

After the warmup rounds of dancing, Laura tells Malcolm she wants to compete. While he is skeptical about her ability to maintain her energy, she changes into her sneakers and they begin. Her “ballet style” of feather-light steps and his reputation gain them the attention of the very astute crowd. As Laura’s stamina starts to fade, Malcolm carries her to the sidelines to the applause of the crowd and with a salute from Duke Ellington himself.

In an effort to outdo Malcolm’s last partner, Laura rises to the occasion to compete against the other dancers. And while she does wonderfully, she ultimately falls victim to the grueling conditions, a foreshadowing of her eventual fall into drugs and prostitution.



As people in the crowd are congratulating Laura, Malcolm catches the eye of a beautiful, tall, blonde woman named Sophia. As dating white women was then a status symbol in black America, Malcolm is immediately struck by her obvious interest in him, almost instantly forgetting about Laura. After he takes Sophia to the floor for a dance, he agrees to take Laura home and then come back to meet Sophia.

While Laura is still trying to recover from the dance, Malcolm has already moved on to Sophia. While Laura may have been a superior dancer, Sophia has one thing Laura can never have – white skin.



When Malcolm returns, Sophia is waiting for him outside. She drives them in her convertible to a side road outside of Boston, before turning off the engine. For the next few months, Malcolm and Sophia go out several times a week together, making quite a statement throughout Roxbury. Sophia’s beauty, wealth, and whiteness increase Malcolm’s status in Roxbury so that he goes from being a young upstart to a respected man in the neighborhood. He’s now known as “Red.”

Malcolm and Sophia’s relationship focuses around what each of them can gain from the other, not on love. Sophia has an attraction to black men and culture, whereas Malcolm can gain socially and economically from the relationship.



Laura never comes back to the drugstore after this. When Malcolm sees her again, years later, she has abandoned her plans for college and fallen into drinking, drugs, and then prostitution to fund it all. Throughout his life, Malcolm will feel responsible for her fall.

Laura’s tragic fall has been foreshadowed throughout the chapter. Now, Malcolm simply sums up the course of her life, as if this part would inevitably follow, which says a lot about his views on “immorality.”



Ella soon finds out about Sophia and makes her disapproval very clear. Malcolm then moves in with Shorty on Sophia’s dime and finds a new job as a bus boy. Shortly thereafter, World War II reaches America at Pearl Harbor.

Malcolm can no longer live a double life, caught between the Hill and the town—so he chooses to move out of Ella’s home and embrace his new life.



CHAPTER 5: HARLEMITE

Through a friend of Ella’s, Malcolm lands a job working for the railroad, due to the war causing a labor shortage. Having always wanted to visit New York City, Malcolm jumps at the chance to work for the route traveling to and from the Big Apple.

While Malcolm may no longer live with Ella and she may no longer approve of his lifestyle, he will continue to benefit from her kindness and connections throughout his life.



Lying about his age and declaring himself 21, Malcolm instantly gets the job. They take him on as a dishwasher, but before working the NYC route, they put him on the “Colonial” to Washington, D.C. There, he sees the worst slums of his life, and all within proximity to the capital. There are nicer black neighborhoods as well, though; these well-educated residents work as janitors, porters, and mailmen.

After several trips to D.C., Malcolm jumps at the chance to join the “Yankee Clipper” route, working as the sandwich man. In New York, he goes with the train’s cooks to Harlem and to their favorite bar there, Small’s Paradise. Here, he is overwhelmed by the natural decorum and manners of its customers. Unlike the pretensions of the Hill in Roxbury, these patrons appear cool and collected in their quiet manners.

Later, Malcolm continues his tour of Harlem, heading first to the Apollo Theater and then to the Braddock Hotel, a popular hangout place for black celebrities. From there, he heads to the Savoy Ballroom, which dwarfs Roseland’s in Boston. There he dances with several of the girls on the sidelines as the room maintains a furious pace. The singer Dinah Washington eventually goes onstage, making the crowd go mad (and Malcolm notes that he and Dinah eventually became great friends).

The streets are filled with black servicemen, taking in the night life. Meanwhile, the prostitutes and the pimps are out on the streets working every single man they see, while the hustlers try to sell their merchandise. Malcolm says that in a few years, he could give any of these hustlers a lesson, but at this moment, he is mesmerized by the atmosphere and certain that he belongs here.

Malcolm heads back to Boston, his head spinning. He tries to convince Shorty to try and enter the New York music scene. Meanwhile, Sophia tells him that he will only ever be happy in New York, a diagnosis he agrees with.

Malcolm works hard at his sandwich job, putting on a show for the passengers, which virtually assures that they will buy something from him. The others working on the train do the same, catering to white people’s egos through being more subservient, but in a very calculating and conscious way.

In a very physical way, D.C. embodies the racist hierarchy that Malcolm sees throughout America. Right at the heart of the country’s center of power, one finds that racial oppression is at its very worst, implying that power and oppression are inevitably entwined.



The customers at Small’s also carry themselves with dignity in a way that Malcolm has never seen before. Perhaps Malcolm will later be attracted to the Nation of Islam partially because their conservative, courteous manners will remind him of these hustlers.



