

CHAPTER IX

I DREAMED I was lying in the middle of Main Street downtown in front of the Federal Building and two poor peckerwoods in overalls were standing over me beating me with lengths of rubber hose. I was sore and numb from the beating and felt like vomiting; I was sick in the stomach and the taste was in my mouth. I was trying to get up on my hands and knees but they were beating me across the back of my head at the base of the skull and every now and then one would hit me across the small of my back and I could feel it in my kidneys. Every time I got one knee up and tried to get the other one up I couldn't make it and would fall down again and I knew I couldn't last much longer. But when the peckerwoods started to stop, a hard cultured voice said peremptorily, 'Continue! I will tell you when to stop.' I turned my head and looked up to see who was talking and it was the president of the shipyard corporation dressed in the uniform of an Army general and he had a cigar in one side of his mouth and his eyes were calm and undisturbed. One of the peckerwoods said: 'The nigger can't take much more.' The president of the shipyard said, 'Niggers can take it as long as you give it to them.' Somebody laughed and I looked around and saw two policemen standing by a squad car to one side nudging each other and laughing. There was no one else on the street. The other peckerwood said, 'It ain't right to beat this nigger like that. What we beating this nigger for anyway?' The cops stopped laughing and looked at him and the president of the shipyard got hard and said, 'Continue! It's an order!' So they started beating me again and I was hoping I would become unconscious but I couldn't.

Then I felt myself rolling over in bed, struggling with the covers, but I couldn't wake up, and the dream kept right on with the two peckerwoods beating me not quite to death. Then two old coloured couples in working clothes on their way to work came up and the peckerwoods stopped beating me and the cops came up and stood over me with their hands on their guns and their chins stuck out as if they were scared I might get up and hurt somebody. The coloured people looked at the peckerwoods with dull hatred and then the president of the shipyard smiled at them and said, 'There should be something done about this,' and they looked at him gratefully and said: 'Yassuh, it's a shame to go beating a man like that,' and the president of the shipyard said, 'All of us responsible white people are trying to keep these things from taking place, but you boys must help us.' I tried to tell the coloured people what he had been doing before they came but my voice wouldn't come out and they just looked at him as if he was a good kind of god and said, 'Yassuh, some of these heah boys do git out of their place, but usses don't cause no trouble at all. We working in defence and we don't cause nobody no trouble.' The president of the shipyard said, 'I knew the minute I saw you that you were good coloured folks,' and they went away feeling good toward him and hating the peckerwoods. The cops picked me up and threw me into the squad car and when I asked them where they were taking me they said they were taking me to jail. When the squad car started with a jerk, I woke up.

I was lying in bed. Outside the sun was shining bright. I've overslept, I thought suddenly, and jumped out of bed. Pain shot through my head like summer lightning. My mouth was full of quinine and cottony-dry. I frowned, turning my head carefully to look into the mirror.

Then I remembered. I tried to stop it about Alice but it came back anyway. I felt an odd sort of embarrassment for her; a sort of mixture of shame and betrayal and repulsion. I hoped I wouldn't have to see her for some time; not until I could get myself prepared to think about her again.

I sat slowly down on the bed and looked about. The night kept coming back in brown, dirty memories. Parts of my dream were mingled with them. I began feeling remorseful. I despised myself. I wondered if I would ever be able to

face people again. I was
All of a sudden I thought
and couldn't stop it. Dad
bossing my gang around
sullen, resentful—ashamed
They'd know what had
white workers' eyes.

When I thought about
me and I began to tremble
about living in the same
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about her I'd get up and

But I couldn't move.
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The phone rang and
'Bob?' It was Alice

The bottom dropped
I said.

'I feel like a slut,' she

I wanted her to stop
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'But I'd die if any
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face people again. I was too ashamed to leave the room.
All of a sudden I thought about my job. I could see it coming
and couldn't stop it. Danny Tebbel would be taking my place,
bossing my gang around. The fellows in my gang would be
sullen, resentful—ashamed too. Just ashamed of being black.
They'd know what had happened to me; they'd see it in the
white workers' eyes.

When I thought about Madge that cold scare settled over
me and I began to tremble. Just scared to think about her,
about living in the same world with her. Almost like thinking
about the electric chair. I knew if I kept sitting there thinking
about her I'd get up and go out to the shipyard and kill her.

But I couldn't move. I couldn't even stand up any more. I'd
forgotten about the dice game and the white boy I was going to
kill. It was just Madge and me in an empty world, with Alice
pulling at me not quite hard enough to get me out.

