



Jazz Second Pass Proofs Master Set Pages A-B, i-viii, 3-114 (formerly 1-112).

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Specifications for Job No. 30496 (Second Pass)

Title—JAZZ

Author—Toni Morrison

Publisher—Knopf

Designer—Dorothy S. Baker

Date—December, 1991

NEW SPEC'S PER OKAYED SAMPLES

Trim Size— $5\frac{5}{8}" \times 8\frac{3}{8}"$

Margins—Head, $\frac{1}{2}"$; Gutter, $\frac{7}{8}"$

Type page— 23×40.5 picas

Lines to full text page—31

Lines to chapter opening—10

Par. indent 1 em Chapter starts right only. Per paging instructions, if a chapter ends on a verso, there must be a blank recto & verso that follow; when a section ends on a recto, then just the blank verso is OK.

Text—11/15 Electra

Figures—Old Style

Folios—10.5/30 Avanta, old style figures, letterspaced 2.5 pts., centered.

Folios on right pages only.

Chapter opening folio—none

Runningheads—10.5/30 Avanta small caps, letterspaced 2.5 pts. Centered. copy, LEFT: Jazz; RIGHT: No runninghead. Folio only

Chapter Opening Style—Initial art to be supplied. Indent initial paragraph indent. Aligns with first line.

Poetry—11/15 Electra, center on longest line. 1 line above and below.

SpaceBreaks—Remain fixed 2 line space. Minimum of 2 lines above or below space break at top or bottom of page. If break falls directly at bottom or top or page leave space at top or bottom (not both) and insert 3 small ellipses separated by 1-em and centered by text width. At top of page align ellipses with base of first line of text; at bottom of page, align with lower case x ht of the last text line. (Per query dated 11/18/91)

Page Makeup—Per paging instructions, run pages long only to avoid widows and bad breaks; a widow is less than 1 full text line; an orphan is less than 1 full word; minimum of 5 text lines on chapter endings; drop folios remain in same position on long pages as on full pages.

Composed on ComCom's computer driven composition device.

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165, 187, 195, 219

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TONI MORRISON

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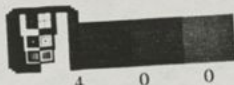
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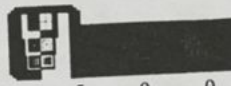
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JAZZ

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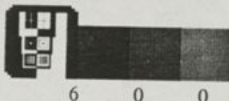
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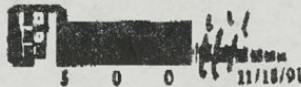
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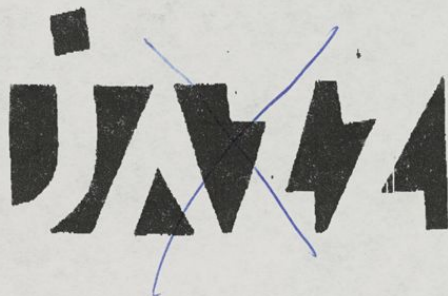
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"Thunder, Perfect Mind,"
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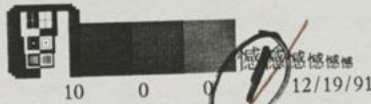
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th, I know that woman. She used to live with a
flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He
fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown,
spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just
to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is
Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead
face 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 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."



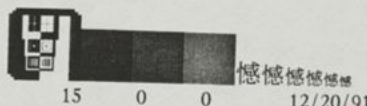
J A Z Z

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 niece cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.

Regardless of the grief Violet caused, her name was brought up at the January meeting of the Salem Women's Club as someone needing assistance, but it was voted down because only prayer—not money—could help her now, because she had a more or less able husband (who needed to stop feeling sorry for himself), and because a man and his family on 134th Street had lost everything in a fire. The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt-out family's aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it.

She is awfully skinny, Violet; fifty, but still good looking 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 is 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. She thought it would dry his 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.

Anyway, Joe didn't pay Violet or her friend any notice.



Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say. He may have come to feel that Violet's gifts were poor measured against his sympathy for the brokenhearted 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—whipped 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. A poisoned silence floated through the rooms like a big fishnet that Violet alone slashed through with loud recriminations. Joe's daytime listlessness and both their worrying nights must have wore her down. So she decided to love—well, find out about—the eighteen-year-old whose creamy little 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. So she commenced to gather the rest of the information. Maybe she thought she could solve the mystery of love that way. Good luck and let me know.

She questioned everybody, starting with Malvonne, an upstairs neighbor—the one who told her about Joe's dirt in the first place and whose apartment he and the girl used as a love nest. From Malvonne she learned the girl's address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn't need to straighten her hair); 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). And when she was shown how, Violet did the dance steps the dead girl used to do. All that. When she had the steps

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J A Z Z

down pat—her knees just so—everybody, including the ex-boyfriend, 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 left behind. But Violet was nothing but persistent and no wisecrack or ugly look stopped her. She haunted PS-89 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. ~~JHS-139, Clinton High School too, because the girl had quit there in the eleventh grade.~~ And for a long time she pestered the girl's aunt, a dignified lady who did fine work off and on in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and 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 became clear to her (as it was to me) that this niece had been hard-headed as well as sly.

One particular thing the aunt showed her, 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 mantel in her own parlor and both she and Joe looked at it in bewilderment.

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 examine the record and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom.

I'm crazy about this City.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In

~~She haunted PS 89 to talk to teachers who knew the girl. JHS-139 too because the girl went there before fooling around in vocational classes, since there were no high schools in that district a colored girl could attend.~~

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the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible—like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath. The A&P hires a colored clerk. Big-legged women with pink kitty tongues roll money into green tubes for later on; then they laugh and put their arms around each other. Regular people corner thieves in alleys for quick retribution and, if he is stupid and has robbed wrong, thieves corner him too. Hoodlums hand out goodies, do their best to stay interesting, and since they are being watched for excitement, they pay attention to their clothes and the carving out of insults. Nobody wants to be an emergency at Harlem Hospital but if the Negro surgeon is visiting, pride cuts down the pain. And although the hair of the first class of colored nurses was declared unseemly for the official Bellevue nurse's cap, there are thirty-five of them now—all dedicated and superb in their profession.

→

J A Z Z

Nobody says it's pretty here; nobody says it's easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can't hurt you.

I haven't got any muscles, so I can't really be expected to defend myself. But I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it's making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do. You have to understand what it's like, taking on a big city: I'm exposed to all sorts of ignorance and criminality. Still, this is the only life for me. I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it. I see them all over the place: wealthy whites, and plain ones too, pile into mansions decorated and redecorated by black women richer than they are, and both are pleased with the spectacle of the other. I've seen the eyes of Black Jews, brimful of pity for everyone not themselves, graze the food stalls and the ankles of loose women, while a breeze stirs the white plumes on the helmets of the UNIA men. A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone, and below him, in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat. He touches her lip to remove a bit of something there. Suddenly she is quiet. He tilts her chin up. They stand there. Her grip on her purse slackens and her neck makes a nice curve. The man puts his hand on the stone wall above her head. By the way his jaw moves and the turn of his head I know he has a golden tongue. The sun sneaks into the alley behind them. It makes a pretty picture on its way down.

Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what goes on on its blocks and lots and side streets is anything the strong can think of and the

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weak will admire. All you have to do is heed the design—the way it's laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow.

I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind. People say I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing, as I have, while your partner overstays at another appointment, or promises to give you exclusive attention after supper, but is falling asleep just as you have begun to speak—well, it can make you inhospitable if you aren't careful, the last thing I want to be.

Hospitality is gold in this City; you have to be clever to figure out how to be welcoming and defensive at the same time. When to love something and when to quit. If you don't know how, you can end up out of control or controlled by some outside thing like that hard case last winter. Word was that underneath the good times and the easy money something evil ran the streets and nothing was safe—not even the dead. Proof of this being Violet's outright attack on the very subject of a funeral ceremony. Barely three days into 1926. A host of thoughtful people looked at the signs (the weather, the number, their own dreams) and believed it was the commencement of all sorts of destruction. That the scandal was a message sent to warn the good and rip up the faithless. I don't know who was more ambitious—the doomsayers or Violet—but it's hard to match the superstitious for great expectations.

Armistice was ~~eight~~ years old the winter Violet disrupted the funeral, and veterans on Seventh Avenue were still wearing their army-issue greatcoats, because nothing they can pay for is as sturdy or hides so well what they had boasted of in 1919.

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J A Z Z

Eight years later, the day before Violet's misbehavior, when the snow comes it sits where it falls on Lexington and Park Avenue too, and waits for horse-drawn wagons to tamp it down when they deliver coal for the furnaces cooling down in the cellars. Up in those big five-story apartment buildings and the narrow wooden houses in between people knock on each other's doors to see if anything is needed or can be had. A piece of soap? A little kerosene? Some fat, chicken or pork, to brace the soup one more time? Whose husband is getting ready to go see if he can find a shop open? Is there time to add turpentine to the list drawn up and handed to him by the wives?