At this stage, Malcolm is still very much a newcomer. Whereas in Roxbury he is often at the center of the dancing, here in Harlem, he can only manage to keep up with the dancers along the sidelines. In addition, he will know the celebrities of Harlem – but not yet.



Malcolm describes the atmosphere of Harlem in a loving way and glorifies its nightlife. But this is meant to reflect how he felt at the time, rather than to simply enchant the reader with a romantic past.



Malcolm’s ambitions have outgrown the confines of Roxbury. He knows that he must be at the center of the action.



While the white customers believe that all black people simply are subservient, these train workers use that prejudice to their advantage to gain larger tips and deceive the customers.



Malcolm stays in Harlem for one day between journeys; he first takes a room at the YMCA, and then at a boarding house. He explores every area of Harlem, from the nicest to the most poor. Its atmosphere is like the town section of Roxbury “magnified a thousand times.” He goes into basement parties packed with people, music blaring and everyone drinking and dancing.

Malcolm quickly becomes a regular at Small’s and the Braddock bar, where the bartenders pour him a shot of his favorite bourbon as soon as he walks in. He’s known as “Red” to the old hustlers there, and he makes friends with many famous musicians.

Malcolm’s record sales of sandwiches ensure that he keeps his job over the man he replaced; he understands that white customers, just like his old shoe shine customers, want to be entertained. However, the other workers begin to joke that he won’t last. Malcolm’s language has apparently grown too profane, and some of the customers have started to complain.

Malcolm remembers one large, white, drunk serviceman who had been offended and declared that he was going to fight Malcolm. Malcolm agreed, but insisted the man take off some of his clothes. As the man stripped further and further, people started laughing at him and he was escorted away.

At this time Malcolm is living a very fast life, and his coworkers say he is out of control. In Boston, he goes out every night with Sophia. Then, coming to work drunk or high, he blasts through his shift before heading to the bars in Harlem in his zoot suit. Finally, after the railroad receives an angry letter from a passenger, Malcolm is let go.

Now that he is free of employment, Malcolm decides it would be a good time to visit his siblings in Michigan. He sees everyone except Wilfred, who has gone to university to study a trade, but his siblings barely recognize him. He causes quite a stir in Lansing, stupefying everyone. Malcolm, meanwhile, basks in the attention.

Malcolm then pays several house calls in Lansing. He first goes to see his mother Louise, who doesn’t really recognize him. Shorty’s mother, an elderly woman, thanks him for news of Shorty. Mrs. Swerlin, on the other hand, is extremely uncomfortable in his presence, and he quickly leaves.

For Malcolm, there is no such thing as people being too low-class for him. He readily explores and meets with people of all economic levels, and in fact, he finds that he connects the most with the poor.



The fact that the bartenders and regulars know him signals that Malcolm is no longer an outsider, but an accepted member of the group – or at least a welcome guest.



While this job is a sort of hustle as well, Malcolm must maintain a certain level of decorum, since it involves white people, who expect to be treated with respect by their racial “inferiors”—but Malcolm is quickly losing that capacity.



Malcolm’s inflammatory language (whether profane or religious) will incite opposition throughout his life, but one of his greatest joys is to use his mind to defeat his enemies.



Just like the train that is traveling back and forth every other day between New York and Boston, Malcolm himself is shooting between substances, his mind in a blurry haze.



Malcolm does not long for the approval of his siblings or the townspeople in Lansing. However, in retrospect he also does not approve of his flamboyant appearance and attitude at the time.



These mother-figures each keep their distance from the new Malcolm, either through non-recognition, not being his own mother, or through exhibiting clear discomfort with his new life.



Before leaving Lansing, Malcolm goes to a school dance, where he shows off all his best moves. He stuns the crowd, who all leave the dance floor to watch. He even signs autographs before leaving the gymnasium at the Lincoln School.

Suddenly, Malcolm himself represents the stardom and glory of New York to these rural young people.



With no employment, Malcolm goes to work for another railroad, the Seaboard Line, who need a man for their route to Florida. However, Malcolm is soon fired after running afoul of the line's white conductor.

Malcolm's options outside of Harlem are quickly closing around him.



Back in New York, one of the bartenders at Small's tells Malcolm that a job as a day waiter is about to open up. With a railroad background serving as a good recommendation for a waiter, Charlie Small and Ed Small take him on, based on their impression of him always being calm in their bar. The year is 1942, and Malcolm is 17.

Malcolm gets extremely lucky with this job. Not only has he burned his bridges with the railroads, but he also must use those shaky credentials to get himself a new job.



For Malcolm, working at Small's, which is the center of life in Harlem, is "Seventh Heaven seven times over." He quickly starts to learn the trade and how to get on the good side of the cooks and bartenders. The customers, who are used to seeing him amongst them, treat him very well too.

The biggest advantage for Malcolm at this time is that he is a very sociable and likeable person. His character helps him to establish himself in his new work.



In fact, the customers begin to teach Malcolm about Harlem as they eat. Harlem had been home to many groups of immigrants throughout its history: first the Dutch, then the Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, and finally the African Americans. Meanwhile, African Americans had been in New York City since 1683.