I'm a goddamned coward, I told myself. I'm afraid to die,
that's my trouble. Afraid of getting hurt. Acting a fool. Being
made ridiculous. Being offended, ignored, despised. Afraid to
make the one final decision in my soul that would settle every-
thing one way or another forever. I knew I was going to do it,
but I was afraid to do it then.

I bowed my head in my hands and groaned. I felt like I was
going to be sick a long, long time and never get well. I wrapped
my robe about me and went in and took a quick shave and bath
and put on some clothes.

The phone rang and I went to answer it.

'Bob?' It was Alice. Her voice was tense.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach. 'Yes, this is Bob,'
I said.

'I feel like a slut,' she said.

I wanted her to stop talking about it; I wanted her to go on
as if it'd never happened. 'Look, can't you forget about last
night?' I said tightly. 'All it was, it just got me for a chick like
you to go for a hype like that. But hell, I've forgotten about it
already.'

'But I'd die if anyone knew . . .' She left it hanging.

So that's it, I thought. 'If you're worrying about me talking—
don't,' I grated. 'I don't talk about anybody—'

'It's not that, Bob, darling,' she cut in quickly, but her voice

sounded relieved. 'I just want to atone, darling; I just want to prove to you I'm not really that type of person.'

I kept right on as if she hadn't spoken. 'But if you're trying to buy my silence it isn't worth it. I know any number of chicks I can go to bed with, but I always thought of you——'

I banged the receiver on the hook and turned toward the kitchen. I thought, Goddamnit, everything I do is wrong. I slipped on my jacket, got my identification and money, and went out without saying anything at all. When I looked in the garage I didn't see my car. My stomach went hollow. Now if I'd banged it up and left it somewhere on the side of the road, that would really do it, I thought, hurrying out to the street. It was parked across the street with the front wheels cut sharply up over the curb as if I'd started to drive into the people's house and had caught myself.

The keys were still in it and the ignition was on, although the lights were off. It must have stalled when the wheels went over the curb. I walked around it, looking for dented fenders and flat tyres, but it didn't have a nick. I climbed in, mashed the starter; the motor kicked on. A better car than I was a man, I thought.

When I started north on Wall Street I had no idea where I was going. Anywhere, just to get away from the people I knew for a while. I just wanted to get away from the so-called respectable people of the world, the decent people. They were playing it too close for me, playing it harder than lightning bumps a stump, taking too many techs.

I turned over to San Pedro and headed downtown toward Little Tokyo, where the spooks and spills had come in and taken over. It was a hot, lazy day and the drain from my hang-over left me lightheaded. I pulled up in front of a hotel near First and San Pedro and went into the combination bar and restaurant called the Rust Room. I climbed on a stool and ordered a double brandy straight, then looked in the mirror to see who was there.

In the mirror I saw a chick get up from a table with a couple of sailors in a booth and start over towards me. I turned to face her and began talking before she could open her mouth. 'Now don't start performing, baby, before you know what it's all about——'

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'What kind of nigger are you anyway?' she broke in.
'Puleeze elucidate. Just what is your jinglet that you are now
about to recite?' She was a long tall yellow chick, named Veda,
who worked as a waitress on the day shift. She had a longish
narrow face and a thick-lipped nice-made mouth; her thick
black curly hair grew low on her forehead like a man's and her
heavy black brows met over the bridge of her nose, not a
pretty chick but good for a change. I'd broken a date with her
a week before.

'I'm tryna tell you, honey,' I grinned. 'My car broke down
and I tried to get you on the phone but couldn't anybody find
you. Where were you, anyway? Having your sport I suppose.'

'Don't hand me that hockey,' she said, leaning one hand on
the bar and looking at me. 'That is the saddest jive; that is
pitiful, puleeze bulieve me.'

'Now look, baby, you're getting loud,' I said. 'It doesn't
become you.'

'You're sad, too sad, puleeze bulieve me,' she said. 'You're
just a chickenshit nigger, too sad, just too sad for words.'

'Now listen, darling, don't lose your pretty ways,' I said,
trying to quiet her. 'You're too refined for all this notoriety
jive.'

'You're just a sad nigger, goddamn. Why in the hell didn't
you call me?'

I turned to the bartender. 'Give this chick a drink.' Then
back to her. 'What you drinking, baby?' I put my arm around
her and pulled her toward me. 'You're a fine-looking chick out
of uniform, strictly exotic.' I was trying to stop her from talking
but it didn't work.

