



Chapter 5: Lover

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CHAPTER FIVE

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Sandler admitted he could have imagined the fragrance but not the glisten. 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 the unmistakable scent 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 adolescent heat, its 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 off the boy's swagger 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 one. Other than her, Cosey had said, he 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 chose 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 class, given her the hall pass she wanted. 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 might have limited his boat activity to fish caught with a hook instead of a wallet. Sandler had attended only one of those water parties and promised himself he would never go again. It wasn't just the company. Although he was uncomfortable being jovial with middle aged white men one of whom was holstered, the black men as well made him feel out of place. The laughter was easy enough. And the two or three women stimulating it were pleasant. It was the language, its tone, its lie. Fuel feeding a delusion: the counterfeit social world indulged in; the real one set aside for a few hours so women could dominate, men would crawl, blacks could insult whites. Until they docked. One of the party stayed

aloof, sober, slightly chiding. Deftly warding off advances, she never raised stakes or temperature. Clearly she belonged to the host and in the photograph from which Cosey's portrait was painted, Sandler knew Cosey was looking at her. It was a glance he could recognize anywhere. One that Romen was acquiring. Sometimes the first was also the last and God help the boy if he got soul-chained to a woman he couldn't trust.

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 evenings 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 you 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 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 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 jive turkeys? Romen had no time for that sniveling self now. The halls of Bethune High were parade grounds; the congregation at the lockers was the audience of a prince. No more sidle 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~~^{ed} 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 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 grapple 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 fast 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 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 chorus of each other to back them up, make it real, help them turn down the trumpet screech in their own ears. All the time doing it, not to the girl but for, maybe even to, one another. He, on the other hand, gripped and nibbled on, had a woman of his own, one who stepped up and snatched privacy right in the middle of a stupid-blind 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 of getting burgers and shakes at Softees to take back to Videoland. She could do two things at the same time. Even three. Romen would like that and so would he. Sometimes he sat at the foot of her bed—just to watch her sleep, and when she woke he winked before he smiled and stepped away. Funny how being seen all the time, watched day and night at Correctional had infuriated her, but being looked at by him—only him—excited her. She didn't have to turn her head to know his foot was on the door saddle or that his fingers were drumming a window sill. The aftershave announced his entrance. And if she were still enough, he might whisper: "nice hair", "take it", "good girl", "sweet tits", "why not?" More understanding than any G.I. Joe. Her luck was still holding: a lovely, warm place to stay, a lot of really good food, a (paying) job—more than she

expected when, because of her age, Correctional had to release her. But the bonus of Romen was like the plus sign after an "A". The ones she got when she had been a model student. Considered model until they made it seem as though she had killed him. Why would she do that? Mess up just when she was about to graduate.

Killing the Administrator was not on her mind—stopping him was. A few girls liked his Conferences; traded them for Office Duty, underwear, trips off-campus. But not her. To Junior, already prized for her keyboard skills, she always had office work, besides cotton underwear was just fine; and the thrill of off-campus trips was erased by the watchful eyes of townspeople as you strolled through the aisles, or put your elbows on the Burger King counter. Anyway she got her sex from Campus A or from a girl crying for home. Who wanted or needed an old man (he must be thirty, at least) wearing a wide red tie pointing down to a penis that couldn't compete with raw vegetables, bars of soap, kitchen utensils, lollipops or anything else inventive girls could conjure?

The Exit Conference was scheduled for Friday, and when he changed it to Monday, four days earlier, Junior thought a prize or a job offer would

be discussed. At fifteen she was free to leave, purged of the wickedness that had landed her there, and return to her family, not one of whom had visited in the whole three years. She had no intention of going back to the Settlement. Correctional had saved her from them. But she did want to see the outside the Settlement world; the televised one, the one new Correctional students talked about. Eagerness to get out would have prevented any last minute infraction; her known good behavior would have disallowed it. Still the Committee refused to believe her, believed the Administrator instead and the Guidance Counselor who knew better.

The Exit Conference started out great. The Administrator, relaxed and talkative, described his hopes for Correctional, for her. He strolled to the sliding doors that opened on to a small balcony, invited her to join him and admire the grand trees surrounding. Perched on the railing, he suggested she do the same, congratulating her, reminding her to keep in touch. He was there for her. Smiling he told her to get a haircut before she left. "Such beautiful hair, wild." He touched it, patting her head fondly, at first and, then, drawing closer, pressed it. Hard. Junior dropped to her knees and while the Administrator's hands were busy unbelting, hers went to the back

of his knees, upending him over the rail. He fell one story. Only one. The Guidance Counselor who saw him fall and rushed to his aid, saw also the loosened belt and open fly. His testimony, arranged of course to keep his job, supported the Administrator who was as confounded and bewildered as anybody at the "sudden, strange, self-loathing behavior" of a once model student. The Committee, pained by Junior's use of the word "lick" in her defense, quickly transferred her from student to inmate for a violence they could only shake their heads at.

Junior learned a lot in the next three years. In Correctional real time is not spent; it is deposited, bit by manageable bit. What to do for the next half hour, ten minutes. It will take seven minutes to do your nails; twenty to wash your hair. A minute and a half to get from gym to class. Games, ninety minutes. Two hours of television before lights out and the falling down years of sleeping while awake to the "there" of other people's bodies. Unlike what people thought, in the daily grid of activities to plan was fatal. Stay ready, on tippy-toe. And read fast: gestures, eyes, mouths, tones of speech, body movement-minds. Gauge the moment. Recognize a chance. It's all you. And if you luck out, find yourself near an open wallet, window

or door GO! It's all you. All of it. Good luck you found, but good fortune you made. And he agreed. He liked to see her win. All she had to do was work it, he said. If she pleased both women, they could live happily together. In time Heed and Christine would tire of their fight, leave things to her. She could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it, the way she had at Correctional when Betty cut in on Sarah at the Christmas dance and they had 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 of Mary House. Siding with each antagonist she had become indispensable to both. How much harder could it be with women too tired to shop; too weak to dye their own hair. Too old to remember the real purpose of an automobile. He chuckled.

She gunned the motor. Vanilla? Strawberry? Romen was in view.