# A Gift from the City

# John Updike

LIKE MOST HAPPY PEOPLE, they came from well inland. Amid this city’s mysteries, they had grown very close. When the phone on his desk rang, he knew it was she. “Jim? Say. Something awful has happened.”

“What?” His voice had contracted and sounded smaller. He pictured his wife and small daughter attacked by teenagers, derelicts, coal men, beneath the slender sparse trees of Tenth Street; oh, if only love were not immaterial! If only there were such a thing as enchantment, and he could draw, with a stick, a circle of safety around them that would hold, though they were on Tenth near Sixth and he forty blocks north.

“I guess it shouldn’t be awful but it’s so upsetting. Martha and I were in the apartment, we had just come back from the park, and I was making tea for her tea party—”

“Nnn. And?”

“And the doorbell rang. And I didn’t know who could be calling, but I pressed the buzzer and went to the stairs, and there was this young Negro. It seemed strange, but then he looked awfully frightened and really smaller than I am. So I stood at the banister and he stood on the middle of the stairs, and he told me this story about how he had brought his family up from North Carolina in somebody else’s truck and they had found a landlord who was giving them a room but they had no furniture or food. I couldn’t understand half of what he said.” Her voice broke here.

“Poor Liz. It’s all right, he didn’t expect you to.”

“He kept saying something about his wife, and I couldn’t understand it.”

“You’re O.K. now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m O.K., let me finish.”

“You’re crying.”

“Well, it was awfully strange.”

“What did he do?”

“He didn’t do anything. He was very nice. He just wanted to know if there were any odd jobs I could let him do. He’d been all up and down Tenth Street just ringing doorbells, and nobody was home.”

“We don’t have any odd jobs.”

“That’s what I said. But I gave him ten dollars and said I was sorry but this was all I had in the house. It’s all I did have.”

“Good. That was just the right thing.”

“Was it all right?”

“Sure. You say the poor devil came up in a truck?” James was relieved: the shadow of the coal man had passed; the enchantment had worked. It had seemed for a moment, from her voice, that the young Negro was right there in the apartment, squeezing Martha on the sofa.

“The point is, though,” Liz said, “now we don’t have any money for the weekend, and Janice is coming tomorrow night so we can go to the movies, and then the Bridgeses on Sunday. You know how she eats. Did you go to the bank?”

“Damn it, no. I forgot.”

“Well, darling.”

“I keep thinking we have lots of money.” It was true; they did. “Never mind, maybe they’ll cash a check here.”

“You think? He was really awfully pathetic, and I couldn’t tell if he was a crook or not.”

“Well, even if he was he must have needed the money; crooks need money, too.”

“You think they will cash a check?”

“Sure. They love me.”

“The really awful thing I haven’t told you. When I gave him the ten dollars he said he wanted to thank you—he seemed awfully interested in you—and I said, Well, fine, but on Saturdays we were in and out all day, so he said he’d come in the evening. He really wants to thank you.”

“He does.”

“I told him we were going to the movies and he said he’d come around before we went.”

“Isn’t he rather aggressive? Why didn’t he let you thank me for him?”

“Darley, I didn’t know what to say.”

“Then it’s not the Bridgeses we need the money for; it’s him.”

“No, I don’t think so. You made me forget the crucial part: he said he has gotten a job that starts Monday, so it’s just this weekend he needs furniture.”

“Why doesn’t he sleep on the floor?” James could imagine himself, in needful circumstances, doing that. In the Army he had done worse.

“He has this family, Jim. Did you want me not to give him anything—to run inside and lock the door? It would have been easy to do, you know.”

“No, no, you were a wonderful Christian. I’m proud of you. Anyway, if he comes before the movie he can’t very well stay all night.”

This pleasant logic seemed firm enough to conclude on, yet, when she had hung up and her voice was gone, the affair seemed ominous again. It was as if, with the click of the receiver, she had sunk beneath an ocean. His own perch, twelve stories above Madison Avenue, swayed slightly, with the roll of too many cigarettes. He ground his present one into a turquoise ashtray, and looked about him, but his beige office at Dudevant & Smith, Industrial and Package Design, offered an inappropriate kind of comfort. His youth’s high hopes—he had thought he was going to be a painter—had been distilled into a few practical solids: a steel desk, an adjustable office chair, a drawing board the size of a dining table, infinitely adjustable lighting fixtures, abundant draftsman’s equipment, and a bulletin board so fresh it gave off a scent of cork. Oversized white tacks fixed on the cork several flattering memos from Dudevant, a snapshot, a studio portrait of Liz, and a four-color ad for the Raydo shaver, a shaver that James had designed, though an asterisk next to the object dropped the eye to the right-hand corner, to the firm’s name, in modest sans-serif. This was all right; it was in the bargain. James’s anonymity had been honestly purchased. Indeed, it seemed they couldn’t give him enough; there was always some bonus or adjustment or employee benefit or Christmas present appearing on his desk, in one of those long blue envelopes that spelled “money” to his mind as surely as green engravings.