'Exotic my fanny,' she said. 'You're just a corn-fed nigger,
a mealy Moe.'

'What you drinking, girl?' the bartender asked.

'Singapore sling,' she said, then changed it: 'No, just brandy
and water.' Then back to me. 'You're really too, too sad. I
laid off to give you something you ain't never had before and
what do you do——' She broke off. 'I'm too, too tall, really
running and leaping, if I'm lying I'm dying. Puleeze bulieve
me.'

'Let me get like you,' I said.

She gave me a look. 'Waste my good earth on you, a sad

nigger like you, to have you duck out on me again? You must wanna die, nigger.'

'What you doing now?' I asked.

'I'm going up and go to bed, darling. What do you care?'

'Let me go up with you and put you to bed, honey,' I said. 'You just might not be able to make it.'

'I just might not at that,' she said. 'But you ain't gonna help me. You gotta have a date with me before you fall in my pad, darling. I just don't pick up anybody at the bar.' She went back to the table with the two sailors in the booth and sat down and began eating the dinner she had left.

Suddenly the brandy took hold and I began feeling melancholy. I thought of my second year at State when I subbed at end on the football team—the one game I played and the one touchdown I made and the people cheering. I had never felt so powerful, so strong, almost as if I'd become the hero I used to dream about being when I grew up. Then I thought about a motion picture called *A Guy Named Joe*; about that cat making that last bomb run, sinking a Nazi flat-top. Going out in a blaze of glory. See you, gates. See you, Jaxon. See you, stud . . . *In the bright blue forever . . .*

Just a simple nigger bastard, that was me. Never would be a hero. Had a thousand chances every day; a thousand coming up tomorrow. If I could just hang on to one and say, 'This is it!' And go out blowing up the white folks like that cat did the Nazis.

My throat went tight, began to ache. My Adam's apple swelled until it choked me and began to hurt. My face wrinkled like a piece of paper beginning to burn; and my mouth spread, lips flattening against my teeth. I began to cry. Not openly. But all down inside.

Two white soldiers and a white chick came in, looked about hesitantly, then went back and sat at a table near the juke box and ordered beer. Every eye in the room was on them.

The soldiers were ordinary boys, didn't look too bright; but the girl was strictly an Arkansas slick chick, a rife, loose, teenage fluff, with a broad face and small eyes and a hard mouth and straggly uncombed hair, dressed in a dirty white waist open at the throat and a dirty blue skirt, barelegged and muddy-shoed. She looked like she had just got off an S.P. freight—but she was white.

The waitress didn't know how to sneered at the girl as if she were down the bar.

But the men looked at her; a couple of them looked at her with hostility.

A couple of white-woman in the juke box spotted them; she looked at the black boys at the juke box off his stool as if she wanted to stand up and fight.

A couple of white boys in the rear; they spotted them; they looked at the white boy who was going to go. She got up in her flat shoes and looked at her eyes as if she wanted to snap. She snapped and tossed her head.

When she got up the boys at the juke box and the soldiers stood up and took her by the arm. She jerked loose and she can take care of herself.

The two soldiers grabbed the girl. He said, 'Tough girl.'

The soldier looked at the other, then at the waitress who was looking at them and stood by the juke box and headed them.

The waitress looked as if she didn't want to serve them but didn't know how to refuse. All the coloured women in the place sneered at the chick; one black girl at a nearby table looked at her as if she wanted to spit on her; and I heard some woman down the bar mutter.

But the men had different reactions. Some studiously ignored her; a couple of black boys at the bar kept turning around to look at her; two Filipinos sitting directly in front of her stared at her with hot burning eyes and forgot to eat their scoff.

A couple of beers made the chick high and she got that frisky white-woman feeling of being wanted by every Negro man in the joint; she couldn't keep still. She got up to put a nickel in the juke box and stood there shaking herself. But one of the black boys at the bar wouldn't let her spend her money; he slid off his stool and went over beside her and played all the pieces she wanted to hear. Then one of the soldiers thought he ought to stand up and protect her, so she sat down.

A couple of well-dressed guys were eating dinner at a table in the rear; they looked slick, like pimps perhaps. The chick spotted them and began flirting with the dark one. By that time the white boys were trying to get her out, but she didn't want to go. She got noisy and began singing one line over and over in her flat Southern voice—“I can't see for looking”—rolling her eyes about at the black boys in the joint. I had to laugh. She snapped a sharp disdainful look in my direction and tossed her head.

