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Greer Johnson

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LATER, SOMEONE painted it. The picture has been widely reproduced in certain magazines, perhaps because of its somewhat striking romantic qualities. But the man who set it with oils on canvas forever, indulged little of his personal vagaries, for the house is like that. It is detached from any other dwelling near it, not as if its solitude were planned but rather because some natural force ordained it this way. It is because of this separateness, one may be sure, that the artist has placed the old frame structure on what appears to be a great black rock, the greatest, blackest rock. Or on the knob of the world. The light which reveals the half-shuttered windows is a ghastly stage blue, and there seems to be too little of the sky about its top for comfortable reality. Yet the house was, is, real. To this moment, at any hour of the day or night, anyone in the district can point it out to you, or breathe with unaffected fear the nature of the woman who owns it and lives in it.

She, too, has gone on like the house, and presumably she will live forever. There is little reason to believe she intends to do otherwise, being ancient as she is, having elected with a grim, shutaway cheer the existence of a crone. Now, as then, she will make her exits from the house, her rare exits; her business elsewhere is always cut short, as if to hasten the time when she may draw the walls about her once more. I assume her name has been duly recorded somewhere, though I have never known it. Never quite known it. When dignitaries of the city mumble this name, it is invariably in the same confused stammer. I never have been able to get it and I have become more than a bit ashamed to ask again *what is it.*

You will begin to see it was no miracle that fifty people had warned her the policeman Rafferty was on his way up the streets, into the district, past the barriers of social station and time and place, into her world to see her. These voices had prepared her, though many are willing to believe that no preparation was necessary, that Rafferty

was doomed to search the streets for her name and, having found it, to come at once.

Early in the season, when the unprecedented hatred exploded over a trivial, recurrent incident, Rafferty, from his secure position with recognized forces, had been instrumental in quieting the month-long street battles—forcibly. Rafferty kept the newspapers fully informed of all backgrounds conducive to the affair: economic, ideological, biological. Rafferty's tongue was quick, if thoughtless; witty, in a crude sort of way, if uninformed. Those stragglers who bitterly carried the battles almost to the door of *her* house were indeed the last to be carted off to jail, and she knew this. Everyone knew it. Our riots had become nationwide scandal for the otherwise slow summer, and Rafferty had been the hero of many a faction.

"He's coming now," someone said. "Down through the gates and past the cemetery. He has on a gray suit, a light brown fall overcoat, and a—"

"A green tie," she said, nodding.

"He was seen very early this morning. It's taken him a long time."

"A long time."

"What are you going to do? What will you say when he comes in the door? Or lock it? Lock it first?"

She said without evident feeling, "I shall sit here where I am sitting. Neither nod nor bow. There he'll sit, and here I'll sit, and after that there will come the waiting."

And so Rafferty did come at last, and went in to her alone. If it took a certain amount of courage to do this, it must have taken also a considerable blindness. They were together that afternoon, and into the night, seven or eight hours. Testimonies on the affair vary. Certainly he went to her because he had learned that her own way of speaking to people (as if she were not really interested, as if they were going to go on being strangers) had precipitated much of the brutal resoluteness behind the attacks her world had made at last on his. They were sitting together a long time, this is certain; in that time, waiting for the veil of her face to tear away, he must have accused her of insurrection and violent obstinacy. Her words would have been terser, I think, and nearer the point. She must have been willing, anyhow, to point out that the incident which set the summer fires was an old one, an old outrage. "A sore opened over and over, never left

to heal," perhaps she said. Across the brooding room from him, her fingers must have waved scorn at every explanation. Rafferty had turned his back to the cries of her people, and hounded them to jail, and prosecuted the innocent for a passion which in its purity was so incorruptible he could not reckon with it. Some are willing to swear yet that the house shook and made storm, but only for itself; beyond its radius, the night was all too still.