His recent fortunes had been so good, James had for months felt that some harsh blow was due. Cautious, he gave Providence few opportunities to instruct him. Its last chance, except for trips in the car, had been childbirth, and Liz had managed that twenty months ago, one Thursday at dawn, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As the months passed harmlessly, James’s suspicion increased that the city itself, with its aging Art Deco surfaces, its black noon shadows, its godless millions, was poised to strike. He placated the circumambient menace the only way he knew—by giving to beggars. He distributed between one and two dollars a day to Salvation Army bell ringers, sidewalk violinists, husky blind men standing in the center of the pavement with their beautiful German shepherds, men on crutches offering yellow pencils, mumbling drunks anxious to shake his hand and show him the gash beneath their hats, men noncommittally displaying their metal legs in subway tunnels. Ambulatory ones, given the pick of a large crowd, would approach him; to their vision, though he dressed and looked like anyone else, he must wear, with Byzantine distinctness, the aureole of the soft touch.

Saturday was tense. James awoke feeling the exact shape of his stomach, a disagreeable tuber. The night before, he had tried to draw from Liz more information about her young Negro. “How was he dressed?”

“Not badly.”

“Not badly!”

“A kind of sport coat with a red wool shirt open at the neck, I think.”

“Well, why is he all dolled up if he has no money? He dresses better than I do.”

“It didn’t seem terribly strange. He would have one good outfit.”

“And he brought his wife and seven children up here in the cab of a truck?”

“I said seven? I just have the feeling it’s seven.”

“Sure. Seven dwarfs, seven lively arts, seven levels of Purgatory …”

“It couldn’t have been in the cab, though. It must have been in the truck part. He said they had no furniture or anything except what they wore.”

“Just the rags on their backs. Son of a bitch.”

“This is so unlike you, darling. You’re always sending checks to Father Flanagan.”

“He only asks me once a year, and at least he doesn’t come crawling up the stairs after my wife.”

James was indignant. The whole tribe of charity seekers, to whom he had been so good, had betrayed him. On Saturday morning, down on Eighth Street buying a book, he deliberately veered away, off the curb and into the gutter, to avoid a bum hopefully eyeing him. At lunch the food lacked taste. The interval between the plate and his face exasperated him; he ate too fast, greedily. In the afternoon, all the way to the park, he maintained a repellent frown. When Liz seemed to dawdle, he took over the pushing of the carriage himself. A young colored man in Levi’s descended the steps of a brick four-story and peered up and down the street uncertainly. James’s heart tripped. “There he is.”

“Where?”

“Right ahead, looking at you.”

“Aren’t you scary? That’s not him. Mine was really short.”

At the park his daughter played in the damp sand by herself. No one seemed to love her; the other children romped at selfish games. The slatted shadow of the fence lengthened as the sun drew closer to the tops of the NYU buildings. Beneath this orange dying ball on an asphalt court, a yelping white played tennis with a tall, smooth-stroking black man with a Caribbean accent. Martha tottered from the sandbox to the seesaw to the swings, in her element and fearless. Strange, the fruit of his seed was a native New Yorker; she had been born in a hospital on West Eleventh Street. He rescued her at the entry to the swing section, lifted her into one, and pushed her from the front. Her face dwindled and loomed, dwindled and loomed; she laughed, but none of the other parents or children gave a sign of hearing her. The metal of the swing was icy. This was September; a chill, end-of-summer breeze weighed on the backs of his hands.

When they returned to the apartment, after four, safe, and the Negro was not there, and Liz set about making tea as on any other day, his fears were confounded, and he irrationally ceased expecting anything bad to happen. They gave Martha her bath and ate their dinner in peace; by pure will he was keeping the hateful doorbell smothered. And when it did ring, it was only Janice their baby-sitter, coming up the stairs with her grandmotherly slowness.

He warned her, “There’s a slight chance a young Negro will be coming here to find us,” and told her, more or less, the story.

“Well, don’t worry, I won’t let him in,” Janice said in the tone of one passing on a particularly frightening piece of gossip. “I’ll tell him you’re not here and I don’t know when you’ll be back.” She was a good-hearted, unfortunate girl, with dusty tangerine hair. Her mother in Rhode Island was being filtered through a series of hopeless operations. Most of her weekends were spent up there, helping her mother die. The salary Janice earned as a stenographer at NBC was consumed by train fares and long-distance phone calls; she never accepted her fee at the end of a night’s sitting without saying, with a soft one-sided smile wherein ages of Irish wit were listlessly deposited, “I hate to take it, but I need the money.”