The greatest advantage about Small's, meanwhile, is the opportunities it affords Malcolm to learn about Harlem. This marks the beginning of a new kind of education.



In 1910, after a few black families started to move into Harlem, the Jewish community began to flee, which led to more black families moving in, until the neighborhood was nearly completely black. Then, in the 1920s, Harlem became a center for music and entertainment for New York City around when Louis Armstrong arrived in the city. Small's opened in 1925, followed by the Cotton Club and Savoy Ballroom in 1926.

Like many minority groups before them, African Americans had not originally been welcome in Harlem. But once the neighborhood became a thriving center for music, they made the place their own.



Harlem's reputation for great music attracts whites from downtown, and many of the clubs and impromptu speakeasies cater specifically to whites. The whole area is flooded with entertainers, hustlers, and pimps as everyone competes for white people's money. The lindy hop, named for Charles Lindbergh's famous flight to Paris from New York, takes off in 1927. The partying continues right up until the stock market crash of 1929.

The hustlers in Small's draw a direct connection between the economic and cultural success of Harlem and the ability of white patrons from downtown to pay for it. Harlem's economy cannot sustain itself, but rather must be fueled by outside cash.



Malcolm loves to hear the old timers talk about these bygone days, taking in everything they have to tell him about the past and about their own hustles. In this way, he gathers a vast trove of wisdom on how to make money and survive on the streets.

In addition to his history lessons, Malcolm begins to gain skills and knowledge that will carry him beyond the world of waiting tables at Small's.



CHAPTER 6: DETROIT RED

While working at Small's, Malcolm sometimes waits on people who have just hit the numbers and are coming in to celebrate with their friends. Seeing their good fortune makes Malcolm long to hit the numbers too, and so he plays every day, spending all his tip money, sometimes as much as fifteen or twenty dollars.

This kind of gambling would give Malcolm a big payoff if he ever won. But instead, he simply loses all his money and can never save anything to use for anything more substantial.



A “hit” in the numbers racket constitutes replicating the last three digits of the New York Stock Exchange total sales for the day. The odds of doing so are a thousand to one, and the payout is six hundred to one—a \$1 hit pays \$600. Many of Harlem's businesses had been founded or bought out from previous big hits.

The numbers game is an example of tragic irony, as the poor play a game which mimics the rich with the false hope of one day becoming rich themselves.



Either despite the widespread poverty or because of it, nearly everyone in Harlem plays daily, giving their bets and numbers to runners, who work for a controller, who report to the (white) banker. Everyone gets a cut of the profit, including the police. The methods for choosing numbers are infinite, from phone numbers, telegrams, zip codes, dream books (for interpreting dreams into numbers), and many other systems.

While there are many ways to pick numbers, there is no way to get around the fact that the odds are stacked in favor of the numbers guys. Thus Harlem daily gives its money away to these hustlers who represent a white banker.



At Small's, many of the old hustlers take a liking to Malcolm and do their best to teach him their ways and “straighten him out.” One, for example, buys him an expensive, conservatively cut suit as a gift. This patron is a member of the “Forty Thieves” gang, who specialize in robbing high-end garment stores.

Malcolm's new suit reflects a more mature and collected style compared to his more flamboyant days in Roxbury. He will wear suits like this for the rest of his life.



Malcolm's coworkers and customers also start to identify the plainclothes police officers to him, an essential catalog of faces crucial to avoiding arrest. In 1942, the police and military are particularly interested in any hustles aimed at draft dodging or at hustling servicemen.

The police are always a worry for the hustlers. But now, the federal government begins to take an interest in anything that might jeopardize the war effort – as if hustling were a treasonous activity.



Lots of servicemen during this period are coming through Harlem, and often ask for illegal goods and services, but they are mostly treated curtly. The first rule of hustling, according to Malcolm, is to never trust anyone outside of your closest circle.

Malcolm will follow this rule throughout his life—especially since the threat of violence or police infiltration will always hang over him.



The bartenders pick out to Malcolm the customers who are “fronts,” (who merely pretend to have connections), the ones really involved in crime, and the dangerous ones to avoid crossing. These men, like “West Indian Archie,” mostly worked as strongarmers for Dutch Shultz, a prominent criminal boss and banker in the numbers racket until his assassination in 1934. They now work as big bet runners for the top bankers and are generally left alone by the police as being simply too dangerous.

Malcolm befriends some of the pimps who come through Small’s as well. “Cadillac” Drake, a large, bald man, only employs unattractive women on the theory that they “work harder.” His complete opposite is “Sammy the Pimp,” a young, smooth character, who employs the most beautiful prostitutes in Harlem.

One of Sammy’s girls is known as “Alabama Peach,” a tall, blonde woman with a characteristic Southern drawl. She frequently tells the story of how she heard as a young girl about the sexual prowess of black men and forced a black man to have sex with her, saying that if he didn’t she would cry rape. After high school, she moved straight to Harlem and went into Sammy’s employ. Malcolm, looking back, says he has frequently wondered what became of her.

An old-time pickpocket named Fewclothes comes into Small’s almost every day to tell tales and make jokes. Once one of the best at his craft, he has now contracted bad arthritis, making it impossible for him to keep working. Nevertheless, the other regulars buy him dinner and drinks every night while they listen to his tales. Malcolm has reflected many times in life on the significance of that kindness, and how it spoke to the brotherhood among the hustler community.

