

CHAPTER X

DR. HARRISON answered my ring. He was dressed in a brown flannel smoking jacket with a black velvet collar. He waved a soggy cigar butt in his left hand, stuck out his right.

'Hello, Robert, it's good to see you, boy.'

We shook hands; his felt dry, lifeless, and his mouth looked nasty. I said, 'It's good to see you, Doctor.'

He closed the door behind me and steered me into his study.

'You're just in time to join me in a nip.'

'Well, thanks,' I said. I always felt a sharp sense of embarrassment around him. I didn't like him, didn't respect him, didn't have anything to say to him, didn't like to listen to him. But he always cornered me off for a conversation and I didn't know how to get out of it short of blasting him one.

He went over to his bar. 'What'll it be, Scotch?'

'Scotch is fine,' I said. 'A little water.'

'A gentleman's drink,' he said, mixing it. 'Now I prefer rye.'

Then he noticed I was standing and said: 'Sit down, sit down. As Bertha says, "We're all coloured folks." You know Bertha Gowing, head of the South Side Clinic?'

'No, I don't,' I said, taking the drink and sitting down.

'A fine person, charming personality, very capable, very capable,' he said, returning to his easy chair across from me. He waved at the *Pittsburgh Courier* on the floor. 'I was just reading about our fighter pilots in Italy; they're achieving a remarkable record.'

I said, 'That's right.'

'Makes the old man wish he was young again,' he went on.

'Think of it, the Negro boys have that.'

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'Yes, it has,' If he asked me subject to tell hi could get it out.

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'Think of it, the first time in the history of our nation that Negro boys have served as pilots. We can thank Roosevelt for that.'

'That's right,' I said. My mind was on Alice. I wondered how she was going to react to seeing me.

'The Nazi pilots say they'd rather engage any two white pilots than one of our Negro boys,' he said.

'Yeah, they're some tough customers,' I said.

'I was talking to Blakely the other day, and he said we should send them a cablegram saying, "The eyes of the world are on you." You know Blakely Moore, the young attorney who fought that restricted covenant case for the Du Barrys?'

'No, I don't,' I said.

'Bright young man,' he said. 'Has a wonderful future. I attended his birth.' He took a sip of rye. 'Well, how is your work progressing, Robert? I understand you have been made a supervisor.'

I stole a look at him, looked away. 'Well, not exactly a supervisor. I'm what they call a leaderman.'

'A leaderman, eh? I'm always intrigued by the titles applied to industrial workers. Now what is a leaderman?'

'I just have charge of a small crew of workers,' I said.

'But you're in authority?' he insisted.

'Well . . .' To hell with trying to explain it, I thought, and said, 'Yes.'

'That's what I like to see,' he said. 'Our Negro boys in authority. It proves that we can do it if we are given the opportunity.'

A little bit of that went a long way. 'How's everything with you, Doctor?' I asked, changing the conversation. My vocal cords were getting tight.

'I keep pretty busy,' he chuckled. 'Walter and I were just talking the other day about the tremendous change that's taken place in Los Angeles——'

'Yes, it has,' I cut in rapidly. 'The city's really growing up.' If he asked me if I knew Walter Somebody-or-other I was subject to tell him to go to hell. 'Is Alice in?' I asked before he could get it out.

'I'll see,' he said, getting up. 'You know, this house is so

arranged we can go for days without running into each other.'
He went into the hallway and called, 'Alice!'

After a moment she replied from upstairs, 'Yes?'
'Robert is here.'

'Oh!' A pause. Then, 'Tell him to come right up.'
He turned to me. 'You can go right up, Robert.'
'Thanks,' I said.

He stopped me to shake hands again. 'It was nice seeing you,
Robert.' He always made it a point to let me know he didn't
have anything against me, even if I didn't belong to his class.
'It was nice seeing you too, Doctor,' I said.

Alice was waiting for me at the head of the spiral stairway.
'How are you, dear?' she greeted. Her cool contralto voice was
under wraps and her eyes were controlled. She wore a scarlet
velvet housecoat and her cheeks were slightly rouged. I
couldn't help but think she was a regal-looking chick.
'Lo, baby,' I said, kissing at her.

She dodged. 'Don't!'

'All right, if that's the way——' I broke it off, looking be-
yond her into the sitting room. 'Goddamn, you've got com-
pany,' I accused. I was ready to turn and go.

But she said quickly, 'Oh, you'll like them,' took me by the
hand and led me into her sitting-room.

