. He took his bride on a train ride



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exciting enough to pop their eyes and danced on into the City.

Violet thought it would disappoint them; that it would be less lovely than Baltimore. Joe believed it would be perfect. When they arrived, carrying all of their belongings in one valise, they both knew right away that perfect was not the word. It was better than that.

[mtk; people, dialogue]

Committed as Violet was to hip development, even she couldn't drink the remaining malt--watery, warm and flat-tasting. She buttoned her coat and left the drugstore and noticed, at the same moment as that Violt did, that it was spring. In the City.



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[opening moved from jchap5]

A thing like that could harm you. Pregnant girls were the most susceptible, but so were the grandfathers. Any fascination could mark a newborn: melons, rabbits, wisteria, rope, and more than a shed snakeskin, a wild woman is the worst of all. So the warnings the girls got were part of a whole group of things to look out for lest the baby come here craving or favoring the mother's distraction. Who would have thought old men needed to be cautioned too; told and warned against seeing, smelling or even hearing her?

She lived close, they said, not way off in the woods or even down in the riverbed, but somewhere in that canefield--at its edge some said or maybe moving around in it. Close. Cutting cane could get frenzied sometimes when young men got the feeling she was just yonder, hiding, and probably looking at them. One swing of the cutting blade could lop off her head if she got sassy or too close, and it would be her own fault. That would be when they cut bad--too high up on the stalk or raggedy. Just thinking about her, whether she was close or not, could mess up a whole morning's work.

The grandfathers, way past slashing but still able enough to bind stalks or feed the sugar vats, used to be thought safe. That is until the man the grandfathers called Hunters Hunter got tapped



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on the shoulder by fingertips that couldn't be anybody's but hers. When he snapped up, he saw the cane stalks shuddering but he didn't hear a single crack. Because he was more used to wood life than tame, he knew when the eyes watching him were up in a tree, behind a knoll or, like this, at ground level. You can see how he was confused: the fingertips at his shoulder, the eyes at his feet. First thing came to mind was the woman he named himself some twenty years ago because, after tending her, that was the word he thought of: Wild. He was sure he was tending a sweet young girl back then, but when she bit him, he thought, O, she's wild. Some things are like that. There's no gain fathoming more.

He remembered her laugh, though, and how peaceful she was after the first few days following the bite, so the touch of her fingertips didn't frighten him, but it did make him sad. Too sad to report the sighting to his co-workers, old men like himself no longer able to cut all day. Unwarned, they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her nor for how trembly their legs got hearing that baby-girl laugh. The pregnant girls marked their babies or didn't, but the grandfathers--unwarned--went soft in the head, walked out of the sugar shack, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of thier grown children and where they'd put thier razor strops.

When the man they called Hunters Hunter knew her--tended her--she was sweet but touchy. If he had handled it right, maybe she



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would have stayed in the house, learned how to dress and talk to folks. He thought she was dead by now. Local people used the story of her to caution children and pregnant girls and it saddened him to learn that instead of resting, she was hungry still. Though for what, exactly, he couldn't say, less it was for hair the color of a young man's name. To see the two of them together was a regular <sup>just</sup> ~~surprise~~: the young man's head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool.

He didn't report it, but the news got out anyway: Wild was not a story of a used-to-be-long-ago-crazy girl whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hard-headed children. She was out there--and real. Someone saw the man they called Hunters Hunter jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the canefield, he murmured loud enough for somebody to hear, "Wild. Dog me, if it ain't Wild." The pregnant girls just sighed at the news and went on sweeping and sprinkling the dirt yards, and the young men sharpened their blades till the edges whistled. But the old men started dreaming. They remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and <sup>that queer</sup> ~~the~~ boy she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the yellow-headed boy. The first wasn't Hunters Hunter, who was off ~~on some trek~~ looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Patty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on Mr. Henry's place while he was gone, and on one of the days he stopped by--to do a little weeding maybe and see if the pigs and



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chickens were still alive--it was rained all morning. Sheets of it made afternoon rainbows everywhere. Later he told his mother that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, and Honor looked at his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, he thought a ghost had taken over the place. Then he realized he was looking at a whiteman and never believed otherwise, even though he saw Mr. Henry's face when the <sup>white</sup> tow-headed man told him he was his son.