Another regular is “Jumpsteady,” who specializes in burglary by entering through white people’s windows. Later, Malcolm will learn that he kept his nerves in check by getting high before his jobs. Despite naming so many criminals as regulars, Malcolm insists that Small’s was in fact one of the most respectable places in Harlem, especially at night time.

Malcolm’s first room in Harlem is on the 800 block of St. Nicholas Avenue, where most of the tenants are prostitutes and where everyone uses some kind of drug to make their days bearable. The prostitutes display a level of trust and sisterliness that Malcolm says he hasn’t seen among married women. In fact, he believes most women, and particularly white women, to be much more dishonest and unvirtuous than most of those prostitutes, many of whom he befriended.

The hustlers identified as “fronts” are portrayed as practically less than a person—just a façade. Meanwhile, the strongmen are elevated to the level of heroes, untouchable even by the police. For Malcolm, everyone in Harlem exists either on the level of myth or hardly at all.



Exactly who qualifies as a notable character can vary quite a bit. Rather than any one quality, it’s a persona that makes a person into a somebody.



Malcolm and the others are enamored with Alabama Peach’s stories, accent, and white skin, and they don’t see the racism underlying her story. After all, she used her privilege to force a man to have sex with her, and then essentialized and fetishized all black men as good lovers.



This is a very important moment, as Malcolm tries to understand the emotional connections happening underneath all the bravado and storytelling. Since society clearly doesn’t care about them, these hustlers must take care of each other, even in old age.



Malcolm challenges the reader to look at criminals differently. Rather than simply imagining slick hustlers in zoot suits, he insists that the reader imagine these men as also some of the most respectable and respectful people around.



Malcolm’s admiration for prostitutes throughout the book is very out of character with his generally strict and conservative moral code. This admiration displays a more sophisticated opinion which admires them as people who are generally virtuous, but who are bound to an “immoral” line of work.



Men come and go all day long, but in the morning, there is a rush of men coming in before work, and then all rushing out again. Malcolm blames this behavior on overly controlling wives who have made their husband's home lives unbearable. The prostitutes then have to let the men "be men." According to the prostitutes, the men are too easy to push around and needed to be firm (physically) with their wives.

Every once in a while, Sophia visits from Boston, and her looks and whiteness once again turn heads and increase Malcolm's status in the bars. In particular, the musicians at the Braddock bar make a big deal about her. But it's not just black men who are interested in mixed-race relationships; Harlem is full of white people from downtown who have come to get a piece of the "atmosphere" in Harlem.

One white girl, for example, comes to the Savoy Ballroom to dance exclusively with black men, and then takes the subway home without saying a word to anyone all night. Another young white "hippie" who appropriates the style and slang of the black zoot suiters can be seen everywhere in Harlem. Nevertheless, this white boy still makes a nasty comment to Sophia about her being with Malcolm, and Malcolm learns how deep racial hypocrisy can run.

Malcolm becomes good friends with Creole Bill, who runs a late-night speakeasy in his apartment. Malcolm leads white people there who still want to party after the bars close, and the room is filled with music, Cajun food, and booze. Eventually, Malcolm says, Bill made enough money to open a Cajun restaurant.

Sophia has recently married a white serviceman, but wants to maintain her relationship with Malcolm, who agrees. Sammy and Malcolm had discussed mixed-race couples before, and Sammy told him that white women were simply practical. They needed a white man for money and stability, and maintained their relations with black men out of either love or lust.

In early 1943, Malcolm (by now known as "Detroit Red") observes a soldier looking lonely and sad at Small's; on a bad impulse, he offers to give the man the number of a prostitute. He almost immediately realizes his mistake and sees that the soldier is a military spy hoping for that kind of offer. Malcolm is taken to the police station, but as he has no record, they merely scare him and let him go. However, as he's attracted police attention, he is now barred from Small's—a bitter loss.

Malcolm's views on marriage are quite old-fashioned and disturbing for a modern reader. Not only does he believe domestic violence is an acceptable practice, but he thinks that wives must let their men act out their sexual urges, whether the wife is interested or not.



The problem for Malcolm is not the idea of a mixed-race couple that loves each other. Rather, he reflects on how these relationships and attractions always seem to boil down to racial stereotypes and exploitation.



These two young white people represent different ways of appropriating and using black culture for their own pleasure, while still maintaining an idea of racial hierarchy (and all their own white privilege, of course).



Like many other Harlem businesses, the speakeasy is dependent on performing a particular idea of blackness for white outsiders.



Malcolm may gain from this relationship, but he also is clearly second-place to Sophia's husband. Instead, he is there for her to have fun and be rebellious or fashionable. While he pretends not to care at the time, it is hard to believe that this objectification would not affect him.



The police and military are not content to simply observe crime and then react, but have resorted to baiting possible hustlers into offering illegal services to undercover officers. Malcolm is actually still inexperienced in this field, which saves him from a more serious punishment.



