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RENDEZVOUS IN MANHATTAN

An American Novel

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I.

As night fell over Manhattan, it brought no relief from the stifling temperatures. All the heat that the narrow island and its vast sea of buildings had absorbed during the day now seeped copiously from its pores. Worn-out city dwellers couldn't even find relief on the Manhattan waterfront. It seemed like hundreds of thousands had made a beeline for the Hudson, the East River, the Harlem River and the harbor, grateful for the slightest breeze that wafted over their clammy bodies. Apartments were unbearable on such summer nights. But before long it was time to head back, because work starts early in the morning for the average New Yorker. Even the lovers promenading along the beach of Coney Island eventually had to make their way home.

In the streets, people sat on the steps of their houses, on the fire escapes, in hallways with the door wide open, on the window ledges. In the working-class neighborhood around Mercer Street, domestic life in all its facets spilled outside on such nights. Men played cards, boys practiced baseball, young girls curled their hair, adolescents felt hormonal stirrings, schoolchildren did their homework, mothers nursed their babies, and all this amid the sounds of shouting, arguments, laughter, flirtation and bonhomie. The street didn't empty until after midnight. Even then, family life remained on full display through the brightly lit open windows.

Radios blared, couples bickered, and the next generation was raised. Packed into cramped quarters, relatives quickly got cranky and vented their spleen. But eventually things quietened down, even in the Scarlatti apartment.

Edna couldn't sleep. It was too hot. The humid air hung like a heavy blanket over her throat and chest. Although all the windows and doors were open, no soothing gusts of air blew in.

Edna kicked off the sheet. Then she cast off her nightgown. The less clothing, the better. Mona was also unclothed. The arc lamp on the corner of Mercer and Spring Streets cast light over the child's slight body. Perhaps she was sleeping. A short while ago she had gone into the kitchen for some water. Edna was also thirsty, but doubted the warm stale liquid that came out of the half-broken pipe would help. It was best to lie still. The slightest movement would only bead her forehead with even more sweat. It wasn't just sweat either. It was a sticky mixture of perspiration and moisture from the humid air outside. It was the ninth day of a heat wave, and the Weather Bureau reported apologetically that no relief was in sight. New York was baking in the mid-July heat. It was pretty likely this weather would last until October. What a dreadful prospect. The thought of it was unbearable. Edna let out a groan.

Rich people were able to live in comfort. Not only could they make a dash out of the city in their cars, bound for a cool hideaway in the mountains, they also worked in air-conditioned offices and spent their evenings and half the night in nicely chilled bars and clubs. But what was a girl like her to do?

God knows it wasn't just the weather. It was everything. Everything was bad. Her whole life. And there was no hope of improvement, change, or escape.

She couldn't blame her parents for their poverty and neither would she. It was hard to work your way up when you were born poor, when you never got a break, never had a bit of luck, never had anyone to help you. The neighbors were poor too: all of Mercer Street and the whole neighborhood. The houses all looked the same. Dirty, derelict and dark, with no running water or radiators. The technological innovations America was famous for inventing and installing didn't exist here.

In the Scarlatti apartment, not one piece of furniture was in good condition. The place was overrun with dirt and grime. Bedbugs and cockroaches thrived. Paintings fell off the walls. Cracked windows went unrepaired. The superintendent always had an excuse. He put everything off. But it wouldn't have made any difference if he had brought in a painter. And who would be

expected to clean up all the mess and clutter once it was done? Only Edna. The very thought of it made her stomach turn.

And yet she couldn't bring herself to blame her parents. They were unhappy themselves. She tried explaining this to Mona, who had a habit of bluntly criticizing them. Edna was often shocked by the little girl's nerve, by her snide contempt. She didn't want to hear any explanations. She just passed judgment. And with such harsh words. Where did she learn that kind of language? She stayed out after school and didn't come home. Where was she? Edna had neither the time nor the energy to go looking for her. And how should she reply to the child when she provocatively declared: "Our home has nothing for me. I count myself lucky when I don't see my drunken father or hear my mother's constant wailing."

Poor mother. She was so sick. Edna didn't know exactly what it was. Some kind of gynecological problem you got if you didn't catch enough rest after childbirth. Mother was often confined to bed for many weeks. Surgery might have helped her, but she was loath to go through with it.