It was a large pleasant room with a love seat and three arm-
chairs done in flowered chintz. There were white scatter rugs
on the polished oak floor and white organdie curtains at the
double windows facing the street. Her bedroom was to the
rear.

'You know Polly Johnson,' she said, and I said, 'Hello,
Polly,' to a sharp-faced, bright yellow woman with a mannish
haircut, dressed in a green slack suit.

'Hi, Bob, how's tricks?' she said around her cigarette.

'And Arline,' Alice went on. 'Arline Wilson.'

'Hello, Arline,' I said. She was a big sloppy dame in a
'Hello, Arline,' I said. She was a big sloppy dame in a
wrinkled print dress with her black hair pulled tight in a knot
at the back of her head, giving her a surprised, sweaty look. I
imagine she thought it made her look childish. She was a
schoolteacher.

'Here's that man again,' she said. I gave her a quick, startled
look; she was too old for that, I thought.

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'And this is Cleotine Dobbs,' Alice said of the third dame.
'Miss Dobbs, Mr. Jones.'

I shook hands with her. 'How do you do, Miss Dobbs.'
She was a long, angular, dark woman dressed in an Eastern
suit. She was strictly out of place in that light bright clique.

'Cleo has just come to our city to direct the Downtown
Settlement House,' Alice said sweetly. 'She's a Chicago gal.'

'That's fine,' I said, figuring on how to escape. Then to
Alice: 'I really can't stay. I just dropped by to say hello.'
'Oh hush, Bob, and sit down,' she said. 'You know you
haven't got a thing to do.'

I gave her a lidded look. 'Don't be too sure,' I said.
She put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me down on
the other half of the love seat with Cleo, the dark dame.

'That's right, girl, don't let a man get away from us,' Arline
said. I sneaked another look at her.
'Maybe Bob's afraid of all us women,' Polly said. 'We must
look like dames on the make.' She had a blunt, sharp-tongued
manner that could soon irritate me.

'Although God knows I haven't started picking them up off
the street,' Arline said, and she and Polly crossed glances.
'I'm overwhelmed,' I choked, then got my voice under better
control.

'We were just discussing the problems that confront the
social worker in Little Tokyo,' Cleo said, coming to my rescue,
I supposed. 'I was saying that first of all there must be some
organization within the community through which a pro-
gramme of integration may be instituted into the broader
pattern of the community. There must be adequate provisions
for health care, adequate educational resources and opportuni-
ties for recreation,' she enumerated. She sounded as if she'd just
gotten her Doctor's.

'What they need down there more than anything else is public
housing,' Polly said bluntly. 'Have you seen some of those
places that those people live in? Twelve people in a single room
and not even any running water.' I remembered then that she
worked with the housing authority. 'That place is a rat hole.
Without adequate housing you can't even start any programme
of integration.'

I sat there with my hands clasped in my lap, looking from

one speaker to another with a forced interested smile, wondering what the hell had brought all of this on and getting tighter every second.

'Housing takes time,' Arline put in. She had the soft manner of the appeaser. 'And you know how they'll do even if they build a development down there; they'll allocate about one-fourth to Negroes and the rest to whites and Mexicans.'

'Mexicans are white in California,' Polly said.

'I know,' Arline said. 'That's what I mean. What they should really do is to stop all these Southern Negroes from coming into the city.'

By now I was tense, on edge; what they were saying didn't have any meaning for me—just some cut-rate jive in social workers' phraseology that proved a certain intellectualism, I supposed. But I didn't have to listen to it; I was going to get the hell out.

'But these people are already here,' Cleo pointed out. 'The ghetto's already formed. The problem now is how best to integrate the people of this ghetto into the life of the community.' She turned to me; I'd been silent long enough, 'What do you think, Mr. Jones?'

'About what?' I asked.

She threw a look at me. 'I mean what is your opinion as to the problem arising from conditions in Little Tokyo?'

Well, sister, you're asking for it, I thought. Aloud I said: 'Well, now, I think we ought to kill the coloured residents and eat them. In that way we'll not only solve the race problem but alleviate the meat shortage as well.'

There was a shocked silence for an instant, then Polly broke into a raucous laugh. Alice said softly, 'Bob!'

All I wanted was for them to get the hell out of there so I could be alone with Alice, but I lightened up a little out of common courtesy. 'All kidding aside,' I said, 'if I knew any solution for the race problem I'd use it for myself first of all.'

'But this isn't just a problem of race,' Cleo insisted. 'It's a ghetto problem involving a class of people with different cultures and traditions at a different level of education.'

'Different from what?' I said.

