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nd when spring comes to the City people notice one another in the road; notice the strangers with whom they share aisles and tables and the space where intimate garments are laundered. Going in and out, in and out the same door, they handle the handle; on trolleys and park benches they settle thighs on a seat in which hundreds have done it too. Copper coins dropped in the palm have been swallowed by children and tested by gypsies, but it's still money and people smile at that. It's the time of year when the City urges contradiction most, encouraging you to buy street food when you

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have no appetite at all; giving you a taste for a single room occupied by you alone as well as a craving to share it with someone you passed in the street. Really there is no contradiction—rather it's a condition: the range of what an artful City can do. What can beat bricks warming up to the sun? The return of awnings. The removal of blankets from horses' backs. Tar softens under the heel and the darkness under bridges changes from gloom to cooling shade. After a light rain, when the leaves have come, tree limbs are like wet fingers playing in woolly green hair. Motor cars become black jet boxes gliding behind hoodlights weakened by mist. On sidewalks turned to satin figures move shoulder first, the crowns of their heads angled shields against the light buckshot that the raindrops are. The faces of children glimpsed at windows appear to be crying, but it is the glass pane dripping that makes it seem so.

In the spring of 1926, on a rainy afternoon, anybody passing through the alley next to a certain apartment house on Lenox might have looked up and seen, not a child but a grown man's face crying along with the glass pane. A strange sight you hardly ever see: men crying so openly. It's not a thing they do. Strange as it was, people finally got used to him, wiping his face and nose with an engineer's red handkerchief while he sat month after month by the window without view or on the stoop, first in the snow and later in the sun. I'd say Violet washed and ironed those handkerchiefs because, crazy as she was, raggedy as she became, she couldn't abide dirty laundry. But it tired everybody out waiting to see what else Violet would do besides try to kill a dead girl and keep her husband in tidy handkerchiefs. My own opinion was that one day she would stack up those handkerchiefs, take them to the dresser drawer, tuck them in and then go light his hair with a matchstick. She



didn't but maybe that would have been better than what she did do. Meaning to or not meaning to, she got him to go through it again—at springtime when it's clearer then than as at no other time that citylife is streetlife.

Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk. They don't want to stand near and compete with the old uncles positioning themselves in the middle of the block to play a six-string guitar.

Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name.

Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man.

Everybody knows your name.

The singer is hard to miss, sitting as he does on a fruit crate in the center of the sidewalk. His peg leg is stretched out comfy; his real one is carrying both the beat and the guitar's weight. Joe probably thinks that the song is about him. He'd like believing it. I know him so well. Have seen him feed small animals nobody else paid any attention to, but I was never deceived. I remember the way he used to fix his hat when he left the apartment building; how he moved it forward and a bit to the left. Whether stooping to remove a pile of horse flop or sauntering off to his swank hotel, his hat had to be just so. Not a tilt exactly, but a definite slant, you could say. The sweater under his suit jacket would be buttoned all the way up, but I know his thoughts are not—they are loose. He cuts his eyes over to the sweetbacks lounging on the corner. There is something they have he wants. Very little in his case of Cleopatra is something men would want to buy—except for aftershave dusting powder, most of it is for women. Women he can get to talk to, look at, flirt with and who knows what else is on his

That was Dorcas, all right. Young but wise. She was Joe's personal sweet—like candy. It was the best thing, if you were young and had just got to the City. That and the clarinets and even they were called licorice sticks. But Joe has been in the City twenty years and isn't young anymore. I imagine him as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. Inside.



So even though he wears button-up-the-front sweaters and round-toed shoes, he's a kid, a strapping, and candy could still make him smile. He likes those peppermint things last the live-long day, and thinks everybody else does too. Passes them out to Gistan's boys clowning on the curb. You could tell they'd rather chocolate or something with peanuts.

Makes me wonder about Joe. All those good things he gets from the Windemere, and he pays almost as much money for stale and sticky peppermint as he does for the room he rents to fuck in. Where his private candy box opens for him.

Rat. No wonder it ended the way it did. But it didn't have to, and if he had stopped trailing that little fast thing all over town long enough to tell Stuck or Gistan or some neighbor who might be interested, who knows how it would go?

"It's not a thing you tell to another man. I know most men can't wait to tell each other about what they got going on the side. Put all their business in the street. They do it because the woman don't matter all that much and they don't care what folks think about her. The most I did was halfway tell Malvonne and there was no way not to. But tell another man? No. Anyhow Gistan would just laugh and try to get out of hearing it. Stuck would look at his feet, swear I'd been fixed and tell me how much high john I need to remedy myself. Neither one of them I'd talk to about her. It's not a thing you tell except maybe to a tight friend, somebody you knew from before, long time ago like Victory, but even if I had the chance I don't believe I could have told him and if I couldn't tell Victory it was because I couldn't tell myself because I didn't know all about it. All I know is I saw her buying candy and the whole



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thing was sweet. Not just the candy—the whole thing and picture of it. Candy's something you lick, suck on, and then swallow and it's gone. No. This was something else. More like blue water and white flowers, and sugar in the air. I needed to be there, where it was all mixed up together just right, and where that was, was Dorcas.

“When I got to the apartment I had no name to put to the face I'd seen in the drugstore, and her face wasn't on my mind right then. But she opened the door, opened it right up to me. I smelled pound cake and disguised chicken. The women gathered around and I showed them what I had while they laughed and did the things women do: flicked lint off my jacket, pressed me on the shoulder to make me sit down. It's a way they have of mending you, fixing what they think needs repair.

“She didn't give me a look or say anything. But I knew where she was standing and how, every minute. She leaned her hip on the back of a chair in the parlor, while the women streamed out of the dining room to mend me and joke me. Then somebody called out her name. Dorcas. I didn't hear much else, but I stayed there and showed them all my stuff, smiling, not selling but letting them sell themselves.

“I sell trust; I make things easy. That's the best way. Never push. Like at the Windemere when I wait tables. I'm there but only if you want me. Or when I work the rooms, bringing up the whiskey hidden so it looks like coffee. Just there when you need me and right on time. You get to know the woman who wants four glasses of something, but doesn't want to ask four times; so you wait till her glass is two-thirds down and fill it up again. That way, she's drinking one glass while he is buying four. The quiet money whispers twice: once when I slide it in my pocket; once when I slide it out.

"I was prepared to wait, to have her ignore me. I didn't have a plan and couldn't have carried it out if I did. I felt dizzy with a lightheadedness I thought came from the heavy lemon flavoring, the face powder and that light woman-sweat. Salty. Not bitter like a man's is. I don't know to this day what made me speak to her on the way out the door.

"I can conjure what people say. That I treated Violet like a piece of furniture you favor although it needed something every day to keep it steady and upright. I don't know. But since Victory, I never got too close to anybody. Gistan and Stuck, we close, but not like it is with somebody knew you from when you was born and you got to manhood at the same time. I would have told Victory how it was. Gistan, Stuck, whatever I said to them would be something near, but not the way it really was. I couldn't talk to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn't told myself. With her I was fresh, new again. Before I met her I'd changed into new seven times. The first time was when I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been.

"I was born and raised in Vesper County, Virginia, in 1873. Little place called Vienna. Rhoda and Frank Williams took me in right away and raised me along with six of their own. Her last child was three months old when Mrs. Rhoda took me in, and me and him were closer than many brothers I've seen. Victory was his name. Victory Williams. Mrs. Rhoda named me Joseph after her father, but neither she nor Mr. Frank either thought to give me a last name. She never pretended I was her natural child. When she parceled out chores or favors she'd say, 'You are just like my own.' That 'like' I guess it was made me ask her—I don't believe I was three yet—where my real parents were. She looked down at me, over her shoulder,



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and gave me the sweetest smile, but sad someway, and told me, O honey, they disappeared without a trace. The way I heard it I understood her to mean the 'trace' they disappeared without was me.

"The first day I got to school I had to have two names. I told the teacher Joseph Trace. Victory turned his whole self around in the seat.

" 'Why you tell her that?' he asked me.

" 'I don't know,' I said. 'Cause.'

" 'Mama be mad. Pappy too.'

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

" 'If she ain't, who is?'

" 'Another woman. She be back. She coming back for me. My daddy too.' That was the first time I knew I thought that, or wished it.

"Victory said, 'They know where they left you. They come back to our place. Williams place is where they know you at.' He was trying to walk double-jointed like his sister. She was good at it and bragged so much Victory practiced every chance he got. I remember his shadow darting in the dirt in front of me. 'They know you at Williams place, Williams is what you ought to call yourself.'

"I said, 'They got to pick me out. From all of you all, they got to pick me. I'm Trace, what they went off without.'

" 'Ain't that a bitch?'

"Victory laughed at me and wrapped his arm around my neck wrassling me to the ground. I don't know what happened

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to the speck of glass. I never did get it out. And nobody came looking for me either. I never knew my own daddy. And my mother, well, I heard a woman in the hotel dining room say the confoundest thing. She was talking to two other women while I poured the coffee. 'I am bad for my children,' she said. 'I don't mean to be, but there is something in me that makes it so. I'm a good mother but they do better away from me; as long as they're by my side nothing good can come to them. The ones that leave seem to flower; the ones that stay have such a hard time. You can imagine how bad I feel knowing that, can't you?'

"I had to sneak a look at her. It took strength to say that. Admit that.

"The second change came when I was picked out and trained to be a man. To live independent and feed myself no matter what. I didn't miss having a daddy because first off there was Mr. Frank. Steady as a rock, and showed no difference among any of us children. But the big thing was, I was picked, Victory too, by the best man in Vesper County to go hunting with. Talk about proud-making. He was the best in the county and he picked me and Victory to teach and hunt with. He was so good they say he just carried the rifle for the hell of it because he knew way before what the prey would do, how to fool snakes, bend twigs and string to catch rabbits, groundhog; make a sound waterfowl couldn't resist. Whitefolks said he was a witch doctor, but they said that so they wouldn't have to say he was smart. A hunter's hunter, that's what he was. Smart as they come. Taught me two lessons I lived by all my life. One was the secret of kindness from whitepeople—they had to pity a thing before they could like it. The other—well, I forgot it.

"It was because of him, what I learned from him, made me

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more comfortable in the woods than in a town. I'd get nervous if a fence or a rail was anywhere around. Folks thought I was the one to be counted on never to be able to stomach a city. Piled-up buildings? Cement paths? Me? Not me.

“Eighteen ninety-three was the third time I changed. That was when Vienna burned to the ground. Red fire doing fast what white sheets took too long to finish: canceling every deed; vacating each and every field; emptying us out of our places so fast we went running from one part of the county to another—or nowhere. I walked and worked, worked and walked, me and Victory, fifteen miles to Palestine. That’s where I met Violet. We got married and set up on Harlon Ricks’ place near Tyrell. He owned the worst land in the county. Violet and me worked his crops for two years. When the soil ran out, when rocks was the biggest harvest, we ate what I shot. Then old man Ricks got fed up and sold the place along with our debt to a man called Clayton Bede. The debt rose from one hundred eighty dollars to eight hundred under him. Interest, he said, and all the fertilizer and stuff we got from the general store—things he paid for—the prices, he said, went up. Violet had to tend our place and walk the plow on his too, while I went from Bear to Crossland to Goshen working. Slash pine some of the time, sawmill most of it. Took us five years, but we did it.

"Then I got a job laying rail for the Southern Sky. I was twenty-eight years old and used to changing now, so in 1901, when Booker T. had a sandwich in the President's house, I was bold enough to do it again: decided to buy me a piece of land. Like a fool I thought they'd let me keep it. They ran us off with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed.

"I changed up again the fourth time in 1906 when I took my wife to Rome, a depot near where she was born, and

boarded the Southern Sky for a northern one. They moved us five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow law.

"We lived in a railroad flat in the Tenderloin. Violet went in service and I worked everything from whitefolks shoe leather to cigars in a room where they read to us while we rolled tobacco. I cleaned fish at night and toilets in the day till I got in with the table waiters. And I thought I had settled into my permanent self, the fifth one, when we left the stink of Mulberry Street and Little Africa, then the flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third and moved uptown.

"By then all the hogs and cows had disappeared, and what used to be little shacky farms nowhere near the size of the piece I tried to buy was more and more houses. Used to be a colored man could get shot at just walking around up there. They built row houses and single ones with big yards and vegetable gardens. Then, just before the War, whole blocks was let to colored. Nice. Not like downtown. These had five, six rooms; some had ten and if you could manage fifty, sixty dollars a month, you could have one. When we moved from 140th Street to a bigger place on Lenox, it was the light-skinned renters who tried to keep us out. Me and Violet fought them, just like they was whites. We won. Bad times had hit then, and landlords white and black fought over colored people for the high rents that was okay by us because we got to live in five rooms even if some of us rented out two. The buildings were like castles in pictures and we who had cleaned up everybody's mess since the beginning knew better than anybody how to keep them nice. We had birds and plants everywhere, me and Violet. I gathered up the street droppings myself to fertilize them. And I made sure the front was as neat as the inside. I was doing hotel work by then. Better than waiting tables in

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a restaurant because in a hotel there're more ways to get tips. Pay was light, but the tips dropped in my palm fast as pecans in November.

"When the rents got raised and raised again, and the stores doubled the price of uptown beef and let the whitefolks' meat stay the same, I got me a little sideline selling Cleopatra products in the neighborhood. What with Violet cutting out day work and just doing hair, we did fine.

"Then long come a summer in 1917 and after those white-men took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me. Along with many a more. One of those whitemen had a heart and kept the others from finishing me right then and there.

"I don't know exactly what started the riot. Could have been what the papers said, what the waiters I worked with said, or what Gistan said—that party, he said, where they sent out invitations to whites to come see a colored man burn alive. Gistan said thousands of whites turned up. Gistan said it sat on everybody's chest, and if the killing hadn't done it, something else would have. They were bringing in swarms of colored to work during the War. Crackers in the South mad cause Negroes were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming.

"I have seen some things in my time. In Virginia. Two of my stepbrothers. Hurt bad. Bad. Liked to kill Mrs. Rhoda. There was a girl, too. Visiting her folks up by Crossland. Just a girl. Anyway, up here if you bust out a hundred'll bust right along with you.

"I saw some little boys running in the street. One fell down and didn't get up right away, so I went over to him. That did it. Riot went on without me while me and Violet nursed my

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head. I survived it, though, and maybe that's what made me change again for the seventh time two years later in 1919 when I walked all the way, every goddamn step of the way, with the three six nine. Can't remember no time when I danced in the street but that one time when everybody did. I thought that change was the last, and it sure was the best because the War had come and gone and the colored troops of the three six nine that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two. Gistan got me a job at another hotel where the tip was folding money more often than coin. I had it made. In 1925 we all had it made. Then Violet started sleeping with a doll in her arms. Too late. I understood in a way. In a way.