"Once they start slicing me open they won't stop. Doctors don't know anything. They'll only send me to an early grave. Poor people are just a quick and dirty job for them."

Edna felt deeply sorry for her mother. But Mona had a spiteful and childish answer ready for this as well. "Mother isn't even trying to get well. She should go to hospital, it's her moral duty. She's ruining our childhood by carrying on like this. And driving our weakling father to drink."

Father hadn't come home for three days. It wasn't the first time. He was probably sleeping it off somewhere. At least they were spared his yelling and door slamming, or his occasional bouts of crying and tearing his hair, accompanied by terrible vomiting and a foul stench.

In spite of this, she couldn't deny him her sympathy, whereas Mona only had scornful words for him. He was probably as sad inside as she was, and couldn't face life without the numbing haze of alcohol. Sometimes he had clear-headed moments. Then he went to work and even brought home some money. He worked as a temp waiter at a restaurant in the Village. If he were a hardworking, sober, decent person, he might have gotten a permanent position. Skilled waiters were in demand, especially now that so many young men had been called up. There was talk of war. And the waiters who stayed on belonged to a union and got good wages. It didn't bear thinking about how well they might live if only their father were a regular earner. They'd be

able to buy new furniture, eat better meals for once, have a doctor see their mother. Rich people don't get cut open straightaway. Doctors devote more time and care to them, no doubt about that. But these were just idle dreams. For months, Father hadn't contributed anything worth mentioning to the household. If he did bring home a few dollars, and even gave some of them to Mother in a fleeting surge of generosity for old times' sake, he'd soon claw back what she couldn't hastily convert into milk, bread and meat. And Mother couldn't get up and down the stairs all that quickly, even if she wasn't exactly bedridden. For months, Edna had to prop up the household with all her earnings. Friday was payday at the factory, and every time she tried to keep three dollars for herself, or two at the very least, but as the week raced past they were so hard-pressed for basic necessities that she kept running through her dwindling funds until her shabby little purse was empty. Then the next payday came around and the same tragicomedy was repeated all over again. The saddest thing was that even though she worked so hard and denied herself any personal comforts – if Walter hadn't taken her to the movies now and then, she wouldn't have gone anywhere – it still wasn't enough. They owed money to their local shopkeeper, and how they were supposed to buy coal in winter was still a mystery to her.

Oh, why worry sick about the winter, maybe she would be dead by then. Like Claire, one of the office girls at the factory. Edna had bumped into her a few times in the bathroom, but rarely spoke to her as the office staff kept themselves at arm's length from the factory workforce, to which Edna belonged. Claire was a bit more approachable and always a laugh. Once she caused a commotion in the bathroom by whispering in mock surprise that the fire inspector was in the storeroom and about to enter the factory floor. Smoking was strictly prohibited. The fumes given off by the cosmetic products were highly flammable and large placards reading "Caution! Danger" were posted in all areas of the factory. Nonetheless, the workers and office employees always found a discreet spot where they could indulge their passion away from their superiors. But when Claire mentioned the inspector, all the smokers made a mad dash for the lavatories and threw their burning cigarettes into the toilet bowl. Lisa cried out and gave Bernie a shove for stepping on her foot with her hundred and sixty pounds in the heat of the moment. Bernie shoved her back and Lisa hissed like a wildcat. Eleanor yanked open the window so the inspector wouldn't smell the smoke. She took off her apron and fanned the air with it, hoping to quickly banish the smell. It was a frosty winter morning, two degrees above zero, and the cold draft instantly chilled them to the bone.

"Shut the window," screeched Sylvia, who didn't smoke. She was a worker like Edna and hated all the office girls. The opportunity to reprimand Eleanor gave her a zing of pleasure.

Then it turned out that Claire had just been playing a prank on them. Oh, what a riot! A scream. Claire leaned against the door and laughed until tears rolled down her face. And now she was dead at twenty-two. Radiant, rosy-cheeked, spoiled. A sudden heart attack. She had never been ill. Edna had also never been ill, so that was one thing they had in common.