Breathing hurts in weather that cold, but whatever the problems of being winterbound in the City they put up with them because it is worth anything to be on Lenox Avenue safe from fays and the things they think up; where the sidewalks, snow-covered or not, are wider than the main roads of the towns where they were born and perfectly ordinary people can stand at the stop, get on the streetcar, give the man the nickel, and ride anywhere you please, although you don't please to go many places because everything you want is right where you are: the church, the store, the party, the women, the men, the postbox (but no high schools), the furniture store, street newspaper vendors, the bootleg houses (but no banks), the beauty parlors, the barbershops, the juke joints, 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 service trails, of course, are worn, and there are paths slick from the forays of members of one group into the territory of another where it is believed something curious or thrilling lies. Some gleaming, cracking, scary stuff. Where you can pop the cork



and put the cold glass mouth right up to your own. Where you can find danger or be it; where you can fight till you drop and smile at the knife when it misses and when it doesn't. It makes you wonderful just to see it. And just as wonderful to know that back in one's own building there are lists drawn up by the wives for the husband hunting an open market, and that sheets impossible to hang out in snowfall drape kitchens like the curtains of Abyssian Sunday-school plays.

The young are not so young here, and there is no such thing as midlife. Sixty years, forty, even, is as much as anybody feels like being bothered with. If they reach that, or get very old, they sit around looking at goings-on as though it were a five-cent triple feature on Saturday. Otherwise they find themselves butting in the business of people whose names they can't even remember and whose business is 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. 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 rooms are like the empty birdcages wrapped in cloth. And a dead girl's face has become a necessary thing for their nights. They each take turns to throw off the bedcovers, rise up from the sagging mattress and tiptoe over cold linoleum into the parlor to gaze at what seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold, unsmiling girl staring from

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J A Z Z

the mantelpiece. If the tiptoer is Joe Trace, 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 judgment. Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tiptoer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail face of someone who will never work for anything; someone who picks up things lying on other people's dressers and is not embarrassed when found out. It is the 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.

Two or three times during the night, as they take turns to go look at that picture, one of them will say her name. Dorcas? Dorcas. The dark rooms grow darker: the parlor needs a struck match to see the face. Beyond are the dining room, two bedrooms, the kitchen—all situated in the middle of the building so the apartment's windows have no access to the moon or the light of a street lamp. The bathroom has the best light since it juts out past the kitchen and catches the afternoon rays. Violet and Joe have arranged their furnishings in a way that might not remind anybody of the rooms in *Modern Home-maker* but it suits the habits of the body, the way a person walks from one room to another without bumping into anything, and what he wants to do when he sits down. You know how some people put a chair or a table in a corner where it looks nice but nobody in the world is ever going to go over to it, let alone sit down there? Violet didn't do that in her place. Everything is put where a person would like to have it, or would use or need

it. So the dining room doesn't have a dining table with funeral-parlor chairs. It has big deep-down chairs and a card table by the window covered with jade, dracena and doctor plants until they want to have card games or play tonk between themselves. The kitchen is roomy enough to accommodate four people eating or give a customer plenty leg room while Violet does her hair. The front room, or parlor, is not wasted either, waiting for a wedding reception to be worthy of. It has birdcages and mirrors for the birds to look at themselves in, but now, of course, there are no birds, Violet having let them out on the day she went to Dorcas' funeral with a knife. Now there are just empty cages, the lonely mirrors glancing back at them. As for the rest, it's a sofa, some carved wooden chairs with small tables by them so you can put your coffee cup or a dish of ice cream down in front of you, or if you want to read the paper, you can do it easy without messing up the folds. The mantel over the fireplace used to have shells and pretty-colored stones, but all of that is gone now and only the picture of Dorcas Manfred sits there in a silver frame waking them up all night long.

Such restless nights make them sleep late, and Violet has 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 can only charge twenty-five or fifty cents anyway, but since that business at Dorcas' funeral, many of her regular customers have 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 is skipping workdays Violet carries her tools and her trade more and more into the overheated apartments of women who wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and

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J A Z Z

don't care what she has done. These women always need their hair done, and sometimes pity darkens their shiny eyes and they tip her a whole dollar.

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

"Shut your mouth," says Violet.

"I mean it," says the woman. She is still sleepy, and rests 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," answers Violet. "Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It's these little hungry girls acting like women. Not 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 press it too?"

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

"Aw, the devil," the woman sighs and takes 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 deathbed."

"I need my breath now." Violet tests the hot comb. It scorches a long brown finger on the newspaper.

"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 . . ."

"Oh," says the woman. She knocks the fire from her cigarette, pinches the tip and lays the butt carefully into the ashtray. Leaning back in the chair, she presses the rim of her ear with two fingers. "You in trouble," she says, yawning. "Deep, deep trouble. Can't rival the dead for love. Lose every time."

Violet agrees that it must be so; not only is she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too. When she isn't trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl's hair; when she isn't cursing Joe with brand-new cuss words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head; when she isn't worrying about his loss of appetite, his insomnia, she wonders what color were Dorcas' eyes. Her aunt had said brown; the beauticians said black but Violet had never seen a light-skinned person with coal-black eyes. One thing, for sure, she needed her ends cut. In the photograph and from what Violet 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, Dorcas. Dorcas.

Violet leaves the sleepy woman's house. The slush at the curb is freezing again, and although she has seven icy blocks ahead, she is grateful that the customer who is coming to her kitchen for an appointment is not due until three o'clock, and there is time for a bit of housekeeping before then. Some business that needs doing because it is 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 can't put her hand to something with another chore just around the bend from the one she is doing. She lights the oven to warm up the kitchen.

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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 resituating the cord that holds the stove door 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 their own thoughts. But they wouldn't like it. They are busy and thinking of ways to be busier because such a space of nothing pressing to do would knock them down. No fields of cowslips will rush into that opening, nor mornings free of flies and heat when the light is shy. No. Not at all. They fill their mind and hands with soap and repair and dicey confrontations because what is waiting for them, in a suddenly idle moment, is the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow-moving. Mindful and particular about what in its path it chooses to bury. 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

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← 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. 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 Edison Street, where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but raise and adore the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his carefully loved hair.

Folks were furious when Violet broke up the funeral, but I can't believe they were surprised. Way, way before that, before Joe ever laid eyes on the girl, Violet 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." They carried her to the nearest steps. Slowly she came around, dusted off her clothes, and got to her appointment an hour late, which pleased the slow-moving whores, who never hurried anything but love.

It never happened again as far as I know—the street sit-



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ting—but quiet as it's kept she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it. What is 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 parlor—just for the shampoo, probably, because there is no way to get that deepdown 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 parlor 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 sneak to a shop just for the pleasure of a comfy shampoo.

Doing two heads in one place was lucky and Violet looked forward to the eleven-o'clock 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 banister 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. Someplace 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 136th 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 reknot 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



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around the cheeks against the threat of wind too cool for its honey-sweet, butter-colored face. Its big-eyed noncommittal 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 kindhearted 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 that 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.

"Ain't got the sense of a gnat."

"Who misraised 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 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 hairdressing 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—too silly



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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 makeshift 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.

Joe never learned of Violet's public crazinesses. Stuck, Gistan and other 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 globe light 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 ac-

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quaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that 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 globe light is imperfect too. Closely examined it shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles 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 use 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 taking shape in early light. She had butted their way out of the Tenderloin district into a spacious uptown 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. Felt the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment.

"I don't believe an eight has been out this month," she says, thinking about the daily number combinations. "Not one.

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LONG

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Bound to come up soon, so I'm hanging an eight on everything."

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

"No. Eight 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 Cleopatra 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 is not too hard, because nobody presses her. Did they do the same? Maybe. Maybe everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until "uh" or "have mercy" carry almost all of her part of a conversation. Less excusable than a wayward mouth is an independent hand that can find in a parrot's cage a knife lost for weeks. Violet is still as well as silent. Over time her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him. He is married to a woman who speaks mainly to her birds. One of whom answers back: "I love you."

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er 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. Someone 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

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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 mantelpiece.

For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based on careful investigations, the girl's memory is a sickness in the house—everywhere and nowhere. There is nothing for Violet to beat or hit and when she has to, just has to strike it somehow, there is nothing left but straw or a sepia print.

But for Joe it is different. That girl had been his necessary thing for three months of nights. He remembers his memories of her; how thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was the way he entered sleep. He minds her death, is so sorry about it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness. And he knows it will continue to fade because it was already beginning to the afternoon he hunted Dorcas down. After she said she wanted Coney Island and rent parties and more of Mexico. Even then he was clinging to the quality of her sugar-flawed skin, the high wild bush the bed pillows made of her hair, her bitten nails, the heart-breaking 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 eyelids when they made love.

