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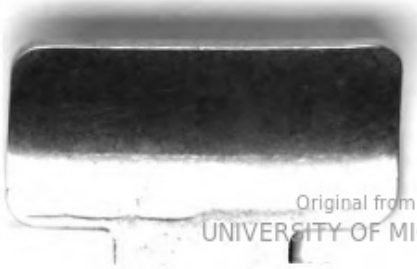

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN LITERARY FELLOWSHIP AWARDS

To E. P. O'Donnell for *Green Margins*
To Jenny Ballou for *Spanish Prelude*
To Robert Penn Warren for *Night Rider*
To Clelie Benton Huggins for *Point Noir*
To Dorothy Baker for *Young Man with a Horn*
To David Cornel DeJong for *Old Haven*
To Maurine Whipple for *The Giant Joshua*
To Mary King O'Donnell for *Quincie Bolliver*
To Helen Todd for *A Man Named Grant*
To A. Fleming MacLeish for *Cone of Silence*
To Donald MacRae for *Dwight Craig*
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To Edward Hoagland for *Cat Man*
To Eugene Burdick for *The Ninth Wave*
To Herbert Simmons for *Corner Boy*

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A NOVEL

BY

HERBERT

SIMMONS

CORNER BOY

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON
1957 : THE RIVERSIDE PRESS CAMBRIDGE

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Social Work
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To Rubye
who caused a boy's dreams to crumble
and a writer's vision to grow . . .

And my thanks
to Professor Jarvis Thurston
whose guidance made it possible
for me to write this book

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1 SPOTS ON THE WALL

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LOUNGING under the lampposts on the corners of the city, crowded together in the dark back alleys and gambling dens, you'll find them. Worn-out men with young faces, scattered through the cities you'll find them, young men as old as the oldest man in the world.

Take eighteen-year-old Jake Adams. Tall, slim and solid in silhouette as the lamppost he leaned against. On his face was a look that could only be described as casual tenseness. This look came often to his face and was one of the things that made him attractive to women. He held a cigarette loosely between his lips and the smoke spiraled lazily upward to linger in the hazy light from the lamp bulb. Out in the street hurrying cars blared angry horns at foolish pedestrians.

"Hey, Jake, what you trying to do, get a suntan?" a guy called from across the street and dashed bravely through the traffic over to where Jake was. It was Scar, Jake's best friend,

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a tall lithe nineteen-year-old, who wore his unruly hair in a close-clipped, crew-cut fashion and got his name from the long razor-inflicted welt that crawled diagonally from his right temple through the cleft in his chin.

"Hey Scar, what's up?"

"World's tired, man, trying to keep the monkey off my back."

"Dammit, Scar, I told you about riding the mainline."

Scar shrugged. "Let's go stick a few across the green," he said. They walked west down Welch Street, past Judie's and the Circle Theater, past Maxwell's candy house, past the long row of listing, dingy tenements and the alley between the tenements and Booker's Billiard Parlor at the end of the block.

Only the first two of the seven squatty pool tables were occupied. It was 10 P.M. and the place should have been crowded at that hour. The pool equipment was the only thing new in the place, the building was like the neighborhood — tired, old, and washed with dirt.

"What's the game?"

"Make it bank, four and four," Scar said.

"Break out."

Scar bent over the table in the slightly pigeon-toed stance good pool shooters assume to apply power to the stroke when breaking the balls. Right arm and leg went back, and then forward together. The seven, five, and deuce fell. "Need one," Scar said. Scar made the straight and two of his banks before missing. Scar was too good for Jake, and Jake knew it, except when . . . The hell with it, Jake thought.

"Say kid, who's the broad I saw you with yesterday?" Booker said, coming over to the table. Booker was the portly, middle-aged owner of the pool hall, who had been racking pool balls for over twenty years and was still a kid at heart.

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"Who you talking 'bout, Maxine?" Jake took his eye off the ball momentarily and glanced sidewise at Booker.

