



Sample Chapter
from

The Weight of a Pearl

by
Walker Smith

The Weight of a Pearl

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CHAPTER 14

HARLEM

Doc Calhoun was feeling better than he had in months. For the first time since coming home from the war, he had no trouble climbing the 135th Street subway steps. The pain in his leg was diminishing. He was still troubled by nightmares, mostly about Spain, but he spent the sleepless hours studying charts, then practicing tenaciously during the day. His chops were back, sharper than ever. Gripping the handle of his horn case, he walked with a bounce that was almost his natural rhythm. He couldn't wait to get to the Red Regency.

As he approached the entrance, he saw a large sidewalk sign that had not been there the night before. When he read it, he rolled his eyes and laughed.

Stepping inside, he saw the other band members on the stage. Elton was tuning his floor tom; Alex was still working out chords on the piano for a new song that was supposed to kick off the first set; Sailor had his head down, clearly in his own world as he practiced a complicated figure on his bass; and Melvin, the bandleader and self-proclaimed sax master, was standing at center stage sucking away at a joint.

"Goddamn, Melvin!" Doc said when he got closer. "Get rid of that!"

Melvin grinned. "Why, man?"

Doc jerked his head in the direction of the bartender. "You *know* Eric's the manager's brother. And I've never met any managers who ain't scared of gettin' closed down because of some fool messin' with narcotics in their establishment."

Melvin scowled at him. "Yes, Mother." He quickly killed the joint with his fingertips and stuck it in his pocket. "Anything else you wanna nag me about?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. I saw that sign outside. So who the hell came up with that corny name for the band?"

Melvin grinned and hooked his saxophone to his neck strap. “Up the River!” he shouted. “And for your information, muthafucka, I came up with the name. You wanna pick a name, get your own band.”

Doc nodded. “Well, now that I think about it, that name might turn out to be perfect for us, if you keep up your public displays of dope-smokin’.”

Melvin nudged him playfully with his shoulder. “You better meet me in that alley after the first set, man, for some *private* dope-smokin’. ’Cause this is some real good shit, Doc.”

Doc laughed and sidestepped Melvin on his way to the piano. “My chart ready, maestro?”

Alex nodded without looking up and handed Doc his chart.

“Thanks, man.” Doc walked over to an empty stool, opened his case and lifted out his trumpet. As he began studying the chart, he heard a wolf-whistle and glanced up to see who Sailor was admiring.

A tall Negro woman in a trench coat was walking slowly toward the stage. Even in the dark club, it was clear that she wasn’t one of the regular B-girls who usually hung around hustling drinks at the bar. There was something very different about her. It was something in her walk—stately and smooth. It was in the curve of her neck and the high set of her head. Doc tried to look away and stop analyzing her, but couldn’t. Smooth brown skin and soft black shoulder-length hair. A light shade of red lipstick. Hands in her pockets. No pocketbook. Cool and relaxed, even in a room filled with this rogue’s gallery of lowlifes. He silently indulged himself by searching for a one-word description, but none of the regular adjectives seemed to fit. Then it hit him. *Elegant*. He smiled at his own foolishness and wondered what a woman like her would think if she could read a man’s mind. Then she stepped up to the edge of the stage, and he finally got a close look at her eyes.

That’s when everything changed.

Something about her eyes made him think of Spain. They were dark, very dark, and they seemed to be looking at something no one else could see. Like a vision. Or perhaps, like Enrique, into some painful past.

His thoughts were interrupted abruptly by Sailor’s crass comment:

“Oooh! Sex on the hoof!”

Elton gave him a crazed look. “Hoof? She ain’t a cow, man! Don’t listen to him, baby. Let me take that coat for ya, so we can see what kind’a chassis ya got under there.”

The woman’s only response was a slight lift of her right eyebrow.

Doc lowered his head and smiled inwardly. *Now that’s class...*

“Everybody shut the hell up,” Melvin said as he helped her up the steps. “ ’Specially you, Sailor, you nasty sonofabitch! Anyway, I told you fellas I had a surprise, and this is her.”

