



Ruby

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Paradise

**For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
numerous sins,
and incontinencies,
and disgraceful passions
and fleeting pleasures,
which (men) embrace until they become
sober
and go up to their resting place.**

**And they will find me there,
and they will live,
and they will not die again.**

Ruby

They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are five miles from a town which has seventeen miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent but there is time and the day has just begun.

They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to capture or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, palm leaf crosses, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses along with clean, handsome guns.

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have parked Chevrolets near its porch to pick up a jar of honey or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon can of barbecue sauce; but none has seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are startled by the clothes they are wearing--suddenly aware of being ill-dressed. For at the dawn of a July day how could they have guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their t-shirts, work shirts, and dashikies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn workshoes are unnerved by the thunder of their steps on marble floors; those in Pro-Keds by the silence. Then there is the grandeur. Only the two who are wearing ties seem to belong here and one by one each is reminded that before the mansion was a Convent, it was

an embezzler's folly. Bisque and rosetone marble floors segue into teak ones. Ising glass holds yesterday's light and patterns walls stripped and white-washed fifty years ago. The ornate bathroom fixtures which sickened the nuns were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and toilets, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt. The embezzler's joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room which the nuns converted to a school room where stilled Arapajo girls once sat and learned to forget.

Now armed men search rooms where macrame' baskets float next to Flemish candalabra ; where Christ and His mother glow in niches trimmed in grape vines. The Sisters of the Final Cross [tk] chipped away all the nymphs, but curves of their marble hair still strangle grape leaves and tease the fruit. The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast and butter smell of rising dough.

One of them, the youngest, looks back, forcing himself to see how the dream he is in might go. The woman, lying uncomfortably on marble, waves her fingers at him--or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its color. He has never before dreamed in colors such as these.

The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stop, editing their breath, making friendly

adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations: you two over there to the kitchen; two more upstairs; two others into the chapel. He saves himself, his brother and the one who thinks he is dreaming for the cellar.

They part gracefully without words or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below.

Outside the mist is waist high. It will turn silver soon and make grass rainbows low enough for children's play before the sun burns it off, exposing acres of clover and maybe witch tracks as well.

The kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. More shelving than Ace's Grocery Store. The table is fourteen feet long if an inch and it's easy to tell that the women they are hunting have been taken by surprise. At one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of Shredded Wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallion piled like a handful of green confetti nestles brilliant discs of carrot, but the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on one of the stove's eight burners. It is restaurant size and on a shelf beneath the great steel hood a dozen loaves of bread swell. A stool is overturned. There are no windows.

One man, called Sargeant, signals the other to open the pantry while he goes to the back door. It is closed but unlocked. Peering out Sargeant sees an old hen, her puffed and bloody hindparts cherished, he supposes, for delivering freaks--double, triple yokes, outsized and misshappen. Soft stuttering comes from the coop beyond; fryers padding confidently into the yard's mist disappear, reappear and disappear again, each flat eye indifferent to anything but breakfast. No footprints disturb the dirt around the stone steps. Sargeant closes the door and joins his partner, Maurice, at the pantry. Together they scan dusty Mason jars and what is left of last year's canning: tomatoes, green beans, peaches. Slack, they think. August just around the corner and these women have not even sorted, let alone washed, the jars.

Sargeant turns the fire off under the stock pot. His mother bathed him in a pot no bigger than that. In Haven where he was born in the sod house his grandfather built. The house he lives in now is much bigger, much better and this town is resplendent compared to Haven, Oklahoma, which, ~~divided and contentious, ate itself alive by 1950.~~ *over* That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out brings rot to the one all-black town worth the pain. *Most of the* ~~All the others~~ he knew about *merged* *over* with white towns, or, if they didn't, shriveled into tracery: foundation outlines marked by the way grass grew there, wallpaper turned negative behind missing windowpanes, schoolhouse floors moved aside by elder trees growing toward the bellhousing. *One* *1899* *five* thousand citizens in 1900 becoming twelve hundred by 1930. Then

arced from

→ had gone from ~~its~~ feet to ~~its~~
~~knees~~ to belly ~~by 1948~~
in 60 years

→ ^{who} freedmen stood tall in 1889
were on their knees in 1930
and crawling by 1948.

→ about knuckled to ^{or merged with} white towns
otherwise, like Haven, they had

1948
1889
59

two
five hundred, then eighty as cotton collapsed or railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere. Subsistence farming, once the only bounty a large family needed, became just scrap farming as each married son got his bit which had to be broken up into more pieces for his children until finally the owners of the bits and pieces who had not just walked off in disgust, welcomed any offer from a white speculator, so eager were they to get away and try someplace else. A big city this time, or a small town--anywhere that was already built.

