



"Sandler admitted he could have imagined the look..."

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Sandler admitted he could have imagined the look 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 produced the unmistakable look Sandler believed he had detected and a moist radiance he recognized at once. But 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 memory of

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 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 kittens sleep, lions creep."

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

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

Maybe, thought Sandler, but it was a mating that had not changed Cosey's bachelor behavior 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 come to enjoy the fishing trips. At twenty-three he didn't like to pal around with old men, but since his father had moved away...of course it wasn't like being with his own father but the conversation between them got easier. Dipping a ball of cotton in acon fat, Sandler had smiled, saying, "My father taught me this."

Cosey looked at the bait. "You and him close?"

"Close enough."

"He still living?"

"Oh, yeah. Up north with my sister after Mama died. Old men feel better with their daughters. Young girls easier to push around." He caught himself and tried to clean it up in case Cosey was offended. "I wanted him to stay with us. I mean it's his house we living in. He's way too stubborn but he must have his reasons."

"Fathers can be hard," answered Cosey, unaffected, it seemed, by the old man young girl comment.

"Yours wasn't. I hear tell he left you a trunk full of money. That so?"

"Well, he had to leave it to somebody."

"My old man did all right by me too," said Sandler. "Not with money. Never had none, but I could always count on him. He knows I love him no matter what."

"I hated mine."

"Sure enough?" Sandler was more surprised by the candor than the fact.

"Sure enough. He died on Christmas day. His funeral was like a gift to the world."

That's the way their talk was when it was just the two of them. Sandler was invited to one of Cosey's famous boat parties and afterwards promised himself he would never go again. Not just because of the company, although he was uncomfortable being jovial with middle aged white men one of whom was holstered; the well to do black men also made him feel out of place. The laughter was easy enough. And the three or four women stimulating it were pleasant. It was the talk, its tone, its lie that he couldn't take. Talk as fuel to feed the main delusion: the counterfeit world invented on the boat; the real one set aside for a few hours so women could dominate, men would crawl, blacks could insult whites. Until they docked. Then the sheriff could put his badge back on and call the colored physician a boy. Then the women took their shoes off because they had to walk home alone. One woman at 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. Hanging

once in back of Vida desk, then above Heed Cosey's bed, the face had a look he would recognize anywhere. One that Romen was acquiring: first ownership. Sandler knew that 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."

"Sandler, 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."

"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, 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~~ ^{appraised} 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 Eighteenth 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 ^{Prince Arthur}~~Lace~~ Street and they drove to one of their pre-planned spots. The plan (hers) was to make it ^{everywhere.}~~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 abandoned Cannery, the phone booth on Baron Street 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 Monarch Street where he would pull leaves from the gutters. Then she would drive him home, stopping maybe at a different 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 they needed 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 her Good Man. 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 her Good Man 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. ^{Some} ~~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 she might want 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 railing. 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. If she ever had a moment's thought that after Correctional she would fail real life, the thought quickly evaporated. Reform then Prison refined her insight. 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 her Good Man agreed. As she knew from the beginning, he liked to see her win.

They recognized each other the very first night when he ^{gazed}~~smiled~~ at her from his portrait. But it was in dream they got acquainted. No fuss, no bother, no recriminations—he lifted her up to his shoulders where she rode through an orchard of green Granny apples. When she woke in a bright, cold room the dream-warmth was better than the blanket. A tub bath (at last) before eagerly climbing the stairs partly to show her new boss lady how punctual she was; mostly to catch another glimpse of her Good Man's ^{face.}~~shoulders~~. Heed was sitting in bed, the crown of her head just under the frame's gilt. Junior told her she didn't want to go pick up her clothes—that she would wear what she had on until she could afford new things. Heed directed her to a closet where a red suit hung in plastic. It was ugly and too big, but Junior was thinking how much she wanted to undress right there in Heed's bedroom while he watched.

"Get some breakfast and come right on back," said Heed.

She did: grapefruit, scrambled eggs, bacon, grits—chatting with Christine in an old woman's suit.

It was when she had finished, on her way back to Heed that she knew for sure. In the hallway on the second floor she was flooded by his company: a tinkle of glee, a promise of more; then her attention drawn to a door opposite the room she had slept in. Ajar. A light pomade or after shave in the air. She stepped through. Inside a kind of office with sofa, desk, leather chairs, dresser. Junior examined it all. She stroked ties and shirts in the closet; smelled his shoes; rubbed her cheek on the sleeve of his seersucker jacket. Then, finding a stack of undershorts, she took off the red suit, stepped into the shorts and lay on the sofa. His happiness was unmistakable. So was his relief at having her there, loving his things and enjoying herself in front of him.

Later, on her way back to Heed's room, Junior looked over her shoulder toward the door—still ajar—and saw the cuff of a white shirt sleeve, his hand closing the door. Junior laughed knowing as she did that he did too.

And wouldn't you know it? Right outside Heed's window was a boy. For

her. Everything was becoming clear. If she pleased both women, they could live happily together. All she had to do was study them, learn them. Christine didn't care about money, liked feeding her and encouraged her to take the car. Heed worried about gasoline prices and the value of dated milk cartons and day old bread. Junior saw both Christine's generosity and Heed's stinginess as forms of dismissal; one was "Take what you need and leave me alone." The other was "I'm in control and you are not." Neither woman was interested in her—except as she simplified or complicated their relationship with each other. Not quite a go-between, not quite a confidante. It was a murky role in which she had discovered small secrets. Among the new never worn clothes in the locked suitcases were a short, sheer nightie, aqua fuzz at the hem; a carton that explained its contents as a douche bag; a jar of mustard yellow Massengill powder. Things needed on vacation? For escape? Christine took a bunch of vitamin pills and poured Michelob in empty Pepsi cans. Both women regularly bought and wore sanitary napkins, and threw them in the trash completely unstained. *

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

* Heed's signature on checks was a press of her initials, HC, rickety and slanting to the left.

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.