When Henry Lestroy, <sup>the man</sup> ~~also~~ called Hunters Hunter, got back and saw the carriage and the beautiful horse tied near his stall, he was instantly alarmed. No man he knew drove a X carriage; no horse in the county had hair cut and combed that way. Then he saw the mule Patty's boy rode and calmed down a bit. He stood in his own door and had a hard time making out what he was looking at. Patty's boy, Honor, was kneeling beside the cot on which a pregnant girl lay, and a golden haired man towered above them both. There had never been a whiteman inside his house. Hunters Hunter swallowed. All the pains he had taken shot to hell.

When the blond man turned to look at him, the gray eyes widened, then closed, then, sliding slowly up from Hunter's boots to his knees, to chest to head, the man's gaze was like a tongue. By the time the gray eyes were level with his, Hunter had to struggle to keep from feeling trapped. In his own house. Even the groan from the cot did not break the lock of the stranger's stare. Everything about him was young and soft--except the color of his



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eyes.

Honor looked from one to the other.

"Glad you back, Mr. Henry."

"Who be these?"

"They both in here before me."

"Who be these?"

"Can't say, sir. The woman she bad but coming around now."

The golden haired man had no pistol Hunter could see, and his thin boots had never walked country roads. His clothes would make a preacher sigh and Hunter knew from the lady-like hands the stranger had never made a fist hard enough to smash a melon. He walked to the table and placed his pouch on it. With one swing he tossed a brace of x in the corner. But he kept his rifle in the crook of his arm. And his hat on his head. The gray eyes followed his every move.

"The woman had a bad fall from what I can tell. This here gent, he carried her in here. I cleaned the blood up best I could."

Hunter noticed the green dress covering the woman, the dark black-blood spots on the sleeve.

"I got the fowl in and most of the pigs. 'Cept Bubba. He young but getting big, Mr. Henry. Big...."

The cane liquor bottled, uncapped, was on the table, a tin cup next to it. Hunter checked its contents and returned it to the table. Carefully he eased the stopper in, wondering what land this



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queer man came from who knew so little about the rules of hospitality. Woodsmen, white or black, all country people were free to enter a lean to, a hunter's shooting cabin. Take what they needed, leave what they could. They were way stations and anybody, everybody might have need of shelter. But nobody, nobody drank a man's liquor in his house unless they knew each other mighty well.

"Do we know one another?" Hunter thought the 'sir' he left out was as loud as a bang. But the man didn't hear it because he had a bang of his own.

"No. Daddy. We don't."

He couldn't say it wasn't possible. That he needed <sup>a</sup>the locket portrait to convince him. But the shock was heavy just the same.

"I never knew you were in the world," what was he said eventually, but what the blonde man had to say, planned to say in response had to wait because the woman screamed then and hoisted her self on her elbows to look between her raised knees.

The city man looked faint, but Honor and Hunter had not only watched the common and counted on birthings farm people see, but had tugged and twisted newborns from all sorts of canals. This baby was easy. It slipped out almost unaided. The problem was clear immediately: the woman would not ( maybe she could not) nurse. Hunter sent the boy home.

"Tell your mother to get one of the women to come out here. Come out here and take it. Otherwise it won't live out the morrow."



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"Yes sir!"

"And bring cane liquor if any's around."

"Yes sir!"

Hunter bent down then to look at the mother who hadn't said anything since that scream. Sweat covered her face and, breathing hard, she licked beads of it off her upper lip. He leaned closer and when he turned his head to <sup>yank</sup>adjust the blanket over her, she raised up and sunk her teeth in his cheek. He <sup>tore</sup>yanked away and touching <sup>his bruised face</sup>the ~~face~~ lightly, chuckled. "Wild, eh?" He turned to the pale boy-man who had called him "Daddy."

"Where you pick up a wild woman?"

"In the woods. Where wild women grow."

"Say who she was?"

The man shook his head. "I startled her. She hit her head on a rock slab. I couldn't just leave her there."

"Reckon not. Who sent you to me?"

"True Belle."

"Ahhhh." Hunter smiled. "Where is she? I never did hear where she went off to."

"Or with?"

"Went off with the Colonel's daughter. Everybody knowed that. Quick they went, too."

"Guess why."

"Don't have to guess now. I never knew you was in the world."

"Did you think about her? Wonder where she was?"



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"True Belle?"

"No! Vera. Vera Louise."

"Aw, man. What I look like wondering where a whitegirl went?"

"My mother!"

