

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN I went down to turn in the time cards Kelly said, 'Wait a minute, Bob, I want to talk to you.'

Then he went on telling this joke to the two white guys from the shop.

'So he took this gal out in the shed out of respect for old Aunty, see, because all old Aunty had was this one-roomed shack where she and the gal lived.' He took a quick glance to see if the tool-crib girl was out of hearing and lowered his voice slightly. 'It'd been raining like hell, see, and the shed didn't have any floor and it was all sloppy and muddy where the hogs had been wallowing. But this guy was hard up, see, he'd been on the road for two weeks . . .'

I wasn't ready for that one; wasn't even looking for it. I didn't even have time to dodge it. He'd tricked me into listening by having me wait, and now without giving me time to get mad he said, 'How's Danny Tebbel getting along Bob? Do you think he's going to be able to handle your gang?'

The other two guys looked at me curiously to see how I was taking it, and the tool-crib girl came over and said, 'Those boys in your crew are breaking too many of those 9/32 bits; they'll just have to stop it or they can't have any more.'

They couldn't have done it any better if they'd rehearsed it. I couldn't take offence because Kelly didn't tell the joke to me and he could always say if I hadn't wanted to hear it I didn't have to listen. And even if I still wanted to take offence, the girl had stepped into the picture and whatever I might say to Kelly was sure to offend her. I never wanted to get out of a place so

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bad in all my life; I wanted to just take my tail between my legs and slink on out. It was a gut punch and my stomach was hollow as a drum; it took all I had to keep standing up straight, to keep on looking at him.

I did something with my face, trying to make it smile, and I had to reach down my throat and pull out my voice with my hand, but I got it and I said, 'I'll get mine by and by.'

The girl's mouth popped open. 'Well, I never——' she began. But Kelly knew he had me. He waved me away. 'Go on, go on. Get out of here.'

I turned away and started walking, not fast but not poking. I went past workers, stepped over lines, ducked under staging, squeezed by shapes, through the access hole in the midship bulkhead, up the jack ladder to the third deck, up another ladder to the fourth deck, headed aft. I didn't see anybody, didn't see anything. I knew where I was going. I didn't want to go. My body just carried me and my mind just pushed me along. I didn't feel rash nor reckless, nothing like that, I felt low, dispirited, black as I've ever felt. Really a black boy now.

But I knew I was going to have to say something to Madge if I got shot on the spot. Not to rack her back or to cuss her out. That wasn't going to be enough. Not now. Not after having been tricked into listening to that bastard tell that joke. I was going to have to have her. I was going to have to make her as low as a white whore in a Negro slum—a scrummy two-dollar whore. . . . I was going to have to so I could keep looking the white folks in the face.

And when Monday came I'd come on back and work as a mechanic. And if they put me in the Jim Crow Army I was going to take that too. Ben could talk all he wanted to. He was right. I knew he was right. But I was going to take it if they put it on me. If I had to fight and die for the country I'd fight and die for it. I'd even go so far as to believe it was my country too. But I'd be damned if I was going to be afraid to make this woman because she was white Texas.

So I started over where she was working. She was over to one side by herself, leaning against some staging. There were a lot of other workers around, but I didn't see them; all I could see was her standing there between me and my manhood.

She saw me coming and looked me square in the eyes, hers

bright with a sudden excitement. One of the mechanics she was working with spotted me too and walked quickly to her side as if his presence would protect her. But his being there didn't mean a thing to me. I was going to say, 'Look, bitch, let's stop all this jive and get together like we want.'

My heart was in my throat and I felt like jelly. We kept looking at each other and I knew she expected me to say something. I knew she wanted me to. I knew she knew what I'd say. I didn't know what her reaction might be; I didn't even think about it. I won't say I didn't want her. It built up fast and shook me like a chip hammer digging in my navel. I wanted her then more than I wanted all the Alices in the world. I don't know how to case it. She looked like a big overpainted strumpet with eyes as wild as Oklahoma.

