



## Mavis

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Mavis

The neighbors seemed pleased when the twins smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they were found had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things: brought food, telephoned, got up a collection, but the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear.

When the journalist came, Mavis sat in the corner of the sofa not sure whether to scrape the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic cover or tuck them further in. But the journalist wanted the photo taken first, so the photographer ordered Mavis to the middle of the sofa with the surviving children on either side of their distraught and grieving mother. Of course he asked for the husband, Jim? is it Jim Albright? but Mavis said he was indisposed, couldn't come out; they have to go ahead without him. The journalist and the photographer exchanged looks and she thought they probably knew anyway that Frank--not Jim--was sitting on the edge of the bathtub drinking Seagrams without a glass.

Mavis moved to the middle of the sofa and cleaned her fingernails of potato chip dust until the other children joined her. "The other children" is what they would always be now. Sal put her arm around her mother's waist. Frankie and Billy James were squished together on her right. Sal pinched her, hard. Mavis knew instantly that her daughter wasn't nervous before the camera and all, because the pinch grew long, pointed. Sal's fingernails were diving for blood. They were going to kill her very very soon.

"This must be terrible for you." Her name, she said, was June.

"Yes, mam. It's terrible for all of us."

"Is there something you want to say? Something you want other mothers to know?"

"Mam?"

/



Mavis saw

June crossed her ankles and ~~it was clear~~ that this was the first time she had worn the white high heeled shoes. The soles were barely smudged. "You know. Something to warn them, caution them, about negligence."

"Well. I can't think of any...I guess...I...."

The photographer squatted down, cocking his head as he examined the possibilities.

"So some good can come out of this awful tragedy?" June's smile was sad.

Mavis straightend against the success of Sal's fingernails. The camera clicked. June moved her ballpoint pen into place. It was a fine thing. Mavis had never seen anything like it--made ink on the paper when you wrote but dry.

"I don't really have nothing to say to strangers right now."

The photographer re-adjusted the shade at the front window and walked back to the sofa holding a black box to Mavis' face.

"I understand," said June. Her eyes went soft, but the shine was like those of the neighbors. "And I do hate to put you through this, but maybe you could just tell me what happened? Our readers are just appalled. Twins and all. Oh, and they want you to know you are in their prayers every single day." She let her glance sweep the boys and Sal. "And you all, too. They are praying for each and every one of you."

Frankie and Billy James looked down at their bare feet. Sal rested her head on her mother's shoulder while she clenched the flesh at Mavis' waist.

"So could you tell us?" June smiled a smile that meant "do us this favor."

"Well." Mavis frowned. She was trying to get it right this time. "He didn't want the Spam. I mean the kids like it but he don't so, in this heat you can't keep much meat, I had a chucksteak go green on me once so I went and took the car, just some weenies, and I thought, well, Merle and Pearl, I was against it at first, but he said..."

"M, E, R, L, E?"

"Yes mam."

"Go on."

"I understood. I did. You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him I know that ain't right..."

"So you took the twins. Why didn't you take the other children along?"

"It's a weasel out back," said Frankie.

"Groundhog," said Billy James.

"Shut." Sal leaned over Mavis' stomach and pointed at her brothers.

June smiled. "Wouldn't it have been safer" she asked, "with other children in the car? I mean they're older."

Mavis slid her thumb under her bra strap pulling it back over her shoulder. "I wasn't expecting no danger. Higgledy Piggledy is just yonder. I could of went to the convenience, but their stuff sits too long for me."

"So you left them in the car and went in to buy some steak..."

"No, mam. Weenies."

"I see. 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 weiners 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?"

~~June~~<sup>She's</sup> was a really nice person, Mavis thought. Polite, ~~She~~<sup>J</sup> 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 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

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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 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 and weren't a trial. She couldn't, of course. Frank said she <sup>better not</sup> ~~couldn't~~ 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 <sup>must have</sup> made the difference) <sup>^</sup> pleased him. Either that or he had reached balance: enough in, enough at hand. In <sup>any</sup> case, he'd been easy, even playful at the table while the other children were downright bold. Sal had Frank's 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 company and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it. NEGLIGENT MOTHER KILLS SELF or GRIEVING MOTHER.... The newspaper people would think of something catchy, and June, the only lady journalist the Hopewell Courier had, would do the story. 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 <sup>had</sup> 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. ~~Kill her, fuck her, fuck her, kill her. What difference did the order make?~~

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 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.

