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Chester HIMES

The Crazy Kill

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CHESTER HIMES

THE
CRAZY
KILL



VINTAGE CRIME / BLACK LIZARD

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IT WAS FOUR o'clock, Wednesday morning, July 14th, in Harlem, U.S.A. Seventh Avenue was dark and lonely as haunted graves.

A colored man was stealing a bag of money.

It was a small white canvas bag, the top tied with a cord. It lay on the front seat of a Plymouth sedan that was double-parked on Seventh Avenue, in front of an A&P grocery store in the middle of the block between 131st and 132nd Streets.

The Plymouth belonged to the manager of the A&P store. The bag contained silver money to be used for making change. The curb was lined with big shiny cars, and the manager had double-parked until he'd unlocked the store and put the money in the safe. The manager didn't want to risk walking a block down a Harlem street at that time of morning with a bag of money in his hand.

There was always a colored patrolman on duty in front of the store when the manager arrived. The patrolman stood guard over the cartons and crates of canned goods, groceries and vegetables, which the A&P delivery truck unloaded on the sidewalk, until the manager arrived.

But the manager was a white man. He didn't trust the streets of Harlem, even with a cop on guard.

The manager's distrust was being justified.

As he stood in front of the door, taking the key from his pocket, with the colored cop standing by his side, the thief sneaked along the other side of the parked cars, stuck his long bare black arm through the open window of the Plymouth and noiselessly lifted the bag of silver money.

The manager looked casually over his shoulder at just the instant the stooping figure of the thief, creeping along the street, was disappearing behind another parked car.

"Stop, thief!" he shouted, assuming the man was a thief on general principles.

Before the words had got clear of his mouth the thief was high-balling for all he was worth. He was wearing a ragged dark green cotton T-shirt, faded blue jeans and dirt-blackened canvas sneakers, which, along with his color, blended with the black asphalt, making him hard to distinguish.

"Where's he at?" the cop asked.

"There he goes!" a voice said from above.

Both the cop and the manager heard the voice, but neither looked up. They had seen a dark blur turning on a sharp curve into 132nd Street, and both had taken off in pursuit simultaneously.

The voice had come from a man standing in a lighted third-story window, the only lighted window in the block of five- and six-story buildings.

From behind the man's silhouetted figure came the faint sounds of a jam session holding forth in the unseen rooms. The hot licks on a tenor sax kept time with the feet pounding on the sidewalk pavement, and the bass notes from a big piano were echoing the light drum

thunder of a kettledrum.

The silhouette shortened as the man leaned farther and farther out the window to watch the chase. What had first appeared to be a tall thin man slowly became a short squat midget. And still the man leaned farther out. When the cop and the store manager turned the corner the man was leaning so far out his silhouette was less than two feet high. He was leaning out of the window from his waist up.

Slowly his hips leaned out. His buttocks rose into the light like a slow-rolling wave, then dropped below the window ledge as his legs and feet slowly rose into the air. For a long moment the silhouette of two feet sitting upside down on top of two legs was suspended in the yellow lighted rectangle. Then it sank slowly from view, like a body going head-down into water.

The man fell in slow motion, leaning all the way, so that he turned slowly in the air. He fell past the window underneath, which bore the black-lettered message:

STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT
*Anoint the Love Apples
With Father Cupid's Original*
ADAM OINTMENT
A Cure For All Love Troubles

To one side of the cartons and crates was a long wicker basket of fresh bread. The large soft spongy loaves, wrapped in wax paper, were stacked side by side like cotton pads.

The man landed at full length on his back exactly on top of the mattress of soft bread. Loaves flew up about him like the splash of freshly packaged waves as his body sank into the warm bed of bread.

Nothing moved. Not even the tepid morning air.

Above, the lighted window was empty. The street was deserted. The thief and his pursuer had disappeared into the Harlem night.

Time passed.

Slowly the surface of the bread began to stir. A loaf rose and dropped over the side of the basket to the sidewalk as though the bread had begun to boil. Another squashed loaf followed.

Slowly, the man began erupting from the basket like a zombie rising from the grave. His head and shoulders came up first. He gripped the edges of the basket, and his torso straightened. He put a leg over the side and felt for the sidewalk with his foot. The sidewalk was still there. He put a little weight on his foot to test the sidewalk. The sidewalk was steady.

He put his other foot over the edge to the sidewalk and stood up.

The first thing he did was to adjust his gold-rimmed spectacles on his nose. Next he felt his pants pockets to see if he'd lost anything. Everything seemed to be there—keys, Bible, knife, handkerchief, wallet and the bottle of herb medicine he took for nervous indigestion.

Then he brushed his clothes vigorously, as though loaves of bread might be sticking to him. After that he took a big swig of his nerve medicine. It tasted bittersweet and strongly alcoholic. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

Finally he looked up. The lighted window was still there, but somehow it looked strange like the pearly gates.

DEEP SOUTH WAS shouting in a hoarse bass voice: "*Steal away, daddy-o, steal away to Jesus ...*"

His meaty black fingers were skipping the light fantastic on the keys of the big grand piano.

Susie Q. was beating out the rhythm on his kettle drum.

Pigmeat was jamming on his tenor sax.

