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RAIN's tapping on the window. The house is quiet, nobody awake.

I keep watching the window. It's dark outside. Only a little while now. I wait, lay quiet and light a cigarette. Me, I cool it when I do a job. That's the only way. Play it smart straight through and you don't get caught, you don't have to answer questions.

I been in the house since ten o'clock like a real chump. Eleven

o'clock I hit the bed. For me, that ain't hardly natural around here, but I got my excuse set for Moms before she asks what's wrong.

There ain't nothing wrong, I told her, except I'm tired from too much stickball. That's enough to set her mind at rest, she don't say no more.

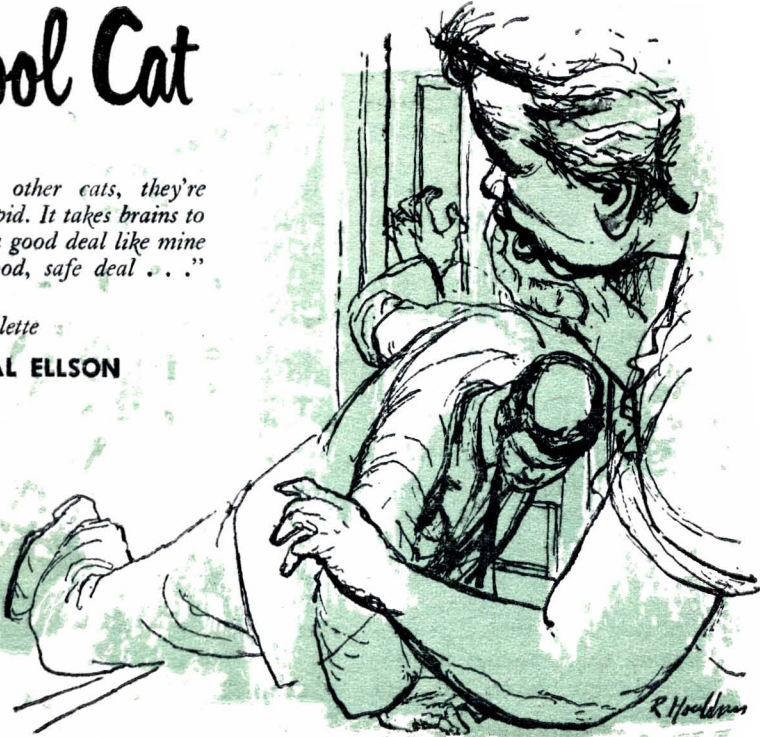
Okay, it's a long wait till twelve-thirty, and I don't even read. It's best to keep the light out. I can think like that. That's one thing about me. I'm not like the rest of the

Cool Cat

"Those other cats, they're just stupid. It takes brains to set up a good deal like mine — a good, safe deal . . ."

A Novelette

BY HAL ELLSON



bunch. They're all kind of stupid. Especially Twist.

That boy thinks he's king and he ain't nothing. What's he got but muscles? I got the brain, I'm the real wheel of the bunch but he don't know it. None of them chumps do. They don't know nothing. All around, that's better for me.

Waiting is long, and then it's gone. I light a match, look at my watch. Yeah, it's twenty after twelve.

Don't have to dress. I'm ready to breeze. Be quiet, that's all. It don't take nothing else to get out of the house, but I ain't taking chances.

The window's always best. I go to it, ease it up, let myself out on the fire escape. Man, it's raining sixty. I head for the roof and come down the stairs soft so nobody hears nothing.

Got to run when I hit the door. I cut for Twist's cellar. That's the meeting place.

They waiting on me when I come in. Old ugly-face Twist got a bad look on his puss. The others is blasé-like, playing it cool.

"Cookie, I thought you wasn't coming," Twist tells me.

I look back at him like his words don't mean nothing, like he can't bug me at all. That's to bug him.

"You see me here, don't you?" I say. "I'm on time, ain't I? I'm never behind."

Man, he don't like that. The others is digging this. Peaches is grinning, so is Jimmy. Even Jeff, and Jeff is Twist's boy.

No more is said. Twist looks at the door, gives the word. We start moving.

It ain't raining so hard when we come up from the cellar. The streets is dark, quiet. Four blocks to walk.

It seems long. But when we reach there I can't remember walking. Seems like a minute ago we was in the meeting place.

Now we're ready. That candy store across the street is still open. I know it like my own room, know the guy who owns it, what he does. I know him better than he knows himself.

That's my job. I line up all the jobs for the gang cause I'm a cool cat. I always play it cool and they know it. If it wasn't for me, they couldn't knock off nothing.

But the others is scared of Twist. Me and him never did get along cause he knows who's got the brain, who's the real leader of the gang. Yeah, after tonight the whole world is going to know.

"Okay, let's move," Twist says.

I look at him. One thing I got to say, he ain't afraid. Nothing scares him. He's got that look in his eye like a dead man, nothing on his face.

We hit that candy store door, come in like it's afternoon. The old man behind the counter looks up, makes a bad face.

It's been a bad night and he's ready to breeze. Tough on him. We hit the stools. I can see he don't want no part of us. That figures, but he's got to do like we say.

"A vanilla malted," Twist tells him, "and don't be stingy with the ice cream."

Man, that kills the old guy. He gives us another bad look. But he starts fixing the malted. I give Jeff the nod. He moves to the jukebox, drops a coin in.

Like I figured, the old guy starts to blow his lid. It's late and he's ready to close. He don't want no music.

That's the cue for Jeff. He gives the old guy back lip. At the same time Twist gets up and moves to the door, slips behind the counter. To make it real cool I get into the argument with the old man.

Twist is moving up behind the counter. This is it. A disc slides on in the juke. Music crashes out and Twist moves like lightning. He's on the old guy, but something happens.

A door opens in back of the store and a big popeyed crazy-looking motherjumper comes flying out.

Nobody has to yell. We hit for the door, scatter quick. It's everybody for himself and I'm out first running like the wind.

Turning the corner, I look back. There's nothing to be seen, nobody after me. I keep running.