Sammy ends up taking in Malcolm in his time of need, helping him to plan his next move. They decide that the best business for him will be to go into selling reefers, as it is an easy business to start, pays immediately, and caters to Malcolm's connections with musicians.

After an initial loan from Sammy, Malcolm starts to immediately turn a profit, selling mostly to his musician friends. With some money in his pocket, he feels truly independent for the first time. Around this time, Malcolm falls in love with the cinema. He often spends his days at the theater, and then prepares his supplies for the night and goes out to make his rounds.

With no obligations, Malcolm makes a trip to Boston. He visits with Ella, who still doesn't approve of his life, but is pleasant. He calls Sophia to meet him at Shorty's house; they have to be more cautious now that she's married. After she leaves, Malcolm goes to see Shorty's (newly formed) band, which he rates as "fair."

Malcolm recounts the story of how Sammy the Pimp became a pimp. After leaving Kentucky, he became a waiter in Harlem and would pick up single women. After having their house key duplicated and then robbing them, Sammy would then offer them a small amount of money to support them, and from then on, they would become dependent on him.

Malcolm quickly catches the notice of the narcotics squad, but he finds a method to avoid arrest. If he feels he is being followed, he simply drops his bundle of reefers from under his armpit and keeps walking. Then he goes back later to pick them up. He also begins to carry a small .25 caliber handgun in the small of his back, but he's not sure exactly why.

Even with all his precaution, word gets out that the narcotics squad has labeled Malcolm a top priority. After he finds his room searched, he moves out and starts to move from place to place. Meanwhile, he is stopped and patted down nearly every day. To combat this, Malcolm starts hiding his reefers in old cigarette and bandage cartons, then leaving them in secret, public places. But as police harassment continues and he moves to a poorer neighborhood, he begins to lose too much of his product to thieves.

Besides the fact that he already has a willing client base amongst his musician friends, selling reefers also appeals to Malcolm's sense of independence.



Malcolm has begun to fall into a daily rhythm comprised of watching movies, getting ready, and heading to business. This routine gives him a sense of security and independence. Malcolm will one day advocate for black-owned businesses as also offering a sense of security.



As with his family back in Michigan, Malcolm's friends and siblings in Boston remain an important part of his life, and his trip to see them reflects the importance he places on these relationships.



Malcolm recounts how he became great friends with Sammy the Pimp. However, it is impossible to hear this story and not imagine how Malcolm would have felt about this kind of clearly immoral exploitation later in life.



When Malcolm was younger and found a more effective method for hunting rabbits, he reflected that if there is a method, it can always be improved. In selling reefers and not getting caught, this is his improvement.



As will happen many times throughout his life, Malcolm finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place. Any less precaution and he may be sent to jail. Any more, and he won't be able to sell enough of his product to survive.



With business at a crawl, Sammy advises Malcolm to use his railroad I.D. card to travel through New England, selling reefers to the traveling musicians. Most conductors, upon seeing a railroad I.D. would let him ride for free, allowing him a way to make money and get out of Harlem for a while. The bands, meanwhile, are pleased to see him so far from home and with marijuana to sell.

One day after Malcolm comes back from a trip, Reginald is waiting for him at Sammy's apartment. They get a room at the St. Nicholas hotel and stay up talking about the family and their younger years. Malcolm is very happy to see his younger brother, who has gone into the merchant marine and is in town while his ship gets repaired in New Jersey.

Reginald fills Malcolm in on the family. Wilfred is an instructor at a trade school, and Hilda and Philbert are both talking about marriage. Meanwhile, Malcolm's youngest siblings Yvonne, Wesley, and Robert are still in school in Lansing. Philbert has also apparently become very religious. Before Reginald leaves, Malcolm urges him to move to New York. Rather than jumping at the offer, Reginald promises to think about it, with a coolness Malcolm admires.

One day, Malcolm receives a draft notification; he is to appear in front of the draft board in ten days' time. He immediately starts to make a show of seeming crazy and constantly high in public where military spies might see him. He even professes his desire to join the Japanese army.

The day of the draft board, Malcolm shows up wearing a brand new, outlandish zoot suit, and puts on his most over-the-top impression of a hipster possible. He walks in swaying, and presents himself to the receptionist. Nonetheless, he is led to the big hall with the other prospective inductees, where he proceeds to talk nonstop, attracting a lot of bad looks and condescending smirks from the mostly white men waiting with him.

After his medical examination, Malcolm is led to the Army psychiatrist's office. A young black woman is the secretary, and she clearly looks down on him. Malcolm, meanwhile, sees her as an uppity "first" – a black person who has risen to a higher position and then lords it over everyone else.

For nearly every occasion that Malcolm finds himself in a tough situation, an escape route presents itself. This is true of when he left Lansing with no future prospects and of when he found his job at Small's on only his railroad credentials.



In this scene, the reader sees a much softer side to the hustler who spends his evenings dodging the cops. Here, Malcolm describes his emotional reunion with his younger brother, back from the high seas.



It is clear that Reginald and Malcolm have the most in common of the Little siblings, as they are the two who have struck out from home alone, while the others remain in the Midwest.



When working as a shoe-shiner, it was important for Malcolm to seem deferential to the white customers. Now, he must appear to be the exact opposite – confrontational and out of control.