The big luxurious sitting room of the Seventh Avenue apartment was jam-packed with friends and relatives of Big Joe Pullen, mourning his passing.

His black-clad widow, Mamie Pullen, was supervising the serving of refreshments.

Dulcy, the present wife of Big Joe's godson, Johnny Perry, was wandering about, being strictly ornamental, while Alameda, Johnny's former wife, was trying to be helpful.

Doll Baby, a chorus chick who was carrying a torch for Dulcy's brother, Val, was there to be seen and be seen.

Chink Charlie Dawson, who was carrying a torch for Dulcy herself, shouldn't have been there at all.

The others were grieving out of the kindness of their hearts and the alcohol in their blood and because grieving was easy in the stifling heat.

Holy Roller church sisters were crying and wailing and daubing at their red-rimmed eyes with black-bordered handkerchiefs.

Dining car waiters were extolling the virtues of their former chef.

Whorehouse madams were exchanging reminiscences about their former client.

Gambler friends were laying odds that he'd make heaven on his first try.

Ice cubes tinkled in eight-ounce glasses of bourbon whisky and ginger ale, black rum and Coca Cola, clear gin and tonic water. Everybody was drinking and eating. The food and liquor were free.

The blue-gray air was thick as split-pea soup with tobacco smoke, pungent with the scent of cheap perfume and hothouse lilies, the stink of sweating bodies, the fumes of alcohol, hot fried food and bad breath.

The big bronze-painted coffin lay on a rack against the wall between the piano and the console radio-television-record set. Flowers were banked about a horseshoe wreath of lilies and about a horse in the winner's circle at the Kentucky Derby.

Mamie Pullen said to Johnny Perry's young wife, "Dulcy, I want to talk to you."

Her usually placid brown face, framed by straightened gray hair pulled into a tight knot atop her head, was heavily seamed with grief and fear.

Dulcy looked resentful. "For Chrissake, Aunt Mamie, can't you let me alone?"

Mamie's tall, thin, work-hardened old body, clad in a black satin Mother Hubbard gown that dragged the floor, stiffened with resolve. She looked as though she had been washed with all waters and had come out still clean.

On sudden impulse, she took Dulcy by the arm, steered her into the bathroom and closed and locked the door.

Doll Baby had been watching them intently from across the room. She moved away from

Chink Charlie and pulled Alameda to one side.

“Did you see that?”

“See what?” Alameda asked.

“Mamie took Dulcy into the crapper and locked the door.”

Alameda studied her with sudden curiosity.

“What about it?”

“What they go so secretive to talk about?”

“How the hell would I know?”

Doll Baby frowned. It relieved the set stupidity of her expression. She was a brownskin model type, slim, tan and cute. She wore a tight-fitting flaming orange silk dress and was adorned with enough heavy costume jewelry to sink her rapidly to the bottom of the sea. She worked in the chorus line at Small’s Paradise Inn, and she looked strictly on the make.

“It looks mighty funny at a time like this,” she persisted, then asked slyly, “Will Johnny inherit anything?”

Alameda raised her eyebrows. She wondered if Doll Baby was shooting at Johnny Perry. “Why don’t you ask him, sugar?”

“I don’t have to. I can find out from Val.”

Alameda smiled evilly. “Be careful, girl. Dulcy’s damn particular ’bout her brother’s women.”

“That bitch! She’d better mind her own business. She’s so hot after Chink it’s a scandal.”

“It’s likely to be more than that now Big Joe is dead,” Alameda said seriously. A shadow passed over her face.

Once she had been the same type as Doll Baby, but ten years had made a difference. She still cut a figure in the deep purple turtle-neck silk jersey dress she was wearing, but her eyes were the eyes of a woman who didn’t care any more.

“Val ain’t big enough to handle Johnny, and Chink keeps pressing Dulcy as if he ain’t going to be satisfied until he gets himself killed.”

“That’s what I can’t see,” Doll Baby said in a puzzled tone of voice. “What’s he giving such a big performance for? Unless he’s just trying to get Johnny’s goat?”

Alameda sighed, involuntarily fingering the collar covering her throat.

“Somebody better tell him that Johnny’s got a silver plate in his head and it’s sitting too heavy on his brain.”

“Who can tell that yellow nigger anything?” Doll Baby said. “Look at him now.”

They turned and watched the big yellow man push his way through the crowded room to the door as though enraged about something, then go out and slam the door behind him.

“He’s gotta make out like he’s mad just because Dulcy went into the crapper to talk to Mamie, when all he’s really tryin’ to do is get the hell away from her before Johnny comes.”

“Why don’t you go too and take his temperature, sugar,” Alameda said maliciously. “You’ve been holding his hand all evening.”

“I ain’t interested in that whisky jockey,” Doll Baby said.

Chink worked as a bartender in the University Club downtown on East 48th Street. He made good money, ran with the Harlem dandies and could have girls like Doll Baby by the dozen.

“Since when ain’t you interested?” Alameda asked sarcastically. “Since he just went out the

door?"

"Anyway, I gotta go find Val," Doll Baby said defensively, moving off. She left immediately afterward

Sitting on the lid of the toilet seat inside of the locked bathroom, Mamie Pullen was saying "Dulcy, honey, I wish you'd keep away from Chink Charlie. You're making me awful nervous, child."

