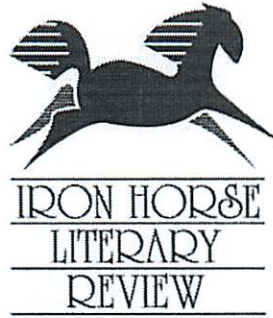


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Victor and Violet

WALTER B. LEVIS

New York City, a summer afternoon, Victor's neighborhood. On the street where he lives, in the middle of the sidewalk, trash: a ripped-open plastic bag oozing a half-eaten jelly doughnut, two empty milk cartons tumbling in a hot gust of wind, a pile of chicken bones partially wrapped in greasy newspaper. Across the street, on the wall of a six-story apartment building, blotches of red paint streak soot-covered cement. At the corner, blocking out the letters of a stop sign, gang symbols: triangles spray-painted over triangles, crooked crowns.

Near the sign stand two teenagers, hand in hand. A boy, DK, skinny, with an intelligent, sensitive face, skin the color of milk chocolate. Real name: Donald Kinsel, age seventeen. Never been upstate—an insider, protected. High up the org-chart. Learning computers, he thinks the “digital revolution” can change the basics: more money, less killing. On this corner, two years ago, two cousins of his died, fifteen and thirteen years old, shot in a turf battle. Or was it just confusion about who owned the spot? A mix-up between runners? And that's DK's point: “It's a motherfuckin' business—'cept we don't run it that way.” His answer is to computerize everything. Track location, purity, weight, number of vials, payment, reorder, shipping, even background on arrests and bail.

That's his riff, and now he takes a ring from his front pocket and gives it to Violet, also seventeen. She has a slim waist and long legs and skin as dark as black coffee. She looks at the ring and smiles, gasping, both hands over her face. Then, after a moment, she leans in for a kiss as another boy, older, turns the corner. This is Victor, tall, muscular, wearing a dark leather jacket and baggy black pants. A thick scar reaches from his ear to his jaw.

He sees DK and Violet and stops and stares and says under his breath, “Muthafucka.” Then he takes a pair of black leather gloves from the pockets of his baggy pants and starts to put them on. He sees a car turn the corner and stop. DK, holding Violet by the elbow, is trying to persuade her to get into the car with him.

Victor hurries. Long military strides, heel-toe, heel-toe. While he walks, he takes a single-edge razorblade from the inside pocket of his jacket, slips off

the cardboard lip, and tucks the blade comfortably between his index and middle finger, the leather glove helping to hold it securely in place.

DK looks down the block, sees Victor, and lets go of Violet's arm. He hears the heel-toe click pick up, louder, faster, an urgency growing closer, rising above the tense voice of Violet saying go—*now-now-now-go*—until the rhythm stiffens—heel-toe-click, heel-toe-click, heel-toe-click—and, cut-time, DK climbs into the waiting car and Violet watches it pull away with a screech as she crosses the street, squinting and straining and hating the third building from the corner, the three-story with gray duct tape covering the zigzag break in the center panel of the ground floor's big square window, filthy dirty window. A pause, a deep breath, a glance over her shoulder, Victor getting closer, and she hops over the big black crack in the front step where a chunk of cement has been missing forever.

Inside the apartment, she tries to control her breath, her thoughts, tries to stop panting and thinking that if only they lived someplace else, someplace without the strips of peeling paint hanging from the ceiling in the living

She hits the button on the radio hard: a crackle of static, then rap music. A metallic driving beat, like chains hitting cement, a steady whip, the low bass lurching on the off-beat, same four notes looping over and over.

room and the yellow water stains on the blank back wall and that stolen bicycle in the front hall missing its front wheel, that useless broken bike, been there forever—

Another breath, short and quick. She bites her lip as she walks past it now, her elbow grazing the bike's dusty blue frame, a faint rubbery smell. Always that smell, seems it's everywhere, the whole neighborhood—dirty rubber, like the bottom of a gym shoe.

In the tiny bathroom, she closes the door tight, locked, her despair and disgust like two small fists pressing into the center of her

back. A radio on the window ledge sits covered with a film of sticky, gritty grime; its cord, patched with gray duct tape in two places, hangs from the outlet above the small cracked mirror. She hits the button on the radio hard: a crackle of static, then rap music. A metallic driving beat, like chains hitting cement, a steady whip, the low bass lurching on the off-beat, same four notes looping over and over. She turns on the faucet, the squeal of the pipes drowning out the voice of the rapper.