Ten minutes later I'm back at the meeting place in Twist's cellar. I'm first there.

I take a smoke and wait it out. A minute later Peaches comes in. He's followed by Jeff. Jimmy is next. That leaves Twist.

We wait it out. Nobody's talking.

Nobody's in a good mood. I see them others looking at me, know what they thinking. Twist is caught. Cops got him. They might beat him into talking and haul us all in.

2.

It don't happen that way. The cellar door swings open and Twist walks in.

Man, he's a sad-looking cat. His jacket is torn and he got a lump on his eye big as an egg.

"Man, what's happened?" Jeff says. "I thought they got you this time."

"Got nothing. I'm here, thanks to nobody."

"That guy nailed you, didn't he?"

"Behind the counter. I was trapped behind it and had to fight my way out."

"That pretty jacket is ripped bad. You see your eye?"

"No, but I feel it. He got me a good one."

"How'd you bust out, Twist?"

"I got him better than he got me. Damn, we was whaling. He flung me on top of the counter and that's when I got him. My hand just naturally picked up a jar and I busted it over his head."

"What about the old man?"

"He was out. I got him right off."

Jeff smiles, nods his head. "If it was one of us, the cops be beating on us now."

Twist shrugs that off. He ain't smiling. The room goes quiet.

There's a bad look on Twist's face when he turns to me.

"Something wrong?" I say to him.

"Yeah, you don't know what? Man, that was your own set-up. You told us it was an easy knock-over, and what happens? I almost had it."

"We almost had it, that's what you mean."

"Cause of you. You supposed to be smart, and you ain't got a brain cell in your head."

"Being I'm so stupid, why you got to follow?" I say to Twist.

He's ready to bust on that. He takes a step, stops and keeps looking at me. I'm jumpy but I don't show nothing. At least my answer stops him, and he cools.

"Okay, tell me how that guy happened to be back of the store?" he says.

"Ask Houdini. I ain't so good at guessing."

"You had the job lined up."

"Something went wrong."

"You telling me that? It could have been my skin."

"All of us," I tell him again. "It could have been all of us."

"Yeah, but I was the one behind the counter. It was my skin."

"Cause you was in the wrong spot."

"That's what I mean, Cookie. You got the idea."

"What you supposed to be saying?"

That old dog-face of Twist's is next to mine now. His eyes is small.

It's like he's ready to jump. I face him out. It's the only way, cause he can beat me.

That does it. He steps back, and everybody relaxes.

"That's better," Jeff tells him. "I thought you was going to clash."

Twist's grinning now. "Okay, man, let's forget it," he says. "I was hot cause of what happened. Give me five."

I give him my hand. That's all. We're friends again, the air is clear. I feel kind of good, like I can breathe.

All of us light up and relax. We don't talk about the job we messed up. It's history. Anything that happens ten minutes back is history.

"I'm missing that money we could have had," Jeff says. "Man, it's bad to be broke."

"If you didn't spend all your money on the broads, you'd be rich," Twist tells him. "And none of them is any good."

"You know any better ones than I do?"

"That's beside the point. I don't feed them and pay the way. It's the other way around with me."

"Ida tells me different," Jeff says.

"She tells everybody different. That girl's got a hole in her head. She don't look out, I'm going to put a hole in her heart."

Jeff grins on that, snuffs his butt. "We're talking when we could be doing. The night is young yet. Who's for a little mugging? The bartenders be throwing the drunk men in the gutter soon."

Peaches and Jimmy don't say nothing to that. They look at Twist. He's the big cheese. We all wait for him.

He yawns and says, "The fact is I could use a little change."

He looks at Peaches and Jimmy, then at me. "You ain't in?"

"Did I say I ain't?"

"Nobody's saying you got to come. The split is bigger with less people in on the kill."

He thinks he's going to talk me out, but he's got the wrong cat. "I'm in all the way," I tell him. "Less you figure you don't want me for no more jobs."

That does it, cause he knows I'm the brain and he ain't nothing without me. They all know that.

"Okay, you're in," he says.

That's the signal. We get up and move to the cellar door. Damn, outside a flood is falling, rain beating on the pavement. We stand in the area-way and look out.

"Ain't nobody walking in the streets in that," Jeff says. "And I ain't in the mood for drowning."

We move back to the cellar, and the cards come out. There ain't nothing else to do but play and wait.

We do that, quit an hour later and look out again. The rain is stopping, but nobody's in the mood for a mugging now.

We hit the pavement and split for the night. Halfway home buckets is falling again. I sprint for the house.

It's dead silent when I go up the

stairs. Seems like nobody's awake. I reach the roof and head for the fire escape, come down it and open the window.

It's good to stretch between the sheets. The window is open a little, rain tapping on it, a funky old smell comes drifting in from the river. Yeah, that's perfumed garbage, but who cares? I'm tired, ready to sleep and I can't. I lay flat for a long time, thinking of old ugly-face Twist. He's dumb, he don't know nothing about tonight, cause that's the way I planned it. None of them knowed that guy was back of the store but me. I had it all figured with Twist back of the counter. He had to get caught, but something went wrong.

Next time it's going to be different. I'll fix it good for him so he won't be around for a long time.

The rain's stopping. There ain't nothing now. Seems like the whole city is sleeping. I close my eyes and go off.

3.

Next day I'm up late. I dress fast and look out the window. Little kids is playing around, the street looks clean, like somebody swept it. That's a lie. The rain did that. So what? By tonight it'll be like the garbage men was through, dumping stuff and junk all over.

Two seconds later I'm out the door. When I hit the street nothing's happening around, but that figures. I breeze over to Suzie's. She's sweet-

pie, the kind I like cause she don't play the field.

There's just two guys in her life, and both of them is me. I hit on her door like the landlord coming for rent.

She opens and I push in, move to the parlor, flop on the couch.

Suzie follows me in. Got a bad look on her face. She don't have to say. I know what's wrong and I wait to see what she got to say, how she going to put it this time.

She don't say nothing so I ask her who died, where should I send the flowers.

