



Chapter 5

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CHAPTER FIVE

Sandler admitted he could have imagined the scent ~~of~~ but not the glow—that was definite. Vida credited neither. The proof, she felt, was in her grandson's walk. Whatever the sign, both agreed that Romen was seeing someone, maybe even going with someone. They liked those terms—'seeing, 'going with'— suggesting merely looking, accompanying. Not the furious coupling that left an unmistakable fragrance Sandler believed he had detected and a moist radiance he recognized at once. And Vida was right about the walk. Romen had developed a kind of strut to replace his former skulk. Of Sandler's feelings—resignation, pride, alarm, envy—he chose to focus on the last, trying to summon the heat, the shield of well being created by the accomplishment of being spent. He remembered his own maiden voyage (free of embarrassment, now) as a ferocity that had never mellowed into routine pleasure. Romen's entry might be as cherish-

able as it was enviable, and although it would probably end in foolishness or misery, it seemed unfair to cut away the boy's swagger ^g~~just~~ when it was fresh. He believed topping him now—introducing shame along with sound advice—was more likely to pervert future encounters without stopping them. So he watched the new moves, the attention to hygiene, the knowing smile replacing guffaws and sniggers, the condescension in his tone when he spoke to Vida. Most of all he savored the skin beauty as well as the ripple Vida noticed in his walk. Also, he appreciated the fact that Romen had stopped swinging his leg and grabbing his groin every minute in that obnoxious way that signaled more 'want' than 'have.' Let him preen a while, thought Sandler. Otherwise he might end up dog-chasing women his whole life. Forever on the prowl for a repeat of that first first time. He might end up like Bill Cosey had, wasting hours between the elbows of women whose names he could not remember and whose eyes he avoided. Except for Celestial, he had told Sandler, Cosey had never felt connected to a woman. His adored first wife, for whom he had saved himself, thought his interests tiresome, his appetite crazy. So he had quickly chosen the view he saw in the eyes of local women, vacationers, slightly tipsy vocalists whose

boyfriends had not joined them on the tour. Thus buoyed up and simmered down, he had released his wife from all but the most perfunctory obligation. Or, in Cosey's own words, "when pussies sleep, lions creep."

"You wrong," Sandler replied. "Lions mate for life."

"So do I," said Cosey, laughing softly. "So do I."

True, but it was a mating that did not change his bachelor's view which, after years of eligible widower-hood, he hoped to end by marrying a girl he could educate to his taste. And if that had worked out for him as planned, Cosey would have come to know what Romen knew: that the first is also the last.

But that was his male take on it. Vida would certainly read it differently. The big question now was who. Who was the girl who burnished skin and oiled a boy's stride? Romen went to no parties, was home when told to be, entertained no friends at home. Maybe she was older, a grown woman with afternoon time on her hands. But Romen's weekends and after school time were filled with chores. When did he have time? Sandler put the question to Vida who was urging him to speak to Romen.

"I need to know who it is before I start lecturing him," he said.

"What difference does it make?"

"I take it you content with his sheets?"

"I'll worry about the laundry," said Vida. "You worry about vd.

Which, by the way, doesn't come with a biography. I work in a hospital, remember? You have no idea what I see."

"Well, I'm going to find out who she is."

"How?"

"I'll ask him."

"He's not going to tell you."

"Must be a way. This is a wee little town and I don't want to wait until somebody's daddy or brother bangs on my door."

"People don't do that anymore. That was in our day. Did you bang on Plaquemain's door when he was courting Dolly?"

"Would have—if you hadn't already fallen in love with him."

"Sandler, be serious. Plaquemain had two years of college. Nobody around here could hold a candle to him."

"Thanks for reminding me. Now I think about it, maybe we should

leave it up to his college-y father. When are they due?"

"Thanksgiving, Dolly said."

"See there? Just two weeks."

"The girl could be pregnant ^{by} then!"

"Thought ~~vd~~ was worrying you."

"Everything is worrying me!"

"Come on, Vida. The boy doesn't stay out late; he cut loose those raggedy friends and you don't have to drag him out of bed anymore to go to school. He's ready before you are, and works good and steady at the Coseys. ^{Overtime, too.}"

"Oh, Lord," said Vida. "Oh my Lord."

"What?" Sandler looked at his wife and then burst out laughing.

"You have lost your natural mind, woman."

"Uh uh," she said. "No I haven't. And 'steady' is the word, all right."

Suddenly Sandler saw thighs rising from tall black boots, and wondered again how icy the skin would be to the touch. And how smooth.