Meanwhile, Victor opens the apartment door. He knows the story, his version of it anyway. The shit goin' down with Violet and that skinny-ass boy with his motherfuckin' rings. Yeah, Victor know exactly what he know and what he gotta do to stop it. The razor blade. He takes it from between his fingers, puts on the cardboard lip, and peels off his black leather gloves, dropping them on the floor next to a pile of old newspapers.

He starts toward the bathroom. The floorboards creak, a familiar groan under the heel of his size-thirteen workboots, Timberlands, polished weekly, metal tips in the front, rib-crackers. He understands that *kuhchunk*, the cry and muffled snap of ribs breaking, like calcified wood cracking. The ugly fucking sound of the unarticulated purpose of his suck-it-up everyday life: Get Violet away. Away from the cokeheads and hustlers and broken-boned teeth-clenched look of pain on the streets in the whites of a brotha's eyes rollin' backward, breath goin', his life, her life, everybody's ugly fuckin' broken life goin' nowhere.

And with a little dip of his wide shoulders, a point guard cutting slo-mo past a screen, goin' to the hoop, he presses through the living room and down the hall, grazing the dusty one-wheeled bike.

He knocks on the bathroom door.

No answer. Rap music louder.

He knocks again, shouts: "Come out here, Violet!"

Again, there's no answer, so he lifts his arm and the buttons on the cuff of his leather jacket cut into his thick wrist as he slams the door with his elbow and forearm, the sound weirdly reversed, wood striking a chunk of flesh. The top hinge gives, white paint crusting the threads of the screws. He yells: "Violet! Vi-oh-let!"

Inside the bathroom, she leans over the small sink, her makeup, a subtle brown liner, sharpening the almond-shaped blackness of her big fawn eyes, long thin fingers so steady until, again, the wood-chunk, the slamming, and the sound of his stomach-twisting scream, her name, such a pretty flower, such an angry rattle in the throat, like the uptown train screeching into the station, metal scraping metal. She reaches toward the windowsill where the grimy white-speckled radio, dusted with paint chips, a jagged crack in the plastic dial, is surrounded by a stack of tampons wrapped in a rubber band, a tube of hair gel, a box of condoms. For the second time, she turns up the radio's volume, pushing the bass until it cracks and distorts.

He yells again, "Violet, you quit fuckin' with me or I'm gonna—"

"I'm doin' my business. Go up and use Russell's toilet if you gotta."

He steps back and stares at the closed door and then feels his dark pants stretch tight across the front of his thigh as he brings his knee to his chest, inhaling, neck and shoulders tightening, widening, a moan of rage like a

He kicks the door; the top hinge pops off, screws falling into the bathtub, a reedy plunk rising above the bass-beat loop of the rap on the radio. She feels a jolt of fear, her stomach knotting, a pounding in her chest as she looks at him standing in the doorway. . . .

plug-loose current, hot blue sparks, the anger burning, ticking, cracking.

He kicks the door; the top hinge pops off, screws falling into the bathtub, a reedy plunk rising above the bass-beat loop of the rap on the radio.

She feels a jolt of fear, her stomach knotting, a pounding in her chest as she looks at him standing in the doorway, the door itself hanging crookedly from its splintered hinge. The picture: His eyes wide, mouth open, he breathes hard, his lips twisted in an angry curl as his shoulders lean forward, his arms rotated, the backs of his hands

facing outward, fingers curved, flexed; one thumb is a half-stump—she remembers the incident. And she knows this pose, smells his anger, a faint, salty, nasty odor. She watches the picture begin to move: His arm rises, spread over her like a big black wing, reaching, reaching past with a quick hard swing to knock the radio off the ledge. It crashes to the tile floor, and in the sudden silence, she hears the sound of the neighbor's baby crying—throaty, rhythmic grunts echoing off slabs of green-gray cement, the sooty air-shaft.

A hot-breathed gaze, a wheeze in his chest—she knows what's coming and slips her right hand over her left, concealing the ring, the thin gold band cool against the soft skin between her fingers.

"Gim' it here," he says.

