

# THE FIVE DOLLAR GUY—A STORY

By WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

ALL the forenoon I had been thinking, returning to it and having it submerged again as more pressing matters were thrown over it by the tide: To put down, to find and to put down some small, primary thing, to begin low down so that all the color and the smell should be in it—plainly seen and sensed,—solidly stated—with this we should begin to have a literature; but we must begin low. It is not to write intriguingly, to fabricate a fascinating tissue of words (so I had been thinking) but to get down to one word where that is fastened upon the object, and so to begin to write—some plain phase: that would be story enough. But I did not then know how strange the common object seems when it is stripped naked before eyes freed from that artifice of seeing which concern for a clever literature enforces. . . .

She was washing clothes in the sink. It was the second floor of one of these quick up, back street places, a home. There was a big middle room outside of which the stairs ran down to the street door. From this bare-floored center containing a coal range and a small oil stove for quick service, there branched out two bedrooms, a small laundry place containing tubs and the sink—before which the blond haired woman had stood—and a front parlor, closed in winter—where they had kept the fern for me one night. My goodness, is that you? she said. You always come at the wrong time. She wiped her hands on her apron. The baby has just had his bath and has gone to sleep. I suppose you want to look at his belly button.

Her elder daughter, three, who looked exactly like the husband with his half closed docile eyes, was standing at her side. The second daughter, clownish, always grinning like a half wit, but clever as a clown, was probably asleep in the closed bed room. We walked into the other bedroom—the scene of the confinement a week before. There she fished up the baby from the bundle it was in in the dark corner of the bed and began talking as she undid it. How are you getting on? I said. Oh, I'm all right except I get a little dizzy sometimes. But the old man is out of work again and Ma had to go home. I'm all right if I keep on working, but if I stop I get dizzy. Then breaking off, she said, I wish that sister of mine would have another. I hate to see only one kid in a family. It isn't right. She says if she could have them as easy as I do she wouldn't mind. The second one is usually easier, I told her. Sure it is, you don't have two the same. Well, maybe she'll have one whether she wants it or not, I interposed. You're right, she may,—if she keeps on fooling with those boarders they have in the house the way she does. The way she carries on with those two fellows, making up to them, makes me sick at my stomach. Good for her, I said. Yea?

Say, I'm going sporting myself pretty soon, she continued. What are you going to do with the kids? I asked

her. Oh, I'll get Ma to come down here some day and mind them. She knows I got a fella but she thinks I'm only fooling. I'm going out for a joy ride on one of those Mex Pet trucks. Say, you'd laugh yourself sick to see him. The house in which she lived was on a blind street near the railroad with a filling station for the Mex Pet Gas and Oil Co. at the end of it. There were several large tanks flanked by a row of old willows with a soccer field adjacent where the employees of the nearby Standard Bleachery Company—mostly Scotch—played football on Sundays and holidays. All the gas trucks passed her window—shaking the house heavily as they did so. Well, I said, it's a good thing to have a load of gas behind you when you go for a joy ride. What d'ye mean? she laughed raising her voice shrilly. You can take that two ways, she said. All right, I answered her, I mean it that way.

He's too old, she concluded, turning up her nose jokingly. (Clown is right, for that second youngster, from the mother's side.) How old is he? Thirty-two. *Old!* I said. Why he's not even ripe yet. Wait till he gets to forty. You're older than that, she corrected. Forty-two, I said. And your birthday is September 17, ain't that

right? I smiled and assented, pleased. She had given me a palm once on my birthday. Thirty-two is just a young man. She shook her head. No.

You should see him, she added laughing and doubling herself over in mockery, he's big, a big German fella. He's married—and she looked at me a moment—he's got a wife older than himself. She weighs 165 pounds: they haven't got any kids. He's the half brother, or something of the sort, to the Boss down there. I don't know what—they both have the same mother but different fathers. Henwood, that's the boss. But this guy. He's so bashful he blushes every time I talk to him. I sure will have to give him a good bringing up before I take him out. But he's nice though. So you think he's too old, I reverted pensively. But she was tricky. Try and find out if she means it.

I was standing looking out of the side window down on the yard below. It thrilled me to see it. Nothing seemed more common or more bizarre. It flashed across my mind, what I had been thinking all morning.

It flashed across my mind that here it was, the inexplicable, exquisite, vulgar thing—rarest of the rare in the imagination, the trodden and defeated atmosphere of perfection. All while

she continued to talk and to laugh and to blush with clownish pleasure and excitement, in her after-maternity-exaltation and release-to-enjoyment, I stood with overcoat and hat on in that uncarpeted room watching that yard unfold its grave and comical secrets: On a long slat-back yellow bench—exhalation of what atmosphere I could not guess—not even a nigger church—a bench fifteen feet long standing before a heap of weather-beaten boards, a bench of most exquisitely worn yellow in that colorless yard—upon this bench lay sleeping a large white mongrel covered with that curly, silky hair of a little poodle so prized by the poor. I say there lay upon this bench a large dog of that luxuriously long, silky hair loved by the poor, coat of their favorite dog since nowhere else in their experience is there to be found such another soft, delicate texture of richness—but a dog pure white only once or twice yearly, when washed. Upon this bench, leashed and sleeping was a large, soiled, silky-haired dog, mongrel breed of some waddling poodle and whatever he had found not too big for him in some field or alley nearby: the narrow yard of the ramshackle house next door.

All about the dog the ground was  
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DRAWING BY STUART DAVIS

## SYNTHETIC REVOLUTIONISTS

FIRST INTELLECTUAL: What the radical moosh-ment needsh ish Inttell'g'nce!  
SECOND INTELLECTUAL: Thash it! But ain't we intell'g'nt? What good's it do?  
SHE-INTELLECTUAL: Gimme 'nuther drink!