"Don't get me wrong. This wasn't Violet's fault. All of it's mine. All of it. I'll never get over what I did to that girl. Never. I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I've been a new Negro all my life. But all I lived through, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcas. You would have thought I was twenty, back in Palestine satisfying my appetite for the first time under a walnut tree.

"Surprised everybody when we left, me and Violet. They said the City makes you lonely, but since I'd been trained by the best woodsman ever, loneliness was a thing couldn't get near me. Shoot. Country boy; country man. How did I know what an eighteen-year-old girl might instigate in a grown man whose wife is sleeping with a doll? Make me know a loneliness I never could imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles, or on a riverbank with nothing but live bait for company. Convince me I never knew the sweet side of anything until I tasted her honey. They say snakes go blind for a while before they shed skin for the last time.

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"She had long hair and bad skin. A quart of water twice a day would have cleared it right up, her skin, but I didn't suggest it because I liked it like that. Little half moons clustered underneath her cheekbones, like faint hoofmarks. There and on her forehead. I bought the stuff she told me to, but glad none of it ever worked. Take my little hoof marks away? Leave me with no tracks at all? In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough. I didn't even have to work at it. Didn't even have to think. Something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look. If the track's not talking to you, you might get up out of your chair to go buy two or three cigarettes, have the nickel in your pocket and just start walking, then running, and end up somewhere in Staten Island, for crying out loud, Long Island, maybe, staring at goats. But if the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without.

"I wanted to stay there. Right after the gun went thuh! and nobody in there heard it but me and that is why the crowd didn't scatter like the flock of redwings they looked like but stayed pressed in, locked together by the steam of their dancing and the music, which would not let them go. I wanted to stay right there. Catch her before she fell and hurt herself.

"I wasn't looking for the trail. It was looking for me and when it started talking at first I couldn't hear it. I was rambling, just rambling all through the City. I had the gun but it was not

the gun—it was my hand I wanted to touch you with. Five days rambling. First High Fashion on 131st Street because I thought you had a hair appointment on Tuesday. First Tuesday of every month it was. But you wasn't there. Some women came in with fish dinners from Salem Baptist, and the blind twins were playing guitar in the shop, and it's just like you said—only one of them's blind; the other one is just going along with the program. Probably not even brothers, let alone twins. Something their mama cooked up for a little extra change. They were playing something sooty, though; not the gospel like they usually do, and the women selling fish dinners frowned and talked about their mother bad, but they never said a word to the twins and I knew they were having a good time listening because one of the loudest ones could hardly suck her teeth for patting her foot. They didn't pay me no mind. Took me a while to get them to tell me you wasn't on the book for that day. Minnie said you had a touch-up Saturday and how she didn't approve of touch-ups not just because they were fifty cents instead of a dollar and a quarter for the whole do, but because it hurt the hair, heat on dirt she said, hurt the hair worse than anything she knew of. Except, of course, no heat at all. What did you have the touch-up for? That's what I first thought about. Last Saturday? You told me you were going with the choir out to Brooklyn to sing at Shiloh, and you had to leave at nine in the morning and wouldn't be back till night and that's why. And that you'd missed the last trip, and your aunt found out about it so you had to go on this one, and that's why. So I didn't wait for Violet to leave and unlock Malvonne's apartment. No need. But how could you have a touch-up the Saturday before and still make it to the station by nine o'clock in the morning when Minnie never opens up before noon on

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Saturday because she's open till midnight getting everybody readied up for Sunday? And you didn't need to keep the Tuesday regular appointment, did you? I dismissed the evil in my thoughts because I wasn't sure that the sooty music the blind twins were playing wasn't the cause. It can do that to you, a certain kind of guitar playing. Not like the clarinets, but close. If that song had been coming through a clarinet, I'd have known right away. But the guitars—they confused me, made me doubt myself, and I lost the trail. Went home and didn't pick it up again until the next day when Malvonne looked at me and covered her mouth with her hand. Couldn't cover her eyes, though; the laugh came flying out of there.

"I know you didn't mean those things you said to me. After I found you and got you to come back to our room one more time. What you said I know you didn't mean. It hurt, though, and the next day I stood freezing on the stoop worrying myself sick about it. Nobody there but Malvonne sprinkling ashes on patches of ice. Across the street, leaning up against the iron railing, I saw three sweetbacks. Thirty degrees, not even ten in the morning, and they shone like patent leather. Smooth. Couldn't be more than twenty, twenty-two. Young. That's the City for you. One wore spats, and one had a handkerchief in his pocket same color as his tie. Had his coat draped across his shoulders. They were just leaning there, laughing and so on, and then they started crooning, leaning in, heads together, snapping fingers. City men, you know what I mean. Closed off to themselves, wise, young roosters. Didn't have to do a thing—just wait for the chicks to pass by and find them. Belted jackets and handkerchiefs the color of their ties. You think Malvonne would have covered her mouth in front of them? Or made roosters pay her in advance for the use of her place of



a Thursday? Never would have happened because roosters don't need Malvonne. Chickens find the roosters and find the place, too, and if there is tracking to be done, they do it. They look; they figure. Roosters wait because they are the ones waited for. They don't have to trail anybody, look ignorant in a beauty parlor asking for a girl in front of women who couldn't wait for me to leave so they could pat on to the sooty music and talk about what the hell did I want to know about a girl not out of high school yet and wasn't I married to old crazy Violet? Only old cocks like me have to get up from the stoop, cut Malvonne off in the middle of a sentence and try to walk not run all the way to Inwood, where we sat the first time and you crossed your legs at the knees so I could see the green shoes you carried out the house in a paper sack so your aunt wouldn't know you tapped down Lenox and up Eighth in them instead of the oxfords you left the house in. While you flicked your foot, turned your ankles for the admiration of the heels, I looked at your knees but I didn't touch. I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart.

"You looked at me then like you knew me, and I thought it really was Eden, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks.

"I went back up there, to the very spot. Old snow made the sky soft and blackened tree bark. Dog tracks and rabbit too, neat as the pattern on a Sunday tie scattered over the snow. One of those dogs must have weighed eighty pounds. The rest

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were small size; one limped. My footprints messed everything up. And when I looked back at where I'd walked, saw myself standing there in street shoes, no galoshes, wet to the ankles, I knew. I didn't feel the cold, though, because I was remembering it the way it was in our time. That warm October, remember? The rose of Sharon was still heavy with flowers. Lilac trees, pines. That tulip tree where Indians gathered looked like a king. The first time we met there I got there before you. Two whitemen were sitting on a rock. I sat on the ground right next to them until they got disgusted and moved off. You had to be working or look like you was to be anywhere near there. That's why I brought my sample case along. To look like I was delivering something important. Yeah, it was forbidden, all right, but nobody loudtalked us that time. And it gave the thing an edge, being there, a danger that was more than me and you being together. I scratched our initials on the rock those men moved away from. D. and J. Later on, after we had a place and a routine, I brought you treats, worrying each time what to bring that would make you smile and come again the next time. How many phonograph records? How many silk stockings? The little kit to mend the runs, remember? The purple metal box with flowers on top full of Schrafft's chocolates. Cologne in a blue bottle that smelt like a whore. Flowers once, but you were disappointed with that treat, so I gave you a dollar to buy whatever you wanted with it. A whole day's pay back home when I was young. Just for you. Anything just for you. To bite down hard, chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of my life. In Malvonne's nephew's room with the iceman's sign in the window. Your first time. And mine, in a manner of speaking. For which, and I will say it again, I would strut out the Garden, strut! as long

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as you held on to my hand, girl. Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I *chose* you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind. And I made up my mind to follow you too. That's something I know how to do from way back. Maybe I didn't tell you that part about me. My gift in the woods that even he looked up to and he was the best there ever was. Ever. Those old people, they knew it all. I talk about being new seven times before I met you, but back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped. And let me tell you, baby, in those days it was more than a state of mind."

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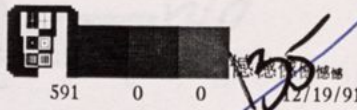
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...the county seat, a slave, and returned in 1858 a free
woman. Her daughter and grandchildren lived in a small little
place called Rose, twelve miles north of the town she'd left.
The grandchildren ranged in age from four to thirteen, and
out of them, Violet, was twelve years old when True Belle
arrived. That was after the men had come for the stock, the
poor and the share her daughter Rose Dear was sitting in.
When she got there all that was left, aside from some borrowed
relatives and the clothes on their backs, was the house. Rose's
husband had agreed saying they could—she had the right
to do it and I suppose, the right to take the house and
to raise, or if none of us fell from the house and was not
crop down to its state. ... paper about the house
hand having a party that had been ... the house
of land and land, the ... of the house were
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to ... people that my husband, ... and

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isky, I'd say, trying to figure out anybody's state
of mind. But worth the trouble if you're like me—curious,
inventive and well-informed. Joe acts like he knew all about
what the old folks did to keep on going, but he couldn't have
known much about True Belle, for example, because I doubt
Violet ever talked to him about her grandmother—and never
about her mother. So he didn't know. Neither do I, although
it's not hard to imagine what it must have been like.

Her state of mind when she moved from Baltimore back to
Vesper County must have been a study. She'd left Words-

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worth, the county seat, a slave, and returned in 1888 a free woman. Her daughter and grandchildren lived in a mean little place called Rome, twelve miles north of the town she'd left. The grandchildren ranged in age from four to fourteen, and one of them, Violet, was twelve years old when True Belle arrived. That was after the men had come for the stock, the pots and the chair her daughter Rose Dear was sitting in. When she got there all that was left, aside from some borrowed pallets and the clothes on their backs, was the paper Rose's husband had signed saying they could—that the men had the right to do it and, I suppose, the duty to do it, if the rain refused to rain, or if stones of ice fell from the sky instead and cut the crop down to its stalks. Nothing on the paper about the husband joining a party that favored niggers voting. Dispossessed of house and land, the sad little family True Belle found were living secretly in an abandoned shack some neighbors had located for them and eating what food these neighbors were able to share and the girls forage. Lots of okra and dried beans, and, since it was September, berries of every kind. Twice, however, the minister's son had brought them a young squirrel to feast on. Rose told people that her husband, fed up and stunned by the uselessness of his back and hands, tired of fried green tomatoes and grits, hungry beyond belief for the meat of some meat and not just its skin, furious at the price of coffee and the shape of his oldest girl's legs, had just quit. Got up and quit. Gone off somewhere to sit and think about it or sit and not think about it. It was better to make up talk than to let out what she knew. They might come looking for her next time, and not just her pots, her pans, her house. Lucky for her, True Belle was dying and willing to die in Vesper County, after giving her whole well life to Miss Vera Louise in Baltimore.

The death True Belle was dying took eleven years, long



enough for her to rescue Rose, bury her, see the husband return four times, make six quilts, thirteen shifts and fill Violet's head with stories about her whitelady and the light of both their lives—a beautiful young man whose name, for obvious reasons, was Golden Gray. Gray because that was Vera Louise's last name (much, much later it was also the color of his eyes), and Golden because after the pink birth-skin disappeared along with the down on his head, his flesh was radiantly golden, and floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears. It was nowhere as blond as Vera Louise's hair once was, but its sunlight color, its determined curliness, endeared him to her. Not all at once. It took a while. But True Belle laughed out loud the minute she laid eyes on him and thereafter every day for eighteen years.

When the three of them lived in a fine sandstone house on Edison Street in Baltimore, far away from Vesper County where both Vera Louise Gray and True Belle were born, what the whitelady told her neighbors and friends was partly true: that she could not bear the narrow little ways of her home county. And that she had brought her servant and an orphaned baby she fancied to Baltimore to experience a more sophisticated way of living.

It was a renegade, almost suffragette thing to do, and the neighbors and would-be women friends surrounded Vera Louise with as polite a distance as they could manage. If they thought that would force her to alter her manner, admit she needed to look for a husband—they were wrong. The out-of-state newcomer, rich and headstrong, contented herself with luxury and even less of their company. Besides she seemed taken up completely with book reading, pamphlet writing and the adoration of the orphan.

From the beginning, he was like a lamp in that quiet, shaded

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house. Simply startled each morning by the look of him, they vied with each other for the light he shed on them. He was given a fussy spoiling by Vera Louise and complete indulgence by True Belle, who, laughing, laughing, fed him test cakes and picked every single seed from the melon before she let him eat it. Vera Louise dressed him like the Prince of Wales and read him vivid stories.

True Belle, of course, would have known everything right away because, first of all, nobody could hide much in Wordsworth and nothing at all could be hidden in the Big Houses of its landowners. Certainly nobody could help noticing how many times a week a Negro boy from out Vienna way was called on to ride along with Miss Vera, and what part of the woods she preferred to ride in. True Belle knew what all the slaves knew, and she knew more since she was the one whose sole job it was to tend to whatever Miss Vera Louise wanted or needed, including doing her laundry, some of which had to be soaked overnight in vinegar once a month. So if it did not need it, if the personal garments could be washed along with the rest, True Belle knew why, and Vera Louise knew she knew. There was never any need to speak of it. The only people who didn't know were the fathers. The about-to-be father—the black boy—never found out, as far as True Belle could tell, because Vera Louise never mentioned his name or came near him ever again. The old father, Colonel Wordsworth Gray, didn't know a thing. Not one thing.

It had to be his wife who finally did tell him. Finally. Although she never spoke about it to her daughter, or, after she found out, ever spoke to her daughter at all, she was the one who would have had to let the Colonel know, and when he found out he stood up then sat down and then stood up again.

His left hand patted around the air searching for something: a shot of whiskey, his pipe, a whip, a shotgun, the Democratic platform, his heart—Vera Louise never knew. He looked hurt, deeply, deeply hurt for a few seconds. Then his rage seeped into the room, clouding the crystal and softening the starched tablecloth. Realizing the terrible thing that had happened to his daughter made him sweat, for there were seven mulatto children on his land. Sweat poured from his temples and collected under his chin; soaked his armpits and the back of his shirt as his rage swamped and flooded the room. The ivy on the table had perked up and the silver was slippery to the hand by the time he mopped his brow and gathered himself together to do an appropriate thing: slap Vera Louise into the serving table.

Her mother, however, had the final cut: her eyebrows were perfectly still but the look she gave Vera Louise as the girl struggled up from the floor was so full of repulsion the daughter could taste the sour saliva gathering under her mother's tongue, filling the insides of her cheeks. Only breeding, careful breeding, did not allow her to spit. No word, then or ever, passed between them. And the lingerie case full of money that lay on Vera's pillow the following Wednesday was, in its generosity, heavy with contempt. More money than anybody in the world needed for seven months or so away from home. So much money the message was indisputable: die, or live if you like, elsewhere.