Dulcy grimaced at her own reflection in the mirror. She was standing with her thigh pressed against the edge of the washbowl, causing the rose-colored skin-tight dress to crease inside the valley of her round, seductive buttocks.

"I'm trying to, Aunt Mamie," she said, nervously patting her short-cut orange-yellow curls framing the olive-brown complexion of her heart-shaped face. "But you know how Chink is. He keeps putting himself in my face no matter how hard I try to show him I ain't interested."

Mamie grunted skeptically. She didn't approve of the latest Harlem fad of brownskin blondes. Her worried old eyes surveyed Dulcy's flamboyant decor—the rainbow-hued whorl shoes with the four-inch lucite heels; the choker of cultured pink pearls; the diamond-studded watch; the emerald bracelet; the heavy gold charm bracelet; the two diamond rings on her left hand and the ruby ring on her right; the pink pearl earrings shaped like globules of petrified caviar.

Finally she commented, "All I can say is, honey, you ain't dressed for the part."

Dulcy turned angrily, but her hot long-lashed eyes dropped quickly from Mamie's critical stare to Mamie's man-fashioned straight-last shoes protruding from beneath the skirt of Mamie's long black satin dress.

"What's the matter with the way I dress?" she argued belligerently.

"It ain't designed to hide you," Mamie said drily, then, before Dulcy could frame a comment, she asked quickly, "What really happened between Johnny and Chink at Dick Wells's last Saturday night?"

Dulcy's upper lip began to sweat.

"Just the same old thing. Johnny's so jealous of me sometimes I think he's crazy."

"Why do you egg him on then? Do you just have to switch your ass at every man that passes by?"

Dulcy looked indignant.

"Me and Chink was friends before I even knew Johnny, and I don't see why I can't say hello to him if I want to. Johnny don't take no trouble to ignore his old flames, and Chink never was even that."

"Child, you're not trying to tell all that rumpus come just from you saying hello to Chink."

"You don't have to believe it unless you want to. Me and Val and Johnny was sitting at ringside table when Chink came by and said, 'Hello, honey, how's the vein holding out?' I laughed. Everybody in Harlem knows that Chink calls Johnny my gold vein, and if Johnny had any sense he'd just laugh, too. But instead of that he jumped up before anybody knew what was happening and pulled his frog-sticker and began shouting about how he was going to teach the mother-raper some respect. So naturally Chink drew his own knife. If it hadn't been for Val and Joe Turner and Big Caesar keeping them apart Johnny would have started chivving on him right there. Didn't nothing really happen though 'cepting they knocked over

some tables and chairs. What made it seem like such a big rumpus was some of those hysterical chicks began screaming and carrying on, trying to impress their niggers that they were scared of a little cutting.”

She giggled suddenly. Mamie gave a start.

“It ain’t nothing to laugh about,” Mamie said sternly.

Dulcy’s face fell. “I ain’t laughing,” she said. “I’m scared. Johnny’s going to kill him.”

Mamie went rigid. Moments passed before she spoke. Her voice was hushed from fear.

“Did he tell you that?”

“He ain’t had to. But I know it. I can feel it.”

Mamie stood up and put her arm about Dulcy. Both of them were trembling.

“We got to stop him somehow, child.”

Dulcy twisted about to face the mirror again, as though seeking courage from her look. She opened her pink straw handbag and began repairing her make-up. Her hand trembled as she painted her mouth.

“I don’t know how to stop him,” she said when she’d finished. “Without my dropping dead.”

Mamie took her arm from about Dulcy’s waist and wrung her hands involuntarily.

“Lord, I wish Val would hurry up and get here.”

Dulcy glanced at her wrist watch.

“It’s already four-twenty-five. Johnny ought to be here now himself.” After a moment she added, “I don’t know what’s keeping Val.”

SOME ONE BEGAN hammering loudly on the door.

The sound was scarcely heard above the din inside the room.

“*Open the door!*” a voice screamed.

It was so loud that even Dulcy and Mamie heard it through the locked bathroom door.

“Wonder who that can be,” Mamie said.

“It sure ain’t neither Johnny or Val making all that fuss,” Dulcy replied.

“Probably some drunk.”

One of the drunks already on the inside said in a minstrel man’s voice, “Open de door for Richard.”

That was the title of a popular song in Harlem that had originated with two blackface comedians on the Apollo theatre stage doing a skit about a colored brother coming home drunk and trying to get Richard to let him into the house.

The other drunks on the inside laughed.

Alamena had just stepped into the kitchen. “See who’s at the door,” she said to Baby Sis.

Baby Sis looked up from her chore of washing dishes and said sulkily, “All these drunks make me sick.”

Alamena froze. Baby Sis was just a girl whom Mamie had taken in to help about the house and had no right to criticize the guests.

“Girl, you’re getting beside yourself,” she said. “You’d better mind how you talk. Go open the door and then get this mess cleaned up in here.”

Baby Sis looked sidewise about the disordered kitchen, her slant eyes looking evil in her greasy black face.