? set

At the first hint of 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 hurriedly. 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,

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Mavis chilled at the thought of approaching it. Down the hall to the left was the little kitchen /dining room; to the right the living room. 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 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. <sup>Eyes wide to the</sup> ~~ahead,~~ <sup>darkness</sup> holding her breath, Mavis padded quickly past the other children's open door toward the living room. 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 closeness with other women. Mavis parked across the street. Peg's house was dark, the shade of the picture window still down. <sup>\*</sup> According to the Cadillac's clock, it wasn't six yet. Mavis decided to drive around for a while and return at a respectable hour. Seven maybe. But they would be up too by then and Frank would see that the Caddie was gone. He would call the police for sure.

Mavis swung away from the curb sad and frightened by how dumb she was. Not only had the whole neighborhood a close familiarity with Frank's car, the photographer's picture would be in today's paper. The men on her street had



slapped the hood and grinned, leaned in to sniff the interior, hit the horn and laughed. Laughed and laughed some more because its owner had to borrow a lawn mower every few weeks; because its owner had no screens in his windows and no working television; because two of his six porch posts had been painted white three months ago-- the rest still waiting; because its owner sometimes slept behind the wheel--all night--in front of his own house. And the women, who saw Mavis in sunglasses driving the children to Wendy's, flat out stared before shaking their heads. As though they knew from the start that the Cadillac <sup>would someday be</sup> was notorious.

Creeping at twenty-five miles per hour Mavis entered route 121 thankful for the little darkness retreating night left behind. She passed Harlan County Hospital, saw <sup>a silent</sup> ~~an~~ ambulance ~~careen out its driveway~~ <sup>of through the (over)</sup> Fifteen times she had been a patient there-- four times for childbirth. During the next to last admission, when the twins were <sup>due</sup> born, Mavis' mother drove from New Jersey to help out. She kept house and minded the other children for three days. When the twins were delivered, she went back to Patterson--a three hour drive, thought Mavis. She could be there <sup>before</sup> by lunch time.

At an Eagle gas station, Mavis checked her wallet before she answered the attendant. Three ten dollar bills were folded behind her driver's license.

"Ten," she said.

"Gallons or dollars, mam?"

"Gallons."

<sup>(over)</sup> ~~A coffee shop in the adjacent lot caught her attention. Mavis stumbled twice as she walked across the gravel to it. The single waitress in the place was eating crabcakes and grits behind the counter. She covered her plate with a cloth and touched the corners of her mouth with a napkin before wishing Mavis a good morning and taking her order. When Mavis left, carrying a paper cup of coffee and two honey dips in a napkin, she caught the waitress' face smiling broadly in the Dr. Pepper mirror by the door. The grin bothered her all the way back to the gas station until, stepping~~

\* \* A green cross in a field of white  
~~slipping away~~ ~~leaving~~  
~~fading from~~ brilliant entrance  
light ~~into~~ <sup>far</sup> shadow.

\* \* \* In the adjacent ~~light~~ lot Manis noticed  
the window of a breakfast diner, coral in  
the early light.

"Is that place open?" She shouted  
over truck-roar.

"Yes, mam."

Turning occasionally on gravel, she walked  
forward the diner.



into the car, she saw her canary yellow feet. <sup>denver</sup> Away from the pump, parked behind the coffee shop, she put her breakfast on the dashboard while rummaging in the glove compartment. She found an unopened pint of <sup>Early Times</sup> ~~and~~ and another containing an inch or so of scotch whiskey, <sup>paper</sup> napkins, a teething ring, several rubber bands, a pair of dirty socks, a battery dead flashlight, a tube of lipstick, a Florida map, rolls of breath mints and a few traffic tickets. She dropped the teething ring into her purse, twisted her hair into a pitiful little pony tail that stuck out from the rubber band like <sup>hen's feathers</sup> a tk; and smeared the stranger's lipstick on her mouth. Then she sat back and sipped the coffee. Too nervous to ask for milk or sugar, she 'd ordered it black and could not force herself to take a third swallow. The stranger's lipstick smiled sloppily from the rim.

Patterson was four hours, not three, and she had four dollars and seventy <sup>six</sup> cents when she saw its sign. The Cadillac needed to drink ten gallons of gasoline every ninety miles. The fuel gauge <sup>touched</sup> ~~was on~~ E. Mavis wondered whether to call her mother or simply arrive. The latter seemed smarter. Frank may have called his mother-in-law by now or might do so any minute. Better if her mother could say truthfully "I don't know where she is."

Eighteenth Street looked narrower than she remembered and the stores were different. [tk] \* \* \* \*

The cadillac shut down a block from her mother's house, <sup>but just</sup> and Mavis managed to coast across the intersection and incline the automobile toward the curb.

It was too early. Her mother wouldn't be home till the afternoon children had been picked up. The door key was no longer under the reindeer, so Mavis sat on the back porch and struggled out of the yellow galoshes. Her feet looked as though they belonged to somebody else.