And yes, she cursed him. With what, and how, one may only surmise. What finally staggered his bloated complacence out of the chair may have been scream or cry or whisper. It had power, her curse and condemnation. It sent him up the night streets with his hand shielding his eyes; and everyone, no matter how slim his connection with the occurence, knows that this was the very night that same hand began to turn black.

2

Emmeline Rafferty turned her head with some curiosity as he came in. He was late, and he guarded with more than his customary care the click the door made. He did not come directly into the bedroom where his wife was lying, reading in desultory fashion at a magazine, propped up with his pillow and hers, now and then munching one of the plain crackers which were stacked on a saucer beside the bed to satisfy her night hunger. Then he spent a long time in the bathroom, breathing hard, as if he were standing before the mirror surveying himself.

"You're late," she said, but with no rancor. He was late just as he was Rafferty, or her husband.

When he came into the room, she saw that he had not removed his overcoat or hat. The hat's brim shaded his face, and he was shaded: Emmeline Rafferty had darkened the room except for the bedlamp; it conserved electricity. Rafferty had reminded her often in irritation they scarcely needed to conserve anything so cheap as electric power, but now something in the way he hugged into a shadowed corner showed he was glad for it.

"What is it?" she said. She never laid the magazine down, but kept it poised for her eyes. In this way, she, a woman, suggested that she was not yet ready to resign what she had been doing when he came in to her.

"Emmeline," he said. "Emmeline. Emmeline," as if stating to a roomful of people that his wife was herself, her name was this.

"Well, take your coat off and stop acting like you'll be off again."

He said her name.

"There's been six dozen calls for you. I just said I didn't know. You've been out from headquarters all day." She lowered the magazine, almost all the way, with some interest. Her eyes were picking at him, there in the dark. "Is there more trouble?"

"There's no trouble."

"Well, why don't you sit down? Why are you standing there like a vulture, or something?" She sat up and flattened her back against the bed's head. Her breasts hung loose in the sleazy nightgown.

"Don't get up!" he said. "Yet."

"Listen, what is it?"

"If people called, you should have taken the message." He would not sit down, though now he swayed a little, in and out of patches of shadow like a tree hit by storm, like a vine rope with nowhere to attach itself in the wind.

"I took them. I couldn't say anything about you. You ought to call me when you ain't coming home to supper—it wasted, and good roast beef."

"I'm not hungry." His eyes glared fury. "Emmeline."

"Why don't you say what's wrong?"

He waited so long that it frightened her. It frightened her because there was something he meant to tell her, and it was coming out too slowly to be very real. He was dressing it up, he was pushing it with all his power onstage. His feet moved a little and he came near the bed.

"Hurry up," she snapped. "I'm sleepy. Some people got to get their rest."

"Look," he said. "Look, look." He pulled his hands from the overcoat pockets with a tearing effort, as if the hands had been chained inside and had to be ripped away. Sheets had been put on fresh that day, as in every week, and the two black hands against their laundered whiteness were like a simple German woodcut. Her eyes narrowed, seeing, and her scream tore like a flood through the midnight house.

3

In the first place, things don't happen like this—Statepatrolman said.

Man with him in conversation answered, Never in this world.

The way I look at it is, it's some mental aberration. Hard work can do it. Too much strain in home life. Maybe his wife's a bitch.

My wife says she's faithful, if nothing else.

I don't mean just faithful. Doc Sanborn, he's the coroner, but he took this psychiatry, whatever it is, in college. Says it's a preconceived idea he dreamed up all by himself.

Funny thing for Rafferty of all people to dream up. He hates the niggers so.

Hates? He don't hate. Rafferty just happened to be the man to take care of biggety ideas.

Biggety! That's a Southern word. Man, we're ninety thousand bluemillion miles above the Mason-Dixon line.

My wife's cousin, she's a Southerner.

When did you see Rafferty? Did you tell him? There must be a dozen doctors glad to help him.

I ain't seen him. Nobody has. His wife screamed and when the people got there, no Rafferty.

Nobody seen him?