Malcolm knows that zoot suits and the people who wear them are representative of white America's worst prejudices about black men. By choosing to put on this character, he is actively resisting the militaristic mentality, which calls for uniformity, subservience, and respect for order and norms.



Whereas Malcolm and the secretary may have similar backgrounds, she has chosen to conform in order to rise economically, whereas he is purposefully not conforming in order to resist.



Upon entering the psychiatrist's office, Malcolm starts to pull him in, not wanting to seem to be obviously faking his insanity. After answering the man's questions for a few minutes, he confesses to wanting to organize an armed rebellion in the South among black people. With that, he is dismissed, and shortly thereafter, he receives a 4-F notification (designating medical or psychological unfitness) in the mail.

In the South before the Civil War, it was illegal to allow a slave to carry a gun for fear that they may start a slave rebellion. While he probably did not know that at the time, Malcolm nonetheless plays on deeply engrained, racist fears of violent, rebellious black men.



CHAPTER 7: HUSTLER

One day, Malcolm is playing blackjack with the other black railroad men in a locker room at Grand Central Station, when one of the others tries to cheat. Malcolm pulls his gun on him as a threat. The next time he goes back, Malcolm gets confronted by the police and is told to never come to the station again unless he has a ticket to go somewhere. And so his trips on the railroad come to an end.

Malcolm the narrator's nonchalant and disturbingly calm tone in recounting these events reflects how familiar Malcolm the character was with violence and the threat of violence at the time.



Back in Harlem, the narcotics squad knows Malcolm too well for him to keep selling reefers. With no other skills, he has to find a new hustle. He likens the hustler's life to that of an animal who must constantly move and prey on others to survive. He starts to do small robberies and stickups in nearby cities for the next six months. His use of narcotics keeps him from getting too nervous both on the jobs and in between, but he still changes rooms often.

Now that legal employment and low-level narcotics sales are no longer options, the only thing Malcolm can do is scale up the level of his crimes. He then copes with the psychological toll of this escalation in danger through using ever-increasing amounts of drugs.



Once, Malcolm and Sammy are nearly caught. As they are running away, they hear sirens behind them. The police car approaches, and they move into the street, pretending to ask for directions. The cops fall for the trick, curse them, and drive on to find the robbers.

This incident highlights Malcolm's incredible ability to think on his feet in difficult situations. Yet the trick's simplicity also testifies to the cops' inability to imagine a black man as capable of outwitting them.



Malcolm disciplines himself to not perform more "jobs" than necessary; he only goes when he is running low on cash. Meanwhile, he plays the numbers every day, waiting to one day have a big payout—but he never gets a big hit.

A delicate balance exists between Malcolm's need to survive and the danger of being caught, while his gambling is a constant attempt to quickly break out of this economic situation.



Reginald comes back on his ship one day, and this time, he decides to stay. He has fallen in love with Malcolm's musician friends and their world. Malcolm introduces him to everyone, such as Billie Holiday, who then treat Reginald as their own baby brother.

Malcolm has long felt at home and amongst family with Harlem's musicians. Now, his younger brother's presence amplifies that feeling.



Wanting to provide Reginald with a stable home, Malcolm starts to rent an apartment for \$100 a month. At nighttime, Malcolm “schools” Reginald on what’s happening around them, and then introduces him to his friends at the late-night speakeasies. Those speakeasies, as always, are packed with white people, who have come to take in black “soul.” Often at the most popular places, like Jimmy’s Chicken Shack, there are big-name celebrities, both white and black.

Malcolm’s actions reflect the treatment that Shorty gave him upon his first arrival to Roxbury, and he takes that role seriously. Malcolm wants Reginald to see him as a man who knows what he is doing and knows what is happening around them.



Malcolm gets Reginald a hustle that will make him money but be risk-free—he gets him a license to sell petty goods, and then takes him to buy cheap goods from a manufacturer’s outlet. Reginald will then present the goods as if they’re stolen and high-value, and thereby get more money for them.

Unlike Malcolm’s reefer business or burglaries, Reginald’s hustle is completely legal and mostly risk-free, reflecting Malcolm’s big-brother concern for Reginald’s safety.



Malcolm assumes that Reginald, like most black men at the time, will be interested in white women, but that is not the case. Instead, Reginald starts dating a black woman in her thirties who provides everything for him. His choice in partner gains Reginald even more respect from Malcolm.

While Malcolm is himself seeing a white woman on a regular basis, he still understands it to be a kind of weakness or betrayal of his race.



Racial tensions throughout the war simmer just below boiling point. Then, in 1943, a white officer shoots a black soldier, and a riot ensues. Many stores are smashed and lots of goods are stolen, which leads to even worse economic conditions after the riot ends. After this, very few white people keep coming to Harlem for the night life.

The economic downturn before the war, the fewer visitors, and the increased police presence push Harlem’s frustrations to its limit, which ultimately ends in even more difficult economic conditions.



Nowadays (in the early 1960s), Malcolm says, Harlem’s night life scene is gone, including the scene for black people. Black people that have money instead choose to go downtown and spend it in fancy white-owned hotels and restaurants, something Malcolm sees as simply another way of putting on airs and of undercutting black businesses.