“Well, no, don’t be rude or anything. Tell him—and I don’t think he’ll come, but just in case—we’ll be here Sunday.”

“The Bridgeses, too,” Liz pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think he’ll show. If he’s as new here as you said he said he was, he probably can’t find the place again.”

“You know,” Janice said to Liz, “you really can’t be so softhearted. I admire you for it, and I feel as sorry for these people as you do, but in this town, believe me, you don’t dare trust anybody, literally anybody. A girl at work beside me knows a man who’s as healthy as you or me, but he goes around on crutches and makes a hundred and twenty dollars a week. Why, that’s more than any of us who work honestly make.”

James smiled tightly, insulted twice; he made more than that a week, and he did not like to hear he was being defrauded by pitiable souls on the street who he could see were genuinely deformed or feeble-minded or alcoholic.

After a pause, Liz gently asked the girl, “How is your mother?”

Janice’s face brightened and was not quite so overpowered by the orange hair. “Oh, on the phone last night she sounded real high and mighty. The P.-T.A. has given her some job with a drive for funds, something she could do with pencil and paper, without getting up. I’ve told you how active she had been. She was all for getting out of bed. She said she can feel, you know, that it’s out of her body now. But when I talked to the doctor last Sunday, he said we mustn’t hope too much. But he seemed very proud of the operation.”

“Well, good luck,” James said, jingling the change in his pocket.

Janice shook her finger. “You have a good time. He isn’t going to get in if I’m here, that you can depend on,” she assured them, misunderstanding, or perhaps understanding more than necessary.

The picture was excellent, but just at the point where John Wayne, after tracking the Comanches from the snowbound forests of Montana to the blazing dunes of Border Country, was becoming reconciled to the idea of his niece’s cohabiting with a brave, James vividly remembered the bum who had wobbled toward him on Eighth Street—the twisted eye, the coat too small to button, the pulpy mouth with pathetic effort trying to frame the first words. The image made him squirm in his seat and pull away from Liz’s hand. She, as the credits rolled, confided that her eyes smarted from the VistaVision. They were reluctant to go home so early; Janice counted on them to stay away during the easy hours when Martha was asleep. But the bar at the White Horse Tavern was crowded and noisy—it had become a tourist trap—and the main streets of the Village, thronged with gangsters and hermaphrodites, seemed to James a poor place to stroll with his wife. Liz with her innocent open stare caught the attention of every thug and teen-ager they passed. “Stop it,” he said. “You’ll get me knifed.”

“Darling. There’s no law against people’s eyes.”

“There should be. They think you’re a whore out with her pimp. What makes you stare at everybody?”

“Faces are interesting. Why are you so uninterested in people?”

“Because every other day you call up the office and I have to come rescue you from some damn spook you’ve enticed up the stairs. No wonder Dudevant is getting set to fire me.”

“Let’s go home if you want to rave.”

“We can’t. Janice needs the money, the bloodsucker.”

“It’s nearly ten. She charges a dollar an hour, after all.”

As they advanced down Tenth from Fifth he saw a slight blob by their gate which simply squinting did not erase. He did not expect ever to see Liz’s Negro, who had had his chance at dinner. Yet, when it was clear that a man was standing there, wearing a hat, James hastened forward, glad at last to have the enemy life-sized and under scrutiny. They seemed to know each other well; James said “Hi!” and grasped the quickly offered hand. The palm felt waxy and cool, like a synthetic fabric.

“I just wanted … thank … such a fine gentleman,” the Negro said, in a voice incredibly thin-spun, the thread of it always breaking.

“Have you been waiting long?” Liz asked.

“No, well … the lady upstairs, she said you’d be back. When the man in the taxi let me go from the station … came on back to thank such wonderful people.”

“I’m awfully sorry,” James told him. “I thought you knew we were going off to the movies.” His own voice sounded huge—a magnificent instrument. He must not be too elaborately courteous. Since his New York success, Liz was sensitive to any sign in him of vanity or condescension. She was unfair; his natural, heartfelt impulse at this moment was toward elaborate courtesy.

“You were at the police station?” Liz asked. Their previous encounter seemed to have attuned her to the man’s speech.

“… how I do appreciate.” He was still speaking to James, ignoring Liz completely. This assumption that he, as head of the family, superseded all its other elements, and that in finding him the Negro had struck the fountainhead of his good fortune, panicked James. He had been raised to believe in strong women and recessive husbands. Further, the little intruder seemed to need specifically maternal attention. He trembled under his coat, and it was not that cold; the night was warmer than the late afternoon had been.

The man’s clothes, in the dimness of outdoors, did not look as shabby as James would have liked. As for his being young, there were few marks of either youth or age.

“Well, come on inside,” James said.

“Aaaah …?”

“Please,” Liz said.