Nobody *I* heard from.

It's a funny thing to me. I heard of lots of guys going bugs. Some of 'em ending up in strait jackets and in state institutions. As a rule, it's something like running around wild with a knife in your hand or squeezing little girls' legs when they go by.

He says he's black.

Rafferty! Old Rafferty. I remember that day in July when the first shot was fired. Shot heard round the town. Rafferty said, joking like, "Don't wait to see the whites of their eyes before you shoot, men." My wife went down the street and fell in love with every member of the troop—said the uniforms slimmed out their hind ends and flanks.

He says he's black—Statepatrolman repeated, and stopping Third Party on way to civic meeting—You hear that?

Third Party smiled—Yes, but I talked to his wife, old boy. She saw his face.

4

Somebody had to begin a search for Rafferty, this much was obvious. Because he had been roommate at college and frequent dinner guest, and because he owned the city's most rapidly growing newspaper, L. P. Smith figureheaded the committee. No one was blinded by it, L. P. Smith least of all. Rafferty was merely another

uniform, easily replaced; but he was, whether he knew it or not, the key man responsible for settling the summer troubles, and for that he deserved the city's gratitude.

L. P. Smith instructed all reporters to look out for indications, and the paper ran a four-column picture of Rafferty every night for a week. Mrs. Rafferty, calmed and ready for anything, gave numerous interviews before her version of it was syndicated and converted into big newspaper moneymaking. Most of the private detective agencies in town picked up the trail in the Rafferty bedroom, losing it just outside the door. In no part of the Negro section of the town was trace to be found. No one had seen him since, and no one had heard his voice. One young man, conveniently behatted to play cub reporter in any play, went to see the old woman in the old house. There had been some talk of arresting her, but liberal feelings in liberal homes rather restricted this strategy. Rafferty had left her house alive and well; Mrs. Rafferty gave this fact away at the outset. What excuse was there to cry for blood?

"Then what did you say?" the young man asked her, pleased that she had been most accessible.

"Nothin' you can print. Nothin' you can spell. I kept lookin' over at him and he kept lookin' over at me."

"You *do* know what happened to poor Rafferty, don't you?" the young man asked anxiously.

"I ain't heard."

"Listen, you know," the boy pleaded, unwilling to put into the irretrievable cold word the exotic plum his tongue watered for.

"Did what? What happened to him?"

"I don't believe in curses," the youngster said, heavily and finally.

"Then why're you askin'?"

Failing a clue anywhere in the old house or with those who knew its owner, entire organizations advertised that upon Rafferty's return, science and art would stand by to aid. As one interested observer put it in a weekly newsmagazine, himself a scientist of sorts, *if* it had really happened, it had never happened before, and deserved the closest examination. Everyone meant to find him.

5

The student's eyes were wide, propped open that way with a toothpick of understanding. "You mean you haven't eaten a single thing in four days?" he asked the rainsoaked man.

"No," Rafferty said. "I haven't."

"Can't your own people—"

"I have no people."

The student looked carefully at the clothes the man wore. Whil he himself had nothing left that was pressed and new, he could tell fine suit of clothes when he saw it; this suit was expensive and wel made. "I—I don't think I can understand why you. . . ."

"All I'm asking you is have you got anything," Rafferty said "Anything at all. I'm hungry."

"I've got some cheese and stuff. I keep it cool on the windowsill If that's what you want."

"I want something to eat," Rafferty said clearly. Not humbl at all.

The student led him into the doorway and up the long stairs. Hi steps slackened on the top steps. "They may not . . .," he began stifling a crazy laugh. "I mean."

Rafferty said, "Nobody saw me."

"You mustn't think I—" the student said. "I mean."

Rafferty whispered that he understood, crowded back against th wall and watching the slim key enter the lock. The student's room was a small one, with toilet-and attached, but he had brightened i with prints stuck up at random, and there were books. Rafferty obeyed the finger and sank into a chair whose springs were evident.

