

"When do you laugh?" she says. "You're so deady serious. It's your fucking book."

"I laugh when I write," Lesser says. "I haven't written a word today. I ought to be writing now."

"Why aren't you?"

Lesser sees himself leaving her at the wall. He crosses Fifth and heads for Third. Halfway to Madison he stops, experiencing a sense of loss. What a fool I am, he thinks. He walks back to where he has left Irene. He thinks she won't be there but she is. She's standing at the wall in a long cape, like a bird about to fly off.

"Why is it taking so long?"

He says he doesn't want to talk about it.

"Is it still that book about love?"

"That's the book," he says.

"I read your first novel. Willie got it out of the library and gave it to me after he finished it. It's very good, better than I thought it would be. The girl reminds me of myself when I was her age. I don't like her. Did you have anyone real in mind?"

Lesser says no.

They sit on a bench.

"You're all such self-conscious characters," Irene says. "When Willie's hung up on his writing he's awful to live with. He fights all the minutes of the day. It's hard to take."

Again the small smile as she inspects her pigeon toes.

"It was bad enough for him but you've made it

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worse. He was awfully hurt by your criticism of his book."

"I didn't want to hurt him."

"He said you didn't think much of it."

"I like the stories better than the Life. They're a lot more original."

"It isn't just autobiography. Willie came from Georgia to Harlem with his mother and kid sister when he was sixteen."

"I thought it was Mississippi."

"He changes his birthplace every time he talks about it. I think he hates to remember it."

"There's a lot he hates to remember. Did he serve a stretch in prison?"

"Two years. But a lot of the book is made up. Willie's an imaginative guy. He enjoys being imaginative. You should hear him when he gets talking about himself. That's the tone I'd like to see in his book. Do you like what he's writing now?"

"So far," says Lesser.

"Do you think he is a good writer—I mean will he be?"

"He is though not consistently. If he stays with it seriously he ought to be good."

"How seriously? Like you have to break your balls to be a writer?"

"There's no halfass way to be a good writer."

"There's nothing halfass about Willie."

Lesser asks her how she and Willie stand as of now.

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She strikes a match, then finds she has no cigarette.

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be together but you seem to be apart."

"That's a good description of us."

"It's none of my business," Lesser says.

"If you say that it means you think it is."

He says he wishes it were.

"I'm not objecting to your question. I'm wondering how to answer it."

"Don't if you don't want to."

"Willie and I met about three years ago—that was about a year and a half after I'd quit college to try being an actress. Not that I was that much of one but the idea of it had become an obsession. My God, what a batty girl I was, and I weighed a good twenty-five more pounds than I do now. I'm not bad in my performances but I can't go down low enough when I have to, or up as high as I would like to. What I'm saying is I wanted to act mainly so that I could skip being myself. A lot of this came out in my analysis. I wasn't very self-knowing."

"You look like an actress but you don't playact."

"I used to an awful lot. Anyway, what it amounted to is acting as a means of getting away from myself. I was a fucked-up kid, I drew men like flies and slept around till I began to wake up frightened."

It seems to Lesser he had left his room that morning to hear her talk about herself.

"I had a very rough time for over a year—but

never mind that. I met Willie and we began to see each other. The blackness of him scared and excited me. I asked him to live with me. I was beginning to be in love with him and I also wanted to know if I could be faithful to one guy. Anyway he moved into my apartment. He wasn't writing as steadily as he is now—for a while he was hung up on whether it was going to be revolution or soul, and I don't really think he's resolved that. He used to write only when he felt he had to. At first we got along badly, then we got kinder to each other and began to have a better time all around. Certain things eased up in me. They stopped being so important—like acting, because I began to have a realer understanding of myself and I don't want to be a halfass anything. And I told you I'm in analysis, which I couldn't bring myself to do before I met Willie."

"Do you love him?"

Irene's eyes are suddenly hungry. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because we're sitting here."

She flips the matchstick into the snow.