She ignores the knowledge that it's useless to resist and looks down at the worn, damp bathmat and pulls her hand back farther, the manicured tips of her fingers rubbing lightly together. Then in a flash, she closes her eyes and again hears the baby's cry and feels it—the jerk, the tug, quick as a cat-pounce, grabbing her, pulling; his thick, hard fingers digging into the soft cartilage of her shoulder, grinding; the thin strap of her bra cutting into her skin. Her head spins, eyes shut tighter, like a carnival ride, stomach dropping. Locked in his grip, she feels him squeeze the hand with her ringed finger, twisting her finger, his hot breath streaming down her neck, into her ear, the

smell of candied mints, unfiltered Camels, the sour-sweet mixture rising, molding, sickening her stomach.

Helpless, overpowered. There's a final pull and a burning deep in her knuckle, then her eyes open as she spins out of his grip, shouting, "Victor! You gimme that back." Off balance, a tug on the plastic shower curtain, catching herself, she shouts: "You can't be comin' in here and—"

"Where you think he got the money for this ring? Flippin' hamburgers?"

"You don't know what he does, Victor. He goes to school. You don't even know where—"

"I seen his ass playin' all up and down the goddamn block."

"He don't work for them. You don't know shit about him, Victor. You think—"

But Victor isn't listening. He has started toward the door, thinking of that skinny-ass nigger and the corner shop where they been cookin' snow in the back with that smart-ass boy in the pizza shop next door readin' his mother-fuckin' newspaper.

And Violet watches him stride toward the door, the heels of his boots pounding the floor, the vibration shimmying up her legs. At the pile of newspapers, he stops. She watches him bend from the waist, spine stiff. He takes up his gloves, slips the razor from his pocket.

"Don't," she says, squeezing her sore finger. "Please, Victor. Please don't hurt him."

She wants to say more, but Victor looks up at her, tugs on the edge of the glove, adjusts the empty leather tip above his half-thumb. He swallows. "When you gonna open your eyes, Violet, and see where we livin'? This ain't about hurtin' him—it's about protecting you."

The pizzeria is empty except for DK and his two friends. They sit at a small, wobbly table, DK carefully cutting his slice with a plastic knife, coiling the hot, oily cheese around his plastic fork, his small hands trembling with excitement as he reads a headline in *The New York Times*:

Tech Stocks Rising: NASDAQ Breaks 5,000

Yes, he thinks, yes, yes. The revolution, the open market, the battlefield. Every black man in America a potential player, a fighter, a market warrior-creator, a potential, a potential—. Why don't the other brothers see it? Work

that white user 'specially hard but take any crackhead's money and invest it—double it, triple it, then get the fuck out. Out of the market, out of the 'hood, out of this whole scammin' country.

But where to? Where can a black man go? Africa? That Marcus Garvey thing is old. . . . Money is what matters. With enough money anything's possible.

Tech Stocks Rising. . . .

He returns to the article and starts to read, but the door of the pizza shop opens, and the cheap jingle of bells hanging from a drapery rod throws off the newsprint, the black ink, narrow elegant font, *T*'s pointed at the edge, distracted now into a blur of excitement, vague anticipation: global markets, rising equity, everything rising, rising. He needs to know exactly what's happening in the market.

But he hears his friend say, "Yo, DK, I think we got company."

He looks up and, seeing that it's Victor, folds the newspaper and straightens his posture, sitting tall, neck lengthened, chin lowered.

DK's other friend, his mouth full, starts to laugh, muffled vowels, a strip of cheese hanging from his lip. "Read somethin' to him, Professor."

Just wait, DK thinks. Just wait for him to approach, then talk. Victor cares, I care—we'll talk. Conflict does not necessarily mean violence. He tucks his chin tighter to his chest. A deep, disciplined breath.

Victor, meanwhile, stands there with one hand on the doorknob. Two homeys and the computer man, doin' 'za and scratchin' bone. Yeah, Victor thinks, I seen that muthafucka playin' all up and down the goddamn block.

The thought hangs in his head:

Up and down.

Up and down.

Up and down the goddamn block.

He steps slowly into the store and leans on an empty table in the front then sits down and puts his head in his hands. His eyes focus on a crack in the floor's black and gray tile. Up and down, up and down, up and down the goddamn block. He breathes deeply, chest rising, falling, up and down, up and down, one tight breath after the next.

He knows this moment—the hard breath of fear and rage and the sense of inevitability, the boyhood love, stupid sport: lighting a match just to watch it burn to its very tip. He gets up and takes off his leather jacket and hangs

it on the back of his chair. Then he adjusts the collar of the coat, walks over to DK and his friends, and places Violet's ring on the newspaper in front of DK.