The table, sink, sidestands and most of the available floor space were strewn with empty and half-filled bottles—gin, whisky and rum bottles, pop bottles, condiment bottles; pots and pans and platters of food, a dishpan containing leftover potato salad, deep iron pots with soggy pieces of fried chicken, fried fish, fried pork chops; baking pans with mashed and mangled biscuits, pie pans with single slices of runny pies; a washtub containing bits of ice floating about in trashy water; slices of cake and spongy white-bread sandwiches, half eaten, lying everywhere—on the tables, sink and floor.

“Ain’t never gonna get this mess cleaned up nohow,” she complained.

“Git, girl,” Alamena said harshly.

Baby Sis shoved her way through the mob of crying drunks in the packed sitting room.

“Somebody open this door!” the voice yelled desperately from outside.

“I’m coming!” Baby Sis shouted from inside. “Keep your pants on.”

“Hurry up then!” the voice shouted back.

“Baby, it’s cold outside,” one of the drunks inside cracked.

Baby Sis stopped in front of the locked door and shouted, “Who is you who been beating on this door like you tryna bust it down?”

“I’m Reverend Short,” the voice replied.

"I'm the Queen of Sheba," Baby Sis said, doubling over laughing and beating her big strong thighs. She turned to the guests to let them share the joke. "He say he's Reverend Short."

Several of the guests laughed as though they were stone, raving crazy.

Baby Sis turned around toward the closed door again and shouted, "Try again, Buster, and don't tell me you is Saint Peter coming for Big Joe."

The three musicians kept riffing away in dead-pan trances, their fixed eyes staring from petrified faces into the Promised Land across the river Jordan.

"I tell you I am Reverend Short," the voice said.

Baby Sis's laughing expression went abruptly evil and malevolent.

"You want to know how I know you ain't Reverend Short?"

"That's exactly what I would like to know," the voice said exasperatedly.

"Cause Reverend Short is already inside of here," Baby Sis replied triumphantly. "And you can't be Reverend Short, 'cause you is out there."

"Merciful God in heaven," the voice said moaningly. "Give me patience."

But instead of being patient, the hammering commenced again.

Mamie Pullen unlocked the bathroom door and stuck out her head.

"What's happening out there?" she asked, then, seeing Baby Sis standing before the door she called, "Who's that at the door?"

"Some drunk what claim's he's Reverend Short," Baby Sis replied.

"I'm Reverend Short!" the voice outside screamed.

"It can't be Reverend Short," Baby Sis argued.

"What's the matter with you, girl, you drunk?" Mamie said angrily, advancing across the room.

From the kitchen doorway Almena said, "It's probably Johnny, pulling one of his gags."

Mamie reached the door, pushed Baby Sis aside and flung it inward.

Reverend Short stepped across the threshold, tottering as though barely able to stand. His parchment-colored bony face was knotted with an expression of extreme outrage, and his reddish eyes glinted furiously behind the polished, gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Hush my mouth!" Baby Sis exclaimed in an awed voice, her black greasy face graying and her bulging eyes whitening as though she'd seen a ghost. "It is Reverend Short."

Reverend Short's thin, black-clad body shook with fury like a sapling in a gale.

"I told you I was Reverend Short," he sputtered.

He had a mouth shaped like that of a catfish, and when he talked he sprayed spit over Dulcy, who had come over to stand with her arm about Mamie's shoulder.

She drew back angrily and wiped her face with the tiny black silk handkerchief that she held in her hand and that represented her dress of mourning.

"Quit spitting on me," she said harshly.

"He didn't mean to spit on you, honey," Mamie said soothingly.

"*Po' sinner stands a-trembling ...*" Deep South shouted.

Reverend Short's body twitched convulsively, as though he were having a fit. Everyone stared at him curiously.

"... *stands a-trembling, Daddy Joe,*" Susie Q. echoed.

"Mamie Pullen, if you don't stop those devils from jamming that sweet old spiritual, *Steppin' Away*, I swear before God I won't preach Big Joe's funeral," Reverend Short threatened in

rage-croaking voice.

“They’re just trying to show their gratitude.” Mamie shouted to make herself heard. “It was Big Joe who started them on their way to fame when they was just hustling tips in Edd Price’s joint, and now they’re just trying to send him on his way to heaven.”

“That ain’t no way to send a body to heaven,” he said hoarsely, his voice giving out from shouting. “They’re making enough noise to wake up the dead who’re already there.”

“Oh, all right, I’ll stop ’em,” Mamie said, and went over and put her black wrinkled hand on Deep South’s dripping wet shoulder. “That’s been fine, boys, but you can rest a while now.”

The music stopped so suddenly it caught Dulcy whispering angrily—“Why do you let the store-front preacher run your business, Aunt Mamie—” in a sudden pool of silence.

Reverend Short turned a look on her that glinted with malevolence.

“You’d better dust off your own skirts before criticizing me, Sister Perry,” he croaked.

The silence became weighted.

Baby Sis chose that moment to say in a loud drunken voice, “What I want to know Reverend Short, is how in the world did you get outside that door?”

The tension broke. Everyone laughed.

“I was pushed out of the bedroom window,” Reverend Short said in a voice that was sticky with evil.

