



Ruby

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

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1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:56:49 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/s4655n18t>

Paradise

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.

Friday

Wednesday 24th August, 1994

Paradise

They shoot the white gun first. While the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are five miles from a town which has seven or ten 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, handkerchiefs, mats and sunglasses along with clean, handsome guns.

They have never been this deep in the convent. Some of them have ported the windows near the porch to pick up a jar of honey or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon jar of barbecue sauce; but never has seen the hall, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they will. And at last they will see the altar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to colour 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 here, cold they have guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their T-shirts, work shirts, and dashies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn workshirts are unnerved by the thunder of their steps on marble

separate page
Ruby

Wednesday 24th August, 1994

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 ^{only one} ~~none~~ has seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they ^{all} 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

the rest:
corr. 11c

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 ^{it} the mansion was a Convent, ^{this house} it was an embezzler's folly. Bisque and rosetone marble floors segue into teak ones. Ising glass holds yesterday's light and patterns walls turned 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 ^{shot} 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~~^g, 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~~^{He} 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.

~~Thomas~~^{Thomas} 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 had gone from feet to belly in sixty years. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1930 and were

Jefferson:
Change this name.

crawling by 1948 . 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. All the others he knew about knuckled to or merged with white towns, otherwise, like Haven, they had 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 and growing toward the bellhousing. One thousand citizens in 1900 becoming five hundred by 1930. Then two 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 ¹⁸⁹⁰~~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 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, wooden houses, one church, a school, a store, the citizens still gathered there. They pierced quinea hens and whole deer 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. to p. 9 (small type) →

In 1910 there were two churches ^{in Haven} 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