Now he lies in bed remembering every detail of that October afternoon when he first met her, from start to finish, and over and over. Not just because it is tasty, but because he is trying to sear her into his mind, brand her there against future wear. So that neither she nor the alive love of her will fade or scab



over the way it had with Violet. For when Joe tries 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 comes to mind. He recalls dates, of course, events, purchases, activity, even scenes. But he has a tough time trying to catch what it felt like.

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 replay 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 Cleopatra 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 drugstore; the girl buying candy and ruining her skin had moved him so his eyes burned. Then, suddenly, there in Alice Manfred's doorway, 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 his whisper through the 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, rather he thought about her, and decided. Just as he had decided on his name, the walnut tree he and Victory slept in, a piece of bottomland,

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and when to head for the City, he decided on Dorcas. Regarding his marriage to Violet—he had not chosen that but was grateful, in fact, that he didn't have to; that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the redwings in the county and the ripe silence that accompanied them.

They met in Vesper County, Virginia, under a walnut tree. She had been working in the fields like everybody else, and stayed past picking time to live with a family twenty miles away from her own. 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.

Violet and Joe left Tyrell, a railway stop through Vesper County, in 1906, and boarded the colored section of the Southern Sky. When the train trembled approaching the water surrounding the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side. Eager, a little scared, they did not even nap during the fourteen hours of a ride smoother than a rocking cradle. The quick darkness in the carriage cars when they shot through a tunnel made them wonder if 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, laughing and tapping back at the tracks, when the attendant 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 attendant. 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 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



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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 that 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 danced with them, proving already 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, surrendered themselves to the City. Others 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. Discharged with or without honor, fired with or without severance, dispossessed with or without notice, they hung around for a 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, when 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, malleable toy designed for their play. Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. The slumped spines of the veterans of the 27th Battalion betrayed by the commander for whom they had fought like lunatics. The eyes of thousands, stupefied with disgust at having been imported by Mr. Armour, Mr. Swift, Mr. Montgomery Ward to break strikes then dismissed for having done so. The broken shoes of two thousand Galveston longshoremen that Mr. Mallory would never pay fifty cents an hour like the white ones. The praying palms, the raspy breathing, the quiet children of the ones who had escaped from Springfield Ohio, Springfield Indiana, Greensburg Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans Louisiana, after raving whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home.

The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the '80s; the '90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it. Like the others, they were country people, but 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. The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. And in the beginning when they first arrive, and twenty years later when they and the City have grown up, they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other

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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 stoplight but looks up and down the street before stepping off the curb; how men accommodate 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 lamp oil or the staple 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 by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City. But if she is clipping quickly down the big-city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop with a cool beer in her hand, dangling her shoe from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, to 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 have to reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. He forgets a sun that used to slide up



like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky, and he doesn't miss it, doesn'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, scary and full of amiable strangers. No wonder they forget pebbly 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. Redcaps and dining-car attendants who wouldn't think of moving out of the City sometimes 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 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 their edges gently from metal bands made to hold them forever. They are down there, along with yellow flowers that

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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 Carrara pried from unfashionable buildings. There are bottles too, made of glass beautiful enough to rival stars I cannot see above me because the citysky has hidden them. Otherwise, if it wanted to, it could show me stars cut from the lamé 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 Iroquois, drifts past their windows. As well as the windows where sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things.

Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the City, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days, and wants them back, aware of what it looked like but not at all of what it felt like, he coupled himself elsewhere. He rented a room from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours a week 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 through the 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 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



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he missed the sign that would have been some combination of shame and pleasure, at least, and not the inside nothing he traveled with from then on, except for the fall of 1925 when he had somebody to tell it to. Somebody called Dorcas with hooves tracing her cheekbones 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 her nothing was 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 slap 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 the window of her best girlfriend'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 cries again and Joe holds her close. The Iroquois sky passes the windows, and if they do see it, it crayon-colors their love. That would be when, after a decent silence, he would lift his sample case of Cleopatra from the chair and tease her before opening it, holding up the lid so she could not see right away what he has hidden under the jars and perfume-sweet boxes; the present he has brought for her. That is the little bow



that ties up their day at the same time the citysky is 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 has pushed back his cuticles, cleaned his nails and painted them with clear polish. She has cried a little talking about East St. Louis, and cheers herself up with his fingernails. She likes to know that the hands lifting and turning her under the blanket have been done by her. Lotioned by her with cream from a jar of something from his sample case. She rears up and, taking his face in her hands, kisses the lids of each of his two-color eyes. One for me, she says, and one for you. One for me and one for you. Gimme this, I give you that. Gimme this. Gimme this.

They try not to shout, but can't help it. Sometimes he covers her mouth with the palm of his hand so no one passing in the hall will hear her, and if he can, if he thinks of it in time, he bites the pillow to stop his own yell. If he can. Sometimes he thinks he has stopped it, because the corner of the pillow is in his mouth all right, and then he hears 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 laughs at that, laughs and laughs before she straddles his back to pound it with her fists. Then when she is exhausted and he half asleep, she leans down, her lips behind his ear, and makes plans. Mexico, she whispers. I want you to take me to Mexico. Too loud, he murmurs. No, no, she says, it's just right. How you know? he demands. 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 bedtime, he says smiling. This my bedtime, she says, Mexico people sleep in the day, take me. They're in there till church time Sunday morning



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and no whitepeople can get in, and the boys who play sometimes get up and dance with you. Uh oh, he says. What uh oh, she asks. 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 says, those little lamps you talking about big enough to show who's there. You always say that, she giggles, 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 tablecloth, can they? Can they? If you don't want to 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 tablecloth. Joe, Joe, take me, say you'll take me. How you going to get out the house? he asks. I'll figure it, she croons, just like always, just say yes. Well, he says, well, no point in picking the apple if you don't want to see how it taste. How does it taste, Joe? she asks. And he opens his eyes.

The door is locked and Malvonne will not be back from her 40th Street offices until way after midnight, a thought that excites them: that if it were possible they could almost spend the night together. If Alice Manfred or Violet took a trip, say, then the two of them could postpone the gift he gives her on into the darkest part of night until, smelling of Oxydol and paste wax, Malvonne came back from her offices. As it is, having made their plans for Mexico, Dorcas tips out the door and down the steps before Violet has finished her evening heads and come home around seven to find that Joe has already changed the birds' water and covered their cages. On those nights 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 observation of the people around her. Very little escaped this woman who rode the trolley against traffic at 6:00 p.m.; who examined the trash baskets of powerful white-men, 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 resituated 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 confidential whispers 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 mailbox 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 a.m. she would never know; others

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she learned after he left 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 twenty-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 reseal and refold 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 signatures, 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 a matchbook application to a correspondence law school 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 be a lawyer 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 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

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from Winsome Clark complaining to her husband who worked in the Canal Zone 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."

Malvonne didn't know Winsome or anybody on the 300 block of Edgecombe Avenue, although one building there was full of rich 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 Edgecombe 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

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whipping the five-year-old for mishandling the hot, heavy pressing iron) she might keep the money for herself. Malvonne resealed 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 to 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 pleasure 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 had 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 lowdown sticky things in the meantime? Finally she decided to mail it with a note of her own attached—urging caution and directing daddy's attention to a clipping from *Opportunity Magazine*.

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 nickel, 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 nickel, 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 left. I'll bring them up right away."

"What brings this on? You ain't selling you giving away free for what reason?" Malvonne looked at the clock on the mantel, figuring out how much time she had to talk to Joe and get her letters mailed before leaving for work.

"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."

Malvonne laughed. "Out with it, Joe. This something Violet ain't 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 month."

"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 five-thirty."

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



"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'd want to ask 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, ain't 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."

"Spouse 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 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 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 anytime, anytime, just leave my money on the table and



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I'll know you mean me to 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 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 ornery, 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?"

"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 it 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?"

"Don't you take up with no woman if her kids is little, Joe."

"All right."

"It's asking too much of me."

"You don't have to think about none of it. You ain't 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. 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 ain't 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 Mexico, Sook's and clubs whose names changed every week—and he was not alone. He became a Thursday man and Thursday men are satisfied. I can tell from their look some outlaw love is about to be, or already has been, satisfied. Week-ends 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 morn-

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ings 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 barmaids and restaurant cooks with Sunday-Monday free; schoolteachers, café 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 payday, the day after payday, the pre-Sabbath activity, the closed shop and the quiet school hall; barred bank vaults and offices locked in darkness.