"Outside of his love for black people I don't really think he loves anything but his work. Otherwise I think we'd've been married by now. Willie was always conscious of his color but it's more so now. The more he writes the blacker he becomes. We talk an awful lot about race and color. A white chick is no longer such a hot thing for a black man, especially the activists. Willie won't let me hold his hand in public any more. Just when I thought there was a

chance we might get married he began to say, 'I'll tell you the truth, Irene, my writing doesn't come on right with me living with a white chick.' I said to him, 'Willie, do what you want to, I have only so much energy.' He moved out of the apartment for a while, then one night he called me up and moved back in. Now it's just a weekend deal till he really gets into his book, he says."

Lesser says nothing. What she has told him has set off an excitement. He feels in himself a flow of language, a surge of words towards an epiphany.

"What about you?" she says. "I told you about me."

He rises craving to write.

"Do you want to walk any more?" Irene asks. Her eyes are vague, unsure. She opens her purse and roots around for something she can't find, maybe a mirror. Lesser thinks of Lazar Kohn's "Woman."

"One thing about loving a black man," Irene says, "there are times you feel black yourself."

In that case find yourself another.

The writer says he has his work to get back to.



February had stepped aside to let a whiff of leaf and flower into present time. Tomorrow will again be winter; in the meantime this puff of promised spring tormented Lesser.

The writer, alone, this end-of-February night, heading downtown on the east side of Lexington for

no other reason than that he had walked uptown on the other side last night, heard laughter across the street and recognized, amid the stream of people passing by, Bill Spear with Irene Bell. They were at the head of a small parade within the Friday night crowd moving along on the sidewalk; behind them was Sam Clemence and behind him four other blacks walking in pairs: a small neatly dressed brown man wearing a big-brimmed black velours hat, with a heavy, light-skinned, fur-coated woman holding his arm; then two iron-bearded black men in long cloth coats, one carrying a flute case, the other a bongo drum he tapped as he walked. The man with the bongo had a broken nose taped with adhesive.

Lesser, recognizing four of the seven and hearing their laughter, felt longing invade his gut and began to follow them. As he watched Irene with Bill, both enjoying themselves, his feeling turned unpleasant, desire in corrosive emptiness, intensified by shame for feeling as he felt. Could I be jealous of them? How can that be if I have nothing to be jealous of and am not, so far as I know, a jealous type? Recalling that he had experienced a similar seizure on first seeing Irene at his party, something more than hunger touched with regret that he hadn't got to her before Willie had, Lesser felt a disquietude so strange he had to stop a minute to brace himself against a lamp-post.

From across the street near a florist shop Bill spied him and whooped, "Lesser, man, for Christ's



sake, cross on over here. I got some soul people with me."

Lesser, struggling to settle his confused state, waved, and stepped into the street, bucking the light in heavy traffic as the blacks and Irene watched with interest to see if he would make it. Eventually he did, hiding his uneasy excitement, trying not to reveal himself to Irene, who was distantly observing him with eyes wondering why he had appeared, if not who was he.

If you swim the Hellespont where there is none, what are you trying to tell yourself? Or anybody else?

"We are partying at Mary's pad," Bill said. "How do you like to come along?"

Lesser said he wouldn't mind.

"Join the train."

Harry glanced at Irene as though for her sanction but she was already walking on.

"What for this ofay type?" Sam asked Bill, loud enough for Lesser to hear.

"He is a fuckn good writer in one of his books and you were there when he laid down his bread for my furniture that's in my office now."

"Join the train," he called.

None of the pairs made room for one more abreast and Lesser preferred not to walk with Sam, so he tailed the line to Mary's. He had met only one of the four people in the rear, the man with the light-skinned woman, Jacob 32, who nodded gravely with both eyes shut. The others ignored him but Lesser was glad to be with them, even as caboose to their

train. The jealousy that had invaded him had vanished and he enjoyed the promise of spring in the February night. Mary lived in a psychodetically painted loft with a girlfriend who was an illustrator. She said she was happy to see Lesser. Who was happy to see him Lesser was happy to see.

"I thought you might come around sometime," Mary said, "seeing we live so close by. My phone is in the book."

He said he had thought of it. "I thought of it the other night, then I remembered that smell that bothered you last time."