Sailor rubbed his hands together. “For me? Aww, man, just what I always wanted!”

“Shut *up*, man,” Melvin said, pushing him away. “This is Pearl. She’s our new singer.”

Everyone went stone silent. Even Sailor.

Doc closed his eyes and her name took up residence in his mind. *Pearl.*

Melvin started talking faster. “Okay, baby, let me introduce everybody. That’s Elton on drums, and that’s Alex at the piano. He helps me with some of the arrangements.”

Doc shook his head and glanced at Alex, who rolled his eyes. Everybody in the band knew that Alex wrote *all* the arrangements. Melvin’s forte was getting high.

“Now, Sailor’s a hell of a bass man,” Melvin was saying, “when he ain’t talkin’ all that mess. He was in the Navy—in the South Pacific during the war. That’s why we call him Sailor.”

Pearl nodded.

“And that’s Doc over there hangin’ onto his damn trumpet like he’s scared somebody gon’ steal it from him. He was in the war too. North Africa, right, Doc?”

Doc nodded, and felt the sudden need to check the valves on his horn. Pearl was looking directly at him.

“Caught a bullet in the leg, didn’t you, Doc? That’s why he’s still a little gimpy.”

“Just some shrapnel,” Doc muttered.

Pearl’s gaze drifted down to his legs, then back up to his eyes.

“It’s nice to meet you fellas.”

Her voice was even more startling than her looks. She spoke in a rich, deep contralto that made Doc's pulse race so fast he almost laughed at himself.

Melvin put his arm around her. "Uh, another thing I probably ought'a mention... She ain't just our new singer. She's my wife. So all you mugs lay off. Ya dig?"

Doc shrugged. "Cool."

He picked up his chart and turned around to hide the fact that this new singer, who also happened to be Melvin's wife, had left him feeling anything but cool.

* * *

With no time for a full rehearsal, Pearl sang only one song that night—"Lover Man." The song was popular, so the band had been playing it every night, but this was the first time they had played a vocal version. Doc accompanied her well, instinctively easing into her timing and filling the spaces without stepping on her vocal. He made up his mind to keep his eyes closed, even during his solo. Too many looks at another man's wife could be quite a hazardous distraction. But in the darkness behind his eyes, she was even more dangerous. Doc knew he was playing just for her and he wondered how it would all end—when he finally did open his eyes.

* * *

Over the next couple of weeks, Doc gave a lot of thought to Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Fulsome. Aside from the fact that he'd never seen a more mismatched couple, he couldn't help noticing an unusual pattern in their comings and goings. He tried not to jump to any conclusions about where Melvin might be taking her when they disappeared between sets. Sometimes he left without her, and Pearl would sit by herself at the bar, nursing a drink and chain smoking.

At the end of her third week with the band, Melvin did his disappearing act just before the last set. Pearl was sitting at the bar wearing the black sheath dress she always wore onstage. As Doc tried to decide whether or not to talk to her, he stared at that dress. It didn't have a plunging neckline and it wasn't too tight. Like

Pearl, it was sexy without trying too hard. It was the back of the dress that was provocative. It was cut low enough in the back that it showed the edges of her shoulder blades and just enough skin to drive a man crazy. After watching her for a few minutes, he finally walked over to the bar, ignoring the voice in his head telling him not to. He slid onto the empty stool to her left and ordered a neat Johnnie Walker Red.

“If you ever finish that Highball, I’ll be happy to buy you another one,” he said.

Pearl laughed in a deep rumble from her throat. As usual, the sound of it sent a chill down his spine.

“This ain’t a Highball, sugah. It’s just a Coke.”

“Oh, you don’t drink?”

“Not really. Maybe a glass of champagne on New Year’s sometimes.”

Eric walked over with Doc’s drink.