"Suppose I did, eh? What'd be the next step? Go up to the Colonel? Say, look here Colonel Gray, I been wondering where your daughter got to. We ain't been riding in a while. Tell you what you do. Tell her I'm waiting for her and to come on out. She'll know the place we meet at. And tell her to wear that green dress. The one make it hard to see her in the grass." Hunter passed his hand over his head. "You aint said where they at. Where you come from."

"Baltimore. My name is Golden Gray."

"Can't say it don't suit."

"Suit you if it was Golden Lestroy?"

"Not in these parts." He slipped his hand under the baby's blanket to see if its little heart was going. "Baby boys weak. Got to get some nursing soon."

"How touching>"

"Look here. What you want? I mean, now; what you want now? Want to stay here? You welcome. Want to chastise me? Throw it out your mind. I won't take a contrary word. You come in here, drink my liquor, rummage in my stuff and think you can cross-talk me just cause you call me Daddy? If she told you I was your daddy, then she told you more than she told me. Get a hold of yourself. A son



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ain't what a woman say. A son is what a man do. You want to act like you mine, then do it, else get the devil out my house!"

"I didn't come down here to court you, get your approval."

"I know what you came for. To see how black I was. You thought you was white, didn't you. She probably let you think it. Hoped you'd think it. And I swear I'd think it too."

"She protected me! If she'd announced I was a nigger, I could have been a slave!"

"They got free niggers. Always did have some free niggers. You could be one of them."

"I don't want to be a free nigger; I want to be a free man."

"Don't we all? Look. Be what you want--white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black and don't bring me no whiteboy sass."

Golden Gray was sober now and his sober thought was to blow the man's head off. Tomorrow.

It was the girl who changed his mind.

Victory might remember. He was Joe's best friend, and they hunted through and worked in that whole county. Not even a police map would show the walnut tree Joe fell out of, but Victory would remember it. It could be there still, in somebody's backyard, but the cotton fields and the colored neighborhood around them were churned up and pressed down. One week of rumors, two days of



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packing, and 900 Negroes, encouraged by guns and hemp, rode out of town on wagons or walked on their feet to who knew (or cared) where. With two days notice? How can you plan where to go and if you do know of a place you think will welcome you, where is the money to arrive?

They stood around at depots, camped in fields on the edge of the road in clusters until shooed away for being the blight that had been visited upon them--for reflecting like still water the disconsolateness they certainly felt, and for reminding others about the wages sin paid out to its laborers.

They burnt the canefield where Wild hid, or watched, or laughed out loud, or stayed quiet. The sugar smell lingered in the smoke--weighting it. Would she know? Would she understand that fire was not light or flowers moving toward her, or flying golden hair? That if you tried to touch or kiss it, it would swallow all your breath away?

The little graveyards, with hand made crosses and sometimes a stone marker pleading for remembrance in careful block letters, never stood a chance.

Hunter refused to leave; he was more in the woods than in his cabin anyway, and seemed to look forward to spending his last days in the places he felt most comfortable. So he didn't haul the gear he collected to a wagon. Or walk the road to X as Joe and Victory did to look for a workplace. Some farm that gave you space to sleep and food in return for clearing brush. Or a mill that had



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a bunkhouse. Joe and Victory walked the road along with the others and knew they were near Crossland when they passed the walnut tree where they used to sleep on nights when, hunting far from home, cool air could only be found high in its branches. And when they looked back down the road, they could still see smoke lifting from what was left of the fields and the cane of Vernonsville. They both found work at a sawmill, then at x, then x, x. Then one spring the southern third of the county erupted in fat white cotton balls, and Joe left Victory at X for the lucrative crop picking outside Crossland. But first, first he had to know if the woman he believed was his mother was still there--or had she confused fire with hair and lost her breath to it.

[1.Joe goes back, tracks back to see if Wild is still there. that encounter depletes him.

She wasn't always in the cane. Nor the back part of the woods on a whiteman's farm. He and Hunter and Victory had seen traces of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals and many times the signal Hunter relied on most--red wings, those blue black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close. Hunter had spoken to her there twice, but Joe knew that those woods were not her favorite place. Across the stream, beyond the place where the trout and the X were plentiful but before the stream went underground heading for the mill, the bank turned around an incline. On top of



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it, some fifteen feet above the stream was a sheltering rock formation its entrance blocked by hedges of old hibiscus. Once, after pulling ten trout in the first two hours of dawn, Joe had walked past that place and heard what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. It hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes.

Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sound. Knowing the music the world makes has no words, he stood rock still and scanned his surroundings. A silver line lay across the opposite bank, sun cutting into the last of the night's royal blue. Above and to his left hibiscus thick, savage and old. Its blossoms were closed waiting for the day. The scrap of song came from a woman's throat, and Joe thrashed and beat his way up the incline and through the hedge, a tangle of muscadine vines, Virginia creeper and hibiscus rusty with age. He found the opening to the rock formation but could not enter it from that angle. He would have to climb above it and slide down into its mouth. But he saw enough tracks to know she was there.

He called out.

"Anybody there?"

The song stopped, and a snap like the braking of twigs took its place.



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"Hey! You in there!"

Nothing stirred and he could not persuade himself that the fragrance that floated over him was not a mixture of honey and shit. He left then, disgusted, and not a little afraid.

But after the dispossession, after having seen the smoke and tasted the sugared air on his tongue. he went back. Skirting the burned ground, and fields of black stalks; looking away from the cabins that were now hot bricks where the wash tub stood, he headed for the stream and the hole in it where trout multiplied like flies. When he reached the turn he adjusted the rifle strapped to his back and dropped to his haunches. Slowly, breathing softly through his mouth he crawled toward the rocks shut away by greenery grown savage in sun and air. There was no sign of her, nothing he recognized. Entering the rock place he saw nothing a woman could use and the vestiges of human habitation were cold. Had she run away, escaped? Or had she been overtaken by smoke, fire, panic, helplessness? Joe waited there, till his listening made him drowsy and he slept for an hour or more. When he woke the day was slipping and the hibiscus was as wide as his hand. He hauled himself down the incline and, as he turned to go four red wing shot up from the lower limbs of a white oak tree. Immediately Joe is on his haunches, whipering: "Is it you? Just say it. Say anything." Some on near him is breathing. Turning round now he examined the place he has just exited. Every movement and leaf shift seemed to be her. "Give me a sign, then. You don't have to speak. Let me



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see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go; I promise. A sign. " He begged pleaded for her hand until the light grew small. "Are you my mother?" Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing. Whispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to breathing, he suddenly sees himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother that Huncce once knew and cared for but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him. A woman who frightened children, made men sharpenknives, for whom woman left food out (might as well--otherwise she stole it). Leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken self all over the county. shaming him before everybody but Victory, who neither laughed nor slant-eyed him when Joe told him what Hunter had said. "She must be tough, " was Victory's reply. "Live outside like that all year round, she must be tough."

Maybe so, but right then Joe felt like a lint-headed fool, crazier than she and just as wild. would he too slip into mud over black roots, patches of dirt crawling with termites. He loved the woods because Hunter taught him how to. but now they wre full of her, a simple-,minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanet sow managed: nurse what she birthed. The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere.



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There are boys who have whores for mothers and don't get over it. There are boys whose mothers stagger through town roads when the juke joint slams its door. Mothers who throw their children away or trade them for folding money. He would have chosen any one of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity. The blast he aimed at the white oak limbs distrubed nothing for the shells were in his pocket. The trigger clicked harmlessly. Yelling he raced back down the bank and followed the stream out of there.

From then on his work was maniacal. He took every job offered or heard about. Cut trees, cane; plowed till he could hardly lift his arms; picked chickens and cotton; hauled lumber, grain, quarry rocks and stock. Some thought he was money hungry, but Victory knew Joe didn't like to be still or thought of as lazy. Sometimes he worked so long and laate he never got back to the bed he bunked in. Then he would sleep in the walnut tree; swinging in the tarp they kept there for when they needed it.

2.Later when he meets Violet,by falling out of the walnut tree, he is content to marry her and leave the area.

3. "He could feel Victory..." tracking dorcus in the city.

4. Details of his meeting with Wild: deep blue evening sky and her hiding behind hedges and hedges of wild hibiscus.

5."So when he closed in..." Arriving at Dorcus' party.]



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As he tracks Dorcus, he could almost feel Victory by his side or Hunter, even, applauding when he got the scent; chuckling and shaking their heads when he lost it.

[Joe's meeting with Wild is ambiguous: did she acknowledge that she was his mother?]

When he closed in, there was neither blue water nor flowers of any kind.