"Oh I was zonked that night," she laughed, touching Lesser's arm. "You shouldn't have held back or felt shy."

"Are you zonked now?"

"I'm staying off grass. When I'm high on it I get low."

As she spoke she watched his eyes. "Are you partial on Irene? You been eye-eating her."

"She's Bill's girl."

"Your eyes stay soft on her."

"It's her mini, I like those long legs."

"Mine are better shaped."

Lesser agreed. "You're a good-looking woman, Mary." In a moment of loneliness and daring, he said to her, "If you liked me I could give you back affection."

Mary, her neck arched, blinked both eyes and walked away.

I write it right but say it wrong, Lesser thought. I

write it right because I revise so often. What I say is unrevised and often wrong. Then he thought, I write about love because I know so little about it.

There were about twenty souls at the party, the writer and Irene the only whites. White souls? Four of the brothers sat barefoot on the floor, improvising black sound with a heartrending beat. Above them rocked a fifth musician with his bull fiddle. Everybody else was dancing, rocking. As he listened to the music the writer felt a yearning, longing for life. The brother with the taped nose beat his bongo with eyes shut. His twin, flowers woven into his stiff beard, played his flute high and sweet. One man plucked the strings of a twelve-string guitar, listening privately to each sound. A brother wearing a gold blouse and red fez beat a rhythmic spoon on an empty bottle. The standing brother, rapping his fingers on his booming bass fiddle, hugged and swayed with it. Each of them whipped up an island of sound around himself. They played to each other, saying their music was beautiful and so were they. Over them hung an umbrella of sweet smoke, and Lesser felt high.

Feeling high, he asked Irene to dance but she was engaged with Sam, who said he didn't appreciate being cut in on. Irene shrugged in mock frustration but said nothing. Lesser thought of the jealousy he had felt before. A short aberration, he thought, directed nowhere in particular, just pro-desire. Bill, in yellow cords, purple silk shirt, short brown boots

and a flowered headband, circled Mary, boogalooing. Irene, in an orange mini, was dancing barefoot, her narrow feet honest, her face flushed. She abandoned Sam as Bill left Mary. They bopped in unison like contrasting birds, each dancing in his casual, habitual orbit as though forever. Bill smiled benignly at his bitch and Irene gazed at him with sad affection. They looked like married folk.

Mary danced with Sam, who shimmied high and shimmied low. Sam moved like a stork with palsy, Mary, both arms aloft, danced with hot eyes. At last she left Sam to dance with Harry.

"Listen now," Mary said as they stepped and twisted, "I got the door key to a friend's apartment across the hall. As soon as people get a little more high I will go on in there and you come in if you have the mood to. Only give me ten more minutes of time so nobody sees us going out of here one right after the other, or Sam might feel bad."

"All right," Lesser said. "But don't get zonked before you go in."

"Okay now. I'll do like you say, honey."

Harry ducked, swung his arms, stepped to the beat of the music as Mary Kettlesmith, in a short slender white-green-and-purple striped dress danced excitedly around him.

She soon slipped out of the loft, Lesser's anticipation rising, his throat dry. Bill, he saw, looked bleary —tonight he was drinking. Irene was in and out of the bathroom, still with cystitis?

The writer, after a quarter of an hour, stepped into the barren outer hall and entered the one-room apartment across from Mary's loft, his heartbeat shaking his frame. Mary lay waiting in bed, covered with a rose blanket. A canary flitted on a bar in a cage by the window.

"Do you mind me getting undressed first? The room is cold and I thought it would be warmer waiting in bed."

Lesser lifted the blanket for a look at her.

"My God you're lovely."

"Tell me what you like."

"Your breasts and belly. The black of you." He passed his hand over her velvet skin.

"Haven't you had a black woman ever?"

"No."

"Don't make too much out of it. Come on in bed now, honey," she said.

When he had undressed and got under the covers with her, Mary said, "Lesser, I want to tell you something. My doctor says I am built a little small. You have to go easy not to hurt me at first."

He said he'd be gentle.

"If you would."

They embraced. Her fingers moved over his face, then down his side and between his legs. He touched her breasts, soft belly, and felt the wet between her thighs.