"This yours?"

DK looks down at the ring. "Yes. I gave it to Violet," he says softly. "But I ain't lookin' for trouble. You know that, Victor."

"Excuse me? Have we been introduced?"

"Come on, man," DK says, smiling. "Everybody knows you."

Victor looks at the two friends then says to DK, "You in school?"

"Yes, I am."

"What you gonna be—a pharmacist?"

The first friend, who wears a pink headband and has the string of pizza cheese still caught on his lower lip, says, "It's true, he at City College."

"You his father?"

No answer.

"Then why don't you shut the fuck up?"

"Yo, playa, why don't you cool out," the other friend says. He chews on a straw, one foot resting on top of the table.

Victor steps back, loosening his shoulders, as if he is about to lift a heavy object. "You talkin' to me?"

"Yeah, muthafucka, I'm talking to you."

"Take it easy," DK says to his friend, who has started to stand.

But in a flash, Victor lunges at the boy with the straw in his mouth. DK, still in his chair, watches. Out of nowhere, Victor's fist hits the center of his friend's soft, full, fleshy pink lips, and there's a cracking noise, like a hard-shell bug being squashed, and the plastic straw floats to the ground, a spray of blood, the chair falling back, table tipping over. The boy holds his mouth, staggers backward, dripping, tripping over the edge of a chair, collapsing with a moan. And the other friend: He starts to stand, but Victor grabs a clump of hair under the pink headband and slams the boy's head onto the edge of the table. Blood seeps slowly down his almond-colored forehead. Again, DK, still in his chair, watches: a thick red trickle; the boy slumps to the floor. Then DK feels his own feet and legs turn cold and tingle, frozen needles, hundreds of thin frozen needles disappearing, a sudden sinking hot flush in the seat of his pants, and a foul smell as Victor pushes him from his chair and pins him to the floor, a knee against his chest, the needles sinking deeper, deeper into the center of his body, his lungs, his breath. Victor's knee pressing harder; he can't move, can't moan, can't feel anything but his own

warm shit oozing up the small of his back as the smell closes his throat, stings his nose, his ears, then a fist in his face as he sees Victor grab the ring off the tabletop, and with a bright blinding stinging light—a single flash of pain—the skin of his right nostril stretches then rips, the ring sliding up, scratching skin and bone, up, up the burning nostril before the dark silence of the blow: Victor slamming his elbow across the bridge of his nose, the center of his scorching pain.

And Victor looks down at the mess, and the putrid smell stings his own nostrils as he considers DK's body, blood spurting from the boy's nose, neck limp, mouth hanging open, the tongue a small slab of pink meat. After a moment, Victor lifts the blood-soaked head, which feels strangely weightless in his bloody hands, and, for no reason he could explain, he lays the skull gently on the floor, unaware of the incongruity: the smell of shit and piss and blood and his own sweating uncontrolled uncoiled rage mixed with an ancient unknown reflex to be tender, to set the unconscious boy's small head on the floor without, absurdly, adding injury.

He leans close to DK, checks the breathing, relieved the boy is alive. He

**He leans close to DK,
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relieved the boy is alive.
He whispers, "You knew
better, muthafucka, you
knew better, you knew
better you knew bet-
ter—you shoulda just
stayed the fuck away
from my sister."**

whispers, "You knew better, muthafucka, you knew better, you knew better, you knew better—you shoulda just stayed the fuck away from my sister."

He gets up slowly, hunching, covering his mouth, and starts to back away from the crumpled stinking body, then stops and leans against the empty chair where his leather jacket hangs. A deep breath, the back of one hand pressing his brow. Slowly, his posture straightens, and he

pulls a wad of napkins from a metal container on the table and wipes his bloody fingers, thin tissues torn, streaked with red. He lays the dirty napkins in a messy clump, then takes his sports coat off the chair, straightens the sleeves, smooths the lapels, folds the jacket over one arm. And with measured, careful steps, he walks to the pizza counter, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a wad of bills, slipping the money under a large plastic container of garlic salt.

"No need for a call, right, brother?"

The pizza man is a large, round Latino with a thick neck and a broad forehead. He stands at the far end of the counter near the oven and nods silently.

Then he waits for Victor to leave and steps forward, taking the money from under the container of garlic salt, folding the bills into his flour-covered hand.