Baby Sis doubled over, started to laugh, caught sight of Reverend Short’s face and chopped it off in the middle of the first guffaw.

The others who had started to laugh stopped abruptly. Dead silence dropped like a shroud over the revelry. The guests stared at the Reverend Short in pop-eyed wonder. Their faces wanted to continue laughing, but their minds pulled the reins. On the one hand, the expression of suppressed vindictiveness on Reverend Short’s face could easily be that of a man who’d been pushed out of a window. But on the other hand, his body didn’t show the effects of a three-story fall to the concrete sidewalk.

“Chink Charlie did it,” Reverend Short croaked.

Mamie gasped. “What!”

“You kidding or joking?” Alameda said harshly.

Baby Sis was the first to recover. She laughed experimentally and gave Reverend Short an appreciative push.

“You takes the cake, Reverend,” she said.

Reverend Short clutched her arm to keep from falling.

She grinned the imbecilic admiration of one practical joker for another.

Mamie turned in a squall of fury and slapped her face.

“You get yourself right straight back to that kitchen,” she said sternly. “And don’t you dare drink another drop of likker tonight.”

Baby Sis’s face puckered up like a dried prune and she began blubbering. She was a big strong-bodied mulelike young woman, and crying gave her an expression of pure idiocy. She turned to run back to the kitchen but stumbled over a foot and fell drunkenly to the floor. No one paid her any attention because, with her support withdrawn, Reverend Short began to fall.

Mamie clutched him by the arm and helped him into an armchair. “You just set right there

Reverend, and tell me what happened,” she said.

He clutched his left side as though in great pain and croaked in a breathless voice, “I went into the bedroom to get a breath of fresh air, and while I was standing in the window watching a policeman chasing a thief, Chink Charlie sneaked up behind me and pushed me out of the window.”

“My God!” Mamie exclaimed. “Then he was trying to kill you.”

“Of course he was.”

Alamena looked down at the twitching bony face of Reverend Short and said in a reassuring tone, “Mamie, he’s just drunk.”

“I’m not the least bit drunk,” he denied. “I’ve never drunk a drop of intoxicating liquor in my life.”

“Where’s Chink?” Mamie asked, looking about. “Chink!” she called. “Somebody get Chink in here.”

“He’s gone,” Alamena said. “He left while you and Dulcy were in the crapper.”

“Your preacher’s just making that up, Aunt Mamie,” Dulcy said. “Just ’cause him and Chink had an argument ’bout the guests you got here.”

Mamie looked from her to Reverend Short. “What’s wrong with ’em?”

She intended the question for Reverend Short, but Dulcy answered. “He said they shouldn’t be nobody here but church members and Big Joe’s lodge brothers, and Chink told him he was forgetting that Big Joe was a gambler himself.”

“I’m not saying that Big Joe didn’t sin,” Reverend Short said in his loud pulpit voice, forgetting for the moment he was an invalid. “But Big Joe was a dining-car cook on the Pennsylvania Railroad for more than twenty years, and he was a member of The First Holy Roller Church of Harlem, and that’s how God sees him.”

“But these folks here is all his friends,” Mamie protested with a look of bewilderment. “Folks who worked with him and saw him all the time.”

Reverend Short pursed his lips. “That ain’t the point. You can’t surround his poor soul with all manner of sin and adultery and expect God to take it to his bosom.”

“Jus’ what do you mean by that?” Dulcy challenged hotly.

“Let him alone,” Mamie said. “Everything has done gone bad enough without all this argument.”

“If he don’t stop picking at me with his dirty hints all the time I’m gonna have Johnny whup his ass,” Dulcy said in a low grating voice intended only for Mamie, but everyone heard her.

Reverend Short gave her a look of triumphant malevolence.

“Threaten all you want, you Jezebel, but you can’t hide it from the Lord that it was your own devilishness that drove Joe Pullen to an early death.”

“That just ain’t so,” Mamie Pullen contradicted. “It was just his time. He’s been taking naps like that, with his cigar in his mouth, for years, and it was just his time that he happened to swallow it and choke to death.”

“If you want to put up with this chicken-season preacher’s lying, you can,” Dulcy said to Mamie. “But I’m going home, and you can just tell Johnny why when he gets here.”

Silence followed her as she turned and walked from the apartment. She slammed the door behind her.

Mamie sighed. “Lord, I wish Val was here.”

“This house is full of murderers!” Reverend Short exclaimed.

“You shouldn’t say that just because you’ve got a grudge against Chink Charlie,” Mamie said.

“For Christ’s sake, Mamie!” Alamina exploded. “If he’d fallen from your bedroom window he’d be lying out there on the sidewalk dead.”

Reverend Short stared at her through glazed eyes. A white froth had collected in the corners of his mouth.

“I see a terrible vision,” he muttered.

“That ain’t no lie,” Alamina said disgustedly. “All you is seeing is visions.”

“I see a dead man stabbed in the heart,” he said.

“Let me fix you a toddy and put you to bed,” Mamie said soothingly. “And, Alamina—”

“He don’t need no more to drink,” Alamina cut her off.

“For Jesus Christ’s sake, Alamina, stop it. Go phone Doctor Ramsey and tell him to come over here.”