This town, this, the one Sargeant and the others had put together, was the exception and the solution. Veterans all, they loved what Haven, Oklahoma had been--the idea of it and its reach. And they carried that idea from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart. And when they got back to the States most of them did what they had promised themselves: took apart the oven that sat in the middle of their hometown and carried the bricks, the hearthstone and its iron plate two hundred and forty miles west--far far from the old Creek Nation which a witty Government called "unassigned land." Sargeant remembers the ceremony they'd had when the Oven's iron lip was re-cemented into place and its worn letters polished for all to see. He himself had cleaned off sixty-two years of carbon and animal fat so the words shone as brightly as they did in 1888 when they were new. And if it hurt--pulling asunder what their grandfathers had put together--it was nothing compared to what they had endured and what they might become if they did not begin anew. Could ex-soldiers be no less purposeful than ex-slaves? Would new fathers be less understanding than the Old Fathers? Those who had cut Haven

Guinea
Guin
Guinea

out of mud knew enough to seal their triumphant arrival with this priority. An Oven. Round as a head, deep as desire. Living in or near their wagons, boiling meal in the open, cutting sod and mesquite for shelter, the Old Fathers did that first: put most of their strength into constructing the huge flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done. When it was finished--each pale brick perfectly pitched; the chimney wide, lofty; the pegs and grill secure; the draft pulling steadily from the tail hole; the fire door plumb--then the iron monger did his work. From barrel staves and busted axles, from pot handles and bent nails he fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it at the base of the Oven's mouth. It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he could even read the half dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce that they had lost.

Once the letters were in place, but before anyone had time to ponder the words they formed, they raised a roof next to where the Oven sat waiting to be seasoned. On crates and makeshift benches Haven people gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game. Later, when buffalo grass gave way to a nice little town with a road down the middle, ^{wood} good houses, one church, a school, a store, the citizens still gathered there. They pierced ^{guinea hens} turkeys and whole ^{deer} pigs for the spit; they turned the ribs and rubbed extra salt into sides of cooling veal. Those were the days of slow cooking, when flames were

kept so low a twenty pound turkey roasted all night and a side could take two days. Whenever livestock was slaughterd, or when the taste for unsmoked game was high, Haven people brought the kill to the Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasonings and the proper test for "done." They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shade of the eaves. And any child in ear shot was subject to being ordered to fan flies, haul wood, clean the work table or beat the earth with a tamping block.

In 1910 there were two churches and the All-Citizens Bank, four rooms in the schoolhouse, five stores selling drygoods, feed and foodstuffs--but the traffic to and from the Oven was greater than to all of those. No family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was. Even in 1930 when everything else about the town was dying; when it was clear as daylight that talk of electricity would remain just talk and when gas lines and sewers were Tulsa marvels, the Oven stayed alive. Running water was not missed because there was a sweetwater creek nearby. As a boy Sargeant had swung overhand from the cottonwood branches leaning over it and peered through clear water at the stones beneath. Time after time he heard stories of the blue dresses and bonnets the men bought for the women with cash from the first harvest or the first cuts from the herd. The spectacular arrival of the St Louis piano, ordered soon as Zion's floor was laid. He imagined his mother as a ten year old among other young girls clustered quietly about the piano, sneaking a touch, a keystroke before the deaconness

Until the
big
drought

slapped their hands away. Their pure sopranos at rehearsal singing "He will take care of you...." which He did, safe to say, until He stopped.

So in 1949 Sargeant, young and newly married, was anything but a fool. Even before ^{his enlistment 1942} he left for the war, Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. ^{Discharged} He stared at his dwindling post-war future and it was not hard to persuade him to join other veterans who had planned all along to repeat what the Old Fathers had done in 1888. Lessons had been learned, after all, about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven--headed not for California as some had, or St. Louis, Houston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could ^{climb} get from the grovel infecting the town their grandfathers had made.

"How long?" asked the children from the back seats of the cars. "How long will it be?"

"Soon," the parents replied. Hour after hour the answer was the same. "Soon. Fairly soon." When they saw the ^{Beaver} Spaniaw River sliding through the ^(over) acres their pooled discharge pay had bought, through hills dotted with cardinals, it did seem fairly if not too soon.