"I can make tea."

"Tea's—hot," Rafferty said, beginning to weep down inside hi throat, stifling cries there and making them grunts, holding his eye straight into the light so they might be strained and staring and hard

"Are you a Southern . . . Negro?" the student asked, hearing th queer speech from the dark face.

Rafferty started. "I'm not . . . Southern."

"You mustn't misunderstand," the student said, watching the doo anxiously. "The people in the flat below . . . I mean, after all, I've always been interested in the problems of minority."

"Sure. Sure," Rafferty said, motioning helplessly toward th half-stale loaf of bread.

"Some of those books are by . . . Negroes," the student said, and h pointed to a rack of them for confirmation. "Things have only begu for you."

"Look," Rafferty said, beginning, but leaving it there for whatever it did.

"We'd better be quiet, I guess. What I mean is, it's late—" say *sure,* his eyes begged—"the people downstairs might—"

Rafferty watched the student rinse last night's liquor from the pair of glass tumblers, and his eyes saw the blond in the sweater occupying the frame in the great spot of honor on the false mantel.

6

We was standing on the corner, fit to kill. We was Amos and Andy, that's what they call us at the garage. He lurches right into us like a punchdrunk prizefighter that was, or a cokey joe too high to call his own name. *Hidy boy* I say and *Whatcha know, Jack* Andy says. The low brown looks at us a long time and the rain keeps running into his eyes.

I got to get work, he says. I got to get work and new clothes.

Tells him, Don't worry about new clothes, just get yourself work. There's a-plenty, everybody says so. Taken your choice. Elevators got to be run, horses got to be curried, streets got to be swept and garbage carted off, if you can dance a buck and wing or tickle the ivories, sixty thousand cabarets can use you cheap.

I can't keep walking around, he says. Boys, you got to help me.

He talken like no nigger he ever seen, says Andy. I do agree. He stand like the color of wet old mud, wet Georgia mud. Was we there to help, the way he says. What's your name, and he wasn't going to give one. Up to now, how you been eating, and he wasn't gonna say a word. *What I going to do?* in fine fancy language.

Shine shoes, open doors, drive taxis, deliver mail, sing a song, manage a whore, clean houses. You just elegant enough to make a fine butler.

Boys, you got to help me, he says.

But Andy recognizes the man from pictures in the newspaper, it's a damn lucky thing Andy can read. He sets up a cry and calls the hounds on our tail. His hand across his face, the fool. *I'm dark, dark* he says *niggers, I'm dark.* Nigger to nigger, I'm telling you.

7

The nurse came bustling into the room, all white aridity and cool. "It's no use," she said. "Doctor, it's simply no use."

"You've tried the last bleaching agent? The very last?" The

lines on the doctor's forehead were like the striated ridges on desert sand, just as even and monotonous.

"After the first, he lightened a little. You remember. Now it's getting darker—" The sound from inside the operating room cut her short.

The doctor said, "What's that?"

"He's screaming. He's gone much blacker. He's very black now. He's every Negro in the world."

The doctor laughed. "Being a white man, I suppose, white through to my guts where the red blood should be, I never thought they had different shades of it!"

8

"He's been found," Emmeline Rafferty's new friend said over the wheel of the one-seated Ford.

"My husband hasn't been found."

"They've got him down at City Hospital." His hand claimed hers. "Will you go back to him?"

"Can't make a black man my husband, can I? Maybe he'll want to be my furnaceman now." Her head flew back and she laughed. It even looked hard.

"I don't believe in miracles these days and times. Maybe he had nigger blood in him all along, and that's why he hated them so," the man said.

9

"It wasn't a curse as you'd have it. More than that. It wasn't the dust of a black cat's ankle or a couple of dried snails knocked together in a gourd. It wasn't no drum beatin' and it wasn't no finger pointin'. You can go on sayin' what you want to, but it wasn't no chant. I done forgot all the chants I ever knew, I done threw away all the coon tails. My eyes looked at him."