“He’s not sick,” Alamina said.

“I didn’t say I was sick,” Reverend Short said.

“He’s just trying to stir up trouble for some reason.”

“I’m hurt,” Reverend Short stated. “You’d be hurt, too, if somebody had pushed you out of a window.”

Mamie took Alamina by the arm and tried to pull her away. “Go now and telephone the doctor.”

But Alamina pulled back. “Listen, Mamie Pullen, for God’s sake be your age. If he fell out of that window it’s a cinch he couldn’t have walked back upstairs. I suppose he’s going to tell you next that he fell into the lap of God.”

“I fell into a basket of bread,” Reverend Short declared.

At last the guests laughed with relief. Now they knew the good reverend was joking. Even Mamie couldn’t restrain herself.

“See what I mean?” Alamina said.

“Reverend Short, shame on you, pulling our leg like that,” Mamie said indulgently.

“If you don’t believe me, go look at the bread,” Reverend Short challenged.

“What bread?”

“The basket of bread I fell into. It’s on the sidewalk in front of the A&P store. God put it there to break my fall.”

Mamie and Alamina exchanged glances.

“I’ll go look, you go call the doctor,” Mamie said.

“I want to look, too.”

Everybody wanted to look.

Sighing loudly, as though indulging the whims of a lunatic against her better judgement, Mamie led the way.

The bedroom door was closed. When she opened it, she exclaimed, “Why, the light’s on!”

With growing trepidation she crossed the lighted bedroom and leaned out of the open window. Alamina leaned out beside her. The others squeezed into the medium-sized room. As many as could peered over the two women’s shoulders.

“Is it there?” someone in back asked.

“Does they see it?”

“There’s a basket of some kind, sure enough,” Alamina said.

“But it don’t look like it’s no bread in it,” the man peering over her shoulder said.

“It don’t even look like a bread basket,” Mamie said, trying to penetrate the early morning shadows with her near-sighted gaze. “It looks like one of them wicker baskets they take away dead bodies in.”

By then Alamina’s sharp vision had become accustomed to the dark.

“It’s a bread basket, all right. But there’s a man already lying in it.”

“A drunk,” Mamie said in a voice of relief. “No doubt that’s what Reverend Short saw that gave him the idea of fooling us.”

“He don’t look drunk to me,” said the man who was leaning over her shoulder. “He’s lying too straight, and drunks always lay crooked.”

“My God!” Alamina exclaimed in a fear-stricken voice. “He’s got a knife sticking in him.”

Mamie let out a long moaning keen. “Lord, protect us, can you see his face, child? I’m getting so old I can’t see a lick. Is it Chink?”

Alamina put her arm about Mamie’s waist and slowly pulled her from the window.

“No, it ain’t Chink,” she said. “It looks to me like Val.”

EVERYONE RUSHED TOWARD the outside door to be the first downstairs. But before Mamie and Alameda could get out the telephone began to ring.

“Who in the hell could that be at this hour?” Alameda said roughly.

“You go ahead, I’ll answer it,” Mamie said.

Alameda went on without replying.

Mamie went back into the bedroom and lifted the receiver of the telephone on the nightstand beside the bed.

“Hello.”

“Are you Mrs. Pullen?” a muffled voice asked. It was so blurred she could scarcely distinguish the words.

“Yes.”

“There’s a dead man out in front of your house.”

She could have sworn the voice held a note of laughter.

“Who are you?” she asked suspiciously.

“I ain’t nobody.”

“It ain’t so goddam funny that you got to make a joke about it,” she said roughly.

“I ain’t joking. If you don’t believe me, go to the window and take a look.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call the police?”

“I reckoned that maybe you wouldn’t want them to know.”

Suddenly the whole conversation stopped making sense to Mamie. She tried to collect her thoughts, but she was so tired her head buzzed. And all this monkey business of Reverend Short’s, and then Val’s getting stabbed to death with Big Joe lying dead there in the coffin left her feeling as though she had stepped off the edge of sanity.

“Why the hell wouldn’t I want the police to know?” she asked savagely.

“Because he came from your apartment.”

“How do you know he came from my apartment? I ain’t seen him in my house tonight.”

“I did. I saw him fall out of your window.”

“What? Oh, you’re talking about Reverend Short. And you sure enough seen him fall?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. And he’s lying down on the sidewalk in the A&P bread basket dead as all hell.”

“That ain’t Reverend Short. He didn’t even get hurt. He come back upstairs.”

The voice didn’t say anything, so she went on. “It’s Val. Valentine Haines. And he was stabbed to death.”

She waited for an answer, but the voice still didn’t speak.

“Hello,” she said. “Hello! You still there! You’re so goddam smart how come you didn’t say that?”

She heard a very soft click.

“The bastard hung up,” she mumbled to herself, then added, “Now if that ain’t almighty strange—”

She stood still for a moment, trying to think, but her mind wouldn't work. Then she crossed to the dressing table and picked up a can of snuff. Using a cotton dauber, she dipped her lipful, leaving the dauber in the pocket of her lip with the stick protruding. It quieted her growing sense of panic. Out of respect for her guests, she hadn't taken a dip all night, and as a rule she lived with a dip in her lip.