That don't go. She stays mad-looking so I call her on it.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I say. "Don't I belong no more, or should I pack to go?"

What I like about her is the way I can twist her. She's got a scared look. I make a move like I'm shoving off for good, do it cool.

Next thing she's on the couch with me. "I ain't mad with you," she tells me. "But you wasn't around last night. I waited for you, I couldn't sleep when I didn't see you."

"I had business," I tell her. "Otherwise, you know I'd be seeing you."

"What kind of business?"

"My business."

"Was you with Twist?"

"How'd you guess?"

"When you ain't with me, you always with him and the boys."

"Something wrong with that?"

She don't answer so I ask again.

She still don't want to say, so I take her hand, bend it back against her arm. Yeah, now she talk Chinese, any language I want to hear.

"What's wrong about being with Twist, Suzie?"

"Nothing."

"Girl, that's a fabricated lie," I say but I let her go. She's looking at me half-angry. It's a kind of sweet look she got, with her big eyes almost ready for tears. It makes my spine feel like butter.

"I hurt you, baby?"

"Yeah, what you think?"

"I was only playing with your hand."

"You near to broke it."

"Cause you lied, girl. That's one thing I ain't for. You don't have to lie to me."

"I wasn't lying."

"That's a lie on top of the first one. You ever hear of double jeopardy? Girl, that's what you in when you play words with me."

She's near to tears, scared like I'm going to tear her skin off. I don't like to do this, but it's a good feeling I get, like I own her soul.

She's rubbing her hand now. That's for sympathy. But I ain't ready to dish no soft stuff out. It's a bit too early.

"You remember Tiny?" I say.

She nods on that.

"Maybe you heard and maybe you didn't. Maybe you got the lie, but this is the truth, why I busted with her. That girl got big ideas, her nose was in business territory

strictly my own. I beat her for that, and I mean beat. She wasn't around on the scene for a week."

Suzie's looking at the floor. She scared as hell, but playing with her hand. Got on a big pout, moving her toe in the carpet like a little girl.

I put the last on her. "You got anything to say now?"

"No."

"Got anything to ask?"

"No."

"You don't know no other word but no?"

Her face comes around slow and she gives me a deep look like she's thinking what I'm meaning. That's the way I planned it. Beat them down, make them scared of you, and you got them, you got everything.

"You asked me a question," she said. "I answered it best I could, Cookie."

"Oh, so you know my name?"

"If I don't, who does?" she says, pouting more.

Them words is sweet to my ear. Yeah, she's purring now. Got that look in her eyes like she's loving me forever. If I said crawl, she'd crawl on the floor. If I said jump, she'd jump off the roof. I give her a little smile and she melts like a hunk of ice.

"I hurt your hand?" I say. I know I did, but that's to test for the reaction.

She's goofed, don't know what to say cause she's still scared.

"You got no tongue, Suzie?"

"It don't really hurt."

"Damn, girl, you lying to me again?"

Her eyes pop. She ain't expecting that. I act like I'm going to split her in half and she starts shaking.

Real tears come to her eyes. I grab her, pull her close.

"Forget it," I say. "I wasn't meaning nothing."

She keeps her face down, don't answer, so I take her hand.

"It's hurting, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I didn't mean that," I tell her. That's a lie, but she laps it up like buttermilk. Them tears is finished and she's smiling again. I kiss her hand soft and tell her that's to make it better.

The line is a charm. I feed her some more soft-talk, shovel it out by the bushel till her eyes is all love for me.

She's easy as pudding now, but it's kind of hot and there's plenty of time. There's all afternoon and an empty house. I give her a kiss and her mouth wants to eat me.

But like I say, there's time, so I push her away easy and light me a cigarette, stretch my legs good and say, "How's the iccbox doing, Suzie? Your Pops leave any beer for me, or did he drink it all by himself again?"

I know she don't like that. It's in her eyes but she says, "I don't know, I didn't look."

"Then look, girl. I got a dry tongue. You can bring me a can if it's real cold."

That's an order and she knows it, she can't refuse. Her butt is up off that couch in no time. I watch her go for the kitchen, watch the way she walks.

It don't take a half minute and she's back with a glass. I take a good drink and blow my breath.

Then I say, "You ain't having none?"

She makes a face on that cause she don't like beer. She don't drink at all. It's what I like about her. She ain't no slobber-lips jiving girl that goes drunk on foam.

I don't tell her that cause she might get a big head and I'd have to slap it off. I'm in the mood for fun so I say, "You better get a glass for yourself."

She shakes her head, tells me she don't want none.

Yeah, I lay it on heavy now and she's got to react. There ain't no way out. I start the ball rolling by shoving my glass in her hand. "Take a sip.

She takes that sip and makes a face. I snatch the glass and laugh.

"It ain't killing," I say. "How does it taste?"

"It don't taste like nothing much."

"Cause you only had a sip. Get yourself a full glass and sit by me. Turn on the player and we'll listen to some records."

She don't move till I raise my voice. Then she jumps, goes to the kitchen and comes back. She throws some records on, starts the player.

It's down real soft so nobody can hear but us, so nobody knows we're here together.

There's all day ahead, miles of time. We empty the glasses and I send her for a refill. One is enough for her. Got a dizzy look in her eye and her legs don't work right on them high heels.

I finish half the glass, put it aside and grab her. Yeah, she's like real butter melting. I'm on her lips and she don't fight like she usually do. I got a green light this time. There ain't no talking cause there's nothing to talk about. Words is beside the point. I don't even hear the music no more. There's nothing now but us.

4.

Later I hear words in my ear, somebody talking. I'm half asleep and don't want to be bothered. But I hear her again, telling me it's late and I got to go.

I open my eyes and Suzie floats away, stands up. Got a nice smile, a shiny face, her hair up in a knot.

"I don't want you to but you got to go," she tells me. "It's real late."

That's no lie and I'm up on my feet. The room looks different, the glasses is gone. I feel dirty and sweaty looking at Suzie. That shiny face is like a star.