So why is it on Thursday that the men look satisfied? Perhaps it's the artificial rhythm of the week—perhaps there is something so phony 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. Irresistible. The outrageous expectations and inflexible demands of the weekend are null on Thursday. People look forward to weekends for connections, revisions and separations even though many of these activities 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 that day that makes them steady enough on their feet to appear graceful even if they are not. They command the center of the sidewalk; 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.

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

Up there, in that part of the City—which is the part they came for—the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool.

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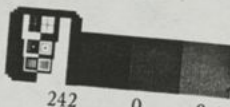
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like that day in July, almost nine years back, when the beautiful men were cold. In typical summer weather, sticky and bright, Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the graceful women and 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. It was July in 1917 and the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them.

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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 faces hurt her, but hurt was better than fear and Alice had been frightened for a long time—first she was frightened of Illinois, 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 salesmen touched her and only her as though she were part of the goods they had condescended to sell her; it was the tissue required if the management was generous enough to let you try on a blouse (but no hat) in a store. It was where she, a woman of fifty and independent means, had no surname. 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 their 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 framing the face, makeup 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 bathtub 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 City Belles 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 expecting 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, was not only annoying, it was redundant.

When Alice Manfred collected the little girl from the Miller

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sisters, on those evenings following the days her fine stitching was solicited, the three women sat down in the kitchen to hum and sigh over cups of Postum at the signs of Imminent Demise: such as not just ankles but knees in full view; lip rouge red as hellfire; burnt matchsticks rubbed on eyebrows; fingernails tipped with blood—you couldn't tell the streetwalkers 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 lowdown you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirtsleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives playing the lowdown stuff that signaled Imminent Demise. Or when a woman with a baby on her shoulder and a skillet in her hand sang "Turn to my pillow where my sweet-man used to be . . . how long, how long, how long." Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived, as Alice Manfred and the Miller sisters did, on Clifton Place, with a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet, a quiet street with no fewer 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 lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with the silent black

women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. So many whites killed the papers would not print the number.

Some said the rioters were disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the YMCA, 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. 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 Dorcas, 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 Postum 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 Colored Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to whitemen in straw hats who needed to know what the freezing faces 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 Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas 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, Dorcas, 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 windowsills fingering horns, and the women wondered "how long." 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.

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She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music—just colored folks stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious.

Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin for a tie—either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, 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 Clifton 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 a café or an uncurtained window when some phrase or other—"Hit me but don't quit me"—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 she was not alone in losing. It was impossible to keep the Fifth Avenue drums separate from the belt-buckle tunes vibrating from pianos and spinning on every Victrola. Impossible. Some nights are silent; not a motor car turning within earshot; no drunks or restless babies crying for their mothers 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

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but as soon as she turns the pillow to its smoother, cooler side, a melody line she doesn't remember where from sings itself, loud and unsolicited, in her head. "When I was young and in my prime I could get my barbecue any old time." They are greedy, reckless words, loose and infuriating, but hard to dismiss because underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm, are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus.

Her niece, of course, didn't have the problem. Alice had been reraising her, correcting her, since the summer of 1917, 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, Dorcas remembered it differently. While her aunt worried about how to keep the heart ignorant of the hips and the head in charge of both, Dorcas lay on a chenille 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, Dorcas thought of that life-below-the-sash as all the life there was. 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.

Back in East St. Louis, as the little porch fell, wood chips—ignited and smoking—exploded in the air. One of them must have entered her stretched dumb mouth and traveled down her



throat because it smoked and glowed there still. Dorcas never let it out and never put it out. At first she thought if she spoke of it, it would leave her, or she would lose it through her mouth. And when her aunt took her on a train to the City, and crushed her hand while they watched a long parade, the bright wood chip sank further and further down until it lodged comfortably somewhere below her navel. She watched the black unblinking men, and the drums assured her that the glow would never leave her, that it would be waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to be touched by it. And whenever she wanted to let it loose to leap into fire again, 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 cotton 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. Dorcas avoided thinking about the huge coffin just there in front, a few feet to her left, 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 elementary school 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. Eyeglasses could not obscure it, nor could the pimples on her skin brought on by hard brown soap and a tilted diet.

When she was little, and Alice Manfred agreed to sew for ✓



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a month or two, Dorcas 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 Miller, gave them apple-butter sandwiches to eat; the one-armed one, Neola, read them Psalms. The strict discipline was occasionally lightened when Frances napped at the kitchen table. 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 stirred something inside her, and she told her charges cautionary tales. Her stories, 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 state. The pain of his refusal was visual, 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 a 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 an Old Gold cigarette to her lips, was straight and steady. But the stories she told them of moral decay, 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 but 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 completely dissolute life 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 Dorcas, at least, was enchanted by the frail, melty tendency 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. 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, byways. Pillows for two. Spreads the limbs of lilac bushes low enough to hide you. 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 fried chicken and something with raisins call attention to an open window



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where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that's not enough, doors to speakeasies 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 public signs: this way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room stop dog on premises absolutely no money down fresh chicken free delivery fast. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own.

There was a night in her sixteenth year when Dorcas 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 outstepped everybody so completely that when they needed tough competition they were forced to dance with themselves. Sneaking out to that party with her best friend, Felice, 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 foxy enough to wear.

The two girlfriends climb the stairs, led straight to the right place more by the stride piano pouring over the door saddle than their recollection of the apartment number. They pause to exchange looks before knocking. Even in the dim hallway the dark-skinned friend heightens the cream color of the other. Felice's oily hair enhances Dorcas' soft, dry waves. The door opens and they step in.

Before the lights are turned out, and before the sandwiches and the spiked soda water disappear, the one managing the record player chooses fast music suitable for the brightly lit



room, where obstructing furniture has been shoved against walls, pushed into the hallway, and bedrooms piled high with coats. Under the ceiling light pairs move like twins born with, if not for, the other, sharing a partner's pulse like a second jugular. They believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music's secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates. In between record changes, while the girls fan blouse necks to air damp collarbones or pat with anxious hands the damage moisture has done to their hair, the boys press folded handkerchiefs to their foreheads. Laughter covers indiscreet glances of welcome and promise, and takes the edge off gestures of betrayal and abandon.

Dorcas and Felice are not strangers at the party—nobody is. People neither of them has seen before join the fun as easily as those who have grown up in the building. But both girls have expectations made higher by the trouble they'd had planning outfits for the escapade. Dorcas, at sixteen, has yet to wear silk hose and her shoes are those of someone much younger or very old. Felice has helped her loosen two braids behind her ears and her fingertip is stained with the rouge she has stroked across her lips. With her collar turned under, her dress is more adult-looking, but the hard hand of a warning grown-up shows everywhere else: in the hem, the waist-centered belt, the short, puffy sleeves. She and Felice have tried removing the belt altogether, then fixing it at her navel. Both strategies prove hateful. They know that a badly dressed body is nobody at all, and Felice had to chatter compliments all the way down Seventh Avenue to get Dorcas to forget about her clothes and focus on the party.

Music soars to the ceiling and through the windows wide

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open for circulation as they enter. Immediately both girls are snatched by male hands and spun into the dancing center of the room. Dorcas recognizes her partner as Martin, 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.” Dorcas dances well—not as fast as some others, but she is graceful, in spite of those shaming shoes, and she is provocative.

It is after two more dances that she notices the brothers commanding the attention of a crowd in the dining room. On the street, in vestibules as well as house parties, they are spectacular, moving like taut silk or loose metal. The stomach-jumps Dorcas and Felice have agreed is the Sign of real interest and possible love surfaces and spreads as Dorcas watches the brothers. The sandwiches are gone now, the potato salad too, and everybody knows that the time for lights-out music is approaching. The unbelievable agility, the split-second timing the brothers are putting on display announces the culmination of the fast-dancing segment of the party.

Dorcas moves into the hall that 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 Dorcas. Taller than most, she gazes at them over the head of her dark friend. The brothers' eyes seem wide and welcoming

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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 turntable 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 Dorcas, whispers something. The other looks Dorcas up and down as she moves toward them. Then, just as the music, slow and smoky, loads up the air, his smile bright as ever, he wrinkles his nose and turns away.

Dorcas 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 love appetite soaring inside it. I've seen swollen fish, serenely 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 it's like 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 worked hard to privatize her niece, 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 grandmothers sweeping the stairs closed their eyes and held their heads back as they cele-

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brated their sweet desolation. "Nobody does me like you do me." In the year that passed between the dancing brothers' dismissal and Alice Manfred's club meeting, the yoke Alice had knotted around Dorcas' neck frayed till it split.

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. Joe met Dorcas 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' cousin Sheila who said if Joe came to 237 Clifton Place before noon he could deliver her order, the #2 Nut Brown and the vanishing cream, right there, and she wouldn't have to wait till the following Saturday or walk all the way over to Lenox at night to 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 Ransom's house and stood for a half hour watching Bud and C.T. 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 already 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 morning. And even though getting home early meant the extended company of a speechless Violet while he fussed with the sink trap or the pulley that turned the clothesline 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 follow 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 appetites 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 be perfectly satisfied.

