

She rose early ~~today~~ earlier than she had done so for years, but she did not stay in bed long and she dressed quietly and alone without the help of the black girl. It was hot, unbearably, suffocatingly hot but she did not move to open the ~~it~~ shuttered windows, nor did she ring the bell for breakfast. She just moved routinely through early morning stillness. Some music came from the tavern saloon below, slow, tinny, early morning music, the same music that she heard every night, only slower now, depressing like a hangover, early morning music. No other sounds came from below, no laughter, no voices, nothing but the tinny piano. She went to the armour and opened the big mahogany doors, which seemed to dwarf her. The box was on the upper shelf, among the other hat boxes, but it had been placed there with more care. She dragged the small ladder over. The box was hard to reach. She reached around until felt the familiar ribbon, then she pulled the hat box down. It was a large hat, with paper flowers and little stuffed birds on it and enough room to hide a small stock that lay carefully folded up on the brim. She pulled out the pins that held the stocking. She carefully unraveled it and emptied the money out on the bed. She didn't count it, she left the money on the bed and went to the chair where her other dress was, the working dress. From the inside lining of the bodice she pulled a couple of bills out. She added these to her little pile already on the bed. But she didn't count it. She seemed to be sure that she would know when she would have enough. She pinned the stocking back to its place on the hat and then she put the hat box back in its place in the armour. She closed the big mahogany doors quickly and a ~~big~~ swish of air blew across her face. She was sweating. She went to her dressing table chair but she didn't pick up anything wipe her face with. She couldn't. her hands were trembling. Below the piano sounded its slow, depressing, early morning music.

The note lay right in front of her on the dressing table but she didn't notice it immediately and when she finally ~~didn't pick it up~~, did, she didn't pick it up. She rested and tried to freshen herself up first, then she opened the small envelope. She recognised his handwriting immediately but it was not the neat and even script that she was used to seeing. Instead, the letters were scratched and blotted upon the paper as if they were written in a fit of drunkenness. There were only ~~three~~ ^{five} words on the paper but they were almost illegible. The ~~note~~ ^{note} simply ~~read~~ ^{read} I WANT TO SEE YOU. There was no signature.

After she read the letter she changed her clothes. She chose a darker, more suitable dress, one ^{however} that made her look as though she were in morning, and perhaps a little older than she would have liked to appear. She did not know exactly how to take the letter. She had expected the note to come, but she had not expected it to be a summons. She had never been allowed to go to his place before. He had always

There was something in the stillness of the air that woke her early. There was something, some inner feeling, a premonition almost, that told her that today would not be the same as other days. Though she had not been up this early in years she did not stay in bed long, and she dressed quietly and alone without the help of the black girl. It was hot, unbearably, suffocatingly hot; no wind whispered through the shuttered windows.

come down to the river front to see her. His life in that old brick building up on Silver Street was kept in complete secrecy. Scattered bit of information leaked through but there was only enough to pique her imagination. She resented his attempts to keep part of his life a secret, but she never questioned it. She felt that he had been her savior once. She had been alone, terribly alone and she had killed a man. That had all happened in New Orleans in a part of her life that was gone now, lost in years of unregret. It was an unexpected past, a past that he had never questioned her about, nor had ever cared to and she knew this. The law was after her and he hid her and when the law scare was passed he gave her a place to stay. But he never asked anything of her, but she gave it anyway, at first out of gratitude and perhaps worship (she was only twenty at the time, she did not know love) then love. But that was twenty years ago and he had stopped asking anything of her and she wasn't grateful any longer and her ingratitude became contempt. But he had been her savior, or at least she thought the instrument of her salvation, if this was salvation.

She didn't take the negro man with her, instead she went by her self down the back stairs and out on the jamed, stinking, muddy streets. It wasn't a far walk to the red brick building. The narrow street turned up the hill passed shipping houses, bars, mostly bars, and up passed another kind of houses. Silver street, which curved up ~~to Ratchez above the hill~~ the bluff to the town of Ratchez above the hill was the busiest of all the streets. The old brick building, partially covered with a green moss which thrived on the wet walls, was located about half way up Silver street. It was a rather unimpressive building, not much different in appearance than one of the merchant houses that lined the street. An elegantly dressed negro answered the door and rather hurriedly led her passed two offices, that must have been shipping house offices, down a long hallway to a door. The door opened to the outside, a stenchy alley, to a small stairway. The stairway led up to the second floor and the servant hurried ahead and opened the door. " In here." he said, and he closed the door behind him.

The room was dark, very dark and for a minute she couldn't see anything. The curtains were drawn. There were no candles burning, ~~but there was no light~~ She saw him sitting in a chair

He was sitting behind a desk. The room was very dark because the curtains were drawn and she didn't see him right away. She stood there quietly ^{Now} at the door waiting for him to make the move. She was really sure if he was in the room, but then he said, "Wont you sit down?" There was no warmth in the words and she had not expected that. The voice was verging on the too polite and she seemed to sense ~~that was going to be~~ now that there was an air of finality in his voice.