What they left behind was a dream town whose once proud streets

The muzzle of a state
Shaped like a gun, on through

were weed-choked, monitored now by eighteen stubborn people wondering how they could get to the post office where there might be a letter from long gone grandchildren. Where the Oven had been, small green snakes slept in the sun. Who could have imagined that twenty-five years later in a brand new town a Convent would beat out the snakes, the Depression, the tax man and the railroad for sheer destructive power?

Sargeant eyes the kitchen sink. He moves to the long table and lifts the pitcher of milk. He sniffs it first and then, the pistol in his right hand, he uses his left to raise the pitcher to his mouth, taking such long measured swallows the milk is half gone by the time he smells the wintergreen.

On the floor above , Roger and Fleet walk the hall and examine each of the four bedrooms with a name card taped on its door. The first, printed in lipstick, is Seneca; the next, Divine, is typed in capital letters. They exchange knowing looks when they learn that each woman sleeps not in a bed like normal people, but in a hammock. Other than that, and except for a narrow desk or end table, there is no additional furniture. No clothes in the closets, of course, since the women always wore no-fit dirty dresses and nothing you could honestly call shoes. But there are strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1963 calendar, large X's marking various dates; astrology charts; a whip; a highschool year book and, for people who swore they were Christians--well, Catholics anyway--not a cross of Jesus anywhere. But what alarms the two men most

are the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to the hanging cord of a hammock in the last bedroom they enter. A teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangles among the tiny shoes. Signaling with his eyes, Fleet directs Roger to four more bedrooms on the opposite side of the hall. He himself moves closer to the bouquet of baby shoes. Looking for what? More evidence? He isn't sure. Blood? A little toe, maybe, left in a white calfskin shoe? He slides the safety on his gun and joins Roger's search across the hall.

These rooms are normal. Messy--the floor in one of them is covered with food-encrusted dishes, dirty cups and a clothes-covered bed; another room sports two rocking chairs full of dolls; a third the debris and smell of a heavy drinker--but normal at least.

Fleet's saliva is bitter and, although he knows this place is diseased, he is startled by the whip of pity flicking in his chest. What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children. Out here in wide open space near a quiet orderly community tucked away in a mansion--no one to bother or insult them--they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew. The winter coat money for which his father saved in secret for two harvests; the light in his mother's eyes when she stroked its seal collar. The surprise party he and his brothers threw for his sister's sixteenth birthday. Yet here not twenty miles away there were women like none he knew or ever heard tell of. In this place of all places. Well there were a few problems, like every other place in the state and in

the country for that matter. But unique and isolated, theirs was a town justifiably proud of its people. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from their town. And the one or two who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of. Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town and the reasons, he thought, were clear. From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of nothing at all. Lampless and without fear she could make her way. And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else.

The woman could decide to go back to her own house then, refreshed and ready to sleep, or she might stay her direction and walk further down the road past other houses, past the three churches, past the

Oven. On out, beyond the limits of town because nothing at the edge thought she was prey.

At each end of the hall is a bathroom. Roger steps into one, Fleet the other; neither man working his jaws because they believe they are prepared for anything. In the one Fleet enters the taps are too small and dowdy for the wide sink. The bathtub rests on the backs of four mermaids--their tails split wide for the tub's security; their breasts arched for stability. The tile underfoot is bottle green. A Modess box is on the toilet tank and a bucket of soiled things stands nearby. There is no toilet paper. Only one mirror has not been covered with chalky paint and that one Fleet ignores. He does not want to see himself stalking females or their liquid. With relief he backs out and closes the door. With relief he lets his handgun point down.

Harper doesn't smile, although when he and Sharktooth first enter the chapel, he feels like it because it was true: they worshipped graven idols. Men and women in white dresses and capes of blue and gold stood on tiny shelves cut into niches in the wall. Holding a baby, gesturing, their blank faces faking innocence. Candles had obviously burned at their feet and, just as Reverend [tk] said, food had probably been offered as well since there were little bowls on either side of the doorway too. When this was over Harper would tell Reverend tk how right he was and laugh in Reverend tk's face. *Misner's*

Whatever the differences among the congregations in town, they merged solidly on the necessity of this action: Do what you have to.

Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue.