That's what he was thinking about when he found 237 and climbed the stairs. The argument between C.T. and Bud over the fate of S.S. *Ethiopia* had been too good, too funny: he had listened to them longer than he thought, because it was way past noon when he got there. Woman noise could be heard through the door. Joe rang anyway.

The peppermint girl with the bad skin answered the door, and 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 Civic Daughters to plan for the Thanksgiving fund raiser for the National Negro Business League. They had settled what they could, tabled what they had to, and begun the chicken à la king 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 were missing anything until Alice sent Dorcas 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

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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 pleasure of his own smile as though sand-colored spats covered his shoe tops.

They laughed, tapped the tablecloth 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 wondered why he never rang *their* doorbells, or climbed four flights of double-flight stairs 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, musing over his two-color eyes and 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 opened his case; they offered to buy him out. "Eat, baby, eat," they said. "You not going out in that pneumonia weather without something sticking to your bones don't make no sense with all we got here, Dorcas, girl, bring this man a empty plate so I can fill it for him hear? Hush, Sheila."

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 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 wordplay took on weight.

I've wondered about it. What he thought then and later, and about what he said to her. He whispered something to Dorcas when she let him out the door, and nobody looked more pleased and surprised than he did.

If I remember right, that October lunch in Alice Manfred's house, something was off. Alice was vague and anybody in her company for thirty minutes knew that wasn't her style. She was the one who with a look could cut good gossip down to a titter when it got out of hand. And maybe it was her head-of-a-seamstress head that made what you thought was a cheerful dress turn loud and tatty next to hers. But she could lay a table.

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Food might be a tad skimpy in the portions, and I believe she had a prejudice against butter, she used so little of it in her cakes. But the biscuits were light, and the plates, the flatware, sparkling and arranged just so. Open her napkins wide as you please and not a catface anywhere. She was polite at the lunch of course; not too haughty either, but not paying close attention to things. Distracted she was. About Dorcas, probably.

I always believed that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years, even if her dress wasn't. Maybe back in October Alice was beginning to think so too. By the time January came, nobody had to speculate. Everybody knew. I wonder if she had a premonition of Joe Trace knocking on her door? Or it could have been something she read in all those newspapers stacked neatly along the baseboard in her bedroom.

Everybody needs a pile of newspapers: to peel potatoes on, serve bathroom needs, wrap garbage. But not like Alice Manfred. She must have read them over and over else why would she keep them? And if she read anything in the newspaper twice she knew too little about too much. If you have secrets you want kept or want to figure out those other people have, a newspaper can turn your mind. The best thing to find out what's going on is to watch how people maneuver themselves in the streets. What sidewalk preachers stop them in their tracks? Do they walk right through the boys kicking cans along the sidewalk or holler at them to quit? Ignore the men sitting on car fenders or stop to exchange a word? If a fight breaks out between a man and a woman do they cross in the middle of the block to watch or run to the corner in case it gets messy?

One thing for sure, the streets will confuse you, teach you or break your head. But Alice Manfred wasn't the kind to give



herself reasons to be in the streets. She got through them quick as she could to get back to her house. If she had come out more often, sat on the stoop or gossiped in front of the beauty shop, she would have known more than what the paper said. She might have known what was happening under her nose. When she did find out what took place between that October day and the awful January one that ended everything, the last people on earth she wanted to see was Joe Trace or anybody connected to him. It happened, though. The woman who avoided the streets let into her living room the woman who sat down in the middle of one.

Toward the end of March, Alice Manfred put her needles aside to think again of what she called the *impunity* of the man who killed her niece just because he could. It had not been hard to do; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting himself in. He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous, because you had seen him with children, bought his products and never heard a scrap of gossip about him doing wrong. Felt not only safe but kindly in his company because he was the sort women ran to when they thought they were being followed, or watched or needed someone to have the extra key just in case you locked yourself out. He was the man who took you to your door if you missed the trolley and had to walk night streets at night. Who warned young girls away from hooch joints and the men who lingered there. Women teased him because they trusted him. He was one of those men who might have marched down Fifth Ave-

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nue—cold and silent and dignified—into the space the drums made. He *knew* wrong wasn't right, and did it anyway.

Alice Manfred had seen and borne much, had been scared all over the country, in every street of it. Only now did she feel truly unsafe because the brutalizing men and their brutal women were not just out there, they were in her block, her house. A man had come in her living room and destroyed her niece. His wife had come right in the funeral to nasty and dishonor her. She would have called the police after both of them if everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider. To actually volunteer to talk to one, black or white, to let him in her house, watch him adjust his hips in her chair to accommodate the blue steel that made him a man.

Idle and withdrawn in her grief and shame, she whittled away the days making lace for nothing, reading her newspapers, tossing them on the floor, picking them up again. She read them differently now. Every week since Dorcas' death, during the whole of January and February, a paper laid bare the bones of some broken woman. Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman and girl victims of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted. Five women caught. Woman says man beat. In jealous rage man.

Defenseless as ducks, she thought. Or were they? Read carefully the news accounts revealed that most of these women, subdued and broken, had not been defenseless. Or, like Dorcas, easy prey. All over the country, black women were armed. That, thought Alice, that, at least, they had learned. Didn't everything on God's earth have or acquire defense? Speed, some poison in the leaf, the tongue, the tail? A mask, flight, numbers in the millions producing numbers in the millions? A thorn here, a spike there.

Natural prey? Easy pickings? "I don't think so." Aloud she said it. "I don't think so."

Worn spots in the linen had been strengthened with 60-weight thread. Laundered and folded it lay in a basket her mother had used. Alice raised the ironing board and spread newspaper under it to keep the hems clean. She was waiting not only for the irons to heat but also for a brutal woman black as soot known to carry a knife. She waited with less hesitation than she had before and with none of the scary angry feelings she had in January when a woman saying she was Violet Trace had tried to see her, talk or something. Knocked on her door so early in the morning Alice thought it was the law.

"I don't have a thing to say to you. Not one thing." She had said it in a loud whisper through the chained opening in the door and slammed it shut. She didn't need the name to be afraid or to know who she was: the star of her niece's funeral. The woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcas' death and in the process had changed the woman's name. Violent they called her now. No wonder. Alice, sitting in the first seat in the first aisle had watched the church commotion stunned. Later, and little by little, feelings, like sea trash expelled on a beach—strange and recognizable, stark and murky—returned.

Chief among them was fear and—a new thing—anger. At Joe Trace who had been the one who did it: seduced her niece right under her nose in her very own house. The nice one. The man who sold ladies' products on the side; a familiar figure in just about every building in town. A man store owners and landlords liked because he set the children's toys in a neat row when they left them scattered on the sidewalk. Who the chil-



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dren liked because he never minded them. And liked among men because he never cheated in a game, egged a stupid fight on, or carried tales, and he left their women alone. Liked among the women because he made them feel like girls; liked by girls because he made them feel like women—which, she thought, was what Dorcas was looking for. Murderer.

But Alice wasn't afraid of him nor, now, his wife. For Joe she felt trembling fury at his snake-in-the-grass stealing of the girl in her charge; and shame that the grass he had snaked through was her own—the watched and guarded environment where unmarried and unmarriageable pregnancy was the end and close of livable life. After that—zip. Just a wait until the baby that came was old enough to warrant its own watched, guarded environment.

Waiting for Violet, with less hesitation than before, Alice wondered why it was so. At fifty-eight with no children of her own, and the one she had access to and responsibility for dead, she wondered about the hysteria, the violence, the damnation of pregnancy without marriageability. It had occupied her own parents' mind completely for as long as she could remember them. They spoke to her firmly but carefully about her body: sitting nasty (legs open); sitting womanish (legs crossed); breathing through her mouth; hands on hips; slumping at table; switching when you walked. The moment she got breasts they were bound and resented, a resentment that increased to outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities and never stopped until she married Louis Manfred, when suddenly it was the opposite. Even before the wedding her parents were murmuring about grandchildren they could see and hold, while at the same time and in turn resenting the tips showing and growing under the chemises of Alice's younger sisters. Resenting the

blood spots, the new hips, the hair. That and the necessity for new clothes. "Oh, Lord, girl!" The frown when the hem could not be taken down further; the waistband refused another stitch. Growing up under that heated control, Alice swore she wouldn't, but she did, pass it on. She passed it on to her baby sister's only child. And wondered now would she have done so had her husband lived or stayed or if she had had children of her own. If he had been there, by her side, helping her make decisions, maybe she would not be sitting there waiting for a woman called Violent and thinking war thoughts. Although war was what it was. Which is why she had chosen surrender and made Dorcas her own prisoner of war.