Booker brushed vainly in an effort to wipe some of the chalk dust from his gray-and-white houndstooth vest. "Aw, I know Maxine," he said impatiently. "This broad was short, but stacked up real tough, with black, pretty hair and a crazy smile. She had some cute eyes too, something like a Jap girl's only they didn't slant as much."

"Where were you to notice all this?" Scar cut in.

" 'Cross the street from the school, sure is fine."

"Sure is," Scar agreed.

"Who is she?" Booker said. "Got a switch to give you an itch for."

"Eleven ball in the side," Jake said, trying to keep from sounding annoyed. The ball hit the corner of the pocket and spun off. "Need one," Jake said disgustedly.

"Who is she?" Booker persisted.

"Girl named Armenta," Jake said casually, hoping Booker would drop the subject.

"She's tough," Booker said.

"Ain't she," Scar said. "Got lots of sense too."

"Is she!" Booker said, making it sound like a statement.

"Your shot," Jake told Scar.

Scar called a cross-corner shot and made it. "Eight ball three rails in the corner."

"What's Maxine going to do?" Booker wanted to know.

"What's it to ya?" Jake said quietly.

"Need one," Scar said, watching the eight ball just miss the corner.

"Don't be getting mad, what's he getting hot about?" Booker said to Scar.

"Leave him alone," Scar said.

"Can you beat that, I've been bull-skating for years with

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this guy about his ole ladies and now he's getting hot. What's so diff'nt about this broad, she got a gold-plated — "

"Shut up," Jake said quietly.

"Leave him alone," Scar said.

"Well of all the — " Booker threw up his hands and walked away.

" 'Nother game?" Scar said after sinking the eight ball.

The door of the poolroom opened with a flourish and Spider walked in. "Say, man, they got a crowd over at Zodie's, let's drift." Spider had on a new suit, a gray shark-skin single-breasted, with the New Look front and seamless back. The shoulders were almost bare of padding and the suit looked neat on his tall, rawboned frame.

"You ought to wear light-colored clothes all the time," Scar said. "They look good on you."

"Come on, man, let's dig the happenings at Zodie's," Spider said.

"What kind of crowd, old or new?" Jake wanted to know.

"New, think I'd play to an old crowd?"

"Think they'll catch on?" Jake said looking at Scar.

"Naw, man," Spider said. "Come on, let's drift."

Jake shrugged. "What the hell, let's try it."

They hung up the sticks and paid for the game. "If Monk comes in tell him I'm at Zodie's."

"O.K., Jake," Booker said. "You guys take it easy."

2

ZODIE'S was across the street down at the other end of the block. Called the Zodiac, it combined a bowling alley with a

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tavern and did a thriving business. They went through the tavern into a small room in the back. The closed door shut out the sound of intoxicated voices and the whine of an alto sax, backed by a piano, drum, and bass fiddle.

Inside the back room were a crowd of men and a few women. Caldonia was there too. Caldonia, who wore women's clothes and a poodle hair cut, and took douches because all girls took douches.

Smoke hung in the room like fog in a swamp. Small round dots of fire bit the atmosphere; the harsh burning ring of the cigarette, the feeble glow of the cigar, the ash-splattered flame of the pipe, gave off a poignant scent of tobacco. In the corners the cold, hard, bright red glare. It gave the foggy room a sweet intoxication. People crowded around the table where the man in the black pin-striped suit was throwing the dice.

"Dig the square," Spider said.

"Aunt Jeremiah's country cousin fattened for the kill."

The square was winning. The square caught nine for a point and made it. The square caught five for a point and made that too. The money started piling up. A baldheaded, wrinkle-faced old man said something unheard and walked away from the table. Nobody wanted to fade the square, but the man to the right was supposed to, if he wanted to stay in the game. That was the house rule. The money was piling up, the square was hot.

The sweaty little man in overalls didn't want to fade the square. His high voice rose excitedly from thin lips. His flat nose quivered. Grease trailed onto his narrow tan face in smeary blotches from the straight, sticky patches of his conked hair. The cold, impersonal marble-brown eyes of the houseman fixed themselves indifferently upon the sweaty little man. The heavy lips on his stony face moved slowly.