They entered the little overheated vestibule, and immediately the buzzer rasped at the lock, signalling that Janice had been watching from the window. She ran to the banister and shouted down in a whisper, “Did he get in? Has he told you about the taxi driver?”

James, leading the group, attained the top of the stairs. “How was Martha?” he asked, rather plainly putting first things first.

“An absolute angel. How was the movie?”

“Quite good, really. It really was. Long, though.”

“I was honestly afraid he’d kill him.”

They shuffled each other into the room. “I gather you two have met, then,” James said to Janice and the Negro. The girl bared her teeth in a kindly smile that made her look five years older, and the Negro, who had his hat already in his hands and was therefore unable to tip it, bent the brim slightly and swiftly averted his head, confronting a striped canvas Liz had done in art school, titled Swans and Shadows.

At this juncture, Liz deserted him, easing into the bedroom. She was bothered by fears that Martha would stop breathing among the blankets. “Before the doorbell rang, even,” Janice talked on, “I could hear the shouting on the street— Oh, it was something. These terrible things being shouted. And then the bell rang, and I answered it, like you had said to, and he said—” She indicated the Negro, who was still standing, in a quiet plaid sport coat.

“Sit down,” James told him.

“—and he said that the taxi driver wanted money. I said, ‘I don’t have any. I don’t have a red cent, honestly.’ You know, when I come over I never think to bring my purse.” James recalled she could never make change, creating an amount she was left owing them, “toward next time.”

“I tol him,” the Negro said, “there were these fine people, in this house here. The lady in there, she tol me you’d be here.”

James asked, “Where did you take a taxi from?”

The Negro sought refuge in contemplation of his hat, pendent from one quivering hand. “Please, mister … the lady, she knows about it.” He looked toward the bedroom door.

Janice rescued him, speaking briskly: “He told me the driver wanted two thirty, and I said, ‘I don’t have a cent.’ Then I came in here and hunted, you know, to see if you left any around—sometimes there’s some tens under the silver bowl.”

“Oh, yes,” James said. “I suppose there are.”

“Then I went to the window to signal—I’m scared to death of going downstairs and locking myself out—and down on the street there was this crowd, from across the street at Alex’s, and it looked like, when he went back to tell the driver, the driver grabbed him; there was a lot of shouting, and some woman kept saying ‘Cop. Call a cop.’ ”

Liz reëntered the room.

“He grab me here,” the Negro humbly explained. He touched with his little free hand the open collar of his red wool shirt.

“So I guess then they went to the police station,” Janice concluded lamely, disappointed to discover that her information was incomplete.

Liz, assuming that the police-station part of the story had been told when she was out of the room, took this to be the end, and asked, “Who wants some coffee?”

“No thanks, Betty,” Janice said. “It keeps me awake.”

“It keeps everybody awake,” James said. “That’s what it’s supposed to do.”

“Oh, no, ma’am,” the Negro said. “I couldn’t do that.” Uneasily shifting his face toward James, though he kept his eyes on the lamp burning above Janice’s head, he went on, “I tolem at the station how there were these people. I had your address, ’cause the lady wrote it down on a little slip.”

“Uh-huh.” James assumed there was more to come. Why wasn’t he still at the police station? Who paid the driver? The pause stretched. James felt increasingly remote; it scarcely seemed his room, with so strange a guest in it. He tilted his chair back, and the Negro sharpened as if through the wrong end of a telescope. There was a resemblance between the Negro’s head and the Raydo shaver. The inventive thing about that design—the stroke of mind, in Dudevant’s phrase—had been forthrightly paring away the space saved by the manufacturer’s improved, smaller motor. Instead of a symmetrical case, then, in form like a tapered sugar sack, a squat, asymmetrical shape was created, which fitted, pleasingly weighty, in the user’s hand like a religious stone, full of mana. Likewise, a part of the Negro’s skull had been eliminated. His eyes were higher in his head than drawing masters teach, and had been shallowly placed on the edges, where the planes of the face turned sideways. With a smothered start James realized that Janice, and Liz leaning in the doorway of the kitchen, and the Negro, too, were expecting him to speak—the man of the situation, the benefactor. “Well, now, what is your trouble?” he asked brutally.

The coffee water sang in its kettle, and Liz, after wrinkling her expressive high forehead at him, turned to the stove.

The Negro feebly rubbed the slant of his skull. “Aaaah?… appreciate the kindness of you and the lady … generous to a poor soul like me nobody wanted to help.”

James prompted. “You and your wife and—how many children?”

“Seven, mister. The oldest boy ten.”

“—have found a place to live. Where?”

“Yes, sir, the man say he give us this room, but he say he can’t put no beds in it, but I found this other man willing to give us on loan, you know, until I go to my job.… But the wife and children, they don’t have no bed to rest their heads. Nothing to eat. My children are tired. They’re gettin’ sick, they so tired.”