As her eyes became used to the dim interior of the room she could see him, nothing

come to her

He was sitting behind the desk, ~~not~~ moving, a silent hunched over shadow ~~there~~ in the curtain drawn darkness. His head didn't move but she knew that he was looking at her with that same sarcastic, scrutinizing look that he always gave her when he was drunk. A silhouette ~~arm~~ pointed to a silhouette chair. She ~~complied obediently~~. obeyed quietly. He sat there yet said nothing. It was as if those dark hidden eyes were doing the talking, as if they both were acting out a ritual, a secret rite in which only the silence spoke and words were confusing. At that moment they knew each other. She knew and was afraid. She tried not to look at him, at that shadowy sardonic smile that she knew was on his face, but she did not know what to do. There was something violent about his silence, about his quiet hidden anger dark ^{about} within these ~~of~~ ancient walls which she had never seen but knew also. The walls dark and cracked, sweating their odors stale cigar smoke and man smell and age, humid and thick dark within like a mushroom patch sheltered from the white, silent, ~~summer~~ sun. It was a silent duel more of nerves than anything else and it was a duel that she always lost. She turned her head from him but she could still see him and she knew that he would not move. The heat the darkness and the smell, all demons working their spells upon her, forcing her to yield the silent duel. He would win. Like a cornered animal she would turn and rush head long.

"Why do you want to see me?"

Her words cracked in the hot stillness; they ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ rang in her ears, then the silence folded around them. He did not answer.

"You never let me come here before."

He only looked at her. His face there silent sardonic but yet always inscrutable, watching her in drunken vigilance. She felt that he was deriving some sadistic pleasure from her uneasiness, as if he were trying to get even for one of her transgressions. He must have ~~xxxxxx~~ found out somehow. In his quiet, personal, friendless defiant world he knew and found out things.

"I don't know what kind of game we're playing but if you aren't going to speak to me, I don't see ^{much} ~~xxxx~~ reason in me staying here."

She stood up but the silhouette arm pointed down to the chair. He commanded her as if she were a pet. "Sit," he said. She obeyed as if she were a pet. ~~After all she did in a way belong to him.~~ He watched her again, then she heard something snap. It was a pencil. "What's his name?" He did know.

"Whose name?" she piped. He ~~didn't answer~~ only looked at her. His name? she thought. For the first time she realized that she didn't know his name. She didn't know anything about him, except the being himself. She looked at him. He was grinning.

"What are you talking about." The words seemed so hollow, even in the quiet room.

He was sitting behind the desk there in the curtain drawn darkness

~~the~~ more than a hunched over silhouette. A silhouette arm pointed almost feebly to a silhouette chair. She did as he asked. She looked at him. He didn't say anything, but his silhouette head never moved and she knew that he was looking at her. She tried not to look at him, but she didn't know what to do. There was something violent about his silence, about him sitting there black and hunched over in the darkness. The room was unbearably hot. The walls seemed to sweat ~~their~~ moisture into the room carrying with it the odors of age, of well soaked in cigar smoke, and of stale man smell. She knew that he was aware of her discomfort. And she knew that he was waiting for her to make the first move. It was an unspoken duel and not the first that she had had with him. " May I please open the curtains. You need some air in here. " The words were out before she could stop them. They seem crack in the stillness. This was not the first of the duels that she had lost, infact she always lost.

" Please . . . please, just sit there, he said. "

" But I don't understand. "

" Just please . . . sit there. "

" Why did you want to see me. I mean, well, until last night we hadn't seen each other for weeks. "

The silence seemed to fold around her words, they rang in her own ears. She began to notice how really nervous she was as she sat there in the heat and the dark silence and the smell. This place, this room of his shrouded in sedrecy and gloom and dusty quiet had always been a source of wonder to her imagination. And now she was here. She didn't know how to feel. It wasn't ~~the feeling of~~ curiosity, that had actually cooled over the years. It was more a feeling of pride of conquest, of having won a victory over his ~~own~~ efforts to keep her away from this place. It had not occurred to her that she was here because he wanted her here. It was as if she had envaded the quiet, reverant ~~sanctity~~ sanctity of a forbidden temple, envaded and ~~comitted~~ in some way comitted sacriledge.

He was sitting in the corner, at the same table where she had first seen him, and at the same ^{table} where he always sat in the shadows where the lamp lights from the bar did not reach him. She had never seen his face very clearly, in fact, if she saw him ~~on~~ the streets she would not have recognized him. And yet she felt she, in some way strange to her ~~real~~ knowledge of him, as if by instinct, knew him. She did not know if she liked him or not. He frightened her in some mild sort of way with that stare of his, ^{how} eyes which she had never really seen yet she knew were on her. He made her nervous, this man that she had never actually seen, but knew. At first she tried to avoid him, by coming down early then going back to her room when it got late. Some nights he wouldn't come in. She would check to see from ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the hallway above. Sometimes he would be gone for weeks and she would forget about him. But that was only during the first absences. When he was gone more often, she worried, not about him so much as his return, when he would be ~~xxx~~ sitting in same dark corner at the same table watching her with those soul~~x~~ searching eyes. That's what it was. That was what made her so nervous, ~~and~~ uncomfortable. That look ^{of} made her think about herself.

" Could we open the curtains you see some air in here. The silence seemed to fold around her words. He said nothing. Did you hear me? Her words cracked in the hot stillness. She rose from her chair. No he said. She turned toward the curtains. NO please, leave them closed. But she would not listen to him. She moved quickly across the room across a floor she could not see. She heard the chair move and she felt him moving behind her. Her hands were on the curtains pulling, feeling, groping in the darkness for the pulls. A hand, small but strong grabbed her wrist and pulled her around, but her other hand jerked the pull and the curtains flashed open. " No " His hand fell limply from her wrist. He was on the floor at her feet, She could only look at his face unmasked by the sun light. That face longer and plainer that proud inscrutable look gone as if suddenly sapped of its strength in the sunlight. Perhaps it was the fading hairline, the almost death-like palor which gave his face a cold passive look of a deathmask. He looked up at her. She stood strait and said nothing, She couldn't. She couldn't His hand grabbed her wrist, feebly now, almost shaking with a palsey. I am old he said.