She was powerless to stop all her hard-earned pay from being sucked into this ramshackle household, but she was determined not to touch her vacation money. She slipped her hand under her mattress. Yes, there it was, a little package wrapped in paper and sewn into a blue patch of wool. At first she'd carried it around with her, having taken about a year to save it up from working overtime. But after Freeda's handbag was snatched at the basement restaurant in Macy's, Edna had second thoughts. She got worried and decided to put it somewhere safe. Her bed was the best place. Every evening she'd be able to check if it was still there. There was another reason for not carrying the money around anymore, which was to avert the risk of ever touching it. She couldn't – and didn't want – to touch it. Her vacation week was coming up at the end of August and she was determined to go away this time. All the other workers went somewhere. Some even took two weeks of vacation, although regular workers only received one week's wages and piece workers nothing at all. Edna, who belonged to the latter group, naturally couldn't afford two weeks. She had been with "Sweetface", a cosmetics factory on Canal Street, for four years. So far she'd spent her vacation week at home. Most of the time she was unlucky with the weather, too, so she couldn't even go to Coney Island every day with the Mercer Street boys. During her week off she had worked more around the house than she ever did in the factory, caring for her mother and mending Mona's clothes. She was greatly relieved when the vacation was over. Returning to the factory, she cast an envious eye on the other girls sitting tanned and rested at their workstations. As they talked about the "wonderful days" they had enjoyed, she gloomily listened. With suppressed tears, she let the taunts of the forewoman, Miss Swab, wash over her.

"Edna, why don't you ever go on vacation? What on earth do you do with your wages? Do you have a lover? Maybe he's a kept man!"

The last question was laced with distinct malice. When Edna was being courted by Walter, Miss Swab had swooped on him and gone all out to drive the two apart.

At that point, Edna started saving for the next vacation. With dogged zeal. She still remembers the first quarter, then the first dollar. She remembers the day she exchanged the first five single dollars for a five-dollar bill. She remembers how she was sorely tempted in January of that year, when she saw a coat on sale for twelve dollars and seventy-nine cents in the display at

Ohrbach's. It was fabulous. The fabric was a dark red wool, with a sealskin collar and sealskin cuffs that looked ever so chic. Its most glorious feature, however, was two large pockets to put your hands in, and these pockets were trimmed with a narrow band of sealskin. The coat dominated a side window and hung on a mannequin that perfectly matched Edna's figure. Medium height with slender legs, a rounded curve to the hips, and a very ample pair of breasts. It was all there, so to speak, just like Edna's own proportions. The mannequin was faceless, as was fashionable now, so it was easy for Edna to mentally project her own face onto the head's smooth plaster surface. "I could look like this," she thought. "And it would be warm too". She got caught up in the reverie of wearing it. What bliss that would be. And once you started dreaming, you couldn't stop. She had the money to buy it, so why not? But her willpower won out in the end, and today she was glad and proud of it. Under the mattress was the guarantee that she would have a real vacation this year. And maybe she could step up her work pace and boost her weekly wages. In the course of a normal forty-hour week, she was now making nineteen dollars. She had acquired considerable skill in filling nail polish bottles. If Miss Swab would let her do this job in peace all day, she might be able to make twenty, even twenty-one dollars. But every time she hit her stride, the forewoman's scolding voice would call: "Edna, enough for today. Go take care of the boxes". This completely threw her off. First, she couldn't just drop everything right there and then. She had to load the filled bottles onto a trolley, put the unfilled ones back in a box, sweep up the broken ones and empty them into the trash can, and then squirt the different shades of paint out of various hoses so that the residue wouldn't dry up and clog the hoses the next day. After that she had to fetch the bottle of turpentine from the ledge and scrub the workbench as well as her own sticky hands, otherwise she would smear the boxes. The packing benches were right at the back of the huge workroom. There were various jobs to be done here. The little bottles were cleaned once again and an unprinted label was stuck onto each one. If the sponge was too dry, you had to go all the way to the bathroom to wet it. You walked past the water cooler on the way, but you weren't allowed to handle work materials there. It was considered unsanitary and punishable by law, so even though Miss Swab did it, the girls were strictly forbidden. If the sponge was too wet, the label wouldn't stick and you might waste a few. If that happened, Miss Swab would appear, as if out of thin air, to give you a tongue lashing. Once the bottle was labeled, cotton wool was wrapped around the cap and tissue paper around the bottle. Then you had to take a bunch of small boxes, open them up, and lay them out in rows of twenty or thirty on the bench. A bottle was to be placed in each. When that was done, you bent under the bench and took a handful of inserts from a box – if the box was empty, which often happened, you would call one of the black kids to bring a new one. The inserts were