True Belle was the one she wanted and the one she took. I don't know how hard it was for a slave woman to leave a husband that work and distance kept her from seeing much of anyhow, and to leave two daughters behind with an old aunt to take care of them. Rose Dear and May were eight and ten

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years old then. Good help at that age for anybody who owned them and no help at all to a mother who lived in Wordsworth, miles away from her husband in a rich man's house taking care of his daughter day and night. Perhaps it wasn't so hard to ask an older sister to look out for a husband and the girls because she was bound for Baltimore with Miss Vera Louise for a while. True Belle was twenty-seven and when would she ever get to see a great big city otherwise?

More important Miss Vera Louise might help her buy them all out with paper money, because she sure had a lot of it handed to her. Then again, maybe not. Maybe she frowned as she sat in the baggage car, rocking along with the boxes and trunks, unable to see the land she was traveling through. Maybe she felt bad. Anyway, choiceless, she went, leaving husband, sister, Rose Dear and May behind, and if she worried, the blond baby helped soothe her, and kept her entertained for eighteen years, until he left home.

So in 1888, with twenty-two years of the wages Miss Vera initiated soon as the War was over (but held in trust lest her servant get ideas), True Belle convinced herself and her mistress she was dying, got the money—ten eagle dollars—and was able to answer Rose Dear's pleas by coming back to Vesper with Baltimore tales for grandchildren she had never seen. She rented a small house, bought a cookstove for it and delighted the girls with descriptions of life with the wonderful Golden Gray. How they bathed him three times a day, and how the G on his underwear was embroidered with blue thread. The shape of the tub and what they put in the water to make him smell like honeysuckle sometimes and sometimes of lavender. How clever he was and how perfect a gentleman. The hilarious grown-up comments he made when a child and the cavalierlike

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courage he showed when he was a young man and went to find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father.

True Belle never saw him again after he rode off and didn't know if Vera Louise had any better luck. Her memories of the boy were more than enough.

I've thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved and Violet too. Or the vain and hincty pinch-nose worrying about his coat and the ivory buttons on his waistcoat? Come all that way to insult not his father but his race.

Pretty hair can't be too long, Vera Louise once told him, and because she seemed to know such things, he believed her. Almost every other thing she said was false, but that last bit of information he held to be graven truth. So the yellow curls covered his coat collar like a farmer's, although the rightness of its length in fastidious Baltimore came from the woman who lied to him about practically everything including the question of whether she was his owner, his mother or a kindly neighbor. The other thing she did not lie about (although it took her eighteen years to get around to it) was that his father was a black-skinned nigger.

I see him in a two-seat phaeton. His horse is a fine one—black. Strapped to the back of the carriage is his trunk: large and crammed with beautiful shirts, linen, and embroidered sheets and pillow slips; a cigar case and silver toilet articles. A long coat, vanilla colored with dark brown cuffs and collar, is folded neatly beside him. He is a long way from home and it begins to rain furiously, but since it is August, he is not cold.

The left wheel strikes a stone and he hears, or thinks he does, a bump that may be the dislocation of his trunk. He reins in the horse and climbs down to see if any damage has been done



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to his things. He discovers that the trunk is loose—the rope has slipped and it is leaning. He unties everything and secures the rope more strongly.

Satisfied with his efforts, but annoyed at the heavy rain, the spoiling it is doing to his clothes and the speed of his journey, he looks around him. In the trees to his left, he sees a naked berry-black woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair. Her eyes are large and terrible. As soon as she sees him, she starts then turns suddenly to run, but in turning before she looks away she knocks her head against the tree she has been leaning against. Her terror is so great her body flees before her eyes are ready to find the route of escape. The blow knocks her out and down.

He looks at her and, holding on to the brim of his hat, moves quickly to get back into the carriage. He wants nothing to do with what he has seen—in fact he is certain that what he is running from is not a real woman but a “vision.” When he picks up the reins he cannot help noticing that his horse is also black, naked and shiny wet, and his feelings about the horse are of security and affection. It occurs to him that there is something odd about that: the pride he takes in his horse; the nausea the woman provoked. He is a touch ashamed and decides to make sure it was a vision, that there is no naked black woman lying in the weeds.

He ties his horse to a sapling and slishes back in driving rain to the place where the woman fell. She is still sprawled there. Her mouth and legs open. A small hickey is forming on her head. Her stomach is big and tight. He leans down, holding his breath against infection or odor or something. Something that might touch or penetrate him. She looks dead or deeply unconscious. And she is young. There is nothing he can do for her

and for that he is relieved. Then he notices a rippling movement in her stomach. Something inside her is moving.

He does not see himself touching her, but the picture he does imagine is himself walking away from her a second time, climbing into his carriage and leaving her a second time. He is uneasy with this picture of himself, and does not want to spend any part of the time to come remembering having done that. Also there is something about where he has come from and why, where he is going and why that encourages in him an insistent, deliberate recklessness. The scene becomes an anecdote, an action that would unnerve Vera Louise and defend him against patricide. Maybe.

He unfolds his long coat that has been tucked in the seat beside him and throws it over the woman. Then he gathers her up in his arms and carries her, stumbling, since she is heavier than he supposed, to the carriage. With great difficulty, he gets her into a sitting position in the carriage. Her head is leaning away from him and her feet are touching one of his splendid but muddy boots. He is hoping her lean will not shift, although there is nothing he can do about the dirty bare feet against his boot, for if he shifts her again, she may swerve over to his and not her side of the carriage. As he urges the horse on, he is gentle for fear the ruts and the muddy road will cause her to fall forward or brush him in some way.

He is heading toward a house a little ways out from a town named Vienna. It is the house where his father lives. And now he thinks it is an interesting, even comic idea to meet this nigger whom he has never seen (and who has never tried to see him) with an armful of black, liquid female. Provided, of course, she does not wake and the rippling in her stomach remains light. That bothers him—that she might regain con-

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sciousness and become something more than his own dark purpose.

He has not looked at her for some time. Now he does and notices a trickle of blood down her jaw onto her neck. The hickey that rose when she smashed into the tree is not the cause of her faint; she must have struck her head on a rock or something when she fell. But she is breathing still. Now he hopes she will not die—not yet, not until he gets to the house described and mapped out for him in clear, childish pictures by True Belle.

The rain seems to be following him; whenever he thinks it is about to stop, a few yards on it gets worse. He has been traveling for six hours, at least, and has been assured by the innkeeper that the journey would end before dark. Now he is not so sure. He doesn't relish night coming on with that passenger. He is calmed by the valley opening before him—the one it should take an hour to get through before he reaches the house a mile or two this side of Vienna. Quite suddenly, the rain stops. It is the longest hour, filled with recollections of luxury and pain. When he gets to the house, he pulls into the yard and finds a shed with two stalls in back. He takes his horse into one and wipes her down carefully. Then he throws a blanket over her and looks about for water and feed. He takes a long time over this. It is important to him, and he is not sure he is not being watched by someone in the house. In fact, he hopes he is; hopes the nigger is watching open-mouthed from a crack in the planks that serve as wall.

But no one comes out to speak to him, so perhaps there is no one. After the horse is seen to (and he has noticed that one shoe needs repair), he returns to the carriage for his trunk. He unlashes it and hoists it to his shoulder. It makes a further mess

After he has seen to the placement of his trunk, he goes back to the carriage to get the woman. The removal of the trunk has displaced the weight, and the carriage is tipping a little on its axis. He reaches in the door and pulls her out. Her skin is almost too hot to handle. The long coat around her drags in the mud as he carries her into the house. He lays her down on a cot, and then curses himself for not having pulled its blanket back first. Now she is on top of it and the coat is all there seems to be to cover her. Its ruin may be permanent. He goes into the second room, and examining a wooden box there, finds a woman's dress. Gingerly he retrieves his coat and covers the woman with the strange-smelling dress. Now he opens his own trunk and selects a white cotton shirt and flannel waistcoat. He drapes the fresh shirt on the single chair rather than risk damaging it on a nail hammered in the wall. Carefully he examines the dry things. Then he sets about trying to make a fire. There is wood in the wood box and the fireplace, and in the darkest corner of the room a can of kerosene which he sprinkles on the wood. But no matches. For a long time he looks for matches and finally finds some in a can, wrapped in a bit of ticking. Five matches, to be exact. The kerosene has evaporated from the



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wood by the time he locates the matches. He is not adept at this. Other people have always lit the fires in his life. But he persists and at last has a good roaring flame. Now he can sit down, smoke a cigar and prepare himself for the return of the man who lives there. A man he assumes is named Henry LesTroy, although from the way True Belle pronounced it, it could be something else. A man of no consequence, except a tiny reputation as a tracker based on one or two escapades signaling his expertise in reading trails. A long time ago, according to True Belle, who gave him all the details—since Vera Louise shut herself in the bedroom or turned her head whenever he tried to pull information from her. Henry Lestory or LesTroy or something like that, but who cares what the nigger's name is. Except the woman who regretted ever knowing him at all and locked her door rather than say it out loud. And would have regretted the baby he gave her too, given it away, except it was golden and she had never seen that color except in the morning sky and in bottles of champagne. True Belle told him Vera Louise had smiled and said, "But he's golden. Completely golden!" So they named him that and didn't take him to the Catholic Foundling Hospital, where whitegirls deposited their mortification.

He has known all that for seven days, eight now. And he has known his father's name and the location of the house he once lived in for two. Information that came from the woman who cooked and cleaned for Vera Louise; who sent baskets of plum preserves, ham and loaves of bread every week while he was in boarding school; who gave his frayed shirts to rag-and-bone men rather than let him wear them; the woman who smiled and shook her head every time she looked at him. Even when he was a tiny boy with a head swollen with fat champagne-

colored curls, and ate the pieces of cake she held out to him, her smile was more amusement than pleasure. When the two of them, the whitewoman and the cook, bathed him they sometimes passed anxious looks at the palms of his hand, the texture of his drying hair. Well, Vera Louise was anxious; True Belle just smiled, and now he knew what she was smiling about, the nigger. But so was he. He had always thought there was only one kind—True Belle's kind. Black and nothing. Like Henry LesTroy. Like the filthy woman snoring on the cot. But there was another kind—like himself.

The rain has stopped for good, apparently. He looks about for something to eat that doesn't need to be cooked—ready made. He has found nothing but a jug of liquor. He continues to sample it and sits back down before the fire.

In the silence left by the rain that has stopped, he hears hoofbeats. Beyond the door he sees a rider staring at his carriage. He approaches. Hello. Might you be related to Lestory? Henry LesTroy or whatever his name is?

The rider doesn't blink.

"No, sir. Vienna. Be back direcklin."

He doesn't understand any of it. And he is drunk now anyway. Happily. Perhaps he can sleep now. But he shouldn't. The owner of the house might return, or the liquid black woman might wake or die or give birth or . . .

When he stopped the buggy, got out to tie the horse and walk back through the rain, perhaps it was because the awful-looking thing lying in wet weeds was everything he was not as well as a proper protection against and anodyne to what he believed his father to be, and therefore (if it could just be contained, identified)—himself. Or was the figure, the vision as he thought of it, a thing that touched him before its fall?

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The thing he saw in the averted glance of the servants at his boarding school; the bootblack who tap-danced for a penny. A vision that, at the moment when his scare was sharpest, looked also like home comfortable enough to wallow in? That could be it. But who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin? But he already had lived in and with it: True Belle had been his first and major love, which may be why two gallops beyond that hair, that skin, their absence was unthinkable. And if he shuddered at the possibility of her leaning on him, of her sliding a bit to the left and actually resting while she slept on his shoulder, it is also true that he overcame the shudder. Swallowed, maybe, and clicked the horse.

I like to think of him that way. Sitting straight in the carriage. Rain matting the hair over his collar, forming a little pool in the space between his boots. His gray-eyed squint as he tries to see through sheets of water. Then without warning as the road enters a valley the rain stops and there is a white grease pat of a sun cooking up there in its sky. Now he can hear things outside himself. Soaked leaves disentangling themselves one from another. The plop of nuts and the flutter of partridge removing their beaks from their hearts. Squirrels, having raced to limb tips, poise there to assess danger. The horse tosses her head to scatter a hovering cloud of gnats. So carefully is he listening he does not see the one-mile marker with VIENNA carved vertically in the stone. He passes it by and then sees the roof of a cabin not five furlongs ahead. It could belong to anyone, anyone at all. But maybe, along with the pity of its fence enclosing a dirt yard in which a rocker without arms lies on its side, the door fastened with a bit of rope for a lock but gaping at its hinges, maybe it shelters his father.

Golden Gray reins in his horse. This is a thing he does well.



The other is play the piano. Dismounting, he leads the horse close enough to look. Animals are somewhere; he can smell them, but the little house looks empty, if not cast-off completely. Certainly the owner never expected a horse and carriage to arrive—the fence gate is wide enough for a stout woman but no more. He unharnesses the horse and walks it a way to the right and discovers, behind the cabin and under a tree he does not know the name of, two open stalls, one of which is full of shapes. Leading the horse he hears behind him a groan from the woman, but doesn't stop to see whether she is waking or dying or falling off the seat. Close up on the stalls he sees that the shapes are tubs, sacks, lumber, wheels, a broken plow, a butter press and a metal trunk. There is a stake too, and he ties the horse to it. Water, he thinks. Water for the horse. What he thinks is a pump in the distance is an ax handle still lodged in a stump. There was the downpour though, and a good bit of it has collected in a washtub near the chopping stump. So his horse can be watered, but where are the other animals he smells but does not see or hear? Out of the shaft, the horse drinks greedily and the carriage tips dangerously with the unequal distribution of his trunk and the woman. Golden Gray examines the trunk fastenings before going to the rope-locked door of the little house.

That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore.

Inside, light comes slowly, and, tired after forcing its way through oiled paper tacked around a window set into the back wall, rests on the dirt floor unable to reach higher than Golden



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Gray's waist. The grandest thing in the room is the fireplace. Clean, set for a new fire, braced with scoured stones, from which two metal arms for holding kettles extend. As for the rest: a cot, wooden, a rust-colored wool blanket fitted neatly over a thin and bumpy mattress. Not cobs, certainly not feathers or leaves. Rags. Bits of truly unusable fabric shoved into a ticking shroud. It reminds Golden Gray of the pillow True Belle made for King to sleep on at her feet. She had been given the name of a powerful male dog, but she was a cat without personality, which is why True Belle liked her and wanted her close by. Two beds and one chair, as it turns out. The person who lived here sat alone at the table, but had two beds: one in a second room entered by a door stronger and better-made than the one to the house itself. And in that room, the second one, is a box and a woman's green frock folded on top of its contents. He looks, just as casual as you please. Lifts up the lid and sees the dress and would dig deeper, but the dress reminds him of what should have been in the front of his mind: the woman breathing through her mouth in the other room. Does he think she will wake up and run off, relieving him of his choice, if he leaves her alone? Or that she will be dead, which is the same thing.