I tell her that and she laughs. Plus that, she says she had herself a shower. I can smell that sweet powder in my brain.

I move toward her. This time she ain't no melted butter. She holds me off, but she's smiling nice.

"We can't fool around, you got to go," she says. "Moms'll be here soon."

I cool fast on that. You never spoil a good thing when you can save it for the next time. So I don't press the matter.

I'm ready to swing. We move to the door. A little last kiss don't matter. I peck her lips, and then she ain't letting me go. Got her arms around me tight.

"Cookie, be careful," she says, real serious.

"About what?"

"You know what."

"You objecting to my friends?"

"I don't like Twist."

"He ain't my friend."

"Then why do you be with him?"

"Cause he's in the same club."

"He's bad influence. I know about him."

I laughed on that. "In my life he ain't even a four-legged fly with no head. He don't mean nothing."

"You couldn't stay way from him — for me?"

"I ain't with him. It's the other way around. He's with me but he don't know it cause he's too stupid."

"Then how come you do what he says?"

"Girl, who told you that punky jive?"

"I heard with my ears."

"Then you heard wrong, cause he does what I say. They all do what

I say, but I play it cool from behind the scene. The others don't even know the happenings."

"You could be in trouble."

"Yeah, somebody really been talking to you. Peaches' sister got a big mouth."

"She didn't tell me."

"It couldn't be nobody else, but don't you worry. I know the score all the way round."

I give her another peck on that and open the door. Going down the stairs, I'm thinking things. Got to talk to Peaches. His sister knows too much. Maybe he talks to her. Maybe she sees too much. Either way, he's got to shut her face.

First things first. That what Moms always says. So I hit for Peaches' house soon as I reach the street.

I catch him coming from the corner and he greets me good like he always does. He's one guy I like, my best friend, but that don't mean I got to forget to straighten him.

Right away he knows something's off. I'm not for beating around the bush so I let him have it when we reach his stoop.

"It's your sister," I say. "Plus you."

"Yeah?"

"That's right. How come she got a mouth bigger than her head?"

"What did she say to throw you, Cookie?"

"You ought to know better than me."

"I don't know what you're talking."

"Okay, so how does Suzie know so much if she don't talk to your sister?"

"I don't tell my sister nothing."

"Yeah, then how she know if you don't tell her?"

"You're asking the wrong cat, cause I don't know."

That don't go down with me and I don't let it. "You do know," I tell him. "Your sister picking up stuff she shouldn't know and spreading it around to Suzie. Maybe you said things you shouldn't say."

"Not that I know about."

"Okay, let it pass now and stop it cold for the future. Speak to Sister and tell her to keep shut. If she don't and she gets between me and Suzie, I'm going to slap her head off. You can tell her that for me."

I can see he don't like what I say and he gives me a kind of bad look, but he knows I'm right.

"Take care of it, Peaches," I tell him. "I leave her to you."

"Okay, man."

That's all. We slap hands, and I swing for home.

5.

After supper is a funny time. There's the usual argument with Moms, then I hit for the roof. It's good up there. Cool. A wind blowing off the river. I lay down and let it blow over me, light a butt and watch the sky.

It's starting to get a little dark. A

flock of pigeons swings overhead. I hear whistling. That's Zebra calling in his birds.

I'm kind of tired and my eyes is closed before I know it. When I open them again I hear mumbling. Somebody on the roof-landing.

I get up. The door is open. I tiptoe up next to it. Yeah, now I know. Two cats is arguing over stuff. They ready to shoot some H, but it's who goes first and who goes second. They arguing like somebody's going to lose real bad.

I slip back. One thing you never do is walk up on two addicts without them knowing.

I hit for the streets through another house and walk to the corner.

Nothing's happening so I quit the scene and leg it over to Peaches' house.

He's sitting on the stoop, puffing on a cigarette. Got a long face.

"What's happening, man?" I say.

"Your puss is dragging on the sidewalk."

"Nothing much."

"Got anything on for tonight?"

"I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"Sister. I got some proving to do."

Sister comes down a few minutes later and gives me a big hello. Got a smile on her face but it don't last, cause I give her the cold treatment.

She starts down the stoop then, and Peaches stops her.

"We got some talking to do, all three of us," he says.

“What about?”

“It ain’t too private here. We’ll talk on the roof.”

Sister’s not for the idea, but Peaches tells her to start moving. She knows what she’ll get so she moves and we go on up.

Soon as we’re there, Peaches says, “Tell Cookie all I told you about him. Go ahead.”

“What’s wrong with you? You told me nothing I don’t know.”

“Then I didn’t give nothing away?”

“What’s there to give away?”

Peaches turns to me. “Okay, you heard,” he says. “You satisfied now that I ain’t no big-mouth?”

“Okay, man.” I’m satisfied on him, but I ain’t through with Sister. She’s ready to go, but I’m blocking the doorway.

“I want a word with you,” I tell her. “You been saying things to Suzie I don’t like.”

“Like what have I been saying?”

“Stuff that’s none of your business. From this point on, you leave me out of your talking, see what I mean? You don’t discuss me with Suzie.”

“You telling me how to talk like you’re my father.”

“I’m giving you fair warning.”

She laughs on that, and I’m ready to slap her. That ain’t necessary, cause Peaches lets her have it full in the mouth.

Yeah, she ain’t laughing now. She’s ready to use her claws, and Peaches busts her again.

That’s the finish. She ain’t got no more fight. She’s ready to cry.

“Next time it’s going to be worse,” he tells her. “Less you keep your mouth shut. Okay, now, you can go about your business.”

There’s no word out of her. I step aside. She don’t look up. That’s all there is to it. I listen to her go down the stairs and turn to Peaches.

He got a big smile. I smile back at him, tell him everything is straight and get set to go down when he stops me.

“I got something to tell you, Cookie,” he says. “You want to listen?”

“Shoot.”

We light up first. Then he tells me, “This is about Twist.”

“Yeah.”

“He ain’t liking you, Cookie.”

“It’s both ways, Peaches. If a Mack truck ran four times over his skull, I’d laugh for a month.”