Mary put out the lamp.

"Don't," said Lesser.

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She laughed and put it on.

Sweating lightly, moaning to herself, after a while Mary said, "You better come on and come, I don't think I will make it, Harry."

"Is it some smell of me?"

"No smell at all."

"Try. I'll hold a while."

For a time she tried with him. Then Mary said with a sigh, "I'm not going to make it at all. You better come on now."

"Did you drink much tonight?"

"Only one scotch and part of another. I didn't take a thing after you said not to."

"I'd like it better if you came too."

"So would I but you better go on alone. I will help you if you tell me what you want me to do."

"Just stay with me," said Lesser.

He came with pleasure, cupping her buttocks. Mary kissed him affectionately. "Lay on me for a while, it keeps me warm." She entwined both arms around him.

Lesser lay on her half asleep. "This is good, Mary."

"I'm sorry I didn't come along with you."

"Don't worry about it."

"Just I like you and would like to come along."

"Next time," Lesser said.

Later, after she had gone to the bathroom, she hung a string of green and violet beads around his neck.

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"What's this for?"

"For our luck," said Mary. "Okay now?"

They lay in bed, passing a cigarette back and forth.

He asked her whether she had ever come with anybody.

"I huff and puff with Sam to make him feel good but I don't really think I have."

He said she would.

"I almost did with you."

"How long haven't you?"

"I don't want to think about that."

"Do you have any idea why you don't?"

"Unless it was because I was raped when I was little, which happened to me on the cellar stairs after he dragged me down there."

"Jesus—who?"

"This redhead nigger neighbor boy from upstairs. His daddy was white and beat the shit out of his black mother. My mama said it got the boy so frustrated he hated everybody and wanted to hurt them. He finally got sent away."

"Tell me, Lesser," said Mary after a while, "do your girls come all of the time?"

"Most of the time."

"Do they come more than once?"

"One used to."

"The bed is not my most favorite place," she said.

"Are you crying, Mary?" Lesser asked.

"No, sir, I am not."

"It sounds as though you were."

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"That's not me. Usually it's Sam out in the hall, kneeling by the keyhole and crying," Mary said.

"A Salaam Aleikum," Jacob 32 said to Lesser when he returned to Mary's loft. Mary had gone back first. Jacob was a narrow-eyed man in a dark blue suit. His gaze locked with Lesser's, but he spoke gently, as though he had been asked to.

"If you think you white you wrong," said Jacob. "You really black. The whites are black. The blacks are the true white."

"I think I know what you mean."

"No, you don't. You see us wrong and you see yourself wrong. If you saw me right you would see me white in the manner which I see you black. You think I am black because your inside eyes are closed to the true vision of the world."

Lesser said no more.

"This is a eye-to-eye confrontation of the force of evil versus a vessel of good," said Jacob 32, "and it ain't up to me to reveal to you which is the which."

Mary had locked herself in her bathroom and Lesser was left alone with a crowd of silent blacks. He guessed that Sam had told them and nobody cared for the news. Irene was standing at a dark window

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in the loft, looking out, her face haunted in the glass. Lesser saw himself in it, staring at her.

We're both scared but what is she scared of? Bill Spear, his mouth slack, heavy eyes glazed, drunk but steady on his feet, summoned Lesser from across the room. Beside him stood Sam Clemence, thick-calved in striped bell-bottoms, aloof but mourning. A cluster of blacks with inexpressive faces was massed around them.

"Lesser, move your paleface ass on over here." Now I take my lumps, he thought. Maybe for not satisfying Mary. Maybe that's the name of the game. The stranger who falls is a dead duck. It's an ancient entrapment and I shouldn't have played. I'm too young to be the sacrifice in a stomp-in. He was alarmed by the thought of broken fingers and bloody eyes.

Bill's flushed eyes were sullen. Of the blacks he was the blackest present.

"Chum," he said, tapping his stubby finger against Lesser's noisy chest, "we have a game we got we call the dozens. Like the brothers play it no ofay has that gift or the wit, and also since whitey ain't worth but half a black I'm gon play you the half-dozens. Now it's a game of nothin but naked words. I'm gon do mine on you and you do yours on me, and the one who bleeds, or flips, or cries mama, he's the loser and we shit on him. Do you dig?"