Pity. Once the Convent had been a true if aloof neighbor, surrounded by five miles of buffalo grass and clover and approached by a gravel path rather than a road. The mansion-turned-Convent was there long before the town and the last boarding Arapajo girls had already gone when the fifteen families arrived. Only the Mother Superior with her servant lived there waiting out the Bureau or the See or something. Talk was they were looking for a buyer. There were none, although Sharktooth said he'd inquired about it. Even talked to the Mother Superior about what kind of money they were looking for. That was twenty years ago when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them. A three mile road straight as a die had been cleared through the center of town, and lined on one side by a paved walk. Side streets, four of them, had been named for the Gospels. Seven of the families had farms of more than three hundred acres, and three had five hundred. The Morgan's application for the bank had been approved. And the Oven, perfectly re-assembled within the first month of their arrival, was still a pleasant place to congregate. By and by, Harper's father and a man named Ossie organized a horse race to celebrate its restoration. From army issue tents, half finished houses and freshly cleared land people rode in bringing what they had. Out came stored away things and things got up on the spot: guitars and late melon, hazel nuts, rhubarb pies and a mouth organ, a wash board, roast lamb, pepper rice, Lil Green, In the Dark, Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five; Red Spot beer and groundhog meat fried and simmered in gravey. The women tied bright scarves over their

hair; the children made themselves hats of wild poppies and river vine. Ossie had a two-year old; X an auburn mare, both fast and pretty as brides. The other horses were simply company: Jessie's tk, Miss Esther's ancient featherweight, all four of Nathan's ploughhorses and a half broke-in pony that grazed the creek bank but that nobody claimed.

The riders quarrelled so long over saddle or bare back the mothers of nursing babies told them to mount or change roles. The men argued handicaps and placed dollar bets with abandon. When the gun went off only three horses lept forward. The rest stepped sideways or cut out over lumber stacked near unfinished homes. When the race finally got underway, the women yelled from the meadow while their children shrieked and danced in grass up to their shoulders. The pony finished first, but since it lost its rider two furlongs out, the winner was the auburn mare. The little girl with the most poppies on her head was chosen to present the first place ribbon hung with Ossie's purple heart. The winner was ^{seven}~~ten~~ years old then and grinning as though he'd won the Kentucky Derby. Now he was somewhere down in the cellar of a Convent watching out for awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but novices, they thought, or lay workers. Nobody knew. But it wasn't important to know because all of them, each in her turn, and like the Mother Superior and the servant who used to, still sold honey, good bread and the hottest peppers in the world. For a pricey price you could buy from them either the purple black peppers or a relish made from them. Either took the cake for pure burning power. The

relish lasted years with proper attention, and though many customers tried planting the seeds, the pepper grew nowhere outside the Convent's garden.

Strange neighbors, every body said, but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in--lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Guests reported kindness, profound silence and very good food. But now Harper and everybody else knew it was all a lie, a front, a carefully planned disguise for what was really going on. Once the emergency was plain, representatives from all three churches met at the Oven because they couldn't agree on which, if any, church should host a meeting to decide on what to do now that the women had ignored all warnings.

It was a secret meeting, but the rumors had been whispered for more than a year. Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed son. Three damaged infants born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other dead on New Year's Eve. Trips to Middleton for ud shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. So when nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flashlights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those

women.

They met at the Oven in spite of the teenager because, as representatives of three churches that had differed on a lot of things over the years, the Oven was one of the things they agreed upon. Once upon a time it was practically a church itself. Harper and Sharktooth both waved flashlights over the worn down words on the Oven's lip:

THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

That much was clear. What was in dispute were the missing words, or (according to some) the one word that began and completed the original sentence. The letters had broken off and been lost either when the Oven was disassembled or on the journey west. The oldest inhabitant, Fleet's mother-in-law, said that when she was a girl in Haven, she had traced the whole sentence with her finger, and she knew from bone finger memory that the original sentence was:

BEWARE THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

For a few years there was no argument about her recollection. Then, in 1955, someone said, no, uh uh, the original sentence was:

BE THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

A dozen years later another revelation was insisted upon. There had never been the letter b at the beginning, and the W was in the wrong place of Miss Esther's bonefinger memory. The true sentence was:

WE ARE THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

Harper walks the aisle checking the pews right and left. He runs a frond of light from his Black and Decker under each seat. The knee

rests are turned up. At the altar he pauses. One window of pale yellow floats above him in the dimness. Things look uncleaned. He steps to one of the bowls positioned on the walls to see if any food offerings remain there. Except for grime and spider webbing, the marble is empty. Maybe they are not for food but for money. Or trash? There is a gum wrapper in the dirtiest one. Doublemint.

Harper shakes his head and joins Sharktooth back at the altar. Shark points. Harper beams the wall below the yellow window where, just barely, the sun announces. The outline of a huge cross comes into view. Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus.