“Okay, but you got to be careful with that stud. If you wasn’t a real friend, I wouldn’t be telling you this.”

I look at him different now, there’s a cold feeling inside me like ice-water is running in my blood. I got that something-wrong feeling that always tells me watch out for myself.

“What’s so special?” I say.

He’s looking away now, like he don’t want to talk, like he’s said too much and is scared to go on.

“Spill it, man,” I tell him. “What

did you hear? How much do you know?"

"If I say, you don't let it go back to him?"

"Man, you know I'm shut. What's the deal?"

"Twist is suspicious."

"Yeah?" I say and I laugh, but it ain't a natural sound from my mouth. My blood is chilling more. "What's he suspicious about?"

"I didn't catch it all cause he was talking to Jeff. But I know he meant you. He going to catch and fry you."

"Thanks, man. I got two eyes in front and four in the back. Nobody's catching Cookie when he ain't looking."

"Good. You going down to the street?"

"I don't know. There's nothing special happening around, so what's the use?"

"There's nothing up here, either."

"It's cooler and there ain't no noise."

"Okay, I'm going to roll. There's a new girl around I got eyes for. Maybe she's on the sidewalk tonight."

That's all. We're finished and he goes for the door. I'm alone on the roof. It's real dark. Lights is way off in big buildings and across the river. There's nothing else but the sky, and I don't want to look up now cause it's a funny kind of dark.

There's nothing I want to do right now. I smoke a butt and think about what Peaches told me.

I'm blowing smoke and talking to myself when I hear steps on the stairs. They coming to the roof. Maybe dope addicts is on the way up. I'm not taking chances so I cut out for another roof and head for the street.

6.

Things is happening at the candy store when I breeze in. The crowd's there, a crazy record playing. Everybody's goofing off in the back, having a gay time.

I sit at the counter and have me a cool drink. A minute later Twist passes in back of me. Suzie is with him. They don't notice me, so I don't say nothing.

Them two together don't make sense. Something's wrong.

I sit it out and Suzie comes back in by herself. She still don't see me and goes to the rear. Sister's waiting at a table.

Both of them start out. I swing around on the stool, stop Suzie and she looks at me like she's ready to fall on her face. She covers that quick, gives me a nice greeting that fools nobody.

"You going out?" I say.

"Yeah, Cookie."

"Then I'll go with you."

The three of us go out to the sidewalk. Sister excuses herself fast. The two of us move on. We don't say nothing, but I'm watching her. She looks kind of pale, kind of nervous.

There's no exchanges till we reach her stoop. Then I tell her, "I didn't think you was friendly with old ugly-face."

"Who's ugly-face?"

"That's my pet name for Twist. Seems like you kind of favor him, don't it?"

Suzie looks at me scared and shakes her head. "You're thinking wrong."

"Then how come you was with him? Make it sound good for me so I don't get mad and bust your lip."

"Cookie, it's not what you're thinking. Honest, it ain't. He came back to the table where me and Sister was. He said he wanted to speak to me private outside."

"About what?"

"A date. He said he was liking me and would I like to go to a show with him some time. I told him no, I don't go with nobody but you."

"Just like that?"

"You don't believe me? Why you so suspicious?"

"Cause I'm liking you, and I don't trust him."

"You don't trust me, that's what you mean."

"I trust you all the way, baby. But I don't want you to be with him ever."

"I ain't going to be with him. Don't you understand?"

"Okay, I understand. Forget it. It's cause I like you so much that I don't want him around. There's only one thing he wants. That's to bust us up and show how big he is."

"He ain't nothing at all to me."

It's good hearing that. Yeah, she ain't for Twist. She ain't for nobody but me.

Everything's okay now. We move up, sit on the stoop. I'm thinking of the afternoon. It was the first time she didn't fight back, the best time. There wasn't no fussing about it.

I lean over and say, "Somebody's home upstairs?"

Suzie looks at me and knows right off what I'm meaning.

"Everybody's up," she tells me.

"That's real bad."

"Why?"

"Cause I'm feeling like this afternoon."

"You shouldn't say like that."

"Maybe not, but that's how I feel."

She turns her face away.

I reach out, get her wrist.

"Come on, Suzie."

"Where?"

"Upstairs near the clouds. There's nobody to bother us."

"You're crazy, Cookie."

I shake my head. Still got her hand. "Not me. I ain't crazy excepting about you."

I say that soft, but I keep my grip on her wrist, start squeezing.

"You're hurting me, Cookie."

"Yeah, I know."

"Let me go."

I shake my head. "You know when I'll let you go. Not before. You coming up?"

The fact is she wants to but she's

a little scared. That's kind of natural. I put the squeeze on a little more and say, "You know you can't refuse me. You know you're loving me so much you can't think of nothing else."

That does it. I see that look she gives me, feel her hand go soft in mine.

"All right, Cookie," she says. Her voice is real soft.

"Let's go," I say, and we both get up.

It's a long way to the roof. I'm hoping we don't meet nobody in her family. I can see Suzie's scared, biting her lip. Maybe she going to run out on me.

That's a lie. She goes all the way to the top and we hit the dark. Soon as we're on the tar, she turns and throws herself on me.

Man, this is something new. She's a real witch, wild as they come. That's okay by me. When they're wild it means they're tamed. She's kissing crazy. Man, it's like she been smoking pot, but I can handle it.

Got her arms around my neck. I take them away and say, "This ain't the spot. Somebody could come up and see us here."

We move away, pick a better place where it's safer, easier for me to run if I got to run. We ain't there half a second when she's got her arms around me, her mouth on mine.

Yeah, she's real frantic. It's the real thing, too. No wonder Twist was after this. He got a good eye.

But this is mine, all the way. He ain't ever going to have none of it.

7.

Half an hour later we're back down on the stoop. Suzie's different now. She don't say nothing. I keep talking at her and then she gets a crying fit.

I ain't expecting none of this, not so late in the game. I figure it's got to do with something I don't know about, so I ask her what's wrong.