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"Got to fade to stay, less somebody else wants to join the game."

"I'll try him," Spider said moving between the little man and the square.

"Move over," Scar said, and squeezed between the little man and Spider.

The little man flushed with anger, but saw the welt on Scar's face and said nothing. When Jake moved in between him and Scar he hardly noticed.

At a dollar a lick the square hit Spider four times before he missed his point.

Across the street from the Zodiac, next to the pawnshop, the movie came to an end promptly at 11 P.M. and the people trickled out of the Circle Theater. Some jumped into the long line of waiting cabs, others walked to the corner and waited for a bus. Many went across the street into the Zodiac or farther down the street into Bill's B.B.Q. Inn or Club Paradise. Some walked all the way down to the corner and went into a dingy, cramped restaurant christened Molly's, but called the Greasy Spoon by the customers. Welch Street came to life. Blocks of night clubs and taverns neon-lighted a message of pleasure and spoke their charms with blaring music and the shuffle of stimulated voices. Women of the night went to their stations at the bar stools. Caldonia's crowd offered five, ten, fifteen. Welch Street was a nauseated volcano erupting people.

Spider, his dark face void of expression, clicked the dice together in his huge hand. The dice rolled from his hand and came up seven.

"That black boy sure got a way with them dice."

The dice rolled again and Scar, who was fading Spider, let them roll without stopping them, which he could do if he wanted to. The dice came up seven.

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"Pay me," Jake said.

The little man with the conk tossed Jake a dollar. The grain-colored woman tossed Jake a dollar. The fat man, whose nose sang when he breathed, reached into his cream-colored pants and tossed Jake a half dollar. The tall muscular guy, at Jake's elbow, knitted his brow and tossed him a half. Somewhere, from out in the crowd, quarters flowed. Everybody wanted to get in on a sure thing. Jake was laying two-to-one odds that Spider would hit. The fat man reached into his pocket and snatched a large green-and-white handkerchief. He put the cloth to his nose and sniffed. He made a pretense of wiping the beefy face under his curly black hair. Spider collected a dollar, on a private bet, from the guy in the pin-striped suit. Spider hit eight straight licks at two dollars a wop. The money was reluctantly pulled from Scar's pocket. Then Spider caught a point and missed. The dice finally arrived at the sweaty little man. He threw craps and cursed. He threw seven and gave a desperate laugh. He threw five and blew on the dice. He cajoled the dice. "Five dice, five!" The dice turned up three. "Five, come on, dice, five!" The dice bounced crazily, spun as if they were being pulled down a whirlpool and turned up six and one. The little man laughed derisively. The dice came to Jake. The little man would not fade Jake for more than a half dollar. Jake caught eight for a point and made it. The stone-faced houseman took the fifty-cent piece and threw Jake four dimes. The little man placed another fifty-cent piece gingerly on the table and held his breath. Jake threw the dice and the little man caught them. Jake let the dice go again and the little man stopped them. Jake smiled. The little man ran his fingers over his greasy hair. Jake threw the dice and the little man let them roll and they turned up seven. Jake smiled. The little man ran his fingers over his greasy head,

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and left the table. "Fifty dollars, sweet Jesus, fifty boons you'll never see again, lord have mercy! A whole week's pay, God damn!"

The dice passed to Scar. The dice rolled out clinging like lovers. Spider bet that Scar would hit; Scar bet on himself. They gave odds to get somebody to bet against Scar. People bet against Scar and lost money. "That wipes me out," Jake said and left the game.

Spider got the dice again. After Spider hit him for five straight licks, Scar decided he had had enough also. Now Spider started catching points instead of seven on the first roll. Spider was hot, he even made four the hard way. He made five points before missing. Leaving the game, Spider lost his balance and bumped into the houseman. In the houseman's pocket were three ten's that hadn't been there before. "Get hot, dice, get hot. Don't have to share your luck no more," the pin-striped square said

3

ON THE LOT, next to the Greasy Spoon, they divided the money. "Wow," Spider said. "Just about seventy-five skins apiece."