Frank had already called. At six a.m. when Mavis was looking at Peg's window shade. Ruth Goodroe told Mavis she had hung up on him after telling him she couldn't think what the hell he was talking about and who the hell did he think he was

The northern waves were beginning  
to turn. Driving underneath them, she  
felt as though the ~~road~~ <sup>slid</sup> ~~pavement~~ <sup>were sliding</sup>  
forward instead of retreating. The faster  
she traveled, the more ~~road~~ <sup>appeared</sup> ~~there was~~  
ahead. f



dragging her out of her sleep? She was not pleased. Not then and not later when Mavis <sup>(</sup>clapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell which is what she <sup>out there</sup> said at the window. "Girl you look like a bat out of hell what you doing up here?"

"Ma. Let me in."

Ruth Goodroe had just enough calf liver for two. Mother and daughter ate in the kitchen, Mavis presentable--washed, combed, aspirined and swimming a little in Ruth's <sup>T</sup>blue housedress.

"Well, let me have it. Not that I need to be told."

Mavis wanted some more of the baby peas and tipped the bowl to see if any were left.

"I could see this coming, you know. Anybody could."

There were a few. A couple of tablespoons. Mavis scraped them on to her plate wondering if there was to be any dessert.. Quite a bit of the fried potatoes were still in her mother's plate. "You going to eat those?"

Ruth pushed her plate toward Mavis. There was a tiny square of liver too and some onions. Mavis scraped it all on to her plate.

"You still have children. Children need a mother. I know what you've been through, honey, but you do have other children."

The liver was a miracle. Her mother always got every particle of the tight transparent tissue off.

"Ma. Why couldn't you make it to the funeral?"

Ruth straightened. "You didn't get the money order? And the flowers?"

"We got them."

"Then you know why. I had to choose--help bury them or pay for a trip. I couldn't afford to do both, I told you that. I asked you all straight out, which thing would be the best and you both said the money, both of you said so, both."

"They're going to kill me, Ma."

"Are you going to hold that over my head for the rest of my life? All I've done for you and those children?"

"They already tried to but I got away."

"You're all I have now your brothers are gone."

"They got no right to kill me."

"What?"

"He's making the children do it."

"Do what? Speak up so I can hear what you saying."

"I'm saying they are going to kill me."

"They? Frank? What they?"

"All of them. The kids too."

"Kill you? Your children?"

Mavis nodded. Ruth Goodroe widened her eyes first, then looked into her lap as she held her forehead in the palm of her hand.

They didn't talk anymore for a while, but later at the sink, Ruth asked, "Were the twins trying to kill you too?"

Mavis stared at her mother. "No! Oh, no Ma. They're babies! Are you crazy?"

"All right. All right. Just asking. It's unusual, you know, to think little children...."

"Unusual? It's, it's, <sup>it's</sup> evil! But they'll do what he says. And now they'll do <sup>any</sup>thing. They already tried, Ma!"

"Tried how? What did they do?"

"Sal had a razor and they were laughing and watching me. Always watching me."

"What did Sal do with the razor?"

"She just had it next to her plate but she was looking at me. They all were."

Neither woman spoke about it again because Mrs. Goodroe said Mavis could stay if and only if she never talked that way again. That she wouldn't tell Frank if he



called back, or anybody else that she was there, but she must never talk about murder again or she would call him right away.

In a week, Mavis was on the road, but this time she had time to plan. Days before she heard her mother talking low into the mouthpiece of the telephone, saying "You better come up here fast and I mean pronto," Mavis had walked around the house while Ruth was at the Play Skool thinking: money, aspirin, paint, underwear; money, aspirin, paint, underwear. She took all she could find of the first two, including two brown government envelopes propped against the photograph of one of her killed in action brothers. She stole back the car keys her mother thought she had hidden well; poured two gallons of lawn mower gasoline into the Cadillac's tank and drove away for more. In Newark she found an Earl Scheib paint shop and waited two days in a Y dormitory until it was sprayed black. The twenty-nine dollars advertised turned out to be for a standard size car only. Sixty-nine dollars is what they made her pay for the Cadillac. The underwear and thong sandals she <sup>bought</sup> ~~bought~~ at a Woolworth's. At a Goodwill she bought a pale blue pantsuit and white cotton turtleneck. Right, she thought, for California. Just right.

Picking up girls was easiest. They were company first of all, and they helped with gas, food and many knew where to crash. They dappled the secondary routes in hole-y jeans flared at the bottom. Flat hair swinging or picked out into Afro's. The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt. But all told her about the world before California. Underneath the knowing talk, the bell chime laughter, the silence, the world they described was just like her own pre-California existence--sad, scarey, all wrong. High schools were dumps, parents stupid...tk & fx.