James put a cigarette in the center of his mouth and said as it bobbled, “You say you have a job?”

“Oh, yes, mister, I went to this place where they’re building the new road to the tunnel, you know, and he tol me as soon as I get in one day’s work he can give me that money, toward my pay. He ast if I could do the work and I said, ‘Yes, sir, any kind of work you give I can do.’ He said the pay was two dollar seventy cents for every hour you work.”

“Two seventy? For Heaven’s sake. Twenty dollars a day just laboring?”

“Yes, pushing the wheelbarrow … he said two seventy. I said, ‘I can do any kind of work you give. I’m a hard worker.’ ”

To James he looked extremely frail, but the notion of there existing a broad-shouldered foreman willing to make this hapless man a working citizen washed all doubts away. James smiled and insisted, “So it’s really just this weekend you need to get over.”

“Thas right. Starting Monday I’ll be making two seventy every hour. The wife, she’s as happy as anybody could be.”

The wife seemed to have altered underfoot, but James let it pass; the end was in sight. He braced himself to enter the realm of money. Here Janice, the fool, who should have left the minute they came home, interrupted with, “Have you tried any agencies, like the Salvation Army?”

“Oh, yes, miss. All. They don’t care much for fellas like me. They say they’ll give us money to get back, but as for us staying—they won’t do a damn thing. Boy, you come up here in a truck, you’re on your own. Nobody help me except these people.”

The man he probably was with his friends and family was starting to show. James was sleepy. The hard chair hurt; the Negro had the comfortable chair. He resented the man’s becoming at ease. But there was no halting the process; the women were at work now.

“Isn’t that awful,” Janice said. “You wonder why they have these agencies.”

“You say you need help, your wife ain’t got a place to put her head, they give you money to go back.”

Liz entered with two cups of coffee. Hers, James noticed, was just half full; he was to bear the larger burden of insomnia. The cup was too hot to hold. He set it on the rug, feeling soft-skinned and effeminate in the eyes of this hard worker worth twenty dollars a day.

“Why did you decide to leave North Carolina?” Liz asked.

“Missis, a man like me, there’s no chance there for him. I worked in the cotton and they give me thirty-five cents an hour.”

“Thirty-five cents?” James said. “That’s illegal, isn’t it?”

The Negro smiled sardonically, his first facial expression of the evening. “Down there you don’t tell them what’s legal.” To Liz he added, “The wife, ma’am, she’s the bravest woman. When I say, ‘Less go,’ she say, ‘Thas right, let’s give oursels a chance.’ So this man promise he’d take us up in the cab of the truck he had.…”

“With all seven children?” James asked.

The Negro looked at him without the usual wavering. “We don’t have anybody to leave them behind.”

“And you have no friends or relatives here?” Liz asked.

“No, we don’t have no friends, and until you were so kind it didn’t look like we’d find any either.”

Friends! In indignation James rose and, on his feet, had to go through the long-planned action of placing two ten-dollar bills on the table next to the Negro. The Negro ignored them, bowing his head. James made his speech. “Now, I don’t know how much furniture costs—my wife gave me the impression that you were going to make the necessary payment with the ten. But here is twenty. It’s all we can spare. This should carry you over until Monday, when you say you can get part of your salary for working on the Lincoln Tunnel. I think it was very courageous of you to bring your family up here, and we want to wish you lots of luck. I’m sure you and your wife will manage.” Flushing with shame, he resumed his post in the hard chair.

Janice bit her lip to cure a smile and looked toward Liz, who said nothing.

The Negro said, “Aeeh … Mister … can’t find words to press, such fine people.” And, while the three of them sat there, trapped and stunned, he tried to make himself cry. He pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head and squeezed soft high animal sounds from his throat, but when he looked up, the grainy whites of his eyes were dry. Uncoördinated with this failure, his lips writhed in grief. He kept brushing his temple as if something were humming there. “Gee,” he said. “The wife … she tol me, You got to go back and thank that man.…”

The Negro’s sense of exit seemed as defective as his other theatrical skills. He just sat there, shaking his head and touching his nose. The bills on the table remained ignored—taboo, perhaps, until a sufficiently exhausting ritual of gratitude was performed. James, to whom rudeness came hard, teetered in his chair, avoiding all eyes; at the root of the Negro’s demonstration there was either the plight he described or a plight that had made him lie. In either case, the man must be borne. Yet James found him all but unbearable; the thought of his life as he described it, swinging from one tenuous vine of charity to the next—the truck driver, the landlord, Liz, the furniture man, the foreman, now James—was sickening, giddying. James said courteously, “Maybe you’d better be getting back to her.”