“Thanks, Eric.” Doc took a sip of his drink and tried to think of something to say to Pearl. Then he blurted out, “So, uh, where’d your husband go?”

Pearl narrowed her eyes at him. Then, instead of answering, she tilted her head back, tapped her cheek, and blew a series of soft, perfect smoke rings.

Doc raised his glass. “Hey! I been trying to figure out how to do smoke rings for years!”

“Patience, trumpet man. That’s the trick.”

“Okay. So, uh....”

Pearl eased into his broken sentence. “You born and raised in New York, sugah?”

Doc smiled, sensing that she was rescuing him from his awkwardness. “Born here and schooled here, but I wandered the world after that. What about you?”

“Born in Chicago, sugah. South Side.”

Doc nodded. “Black Belt.”

“I see you’re familiar with the area.”

“Is that where you met Melvin?”

“No, I didn’t meet Melvin till I’d been in New York for a while.”

“How long have you two been married?”

“Little over a year. Before that I was on my own—till Melvin rescued me.”

For the first time Doc saw the needle marks on her arm. “So he... *rescued* you, huh?”

Pearl folded her arms and changed the subject. “You know, I just love New York. Only two places I’ve ever been are Chicago and New York. But you said you wandered around. Where did you wander to, trumpet man?”

“Oh, I spent a little time in Chicago myself, and Kansas City, New Orleans... anywhere jazz was. I didn’t start seeing the rest of the world till ’38.”

Doc stopped when he saw Pearl’s gaze shift toward something over his right shoulder. He turned around and saw two white men standing behind him. They were both wearing dark, conservative suits and stony facial expressions. He didn’t know them, but he had a pretty good idea where they were from.

The man on the right had extremely white skin, which contrasted with his extremely black hair, which looked extremely Brylcreemed. There was nothing otherwise remarkable about him until Doc gazed into his eyes. He had seen pale blue eyes before, but this man’s eyes were as colorless as ice.

The one on the left had a blond G.I.-style crew-cut and stared at Doc while unwrapping a stick of chewing gum and popping it into his mouth. Then he tossed the wrapper to the floor and grinned. Doc tried not to laugh at the man’s jaws working so fiercely on that chewing gum.

Before he could speak, the man on the right flashed a badge and said, “Your name Demetrius Calhoun?”

“Depends on who’s asking.”

“Step outside with us, Mr. Calhoun.”

Doc gazed at them over the top of his glass as he finished his drink. Then he pulled two singles from his pocket and placed them on the bar. “You have me at a disadvantage, gentlemen. You seem to know my name, but I don’t know yours. Mind if I have another look at that badge?”

He read the badge and felt his teeth begin to grind. *Federal Bureau of Investigation.*

The man on the right smoothed his tie and gestured toward the door. "I'm Agent Adams," he said. "Outside. *Now.*"

When Doc stood up, Pearl touched his arm. "Wait, a minute. Maybe you shouldn't—"

Doc patted her hand and smiled. "It's okay. I'll be back in a few minutes."

As the two men walked Doc to the front door, Melvin was walking in.

"Hey, Doc," he said, eyeing the two agents curiously. "We, uh, we're about to start the last set in a few minutes."

"Play this one without me, Melvin. This might take a while."

When they stepped outside, Agent Adams led Doc to a black sedan parked directly under a "No Parking" sign. Opening the back door, he said, "In the car, Mr. Calhoun."

Doc sighed and slid into the back seat. Adams got in and sat to his right, and Crew-cut got in from the other side. A pair of dark eyes peered at him from the rear-view mirror.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?" Doc asked.

Adams got right to the point. "Do you know a man named James Turner?"

Doc turned his head slowly and stared at him. "Why?"

Adams grinned. "I'm asking the questions here. Do you know James Turner?"

"*Why* are you looking for this James Turner?" Doc asked pointedly.

Adams twitched slightly. "Didn't you hear what I said? *I'm* asking the questions here."