"Lord, if Big Joe was alive, he'd know what to do," she said to herself as she went walking slow, dragging steps back into the sitting room.

It was littered with dirty glasses and plates containing scraps of food, ashtrays overflowing with smoldering cigarette and cigar butts. The maroon-carpeted floor was a mess. Burnt cigarettes had left holes in the upholstery, burned scars on the tabletops. The ashy skeleton of a cigarette lay intact atop the grand piano. There was a resemblance to a fairground after a circus has gone, and the smell of death and lilies of the valley and man-made stink was overpowering in the hot, close room.

Mamie dragged herself across the room and looked down into the bronze-painted coffin at the body of her late husband.

Big Joe was dressed in a cream-colored Palm Beach suit, pale green crepe de Chine shirt, a brown silk tie with hand-painted angels held in place by a diamond horseshoe stickpin. His big square dark-brown face was clean shaven, with deep creases encircling the wide mouth. He looked freshly massaged. His eyes were closed. His stiff gray kinky hair had been cut short after death and had been painstakingly combed and brushed. She had done it herself, and she had dressed him, too. His hands were folded across his chest, exhibiting a diamond ring on his left hand and his lodge signet ring on his right.

She removed all of the jewelry and put it down into the deep front pocket of her long black satin Mother Hubbard dress that swept the floor. Then she closed the coffin.

"One hell of a wake this turned out to be," she said.

"He's dead," Reverend Short said suddenly in his new croaking voice.

Mamie gave a start. She hadn't seen Reverend Short.

He sat slouched on the end of his spine in an overstuffed armchair, staring with a fixed expression toward the opposite wall.

"What the hell do you think," she said roughly. All her social affections had left since the discovery of Val's body. "You think I'd bury him if he was alive?"

"I saw it happen," Reverend Short continued as though she hadn't spoken.

She stared at him in perplexity. "Oh, you mean Val."

"A woman filled with the sin of lust and adultery came from the pit of hell and stabbed him in the heart."

His words sunk slowly into Mamie's clogged thoughts.

"A woman?"

"And I gave her space to repent of her fornication, and she repented not."

"You saw her do it?"

"For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities."

Mamie saw the room tilt.

"May the Lord have mercy," she said.

She saw Big Joe in his coffin, the grand piano and the console radio-television set begin a slow ascent toward heaven. Then the dark maroon carpet rose slowly until it spread out

before her eyes like a sea of dark, congealed blood into which she buried her face.

“Sin and lust and abomination in the sight of the Lord,” Reverend Short croaked, then added in a small dry whisper, “She ain’t nothing but a whore, O Lord.”

THE AUTOMATIC ELEVATOR was on the ground floor, and most of the curious mourners chose to run down the stairs rather than wait for it. But they were not the first to arrive.

Dulcy and Chink stood facing each other across the basket of bread containing the body. He was a big yellow man, young but going to fat, dressed in a beige summer suit. He leaned over tensely.

The first to approach heard Dulcy exclaiming, "Jesus Christ, you didn't have to kill him" and Chink replying in a voice choked with sudden passion, "Not even for you—" Then he broke off and cautioned in a tense whisper, speaking between set lips, "Shut up and play dumb."

She didn't speak again until all the mourners from the wake had gathered and had the look and said their say.

"It's Val, and he's dead all right."

"If he ain't, Saint Peter's going to be mighty surprised."

Alamena had wormed close enough to get a clear view of the body. She heard a dining-crowd waiter say, "You reckon he was stabbed where he's at?"

A voice behind her replied, "Must have been—there ain't no blood nowhere else."

The body lay at full length on the mattress of soft wrapped loaves of bread as though the basket had been fitted to its measure. The left hand, exhibiting the band of a single gold ring, lay palm upward across a heavy, black silk knitted tie knotted about the collar of a soft sand-colored linen silk shirt; the right hand lay palm downward across the center button of the jacket of an olive drab sheen gabardine suit. The feet pointed straight up, exposing the slightly worn crepe-rubber soles of lightweight Cordovan English-made shoes.

The knife protruded from the jacket just beneath the breast pocket, which was adorned with a quarter-inch stripe of white handkerchief. It was a stag-handle knife with a push-button opener and handguard, such as used by hunters to skin game.

Blood made irregular patterns over the jacket, shirt and tie. Splotches were on the waxed paper wrappings of the loaves of bread, and on one side of the woven rattan basket. There was none on the sidewalk.

The face was set in a fixed expression of utter disbelief; the eyes, widened into protruding white-rimmed balls, stared fixedly at some point above and beyond the feet.

It was a handsome face, with smooth brown skin and features bearing a close resemblance to Dulcy's. The head was bare, revealing curly black hair, thickly plastered with pomade.

An odd moment of silence followed the last speaker's statement as the fact sunk in that the murder had been committed on the spot.

Dulcy said into the silence, "He looks so surprised."

"You'd look surprised, too, if some one stuck a knife in your heart," Alamena said grimly.

With a startling abruptness, Dulcy became hysterical.

"Val!" she screamed. "I'll get him, Val, sugar, oh God—"

She would have thrown herself atop Val's body, but Alamena quickly wrenched her away.

and several of the mourners closed in and held her.