Other women, however, had not surrendered. All over the country they were armed. Alice worked once with a Swedish tailor who had a scar from his earlobe to the corner of his mouth. "Negress," he said. "She cut me to the teeth, to the teeth." He smiled his wonder and shook his head. "To the teeth." The iceman in Springfield had four evenly spaced holes in the side of his neck from four evenly spaced jabs by something thin, round and sharp. Men ran through the streets of Springfield, East St. Louis and the City holding one red wet hand in the other, a flap of skin on the face. Sometimes they got to a hospital safely alive only because they left the razor where it lodged.

Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose.

Who were the unarmed ones? Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them, He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to



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them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores? Uh huh. Did police put their fists in women's faces so the husbands' spirits would break along with the women's jaws? Did men (those who knew them as well as strangers sitting in motor cars) call them out of their names every single day of their lives? Uh huh. But in God's eyes and theirs, every hateful word and gesture was the Beast's desire for its own filth. The Beast did not do what was done to it, but what it wished done to itself: raped because it wanted to be raped itself. Slaughtered children because it yearned to be slaughtered children. Built jails to dwell on and hold on to its own private decay. God's wrath, so beautiful, so simple. Their enemies got what they wanted, became what they visited on others.

Who else were the unarmed ones? The ones who thought they did not need folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass taped to their hands. Those who bought houses and hoarded money as protection and the means to purchase it. Those attached to armed men. Those who did not carry pistols because they became pistols; did not carry switchblades because they were switchblades cutting through gatherings, shooting down statutes and pointing out the blood and abused flesh. Those who swelled their little unarmed strength into the reckoning one of leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease. Bail out, dress the dead, pay the rent, find new rooms, start a school, storm an office, take up collections, rout the block and keep their eyes on all the children. Any other kind of unarmed black woman in 1926 was silent or crazy or dead.

Alice waited this time, in the month of March, for the woman with the knife. The woman people called Violent now because she had tried to kill what lay in a coffin. She had left notes under Alice's door every day beginning in January—a week after the funeral—and Alice Manfred knew the kind of Negro that couple was: the kind she trained Dorcas away from. The embarrassing kind. More than unappealing, they were dangerous. The husband shot; the wife stabbed. Nothing. Nothing her niece did or tried could equal the violence done to her. And where there was violence wasn't there also vice? Gambling. Cursing. A terrible and nasty closeness. Red dresses. Yellow shoes. And, of course, race music to urge them on.

But Alice was not frightened of her now as she had been in January and as she was in February, the first time she let her in. She'd thought the woman would end up in jail one day—they all did eventually. But easy pickings? Natural prey? "I don't think so. I don't think so."

At the wake, Malvonne gave her the details. Tried to, anyway. Alice leaned away from the woman and held her breath as though to keep the words at bay.

"I appreciate your concern," Alice told her. "Help yourself." She gestured toward tables crowded with food and the well-wishers circling it. "There's so much."

"I feel so bad," Malvonne said. "Like it was my own."

"Thank you."

"You raise other people's children and it hurts just the same as it would if it was your own. You know about Sweetness, my nephew . . . ?"

"Excuse me."

"Did everything for him. Everything a mother would."

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"Please. Help yourself. There's so much. Too much."

"Those old reprobates, they live in my building, you know. . . ."

"Hello, Felice. Nice of you to come . . ."

She did not want to hear or know too much then. And she did not want to see that woman they began to call Violent either. The note she slid under Alice's door offended her, then frightened her. But after a while, having heard how torn up the man was and reading the headlines in the *Age*, the *News*, the *Messenger*, by February she had steeled herself and let the woman in.

"What *could* you want from me?"

"Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair," Violet said.

"I'm sorry. I just can't think what good can come of this."

"I'm having trouble with my head," said Violet placing her fingers on the crown of her hat.

"See a doctor, why don't you?"

Violet walked past her, drawn like a magnet to a small side table. "Is that her?"

Alice didn't have to look to know what she was staring at. "Yes."

The long pause that followed, while Violet examined the face that loomed out of the frame, made Alice nervous. Before she got up the courage to ask the woman to leave, she turned away from the photograph saying, "I'm not the one you need to be scared of."

"No? Who is?"

"I don't know. That's what hurts my head."

"You didn't come here to say you sorry. I thought maybe you did. You come in here to deliver some of your own evil."

"I don't have no evil of my own."

"I think you'd better go."

"Let me rest here a minute. I can't find a place where I can just sit down. That's her there?"

"I just told you it was."

"She give you a lot of trouble?"

"No. None. Well. Some."

"I was a good girl her age. Never gave a speck of trouble. I did everything anybody told me to. Till I got here. City make you tighten up."

Odd-acting, thought Alice, but not bloody-minded. And before she could think not to let it happen, the question was out. "Why did he do such a thing?"

"Why did she?"

"Why did you?"

"I don't know."

The second time she came, Alice was still pondering over those wild women with their packets of lye, their honed razors, the keloids here, here and there. She was pulling the curtain to cut off the light that smashed right into her visitor's eyes when she said, "Your husband. Does he hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" Violet looked puzzled.

"I mean he seemed so nice, so quiet. Did he beat on you?"

"Joe? No. He never hurt nothing."

"Except Dorcas."

"And squirrels."

"What?"

"Rabbits too. Deer. Possum. Pheasant. We ate good down home."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Landowner didn't want rabbit. He want soft money."

"They want money here, too."

"But there's a way to get it here. I did day work when I first



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came here. Three houses a day got me good money. Joe cleaned fish at night. Took a while before he got hotel work. I got into hairdressing, and Joe . . ."

"I don't want to hear about all that."

Violet shut up and stared at the photograph. Alice gave it to her to get her out of the house.

The next day she was back and looked so bad Alice wanted to slap her. Instead she said, "Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff." Violet wore the same dress each time and Alice was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve, as well as the coat lining ripped in at least three places she could see.

Violet sat in her slip with her coat on, while Alice mended the sleeve with the tiniest stitches. At no time did Violet take off her hat.

"At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that is it, is it?"

"I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. That you would let me and you did. I know I didn't give Joe much reason to stay out of the street. But I wanted to see what kind of girl he'd rather me be."

"Foolish. He'd rather you were eighteen, that's all."

"No. Something more."

"You don't know anything about your own husband, I can't be expected to help you."

"You didn't know they were seeing each other no more than I did and you saw her every day like I did Joe. I know where my mind was. Where was yours?"

"Don't chastise me. I won't let you do that."



Alice had finished the sheets and begun the first shirtwaist when Violet knocked on her door. Years and years and years ago she had guided the tip of the iron into the seams of a man's white shirt. Dampened just so the fabric smoothed and tightened with starch. Those shirts were scraps now. Dust cloths, monthly cloths, rags tied around pipe joints to hinder freezing; pot holders and pieces to test hot irons and wrap their handles. Even wicks for oil lamps; salt bags to scrub the teeth. Now her own shirtwaists got her elegant attentive handcare.

Two pairs of pillow slips, still warm to the touch, were stacked on the table. So were the two bed sheets. Next week, perhaps, the curtains.

By now she recognized the knock and never knew if she was eager or angry when she heard it. And she didn't care.

When Violet came to visit (and Alice never knew when that might be) something opened up.

The dark hat made her face even darker. Her eyes were round as silver dollars but could slit of a sudden too.

The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people. With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was—clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy.

Violet, her coat lining repaired too now, her cuffs secure, needed only to pay attention to her hose and hat to appear normal. Alice sighed a little sigh, amazed at herself as she opened the door to the only visitor she looked forward to.

"You look froze."



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"Near bout," said Violet.

"March can put you in the sickbed."

"Be a pleasure," Violet answered. "All my troubles be over if I could get my body sick stead of my head."

"Then who would do the fancy women's hair?"

Violet laughed. "Nobody. Maybe nobody would do it and nobody would know the difference."

"The difference is more than a hairdo."

"They're just women, you know. Like us."

"No," said Alice. "No they're not. Not like me."

"I don't mean the trade. I mean the women."

"Oh, please," said Alice. "Let's get off that. I'm steeping you some tea."

"They were good to me when nobody else was. Me and Joe eat because of them."

"Don't tell me about it."

"Anytime I come close to borrowing or need extra, I can work all day any day on their heads."

"Don't tell me, I said. I don't want to hear about it and where their money comes from. You want tea or not?"

"Yeah. Okay. Why not? Why can't you hear about it?"

"Oh. The men. The nasty life. Don't they fight all the time? When you do their hair, you're not afraid they might start fighting?"

"Only when they sober." Violet smiled.

"Oh, well."

"They share men, fight them and fight over them, too."