By taking their hard-earned cash out of the community and spending it elsewhere, these individuals, according to Malcolm, are throwing their money away and not using it to support their neighbors.



The poor economic situation (in 1943) has hurt all parts of the Harlem underground, and the hustlers and prostitutes are all getting day jobs. Malcolm and Sammy start to pull more dangerous robberies together. One day they are caught mid-act, and Sammy’s arm is grazed by a bullet from a security guard. They split up, and then meet back at Sammy’s apartment early the next morning. Sammy’s girlfriend is crying very loudly and blaming Malcolm. Malcolm hits her “to shut her up,” and Sammy reaches for his gun. Malcolm is able to get away, and he and Sammy later make up, but things are never the same between them after that.

This is a key moment in Malcolm’s life, when the threat of death by violence is particularly high, as both a security guard and his own partner have tried to shoot at him in one day. Separately, Malcolm shows no awareness for why Sammy may be angry with him for enacting violence against his girlfriend. This blind spot towards women not only endangers Malcolm in the moment, but it opens him up to criticism (as a writer) of sexism.



Malcolm enters the numbers business on his reputation as a good hustler. His new boss and his wife have been granted control of a section of the city's numbers racket for six months by the mob. Malcolm's job is simply to pass on a bag of numbers slips to another man at a bus stop every day. Sometimes, he will have conversations with the boss's wife about how the criminal world is actually inseparable from politics and the legal world.

Now that he's in the racket, Malcolm decides to start placing his bets with West Indian Archie, who works for the same boss. Archie has a photographic memory, which makes him very valuable as a numbers runner, as he never carries evidence of gambling. Placing bets with him is a status symbol, since he only takes large betters. He also often pays off the hits from his own money, and then collects from his banker later.

Malcolm meets a Brothel Madam who recruits Malcolm to help her outsource certain sexual requests that her workers won't do. His job is to stand on the corner of 45th and Broadway with a white flower in his lapel, and then to accompany the customers to special locations in Harlem where their desires will be met. This steering gets him very heavy tips from the middle-aged and senior men, who are often big politicians and leaders in society. One of the people Malcolm directs his clients to is a big, strong black woman who whips her customers as they beg for mercy—and sometimes they pay Malcolm to watch.

Another of Malcolm's acquaintances is a white lesbian woman who runs a "stable" of black men for white women. Having heard of black men's prowess, these often bored, married women pay heavily, and almost always with a color preference for the darkest men. Malcolm sees this color preference as ironic, because these customers nevertheless do not respect the people they use, men and women alike. Malcolm also believes that black men, like himself, who sleep with white women (in his case, Sophia) are also just using them.

One morning, a bar in Harlem gets held up by a light-skinned black man, and Malcolm is considered a suspect. After he gets interrogated by some thugs looking for the robber, he calls Sammy and the Brothel Madam, who then help him to leave town and go see Philbert in Michigan. About a week later, Sammy telegrams him that the coast is clear: someone else confessed.

The idea that politics and the criminal world are intertwined foreshadows and underlies the views Malcolm will hold as a minister in the Nation. If U.S. politics is corrupt and intertwined with the criminal world, then the "criminal game" is one that is constantly rigged to take money and opportunities away from black people.



West Indian Archie has already been referred to as one of the most feared strongmen in Harlem. Now, his character appears even more dangerous as Malcolm emphasizes both his intellectual abilities and his high status as a man with his own money (and who is therefore very prideful).



The men who are the most respected and powerful in society also seem to be the ones who are most interested in sexual acts that even many sex workers won't perform, which Malcolm sees as proof of white America's immorality. While he clearly finds these men's desires disturbing, Malcolm does seem to secretly admire the woman for making so much money by beating and degrading old and powerful white men.



The color preference for dark sex workers is the same for female and male customers, which is reflective of how society in general treats "blackness" as something exotic or sexually appealing—but because "blackness" is simply something interesting to be fetishized or enjoyed in sex, then black bodies are simply there to be used.



While he may no longer be involved in the underground world, Malcolm is grateful to all those people, like Sammy and the Madam, who were his friends and protected him so that he could become who he is today.



Malcolm then starts working for Hymie, a specialist in renovating bars and restaurants and then selling for profit. Malcolm's main job is to transport bootleg liquor to some of the bars in Harlem, where it is substituted for brand-name liquor, unbeknownst to the customers. Malcolm and Hymie get along well, and he's making good money. But after a scandal involving corruption at the State Liquor Authority, Hymie is murdered at sea.

In the Bronx, a tall, light skinned black man holds up an Italian mobsters' craps game, once again bringing suspicion on Malcolm. Unarmed, he is confronted by two Italians, when all of a sudden a cop walks in, thereby saving him.

Meanwhile, Malcolm has just hit his number on a small bet and is going to meet his friend Jean Parks for a night out. He heads to Sammy's place, where he tells him what just happened, and Sammy says that West Indian Archie just came looking for Malcolm. While they wait for the evening to proceed, they do some cocaine.

CHAPTER 8: TRAPPED

West Indian Archie shows up at Sammy's apartment, carrying a gun and demanding that Malcolm give him back the three hundred dollars from his hit. Archie claims that Malcolm didn't hit and was trying to fool him. When Malcolm says he doesn't have the money, Archie gives him until noon the next day to get it to him.