"Actually, your friend's gum-smackin' is making it hard to hear..." Before either of them could respond, he said, "Oh, yeah, James Turner. Guess that *might* be—"

He stopped. A blur of motion on the sidewalk caught his eye. It was Pearl. She was standing near the front right quarter panel of the car, casually smoking a cigarette.

"Guess that might be *what*, Mr. Calhoun? What were you saying?"

Doc looked at him, and then tapped his forehead. “I was just tryin’ to remember sump’m. Lemme see...” He snuck another look at Pearl. Now she was pacing as she smoked, back and forth along the sidewalk.

“What I was thinking was that, uh, James Turner might have been Jimmy Turner. I knew a Jimmy Turner once, but I haven’t seen him in years.”

Adams showed his teeth in an unfriendly smile. “You’re lying.”

“Now why would I lie about that? I haven’t seen Jimmy in years.”

Doc had to concentrate hard to keep from grinning. Pearl was still strolling along the sidewalk, and had just lit a new cigarette off the end of the one she was finishing.

“We happen to know you were very close friends with Mr. Turner. And all of a sudden you lost complete touch with him? You expect us to believe that?”

Doc sighed. “Well, it was hard for me to believe too, till I heard he was dead.”

Adams smiled tightly. “We talked to the family. They would’ve known if he was dead.”

Doc stared straight ahead. The Party always handled breaking that kind of news to families, and he had notified them of Jimmy’s death the day he returned from Spain. Had the family lied to the FBI? Or had the Party somehow failed to tell them what had happened to Jimmy? Doc felt a sudden wave of grief, knowing that he would have to visit Jimmy’s mother—once he was out from under the scrutiny of the FBI.

Adams was still talking. “So you claim he’s dead, huh? Did you see him die?”

“No, I *didn’t* see him die. But I haven’t seen him alive since—” Doc paused, as Jimmy’s death replayed in his mind. *No, I didn’t see him die, you sonofabitch. I don’t know how long it took him to choke on his own blood—*

“Since when?” Adams said, shattering the terrible memory. “What year?”

Doc composed himself. “Oh, let’s see... 1936. Maybe ’37. Not exactly sure.”

“Let me help you with that, Mr. Calhoun,” Adams said, tapping the driver’s shoulder.

The driver handed him an envelope. Adams opened it, pulled out a page, and looked at it.

“Says here you attended a meeting of the American Communist Party on May 9th, 1937. You were with James Turner. Don’t deny it. Both your signatures are on the sign-in sheet.”

Doc shrugged. “I’m not denying it. Yeah, I went to a meeting.”

“With James Turner.”

“If he was there, I didn’t see him. We weren’t Siamese twins, and it was a big hall.”

“A big hall,” Adams said contemptuously. “Who was there? Give me some names.”

“Didn’t you just say you had the sign-in sheet? I’m afraid you’ll have to get your names from that, because honestly, my memory isn’t what it used to be.”

Doc snuck another look outside and was relieved to see Pearl going back inside the club.

“How long have you been a Communist, Mr. Calhoun?”

“I’m not a Communist, Mr. Adams.”

“That’s *Agent* Adams.”

“Okay. I’m not a Communist, Agent Adams.”

“You’re a liar.”

“A liar? Sure. All men are liars. Ask any woman. But I’m *not* a Communist.”

“So you just decided to go to a meeting on a whim.”

“Not on a whim. I attended a meeting that was about some local issues that concerned me. And that’s not a crime.”

“Jury’s still out on that one, Mr. Calhoun. The FBI is looking closely into all subversive activities involving you Reds. The definition of ‘crime’ is changing every day.”

“Evidently.”

At last, Crew-cut spoke: “You’re a real smart nigger, aren’t you?”

Doc grinned at Adams. “Do I have to answer that one too?”

Crew-cut grabbed Doc’s chin and yanked it in his direction. “Yeah, you do!”

Doc jerked away from him, but stayed calm. “Hmm. Sounds like a two-part question. Am I real smart *and* am I a nigger. And here’s my answer... Yes to the first and no to the second.”