"No woman should live like that."

"No. No woman should have to."

"Killing people." Alice sucked her teeth. "Makes me sick to my stomach." She poured the tea, then lifting cup and saucer, held it back while she looked at Violet.



"If you had found out about them before he killed her, would you have?"

"I wonder."

Alice handed her the tea. "I don't understand women like you. Women with knives." She snatched up a long-sleeved blouse and smoothed it over the ironing board.

"I wasn't born with a knife."

"No, but you picked one up."

"You never did?" Violet blew ripples into the tea.

"No, I never did. Even when my husband ran off I never did that. And you. You didn't even have a worthy enemy. Somebody worth killing. You picked up a knife to insult a dead girl."

"But that's better, ain't it? The harm was already done."

"She wasn't the enemy."

"Oh, yes she is. She's my enemy. Then, when I didn't know it, and now too."

"Why? Because she was young and pretty and took your husband away from you?"

Violet sipped her tea and did not answer. After a long silence, and after their talk had turned to trifles then on to the narrowness of life, Violet said to Alice Manfred, "Wouldn't you? You wouldn't fight for your man?"

Seeded in childhood, watered every day since, fear had sprouted through her veins all her life. Thinking war thoughts it had gathered, blossomed into another thing. Now, as she looked at this woman, Alice heard her question like the pop of a toy gun.

Somewhere in Springfield only the teeth were left. Maybe the skull, maybe not. If she dug down deep enough and tore off the top, she could be sure that the teeth would certainly be there. No lips to share with the woman she had shared them with. No fingers to lift her hips as he had lifted others. Just the



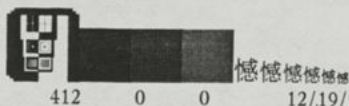
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teeth exposed now, nothing like the smile that had made her say, "Choose." And he did.

What she told Violet was true. She had never picked up a knife. What she neglected to say—what came flooding back to her now—was also true: every day and every night for seven months she, Alice Manfred, was starving for blood. Not his. Oh, no. For him she planned sugar in his motor, scissors to his tie, burned suits, slashed shoes, ripped socks. Vicious, childish acts of violence to inconvenience him, remind him. But no blood. Her craving settled on the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins. An ice pick stuck in and pulled up would get it. Would a clothesline rope circling her neck and yanked with all Alice's strength make her spit it up? Her favorite, however, the dream that plumped her pillow at night, was seeing herself mount a horse, then ride it and find the woman alone on a road and gallop till she ran her down under four iron hooves; then back again, and again until there was nothing left but tormented road dirt signaling where the hussy had been.

He had chosen; so would she. And maybe after galloping through seven months of nights on a horse she neither owned nor knew how to ride, over the twitching, pulpy body of a woman who wore white shoes in winter, laughed loud as a child, and who had never seen a marriage license—maybe she would have done something wild. But after seven months she had to choose something else. The suit, the tie, the shirt he liked best. They suggested she not waste the shoes. No one would see them. But socks? Surely he has to have socks? Of course, said the mortician. Socks, of course. And what difference did it make that one of the mourners was her sworn and hated enemy laying white roses on the coffin, taking away one

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the color of her dress. For thirty years he was turning into teeth in Springfield, and neither she nor the mourner in the inappropriate dress could do a thing about it.

Alice slammed the pressing iron down. "You don't know what loss is," she said, and listened as closely to what she was saying as did the woman sitting by her ironing board in a hat in the morning.

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he hat, pushed back on her forehead, gave Violet a scatty look. The calming effect of the tea Alice Manfred had given her did not last long. Afterward she sat in the drugstore 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 weaponry glint. Where she, last in line at the car stop, noticed a child's cold wrist jutting out of a too-short,



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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 looking past 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, 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 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 barbered 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* 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 boys' whole body weight ✓
from the iron railings of El bridges—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 earlobe, like
a fold in the skin that was hardly a disfigurement at all. She
could have left it at that: the fold under the earlobe, 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. Les-
sons learned from the old folks whose milky-light eyes watched
everything 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 street curb in a two-block radius. And they would
cut it out, or take it downstairs behind the trunks, or off in a
neglected 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, be-
cause who knew? Maybe she had more than one cutting in
mind. Or maybe they could see themselves hangdog at the
dinner table trying to explain to these same women or even,
Jesus! the men, the fathers and uncles, and grown cousins,

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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 *that* 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 wagon like a full-
grown man. But twenty years doing hair in the City had soft-
ened 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 for her black-eyed peas.
Gistan and Stuck came by to ask for him, to say they couldn't
play cards Friday and to linger with embarrassment in the hall
while Violet stared at them. So she knew the parrot was there
because she kept going up and down the stairs from her apart-
ment door to the front door to see if Joe was coming down the

street. 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 blond 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 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 for him? 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 taken 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 behind the secondhand magazine rack to one of the little tables 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 Dr. Dee's Nerve and Flesh Builder to stir into the malted milkshake, because the milkshakes alone didn't seem to be doing any good. The hips she came here with were gone, too, just like the power in her

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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 rack 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 *Collier's* and playing for time in the drugstore. Did Dorcas, when she was alive, like *Collier's*? *Liberty Magazine*? Did the blonde ladies with shingled 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 Cleopatra 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, instead of up so as to drown out her rendition of "Lay my body down." Turned, too, his jaw to the light of the bulb so she could press out between her thumbnails 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 bou-doir lamp or an orchid-colored satinlike 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? Take her to Indigo on Saturday and sit 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 trolley? Wherever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me 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 earlobe. 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

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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 field row the next morning. Plenty times, plenty, I chopped twice the wood that was needed into short logs and kindlin so as to make sure the crackers 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 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 with two-color eyes 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 Dorcas 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 boy, 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 any way 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 want to be like that. Oh never like that. To sit at the table, alone in the moonlight, sipping boiled coffee from a white china cup as long as it was there, and pretending to sip it when it was gone; waiting for morning when men



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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 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 nobody—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 or 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 Dear. 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 backbone. This one time. This here particular spine.

Rose's mother, True Belle, came when she heard. Left her cushiony job in Baltimore and, with ten eagle dollars stitched separately into her skirts to keep them quiet, came back to a little depot called Rome in Vesper County 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 Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun. Two weeks after her burial, Rose's husband arrived loaded with ingots of gold for the children, two-dollar pieces for the women and snake oil for the men. For Rose Dear he brought a silk embroidered pillow to comfort her back on a sofa nobody ever had, but would have been real nice under her 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 in Rome 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

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and up with the Readjuster Party, and when a verbal urging from landowners had not worked, a physical one did the trick and he was persuaded to transfer himself someplace, anyplace, 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. Anytime anytime, 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, purgative 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 for Violet (as well as for her sisters and those who stayed in the county) 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 of this phantom father, taking pleasure in the distribution of his bounty both genuine and fake, Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she had

thrown herself into—a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in a wooden box.

"Thank God for life," True Belle said, "and thank life for death."

Rose. Dear 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 Mount: 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 a log, 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 lie there deciding right then that she would do it. Someday. Delaying it for four years while True Belle came and took over but remembering the floorboards as a door, closed and locked. Seeing bleak truth in an unbreakable china cup? Biding her time until the moment returned—with all its mewing hurt or overboard rage—and she could turn away from the door, the cup 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 mustard tea



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on the girls' cuts and bruises, and keeping them at their tasks with spellbinding 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.

The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?

As she grew older, Violet could neither stay where she was nor go away. The well sucked her sleep, but the notion of leaving frightened her. It was True Belle who forced it. There were bully cotton crops in Palestine 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. His two black laborers walked the rows, touching the tender flowers, fingering the soil and trying to puzzle out the sky. Then one day of light, fresh rain, four dry, hot and clear, and all of Palestine 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 in a twenty-mile radius showed up and was hired on the spot. Nine dollars a bale, some said, if you grew your own; eleven dollars 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 wagonload to go. They rode all night, 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 seventeen 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 Rome 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 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 at the edge of the woods 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.

"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."



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"Sounds softheaded to me. Could be snakes up there."

"Snakes around here crawl the ground at night. Now who's softheaded?"

"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 till 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, nighttime 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 Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small.

His name was Joseph, and even before the sun rose, when

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it was still hidden in the woods, but freshening the world's green and dazzling acres of white cotton 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 contrasting color of his two eyes brought her glance back each and every time. She grew anxious 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 hunting work. The straw boss had no faith in her, having watched her sweating hard to fill her sack as quickly as the children, but she was highly and suddenly vocal in her determination.

She moved in with a family of six in Tyrell and worked at anything 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

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double-eyed 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, ~~fourteen~~ years later, 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 \$2.50 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 strangers' 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.