It's like pulling teeth. Yeah, she's goofed up over nothing. Broads is all alike, made of pudding inside.

I finally get it out of her and it ain't nothing. She just wants me to take care of myself, that's all. She don't want me with the gang and all that kind of jive, just like you can walk in and out like you please.

I tell her the facts. Behind that, I say, "I know what I'm doing. Little Cookie can take care of himself."

"Then you ain't getting out of the gang?"

"I can't, plus the fact that I don't want to. Now let's drop it where we found it."

There's no more tears, nothing but a funny look that she throws me, then she gets up. I follow her into the vestibule for a good-night kiss.

It's a real long one, the best. Then she pulls away. "No matter what happens, remember that I'm always loving you," she says, and she leaves me standing there.

I smile to myself, go out, down the stoop, light up. Yeah, girls is goofy. What she got to say that for? It ain't sensible-like.

A couple of minutes later I cruise into the candy store. The usual crowd is there. I cop me a cool drink, see Peaches and give him a greeting. He's got on a long face.

"Whose funeral you going to?" I say.

That don't draw. He's looking at me funny. "Something's up," he tells me.

"Like what?"

"I don't exactly know, but I think you're in bad trouble."

"Let's stroll," I tell him, but we don't get to do that cause Jeff barges in.

He gives Peaches the nod and says, "You're wanted outside."

"Who wants to see me?"

"You don't know? Better get out fast, boy."

Peaches moves. Me and Jeff look at each other. Yeah, it's like he don't know me now. I don't like that look, but we never did like each other cause he's Twist's boy.

He follows Peaches outside. I wait around and then move on out. Peaches ain't around. Nobody's on the corner. Something's shaking. I don't know what, but I got a bad feeling, like this is got to do with me.

There's nothing to hold me so I hit for home. Peaches is on his stoop when I come along. I stop and ask him what's up.

He ain't the same cat now. Got a

funny look in his eye.

"Nothing," he says.

"What's between you and Twist?"

"Nothing."

"That was him that called you out, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"What did he have to say?"

"Nothing much. It was between him and me."

"Okay, man, I don't want to stick my nose in your affairs. But you was going to tell me something before Jeff called you out."

"Forget it."

"Didn't you say I was in bad trouble?"

"Forget it, man. It was nothing."

I see he ain't going to talk. There ain't no use standing around. I'm all right till I get to my stoop. Then it hits me hard. Things ain't straight. I'm thinking of what Suzie told me, how that Jeff boy looked at me.

8.

Next day I'm in no mood for the regular routine. I don't want to see nobody.

I hit a show by myself and that don't help, cause I'm kind of scared. That Twist is no one to play with.

I wish I was out of it, but there ain't no way out. I got to play it straight through. Can't hide cause there's no place to hide. Behind that, if I stay off the scene Twist is going to get ideas. He's going to think I'm scared, going to really think I pulled a fast one on him.

Night time I'm back at the candy store like usual. Everything's kind of the same. I see the boys and they're all right. Except Twist and Jeff. Old ugly-face and his boy is looking evil, but that ain't new with them. The only guy I can't figure is Peaches. Suddenly he's cold potato salad.

I see Suzie the next night. We're the same till she brings up the facts about a party in the neighborhood.

I'd heard tell about it but didn't figure on going. Least of all, I didn't think Suzie wanted to be there.

I ask her how she know about the party and she says Sister told her.

"Yeah, old trap-mouth. That one talk you blind."

"You don't want to take me?"

"What for?"

"Cause I'd like to go with you."

"It ain't your kind of party. Things'll be rough. They going to be drinking and smoking pot."

"So what? That don't mean I have to do like they do. Ain't you going to take me, Cookie?"

"You can talk a mile high and the answer is no."

"Yeah, you're afraid to take me cause of Twist. That's what you're thinking."

"Ugly-face don't scare me. Nobody does."

"Sister told me different. She says you wouldn't take me cause of him. She said . . ."

"Yeah, Sister!" I yell that out, and I'm ready to slap her down.

I don't. "Okay," I tell her, "you

want to see what's doing, then I'll take you."

She kisses me on that and it's set, but I got to dress for the session.

I fly home and come back in no time. I'm wearing my charcoal suit, wing-tip shoes, tab collar, blue tie, pink shirt.

Suzie's dressed pretty too. Got on pretty kicks, a pretty dress, her hair combed. I look her over, give her the nod.

"Nobody there is going to be prettier than you," I tell her.

She gives me a kiss on that and we cut the scene, take off for the party. By this time I'm in the mood.

We get there among the last, but that's okay. The party's really busting out when we cruise in. Yeah, everybody's got eyes for Suzie. She's the belle. Old Twist's eyes pop like an alligator's. We get a real old-time welcome.

A record is playing, the lights is dim, drinks going around. I smell pot in the air. That's not for me, not for Suzie.

We dance, and I'm glad we came now. Everything's okay. It's a good party, real cool, no rough stuff. Everybody's coasting nice.

I hold Suzie tighter, feel her head on my shoulder and close my eyes. It's like ten years till the record goes off.

A little later I walk into the kitchen for a beer. Drinks is all over the place, anything you want. I take some beer and somebody's behind me. It's old ugly-face.

We look at each other and I see him grin.

"Good party, ain't it, Cookie?"

"Yeah, not bad."

"You got your pretty broad with you. How'd you manage that? I didn't think she'd like to come."

"Where I go, she goes."

He laughs on that. "You're a cool cat," he says. "I got to hand it to you."

"You can say that again."

"Been meaning to tell you something, Cookie. Them words I used on you the night we pulled the job, I'm taking them back. I was off my rocker."

That's a weight off me, good to hear. "Forget it, man," I tell him. "It didn't mean nothing."

"Good. Give me some skin."

We touch hands and laugh.

"Somebody missing tonight. Who is it?" I say.

"Peaches." Twist ain't laughing no more. "I been meaning to tell you," he says.

"Tell me what?"

"Peaches put that guy on me when we pulled the job on the candy store."