The boots, probably, which she never took off, excited Romen as much as her nakedness—in fact they made her more naked than if she had removed them. So it seemed natural to steal his grandfather's old security uniform cap. It was gray, not black to match the boots, but it had a shiney visor and when she put it on and stood there in just the cap and the boots, Romen knew his instinct was right. All his instincts were right, now. He was fourteen doing ~~and~~ ^{an} eighteen or maybe twenty year old woman. Not only did she want him; she demanded him. Her craving was equal to his and his was bottomless. He could barely remember himself before November 12. Who was that wuss crying under a pillow because of some ^{hive} ~~five~~ turkeys? Romen had no time for ^{that self} ~~them~~ now. The halls of Bethune High were parade grounds; the congregation at the lockers was the audience of a prince. No more slide along the walls or safety searches in crowds. And no trumpet blast to be heard. It was that simple.

When he approached the lockers that first day after November 12, they knew. And those who didn't, he told—in a way. Anybody who needed to get drunk, or tie somebody up, or required the company of a herd was a punk. Two days earlier Theo would have knocked him into the wall. But on

November 13, Romen had new eyes, ones that knew and dared. The boys hazarded a few lame teases, but Romen's smile, slow and informed, kept them off balance. The clincher came from the girls. Sensing something capable in his manner, they stopped rolling their eyes and smothering giggles. Now they arched their backs, threw back their shoulders in great, long deceptive yawns. Now they cut question-and-answer glances his way. Not only had Romen scored, the score was big time. A teacher, they wondered? Somebody's older sister? He wouldn't say--even resisting the "your mama" that rose to his lips. In any case, he had neck now. And when he wasn't stretching it, he was gazing through the classroom window dreaming of what had already taken place and imagining new ways to do it. The boots. The black socks. With the security cap she would look like ~~an~~ officer. Hard enough to drill for oil, Romen adjusted his chair and tried to focus on the eleventh Amendment the teacher was explaining with such intensity he almost understood her.

Junior had use of the Cosey's car. To shop, go to the bank, post office, do errands Miss Heed needed done and Miss Christine didn't want to do. So if he skipped sixth period, or if study hall preceded lunch, Junior

picked^{him} up at on Lace Street and they drove to one of their pre-planned spots. The plan (hers) was to make it all over the place. To map the county with kisses and heat. On the list, but not managed yet, was Bethune High (preferably in a class room); the Cine-plex, the beach, the cannery, the phone booth near Softee's and, her favorite, the bus station. So far they had accomplished only one outside-her-bedroom event—a back seat adventure one evening in Café Ria's parking lot. Today he would meet her behind Videoland, for some quick stroking before she drove him to Post Road where he would pull leaves from the gutters. Then she would drive him home, stopping maybe at a phone booth on the way. Exciting as all that travel was to anticipate, indelible as this town was becoming (he sort of owned Café Ria now, and Theo too), nothing in his imagination beat the sight of a straddling Junior in bed, booted, hatted, with a visor throwing her eyes into shadow. Theo, Jamal and Freddie could keep whatever tenth grade party girl in plastic heels they found. Where was the neck in that? No arms tightening but their own; no eager mouths but their own; no eeeee's of pleasure but their own. Most of all no privacy. Instead a public chorus of each other—in or out of the room— to back them up, make it real,

help them turn down the sound of the trumpets in their own ears. All the time doing it, not to the girl but, to one another. He, on the other hand, gripped and nibbled on, had a girl of his own who snatched privacy right in the middle of an unknowing public.

Romen raised his eyes to the clock. Two minutes—forever—before the bell.

Junior kept the motor running. She had no driver's license and wanted to be in position to take off, if noticed by a cop cruiser. She was hungry again. Two hours earlier she had eaten four strips of bacon, toast and two eggs. Now she thought^t of getting burgers and shakes at Softees. She could do two things at the same time. Even three. Romen would like that. A month now and her luck was stil holding: a lovely, warm place to stay, fabulous meals, a (paying) job—all she had longed for when they let her go. Had to because of her age. But the bonus of Romen was dizzying. Good luck was found; fortune was made. All she had to do was work it, please both women. All three could live happily there. Why not? In time Heed and Christine would give up their fight. She could make it happen the way she

had negotiated peace in Correctional when she felt like it. When Betty cut in on Sarah at the Christmas Dance and they fought themselves into Isolation, Junior had brokered the peace when the girls returned, bristling, to the Common Room, threatening behavior that could ruin it for the whole House.

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