“Iiih,” the Negro sighed, on an irrelevant high note, as if he produced the sound with a pitch pipe.

James dreaded that Liz would start offering blankets and food if the Negro delayed further—as he did, whimpering and passing the hat brim through his hands like an endless rope. While Liz was in the kitchen filling a paper bag for him, the Negro found breath to tell James that he wanted to bring his wife and all his family to see him and his missis, tomorrow, so they could all express gratitude. “Maybe there’s some work … washing the floors, anything, she’s so happy, until we can pay back. Twenty, gee.” His hand fled to his eyes.

“No, don’t you worry about us. That thirty dollars”—the first ten seemed already forgotten—“you can think of as a gift from the city.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t have it no other way. You let my wife do all your work tomorrow.”

“You and she get settled. Forget us.”

Liz appeared with an awkward paper bag. There were to be no blankets, he deduced; she wasn’t as soft as he feared.

Talkative as always when a guest was leaving, James asked, “Now, do you know how to get back? For Heaven’s sake, don’t take a taxi again. Take a bus and then the subway. Where is your place?”

“Aaaah … right near where that Lexington Avenue is.”

“Where on Lexington? What cross street?”

“Beg pardon, mister? I’m sorry, I don’t make sense I’m so thrilled.”

“What cross street? How far up on Lexington?”

“The, ah, Hundred Twenty-nine.”

As James, with an outlander’s simple pride in “knowing” New York, gave detailed instructions about where to board the Fourteenth Street bus, where to find the subway kiosk, and how to put the token in the turnstile, the words seemed to bounce back, as if they were finding identical information already lodged in the Negro’s brain. He concluded, “Just try to resist the temptation to jump in a taxicab. That would have cost us two thirty if we’d been home. Now, here, I’ll even give you bus fare and a token.” Dredging a handful of silver from his coat pocket, he placed a nickel and a dime and a token in the svelte little palm and, since the hand did not move, put two more dimes in it, then thought, Oh, hell, and poured all the coins in—over a dollar’s worth.

“Now I’m penniless,” he told the colored man.

“Thank eh, you too Missis, so much, and you, miss.”

They wished him luck. He shook hands all around, hoisted the bag with difficulty into his arms, and walked murmuring through the door James held open for him.

“Four blocks up, to Fourteenth Street,” James called after him, adding in a normal voice, “I know damn well he’ll take a taxi.”

“It’s awfully good-hearted of you,” Janice said, “but about giving all that money, I—don’t—know.”

“Ah, well, money is dross,” said James, doing a small dance step, he was so relieved the Negro was out the door.

Liz said, “I was surprised, darley, that you gave him two bills.”

“You were? These are times of inflation. You can’t buy seven air-conditioned Beautyrest mattresses for ten dollars. He’s shown a great gift for spending; he ran through your ten like a little jackrabbit. We never did find out where it went to.”

Janice, Irishly strict, still grappled with the moral issue. She spoke more to Liz than to him. “I don’t doubt he needs the money— Oh, you should have heard the things that cabby said, or maybe you shouldn’t. But then who doesn’t need money? You and I need money, too.”

“Which reminds me,” James said. He looked at the electric clock in the kitchen: 11:20. “We came home, didn’t we, around ten? Seven-thirty to ten—two and a half. Two and a half dollars. You can’t change a ten, can you?”

The girl’s face fell. “Honestly, I never remember to bring my purse. But you could owe me to next time.…”

“I hate to do that. You need the money.” He couldn’t believe the girl would take a surplus of $7.50 from him.

“That—I—do,” Janice admitted cheerfully, gathering up her coat and a limp black book stamped simply with a cross. Her mother, James thought, and felt the night’s prayers still circling the room.

“Wait,” Liz said. “I think in my purse. I lied to him when I said I had nothing in the house but the ten.” They found the purse and were indeed able to piece together, out of paper and silver, the fee.

Spited, Janice said, “For your sakes, I sure hope he doesn’t bother you again. This little island has more different kinds of crooks on it than you or I could imagine existed. Some of them could out-act old Larry Olivier himself.”

“I really don’t see how he can do this laboring job,” Liz said, with a tactful appearance of agreeing. “Why, just that little bag I gave him almost knocked him over.” When Janice was gone, she asked, “Do you think she expected us to pay her for the hour and a half she stayed to watch the Negro?”

“Heaven knows. I feel vile.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere. I feel like a vile person.”

“Why? You were fine. Jim, you were awfully, awfully good.”

From her hasty kiss on his cheek he gathered that, surprisingly, she meant it.