The Morgan brothers were once identical. Although they are twins their wives look more alike than they do. One, Deek Morgan, is tough, loud and smokes Te Amo cigars. The other Morgan hides his face when he prays. But both have money and both are as singleminded now standing before a locked door as they were in 1942 when they enlisted. Then they were looking for an out--a break, away from a life where all was owed, nothing owned. Now they want in. Then, in the forties, they had nothing to lose. Now everything requires their protection. From the beginning when the town was founded they knew isolation did not guarantee safety. Men strong and willing were needed when lost or aimless strangers did not just drive through hardly glancing at a sleepy town with three churches within one hundred feet of each other but nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital. Sometimes, if they were young and drunk or old and sober, the

strangers might spot three or four colored girls walk-dawdling along the side of the road. Walking a few yards, stopping as their talk required; skipping on, pausing to laugh or slap another's arm in play. The men get interested in them, perhaps. Three cars, say, a '55 Buick green with cream colored interior license number 085 B; a '39 Chevvy black, cracked rear window; and the '53 Oldsmobile with Arkansas plates. The drivers slow down, put their heads out the windows and holler over the fenders. Their eyes crinkled in mischief they drive around the girls making U turns and K's, churning up lawn in front of the houses, flushing cats in front of Ace's Grocery Store. Circling. The girls' eyes freeze as they back into one another. Then, one at a time, the men come out of the houses, the store, the back yards, off the scaffold of the bank, out of the barber shop. One of the passengers has opened the front of his trousers and hung himself out the window to scare the girls. The girls' little hearts stand up and they cannot close their eyes fast enough, so they jerk their heads aside. But the townsmen do look at it, see the wish in this most militant of gestures, and smile. Smile reluctantly and in spite of themselves because they know that from this moment on, if not before, this man, till his final illness, will do as much serious damage to colored folks as he can.

More men come out, and more. Their guns are not pointing at anything, just held slackly against their thighs. Twenty men; now twenty-five. Circling the circling cars. Seventeen miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety from the nearest badge. If the day had been dry the dust spuming behind the tires would have discolored them all. As it was just a little gravel kicked up in the

tread they left behind.

Now Deek, a leader in everything, smashes the cellar door with the butt of his rifle. The other Morgan waits a few feet back with K.D., their nephew. All three descend the steps ready and excited to know.

They are not disappointed. What they see is the devil's bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen.

K.D. knew that his mother had tried as hard as she could to hang on. She had managed to see him ride the winning horse, but beyond that she had no strength. Not even enough to get interested in the debates about what to call this place she had traveled to with her brothers and her little boy. For three years New Haven had been the name most agreed to, although a few were loud in suggesting other names--names that did not speak, they said, of failure new or repeated. Pacific veterans liked Guam and Incho. Those who fought in Europe kept coming up with names only the children enjoyed pronouncing. The women had no firm opinion until K.D.'s mother died. Her funeral--the town's first--stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity. They named the town after one of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby.

It pleased Deek and the other Morgan who could then both mourn the sister and honor the friend and brother-in-law who didn't make it back. But K.D., winner of Ossie's purple heart, heir to his father's dog

tags, witness to his mother's name painted on signs and written on envelopes for the rest of his life, was displaced by these sad markings. The heart, the tags, the post office name outsized him somehow. The women who had known and tended his mother spoiled Ruby's boy. The men who grew up and enlisted with his father favored Ruby's husband's boy. The uncles took him for granted. When the decision was taken at the Oven, he was not there. But when the plan was being carried out, Uncle Deek simply knocked on his door and said We got coffee in the truck get your rifle. Which he did but he took the palm cross too.

It was three in the morning when they left; four when they arrived because, not wanting engine hum or headlights to ruin their cover of darkness, they walked the final miles. They parked the trucks behind tk for light could signal uninterrupted for mile upon mile in this country. When the beaks of derricks gulping gulping fifty miles in line were invisible, a lit birthday cake could be spotted as soon as the match was struck.

In the school room, that used to be a dining room and now has no function except storage of desks pushed to the wall, the view is clear. The men of Ruby bunch at its windows. Finding nothing but confirming evidence elsewhere in the Convent, they gather in the schoolroom. The New Fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma. The chill they first encountered is gone; they are animated--warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness. The view is clear.

Gas domes

Track. That's all K.D. can think of. Five hundred yard dashers or even the three mile runners. The heads of two of them are thrown back as far as their necks will allow; fists tight as their arms pump and stretch for distance. One has her wooly head down, butting air and time wide open, one hand reaching for a winner's wire nowhere in her future. Their mouths are open, pulling in breath, giving up none. The legs of all are off the ground, split wide above the clover.

They are like panicked doe leaping blindly toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the dark skin of the quarry.

God at their side, right? the men take aim. For Ruby.