I'm knocked dead on that, cause it's a lie. Cause I'm the one who made that set-up. I shake my head. It don't figure, that's what I tell him.

"It was Peaches," Twist says. "He knew the guy was in back of the store."

"If he knowed that, why did he come along when it could have

been his own neck?"

"I'll tell you why. Cause he was sure to get away. He figured I'd be bagged behind the counter like it almost happened."

"That still don't make sense if he was with us."

"It do, cause he knows I wouldn't talk if the cops got me. But why you sticking up for him?"

He's got me on that. But Peaches didn't do it. It's one thing I know. He ain't been talking to me, but he's the best in the bunch. Been ducking me, but the way I figure he's still my friend and I don't want them to put this on him.

Twist is waiting for the answer, looking at me. He asks me again why I'm sticking up for Peaches.

"Cause I know he didn't do it," I tell him back. "On top of that, he's my friend."

Twist is looking at me with that blank face, them dead eyes he has when he's mad.

"Okay," he says, "you got proof he didn't do it?"

I'm stopped again, can't say nothing but I got to say. "I happen to know," I tell him. "It ain't his style, that's all."

Twist nods like he's believing that, but he ain't. His face stays the same. He looks at me with them dead eyes.

"Okay, for the time being we'll let the first pass. You say he's your friend?"

"That's right."

"Yeah, but how do you really

know if he's your friend? What's the proof?"

Seems like crazy questions he's putting at me, but I'm wondering now. Twist ain't asking them for nothing. He got something up his sleeve, and I got a cold feeling like a wind is blow on me and there ain't no wind.

"Yeah, what's the proof?" he says. "Tell me, man."

I shrug. That uneasy feeling is still on me. "You don't prove something like that on paper. You just know it when it's so," I tell him.

Twist gives me a grin on that and shakes his head. "I got news for you, boy. Your theory is out, cause your friend ain't your friend."

"What you meaning?"

"Just like I say. He ain't your friend like you think. That's a fairy story all around. Better wake up, cause he's done put a knife in your back."

"How you figure that?"

"It didn't take no figuring. That's a fact, cause he already put it all on you."

I go dead cold on them words, but I don't say nothing. Got to cool it, keep my head. Something wrong here. Twist is trying to spring a trap.

"How you know all this?" I ask him.

"Only one way, man. He came to me and told. He swore on his mother."

I'm froze now. Sweat's trickling out of a million holes in my skin. I look at Twist. That face don't

show nothing. His eyes show nothing.

"What did he swear?"

"Man, do I have to spell it all out? He put it on you. He told me you knew about that guy in back of the store and wanted me caught."

I got a sick feeling, but I have to play this out, keep it cool. I try to smile.

"But you didn't believe that," I say.

"Nay, man, I knew he was putting it on you to take it off himself. Now you know what kind of a friend he is."

I nod, but this don't make sense. Something's wrong. Twist is wrong, cause no matter what Peaches said about me, he didn't know about that guy in back of the store and he didn't try to get Twist busted. That was my idea.

I look at Twist and he says, "You don't seem so happy. What's wrong, man? You don't believe what I told?"

"Yeah, I believe it now. But I didn't think he'd do something like that to me."

"Now you know."

"You going to work him over?"

"That's putting it mild. When I'm done with him he won't know his own face."

I look back at Twist, see that ugly face. Yeah, he means real business and I'm glad it's Peaches instead of me. The hell with him now. I don't care no more. He made

that up to put me on the spot. Now it's his skin.

Suzie busts into the kitchen looking for me. She gets my arm and I feel her nails in my skin.

"Something wrong?" I say.

"No, I was just wondering where you was. You was gone so long."

"I been talking business, that's all. But I'm with you now. You want to taste a little beer?"

I push my glass out and she pulls away. Me and Twist laugh on that.

"That's all right, though," Twist says. "Damn, some of them broads inside could empty a hog'shead without blinking. They all going to end up bums in the street."

"Suzie is different," I say.

"Yeah, I know."

We move inside then. Next thing Twist is asking do I mind if he dance with Suzie. He says it all right so I can't refuse.

"Okay," I tell him, "but don't forget who she belong to."

"Yeah, I know. It's your property, man. I won't cut in. This is just a dance."

He's got her then. They swing out on the floor and I sip my beer and watch just in case he going to try some funny stuff.

He don't, and the record slides away. Suzie comes back to me and we sit the next one out. It's still a good party. There's no fights and nobody blows his top. I'm feeling all right again, not sweating no more cold sweat. I'm in the clear.

There's only one trouble. Suzie's

so stiff it ain't funny. It's like she's scared, but that's cause she's new for this. Some of the stuff she's seeing don't go now. Some of the other bitches getting a little wild. Yeah, let her wait a while. She ain't seen nothing yet.

I'm thinking like that when Jeff busts into the house. He finds Twist and they go into conference. Something's up.

I see them look across at me. I get the high sign and they go to the kitchen. I excuse myself and follow them in.

They waiting for me. Right off, Twist says, "We got him."

"Got who?"

"We got that rat Peaches at the meeting place."

I feel ice in my veins again. Them two is looking at me, waiting for me to say something and I can't move my tongue.

"You ready to go?" Twist says. "We going to do some fixing."

"Right now?"

"Right now, man. When you expect?"

"Okay, I got to speak to Suzie."

"We'll be downstairs with the others."

The three of us move out of the kitchen. Twist and Jeff speak to some of the others and they make for the door.

I explain to Suzie, tell her I got a little business and to hold tight till I get back, cause it won't be too long.

"Where you going, Cookie?" she

asks.

"No place special. Just hold tight."

The others is out except Twist. He's standing at the door. I hear him say "Keep the party going and don't drink everything up. We'll be back. Hurry it, Cookie."

"Yeah, I'll be with you," I say, and I feel Suzie's hand on my arm. She holding me tight, got a scared look in her eyes. It's like she wants to tell me something and can't.

I give her a peck and say, "Don't worry. You're safe as home. I'll be back for you."