"What's the point of it?"

"The point is the point."

"I thought we were friends, Bill?"

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"You got no friends here," Sam told Lesser. "Suppose I don't play?"

"If you gon fuck black you gon face black," said the light-skinned woman, Jacob's friend.

"Off the shmuck," said the flute player with flowers in his beard.

Several of the brothers nodded. Lesser felt his testicles tighten.

"I'll begin like easy so you can join the fun," Bill said in his resonant raspy voice. "I ain't gon work on your mama and sister which is the way we do it, but come right to the tough-shit funk of it, special for you:

"Lesser, don't think you so hot,

You got the look of a shit-pot."

Some of the blacks snickered as the bull fiddler bowed a high chord.

"Now raise me on that."

Lesser stood mute.

"If you don't we might have to play a different kind of a game."

"Poker?" the writer bluffed, truly frightened.

"Man, have you lost your nuts down the can?"

The blacks laughed.

Lesser figured it was a game so long as he played it.

"Willie, your mouth is a place of excrement."

To his surprise he roused a titter of amusement.

The bull fiddler fiddled a low note.

Bill blinked in scorn, his tumid eyes momentarily refusing to focus.

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"Lesser," he said, when he had got a new fix on him, "I see you runnin a bad trip. And I see that you a mammyrammer blowhard fart that has no respect for hisself."

"What good is a contest of imprecation? All it does is arouse bad feeling."

He roused raucous guffaws.

"Listen to that soft bullshit," Sam said huffily.

"Now you leave this honky to me," said Bill. "He is my guest."

More laughs.

Irene came over, her cape and hat on, leather purse hanging from her shoulder. Her long hair seemed longer.

Lesser thought if he hadn't gone to bed with Mary he might now be outside somewhere with Irene.

"Willie, can we go home now?" she said, not looking at Lesser. "I'm tired."

"Go on home."

"Couldn't you come with me?"

"Go fuck yourself."

"If I could what would you do for kicks?"

The sisters let out little shrieks of laughter and some of the brothers laughed. The bull fiddler slapped his knee. Irene retreated to the window.

"Lesser," said Bill, testily impatient, "I called you a mammyrammer blowhard fart. Don't that tempt you to return me an answer?"

"If you have to do this, why don't you write it? I thought you were a writer." Lesser's voice was hoarse, his underpants damp.

"Don't tell me what to write, chum," Bill said, raising his head haughtily. "I don't need no bleached-out Charlie to tell *me* what to write."

"Amen," said Jacob 32.

Lesser's fear incited anger. "If you have some kind of complaint about me why don't you say it directly? Why pretend to play this stupid game? If what you want to say is none of your business in the first place, then let Sam say it."

"I told you not to let this redneck shiteater come along here," Sam complained.

Jacob 32 nodded.

"What is the answer to the words I have laid down to you?" Bill said, irritated. "How much more of a motherfuckn coward you gon be?"

"I could call you filthy prick," Lesser offered.

He saw Irene, across the room, make a gesture of silence.

"I withdraw that."

"You can't withdraw nothin," Bill said, moving his glowing face close to Lesser's. "That's the fuckn rules of it. Now isn't the reason why you want to withdraw it because it really don't say what you wanted to call me? Wasn't you plannin to say filthy nigger prick, without havin the courage to get it out? Tell the truth, man."

"I'll tell the truth—I thought of it because I know you want to hear it."

"Fine and okay," said Bill. "But now I'm gon call you a fartn shiteater faggot whore kike apeshit

thievin Jew." He spaced each word slowly and ended with a hard beat.

The blacks murmured approval. The bongo player tapped out a little tune. Sam wiped a happy tear from under his eyeglasses.

"I get the message," said Lesser, "and concede the game. That's my last word."

There was a hush. The room smelled of sweat. He thought he would be struck on the head, but nobody moved. Those who continued to look on were bored. The man in the red fez yawned. The bull fiddler packed away his instrument. People drifted away. Bill seemed satisfied and Jacob 32 enjoyed a cigar.

