



"Okay. But what I want to ask..."

---

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"Okay. But what I want to ask..."

1 folder (partial)

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:56:55 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/4f16c7396>

"Okay. But what I want to ask is, how come it took you so long? To buy one item."

"It didn't. Take long. I couldn't of been in there more than five minutes, tops."

"Your babies suffocated, Mrs. Albright. In a hot car with the windows closed. No air. It's hard to see that happening in five minutes."

It could be sweat, but it hurt enough to be blood. She didn't dare swat Sal's hand away or acknowledge the pain even slightly. Instead she scratched the corner of her mouth and said, "I've punished myself over that, but that's pretty near what it was. I walked in there straight to the dairy section and picked up two packs of Armours which is high you know but I didn't even look for the price. Some of them is cheaper but just as good. But I was hurrying so I didn't look"

"You were hurrying?"

"Oh, yes, mam. He was fit to be tied. Spam ain't nothing for a working man to eat."

"And wieners are?"

"I thought about chops. I thought about chops."

"Didn't you know your husband was coming home for supper, Mrs. Albright? Doesn't he come home for supper every day?"

She's a really nice person, Mavis thought. Polite, she didn't look around the room, or at the boys' feet, or acknowledge the crash followed by a flushing toilet.

The sound of the photographer snapping his cases was loud. "Got it," he said. "Real nice meeting you, mam." He leaned in to shake Mavis' hand.

"Get the car?" asked June

"Plenty," he smiled and made an O with thumb and forefinger. "You all be nice, hear."

Sal left off squeezing her mother's waist. She leaned forward and concentrated on swinging her foot, only occasionally hitting Mavis' shin.

From where they sat no one in the room could see the Cadillac parked in front of the house. But it had been seen for months by everybody in the neighborhood and would now be seen by everybody in Hopewell, Maryland, since the photographer had taken more shots of it than he had of them. Mint green. Lettuce green. Cool. But the color wouldn't show in the newspaper. What would show would be the size, the flashiness of the place where babies had died. Babies forever unseen now because the mother did not have even a snapshot of their darling faces.

Sal jumped up and screamed, "Ow! Look! A beetle!" and stomped on her mother's foot.

Mavis had said, "Yes mam. He come home for supper every day," and wondered what that would be like: to have a husband who came home everyday. For anything. After the journalist left she wanted to go look at the damage Sal had done to her side, but Frank was still in the bathroom and it wasn't a good idea to bother him. She thought to clean the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic covers, but where she wanted to be was in the Cadillac. It wasn't hers; it was his, but Mavis loved it maybe more than he did and lied about losing the second set of keys. It was what she talked about last as the journalist left, saying "It aint new, though. It's three years old. A '65." If she could, she would have slept out there, in the back seat where her twins died, the only ones who liked her company and weren't a trial. She



couldn't , of course. Frank said she better not touch let alone drive the Cadillac ever again. So she was as surprised as anybody when she stole it

"You all right?" Frank was already under the sheet and Mavis woke with a start of terror which dissolved quickly into familiar fright.

"I'm OK." She searched the darkness for a sign, trying to feel, smell his mood in advance. But he was a blank just the way he had been at supper the evening of the newspaper interview. The perfect meatloaf (not too loose, not too tight--two eggs made the difference) must have pleased him. Either that or he had reached balance: enough in, enough at hand. In any case, he'd been easy, even playful at the table while the other children were downright bold. Sal had Frank's old shaving razor unfolded by her plate and asked her father a series of questions all starting with "Is it sharp enough to cut...?" And Frank would answer "Cut anything from chin hair to gristle," eliciting peals of laughter from Sal. When Frankie spit Kool-Aid into Mavis' plate, his father said "Hand me that catsup, Frankie, and stop playing in your mother's food, you hear?"

She didn't think it would take them long, and seeing how they were at supper, enjoying each other's jokes and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it. The newspaper people would think of something catchy, and June, the only lady journalist the Hopewell Courier had, would do the human interest.

She tried not to stiffen as Frank made settling down noises on the mattress. Did he have his shorts on? If she knew that she would know whether he was looking to have sex, but she couldn't find out without touching him. As if to satisfy her curiosity, Frank snapped the waistband of his boxers. Mavis relaxed, permitted herself a sigh

that she hoped sounded like a snore. The sheet was off before she could complete it. When he pulled her nightgown up he threw it over her face and she let that mercy be. She had misjudged, again. He was going to do this first and then the other. The children would be behind the door, snickering; Sal's eyes as cold and unforgiving as they were when told of the accident. Before Frank came to bed she had been dreaming of something important she was supposed to do, but couldn't remember what it was. Just as it came to her, Frank had asked her was she all right. Now she supposed she was all right because the important thing she'd forgotten would never need doing anymore.

tk

The rest of the night she waited, not closing her eyes for a second. Frank's sleep was sound and she would have slipped out of bed as soon as he had not smothered or strangled her to death, and opened the door except for the breathing beyond it. She was sure Sal squatted there--ready to pounce or grab her legs. Her upper lip would be raised showing eleven year old teeth too big for her snarling mouth. Dawn, Mavis thought, would be critical. The trap would be agreed upon but maybe not laid yet. Her sharpest concentration would be needed to locate it before it sprung. She didn't mind dying, but she did mind letting them--Frank and the other children--win.

At the first hint of gray light Mavis eased out of the bed. If Frank woke it was all over. Clutching a pair of jeans and a tk sweat shirt, she made it to the bathroom. She took a soiled brassiere from the hamper and got dressed fast. No panties and she couldn't go back in the bedroom for her shoes. The big thing was to get past the other



children's room. The door stood open and, although there was no sound coming out, Mavis chilled at the thought of approaching it. Down the hall to the left was the little kitchen /dining room; the living room to the right. She would have to decide which way she was headed before she ran past that door. They would probably expect her to go straight to the kitchen as usual, so maybe she should shoot for the living room. Or maybe they counted on her changing a habit and the trap was not in the kitchen at all.

Suddenly she remembered her purse was in the living room, perched on the television cabinet which, when the set broke, had become a catch all. Holding her breath, eyes wide to the darkness, Mavis padded quickly past the other children's open door. With her back exposed to that much danger she felt feverish--sweaty and cold together.

Not only was her purse where she remembered it, but Sal's galoshes were lying at the front door. Mavis grabbed the purse, stuck her feet in her daughter's yellow boots and escaped onto the front porch. She did not even look toward the kitchen and never saw it again.

Getting out of the house had been so intense, she was pulling the Cadillac away from the curb when she realized she had no idea of what to do next. She drove toward Peg's, a woman she didn't know all that well, but whose tears at the funeral impressed her. She had always wanted to know her better, but Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship. Mavis parked across the street. Peg's house was dark, the shade of the picture window still down. Complete quiet. The wooden girl in the petunias, her face hidden by a fresh blue bonnet, tilted a