For fourteen years Joe listened to these stories and laughed. But he resisted them too, until, abruptly, he changed his mind. No one, not even Violet, knew what it was that permitted him

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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. Violet never knew what it was that fired him up and made him want—all of a sudden, but later than most—to move to the City. She supposed that the dinner that tickled everybody must have played a part in Joe's change of mind. If Booker T. was sitting down to eat a chicken sandwich in the President's house in a city called capital, near where True Belle had had such a good time, then things must be all right, all right. He took his bride on a train ride electric 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.

Joe didn't want babies either so all those miscarriages—two in the field, only one in her bed—were more inconvenience than loss. And city life would be so much better without them. Arriving at the train station back in 1906, the smiles they both smiled at the women with little children, strung like beads over suitcases, were touched with pity. They liked children. Loved them even. Especially Joe, who had a way with them. But neither wanted the trouble. Years later, however, when Violet was forty, she was already staring at infants, hesitating in front of toys displayed at Christmas. Quick to anger when a sharp word was flung at a child, or a woman's hold of a baby seemed awkward or careless. The worst burn she ever made was on the temple of a customer holding a child across her knees. Violet, lost in the woman's hand-patting and her knee-rocking the

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little boy, forgot her own hand holding the curling iron. The customer flinched and the skin discolored right away. Violet moaned her apologies and the woman was satisfied until she discovered that the whole curl was singed clean off. Skin healed, but an empty spot in her hairline . . . Violet had to forgo payment to shut her up.

By and by longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving. She was limp in its thrall or rigid in an effort to dismiss it. That was when she bought herself a present; hid it under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn't be helped. She began to imagine how old that last miscarried child would be now. A girl, probably. Certainly a girl. Who would she favor? What would her speaking voice sound like? After weaning time, Violet would blow her breath on the babygirl's food, cooling it down for the tender mouth. Later on they would sing together, Violet taking the alto line, the girl a honeyed soprano. "Don't you remember, a long time ago, two little babes their names I don't know, carried away one bright summer's day, lost in the woods I hear people say that the sun went down and the stars shone their light. Poor babes in the woods they laid down and died. When they were dead a robin so red put strawberry leaves over their heads." Aw. Aw. Later on Violet would dress her hair for her the way the girls wore it now: short, bangs paper sharp above the eyebrows? Ear curls? Razor-thin part on the side? Hair sliding into careful waves marcelled to a T?

Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming. Just when her breasts were finally flat enough not to need the binders the young women wore to sport the chest of a soft boy, just when her nipples had lost their point, mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out. When she woke up, her

husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter whose hair she had dressed to kill. Who lay there asleep in that coffin? Who posed there awake in the photograph? The scheming bitch who had not considered Violet's feelings one tiniest bit, who came into a life, took what she wanted and damn the consequences? Or mama's dumpling girl? Was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb? Washed away on a tide of soap, salt and castor oil. Terrified, perhaps, of so violent a home. Unaware that, had it failed, had she braved mammymade poisons and mammy's urgent fists, she could have had the best-dressed hair in the City. Instead, she hung around in the fat knees of strangers' children. In shop windows, and baby carriages left for a moment in the sun. Not realizing that, bitch or dumpling, the two of them, mother and daughter, could have walked Broadway together and ogled the clothes. Could be sitting together, cozy in the kitchen, while Violet did her hair.

"Another time," she said to Alice Manfred, "another time I would have loved her too. Just like you did. Just like Joe." She was holding her coat lapels closed, too embarrassed to let her hostess hang it up lest she see the lining.

"Maybe," said Alice. "Maybe. You'll never know now, though, will you?"

"I thought she was going to be pretty. Real pretty. She wasn't."

"Pretty enough, I'd say."

"You mean the hair. The skin color."

"Don't tell me what I mean."

"Then what? What he see in her?"

"Shame on you. Grown woman like you asking me that."

"I have to know."

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"Then ask the one who does know. You see him every day."
"Don't get mad."
"Will if I want to."
"All right. But I don't want to ask him. I don't want to hear what he has to say about it. You know what I'm asking."
"Forgiveness is what you're asking and I can't give you that. It's not in my power."
"No, not that. That's not it, forgiveness."
"What, then? Don't get pitiful. I won't stand for you getting pitiful, hear me?"
"We born around the same time, me and you," said Violet.
"We women, me and you. Tell me something real. Don't just say I'm grown and ought to know. I don't. I'm fifty and I don't know nothing. What about it? Do I stay with him? I want to, I think. I want . . . well, I didn't always . . . now I want. I want some fat in this life."
"Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it."
"You don't know either, do you?"
"I know enough to know how to behave."
"Is that it? Is that all it is?"
"Is that all what is?"
"Oh shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?"
"Oh, Mama." Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth.
Violet had the same thought: Mama. Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn't do it no more? The place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it? Where everything is over but the talking?
They looked away from each other then. The silence went on and on until Alice Manfred said, "Give me that coat. I can't look at that lining another minute."

Violet stood up and took off her coat, carefully pulling her arms trapped in frayed silk. Then she sat down and watched the seamstress go to work.

"All I could think of was to step out on him like he did me."

"Fool," said Alice and broke the thread.

"Couldn't name him if my life depended on it."

"Bet he can name you."

"Let him."

"What did you think that was going to solve?"

Violet didn't answer.

"Did it get you your husband's attention?"

"No."

"Open my niece's grave?"

"No."

"Do I have to say it again?"

"Fool? No. No, but tell me, I mean, listen. Everybody I grew up with is down home. We don't have children. He's what I got. He's what I got."

"Doesn't look so," said Alice. Her stitches were invisible to the eye.

Late in March, sitting in Duggie's drugstore, Violet played with a spoon, recalling the visit she had paid to Alice that morning. She had come early. Chore time and Violet wasn't doing any.

"It's different from what I thought," she said. "Different."

Violet meant twenty years of life in a City better than perfect, but Alice did not ask her what she meant. Did not ask her whether the City, with its streets all laid out, aroused jealousy too late for anything but foolishness. Or if it was the City that produced a crooked kind of mourning for a rival young enough to be a daughter.

They had been talking about prostitutes and fighting

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women—Alice nettled; Violet indifferent. Then silence while Violet drank tea and listened to the hissing iron. By this time the women had become so easy with each other talk wasn't always necessary. Alice ironed and Violet watched. From time to time one murmured something—to herself or to the other.

"I used to love that stuff," said Violet.

Alice smiled, knowing without looking up that Violet meant the starch. "Me too," she said. "Drove my husband crazy."

"Is it the crunch? Couldn't be the taste."

Alice shrugged. "Only the body knows."

The iron hissed at the damp fabric. Violet leaned her cheek on her palm. "You iron like my grandmother. Yoke last."

"That's the test of a first-class ironing."

"Some do it yoke first."

"And have to do it over. I hate a lazy ironing."

"Where you learn to sew like that?"

"They kept us children busy. Idle hands, you know."

"We picked cotton, chopped wood, plowed. I never knew what it was to fold my hands. This here is as close as I ever been to watching my hands do nothing."

Eating starch, choosing when to tackle the yoke, sewing, picking, cooking, chopping. Violet thought about it all and sighed. "I thought it would be bigger than this. I knew it wouldn't last, but I did think it'd be bigger."

Alice refolded the cloth around the handle of the pressing iron. "He'll do it again, you know. And again and again and again."

"In that case I'd better throw him out now."

"Then what?"

Violet shook her head. "Watch the floorboards, I guess."

"You want a real thing?" asked Alice. "I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it."

Violet raised her head. "And when he does it again? Don't mind what people think?"

"Mind what's left to you."

"You saying take it? Don't fight?"

Alice put down her iron, hard. "Fight what, who? Some mishandled child who saw her parents burn up? Who knew better than you or me or anybody just how small and quick this little bitty life is? Or maybe you want to stomp somebody with three kids and one pair of shoes. Somebody in a raggedy dress, the hem dragging in the mud. Somebody wanting arms just like you do and you want to go over there and hold her but her dress is muddy at the hem and the people standing around wouldn't understand how could anybody's eyes go so flat, how could they? Nobody's asking you to take it. I'm sayin make it, make it!"

It took her a moment to notice that Violet was staring. Following her gaze Alice lifted the iron and saw what Violet saw: the black and smoking ship burned clear through the yoke.

"Shit!" Alice shouted. "Oh, shit!"

Violet was the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter was rocking them both. Violet was reminded of True Belle, who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor, hungry and irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall to keep her laughter from pulling her down to the floor with them. They should have hated her. Gotten up from the floor and hated her. But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better. They laughed too, even Rose Dear shook her head and smiled, and suddenly the world was right side up. Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears.

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Crumpled over, shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy, something hep, fumbling the knife, too late anyway . . . She laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them both a cup of settling tea.

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* Violet did, that it was spring. In the City.