Sunday, husk among days, was full of fear. Even in happy times James felt on this day like a nameless statue on an empty plaza. Now he dared not go out, either to church or to the newsstand. Last night’s episode had the color of a public disgrace. James holed up in his inadequate cave. The walls seemed transparent, the floors sounding boards. The Negro’s threat to return had smashed the windows and broken the burglar locks. Never on a morning had he wished so intensely to be back in his home town, in Minnesota. The town had over seven thousand residents now, and a city manager instead of a mayor, and since the war its main drag had been robbed of its Indian name and called Douglas MacArthur Avenue; but the cars still parked at will on the elm-shaded streets, and he would still have a place, his father’s son.

On West Tenth Street, Liz and James lived four doors down from an Episcopal church. There was not an inch of air between the masonry of any of the buildings. When the church bells rang, their apartment quivered. Enveloped in this huge dead hum, he fought the picture of seven woolly-haired children squeezed into the cab of a truck, roadside lights flickering in their faces, the dark of the Carolina fields slipping away, great whoring cities bristling and then falling back, too, and then the children dozing, except for the oldest, a boy of ten, who remained awake to stare unblinking at the bent-necked blue lights of the Jersey Turnpike, the jet carpet carrying them to the sorcerer’s palace, where Harlem was choked with Cadillacs, and white men on subways yielded their seats to colored ladies. James hated the Negro chiefly because he was tactless. Janice’s mother, the scores of street beggars—this was misery, too, but misery that knew its limits, that kept an orbit and observed manners. But in his perfect ignorance the Negro was like one of those babies born with their hearts in front of their ribs. He gave no protection. You touched him and you killed him. Now that he had found this Northern man—the promised man—so free with money, he would be back today, and again tomorrow, with an even greater gift of mumbled debts. Why not? Thirty was nothing to James. He could give away a flat three thousand, and then thirty every week—more than thirty, fifty—and he and Liz would still be comfortable. Between him and the Negro the ground was unimpeded, and only a sin, a lack of charity, could be placed there as barrier.

By afternoon the focus of James’s discomfort had shifted from the possibility that the Negro had told the truth to the possibility that he had not. Reliving his behavior in this light was agonizing. He shuddered above the depths of fatuity the Negro must have seen in his clumsy kindness. If the story had been a fraud, the impatience of James’s charity was its one saving grace. The bits of abruptness, the gibes about the taxi shone in memory like jewels among refuse. The more he thought, the more he raged, aloud and privately. And the angrier he grew at the Negro, the less he wanted to see him, the more he dreaded him, an opponent invincibly armed with the weapon of having seen him as a fool. And those seven clambering children, and the wife bullying Liz while pretending to clean the apartment.

He only wanted to hide his head in the haven of the Bridgeses’ scheduled visit. They saw him as others saw him and knew his value. He would bask in their lucid external view.

Then, mercifully, it was dark, and his friends had come.

Rudy Bridges was also from Ontauk, Minnesota. He had been two classes ahead of James in the high school, a scholastic wonder, the more so because his father was a no-account who died of tuberculosis the year Rudy graduated. In the nine years since, Rudy’s fair hair had thinned severely, but the spherical head and the chubby lips of the prig had remained constant. His great hopes had been boiled down to instructing three sections of Barnard girls in American history. His wife came from Maryland. Augustina was a pale and handsome woman with an uncompromising, uptilted nose that displayed its nostrils. She wore her abundant chestnut hair strictly parted in the middle—a madonna for the Piston Age. They had no children, and, with elaborate managing, just enough money. James loved them as guests. In their own home, Rudy talked too much about his special field, U.S. domestic fiscal policy between Grant and Wilson, a desert of dullness where the lowliest scholar could be king. And Augustina, careful of the budget, went hungry and thirsty and inhibited everyone. Away from home she drank and ate beautifully, like the Rockville belle she was.

James tiptoed into the bedroom with their heavy coats. Martha was cased in her crib like a piece of apparatus manufacturing sleep. He heard Liz talking and, returning, asked, “Is she telling you about how we’re running the Underground Railway?”

“Why, no, James,” Augustina said slowly.

“I was telling them the accident Martha had in the park,” Liz said.

“Yeah, the poor kid just ran right into the swings,” he said, no doubt duplicating the story.

“Now, James,” Rudy said, “what is this mad tale about the Underground Railroad?” Years of teaching had perfected his speech habit of pronouncing everything, clichés and all, with artificial distinctness. Throughout James’s recital of the Negro story he kept saying “Ah, yes,” and when it was over and, like Janice the night before, James seemed to have reached an insufficient conclusion, Rudy felt compelled to clarify: “So the chances are these seven children are going to show up in the middle of supper.”

“Oh dear,” Augustina said with mock alarm. “Do you have enough food?”

Rudy, beside her on the sofa, attacked the tale pedantically. “Now. You say he was well dressed?”

“Sort of. But after all it was Saturday night.” James didn’t get the smile he expected.

“Did you look at his shoes?”

“Not much.”

“Would you say his accent was Southern or neutral?”