"When do you think they'll get wise?" Scar said.

"They'll never get wise," Spider said. It was his standard reply. Spider kissed the small dice in his hand that matched the set in the Zodiac.

Jake whistled for a cab cutting across Welch on Thirteenth Street.

"Where to, Jack?" The voice was a part of the street.

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Where to . . . step into my cab and I will show you my wares. I will whisper of bars that open after legits close down, of cool, dark corners where intimacies and strangers are one, of close revolving atmospheres where the hard red glare glows, or the plunger, and love for sale. I can lead you to a cross stream, whose current is the swift pace of a big city on the move, in the dark, while the tissue-paper morals of society are soggy with sleep, and if you tire of the pace, or flounder in the stream, I can always take you home . . .

"Ninth and Welch," Spider said.

"Fifteen-o-six South Thirteenth," Scar said.

"Thirteen-thirteen Wisconsin, what the hell, I ain't ready to go home yet."

Thirteen-thirteen Wisconsin, of course. Where else would Jake be going? All the same Scar wished he hadn't been around to hear Jake say where he was heading. Well, she was his ole lady, wasn't she?

"Say, you guys still moving around in circles?" Spider said. "I guess when Jake moves out on Maxine for Armenta, you move in, then when you move out for Armenta, Jake moves in on your ole lady, ain't that the way it goes?"

Jake and Scar looked at Spider. "Yeh, I guess," Jake said listlessly. He didn't mean it though. It made him sick to think of Scar moving in on Armenta. He tried to shake off the feeling. He and Scar had often exchanged girls, so to speak. But not Armenta. A guy had to draw the line somewhere.

Spider talked on and on about the things they used to do. Spider was too engrossed in talking and Jake was too involved with his own thoughts to notice Scar's silence.

"This is me," Spider said. "Later on."

"Later," they said. The cab pulled away as Spider ran across the street and disappeared into a gangway between

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the corner tavern and the delicatessen on the southeast side of Welch Street.

Forget her, Scar was thinking. You don't want her, not now. Not much you don't. She alone you wanted for yourself, just for yourself. It's too late now. Yes, it's too late, because you can't get her on that basis. Well, neither can he get Armenta on that basis. Didn't you and Armenta years ago? But how were you to know Jake was going to become crazy about Armenta? Jake didn't know about you and Armenta. You wonder if he would feel the same about her if he did. Or would it be different, like the way you feel about Maxine is different? Different, and yet all the same. Well, Jake didn't know how you felt about Maxine either. Forget it, Jake's your friend, your best friend. No woman is worth breaking up that.

"Later on, Scar," Jake said.

"Later."

Scar watched the cab head south toward Wisconsin Avenue. The hell with it he told himself. He couldn't go directly to sleep. There was the spoon, the flame, the plunge. He floated a long time, riding his habit hard . . . *Armenta is the best thing could have happened to Jake, his mind said. Who is Armenta? his other self wanted to know. Lucky, lucky guy. Not as lucky as you. You're a king, you have a palace in the clouds, you're up so high, the height's so long you need a parachute to go downstairs. I wish I was in college. What you want to go to college for, man, that's for squares. They said I was a great halfback. You great now, man, don't you feel great, up in the clouds? What could be greater than that? Maxine. Jake's girl. I really used to like Maxine. Armenta is Jake's girl. I still go for Maxine. That's Jake's girl, jake's, Jake's, JAKE'S! It was. She still is . . . Yeah, she still is. College, football, beating your legs against*

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the line, running, running to Max . . . one of these days going to college. Going to go, go, go, be great, somebody. Man, I done tole you, you great now, you in the clouds, you getting your kicks way up high, don't nobody live up here but you. Lonely — taking the long lonely road. Man, I done tole you, you great, you in the clouds, man, ain't I done tole you —

4

THE STEPS complained as Jake galloped up to the second floor. He was careful not to touch the wall, and stain his jacket. There was no light coming from her room. He rapped lightly on the door.