He is avoiding her, I know. Having done the big thing, the hard thing, by going back and lifting the girl up from weeds that clung to his trousers, by not looking to see what he could see of her private parts, the shock of knowing the hair there, once it was dry, was thick enough to part with a fingernail. He tried not to look at the hair on her head either, or at her face, turned away into blades of grass. Already he had seen the deer eyes that fixed on him through the rain, fixed on him as she backed away, fixed on him as her body began to turn for flight.



Too bad she didn't have the sense of a deer and hadn't looked in the direction she was going soon enough to see the giant maple in time. In time. When he went back for her he did not know if she was still there—she could have gotten up and run away—but he believed, hoped, the deer eyes would be closed. Suddenly he was not sure of himself. They might be open. His gratitude that they were not gave him the strength he needed to lift her.

After fidgeting with his trunk he steps into the yard. The sunlight bangs his own eyes shut and he holds his hand over them, peeking through his fingers until it is safe. The sigh he makes is deep, a hungry air-take for the strength and perseverance all life, but especially his, requires. Can you see the fields beyond, crackling and drying in the wind? The blade of black-birds rising out of nowhere, brandishing and then gone? The odor of the invisible animals accentuated in the heat mixing now with out-of-control mint and something fruity needing to be picked. No one is looking at him, but he behaves as though there is. That's the way. Carry yourself the way you would if you were always under the reviewing gaze of an impressionable but casual acquaintance.

She is still there. Hardly distinguishable from the shadow of the carriage hood under which she sleeps. Everything about her is violent, or seems so, but that is because she is exposed under that long coat, and there is nothing to prevent Golden Gray from believing that an exposed woman will explode in his arms, or worse, that he will, in hers. She should be stuffed into the ticking along with the bits of rag, stitched shut to hide her visible lumps and moving parts. But she is there and he looks into the shadow to find her face, and her deer eyes, too, if he has to. The deer eyes are closed, and thank God will not open



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easily, for they are sealed with blood. A lip of skin hangs from her forehead and the blood from it has covered her eyes, her nose and one cheek before it jelled. Darker than the blood though are her lips, thick enough to laugh at and to break his heart.

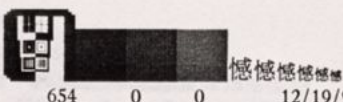
I know he is a hypocrite; that he is shaping a story for himself to tell somebody, to tell his father, naturally. How he was driving along, saw and saved this wild black girl: No qualms. I had no qualms. See look, here, how it ruined my coat and soiled beyond repair a shirt you will never see another one of. I have gloves made from the hide of a very young cow, but I did not use them to hoist her, carry her. I touched her with my bare hands. From the weeds to the carriage; from the carriage into this cabin that could belong to anyone. Anyone at all. I laid her on the wooden cot first thing because she was heavier than she looked, and in my haste forgot to lift the blanket first to cover her. I thought of the blood, I think, dirtying the mattress. But who could tell if it was already dirty or not? I didn't want to lift her again, so I went into the other room and got the dress I found there and draped it best I could over her. ✓ She looked more naked then than before I covered her, but there was nothing else I could do.

He is lying, the hypocrite. He could have opened his big fat trunk; removed one of the two hand-embroidered sheets, or even his dressing gown, and covered the girl. He's young. So young. He thinks his story is wonderful, and that if spoken right will impress his father with his willingness, his honor. But I know better. He wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils. Except this monster without scales or flaming

breath is more dangerous for she is a bloody-faced girl of moving parts, of luminous eyes and lips to break your heart.

Why doesn't he wipe her face, I wonder. She is more savage perhaps this way. More graphically rescued. If she should rise up and claw him it would satisfy him even more and confirm True Belle's warning about the man who saved the rattler, nursed the rattler, fed the rattler only to discover that the last piece of information he would have on earth was the irrevocable nature of the rattler. Aw, but he is young, young and he is hurting, so I forgive him his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures, and when I watch him sipping too quickly the cane liquor he has found, worrying about his coat and not tending to the girl, I don't hate him at all. He has a pistol in his trunk and a silver cigar case, but he is a boy after all, and he sits at the table in the single chair contemplating changing into fresh clothes, for the ones he is wearing, still wet at the seams and cuffs, are filthy with sweat, blood and soil. Should he retrieve the broken rocker from the front yard? Go check on the horse? He is thinking about that, his next move, when he hears slow, muffled hoof clops. Glancing at the girl to make sure the dress and the blood are intact, he opens the door and peers into the yard. Floating toward him parallel to the fence is a black boy astride a mule.

He would have said, "Morning," although it wasn't, but he thought the man lurching down the steps was white and not to be spoken to without leave. Drunk, too, he thought, because his clothes were those of a gent who sleeps in his own yard after a big party rather than in his wife's bed, and wakes when his dogs come to lick his face. He thought this whiteman, this



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drunken gent, was looking for Mr. Henry, waiting for him, needing the wild turkeys now, now, goddamn it—or the pelts, or whatever it was Mr. Henry promised, owed or sold.

"Hello," said the drunken gent, and if the black boy doubted for a minute whether he was white, the smileless smile that came with the greeting convinced him.

"Sir."

"You live around here?"

"No, sir."

"No? Where from then?"

"Out Vienna way."

"Is that right? Where you on your way to?"

It was better when they asked questions most times. If they said anything flat out it was something nobody wanted to hear. The boy picked at the burlap of his sack. "See bout the stock. Mr. Henry he say I'm to see bout it."

See that? The smile was gone. "Henry?" the man asked. His face was another color now. More blood in it. "You said Henry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he? Is he close?"

"Don't know, sir. Gone off."

"Where does he live. What house?"

Oh, thought the boy, he doesn't know Mr. Henry but he's looking for him. "This here one."

"What?"

"This here place his."

"This? This is his? He lives here?"

The blood left his face and showed up his eyes better. "Yes, sir. When he home. Ain't home now."

Golden Gray frowned. He thought he would know it right



away, without being told and, surprised that he had, he turned around to look at it. "You sure? You sure this is where he lives? Henry Lestroy?"

"Yes, sir."

"When's he coming back?"

"Any day now."

Golden Gray ran his thumb across his bottom lip. He lifted his eyes from the boy's face and stared out across the fields still cracking in the wind. "What did you say you come by here for?"

"See bout his stock."

"What stock? There's nothing here but my horse."

"Out back." He pointed with his eyes and a gesture of his hand. "They roam now and again. Mr. Henry he say I'm to look see they get back if they break out."

Golden Gray didn't hear the pride in the boy's voice: "Mr. Henry say *I'm* . . ." because he was so terrified he laughed.

This was it, then. The place he meant to come to and any day now the blackest man in the world would be there too. "All right, then. Go on about it then."

The boy tsched his mule—for nothing, apparently, because he had to kick his sides with creamy heels before the animal obeyed.

"Say!" Golden Gray held up his hand. "When you're done, come back here. I want you to help me with something. Hear?"

"Yes, sir. I be back."

Golden Gray went into the second room to change his clothes—this time he chose something formal, elegant. It was the right time to do it. To select a very fine shirt; to unfold the

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dark blue trousers that fit just so. The right time and the only ✓
time for as long as anyone in Vienna knew him he wore the ✓
clothes he put on at that moment. When he took them out and ✓
laid them carefully on the cot—the yellow shirt, the trousers ✓
with buttons of bone in the fly, the butter-colored waistcoat— ✓
the arrangement, lying on the bed, looked like an empty man ✓
with one arm folded under. He sat down on the rough mattress ✓
near the trouser cuffs, and when dark spots formed on the cloth ✓
he saw that he was crying. ✓

Only now, he thought, now that I know I have a father, do
I feel his absence: the place where he should have been and was
not. Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now
I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered, the
sliced flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the
bloodrun and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe.
Singing pain. Waking me with the sound of itself, thrumming
when I sleep so deeply it strangles my dreams away. There is
nothing for it but to go away from where he is not to where
he used to be and might be still. Let the dangle and the writhe
see what it is missing; let the pain sing to the dirt where he
stepped in the place where he used to be and might be still.
I am not going to be healed, or to find the arm that was
removed from me. I am going to freshen the pain, point it, so
we both know what it is for.

And no, I am not angry. I don't need the arm. But I do need
to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a
phantom I have to behold and be held by, in whatever crevices
it lies, under whatever branch. Or maybe it stalks treeless and
open places, lit with an oily sun. This part of me that does not
know me, has never touched me or lingered at my side. This
gone-away hand that never helped me over the stile, or guided
me past the dragons, pulled me up from the ditch into which



I stumbled. Stroked my hair, fed me food; took the far end of the load to make it easier for me to carry. This arm that never held itself out, extended from my body, to give me balance as I walked thin rails or logs, round and slippery with danger. When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon to me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am? It doesn't matter. I will locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement. Perhaps then the arm will no longer be a phantom, but will take its own shape, grow its own muscle and bone, and its blood will pump from the loud singing that has found the purpose of its serenade. Amen.

Who will take my part? Soap away the shame? Suds it till it falls away muck at my feet to be stepped out of? Will he? Redeem me like a pawn ticket worth little on the marketplace, but priceless in retrieving real value? What do I care what the color of his skin is, or his contact with my mother? When I see him, or what is left of him, I will tell him all about the missing part of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine and take his as my own and we will both be free, arm-tangled and whole.

It had rocked him when he heard who and what his father was. Made him loose, lost. He had first fingered then torn some of his mother's clothes and sat in the grass looking at the things scattered on the lawn as well as in his mind. Little lights moving like worms frolicked before his eyes, and the breath of despair had a nasty smell. It was True Belle who helped him up from the grass, soaped his tangled hair and told him what he had to do.

"Go on," she said. "I'll tell you how to find him, or what's left of him. It don't matter if you do find him or not; it's the going that counts."

So he collected what she said he should collect, packed it all

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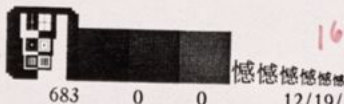
and set out. During the journey he worried a lot about what he looked like, what armor he could call on. There was nothing but his trunk and the set of his jaw. But he was ready, ready to meet the black and savage man who bothered him and abused his arm.

Instead he met, ran into, a wild black girl smashing herself in the head with fright, who lay now in the other room while a black boy was rounding up stock outside. He thought she would be his lance and shield; now he would have to be his own. Look into the deer eyes with the dawning gray of his own. He needs courage for that, but he has it. He has the courage to do what Duchesses of Marlborough do all the time: relinquish being an adored bud clasping its future, and dare to open wide, to let the layers of its petals go flat, show the cluster of stamens dead center for all to see.

What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture. I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. Even his horse had understood and borne Golden Gray along with just a touch or two of the whip. Steadily it had plodded, through valleys without trails, through streams without bridges or ferries for crossing. Eye gaze just above the road, undistracted by the small life that darted toward its hooves, heaving its great chest forward, pacing to hold on to its strength and gather more. It did not know where it was going and it knew nothing of the way, but it did know the nature of its work. Get there, said its hooves. If we can just get there.



Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things. I have to be a shadow who wishes him well, like the smiles of the dead left over from their lives. I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of him. Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet, and contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it. I want to be the language that wishes him well, speaks his name, wakes him when his eyes need to be open. I want him to stand next to a well dug quite clear from trees so twigs and leaves will not fall into the deep water, and while standing there in shapely light, his fingertips on the rim of stone, his gaze at no one thing, his mind soaked and sodden with sorrow, or dry and brittle with the hopelessness that comes from knowing too little and feeling too much (so brittle, so dry he is in danger of the reverse: feeling nothing and knowing everything). There then, with nothing available but the soaking or the brittleness, not even looking toward the well, not aware of its mossy, unpleasant odor, or the little life that hovers at its rim, but to stand there next to it and from down in it, where the light does not reach, a collection of leftover smiles stirs, some brief benevolent love rises from the darkness and there is nothing for him to see or hear, and there is no reason to stay but he does. For the safety at first, then for the company. Then for himself—with a kind of confident, enabling, serene power that flicks like a razor and then hides. But he has felt it now, and it may come again. No doubt a lot of other things will come again: doubt will come, and things may seem unclear from time to time. But once the razor blade has flicked—he will remember it, and if he remembers it he can recall it. That is to say, he has it at his disposal.



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The boy was thirteen and had seen enough people slumped over a plow, or stilled after childbirth, and enough drowned children to know the difference between the quick and the dead. What he saw lying on the cot under a shiny green dress he believed was alive. The boy never raised his eyes from the girl's face (except when Golden Gray said, "I found that dress in there and covered her with it"). He glanced toward the second room and back at the man he believed was white. The boy lifted the sleeve of the dress and patted the slash on the girl's forehead. Her face was fire hot. The blood was dry as skin.

"Water," he said and left the cabin.

Golden Gray started to follow him but stood in the doorway unable to go forward or back. The boy returned with a bucket of well water and an empty burlap sack. He dipped a cup into the water, dribbled some into her mouth. She neither swallowed nor stirred.

"How long she been out?"

"Less than an hour," said Golden Gray.

The boy knelt down to clean her face, slowly lifting whole patches of blood from her cheek, her nose, one eye, then the other. Golden Gray watched and he thought he was ready for those deer eyes to open.

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

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

The grandfathers, way past slashing but still able enough to bind stalks or feed the sugar vats, used to be thought safe. That is until the man the grandfathers called Hunters Hunter got tapped on the shoulder by fingertips that couldn't be anybody's but hers. When the man snapped up, he saw the cane stalks shuddering but he didn't hear a single crack. Because he was more used to wood life than tame, he knew when the eyes watching him were up in a tree, behind a knoll or, like this, at ground level. You can see how he was confused: the fingertips at his shoulder, the eyes at his feet. First thing came to mind was the woman he named himself some thirteen years ago because, while tending her, that was the word he thought of: Wild. He was sure he was tending a sweet but abused young girl at first, but when she bit him, he said, Oh, she's wild. Thinking, some things are like that. There's no gain fathoming more.

He remembered her laugh, though, and how peaceful she was the first few days following the bite, so the touch of her fingertips didn't frighten him, but it did make him sad. Too sad to report the sighting to his coworkers, old men like himself



no longer able to cut all day. Unwarned, they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her, or for how trembly their legs got hearing that babygirl laugh. The pregnant girls marked their babies or didn't, but the grandfathers—unwarned—went soft in the head, walked out of the syrup house, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of their grown children and where they'd put their razor strops.