When she got up to play her nickel again both of the black boys at the bar went over and started talking to her. The soldiers stood up and tried to make her sit down. One of them took her by the arm and tried to force her into her chair but she jerked loose and said, ‘Just go on out and let me alone. I can take care of myself all right.’

The two slick studs passed her on the way out and she grabbed the dark boy's arm.

He said, ‘Take it easy, baby,’ and brushed her off.

The soldiers got salty. They whispered something to each other, then called the waitress to pay for the beer. Another waitress went after the manager and he came from the lobby and stood by the bar. When the soldiers started to leave he headed them off.

'You can't go out and leave her here,' he said.
'She don't want to come,' one of the soldiers said.
'She came in with you, she's got to go out with you,' the manager said, taking the soldier by the arm.
They went back to the juke box and the soldier said, 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

'Listen,' the manager said to her. 'You'll have to leave with these soldiers you came in with.'

'Why?' she asked in her flat voice. 'It's a free country, ain't it?'

'Aw, come on,' the soldier said, getting red. 'Let's get out this nigger joint.' I don't think he meant to say it, but after he'd said it he got defiant.

Where before there had just been race, now there was tension. We could call ourselves nigger all we wanted, but when the white folks did it we wanted to fight.

'Well, go on then,' she said to the soldier, then turned to the manager. 'Why I got to go out with 'em? I don't know nothing 'bout 'em. I just come in with 'em, that's all.'

All she's got to do now, I thought, is to start performing. She could get everybody in the joint into trouble, even me just sitting there buying a drink. She was probably under age anyway; and if she was she could get the hotel closed, the liquor licence revoked, probably get the manager in jail. She could take those two black chumps flirting with her outside and get them thirty years apiece in San Quentin; in Alabama she could get them hung. A little tramp—but she was white.

Then all of a sudden I thought of Madge; the two of 'em were just alike. I hadn't thought of her all that day, and now the whole bitter memory washed over me. The indignity of it, the gutting of my pride, what a nigger had to take just to keep on living in the goddamned world. I thought about killing the white boy again, but it didn't do anything at all for me now. It seemed childish, ridiculous, so completely futile; I couldn't kill all the white folks, that was a cinch. The cold scared feeling started clamping down on me; it nailed me to my seat, weak and black and powerless.

I heard the manager saying to the Arky Jill, 'You've got to go out with them.'

His voice wasn't exactly rough, but the white boy didn't like

it. His defiance was riding the manager. I thought he was wrong if he said the wrong thing because he was a rugged thought hopefully: Well if there was any kind of way wouldn't be any way at swarm into Little Tok; tricts during the zoot; have to kill and be killed some really rugged cat white cow's milk. I was the white boy caught in sense of disappointment.

'Well, all right, I'll go. But I'm coming back. Pay the boy and le's go.'

'I done paid him a dollar by the arm and all.'

She turned her head and she left. The manager followed them.

'All you got to do is go home,' he said to me.

I looked at him. 'I'll go home, then I asked for a drink.'

He gave it to me. The drink was still sitting on the bar leaving she headed me. She said, 'I thought you were gone.'

'It's on the bar,' I said.

She caught me by the arm. 'I get rid of my comp.'

I shook her off.

I got in my car and drove to the station beyond Sixth. I got out. All the guys I used to know, Willie, Freddie, Bill, the girls we used to run

it. His defiance was riding and he turned a white look on the manager. I thought he was going to say something; and I knew if he said the wrong thing the manager would likely pop him because he was a rugged stud, formerly a Negro copper. I thought hopefully: Well, here it goes. If the boy got hurt, or if there was any kind of rumpus with the white chick in it, there wouldn't be any way at all to stop a riot—the white GIs would swarm into Little Tokyo like they did into the Mexican districts during the zoot suit riots. Only in Little Tokyo they'd have to kill and be killed, for those spooks down there were some really rugged cats; the saying was they wouldn't drink a white cow's milk. I wanted it to come and get it over with. But the white boy caught himself and didn't say anything; I felt a sense of disappointment.

'Well, all right, I'll go out with 'em,' she finally consented.

'But I'm coming back by myself.' Then she said to the soldier:

'Pay the boy and let's go.'

'I done paid him already,' the soldier said angrily, taking her by the arm and almost dragging her out.

She turned her head and grinned at the two black boys before she left. The manager walked to the door and held it open for them.

'All you got to do is go outside and get it,' the bartender said to me.

I looked at him. 'I wouldn't have her with your help,' I told him, then I asked for my bill.