“Stop wasting time, Vince,” Adams snapped at his partner. “Now, Mr. Calhoun, how did you get back from Spain? ...Oh, I guess you figured we didn’t know about you Reds sneaking over there and back. Well, we know all about it.”

“I told you, I’m not a Red. I wasn’t then, and I’m not now. I was a soldier.”

“In Spain! Which was strictly prohibited by the United States Government!”

“In North Africa,” Doc said, keeping his voice irritatingly calm. “I was a soldier in the United States Army, and I was stationed in North Africa. You can check it. And as far as Spain, I don’t have any information for you.”

“Let’s get back to that Communist meeting you went to—”

“No, let’s *not*. Let’s get back to my job inside that club over there—unless I’m under arrest. Am I under arrest, Agent Adams?”

After a long silence, Adams opened the door and let Doc out.

“You know,” Doc said, “you really ought’a take that chewing gum away from your partner. It’s hard to take you guys seriously with all that juvenile smacking going on.”

Adams smoothed his tie. “You’ll be taking us seriously, Mr. Calhoun. Very soon.”

* * *

By the time Doc got back inside, the last set had ended and the band was packing up.

“Sailor,” he called.

Sailor looked up. “Hey, man, what the hell happened to you?”

“Unavoidable business I had to tend to. Where’s Melvin?”

Sailor snorted. “Come on, man!”

Doc laughed. “Already?”

“Yeah,” Sailor said. Then he jerked his chin in the direction of the bar, where Pearl was sitting alone. “I don’t mind tellin’ you,

Doc... If he keeps leavin' that Grade-A ass unattended, I might just have to steal it from him."

"Hey, man!" Doc snapped. "The last thing she needs is a shit-mouthed low-life like you! And if you don't roll your tongue back in your head, I'll go to work as her goddamn bodyguard!"

"Aww, lounge, man," Sailor groaned. "Goddamn... You boy-scout cats make me sick!"

Doc gathered his sheet music, placed his trumpet in its case, and walked over to the bar. Signaling the bartender, he took the seat next to Pearl. "You must'a missed most of the last set."

Pearl slid a pack of cigarettes toward him. "How do you figure?"

"All those cigarettes you were smoking on that long walk you took outside. Were you lookin' out for me?"

"I just wanted to make sure they didn't haul you off someplace with no witnesses. I got the plate number and you better believe I would'a raised some hell with *somebody*."

Doc smiled. "You little tiger!"

Pearl gave him a sidelong glance. "Little?"

"Correction. You *tall* tiger. But you *were* stalking. I was waitin' for you to take a bite out'a one of those guys. And what made you think they were gonna haul me off someplace?"

"I'm from Chicago, sugah. I've seen more than my share of Negroes gettin' hauled off by the cops."

The bartender walked over with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red and yawned as he poured him a drink. "Awright, Doc, I'm warnin' you. After this one I'm closin' up the laboratory."

Doc grinned and pretended to flutter his eyelashes. "Eric! You remembered!"

"Yeah, yeah. Johnnie Red. That took a lotta guesswork. Hey, Pearl, you okay with that Coke? It's gotta be warm by now."

"It's fine, sugah."

"Awright, soon as I sweep up, I gotta throw both'a yuz out. 'Scuse me, Pearl. *You* I escort. Him I throws. And then I make like Santa Claus—to all a goodnight."

Doc laughed. "We'll be gone in five minutes, Eric."

Once Eric was out of earshot, Pearl said, “Okay, now tell me what those cops wanted.”

“They weren’t cops.”

Pearl put out her cigarette and stood up. “Never mind. None of my business.”

“Wait, Pearl. I’ll tell you.” He knocked back his drink and left two singles under the ashtray for Eric. “Let me walk you to the subway. Unless you’re waiting for Melvin.”

Pearl shook her head. “Let’s go.”