In essence, the dispute is not over the money, as that could be raised fairly easily. Rather, West Indian Archie has made it about each other's reputation. He can't let Malcolm get away with appearing to have tricked him, and Malcolm can't allow himself to appear weak and like he can be strongarmed. The only way out is to shoot it out or to run. And to this day, Malcolm doesn't know if he or Archie made the mistake regarding which numbers Malcolm played.

Malcolm nevertheless goes out with Jean Parks to listen to Billie Holliday sing at the Onyx Club. When she sees Malcolm, she sings one of his favorite songs, and then comes to greet them at their table. She asks if something is wrong, but he plays it off as nothing.

Hymie's brief relationship with Malcolm is one of the few good relationships he has had with a white person. Hymie's murder, then, also reminds Malcolm and the reader that death could be around the corner at any minute for those in the criminal world.



After having been so recently reminded of the randomness of violence, Malcolm once again finds himself suspect to a crime, and only narrowly escaping.



Just as many of the hustlers Malcolm has met use drugs to calm their nerves before a job, Malcolm now uses drugs as a way to push off his worries, even as violence and danger encircle him.



After many close encounters with violence, Malcolm is finally given an ultimatum. If he doesn't meet it, then he will be forced to confront Archie.



In the world of hustlers in Harlem, the most important thing to maintain is one's reputation. If either Malcolm or Archie give in, then they will lose face and respect, and their careers will suffer greatly. With no other skills or opportunities, losing their hustles could be a death sentence.



Billie Holliday's tender concern for Malcolm is contrasted with his hard callousness, but this is more reflective of his worry than of his indifference.



From there, Jean and Malcolm go to the La-Marr-Cheri, one of his regular hangouts. As he is very high on cocaine and booze, Jean soon goes home. Malcolm sits with his back to the door, and so he doesn't see West Indian Archie come in. Archie proceeds to threaten and humiliate Malcolm publicly, until some of Archie's friends manage to quietly drag him out and defuse the situation. Malcolm walks outside and waits, but when Archie doesn't emerge to confront him, he leaves.

At this point, Malcolm decides the best course of action is to get unbelievably high. He first smokes some opium, then takes Benzedrine tablets to perk up. He then smokes some marijuana with his neighbor, who helps him roll a hundred reefers. Malcolm then goes to Sammy's, where they do cocaine. He arrives at his lesbian friend's apartment to deliver them fifty reefers, and then proceeds to pass out for the rest of the day. Malcolm stays high for the next couple of days, and nothing happens—his would-be shootout with Archie never occurs.

After a slight scuffle in a bar one day, Malcolm can sense the police coming. He gives his gun away just in time, as the police come into the bar and pat him down. They recommend that he leave town. With the narcotics squad, West Indian Archie, and the Italian mob all looking for him, Malcolm feels very trapped.

Sammy calls Shorty in Boston and asks him to come get Malcolm, as he needs to get out of town. Shorty arrives, and Malcolm gratefully packs up the car and they leave town. Malcolm writes that he's always been grateful to Sammy for making that call.

CHAPTER 9: CAUGHT

Ella cannot believe how profane Malcolm has become in both his speech and in his general outlook. Shorty, likewise, is a little overwhelmed by how predatory Malcolm is, like a dangerous animal. At first, Malcolm just sleeps and smokes reefers for two weeks at Shorty's house. Once he starts going out and finds some cocaine, though, he begins to want to talk and make plans for the future. Malcolm talks with Sophia in the evening and with Shorty all night.

Sophia's husband works now as a traveling salesman, giving her more ability to come see Malcolm. Malcolm has always exploited Sophia for money, but she's never complained about it. He also occasionally would hit her, but she always came back. Now, his demands for money and her beatings have gotten worse, but he never worries that she will stop coming.

Malcolm has lost control of himself and the situation by leaving himself exposed to a surprise attack. But the fact that nothing serious happens is telling; perhaps neither Malcolm nor West Indian Archie want to hurt each other, but are nonetheless obliged to put on a public show of masculinity and confidence.



In a way, Malcolm's drug use is a quasi-religious escape from a reality that is full of violence and hatred. In his haze, he completely checks out of his difficulties and simply waits for fate to unfold itself. Of course, drugs are much more harmful for one's health than praying, but a similar attitude can be observed in the Nation of Islam's hands-off approach to contemporary political issues.



Malcolm remarks early in the autobiography that his mother and his siblings have always had an intuition for impending danger; here, the reader sees that intuition in action.



One of the greatest things that any friend ever did for Malcolm was to essentially offer him an escape route. Soon, Reginald will offer him a similar "escape."



Malcolm the narrator marks the time lapse since his last time in Boston by his changed attitude, which shocks his friends and family. This attitude, which he describes as predatory, is completely goal-focused: looking forward only to the next high, the next score, the next hustle.



Malcolm the narrator reflects that this level of extortion and abuse was out of hand. However, he seems to imply that a certain level of extortion and abuse is normal and acceptable – a potentially shocking claim to a contemporary reader.