She struggled furiously and screamed, "Turn me loose, you mother-rapers! He's my brother and some mother-raper's going to pay—"

"For Jesus sake, shut up!" Alamina shouted.

Chink stared at her, his big yellow face distorted with rage. She shut up and got herself under control.

A colored patrolman came from the doorway of the adjoining building. When he saw the crowd he drew himself up and began adjusting his uniform.

"What's happened here?" he asked in a loud self-conscious voice. "Somebody get hurt?"

"You can call it that," some one replied.

The patrolman pushed in close and looked down at the body. The collar of his blue uniform was open, and he smelled like sweat.

"Who stabbed him?" he asked.

Pigmeat replied in a high falsetto voice, "Don't you wish you knew."

The patrolman blinked his eyes, then suddenly grinned, showing rows of big yellow teeth.

"What minstrel you with, sonny-o?"

Everyone stared at him, waiting to see what he would do. Their faces took dark shape in the gray light of dawn.

He stood there grinning, doing nothing. He didn't know what to do, but he wasn't perturbed by it.

The distant sound of a siren floated in the humid air. The crowd began to scatter.

"Don't nobody leave the scene," the patrolman ordered.

The red eye of a patrol car came north up Seventh Avenue. The patrol car made a screaming U-turn around the park dividing the traffic lanes and dragged to a stop, double parking beside the cars at the curb. Another red eye was coming south down the dark street in a screaming fury. A third turned the corner of 132nd Street, almost colliding with it. A fourth turned in from 129th Street and screamed north on the wrong side of the avenue.

The white precinct sergeant arrived in the fifth patrol car.

"Keep everybody here," he ordered in a loud voice.

By then half-clad people were hanging from every front window in the block, and others began collecting in the street.

The sergeant noticed a white man clad in a short-sleeved white sport shirt and khaki trousers standing apart, and asked him, "Do you work in this A&P store?"

"I'm the manager."

"Open it up. We're going to put these suspects inside."

"I object," the white man said. "I've been robbed once tonight by a shine, right under my eyes, and the cop hasn't even caught the thief."

The sergeant looked at the colored cop.

"It was his buddy," the A&P manager said.

"Where is he now?" the sergeant asked.

"How in the hell do I know?" the store manager replied. "I had to leave and come back to open the store."

"Well, go ahead and open it," the colored cop said.

"I'll be responsible if anything is stolen," the sergeant said.

The manager went to unlock the door without replying.

An inconspicuous black sedan pulled to the curb and parked at the end of the block unnoticed, and two tall, lanky colored men dressed in black mohair suits that looked as though they'd been slept in got out and walked back toward the scene. Their wrinkled coats bulged beneath their left shoulders. The shiny straps of their shoulder holsters showed across the fronts of their blue cotton shirts.

The one with the burnt face went to the far side of the crowd; the other remained on the near side.

Suddenly a loud voice shouted, "Straighten up!"

An equally loud voice echoed, "Count off!"

"Detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson reporting for duty, General Pigmeat muttered.

"Jesus Christ!" Chink fumed. "Now we've got those damned Wild West gunmen here to mess up everything."

The sergeant said, winking at a white cop, "Herd 'em into the store, Jones, you and Johnson. You fellows know how to handle 'em."

Grave Digger gave him a hard look. "They all look alike to us, Commissioner—white, blue, black and merino." Then turning to the crowd he shouted, "Inside, cousins."

"They're going to hold prayer meeting," Coffin Ed said.

As the cops were closing the door on the corraled suspects, a big cream-colored, made-to-order Cadillac convertible with the top down stopped in the street, double-parking behind the row of patrol cars.

A small white-faced playing card was embossed on each door. In the corners of each card were an inlaid spade, heart, diamond and club. Each door was the size of a barn gate.

One of the doors swung open. A man got out. He was a big man but, standing, his six-foot height lost impressiveness in his slanting shoulders and long arms. He was wearing a powder blue suit of shantung silk; a pale yellow crepe silk shirt; a hand-painted tie depicting an orange sun rising on a dark blue morning; highly glossed light tan rubber-soled shoes; a miniature ten-of-hearts tie pin with opal hearts; three rings, including a heavy gold signet ring of his lodge, a yellow diamond set in a heavy gold band and a big mottled stone of nameless variety, also set in a heavy gold band. His cuff links were heavy gold squares with diamond eyes. It wasn't from vanity he wore so much gold. He was a gambler, and it was his bank account in any emergency.

He was bareheaded. His kinky hair, powdered with gray, was cut as short as a three-day growth of whiskers, with a part shaved on one side. In the dim light of morning his big featured, knotty face showed it had taken its lumps. In the center of his forehead was a puffed, bluish scar with ridges pronging off like immobilized octopus tentacles. It gave him an expression of perpetual rage, which was accentuated by the smoldering fire that lay always just beneath the surface of his muddy brown eyes, ready to flame into a blaze.

He looked hard, strong, tough and unafraid.

"Johnny Perry!"

The name came involuntarily to the lips of everyone who lived in Harlem. "He's the greatest," they said.

Dulcy waved to him from inside the store.

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