Lesser pulled his hat and coat off a hook on the wall and headed for the door. Irene, as he went by, threw him an embittered look.

Three brothers sprang to the door to block Lesser's exit but Bill whistled shrilly and waved them aside.

"Let the white spook exit out."

The spook, whiter than ever, humiliated to the soles of his shoes but still in one piece, left the loft as Mary burst out of the bathroom and embraced Irene.

Down the block Lesser waited across from a broken street light, hoping Irene would walk out after him, but when she came out she was with Willie. They headed the other way. Throughout the night Lesser dreamed of her. He dreamed she had come to his

room and they sat without touching because she was married to Willie. When he woke in the dark, thinking of her, from the weight of his heart he knew he was in love.

Bill, with a low snuffle, came in after work the next afternoon. He sat in Lesser's ragged armchair, thick hands clasped between stubby knees, gazing at the floor. He looked as though he had shrunk an inch, lost weight. His overalls hung droopy over his newly washed bulky green sweater. He adjusted his wire-trimmed glasses and smoothed the bushy ends of his Mongolian mustache.

"I sure got nothing done today, not even one lousy sentence left over to keep. Man, I have a hangover bigger than an elephant ass."

Lesser, sitting motionless, did not speak.

Bill said: "I want you to know, Lesser, that was how I saved your skin last night."

"Saved whose skin?"

"Sam wanted the brothers to beat up on you and crack your nuts for putting the meat to his bitch, but I got you in the game so they could see you get your shame that way and not want your real red blood."

Lesser said he was, in that case, grateful.

"You sure as shit don't look it."

"Take my word."

"I just wanted you to know how I did it."

Lesser afterwards thought it would be better not to know. Not to be concerned with gratitude or ingratitude. To love Willie's girl in peace and with joy.



Sheltered in a doorway late one afternoon, Lesser watches it snow. A black head looms out of the snow, stares at him fixedly and disappears like a moon entering a cloud bank. The black head is in Lesser's. He has been tormenting himself all day about Bill: He has little, why should I make it less? Less if he loves her, more if he doesn't—I wish I knew.

He waits in the doorway above a five-step stoop across the street from where Irene lives, in a red-brick apartment house on West Eleventh. He had gone that morning into the vestibule to look at the name on the mail box: IRENE BELL—WILLIE SPEARMINT. Harry sees a letter in Irene's box, one he has written often but not on paper. He imagines Willie reading it by matchlight.

The letter speaks of Lesser's love. Willie reads it and sets it afire with a match. Maybe he would if he were there, if the letter were there. But Willie's in his room on the fourth floor of Levenspiel's deserted house, hard at work on his new book. Lesser, since the morning after Mary's party last week, has not been able to concentrate on his writing. He walks back and forth in his room, but when he sits down at his desk he does nothing desperately and gets up.

He hadn't tried to write that morning. He had left the house early. He had walked to Fifth Avenue, caught the bus there, then cut over to Sixth. He had rung her bell. Lesser had missed Irene, gone off to a rehearsal. He had gone back home, tried to write, returned after a day of not writing. He had told himself not to go. Stay the hell away. Wait it out. This wasn't the time to be in love. Willie was a complicated guy. Lesser felt he wouldn't want a white man to be in love with Irene.

But he had left the house again to see her.

It's night. It's snowing. After a while he sees the snow. He watches it fall into the street, cover the sidewalks, window ledges, the cornices of the houses across the street. Lesser has been waiting for hours. He has to tell her he loves her or he may never write again.

A church bell faintly bongs the quarters, making the wait longer. Lesser adds up each quarter of an hour. He always knows what time it is. It is past six. At last a tallish girl in boots and cape, wearing a green wool hat dusted with snow over her blond but truly black hair, comes around the corner. Lesser watches her in the snowy light of the street lamp. He crosses the street and calls her name.

Irene looks at him as though she doesn't know him. Then she looks as though she reluctantly does.

Lesser says it's Lesser. Who else can it be?

She wants to know why he had said shalom that day, meeting her outside the museum.

"I meant don't be a stranger."