That's all. I swing for the door. Twist is gone. I hit that hall and I'm scared. Got a feeling like something's going to happen.

I can hear the others on the stairs going down. They're talking low. I wait at the top and listen.

Yeah, suppose this is a trick? Something tells me not to go down. I look up the stairs to the roof. That way I can make it, get away.

I'm ready to cut out when I catch myself. Man, if I ever do that then they really got me. I got to go down, bluff it out. All them other cats is stupid. They don't want me. They already got Peaches.

I start down the stairs. The guys is waiting outside. We move together. Nobody's talking. I feel good again, but that don't last. I'm starting to get scared. Suppose they ain't got Peaches? Suppose it's a trap. Twist got too friendly-like all of a sudden.

We keep walking and I'm pouring sweat. Maybe I can bust loose. But

that's a crazy idea. I ain't got a chance for it now.

We pass the candy store and I figure something, tell them I need smokes. I only be a minute.

"Don't make it no more," Twist says, but they don't wait.

That's good. I move into the candy store, grab me a pack of smokes and come on out.

By that time the others is half down the block. I got a chance for it now. All I have to do is cut out around the corner.

I'm ready to run when I see what's wrong. It ain't me they want, or I couldn't pull nothing like this. They wouldn't let me be by myself.

Yeah, I'm all right again. For a minute I almost jammed the works. But they don't know nothing. They all stupid. I start after them, catch up.

We move along, reach Twist's house. Yeah, maybe it is a trap. I fall back a little. Nobody notices. While I'm lighting a cigarette the others move down the cellar steps. It's my last chance to run and I'm ready to take it.

But maybe that's what they want, for me to show my hand. It's a test. They ain't got Peaches. That story was a phony. Twist is bluffing.

It ain't going to work. I start down the steps, move into the cellar.

I'm wrong about Peaches. They got him. He's standing against a wall between two of the boys. That boy is a sad-looking cat, and I almost feel sorry for him.

It's like he don't see me at first. Soon as he does, he starts coming at me. Them other two grab him, rip his shirt, chuck him back against the wall.

"Do that again and you might be dead," Twist tells him. He nods to the others. They let go. Peaches stands there.

"What you going to do with him?" I say.

"What do you do to any rat?"

I don't want to ask any more. This is going to be bad. I don't want to be in on it. Peaches going to get it, and it was me. I want to talk up for him but I can't.

Twist looks around. His face is real evil now. Got a small smile on his face like a cat after he ate the bird.

"Is you studs all set?" he asks.

"Yeah," them others say. But I don't. I wish I wasn't here. Wish my legs would stop shaking.

"Okay," Twist tells us. "This boy is a real rat. His whole family is rats, and we going to mess him up so he know better next time."

He finishes and looks at me. I got the feeling he's talking only to me. Nobody says anything.

"We going to start the usual way," Twist says. "He going to get a slit face, the squealer mark so everybody know not to trust him."

I go sick on that. Peaches going to be cut. I don't want to see no blood.

"Okay, you ready?" Twist says right at me. "Get your stabber out."

"What you want my knife for?"

"Cause you going to slit him, man. What you think?"

I shake my head cause I'm sick enough to throw up.

"Man, what do I have to do it for? What's wrong with somebody else?"

"He put it on you, Cookie, so you get the honor. Bring that knife out and get ready for business."

I don't want to do it, but I got to. There ain't no other way. No way to talk my way out. It's Peaches or me, that's all, and it can't be me. I reach for my switch, bring it out.

"Go ahead, slice him," Twist says.

I can't lift the blade. I can't do it. They stand there, waiting. Twist says, "You chickening out?"

I know I got to do it. I step toward Peaches. He spits in my face. Then I hear them, others laughing.

Next thing they're on me. My arm is bent back and I drop the knife. Peaches is trying to get at me again. They hold him back.

I know what it is now. Twist been playing with me, he sprung the trap. Peaches is still trying to get at me.

Twist looks at me. His face is evil. "You was the cool cat," he tells me. "But this time you forgot yourself. You nothing but a funky rat coming from a long line of funky rats. You got anything to say for yourself before you get what's coming?"

"Yeah, what's this for?"

"You don't know, man?"

"You tell me."

"Okay, I'll oblige. I knew all the time you put that guy on me when we tried to rob that place. That was a rat's job, and now you'd even cut your own friend to save yourself. Boy, you way down."

I look at Peaches. He ain't trying to get at me now. "Yeah, who's saying?" I tell him. "You can't tell me nothing about ratting when you specialize in the same. You and Suzie put the screws on me, so you both is lower-order rats."

Twist smiles on that. "You're wrong, man. I done it. Peaches wasn't in on this till I fixed it. I told him you said he put that guy on. He fell for the line and came in with us.

"You wrong on Suzie, too. She got you to the party thinking she was saving you. I told her, if she loved you, she better bring you along, elsewise you was going to get hurt. Coming back to Peaches, I told him you'd cut him to save your own skin, and that's what happened. You proved that good. Yeah, you was the cool cat with the big brain, but you ain't nothing now. Now you got to suffer."

I'm sweating bad. There's no way

out. I talk fast, say I won't do it no more, but I don't get the break.

"It's too late," Twist says, and he gives the nod.

Jeff moves in. He's got my blade. Next he's got a handful of my shirt. That knife-point is next to my neck.

"Say the word and I'll cut his goddam head off," he says.

"Just his face," Twist says.

I get it before I can holler. Then the others is on me. Feet and fists hit me. I'm down and they're stomping. I try to cover and it ain't no use. They get me, kick me till my ribs is rattling and my brain is going dark. I can't holler. Inside myself I'm saying, *please don't*, when a shoe busts my lips.

Far away I hear Twist say, "That's enough, he's near to dead," and I feel myself being lifted.

They take me to the back yard and dump me, leave me there. Later, I get up. I can hardly walk. Home seems a long way off. It takes time to reach the house and I don't figure to ever make the stairs, but I do.

Can't open the door. I got to knock. Moms answers. I keep my face down till I get inside. Then she sees it and lets out a scream.