He gave it to me and I paid him and started out. Veda's drink was still sitting on the bar untouched. When she saw me leaving she headed me off at the door. 'Well, how 'bout you?' she said. 'I thought you were buying me a drink.'

'It's on the bar,' I growled.

She caught me by the arm. 'Can't you wait for a minute until I get rid of my company? Just what is your story?'

I shook her off.

I got in my car and dug off in a hurry. I was tense, jerky, at loose ends; almost got bumped by a P.E. train turning into the station beyond Sixth. Now I didn't know where to go, what to do. All the guys I used to run around with were in the Army—Willie, Freddie, Bill, Chet. I hadn't seen any of that group of girls we used to run around with since I'd started going with

Alice. Ruth was married, I'd heard; Gussie was still working in service. I saw Josie on the street-car one day and she said she was working at Lockheed. There was Vivien Williams; there used always to be something going on at her house back in the days before the Communist Party dealt the race issue out. But I decided against her. With all the pressure on me, I couldn't have listened to a Negro spouting the party line if my life had depended on it.

I was still scared to think about Alice. I wanted time to let it cool. If I thought about her now I'd hate her guts, I knew. I could understand how she'd gotten upset. After all, she wasn't used to the pressure we'd gotten last night—hard enough to beat her down. I could sympathize with her on that rap. But the breakout . . . I rubbed my hand down over my face. . . . She'd known where she was going, had known what the play was from the first. I could overlook it happening once—happening accidentally. The white folks' pressure would make a monkey eat cayenne pepper—once.

I tried to shake it from my mind, looked about me. I'd gone out past Washington. I turned around, headed back downtown, decided to go to a show, get my mind clear of everything. I parked in the lot at Sixth and Hill, stopped a moment to look at the rows of white faces on the magazine covers at the book stand, thought sardonically: The white folks sure think they're beautiful, walked up to the drugstore at the corner for a pack of smokes. The little prim-mouth girl back of the counter let me stand there while she waited on all the white customers first. When she started to wait on another one who just came in I banged my hand down on the counter. 'Give me some cigarettes, goddamnit!' I said.

She jerked a look at me as if she thought I was raving crazy; everyone within earshot looked at me. I felt my face burning, my body trembling from the sudden fury.

'Never mind!' I said, wheeled outside, walked fast out Hill Street, bumping into people. There was nothing at Paramount that interested me—just a lot of white faces on the marquee billboards—nothing at Warner's. I turned down Seventh, stopped in front of Bullock's at the corner of Broadway, watched the people pass. The sidewalk was heavy with pedestrian traffic, mostly white, a sprinkling of Mexicans, here and

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there a coloured face. Every second man was in uniform; four out of five women were unescorted.

The servicemen were always hostile towards a Jodie, especially a black Jodie in his fine Jodie clothes. Two little Mexican slick chicks passed; I caught them looking at me and they turned up their noses and looked away disdainfully. I wasn't trying to flirt with them; I wasn't trying to flirt with anybody.

It beat me. I began to feel conspicuous, ill at ease, out of place. It was the white folks' world and they resented me just standing in it. I crossed the street and went into Loew's just to get out of sight. The seat I found was between two couples; on one side the man was next to me, on the other side the woman. The woman said something to the man with her and they got up and changed seats so the man sat next to me. It had never happened to me before. I began burning again but I tried to ignore it. I concentrated on the picture.

I never found out the name of the picture or what it was about. After about five minutes a big fat black Hollywood mammy came on the screen saying: 'Yassum' and 'Noam,' and grinning at her young white missy; and I got up and walked out.

I was down to a low ebb. I needed some help. I had to know that Negroes weren't the lowest people on the face of God's green earth. I had to talk it over with somebody, had to build myself back up. The sons of bitches were grinding me to the nub, to the white meatless bone.

I started hurrying back to the parking lot, got my car, and turned toward the West Side. In a way I still respected Alice; whatever else she might be, she'd still make the grade in the white folks' world. And I loved her too, I knew. I didn't know how I expected her to help me; what she could say or do. Maybe I wanted her to lean on me and tell me I was strong and that she belonged to me; or to hold my head against her breast and let me get it all straightened out. Or maybe I wanted to give her a chance to fall on her knees and ask for my forgiveness and tell me it was an accident and would never happen again. I didn't know.

All I knew was I needed help. Needed it the very worst way. Needed it then. Or I was gonna blow my simple top. And she was the only one I knew who could give it to me.