When they got outside, Doc said, “They were FBI agents.”

Pearl looked at him with wide eyes. “FBI?”

“Mm-hmm. But look, Pearl, I’m not a criminal. Believe that, please. And since they already have all the information there is on me, there’s no reason I can’t tell you this. Hell, they investigated me inside out before they’d let me fight in World War Two. That’s why this visit surprised me. You see, I was in Spain in ’38. In the war.”

Pearl tapped out a cigarette and Doc lit it for her. “So you fought in both wars?”

“I did. In Spain I was with the Lincoln Brigade.”

“The Lincoln Brigade,” she said, nodding. “I read about you fellas in the newspapers. So, are you a Communist? Is that what those FBI agents wanted to talk to you about?”

Doc smiled. Unlike most people, Pearl showed no horror at the word “Communist.”

“No, I’m not a Communist, but a lotta the other Lincolns were. Those agents were askin’ about one of my buddies.”

“Oh. Is he in trouble with those fellas from Washington I been readin’ about?”

Doc gazed at her for a moment, then lit a cigarette for himself. “He’s dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sugah. Was he a close friend?”

“Yeah, he was. We grew up together and we learned a lot in Spain. All about the world, about people, about the *value* of people. Every single human life. He had a head start on me though, because he had joined the party. Sometimes I thought about joining, but I never did. It’s hard to explain why so many folks joined

up back then. But those were different times in the thirties. Hard times. Everybody was just lookin' for some justice."

Pearl nodded. "And some food. And some jobs. The Depression was... well, depressing."

"So was Spain. And it all led to World War Two."

"More folks dying," Pearl murmured. "Hitler and those damn concentration camps. I'm sure glad he's gone, and Mussolini too."

"Yeah," Doc said, "but everybody forgot about Franco. That sonofabitch is still in power over in Spain."

"I know, sugah. Nobody wins in a war."

Doc stared at her. "What did you say?"

"I just said nobody really wins a war. Everybody thinks they're right, that they're the only good guys. Everybody can't be right, so it seems to me that makes everybody wrong."

Doc was quiet for a moment. "Somebody told me that same thing once." He looked at her and shrugged. "Look, why don't we talk about something more pleasant."

Pearl shook her head. "No, sugah. If we don't talk about it, it gets forgotten. And we *better* not forget this war or Spain either. Maybe if folks talked about it more, then we could find some answers instead of killin' each other over and over again, in war after war. 'Cause as far as I'm concerned, there are no good guys in a war. Only bad guys and victims. That might not sound right, but I think a lot of soldiers are victims too, just like the folks they're tryin' to help."

"Well, all I know is that ever since we got back from Spain, what was left of us, the government's been making *us* out to be the bad guys. I don't feel like a victim myself, but I saw a lot of people who were. And we couldn't save 'em. So... I guess we failed."

"No, you didn't. The way I see it, you were a hero for just goin' over there to help."

Doc smiled. "Didn't you just say there are only bad guys and victims in a war? Anyway, whatever I was, I was too young and dumb to be a hero, believe me. All I did was follow orders."

"Well, doesn't that work out to be the same thing? At least sometimes?"

He gazed at her through the smoke. “Come to think of it, the closest I ever came to doing anything that felt heroic was *not* obeying orders.”

“And what was that?”

“Well, I stopped to bury some... somebody when I should’ve been in... in Barcelona delivering—” Doc suddenly went cold and stopped talking.

“What? What were you supposed to deliver?”

“I just thought of sump’m... I was supposed to deliver a truckload of supplies, but I stopped to dig that grave. If I hadn’t done that I probably would’ve made it to Barcelona just in time to get killed with the others. And I wouldn’t have met Pablo and— My God, it’s amazing how your whole life can turn on a dime.”

“But you survived. All that means is you weren’t supposed to die in Barcelona.”

Doc stared at her. “Maybe. And I only survived because of a brave nurse from Harlem.”

“A female nurse was in Spain? From Harlem?”