But when I got to her I lost my nerve. I couldn't say a word. I just couldn't do it, that was all. She was pure white Texas. And I was black. And a white man was standing there. I never knew before how good a job the white folks had done on me.

I turned and kept on by. I cursed myself for a coward. I called myself a fool. I told myself there was nothing to it. Hell, she was a cheap bitchy tacker. And I was still a leaderman. We were both workers. What could she say? How could she resent my speaking to her? The white guys treated some of those white women like they were bitches in heat. A lot of 'em were prostitutes anyway; they were always firing some of 'em for tricking on the job. And this woman looked like a slut on the make. Anybody in the world could understand how she'd get a proposition. A white guy might ask her outright how much was it worth—or sold for anyway. But I didn't even have the nerve to speak to her. That was what really got it, when I really knew. I had gotten up that morning and gotten myself ready to die. And I could have gone out and done it. I could have kept walking into .45 slugs until the weight of 'em pulled me down, so help me God. But I just couldn't walk into this woman with so much white inside her.

I knew she knew just what had happened. A white man wouldn't have known it. Some white women might not and she had seen my nerve desert me. I've never felt so cheap, so small and inconsequential, so absolutely subhuman. I couldn't stand

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I kept going toward the gangway port. Once I stopped I knew
she was watching me. I knew her mouth was twisted in a sneer
the size of a dill pickle. I wanted to turn around and go on back
and talk to her. Even then I could have saved a little pride. I
knew she would know I'd funk'd, then braced myself for an-
other try. I knew she wanted me to make it. But I couldn't, just
couldn't, that was all.

I wouldn't even try to make Sad Sammy believe it, and he'll
believe anything. Because I didn't even believe it myself, even
while it was happening. I didn't know whether it was all the
things that had happened to me put together—that was what I
wanted to believe—or whether it was just the pure and simple
colours of America.

I had known white girls in both California and Ohio. I had
gone with a little Italian girl in Cleveland for almost a year.
Then there had been a tall brown-haired girl who worked as a
stenographer in a downtown office who used to let me take her
out now and then. She'd lived over on 100th Street near Euclid
and used to walk up and meet me at the Chauffeurs Club. Both
of them were good girls, as good morally as most.

And when Val had his joint in the alley off Cedar and Eighty-
sixth Street a lot of gine white women in the money used to
come out there to hear Art Tatum and Lonnie Johnson. Many
of them would get drunk and cut out with any coloured guy
available. And out at the Cedar Gardens the Avenue slicks laid
about to catch them on the rebound. It wasn't any secret. The
white men knew all about it. If the black boys played too rough
the whitemen would put the cops on them and get them sapped up.

So it wasn't that Madge was white; it was the way she used it.
She had a sign up in front of her as big as Civic Centre—KEEP
AWAY, NIGGERS, I'M WHITE! And without having to say one
word she could keep all the white men in the world feeling they
had to protect her from black rapists. That made her doubly
dangerous because she thought about Negro men. I could tell
that the first time I saw her. She wanted them to run after her.
She expected it, demanded it as her due. I could imagine her
teasing them with her body, showing her bare thighs and
breasts. Then having them lynched for looking.

And that was what scared me. Luring me with her body and daring me with her colour. It ate into me, made me want her for her colour, not her body. In order to have her I'd have to challenge her colour; I couldn't take the dare. Just twenty steps and thirteen words—but I couldn't make it.

So I went outboard and down the wooden gangway, roughing people out of the way. I felt castrated, snake-bellied, and cur-doggish, I felt like a nigger being horse-whipped in Georgia. Cheap, dirty, low. I wanted to grab some bastard and roll down the stairs. My face felt tight. The taste of white folks was in my mouth and I couldn't get it out.

What I ought to do is rape her, I thought. That's what she wanted.