When the man they called Hunters Hunter knew her—tended her—she was touchy. If he had handled it right, maybe she would have stayed in the house, nursed her baby, learned how to dress and talk to folks. Every now and then when he thought about her he was convinced she was dead. When for months there was no sign or sound of her, he sighed and relived that time when his house was full of motherlessness—and the chief unmothering was Wild's. Local people used the story of her to caution children and pregnant girls and it saddened him to learn that instead of resting she was hungry still. Though for what, exactly, he couldn't say, unless it was for hair the color of a young man's name. To see the two of them together was a regular jolt: the young man's head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool.

He didn't report it, but the news got out anyway: Wild was not a story of a used-to-be-long-ago-crazy girl whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hardheaded children. She was still out there—and real. Someone saw the man they called Hunters Hunter jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the cane field, murmur loud enough for somebody to hear, "Wild. Dog me, if it ain't Wild." The pregnant girls just sighed at the news and went on sweeping and sprinkling the dirt yards, and the

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young men sharpened their blades till the edges whistled. But the old men started dreaming. They remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and that queer boy she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the boy. The first wasn't Hunters Hunter, who was off looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Patty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on Mr. Henry's place while he was gone, and on one of the days he stopped by—to do a little weeding maybe and see if the pigs and chickens were still alive—it rained all morning. Sheets of it made afternoon rainbows everywhere. Later he told his mother that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, and Honor looked at his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, he thought a ghost had taken over the place. Then he realized he was looking at a whiteman and never believed otherwise, even though he saw Mr. Henry's face when the whiteman told him he was his son.

When Henry Lestory, the man so expert in the woods he'd become a hunter's hunter (and when spoken of and to, that is what they called him), got back and saw the buggy and the beautiful horse tied near his stall, he was instantly alarmed. No man he knew drove a carriage like that; no horse in the county had its mane cut and combed that way. Then he saw the mule Patty's boy rode and calmed down a bit. He stood in his own door and had a hard time making out what he was looking at. Patty's boy, Honor, was kneeling beside the cot on which a pregnant girl lay, and a golden-haired man towered above them both. There had never been a whiteman inside his house. Hunters Hunter swallowed. All the pains he had taken shot to hell.

When the blond man turned to look at him, the gray eyes



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

Honor looked from one to the other. "Glad you back, Mr. Henry."

"Who be these?"

"They both in here before me."

"Who *be* these?"

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

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

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

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

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

The cane-liquor bottle, uncapped, was on the table, a tin cup next to it. Hunter checked its contents and eased the stopper



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

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

"No. Daddy. We don't."

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

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

The city man looked faint, but Honor and Hunter had not only watched the common and counted-on birthings farm people see, but had tugged and twisted newborns from all sorts of canals. This baby was not easy. It clung to the walls of that foamy cave, and the mother was of practically no help. When the baby finally emerged, the problem was clear immediately: the woman would not hold the baby or look at it. Hunter sent the boy home.

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

"Yes sir!"

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

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"Yes sir!"

Hunter bent down then to look at the mother, who hadn't said anything since that scream. Sweat covered her face and, breathing hard, she licked beads of it off her upper lip. He leaned closer. Under the dirt, lacing her coal-black skin, were traces of bad things; like tobacco juice, brine and a craftsman's sense of play. When he turned his head to adjust the blanket over her, she raised up and sank her teeth in his cheek. He yanked away and touching his bruised face lightly, chuckled. "Wild, eh?" He turned to look at the pale boy-man who had called him "Daddy."

"Where you pick up a wild woman?"

"In the woods. Where wild women grow."

"Say who she was?"

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

"Reckon not. Who sent you to me?"

"True Belle."

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

"Or with?"

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

"Guess why."

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

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

"True Belle?"

"No! Vera. Vera Louise."

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

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"My mother!"

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

"Baltimore. My name is Golden Gray."

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

"Suit you if it was Golden Lestory?"

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

"How touching."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't we all. Look. Be what you want—white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up—quicklike, and don't bring me no whiteboy sass."

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

It must have been the girl who changed his mind.

Girls can do that. Steer a man away from death or drive him right to it. Pull you out of sleep and you wake up on the ground under a tree you'll never locate again because you're lost. Or if you do find it, it won't be the same. Maybe it cracked from the inside, bored through by crawling life that had to have its own way too, and just crept and bunched and gnawed and burrowed until the whole thing was pitted through with the service it rendered to others. Or maybe they cut it down before it crashed in on itself. Turned it into logs for a fire in a big hearth for children to gaze into.

Victory might remember. He was more than Joe's chosen brother, he was his best friend, and they hunted through and worked in most of Vesper County. Not even a sheriff's map would show the walnut tree Joe fell out of, but Victory would remember it. It could be there still, in somebody's backyard, but the cotton fields and the colored neighborhood around them were churned up and pressed down.

One week of rumors, two days of packing, and nine hundred Negroes, encouraged by guns and hemp, left Vienna, rode out



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

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

The cane field where Wild hid, or watched, or laughed out loud, or stayed quiet burned for months. The sugar smell lingered in the smoke—weighting it. Would she know? he wondered. Would she understand that fire was not light or flowers moving toward her, or flying golden hair? That if you tried to touch or kiss it, it would swallow your breath away?

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

Hunter refused to leave; he was more in the woods than in his cabin anyway, and seemed to look forward to spending his last days in the places he felt most comfortable. So he didn't haul his gear to a wagon. Or walk the road to Bear, then Crossland, then Goshen, then Palestine looking for a workplace as Joe and Victory did. Some farm that would give thirteen-year-old black boys space to sleep and food in return for clearing brush. Or a mill that had a bunkhouse. Joe and Victory walked the road along with the others for a while, then took off. They knew they had left Crossland far behind when they passed the walnut tree where they used to sleep on nights when, hunting far from home, cool air could be found high in its branches. And when they looked back down the road, they



could still see smoke lifting from what was left of the fields and the cane of Vienna. They found short work at a sawmill in Bear, then an afternoon pulling stumps at Crossland, finally steady work in Goshen. Then one spring the southern third of the county erupted in fat white cotton balls, and Joe left Victory helping the smithy at Goshen for the lucrative crop picking going on outside Palestine, some fifteen miles away. But first, first he had to know if the woman he believed was his mother was still there—or had she confused fire with hair and lost her breath to it.

All in all, he made three solitary journeys to find her. In Vienna he had lived first with the fear of her, then the joke of her, finally the obsession, followed by rejection of her. Nobody told Joe she was his mother. Not outright; but Hunters Hunter looked right in his eyes one evening and said, "She got reasons. Even if she crazy. Crazy people got reasons."

They were cleaning up after eating some of what they'd caught. Joe believed later it was fowl, but it could have been something with fur. Victory would remember. Victory was wiping the roasting stick with leaves while Joe leveled the fire.

"I taught both you all never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it. Didn't think I had to teach you about people. Now, learn this: she ain't prey. You got to know the difference."

Victory and Joe had been joking, speculating on what it would take to kill Wild if they happened on her. If the trail of her all three of them sometimes saw and followed led straight to her hide. That's when Hunter said it. About how crazy people have reasons. Then he looked right at Joe (not Victory). The low fire galvanized his stare. "You know, that woman is *somebody's* mother and *somebody* ought to take care."



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Victory and Joe exchanged looks, but it was Joe's flesh that cooled and his throat that tried and failed to swallow.

From then on he wrestled with the notion of a wildwoman for a mother. Sometimes it shamed him to tears. Other times his anger messed up his aim and he shot wild or hit game in messy inefficient places. A lot of his time was spent denying it, convincing himself he misread Hunter's words and most of all his look. Nevertheless, Wild was always on his mind, and he wasn't going to leave for Palestine without trying to find her one more time.

She wasn't always in the cane. Nor the back part of the woods on a whiteman's farm. He and Hunter and Victory had seen traces of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals and many times the signal Hunter relied on most—redwings, those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close. Hunter had spoken to her there twice, he said, but Joe knew that those woods were not her favorite place. The first time he'd looked for her it was a halfhearted search after a couple of hours' spectacular fishing. Across the river, beyond the place where the trout and the bass were plentiful but before the river went underground heading for the mill, the bank turned around an incline. On top of it, some fifteen feet above the river was a sheltering rock formation, its entrance blocked by hedges of old hibiscus. Once, after pulling ten trout in the first hour of dawn, Joe had walked past that place and heard what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. It hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes.

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

He called out. "Anybody there?"

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

"Hey! You in there!"

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

The second time he looked for her was after the dispossession. Having seen the smoke and tasted the sugared air on his tongue, he delayed his journey to Palestine to detour back toward Vienna. Skirting the burned ground and fields of black stalks; looking away from the cabins that were now just hot bricks where a washtub once stood, he headed for the river and the hole in it where trout multiplied like flies. When he reached the place where the river turned he adjusted the rifle strapped to his back and dropped to his haunches.

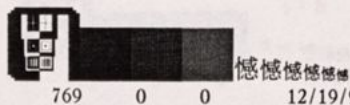
Slowly, breathing softly through his mouth, he crawled toward the rocks shut away by greenery grown ruthless in sun and



J A Z Z

air. There was no sign of her, nothing he recognized. He managed to climb above the opening, but when he slid down and entered the rock place, he saw nothing a woman could use and the vestiges of human habitation were cold. Had she run away, escaped? Or had she been overtaken by smoke, fire, panic, helplessness? Joe waited there, till his listening made him drowsy and he slept for an hour or more. When he woke the day had moved and the hibiscus was as wide as his hand. He hauled himself down the incline and, as he turned to go four redwings shot up from the lower limbs of a white-oak tree. Huge, isolated, it grew in unlikely soil—entwined in its own roots. Immediately Joe fell to his hands and knees, whispering: "Is it you? Just say it. Say anything." Someone near him was breathing. Turning round he examined the place he had just exited. Every movement and leaf shift seemed to be her. "Give me a sign, then. You don't have to say nothing. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go; I promise. A sign." He begged, pleaded for her hand until the light grew even smaller. "You my mother?" Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing.

Whispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to breathing, he suddenly saw himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother that Hunter once knew but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him. A woman who frightened children, made men sharpen knives, for whom brides left food out (might as well—otherwise she stole it). Leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken self all over the county. Shaming him before everybody but Victory, who neither laughed nor slant-eyed him when Joe told him what he believed Hunter meant by those words and espe-



cially that look. "She must be tough" was Victory's reply. "Live outside like that all year round, she must be tough."

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

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

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



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in, baled and spoken for, Joe got married and worked even harder.

Did Hunter stay near Vienna after the fire? Move back to Wordsworth? Fix himself a little place up country—like he talked of doing—and work the world his own way? In 1926, far away from all those places, Joe thought maybe it was Wordsworth Hunter moved near to, and if he could ask him, Victory would remember exactly (assuming he was alive and prison had not rattled him) because Victory remembered everything and could keep things clear in his mind. Like how many times peahens had used a certain nest. Like where a henna carpet of pine needles was shin-bone deep. Like whether a particular tree—the one whose roots grew up its trunk—was in bud two days ago or a week and exactly where it was.

Joe is wondering about all this on an icy day in January. He is a long way from Virginia, and even longer from Eden. As he puts on his coat and cap he can practically feel Victory at his side when he sets out, armed, to find Dorcas. He isn't thinking of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender. She is female. And she is not prey. So he never thinks of that. He is hunting for her though, and while hunting a gun is as natural a companion as Victory.

He stalks through the City and it does not object or interfere. It's the first day of the year. Most people are tired from the night before. Colored people, however, are still celebrating with a day gathering, a feast that can linger into the night. The streets are slippery. The City looks as uninhabited as a small town.

"I just want to see her. Tell her I know she didn't mean what



she said. She's young. Young people fly off the handle. Bust out just for the hell of it. Like me shooting an unloaded shotgun at the leaves that time. Like me saying, 'All right, Violet, I'll marry you,' just because I couldn't see whether a wildwoman put out her hand or not."

The streets he walks are slick and black. In his coat pocket is the forty-five he pawned his rifle for. He had laughed when he handled it, a fat baby gun that would be loud as a cannon. Nothing complex; you'd have to fight your own self to miss, but he isn't going to miss because he isn't going to aim. Not at that insulted skin. Never. Never hurt the young: nest eggs, roe, fledglings, fry . . .

A wind rips up from the mouth of the tunnel and blows his cap off. He runs to get it from the gutter it swept into. He doesn't see the paper ring from a White Owl cigar that sticks to the crown of his cap. Once inside the train he perspires heavily and takes off his coat. The paper sack thuds to the floor. Joe looks down at the fingers of a passenger who reaches for the bag and returns it to him. Joe nods a thank you and shoves the sack back into his coat pocket. A Negro woman shakes her head at him. At the paper sack? Its contents? No, at his dripping face. She holds out to him a fresh handkerchief to wipe it. He refuses; puts his coat back on and moves to the door to stare into the swiftmess and the dark.

The train stops suddenly, throwing passengers forward. As though it just remembered that this was the stop where Joe needs to get off if he is going to find her.

Three girls pile out of the train and clack down the icy stairs. Three waiting men greet them and they all pair off. It is biting cold. The girls have red lips and their legs whisper to each other through silk stockings. The red lips and the silk flash power. A

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power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated. The men at their side love it because, in the end, they will reach in, extend, get back behind that power, grab it and keep it still.

The third time Joe had tried to find her (he was a married man by then) he had searched the hillside for the tree—the one whose roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreated to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic its roots climbed. Toward leaves, light, wind. Below that tree was the river whites called Treason where fish raced to the line, and swimming among them could be riotous or serene. But to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on. The slopes and low hills that fell gently toward the river only appeared welcoming; underneath vines, carpet grass, wild grape, hibiscus and wood sorrel, the ground was as porous as a sieve. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self.

“What would she want with a rooster? Crowing on a corner, looking at the chickens to pick over them. Nothing they have I don’t have better. Plus I know how to treat a woman. I never have, never would, mistreat one. Never would make a woman live like a dog in a cave. The roosters would. She used to say that too. How the young ones couldn’t think about anybody but themselves; how in the playground or at a dance all those boys thought about was themselves. When I find her, I know—I bet my life—she won’t be holed up with one of them. His clothes won’t be all mixed up with hers. Not her. Not Dorcas. She’ll be alone. Hardheaded. Wild, even. But alone.”