“Small world, huh? She told me she worked at Harlem Hospital before joining up with the Lincolns. She fixed up my shoulder at a triage unit on the way to Gerona. I sure hope she got back in one piece. She had an odd name... Sally-ree or sump’m like that.”

Pearl gazed absently for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. “Tell me sump’m... Did you have to kill anybody in Spain?”

“More than I’d like to think about.”

“That must be a hard thing to do, even in a war. ’Specially the first one.”

“Not the first one,” Doc said bitterly. “The first one I killed was the easiest. Actually, it was two of Franco’s soldiers who’d just killed one of my buddies. I emptied my clip into both of ’em before they could reload. Didn’t blink an eye.”

“Lord! I don’t know how any of you found the guts to go to war.”

“You never know what kind’a guts you have until you face sump’m really evil or frightening. And Spain was all of that. That’s why it kept botherin’ me, I guess, so—”

“So you joined up for World War Two.”

“Like I said, young and dumb. The FBI treated anybody who’d fought in Spain like we were the enemy. Interrogated us and made us jump through hoops before they’d *allow* us to serve in their segregated army! Imagine that. As bad as they needed soldiers! Anyway, next thing I knew, I was in North Africa gettin’ my young, dumb ass shot at. But not for long.”

“You were right on the front lines? Like—oh, what do they call that?”

“Infantry. But you don’t have to be in the infantry to be on the front lines. All they let me do was drive a supply truck, and I *still* managed to catch two pieces of shrapnel—one in my back, and one in my thigh. I got hit in the shoulder in Spain, but that was nothin’ compared to that thigh wound in North Africa. That’s the one that hit a main artery.”

Pearl’s eyes widened. “Oh, Lord! Was it bad?”

“Pretty bad. I lost so much blood so fast, I passed out and woke up in a field hospital, with some medic givin’ me the good-news-bad-news routine. ‘You’re goin’ home, boy, and by the way, you’ll never walk again.’ But I made a liar out of him ’cause I walk pretty good now.”

Doc dropped his cigarette on the sidewalk and crushed it with his shoe, then glanced over at Pearl. Her eyes looked ink-black and unreadable under the street lights. “I can’t believe I’m talking about all this,” he said. “I usually never do.”

Pearl smiled. “I understand.”

They fell into a long silence, then Doc said, “You know what you said before, about soldiers being victims? I have a very good book that talks about that. Real philosophical book.”

“I don’t read as much as I used to,” Pearl said wistfully. “But what’s the title?”

“It’s called *Johnny Got His Gun*. I’ll bring it to you at the club tomorrow night.”

“Oh, no, sugah. Mama always taught me never to borrow books, except from the library. I’ll find it... So, tell me about some other books you like.”

Doc smiled. “You know, it’s been a long time since I could talk to anybody about books. You’re a mysterious lady, Pearl Fulsome. Lotta angles to you.”

Pearl pointed at his pocket. “You got another cigarette, sugah? That was my last one.”

Doc tapped out two cigarettes, lit them and grinned as he handed one to her. “I sure hope Melvin doesn’t mind you callin’ me that, ’cause I kind’a like it.”

Pearl laughed. “Oh, he don’t mind. I call everybody sugah. Sometimes I have trouble remembering folks’ names. But stop changin’ the subject. What happened after you got back from the war and figured out how to walk again?”

“Oh, yeah. Well, when I was released from the hospital, I came back to the States on the first plane I could get on. Soon as I got back to New York, I got my horn out of hock and limped on over to the Savoy to see if I still had my lip. And that’s where I met Melvin. He was lookin’ for a trumpet man and I was lookin’ for a gig. So I joined the band and a couple’a weeks later he told us we had a singer, which turned out to be you. Since then, nobody’s started any wars, we’re working at a *glamorous* joint, and you and I are making beautiful music together.”

Pearl exhaled a soft mist of smoke and laughed. “So we are, trumpet man... So we are.”