"Is that you, Jake?"

"Nobody else but."

"Just a minute."

"Here Rover," a young female voice drifted up from somewhere in the streets. Screaming tires, trying to hold, mingled with the night sounds. A rustle of garments. Light flooding under the door. Minutes dragged —

"I thought you weren't coming," Maxine said, opening the door. Her coarse black hair was in a net. Even now, in her black-and-gold Chinese style bathrobe, a faint blush spanked her light-brown skin. Her wide, attractive mouth broke into a grin. "I cursed you out," she said, wrinkling her small broad nose at him.

"How could you?" Jake said. "You don't even know the words."

His touch was as familiar as if they had been living to-

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gether all their lives. She broke away from him shyly. She sat down on the bed with her head turned toward the wall. She did not look his way when he casually started taking off his clothes.

5

EVELYN KEYES turned off the radio she had been listening to for the past three hours. She was peeved with herself because she had not put her hair up for the night. Maybe she should let it slide just for the night. No, Spider might come over tomorrow. She had to keep her hair looking nice; it was her one good point. She knew she was for the main part a plain girl, but Spider said she had nice hair. He told her that way back in grade school. She had to try to keep it looking nice. Her hair was thick and black and wild. It took her hours to pin it up, and there was not a home permanent kit on the market that could keep it in curls, nor was there a beauty parlor that could turn the trick, for that matter. No, her hair wouldn't curl, but if she took enough pains with it, it would be in thick fluffy waves in the morning. She started doing her hair. A slow, methodical process.

Spider was so wild. He didn't have a regular job, just as an extra waiter now and then, but he always had money, and he always wanted to take her some place where he could throw it away. Not that she didn't like to go out, it was just that she couldn't ever see them getting any place at the rate they were going. He said he wanted to marry her. She wondered what kind of life that would be. Not that she didn't want to marry him, but she knew he gambled. She won-

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dered if she was doomed to feel insecure all of her life.

She smiled, remembering the minor victory she had won. She had talked him into giving her five dollars a week for her to put away and save. She only made $28 a week as a stock girl in one of the big stores downtown, but managed to put $10 of that away every week. They might be able to get somewhere after all. They might be able to have a house someday and some children. Not a big house, nothing extravagant. Just something where they could raise some kids and be happy, and not have to worry about the plaster falling down on them. It wouldn't be like this place she lived in on Elm Street. No, it could never be like the lean-to wrecks on Elm Street, not their house. She sighed. She was getting sleepy. She should have been in bed hours ago. She had to get up at six-thirty in order to arrive at work by eight. She dipped on the wave solution a little faster, hurried just a little bit more with her curls. It was still a long, slow process.

6

THE BIG CLOCK down over the railroad station struck four. A siren screamed. Somewhere in the distance dogs yelped at intruders in the alleyways.

"It's four o'clock," Maxine said. "I've got to get up to go to work at seven."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't feel right."

"Uh-huh."

"Jake, I'm not kidding."

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"Good, I hope you're not having no kids."
"How long does this go on?"
Jake got up without answering and began to dress rapidly.
"Jake, I'm talking to you."
"I hear you."
"Well, why don't you say something then?"
"What do you want me to say?"
"I hate you."
"Do you?" Jake said raising an eyebrow.
"You're impossible to reach. You won't let anyone talk to you."
"You're talking to me."
"I don't mean that way, I mean really talk to you, you know what I mean."
"Uh-huh."
"I thought I knew how to reach all of you. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe there isn't any more to you after all."
"Why don't you go to sleep, Maxine?"
"Before you go, Jake, I want to know something."
"Sure."
"How long does this go on?"
"You mean —"
"I mean you seem content to go on like this forever. We're different. I want to do things."
"Like what, get married?"
"Someday, what girl doesn't? But I wasn't speaking exactly about that."
"You mean you want to become a famous dancer, and tag a husband along behind you."
"You have an awful way of putting things."
"That's it though."
"Well, you could be a doctor or something."
"And we'll live happily ever after," Jake said mockingly.

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