Beyond the tree, behind the hibiscus, was a boulder. Behind it an opening so badly disguised it could be only the work of a human. No fox or foaling doe would be so sloppy. Had she been hiding there? Was she that small? He squatted to look closer for signs of her, recognizing none. Finally he stuck his head in. Pitch dark. No odor of dung or fur. It had, instead, a domestic smell—oil, ashes—that led him on. Crawling, squirming through a space low enough to graze his hair. Just as he decided to back out of there, the dirt under his hands became stone and light hit him so hard he flinched. He had come through a few body-lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. Going nowhere. Angling through one curve of the slope to another. Treason River glistening below. Unable to turn around inside, he pulled himself all the way out to reenter head first. Immediately he was in open air the domestic smell intensified. Cooking oil reeked under stabbing sunlight. Then he saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun. Noon light followed him like lava into a stone room where somebody cooked in oil.

"She don't have to explain. She don't have to say a word. I know how it is. She might think it's jealousy, but I'm a mild man. It's not that I don't feel things. I've known some tough times. Got through them, too. I feel things just like everybody else.

"She'll be all alone.

"She'll turn to me.

"She will hold out her hand, walk toward me in ugly shoes, but her face is clean and I am proud of her. Her too-tight braids torture her so she unlooses them as she moves toward me. She's

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J A Z Z

so glad I found her. Arching and soft, wanting me to do it, asking me to. Just me. Nobody but me."

He felt peace at the beginning, and a kind of watchfulness, as though something waited. A before-supper feeling when someone waits to eat. Although it was a private place, with an opening closed to the public, once inside you could do what you pleased: disrupt things, rummage, touch and move. Change it all to a way it was never meant to be. The color of the stone walls had changed from gold to fish-gill blue by the time he left. He had seen what there was. A green dress. A rocking chair without an arm. A circle of stones for cooking. Jars, baskets, pots; a doll, a spindle, earrings, a photograph, a stack of sticks, a set of silver brushes and a silver cigar case. Also. Also, a pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded, a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy—except at the seams. There, both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow.

But where is *she*?

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here she is. No dancing brothers are in this place, nor any breathless girls waiting for the white bulb to be exchanged for the blue. This is an adult party—what goes on goes on in bright light. The illegal liquor is not secret and the secrets are not forbidden. Pay a dollar or two when you enter and what you say is smarter, funnier, than it would be in your own kitchen. Your wit surfaces over and over like the rush of foam to the rim. The laughter is like pealing bells that don't need a hand to pull on the rope; it just goes on and on until you are weak with it. You can drink the safe gin if you like, or stick to

Dorcas is happy. Happier than she has ever been anytime. No white strands grow in her partner's mustache. He is up and coming. Hawk-eyed, tireless and a little cruel. He has never given her a present or even thought about it. Sometimes he is where he says he will be; sometimes not. Other women want him—badly—and he has been selective. What they want and the prize it is his to give is his savvy self. What could a pair of silk stockings be compared to him? No contest. Dorcas is lucky. Knows it. And is as happy as she has ever been anytime.



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"He is coming for me. I know he is because I know how flat his eyes went when I told him not to. And how they raced afterward. I didn't say it nicely, although I meant to. I practiced the points; in front of the mirror I went through them one by one: the sneaking around, and his wife and all. I never said anything about our ages or Acton. Nothing about Acton. But he argued with me so I said, Leave me alone. Just leave me alone. Get away from me. You bring me another bottle of cologne I'll drink it and die you don't leave me alone.

"He said, You can't die from cologne.

"I said, You know what I mean.

"He said, You want me to leave my wife?

"I said, No! I want you to leave *me*. I don't want you inside me. I don't want you beside me. I hate this room. I don't want to be here and don't come looking for me.

"He said, Why?

"I said, Because. Because. Because.

"He said, Because what?

"I said, Because you make me sick.

"Sick? I make you sick?

"Sick of myself and sick of you.

"I didn't mean that part . . . about being sick. He didn't. Make me sick, I mean. What I wanted to let him know was that I had this chance to have Acton and I wanted it and I wanted girlfriends to talk to about it. About where we went and what he did. About things. About stuff. What good are secrets if you can't talk to anybody about them? I sort of hinted about Joe and me to Felice and she laughed before she stared at me and then frowned.

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"I couldn't tell him all that because I had practiced the other points and got mixed up.

"But he's coming for me. I know it. He's been looking for me all over. Maybe tomorrow he'll find me. Maybe tonight. Way out here; all the way out here.

"When we got off the streetcar, me and Acton and Felice, I thought he was there in the doorway next to the candy store, but it wasn't him. Not yet. I think I see him everywhere. I know he's looking and now I know he's coming.

"He didn't even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything—and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad. I don't know.

"Acton, now, he tells me when he doesn't like the way I fix my hair. Then I do it how he likes it. I never wear glasses when he is with me and I changed my laugh for him to one he likes better. I think he does. I know he didn't like it before. And I play with my food now. Joe liked for me to eat it all up and want more. Acton gives me a quiet look when I ask for seconds. He worries about me that way. Joe never did. Joe didn't care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I'm getting one. I have a look now. What pencil-thin eyebrows do for my face is a dream. All my bracelets are just below my elbow. Sometimes I knot my stockings below, not above, my knees. Three straps are across my instep and at home I have shoes with leather cut out to look like lace.

"He is coming for me. Maybe tonight. Maybe here.

"If he does he will look and see how close me and Acton dance. How I rest my head on my arm holding on to him. The hem of my skirt drapes down in back and taps the calves of my legs while we rock back and forth, then side to side. The whole

front of us touches. Nothing can get between us we are so close. Lots of girls here want to be doing this with him. I can see them when I open my eyes to look past his neck. I rub my thumbnail over his nape so the girls will know I know they want him. He doesn't like it and turns his head to make me stop touching his neck that way. I stop.

"Joe wouldn't care. I could rub anywhere on him. He let me draw lipstick pictures in places he had to have a mirror to see."

Anything that happens after this party breaks up is nothing. Everything is now. It's like war. Everyone is handsome, shining just thinking about other people's blood. As though the red wash flying from veins not theirs is facial makeup patented for its glow. Inspiring. Glamorous. Afterward there will be some chatter and recapitulation of what went on; nothing though like the action itself and the beat that pumps the heart. In war or at a party everyone is wily, intriguing; goals are set and altered; alliances rearranged. Partners and rivals devastated; new pairings triumphant. The knockout possibilities knock Dorcas out because here—with grown-ups and as in war—people play for keeps.

"He is coming for me. And when he does he will see I'm not his anymore. I'm Acton's and it's Acton I want to please. He expects it. With Joe I pleased myself because he encouraged me to. With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand."



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Oh, the room—the music—the people leaning in doorways. Silhouettes kiss behind curtains; playful fingers examine and caress. This is the place where things pop. This is the market where gesture is all: a tongue's lightning lick; a thumbnail grazing the split cheeks of a purple plum. Any throwaway lover in wet unlaced shoes and a buttoned-up sweater under his coat is a foreigner here. This is not the place for old men; this is the place for romance.

"He's here. Oh, look. God. He's crying. Am I falling? Why am I falling? Acton is holding me up but I am falling anyway. Heads are turning to look where I am falling. It's dark and now it's light. I am lying on a bed. Somebody is wiping sweat from my forehead, but I am cold, so cold. I see mouths moving; they are all saying something to me I can't hear. Way out there at the foot of the bed I see Acton. Blood is on his coat jacket and he is dabbing at it with a white handkerchief. Now a woman takes the coat from his shoulders. He is annoyed by the blood. It's my blood, I guess, and it has stained through his jacket to his shirt. The hostess is shouting. Her party is ruined. Acton looks angry; the woman brings his jacket back and it is not clean the way it was before and the way he likes it.

"I can hear them now.

"Who? Who did this?"

"I'm tired. Sleepy. I ought to be wide awake because something important is happening.

"Who did this, girl? Who did this to you?"

"They want me to say his name. Say it in public at last.

"Acton has taken his shirt off. People are blocking the doorway; some stretch behind them to get a better look. The record

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playing is over. Somebody they have been waiting for is playing the piano. A woman is singing too. The music is faint but I know the words by heart.

"Felice leans close. Her hand holding mine is too tight. I try to say with my mouth to come nearer. Her eyes are bigger than the light fixture on the ceiling. She asks me was it him.

"They need me to say his name so they can go after him. Take away his sample case with Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye inside. I know his name but Mama won't tell. The world rocked from a stick beneath my hand, Felice. There in that room with the ice sign in the window.

"Felice puts her ear on my lips and I scream it to her. I think I am screaming it. I think I am.

"People are leaving.

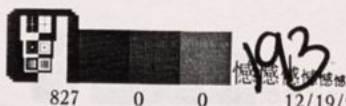
"Now it's clear. Through the doorway I see the table. On it is a brown wooden bowl, flat, low like a tray, full to spilling with oranges. I want to sleep, but it is clear now. So clear the dark bowl the pile of oranges. Just oranges. Bright. Listen. I don't know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart."

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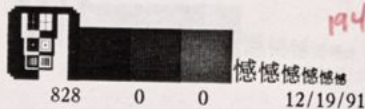
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weetheart. That's what that weather was called. ✓
Sweetheart weather, the prettiest day of the year. And that's ✓
when it started. On a day so pure and steady trees preened. ✓
Standing in the middle of a concrete slab, scared for their lives, ✓
they preened. Silly, yes, but it was that kind of day. I could see ✓
Lenox widening itself, and men coming out of their shops to ✓
look at it, to stand with their hands under their aprons or stuck ✓
in their back pockets and just look around at a street that ✓
spread itself wider to hold the day. Disabled veterans in half ✓
uniform and half civilian stopped looking gloomy at working- ✓



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men; they went to Father Divine's wagon and after they'd eaten they rolled cigarettes and settled down on the curb as though it were a Duncan Phyfe. And the women tip-tapping their heels on the pavement tripped sometimes on the sidewalk cracks because they were glancing at the trees to see where that pure, soft but steady light was coming from. The rumbling of the M11 and M2 was distant, far away and the Packards too. Even those loud Fords quieted down, and no one felt like blowing his horn or leaning out the driver's side to try and embarrass somebody taking too long to cross the street. The sweetness of the day tickled them, made them holler "I give you everything I got! you come home with me!" to a woman tripping in shiny black heels over the cracks.

Young men on the rooftops changed their tune; spit and fiddled with the mouthpiece for a while and when they put it back in and blew out their cheeks it was just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind. You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played. The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine like a young girl singing by the side of a creek, passing the time, her ankles cold in the water. The young men with brass probably never saw such a girl, or such a creek, but they made her up that day. On the rooftops. Some on 254 where there is no protective railing; another at 131, the one with the apple-green water tank, and somebody right next to it, 133, where lard cans of tomato plants are kept, and a pallet for sleeping at night. To find coolness and a way to avoid mosquitoes unable to fly that high up or unwilling to leave the tender neck meat near the street lamps. So from Lenox to St. Nicholas and across 135th Street, Lexington, from Convent to Eighth I could hear the

men playing out their maple-sugar hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn't have a bucket to hold it and didn't want one either. They just wanted to let it run that day, slow if it wished, or fast, but a free run down trees bursting to give it up.

That's the way the young men on brass sounded that day. Sure of themselves, sure they were holy, standing up there on the rooftops, facing each other at first, but when it was clear that they had beat the clarinets out, they turned their backs on them, lifted those horns straight up and joined the light just as pure and steady and kind of kind.

No day to wreck a life already splintered like a cheap windowpane, but Violet, well you had to know Violet. She thought all she had to do was drink malts full of Dr. Dee's Nerve and Flesh Builder, eat pork, and she'd put on enough weight to fill out the back of her dress. She usually wore a coat on warm days like this to keep the men at curbside from shaking their heads in pity when she walked by. But on this day, this kind, pretty day, she didn't care about her missing behind because she came out the door and stood on the porch with her elbows in her hands and her stockings rolled down to her ankles. She had been listening to the music penetrate Joe's sobs, which were quieter now. Probably because she had returned Dorcas' photograph to Alice Manfred. But the space where the photo had been was real. Perhaps that's why, standing there on the porch, unmindful of her behind, she easily believed that what was coming up the steps toward her was another true-as-life Dorcas, four marcelled waves and all.

She carried an Okeh record under her arm and a half pound of stewmeat wrapped in pink butcher paper in her hand al-

J A Z Z

though the sun is too hot to linger in the streets with meat. If she doesn't hurry it will turn—cook itself before she can get it to the stove.

Lazy girl. Her arms are full but there is nothing much in her head.

She makes me nervous.

She makes me wonder if this fine weather will last more than a day. I am already disturbed by the ash falling from the blue distance down on these streets. A sooty film is gathering on the sills, coating the windowpanes. Now she is disturbing me, making me doubt my own self just looking at her sauntering through the sunshafts like that. Climbing the steps now, heading for Violent.

"My mother and my father too lived in Tuxedo. I almost never saw them. I lived with my grandmother who said, 'Felice, they don't live in Tuxedo; they work there and live with us.' Just words: live, work. I would see them once every three weeks for two and a half days, and all day Christmas and all day Easter. I counted. Forty-two days if you count the half days—which I don't, because most of it was packing and getting to the train—plus two holidays makes forty-four days, but really only thirty-four because the half days shouldn't count. Thirty-four days a year.

"When they'd come home, they'd kiss me and give me things, like my opal ring, but what they really wanted to do was go out dancing somewhere (my mother) or sleep (my father). They made it to church on the Sunday, but my mother is still sad about that because all of the things she should have been doing in the church—the suppers, the meetings, the fixing up



of the basement for Sunday-school parties and the receptions after funerals—she had to say no to, because of her job in Tuxedo. So more than anything she wanted gossip from the women in Circle A Society about what'd been going on; and she wanted to dance a little and play bid whist.

"My father preferred to stay in a bathrobe and be waited on for a change while he read the stacks of newspapers me and my grandmother saved for him. The *Amsterdam*, the *Age*, *The Crisis*, *The Messenger*, the *Worker*. Some he took back with him to Tuxedo because he couldn't get them up there. He likes them folded properly if they are newspapers, and no food or fingerprints on the magazines, so I don't read them much. My grandmother does and is very very careful not to wrinkle or soil them. Nothing makes him madder than to open a paper that is badly folded. He groans and grunts while he reads and once in a while he laughs, but he'd never give it up even though all that reading worries his blood, my grandmother said. The good part for him is to read everything and argue about what he's read with my mother and grandmother and the friends they play cards with.

"Once I thought if I read the papers we'd saved I could argue with him. But I picked wrong. I read about the white policemen who were arrested for killing some Negroes and said I was glad they were arrested, that it was about time.

"He looked at me and shouted, 'The story hit the paper because it was news, girl, news!'

"I didn't know how to answer him and started to cry so my grandmother said, 'Sonny, go somewhere and sit down,' and my mother said, 'Walter, shut up about all that to her.'