“Well, your wife’s the only Southerner I know. His speech was so peculiar and high, I couldn’t tell. Certainly he didn’t talk like you. Or me.”

“And at one point he used the word ‘thrilled.’ ”

“Yeah, that got me, too. But look: there were odd things, but when a man is in such a dither anyway—”

Augustina broke in, addressing Liz. “Did James really just hand him twenty dollars?”

“Twenty-one and a token,” James corrected.

Rudy laughed excessively—he had no sense of humor, so when he laughed it was too hard—and lifted his golden glass in toast. Augustina, to back him up, gripped hers, which was already empty. “James,” Rudy said, “you’re the soul of generosity.”

It was flattering, of course, but it wasn’t the way he thought they should take it. The point really wasn’t the twenty dollars at all; hard as it was to explain without seeming to ridicule Rudy’s salary, twenty dollars was not much.

“It doesn’t seem to me,” he said, “that he would have such an unlikely story, with so many authentic overtones, unless it were true. He didn’t look at all like a Harlem Negro—his head was uncanny—and he seemed to know about North Carolina and the relief agencies—”

“Nonsense, James. There are a hundred—a thousand—ways of obtaining such information. For instance: he quoted thirty-five cents an hour as his old wage. Well, you could research that. Is thirty-five cents an hour standard pay in the cotton belt? To be frank, it sounds low to me.”

“That was the thing,” Liz said, “that made me begin to wonder.”

James turned on her, surprised and stung. “Damn it, the trouble with people like you, who are passed from one happy breadwinner to the next without missing a damn meal, is you refuse to admit that outside your own bubble anybody can be dirt-poor. Of course people starve. Of course a man will pay a quarter an hour if nobody makes him pay more. Jesus.”

In the shocked hush, Augustina softly offered, “In the Deep South, I know, black people can just show up and attach themselves to you. It’s a leftover from slavery.”

“However,” Rudy went doggedly on, “mere dollar-and-cents quotations mean very little; the relative value, purchase-wise, of, for instance, ten cents, ‘a thin dime’—”

James’s harangue had agitated Augustina; her nostrils darted this way and that, and when she heard her husband’s voice drone, she turned those marvellous staring apertures directly on him. Not totally insensitive, he slowly climbed out of his brain, sensed the heat in the room, and, the worst thing possible, fell silent.

The silence went on. Liz was blushing. James held his tongue, by way of apology to her. Rudy’s brittle gears shifted, his mouth flipped open, and he considerately said, “No, joke about it as we will, a problem in sheer currency can very seriously affect real people. To take an example, in the states of the Confederacy in the decade after the surrender of Appomattox—that is, from the year eighteen sixty-five to the year eighteen seventy-four …”

On Monday, James’s office was waiting for him. The white-headed tacks made his personal constellation on the cork. The wastebasket had been emptied. A blue envelope lay on the steel desk. Otherwise, not so much as a pen nib had been disturbed; the sketch he had been working on when Liz called still lay by the telephone, its random placement preserved like the handiwork of a superbly precious being.

He did his work all day with great precision, answering letters, making order. His office encouraged the illusion that each episode of life occupied a separate sheet, and could be dropped into the wastebasket, and destroyed by someone else in the night. One job that he gave his mind was to keep the phone from ringing. Whether the Negro came or not, with his tattered children or not, from ten to six let the problem belong to Liz. It was of her making, after all. There should be, in a man’s life, hours when he has never married, and his wife walks in magic circles she herself draws. It was little enough to ask; he had sold his talent for her sake. The phone did not ring, except once: Dudevant, effusive. The envelope contained a bonus.

As James made his way home, through indifferent crowds, the conviction grew that Liz had wanted to call and had been balked by the cold pressure he had applied at the other end of the line. He would find her clubbed, and Martha hacked in two. He wondered if he would be able to give a good enough description of the Negro to the police. He saw himself in the station stammering, blushing, despised by the policemen; had it been their families, they would have been there, knotting their fists, baring their teeth. Through this daydream ran the cowardly hope that the killer would not still be there, lingering stupidly, so that James would have to struggle with him, and be himself injured.

Liz waited until he was in the apartment and his coat was off before she communicated her news. Her tone was apprehensive. “He came again, when Martha was having her nap. I went to the stairs—I was terribly busy cleaning up. He said the man who promised to sell him the furniture wouldn’t give him the beds if he didn’t give him ten dollars more, and I asked him why he wasn’t at his job, and he said something about Wednesday, I don’t know. I told him we had given him all we could, and I didn’t have a dollar—which was true; you went off with the money and we have nothing for supper. Anyway, he seemed to have expected it, and was really very nice. So I guess he was a crook.”

“Thank God,” he said, and they never saw the Negro again, and their happiness returned.