I went down to the dock, searched in the scrap-iron pile until I found a two-foot dog, heavy on one end with weld burrs. One blow with that would crush a chump's skull. Gripping it tightly in my right hand, I went along the dock. The sun was hot, unbearable. My skin felt scorched; my mouth was dry. My eyes felt half open, dead, ringed in steel. I walked with a steady hard motion, planting each step like driving piles. I shouldered into guys, split between couples, walked in a straight line. At the end of the dock I passed the guard in his little shanty, kept on toward the copper shop. It wasn't until then that I knew where I was going. I was looking for my white boy again. He'd been elected.

I was going to walk up and beat out his brains. Then I was going to find Madge, wherever she was, make my bid and make it stick. After that I could go up and sit in the gas chamber at San Quentin and laugh. Because it was the funniest goddamned thing that had ever happened. A black son of a bitch destroying himself because of a no-good white slut from Texas. It was so funny because it didn't make sense. It was just the notion. If you could just get over the notion you could laugh yourself silly.

I entered the copper shop from the front, kept on back toward the punch press the white boy operated. He wasn't there. I asked an old fellow working on the bench where the boy who ran the machine was.

'Johnny Stoddart?' he asked. Then he looked at me. He saw the dog in my hand. He saw my face. His eyes bucked. 'What do you want with him?' he asked.

'None of your goddamned business,' I answered evenly. He opened his mouth as if to say something else, thought better of it. But he wouldn't turn his back to me; instead he backed away a distance, turned quickly, and started down toward the office. I stood there for a moment looking about. I felt weighted, baulked, baffled. It was as if this boy, Johnny Stoddart, had let me down by not being there so I could beat out his brains, had betrayed me.

I went out the back doorway, turned to the right. I whistled a sharp, high-breaking 'scale, levelled off on 'Don't Cry, Baby.' My lips felt stiff, inflexible. As I turned the corner of the corrugated building I threw the dog against the tin wall out of sheer frustration.

It sounded like a cannon shot and just missed hitting my boy in the face. He was coming down the other side and I hadn't even seen him. We both jumped back from pure reflex. Then recognition came into his eyes and his face turned greenish white. It froze him, nailed him to the spot. For a moment I was stunned. I'd never seen a white man scared before, not craven, not until you couldn't see the white for the scare.

Murder touched me then. Not the notion but the actual; the physical; the impelling vicarious urge to take my iron dog and beat him to a pulp. Then all at once I felt sorry for him. Sorry for anybody who had to be that scared and keep on living.

Suddenly I was laughing, doubling over, laughing all down in my belly. I was thinking, without knowing why, about the other night when I took the garbage out for Ella Mae. Something had moved in the dark and made a funny noise that scared the hell out of me. I had dropped the garbage and damn near killed myself stumbling over the steps trying to get out of the way. Whatever it was lit out the other way. I ran into the house, got my pistol and flashlight, came back to investigate with the cocked pistol in my hand, and found the tiniest little kitten you ever want to see trying to hide in the irises. I was thinking about that and laughing like hell; and thinking about how all my life I'd been scared of white folks because they were white and it was funny as hell to find out white folks were scared of me, too, because I was black.

The white boy came out of it and colour came back into his face and it got beet-red. White came back into his soul; I could

see it coming back, rage at seeing a nigger threatening him. Now he was ready to die for his race like a patriot, a true believer. I could see in his mind he wanted to kill me because I had seen him lose it. He hunched his shoulders, bowed his head, and started into me. And then he lost his nerve. He shook himself steady, straightened up, looked around for a weapon. He didn't see any, so he said, 'I'll fight you.'

I smiled at him. 'I don't want to fight you,' I told him. 'I want to kill you. But right now I'm saving you up.'

I could see the fear coming back and see him fighting against it.

'If I catch you around my house again I'm gonna shoot you like a dog,' he threatened, and wheeled away.

I turned and watched him for a moment, feeling good, feeling fine, loose, free. I had gotten over the notion; I had spit the white folks out my mouth. There wasn't anything they could do to me now, I told myself; nothing they could say to me that would hurt. I was ready now, solid ready, to walk right up to Texas.

I kicked my tin hat back at a signifying angle, pushed back toward the dock. Before I got there the whistle blew for lunch.

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