Night. The late summer air is damp, muggy. Victor comes out of a bar on East 178th, the streetlights a dull, urban yellow, hazy globes. A beer can in the gutter, catching a glow, like a fish barely visible in a dirty-water night sky. Reminds him of his father, the Big Man Under, the ice-fishing, cab-driving disappearing daddy: drove his yellow Checker straight through the night, straight north, straight up into the Larenchen Mountains, three hundred miles past Montreal. Got tired of fishin' for porgie off the West Side Pier, tired of my Moms and her raggin' to find some work. Sent money for a while, then the money stopped, and there were pictures of a hairy black man fishing on a frozen white lake, snow-capped mountains in the distance, green trees like vanilla-frosted candy. Then the pictures stopped, then nothing. So goes the story, which Victor knows only from a doorman on the Upper West Side who claims to have known the famous fisherman, the big man who could sink forty-foot jumpers, who could sky and reverse slam, and who, once upon a time, talked to a Knicks scout about playing real ball. Oh, fish in the sky, you can fly, you can fly . . . Daddy, daduh, duh-duhm-dadum.

Beer cans in the gutter. Victor knows he's drunk. A whiskey-burp, foul-smelling, mixed with beer and cigarettes and a greasy bar-burger, rises in his gut, a mild salty warmth. He wobbles past an elderly black man begging from a wheelchair. The man rattles small change in a paper cup—white pattern against blue background, imitation Greek columns. Same goddamn cups in every diner in New York. The old man sings, "All we are sayin' . . . is give peace a chance. All we are saying—" Old man stops and speaks: "Spare change? Spare a little change fo' a brutha?" Singing again: ". . . is give peace a chance. All we are sayin' is give peace a chance."

Victor stops, his fingers thick and slow as he reaches into his pocket for a quarter, watchband catching on the edge of his pants pocket. He pulls, losing his balance, one foot slipping behind the other. He almost falls, but the quarter drops to the pavement, a high-pitched plink. The singing continues. Victor bends, picks up the coin, drops it in the cup, a quiet *plink*, and the old man smiles, toothless muthafucka in a wheelchair, scratches on the chrome sides, duct tape covering cracked plastic handles.

Victor wants to walk away but instead stands there swaying, open-mouthed, reaching back into his pocket, pennies slipping through his big, drunk fingers. He extends his arm, hand wobbling over the paper cup until

**She almost says
why don't you go
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but instead she
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dog's. . . .**

the insides of the empty pockets stick out like rabbit ears growing from his hips.

Then he shakes the ears and stuffs the fabric back into his pants and takes off his leather jacket and hangs it on the corner of the wheelchair.

Again, the old man stops singing: "God bless you, brutha, God bless . . . God bless you . . . God bless. . . ."

The frame is smashed, the picture torn, pieces strewn across the floor: a ballet slipper and half a

leg, a headless boy, part of a bent umbrella.

As Victor sits on the couch, the sagging cushion slips under his weight. Tears in his eyes, the rug a watery blue-gray. He blinks then gets down on his hands and knees, and gathers the broken frame and ripped-up photo.

Violet heard the door squeak open and now walks down the hall from the bedroom. She wears Victor's Michael Jordan jersey, the number 23 in big black letters, the Bull's bold dark-red faded around the collar. Standing in the doorway, she pulls on the baggy shoulders of the jersey and takes in that bar-smell of cigarettes and alcohol.

She almost says why don't you go live somewhere else and leave me the fuck alone, but instead she watches him crawlin' on all fours, chin slack-jawed like an old dog's, a big fat freckle in the scooped out back of his black neck, and he be crawlin' and crawlin' and pickin' up the bits of the smashed frame and the torn picture of him, eight, shirtless, feet bare, wearing red shorts and holding a bent umbrella, the handle gone, and under the umbrella, there she was, a six-year-old in a purple leotard and pink tights, a hole in one knee, ballet slippers darkened by mud. They held hands then, a brother and a sister about to jump in a puddle of rain, half-assed umbrella, feet suspended in the air, smiles frozen on their tiny brown faces, big-ass toothy white smiles.

She stands there now, watching him, wishing he'd stop looking for every torn scrap, examining each one like it's some kind of find until, finally—sniffling, coughing, clutching the pieces—he crawls straight into her, burying his face in her belly like a little boy crying to his mamma, his breath and tears

warming the skin of her stomach until she wants to push him away and scream and rip out the heart of the history of the whole fucking world. . . .

But she can't do a goddamn thing 'cept place her hand on the crown of her brother's head.