The room was crowded with people, people being brave, some of whom had never been there before. For once the shutters were drawn and there were shadows big and small flung on the wall.

"It was goin' to happen to somebody, and it happened to be him. Now, he's found. He's found, and with everything they can do, he's still black. Go find him and bring him back. Tell him to sign a paper givin' us rights, then. Tell him to get a new city charter givin' us rights."

The heads nodded in rhythm together, making the shadows sing. Some of the old chants were in the room, then.

"It's the only way. Call it *curse* if you want, tell him he'll stay black forever unless he's the one to forgive it. It's time he forgave. He was the one this summer. If it hadn't a-been for Rafferty, a lot of boys and girls would be alive enjoyin' themselves."

No one repeated a word, for the old woman needed no emphasis. But everyone listened, bent forward. She had never spoken so clearly, so long. Each syllable was a treasure, a bright gift to store away. Every sound was a drop of water for barrels in time of drought.

"Say it's the only way. I will not forget the wrong he did. It's me: it happened to be me. Remind him he come here himself, and wasn't called. How the people run cryin' it was him. But also tell him I knew and before anyone could, I said he wore a green tie."

All the heads made benediction.

10

His hair had not changed, only his skin. It made him even more the curious object in the room. L. P. Smith, the newspaper publisher, had donated the use of his office, and there were also present three doctors, a nurse, two attorneys, the new friend of Mrs. Rafferty (though Rafferty did not know this), and several incredulous reporters. They kept touching him, as if this might teach them something.

"What are we going to do now," Smith said, "unless you sign the paper?"

Rafferty spoke in a monotone. "Who am I to sign it?"

"She wants you to," a reporter urged. "The old woman. It's the one way."

"Sign it and give them perpetual amnesty," Rafferty said. "Encourage their dirty ambushes. The hell I will."

"The hell you won't," the thin nurse said, drawing her hands wonderingly and amorously across his burnished, smooth skin.

"Man, you ought to see it by now," one of the doctors said, a young one, and proud, too, of his generosity, perhaps because of the obvious Southern color in his speech. "Now that you are like one of them you can see their side of it."

"And if I can? If I can," Rafferty said, "give them this much of the battle, signing—"

"One little old piece of paper," L. P. Smith said disgustedly. "What's one piece of paper?"

Rafferty pushed the document out of eyeshot, but the small, redhaired nurse slid it back. "It's just something like being defeated. They can make me black, and make me hungry, and lose my wife and job for me. They'll never give me a nigger heart."

L. P. Smith threw up his hands. "God, man, it's a way, she said."

"What does *she* know!"

They looked closely at his skin, all of them; while it made no answer for reason, it was an answer.

"I'm not signing anything. I'm still against them, whether I'm black or white. Send them back where they came from. Send them to Africa. Take the vote away—"

The redhaired nurse sighed. "You're so obstinate, Mr. Rafferty. You've been through so much."

His eyes, littered with broken veins, sleepless, saw hers. And he reached for the pen. "I suppose everybody here thinks I'm a little harsh on the subject. Maybe. Maybe I should have let them run the streets forever, looting and killing and grabbing a revenge they don't deserve. I suppose everybody here thinks that."

No one spoke, but the elder of the two doctors coughed delicately behind his hand.

"All right, all right." The pen poised in his hand, catching the light and holding it for a moment. The heads in the room strained forward, watching as the golden point made a slow arc in the air, reaching the straight, uncompromising black line. When the name was written, the "y" trailing off into the revealing hook, Rafferty sank forward into the chair and slumped forward toward the floor.

Before the young doctor caught him, he turned to his superior and said, "He's dead." And the redhaired nurse pointed to the signature—not blue, but red; this color—and others of the men discovered that the pen dripped blood. Still no one spoke. With Rafferty dead, and no one to blame, or at least no one to imprison for it, some of them saw this way had been one way. Some of them saw it, and all agreed it surely was not the best.