small pieces of stiff cardboard that had a couple of crease lines and a round indentation. The crease lines were folded and the entire insert was pushed around the bottle in such a way that the indentation tightly enclosed the rounded part of the bottle and prevented it from breaking. Then the boxes were closed, lined up in neat rows with their backs facing upwards, and stamped with the appropriate number, depending on the color and type of varnish. Next, the boxes were all lined up, transferred to a tray and carried to Walter's bench. He then packed them into large boxes. You got one cent for finishing two small boxes. Miss Swab claimed you could easily pack a hundred and fifty in an hour, but Edna couldn't manage even a hundred. There were too many hold-ups, too many hitches. When you were stamping, the ink pad might suddenly go dry and the ink was nowhere to be found. You had to keep too many plates spinning. No, Edna had no chance of making a decent buck from packing. Filling bottles was better. You got one cent for ten filled bottles, and it was possible to do five or sometimes even six hundred bottles an hour.

There was another reason Edna didn't like packing boxes. The packing bench was in a dingy corner at the back of the workroom. There was no daylight and a glaring light shone around the bench. It was a blinding white light that seared your eyes. Edna had already suffered two bouts of pink eye. Maybe it was all the cardboard dust that enveloped you like a cloud back there. At any rate, the light was a painful irritation to her already watery eyes.

"Edna, you're a schlemiel," said Miss Swab on such occasions. When Edna asked her if she could do some other job, the forewoman snapped at her: "We're running a factory here, not a sanatorium."

Edna wiped the sweat from her face with the bed sheet. Noise was coming from the stairwell. It sounded like a late-night squabble between Mr. and Mrs. Dunhill, who lived one floor below the Scarlattis. They often quarreled, especially since the young woman had dyed her dark brown hair strawberry red and received regular visits from an admirer who showed up as soon as Mr. Dunhill went to work. The funny thing was that she made no secret of her lifestyle, but openly stressed that she wanted something out of life, and what her husband couldn't give her, someone else would have to provide. This applied to money and everything else too. Mr. Dunhill raised hell with her, but she gave as good as she got, and as the argument came to a close, it looked as if the blameless man was scared. Scared of her, the admirer, and the consequences. She was an alluring but hard-hearted hussy, with an attractive body that she wasn't shy to show off. On these hot days, when she sat on the steps on the house and crossed her legs, men from fourteen to sixty let their gaze wander over to her. Now her voice got louder, but Edna couldn't make out the words. A man answered her. His speech was slurred, he had to

be drunk. That was strange. Mr. Dunhill was teetotal. Had his despair over his wife's infidelity driven him to the bottle? That was something new. Anyway, it was none of Edna's business. She settled down again in an effort to fall back asleep.

Heavy, shuffling footsteps echoed from the hallway. It sounded like someone was dragging himself along while clinging to the railing.

"Pure mayhem," griped Mrs. Dunhill. "And right outside our door."

"Oh leave him be," said her husband, trying to calm her. Him? Who did he mean? Edna sat up. An awkward thought crossed her mind.

"He's been sick all over the floor, he has to clean it up."

"Just leave him be. He doesn't realize what he's done. He's completely blotto."

It suddenly struck Edna that it was her father. He was drunk, again. And had just made a pretty mess in front of the Dunhills' door. Should she go downstairs?

"Mrs. Dunhill," slurred Mr. Scarlatti. "Since when did you brush off a guy?"

She hollered back at him: "I'll slap your face silly, you pig!"

"Come along, Scarlatti," said Mr. Dunhill. "I'll help you up the stairs. Hold on here."

"You're a good friend," said Mr. Scarlatti, his voice hoarse from drinking. "Come with me, have a glass of wine. My treat." You could hear him struggling to put one foot in front of the other. He must have buckled to the floor, as Mr. Dunhill said: "Pull yourself together. It's only a short way to your door."

"Who are you and how do you know my name? It's true, I'm Mr. Scarlatti. I won't forget your kindness. You'll be handsomely rewarded. Time stands still for no man. Today... I've been brought low today, but tomorrow..."

"You'll be brought even lower, you rat," Mrs. Dunhill shouted at him scornfully.