'The mayor's organizing a committee to investigate conditions down there,' Arline said. 'Blakely Moore is on it.'

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'Would you gals like a drink?' Alice asked, and at their quick nods, turned to me, 'Bob dear . . .'
I went down to the kitchen with her for the rum-and-coke setups, glad to get a breather. 'Can't you get rid of 'em?' I asked. 'I want to talk to you, baby.'

She put her arms about me and kissed me. 'Be nice, darling,' she said. 'Tom's coming by and they want to meet him.'

'Tom who?' I asked, but she just smiled.

'You'll like him,' she said. 'He's something like you.'

The drinks got them gossipy.

'Herbie Washington has married a white girl.'

'No!'

'I don't believe it!'

'Who is she?' Alice asked.

'She's white,' I muttered to myself. 'Ain't that enough?'

They didn't even hear me.

'Nobody knows,' Arline said. 'Some girl he met at one of Melba's parties.'

That started Cleo off. 'I can't understand these Negro men marrying these white tramps,' she said. You wouldn't, I thought, black as you are. 'Chicago's full of it. Just as soon as some Negro man starts to getting a little success he runs and marries a white woman. No decent self-respecting Negro man would marry one of those white tramps these Negroes marry.'

'I wouldn't say that exactly,' Polly injected. 'I know of Negro men married to decent white women—as decent as you and I.'

She was taking up for herself—her father was a Negro married to a white woman.

But Cleo didn't know that. 'Nothing but tramps!' she stormed, getting excited about it. The veneer came off and she looked and talked just like any other Southern girl who'd never been farther than grammar school. 'Nobody but a white tramp would marry a nigger!' she shouted, almost hitting me in the mouth with her gesticulations. 'And nobody but a nigger tramp would have 'em. I was at a party in Chicago and saw one of our supposed-to-be leading Negro actors sitting up there making love to some white tramp's eyebrows.'

I laughed out loud. 'To her eyebrows?' I said. 'Now I'd like to see that.'

Polly and Arline were exchanging strange looks, as if to

say, 'Where did this creature come from?' And Alice looked positively pricked.

But Cleo didn't pay any attention to any of us; she went on beating up her chops, looking wild and agitated. 'One of my teachers at Chicago U. was talking 'bout some girl 'bout your colour'—she indicated Alice—'and I just up and told him that it was an insult to mention light Negroes' colour to 'em; it was 'most the same as calling 'em bastards, saying their mamas had been slipping off in the bushes with white men. . . .'

Alice looked horrified; I knew she'd never be invited there again. But it tickled me. It was all I could do to keep from falling out laughing.

'Just as soon as a Negro marries one of them they start going down,' Cleo went on vehemently. 'Decent Negro people won't accept them in their homes——'

The doorbell chimed and Alice went down to answer it. Cleo was still raving when Alice ushered a tall, nice-looking, well-dressed white fellow into the room. He had sandy hair and a pleasant smile and looked like a really nice guy. But he was white, and I was antagonistic from the start.

'This is Tom Leighton, one of my co-workers,' she introduced him about.

For a moment there was an embarrassed silence; then the dames became intellectual again.

'Perhaps Mr. Leighton can give us some suggestions on our Little Tokyo problem,' Polly prompted, and they had it and gone.

Leighton said something that didn't make any sense at all to me, and Cleo gushed. 'Oh, that's it! That's just the thing!' I jerked a look at her; she'd blown coy to the point of simpering. I thought, well, whataya know; this white animosity didn't go as far as the men.

Finally, when they got through kicking Little Tokyo around, Leighton turned his bright friendly smile to me. 'Did I understand Miss Harrison to say you were an attorney?'

'No, I'm a shipyard worker,' I said.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he apologized.

I let him dangle. There was another embarrassed silence.

Then Alice said, 'Bob's going into law after the war. He's fighting on our production front now.'

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Leighton gave me another of his bright friendly smiles. 'I imagine it's a very interesting occupation,' he said. 'It's a killer,' I said. He blinked a little.

'Tom has just finished reading *Strange Fruit*,' Alice said. 'He thought it was fascinating.'

Something about the way she pronounced his name made me throw a quick searching glance at her, started me to wonder both of them under lowered lids, half ashamed for the crazy suspicion that had come into my mind, jealous of the guy against my will. I'd seen so many light-complexioned Negro women absolutely pure nuts about white men, it scared me to think that Alice might be like that herself. I started thinking again of some excuse to get away.

He was saying, 'I was particularly interested in the characterization of Nonnie.'

You would, I thought, since she was so goddamned crazy about a white man.

