

## *South Atlantic*

The boat's been steady. Fag comes and goes without saying much. A blackie comes now and again to empty the piss and shit pot. I try to rile him up to make a joke or two, but he won't have it. He holds his palms up around his face and sticks his tongue out. It's meant to scare me and it does. I'll just wait until I get back home to think ahead. For now, there's much to remember.

Like New York.

There was a cold mist across the lawn and fat sheep along a little hill and a few men on horses and a big sprawl of land one way and another way and the grass and trees rubbed out for roads and little houses, and rivers on either side which I could see in spots where the mist cleared and if I squinted. There were pigs sleeping in a little gutter by the edge of the park. A sign on a post said PARADE.

We'd got to Manhattan Island early in the morning and right away Johnson found a man to buy his horse. I pawed up the hill and sat with my back against the tree. There was no snow there but the ground was frozen. I watched Johnson sell his horse. He didn't pat her on the neck or anything to say goodbye. Just put the money in his pocket and walked up the hill.

"Down there is where the boats and folk live," Johnson pointed. "Let's go find my cousin." We set off down the hill and towards the southern end of the island, Johnson with his head bowed and hat tall and coat flared, hands in pockets and cheeks aglow with pink, and then

trotting down a wide lane with few people on the streets so early, turning his head just barely to take in the place as though he already knew where he was and where he was going, and he hurried on and on, me trundling behind, vision spotted white from sunshine, legs like deadwood at first from the long day and night's ride then numb with cold and huffing smoky air and no hat and I said, "Johnson," but I didn't stop because he walked too fast, but I was cold and thirsty so I ran up next to him and said, "I need a drop quick if we're to keep like this all day," and he stopped and nodded, which I didn't expect. I expected him to shove me off, but he stopped and nodded and looked up and took me by the collar and ruffled it up around my neck. A sign said BURNT MILL POINT. How I remember this, God knows. I looked in Johnson's eyes. He stood there facing me a few breaths. Nothing came out of his eyes like I was used to seeing in any man. I felt some fear.

"We have to get that mustache off you," Johnson said.

We were out by the docks by now and it was so cold and windy we took a corner inward and down an avenue marked D where the streets were filled with people and carriages and children. We went along and I took a look at the faces: some greased up and pale-eyed and worn and young and others pulled tight and dry and rubbed red with wind and some with scarves on and some with blankets over their shoulders and some sitting in the doorways and some kids rolling a broken cart with two puppies in it and one yelling, "Down theyah," and a row of young ladies in black-and-green dresses lifting their skirts over muddy puddles across the street, holding

books under their arms, small gloved hands, and a big uncoated man pulling a bull, another big man beside him with a full orange beard walking backwards, splashing through the puddles and upsetting an older, white-haired couple stepping slowly, arm-in-arm up the stones and onto a curb into a little alley. The rows of houses were all lined up and touching one another for the most part, and some houses had just a number painted on the glass and some had signs hanging in the windows advertising dry goods or hardware or tailoring or something. As we passed by one brown wooden door, two girls came out in long grey coats with hoods, one carrying a loaf of bread. They both looked Johnson up and down, then at each other, smiling meanly, it seemed. He tipped his hat and turned. Whores. I looked through the window and into the little store: brightly colored tins and jars of jams, big and small breads heaped on high shelves and a lamp burning. An old man leaning against a high counter, turning the pages of a newspaper. A little boy with his back facing, dancing in the blackies' way. I heard his feet clack the floorboards, then Johnson said, "Up there," and we went up the road and turned a few corners onto a street called Clinton.

In the front room of a house a man was selling liquors. We went in and it was suddenly quiet—the noise of the streets and people and horses and bells hushed behind the closed door and the closeness of the booze. The booze, most of all, just sitting there, made it quiet.

"What sort is this?" Johnson asked him.

There were bottles on the shelf. The man had a heavy jowl and buggish, slow-moving eyes.

"Grog shop sells grog," he said. "Dis a friend of yours?" The man

was sticking a thumb at me. Johnson gave him the money and made a funny face to make me smile.

“Are you a friend, Nick,” he said.

The stuff was sweet like brandy but did a foul, sour number on my tongue. I drank a bottle down and had Johnson pay for a few more and I opened the next one and passed it to Johnson and he took a swig and winced and laughed and passed it back to me, and that was it.

We kept walking. It had warmed a bit. I paid less mind to the people. The street was called Rivington. Johnson slowed. We turned into a small alley and into a barbershop. The place smelled like smoke and laundry soap. A short old man pushed me down into a leather armchair. I took a drink.

A young kid shaved my beard and combed my hair. His fingers were so soft I wondered how he kept from getting cut. I grit my jaw. Johnson sat and spoke with men in rough suits. “We come from up north, on business,” I heard him say.

Two men walked in speaking another language. It reminded me of a sad song. The old man in charge bleared loudly, “Git ow!” Then a fat lady came out the back blowing a bugle. The old man scuttled her back away. I smelled cooking cabbage. The two men were gone. The kid slapped my face with a burny salve and pushed me softly up out of the chair. Johnson took a hat off the pole and a bell clanged when we swung through the door. I had a new hat.

In all this I knew I could break off and go wherever I pleased. I had a gun worth a bit and a mind of my own. I didn’t break off though. I figured he was paying. I figured, he must be crazy.

We went into a corner store and sat down and Johnson ordered coffee and plates of food and a blackie brought it to us on a tray and Johnson watched me pour what was left of the bottle into the cup after I'd drank all the coffee and then he wiped his mouth and told me why we'd come.

"We're going to go find my cousin," he said. "This is where the people come and this is where the money is and this is where I want to make it because up there there's nothing but old ties, and I'm done with old ties. And you're a good kid, and a drunk, but you just do what I say and you'll make it with me, right?"

"Right," I said, but it didn't feel very right. I didn't want to make it. I wanted to lie down with it and strangle it and kill it and save it and nurse it and kill it again and I wanted to go and forget where I was going and I wanted to change my name and forget my face and I wanted to drink and get my head ruined but I certainly hadn't thought about making it. That wasn't anything I'd ever sought out to do. We walked back out to the docks and to a shipyard where there was much smoke and noise and I stayed back in a tavern with some coins Johnson put in my hand while he went out, he said, to look for his cousin. He came back a few hours later. I was under the table by then, a red-faced short little guy with pig ears by my side asking me what I did for money and me saying, "I sing."

"Have a song," Pig said, coming closer, and Johnson shoved him off and tugged my collar.

"Come," said Johnson. "Can you walk?"

"Piggy back," I said, and circled around. The dark wood planks of

floor came up, I tasted sawdust. I slept. That sour brandy taste on my tongue revived me a moment later. I looked up into Johnson's eyes. They sparkled this time. I began to sing a song. And Johnson just sat there with my head in his lap, listening. It wasn't what I'd expected. After one verse I stood up and went with him out the door and toward Clinton where Johnson said there was a boarding house.

"That's where you live now." He pushed me into a bed next to beds full of men and men sitting between the beds playing cards and smoking and passing bottles and sometimes hollering too loud and someone yelping up to tell them to shut it, and the night stilled eventually and I felt Johnson's weight in the bed with me, and it was New York.

In the morning New York was there again, with fog horns and racket from the street and Johnson snoring, and I got up to piss and saw a bottle in an old man's satchel poking out so I nabbed it and drank it and put the empty bottle back and went to find the head.