"She explained to me what he meant: that for the everyday killings cops did of Negroes, nobody was arrested at all. She

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took me shopping after that for some things her bosses in Tuxedo wanted, and I didn't ask her why she had to shop for them on her off days, because then she wouldn't have taken me to Tiffany's on Thirty-seventh Street where it's quieter than when Reverend asks for a minute of silent prayer. When that happens I can hear feet scraping and some people blow their noses. But in Tiffany's nobody blows a nose and the carpet prevents shoe noises of any kind. Like Tuxedo.

"Years ago when I was little, before I started school, my parents would take me there. I had to be quiet all the time. Twice they took me and I stayed the whole three weeks. It stopped, though. My mother and father talked about quitting but they didn't. They got my grandmother to move in and watch over me.

"Thirty-four days. I'm seventeen now and that works out to less than six hundred days. Less than two years out of seventeen. Dorcas said I was lucky because at least they were there, somewhere, and if I got sick I could call on them or get on the train and go see them. Both of her parents died in a very bad way and she saw them after they died and before the funeral men fixed them up. She had a photograph of them sitting under a painted palm tree. Her mother was standing up with her hand on the father's shoulder. He was sitting down and holding a book. They looked sad to me, but Dorcas couldn't get over how good looking they both were.

"She was always talking about who was good looking and who wasn't. Who had bad breath, who had nice clothes, who could dance, who was hincty.

"My grandmother was suspicious of us being friends. She never said why but I sort of knew. I didn't have a lot of friends in school. Not the boys but the girls in my school bunch off

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according to their skin color. I hate that stuff—Dorcas too. So me and her were different that way. When some nastymouth hollered, 'Hey, fly, where's buttermilk?' or 'Hey, kinky, where's kind?' we stuck our tongues out and put our fingers in our noses to shut them up. But if that didn't work we'd lay into them. Some of those fights ruined my clothes and Dorcas' glasses, but it felt good fighting those girls with Dorcas. She was never afraid and we had the best times. All through high school, every day.

"It stopped, the good times, for a couple of months when she started seeing that old man. I knew about it from the start, but she didn't know I did. I let her think it was a secret because she wanted it to be one. At first I thought she was shamed of it, or shamed of him and was just in it for the presents. But she liked secret stuff. Planning and plotting how to deceive Mrs. Manfred. Slipping ~~sex~~ underwear on at my house to go walking in. Hiding things. She always did like secrets. She wasn't ashamed of him either.

"He's old. Really old. Fifty. But he met her standards of good looking, I'll say that for him. Dorcas should have been prettier than she was. She just missed. She had all the ingredients of pretty too. Long hair, wavy, half good, half bad. Light skinned. Never used skin bleach. Nice shape. But it missed somehow. If you looked at each thing, you would admire that thing—the hair, the color, the shape. All together it didn't fit. Guys looked at her, whistled and called out fresh stuff when we walked down the street. In school all sorts of boys wanted to talk to her. But then they stopped; nothing came of it. It couldn't have been her personality because she was a good talker, liked to joke and tease. Nothing standoffish about her. I don't know what it was. Unless it was the way she pushed

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J A Z Z

them. I mean it was like she wanted them to do something scary all the time. Steal things, or go back in the store and slap the face of a white salesgirl who wouldn't wait on her, or cuss out somebody who had snubbed her. Beats me. Everything was like a picture show to her, and she was the one on the railroad track, or the one trapped in the sheik's tent when it caught on fire.

"I think that's what made her like that old man so much at first. The secrecy and that he had a wife. He must have done something dangerous when she first met him or she would never have gone on sneaking around with him. Anyway, she thought she was sneaking. But two hairdressers saw her in that nightclub, Mexico, with him. I spent two hours in there listening to what they had to say about her and him and all kinds of other people who were stepping out. They had fun talking about Dorcas and him mostly because they didn't like his wife. She took away their trade, so they had nothing good to say about her, except crazy as she was she did do hair well and if she wasn't so crazy she could have got a license proper instead of taking away their trade.

"They're wrong about her. I went to look for my ring and there is nothing crazy about her at all.

"I know my mother stole that ring. She said her boss lady gave it to her, but I remember it in Tiffany's that day. A silver ring with a smooth black stone called opal. The salesgirl went to get the package my mother came to pick up. She showed the girl the note from her boss lady so they would give it to her (and even showed it at the door, so they would let her in). While the salesgirl was gone, we looked at the velvet tray of rings. Picked some up and tried to try them on, but a man in a beautiful suit came over and shook his head. Very slightly.



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'I'm waiting for a package for Mrs. Nicolson,' my mother said.

"The man smiled then and said, 'Of course. It's just policy. We have to be careful.' When we left my mother said, 'Of what? What does he have to be careful about? They put the tray out so people can look at the things, don't they? So what does he have to be careful about?'

"She frowned and fussed and we waited a long time for a taxi to take us home and she dared my father to say something about it. The next morning, they packed and got ready to take the train back to Tuxedo Junction. She called me over and gave me the ring she said her boss lady had given her. Maybe they made lots of them, but I know my mother took it from the velvet tray. Out of spite, I suppose, but she gave it to me and I love it, and only lent it to Dorcas because she begged so hard and the silver of it did match the bracelets at her elbow.

"She wanted to impress Acton. A hard job since he criticized everything. He never gave her gifts the way the old man did. I know she took stuff from him because Mrs. Manfred would die before she bought slippery underwear or silk stockings for Dorcas. Things she couldn't wear at home or to church.

"After Dorcas picked up with Acton, we saw each other like before, but she was different. She was doing for Acton what the old man did for her—giving him little presents she bought from the money she wheedled out of the old man and from Mrs. Manfred. Nobody ever caught Dorcas looking for work, but she worked hard scheming money to give Acton things. Stuff he didn't like, anyway, because it was cheap, and he never wore that ugly stickpin or the silk handkerchief either because of the color. I guess the old man taught her how to be nice, and she wasted it on Acton, who took it for granted, and took her for granted and any girl who liked him.

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"I don't know if she quit the old man or just two-timed him with Acton. My grandmother says she brought it on herself. Live the life; pay the price, she said.

"I have to get on home. If I sit here too long, some man will think I'm looking for a good time. Not anymore. After what happened to Dorcas, all I want is my ring back. To have and to show my mother I still have it. She asks me about it once in a while. She's sick and doesn't work in Tuxedo anymore, and my father has a job on the Pullman. He is happier than I've ever seen him. When he reads the papers and magazines he still grunts and talks back to the printed words, but he gets them first and freshly folded and his arguments aren't so loud. 'I've seen the world now,' he says.

"He means Tuxedo and the train stops in Pennsylvania and Ohio and Indiana and Illinois. 'And all the kinds of white-people there are. Two kinds,' he says. 'The ones that feel sorry for you and the ones that don't. And both amount to the same thing. Nowhere in between is respect.'

"He's as argumentative as ever, but happier because riding trains he gets to see Negroes play baseball 'in the flesh and on the lot, goddamnit.' It tickles him that whitepeople are scared to compete with Negroes fair and square.

"My grandmother is slower now, and my mother is sick, so I do most of the cooking. My mother wants me to find some good man to marry. I want a good job first. Make my own money. Like she did. Like Mrs. Trace. Like Mrs. Manfred used to before Dorcas let herself die.

"I stopped in there to see if he had my ring, because my mother kept asking me about it, and because I couldn't find it when I rummaged around in Mrs. Manfred's house after the funeral. But I had another reason too. The hairdresser said the

"I can see why Mrs. Manfred let her visit. She doesn't lie, Mrs. Trace. Nothing she says is a lie the way it is with most older people. Almost the first thing she said about Dorcas was 'She was ugly. Outside and in.'

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"Dorcas was my friend, but I knew that in a way she was right. All those ingredients of pretty and the recipe didn't work. Mrs. Trace, I thought, was just jealous. She herself is very very dark, bootblack, the girls at school would say. And I didn't expect her to be pretty, but she is. You'd never get tired looking at her face. She's what my grandmother calls pick thin, and wears her hair straightened and flat, slicked back like a man's except that style is all the rage now. Nicely trimmed above her ears and at the kitchen part too. I think her husband must have done her kitchen for her. Who else? She never stepped foot in a beauty shop or so the hairdressers said. I could picture her husband doing her neckline for her. The clippers, maybe even a razor, then the powder afterward. He was that kind, and I sort of know what Dorcas was talking about while she was bleeding all over that woman's bed at the party.

"Dorcas was a fool, but when I met the old man I sort of understood. He has a way about him. And he is handsome. For an old man, I mean. Nothing flabby on him. Nice-shaped head, carries himself like he's somebody. Like my father when he's being a proud Pullman porter seeing the world, and baseball and not cooped up in Tuxedo Junction. But his eyes are not cold like my father's. Mr. Trace looks at you. He has double eyes. Each one a different color. A sad one that let you look inside him, and a clear one that looks inside you. I like when he looks at me. I feel, I don't know, interesting. He looks at me and I feel deep—as though the things I feel and think are important and different and . . . interesting.

"I think he likes women, and I don't know anybody like that. I don't mean he flirts with them, I mean he likes them without that, and, this would upset the hairdressers, but I really believe he likes his wife.

"When I first went there he was sitting by the window

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staring down in the alleyway, not saying anything. Later on Mrs. Trace brought him a plate full of old-people food: vegetable stuff with rice and the cornbread right on top. He said, 'Thank you, baby. Take half for yourself.' Something about the way he said it. As though he appreciated it. When my father says thanks, it's just a word. Mr. Trace acted like he meant it. And when he leaves the room and walks past his wife, he touches her. Sometimes on the head. Sometimes just a pat on her shoulder.

"I've seen him smile twice now and laugh out loud once. Then nobody would know how old he is. He's like a kid when he laughs. But I had visited them three or four times before I ever saw him smile. And that was when I said animals in a zoo were happier than when they were left free because they were safe from hunters. He didn't comment; he just smiled as though what I said was new or really funny.

"That's why I went back. The first time was to see if he had my ring or knew where it was, and to tell him to stop carrying on about Dorcas because maybe she wasn't worth it. The next time, when Mrs. Trace invited me to supper, was more to watch how he was and to listen to Mrs. Trace talk the way she did. A way that would always get her into trouble.

"'I messed up my own life,' she told me. 'Before I came North I made sense and so did the world. We didn't have nothing but we didn't miss it.'

"Who ever heard of that? Living in the City was the best thing in the world. What can you do out in the country? When I visited Tuxedo, back when I was a child, even then I was bored. How many trees can you look at? That's what I said to her. 'How many trees can you look at? And for how long and so what?'

"She said it wasn't like that, looking at a bunch of trees. She

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said for me to go to 143rd Street and look at the big one on the corner and see if it was a man or a woman or a child.

"I laughed but before I could agree with the hairdressers that she was crazy, she said, 'What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?'"

"The way I want it?"

"Yeah. The way you want it. Don't you want it to be something more than what it is?"

"What's the point? I can't change it."

"That's the point. If you don't, it will change you and it'll be your fault cause you let it. I let it. And messed up my life."

"Messed it up how?"

"Forgot it."

"Forgot?"

"Forgot it was mine. My life. I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else."

"Who? Who'd you want to be?"

"Not who so much as what. White. Light. Young again."

"Now you don't?"

"Now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before. . . . My grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child. He was a boy, but I thought of him as a girl sometimes, as a brother, sometimes as a boyfriend. He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn't know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it."

"She talked like that. But I understood what she meant. About having another you inside that isn't anything like you. Dorcas and I used to make up love scenes and describe them to each other. It was fun and a little smutty. Something about

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it bothered me, though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did it. Nothing like me. I saw myself as somebody I'd seen in a picture show or a magazine. Then it would work. If I pictured myself the way I am it seemed wrong.

"How did you get rid of her?"

"Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her."

"Who's left?"

"Me."

"I didn't say anything. I started thinking maybe the hairdresser was right again because of the way she looked when she said 'me.' Like it was the first she heard of the word.

"Mr. Trace came back in then, and said he was going to sit outside awhile. She said, 'No, Joe. Stay with us. She won't bite.'

"She meant me, and something else I couldn't catch. He nodded and sat down by the window saying, 'For a little while.'

"Mrs. Trace looked at him but I knew she was talking to me when she said, 'Your little ugly friend hurt him and you remind him of her.'

"I could hardly find my tongue. 'I'm not like her!'

"I didn't mean to say it so loud. They both turned to look at me. So I said it even though I didn't plan to. I told them even before I asked for the ring. 'Dorcas let herself die. The bullet went in her shoulder, this way.' I pointed. 'She wouldn't let anybody move her; said she wanted to sleep and she would be all right. Said she'd go to the hospital in the morning. 'Don't let them call nobody,' she said. 'No ambulance; no police, no nobody.' I thought she didn't want her aunt, Mrs. Manfred, to know. Where she was and all. And the woman giving the party said okay because she was afraid to call the police. They all were. People just stood around talking and

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waiting. Some of them wanted to carry her downstairs, put her in a car and drive to the emergency ward. Dorcas said no. She said she was all right. To please leave her alone and let her rest. But I did it. Called the ambulance, I mean; but it didn't come until morning after I had called twice. The ice, they said, but really because it was colored people calling. She bled to death all through that woman's bed sheets on into the mattress, and I can tell you that woman didn't like it one bit. That's all she talked about. Her and Dorcas' boyfriend. The blood. What a mess it made. That's all they talked about.'

"I had to stop then because I was out of breath and crying.

"I hated crying all over myself like that.

"They didn't stop me neither. Mr. Trace handed me his pocket handkerchief, and it was soaked by the time I was through.

" 'This the first time?' he asked me. 'The first time you cried about her?'

"I hadn't thought about it, but it was true.

"Mrs. Trace said, 'Oh, shit.'

"Then the two of them, they just looked at me. I thought they would never say another word until Mrs. Trace said, 'Come to supper, why don't you. Friday evening. You like catfish?'

"I said sure, but I wasn't going to. The hell with the ring. But the Thursday before, I thought about the way Mr. Trace looked at me and the way his wife said 'me.'

"The way she said it. Not like the 'me' was some tough somebody, or somebody she had put together for show. But like, like somebody she favored and could count on. A secret somebody you didn't have to feel sorry for or have to fight for. Somebody who wouldn't have to steal a ring to get back at

whitepeople and then lie and say it was a present from them. I wanted the ring back not just because my mother asks me have I found it yet. It's beautiful. But although it belongs to me, it's not mine. I love it, but there's a trick in it, and I have to agree to the trick to say it's mine. Reminds me of the tricky blond kid living inside Mrs. Trace's head. A present taken from whitefolks, given to me when I was too young to say No thank you.