'I didn't like Nonnie at all,' Polly said. 'I can't even imagine a Negro girl who's been to college doing any of the things Nonnie was supposed to do.'

'That was it,' Alice said. 'She didn't do anything.'

Watching her furtively, I began getting so tight inside I could hardly breathe. She might be having an affair with Leighton sure enough, I thought. She wouldn't count that, just like she wouldn't count that stuff at Stella's. She'd probably be proud of it, I thought; probably feel that I shouldn't resent it even if I found out. . . .

Arline was saying, 'Oh, I know a girl just like Nonnie. She's a good friend of mine—at least I went to school with her—and she's just like Nonnie.'

'Did you read the book, Mr. Jones?' Leighton asked.

'Yes, I did,' I said, and dropped it.

He waited for me, and when he saw I wasn't coming he said by way of appeasement, 'Of course I think that Richard Wright makes the point better in *Native Son*.'

'Oh, but what Lillian Smith does is condemn the white Southerner,' Arline said. 'All Wright did was write a vicious crime story.'

'Personally, I think the white Southerner doesn't mind being just like Lillian Smith portrays him,' I said.

'I think Richard Wright is naïve,' Polly said.

'Aren't we all?' I said.

'*Native Son* turned my stomach,' Arline said. 'It just proved what the white Southerner has always said about us; that our men are rapists and murderers.'

'Well, I will agree that the selection of Bigger Thomas to prove the point of Negro oppression was an unfortunate choice,' Leighton said.

'What do you think, Mr. Jones?' Cleo asked.

I said, 'Well, you couldn't pick a better person than Bigger Thomas to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what? Most white people I know are quite proud of having made Negroes into Bigger Thomases.'

There was another silence and everybody looked at me. 'Take me for instance,' I went on. 'I've got a job as leaderman at a shipyard. I'm supposed to have a certain amount of authority over the ordinary workers. But I'm scared to ask a white woman to do a job. All she's got to do is say I insulted her and I'm fired.'

Leighton looked concerned. 'Is that so?' he said. 'I didn't realize relations between white and coloured were that strained in our industries.'

'Of course Bob's problem is more or less individual,' Alice apologized. 'He's really temperamentally unsuited for industrial work. As soon as he enters into a profession his own problem will be solved.'

'Yes, I can understand that,' Leighton said. 'But as far as the problem of the Negro industrial worker is concerned, I feel that it is not so much racial as it is the problem of the masses. As soon as the masses, including all of our minority groups, have achieved economic security, racial problems will reach a solution of their own accord.' He turned to me. 'Won't you agree with me to that extent, Mr. Jones?'

'No,' I said. 'It's a state of mind. As long as the white folks hate me and I hate them we can earn the same amount of money, live side by side in the same kind of house, and fight every day.'

He got one of those condescending, indulgent smiles. 'Then

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how would you suggest effecting a solution to a minority group
problem?'

'I don't know about any other minority group problem,' I
said, 'but the only solution to the Negro problem is a revolu-
tion. We've got to make white people respect us and the only
thing white people have ever respected is force.'

'But do you think a revolution by Negro people could be
successful?' he asked in that gentle tone of voice used on an
unruly child.

But I tried to keep my head. 'Not unless there were enough
white people on our side,' I said.

'By the same token,' he argued, 'if there were enough white
people on your side there wouldn't be any need for a revolu-
tion.'

'There's a lot of 'em who don't do anything but talk. If we
had a revolution it'd force you to act, either for us or against
us—personally, I wouldn't give a goddamn which way.'

'Suppose your revolution failed?' he asked.

'That'd be all right, too,' I said. 'At least we'd know where
we stood.'

His smile became more indulgent, his voice more condes-
cending. 'I think that you will discover that the best course for
Negroes to take at this time is to participate and co-operate in
the general uprising of the masses all over the world.'

'Are you a Communist?' I asked him.

Everybody else looked shocked, but he didn't even flinch.
'No, not that I have anything against the Communists, but
I believe in the same, sensible way of doing things. And there's
just one solution for the Negro——'

All of a sudden I burnt up. I'd been trying to get away from
the white folks to begin with. And I wasn't going to have this
peckerwood coming down here among my people, playing a
great white god, sitting on his ass, solving the Negro problem
with a flow of diction and making me look like a goddamned
fool in front of my girl, when all I could do around his people
was to be a flunkey and get kicked in the mouth. And what was
more, his goddamned condescending smile was getting under
my skin.

I cut him off with a sudden violent gesture and jumped to my
feet. That broke it up.