Edna's heart was racing like crazy. Did the woman really have to make fun of him too? Wasn't it bad enough that he was in this state? Who was she to lash out at a weak man who was dead drunk? Was her lifestyle such a shining example? Edna seethed with indignation. She got out of bed, barefoot and naked as a jaybird, and went to the closet, where a dressing gown of faded light-blue cambric hung over the half-open door. When she put it on, it immediately clung

to her clammy skin. She went to the door and listened. Her father and Mr. Dunhill had just reached the apartment door.

“Where are you taking me now?” asked Mr. Scarlatti very loudly. “I don’t even want to come here. I’m dying of thirst, I need to go to a bar. You want to tuck me into bed on a hot night like this?” He erupted with a hearty laugh. Oh dear, now he would wake up the whole building. Wasn’t it enough that the Dunhills had already witnessed his lousy behavior? Was it necessary to bring all the other neighbors flocking into the hallway too? Edna opened her door, but saw that her mother had come out of the other room to take charge of her father. Then she went back to bed. She could hear every word of the loud conversation. Getting the drunk man into bed was a protracted struggle, accompanied by fierce protesting that he didn’t belong here and was dying of thirst. The sound of Mother’s clucking and shushing pierced Edna’s heart. Now he must have gotten up, because the furniture was shaking. There was suddenly a big crash. What had he knocked over now?

“For God’s sake, Joe, do you have to smash everything to smithereens?”

His reply was unintelligible. It began as a slurred jabbering that swelled into grunts and curses, then subsided into half-crazed laughter, before another burst of garbled shouting.

“Oh Joe, carrying on like this won’t end well for you. You’ll drink yourself to death. Is that what you want? Are you trying to make life utterly wretched for yourself and your family? Don’t you spare a single thought for me and the children?”

“To hell with you and the children.”

Those were some blunt words, though hardly very pleasant to Edna’s ears. If only he would go to sleep. If only it would quieten down at last. How late was it now, anyway? Two o’clock?

Three o’clock? She had no idea. Mother was crying next door. What a dog’s life they had. Oh poor Mother, why was everything so terrible? How come other people lived in happiness and comfort while she knew nothing but hardship and humiliation? She was ashamed of her father. More banging and shouting broke out in the next room. Mona woke up. It was a miracle she had slept until now.

“Edna, what’s going on? An earthquake?” She sat up, recognizing her father’s growling voice before Edna had chance to answer. “Oh, the inebriate has come home.” She lay back

down and turned away. “Three sheets to the wind, like usual. I hope the devil hauls him off. Good night.”

Edna froze in shock. Still, her aversion to such talk was tinged with envy and respect. Envy for Mona’s display of nonchalance, respect for her firmness.

Things had now quietened down in the other room. It seemed Father was falling asleep. His gibbering trailed off into a murmur. Mother sobbed weakly now and then. Edna thought about finally getting some rest, which was easier said than done. Her heart was still pounding and she had a lump stuck in her throat. Still, she tried lulling herself to sleep with a daydream. She pictured her favorite movie star, Red Skelton, and imagined he was there in her room. Sure, the redhead was no looker, but he was so funny that a girl’s head could be turned. She’d recently seen him in a movie where he had such a hilarious scene with his co-star, Lucille Ball, that Edna was doubled up with laughter. She was helplessly in love with him. With his impish face, his screwball hijinks, his wide-eyed innocence. She knew that the other factory girls swooned over Errol Flynn, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra or Alan Ladd. But she didn’t see why Red should be any worse than the others. Her favorite dream was to imagine him filming on Mercer Street. Hollywood honchos, directors and photographers would be chauffeured there in fancy cars. The street would be bustling with flawlessly made-up beauties, draped in shimmering wisps of lace, then at last they would film the close-up with Red. She would stand on the sidewalk and watch, surrounded by hundreds of other curious onlookers. Suddenly, his gaze would fall on her. He would scribble a few words on a calling card, which his dresser would bring over to her. Everybody would be dumbstruck. Later she would leave the grimy street on his arm and be driven in his car to Toffenetti, where they served delicious spaghetti. She would eat, drink and laugh. And of course, he would tell dozens of jokes.

But her favorite dream didn’t seem to work today. She couldn’t hold onto Red’s face; it kept receding into the misty distance. After a while she fell into a groggy sleep.

[End of sample]