"It was buried with her. That's what I found out when I went back for the catfish supper. Mrs. Trace saw it on Dorcas' hand when she stabbed her in the coffin.

"I had a funny feeling in my stomach, and my throat was too dry to swallow, but I had to ask her just the same—why did she mess up the funeral that way. Mr. Trace looked at her as though he had asked the question.

"'Lost the lady,' she said. 'Put her down someplace and forgot where.'

"'How did you find her?'

"'Looked.'

"We sat there for a while nobody saying anything. Then Mrs. Trace got up to answer a knock at the door. I heard voices. 'Just right here and right here. Won't take but two minutes.'

"'I don't do no two-minute work.'

"'Please, Violet, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't absolutely necessary, you know that.'

"They came into the dining room, Mrs. Trace and a woman pleading for a few curls 'just here and here. And maybe you can turn it down up here. Not curled, just turned, know what I mean?'

"'You all go up front, I won't be too long.' She said that to

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Mr. Trace and me after we said 'Evening' to the hurry-up customer, but nobody introduced anybody.

"Mr. Trace didn't sit at the window this time. He sat next to me on the sofa.

" 'Felice. That means happy. Are you?'

" 'Sure. No.'

" 'Dorcas wasn't ugly. Inside or out.'

"I shrugged. 'She used people.'

" 'Only if they wanted her to.'

" 'Did you want her to use you?'

" 'Must have.'

" 'Well, I didn't. Thank God she can't anymore.'

"I wished I hadn't taken my sweater off. My dress stretches across the top no matter what I do. He was looking at my face, not my body, so I don't know why I was nervous alone in the room with him.

"Then he said, 'You mad cause she's dead. So am I.'

" 'You the reason she is.'

" 'I know. I know.'

" 'Even if you didn't kill her outright; even if she made herself die, it was you.'

" 'It was me. For the rest of my life, it'll be me. Tell you something. I never saw a needier creature in my life.'

" 'Dorcas? You mean you still stuck on her?'

" 'Stuck? Well, if you mean did I like what I felt about her. I guess I'm stuck to that.'

" 'What about Mrs. Trace? What about her?'

" 'We working on it. Faster now, since you stopped by and told us what you did.'

" 'Dorcas was cold,' I said. 'All the way to the last she was dry-eyed. I never saw her shed a tear about anything.'

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← "He said, 'I did. You know the hard part of her; I saw the soft. My luck was to tend to it.'

" 'Dorcas? Soft?'

" 'Dorcas. Soft. The girl I knew. Just cause she had scales don't mean she wasn't fry. Nobody knew her that way but me. Nobody tried to love her before me.'

" 'Why'd you shoot at her if you loved her?'

" 'Scared. Didn't know how to love anybody.'

" 'You know now?'

" 'No. Do you, Felice?'

" 'I got other things to do with my time.'

" 'He didn't laugh at me, so I said, 'I didn't tell you everything.'

" 'There's more?'

" 'I suppose I should. It was the last thing she said. Before she . . . went to sleep. Everybody was screaming, "Who shot you, who did it?" She said, "Leave me alone. I'll tell you tomorrow." She must have thought she was going to be around tomorrow and made me think so too. Then she called my name although I was kneeling right beside her. "Felice. Felice. Come close, closer." I put my face right there. I could smell the fruity liquor on her breath. She was sweating, and whispering to herself. Couldn't keep her eyes open. Then she opened them wide and said real loud: "There's only one apple." Sounded like "apple." "Just one. Tell Joe."

" 'See? You were the last thing on her mind. I was right there, right there. Her best friend, I thought, but not best enough for her to want to go to the emergency room and stay alive. She let herself die right out from under me with my ring and everything and I wasn't even on her mind. So. That's it. I told you.'



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“That was the second time I saw him smile but it was more sad than pleased.

“‘Felice,’ he said. And kept on saying it. ‘Felice. Felice.’ With two syllables, not one like most people do, including my father.

“The curled-hair woman came past on her way out the door, chattering, saying, Thanks so much see you Joe sorry to interrupt bye honey didn’t catch your name you a blessing Violet a real blessing bye.

“I said I had to go too. Mrs. Trace plopped down in a chair with her head thrown back and her arms dangling. ‘People are mean,’ she said. ‘Plain mean.’

“Mr. Trace said, ‘No. Comic is what they are.’

“He laughed a little then, to prove his point, and she did too. I laughed too but it didn’t come out right because I didn’t think the woman was all that funny.

“Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn’t be there. Shouldn’t be looking at them doing that.

“Mr. Trace said, ‘Come on, Felice. Let’s see what you can do.’ He held out his hand.

“Mrs. Trace said, ‘Yeah. Come on. Hurry; it’s almost over.’

“I shook my head, but I wanted to.

“When they finished and I asked for my sweater, Mrs. Trace said, ‘Come back anytime. I want to do your hair for you anyway. Free. Your ends need clipping.’

“Mr. Trace sat down and stretched. ‘This place needs birds.’



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← “And a Victrola.”

“Watch your mouth, girl.”

“If you get one, I’ll bring some records. When I come to get my hair done.”

“Hear that, Joe? She’ll bring some records.”

“Then I best find me another job.” He turned to me, touching my elbow as I walked to the door. “Felice. They named you right. Remember that.”

“I’ll tell my mother the truth. I know she is proud of stealing that opal; of daring to do something like that to get back at the whiteman who thought she was stealing even when she wasn’t. My mother is so honest she makes people laugh. Returning a pair of gloves to the store when they gave her two pair instead of the one pair she paid for; giving quarters she finds on the seat to conductors on the trolley. It’s as though she doesn’t live in a big city. When she does stuff like that, my father puts his forehead in his hand and store people and conductor people look at her like she is nutty for sure. So I know how much taking the ring meant to her. How proud she was of breaking her rules for once. But I’ll tell her I know about it, and that it’s what she did, not the ring, that I really love.

“I’m glad Dorcas has it. It did match her bracelet and matched the house where the party was. The walls were white with silver and turquoise draperies at the windows. The furniture fabric was turquoise too, and the throw rugs the hostess rolled up and put in the spare bedroom were white. Only her dining room was dark and not fixed up like the front part. She probably hadn’t got around to doing it over in her favorite colors and let a bowl of Christmas oranges be the only decoration. Her own bedroom was white and gold, but the bedroom

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she put Dorcas in, a spare one off the dark dining room, was plain.

"I didn't have a fellow for the party. I went along with Dorcas and Acton. Dorcas needed an alibi and I was it. We had just renewed our friendship after she stopped seeing Mr. Trace and was running around with her 'catch.' Somebody a lot of girls older than us wanted and had too. Dorcas liked that part—that other girls were jealous; that he chose her over them; that she had won. That's what she said. 'I won him. I won!' God. You'd think she had been in a fight.

"What the hell did she win? He treated her bad, but she didn't think so. She spent her time figuring out how to keep him interested in her. Plotting what she would do to any girl who tried to move in. That's the way all the girls I know think: how to get, then hold on to, a guy and most of that is having friends who want you to have him, and enemies who don't. I guess that's the way you have to think about it. But what if I don't want to? ✓

"It's warm tonight. Maybe there won't be a spring and we'll slide right on into summer. My mother will like that—she can't stand the cold—and my father, chasing around looking for colored baseball players 'in the flesh and on the lot,' hollering, jumping up and down when he recounts the plays to his friends, he'll be happy too. No blossoms are on the trees yet but it's warm enough. They'll be out soon. That one over there is aching for it. It's not a man tree; I think it's a child. Well, could be a woman, I suppose.

"Her catfish was pretty good. Not as good as the way my grandmother used to do it, or my mother used to before her chest wore out. Too much hot pepper in the dredging flour the way Mrs. Trace fixed it. I drank a lot of water so as not to hurt her feelings. It eased the pain."

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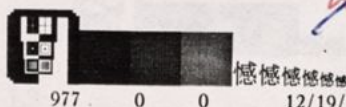
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ain. I seem to have an affection, a kind of sweet-
tooth for it. Bolts of lightning, little rivulets of thunder. And I
the eye of the storm. Mourning the split trees, hens starving on
rooftops. Figuring out what can be done to save them since they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



J A Z Z

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

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

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



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watching the streets, thrilled by the buildings pressing and pressed by stone; so glad to be looking out and in on things I dismissed what went on in heart-pockets closed to me.

I saw the three of them, Felice, Joe and Violet, and they looked to me like a mirror image of Dorcas, Joe and Violet. I believed I saw everything important they did, and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn't: how exotic they were, how driven. Like dangerous children. That's what I wanted to believe. It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of. Like Joe. To this moment I'm not sure what his tears were really for, but I do know they were for more than Dorcas. All the while he was running through the streets in bad weather I thought he was looking for her, not Wild's chamber of gold. That home in the rock; that place sunlight got into most of the day. Nothing to be proud of, to show anybody or to want to be in. But I do. I want to be in a place already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed, a view slanted for light and bright autumn leaves but not rain. Where moonlight can be counted on if the sky is clear and stars no matter what. And below, just yonder, a river called Treason to rely on.

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

Now I know.

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P. 222
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[Alice Manfred moved away from the tree-lined street back to Springfield. A woman with a taste for brightly colored dresses[†] is there whose breasts are probably soft sealskin purses now, and who may need a few things. Curtains, a good coat lining to bear the winter in. The cheerful company maybe of someone who can provide the necessary things for the night.

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MASTER SET - 2nd PASS

J A Z Z

Felice still buys Okeh records at Felton's and walks so slowly home from the butcher shop the meat turns before it hits the pan. She thinks that way she can trick me again—moving so slow people nearby seem to be running. Can't fool me: her speed may be slow, but her tempo is next year's news. Whether raised fists freeze in her company or open for a handshake, she's nobody's alibi or hammer or toy.

Joe found work at Paydirt, a speakeasy night job that lets him see the City do its unbelievable sky and run around with Violet in afternoon daylight. On his way home, just after sunrise, he will descend the steps of the Elevated, and if a milk wagon is parked at the curb, he might buy a pint from the second-day crate to cool the evening's hot cornbread supper. When he gets to the apartment building, he picks up the bits of night trash the stoop dwellers have left, drops them in the ashcan and gathers up the children's toys to place them under the stairwell. If he finds a doll he recognizes among the toys, he leaves it propped up and comfortable against the pile. He climbs the stairs and before he gets to his own door he can smell the ham Violet will not give up frying in its own fat to season the hominy swelling in the pot. He calls loudly to her as he closes the door behind him and she calls back: "Vi?" "Joe?" As though it might be another, as though a presumptuous neighbor or a young ghost with bad skin might be there instead. They eat breakfast then and, more often than not, fall asleep. Because of Joe's work—Violet's too—and other things as well, they have stopped night sleeping—exchanging that waste of time for short naps whenever the body insists, and were not surprised by how good they felt. The rest of the day goes however they want it to. After a hairdressing, for example, he meets her at the drugstore for her vanilla malt and his cherry smash.

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J A Z Z

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

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

[There was an evening, back in 1906, before Joe and Violet went to the City, when Violet left the plow and walked into their little shotgun house, the heat of the day still stunning. She was wearing coveralls and a sleeveless faded shirt and slowly removed them along with the cloth from her head. On a table near the cookstove stood an enamel basin—speckled blue and white and chipped all round its rim. Under a square of toweling, placed there to keep insects out, the basin was full

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

Joe had been away for two months at Crossland, and when he got home and stood in the doorway, he saw Violet's dark girl-body limp on the bed. She looked frail to him, and penetrable everywhere except at one foot, the left, where her man's workshoe remained. Smiling, he took off his straw hat and sat down at the bottom of the bed. One of her hands held her face; the other rested on her thigh. He looked at the fingernails hard as her palm skin, and noticed for the first time how shapely her hands were. The arm that curved out of the shift's white sleeve

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MS. P. 281; FF 5; MV 1.3
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J A Z Z

was muscled by field labor, awful thin, but smooth as a child's. He undid the laces of her shoe and eased it off. It must have helped something in her dream for she laughed then, a light happy laugh that he had never heard before, but which seemed to belong to her.

When I see them now they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real. Sharply in focus and clicking. I wonder, do they know they are the sound of snapping fingers under the sycamores lining the streets? When the loud trains pull into their stops and the engines pause, attentive listeners can hear it. Even when they are not there, when whole city blocks downtown and acres of lawned neighborhoods in Sag Harbor cannot see them, the clicking is there. In the T-strap shoes of Long Island debutantes, the sparkling fringes of daring short skirts that swish and glide to music that intoxicates them more than the champagne. It is in the eyes of the old men who watch these girls, and the young ones who hold them up. It is in the graceful slouch of the men slipping their hands into the pockets of their tuxedo trousers. Their teeth are bright; their hair is smooth and parted in the middle. And when they take the arms of the T-strap girls and guide them away from the crowd and the too-bright lights, it is the clicking that makes them sway on unlit porches while the Victrola plays in the parlor. The click of dark and snapping fingers drives them to Roseland, to Bunny's; boardwalks by the sea. Into places their fathers have warned them about and their mothers shudder to think of. Both the warning and the shudder come from the snapping fingers, the clicking. And the shade. Pushed away into certain streets, restricted from others,



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LONG

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making it possible for the inhabitants to sigh and sleep in relief, the shade stretches—just there—at the edge of the dream, or slips into the crevices of a chuckle. It is out there in the privet hedge that lines the avenue. Gliding through rooms as though it is tidying this, straightening that. It bunches on the curbstone, wrists crossed, and hides its smile under a wide-brim hat. Shade. Protective, available. Or sometimes not; sometimes it seems to lurk rather than hover kindly, and its stretch is not a yawn but an increase to be beaten back with a stick. Before it clicks, or taps or snaps its fingers.

Some of them know it. The lucky ones. Everywhere they go they are like a magician-made clock with hands the same size so you can't figure out what time it is, but you can hear the ticking, tap, snap.

I started out believing that life was made just so the world would have some way to think about itself, but that it had gone awry with humans because flesh, pinioned by misery, hangs on to it with pleasure. Hangs on to wells and a boy's golden hair; would just as soon inhale sweet fire caused by a burning girl as hold a maybe-yes maybe-no hand. I don't believe that anymore. Something is missing there. Something rogue. Something else you have to figure in before you can figure it out.

It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way down underneath tissue. They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they never sailed on. The pears they let hang on the limb because if they plucked them, they would be gone from there and who else would see that ripeness if they took it away for themselves? How could anybody passing by see them and imagine for them-

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J A Z Z

selves what the flavor would be like? Breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916 dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispering, old-time love. They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie glance to undo them. They are inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers.

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

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

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

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