



## Mavis

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Friday 29th July, 1994

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**Friday 26th August, 1994**

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.

"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?"

June crossed her ankles and Mavis saw 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 the newborns in the car and went in to buy some steak..."

"No, mam. Weenies."

"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.

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

watering can; a family of carved ducks lined at her heels. The lawn, edged and close cut, looked like a carpet sample of expensive wool. Neither the tiny windmill nor the hostra surrounding it moved. Left of the porch, however, a rose of sharon, taller than Peg's house and older, was shaking. Stirred by the air conditioner's exhaust it danced roughing blossoms and buds to the grass. 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 was the whole neighborhood familiar 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 would someday be notorious.

Creeping at twenty-five miles per hour Mavis entered route 121 thankful for the little bit of darkness left. She passed Harlan County Hospital, saw a silent ambulance glide out of the driveway. A green cross in a field of white escaping brilliant emergency light for shadow. Fifteen times she had been a patient there--four times for



childbirth. During the next to last admission, when the twins were due, 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 before The Secret Storm.

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."

In the adjacent lot Mavis noticed the window of a breakfast diner, coral in the early light.

"Is that place open?" she shouted over truck roar.

"Yes, mam."

Tripping occasionally on gravel, she walked toward the diner. Inside the waitress was eating crabcakes and grits behind the counter. She covered her plate with a cloth and touched the corners of her mouth 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 Hines Root Beer mirror by the door. The grin bothered her all the way back to the gas station until, stepping into the car, she saw her canary yellow feet.

Away from the pump, parked behind the diner, she put her breakfast on the dashboard while rummaging in the glove compartment. She found an unopened pint of Early Times and another containing an inch or so of scotch whiskey, paper

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 hen feathers, 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 smirked sloppily from the rim.

Patterson was four hours, not three, and she had four dollars and seventy-six cents when she saw its sign. The Cadillac needed to drink ten gallons of gasoline every ninety miles. The fuel gauge touched 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. The northern leaves were beginning to turn. Driving underneath them, in the dappled hall they made, she felt as though the pavement slid forward instead of retreating. The faster she traveled, the more road appeared ahead.

The Cadillac shut down a block from her mother's house but 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 dragging her out of her sleep? She was not pleased. Not then and not later when Mavis tapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell which is what she 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 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 evil! But they'll do what he says. And now they'll do anything. They already tried, Ma!"

"Tried how? What did they do?"

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

"What did Sal do with the razor?"

"She had it next to her plate and 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 killing 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 took a pair of rhinestone clips from Ruth's jewelry box and 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. 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 bought at Woolworth's. At a Goodwill she bought a pale blue pantsuit and white cotton turtleneck. Just 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 low on the hips and 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.

tk 1.: Man eating slowly; pile of newspapers next to his lunch pail; reading about death and mutilation

tk 2.: First hitcher is a girl who is on her way to a cemetery close by; girl looks like Peg, older and competent; turns out to be ten years younger [in her 20's]; at cemetery Mavis sees uniformed children standing about among row upon row of new headstones. The older stones were at some distance. the uniformed children are aimless but somehow focussed; some of them carry their caps in their hands. The girl thanks her and gets out. Walks down the gravel path past grave diggers with plenty to do.

tk 3.: picks up a girl with dog tags of six boys she knew who were killed in Vietnam; the rain is soft, sweet smelling



tk 4.: last hitcher, the sweetest one, steals Mavis' clothes

tk 5.: Mavis sees a man who looks exactly like Frank except for more hair. Could Frank have grown that much hair in two or three[?] weeks. frightens her. Takes another turn. south, heading as far as possible away from Frank double. After a long stretch of flat "empty" land ends up on a narrow country road going nowhere. Runs out of gas.

Cries for the first time. Drinks the Early Times in the glove compartment. Passes out. Wakes. Cries some more, but no tears--just nausea with dry sobs. Leaves car and walks until she sees a house. Walks through field then a road narrowed by encroaching growth. Arrives. Long porch turns left around the house. No front windows. Knocks. No answer. sits on porch. Knocks again. Walks around to right side, thinking the house can't be abandoned because the ground, grass etc. are tended. Goes all the way around the back.

[tense may change in ff.]

A woman is sitting in a red wooden chair at the edge of a vegetable garden.

"Excuse me," Mavis calls out, her hands funnelling around her mouth.

The woman is facing her, but Mavis can't tell if she is looking at her. She is wearing sunglasses.

"Excuse me," Mavis moves closer. No need to shout now. "I broke down a ways back. Can anybody help?"

Woman stands up, gathering hem of apron in both hands, and comes forward.

Windy. the sun beats. Behind the sunglasses the woman scans Mavis. They are the same height. The woman has very dark skin and Mavis feels comfortable with her.

"No telephones out here," she says. "Come inside."

Mavis follows her into the kitchen where the woman dumps the pecan shells in her apron into a box by the stove. [Takes off her shoes] She props open the kitchen door with a brick and removes her sunglasses. The kitchen is big and full of smells and a woman's solitary mess.

"You a drinking woman?"

Mavis thinks she is about to be offered a drink.

"No,"

"Lies not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is OK."

Mavis breathes into her palm. "I drank some of my husband's liquor a while ago. But I'm not what you'd call a drinking woman. I was just wrung out."

The woman lights an eye on the stove.

"I forgot to ask your name. Mine's Mavis Albright."

"They call me Connie."

"I'd appreciate some coffee, Connie, if you got any."

Connie nods without turning around.

"You work here?"

"I work here." Connie lifts her two Hiawatha braids from her chest and drops them behind her shoulders.

"Is any of the family at home now? I knocked for such a long time."

"No family. Just her upstairs. She couldn't answer the door if she wanted to and she don't want to."



"I'm on my way to California. You think you can help me get some gas back to my car? Show me the way out of here? "

The woman sighed at the stove, but didn't reply.

"Connie?"

"I'm thinking."

Mavis looked around the kitchen which seemed to her as large as her junior high school cafeteria, including swinging wooden doors. She imagined rooms full of rooms outside that door.

"You all aint scared out here all by yourself? Don't seem like there's nothing for miles outside."

A light giggle. "Scarey things not always outside. Most scarey things is inside." Connie turned from the stove with a bowl and placed it before Mavis.

Mavis looked in despair at the steaming potatoes over which a pat of butter melted, but she said thank you and accepted the fork Connie offered. Anyway she could smell the coffee.

Connie sat down next to her. "Maybe I go with you," she said.

Mavis looked up. It was the first time she saw Connie's face without the sunglasses. Quickly Mavis looked away, down again at her food and poked her fork into the bowl.

"What you say, me and you go to California."

"What about your job here?" Mavis tasted a tiny bit of potato. Salty.

"It's by the sea, California?"

"Yeah. Right on the coast"

"Be nice to see water again." Connie kept her eyes on Mavis' face. "Wave after wave after wave. Big water. Blue, blue, blue, yes?"

"That's what they say. Sunny California, beaches, oranges...."

"Maybe too sunny for me." She stood up and went to the stove.

"Can't be sunnier than here." The butter, salt and pepper mashed into the potatoes weren't all that bad. Mavis was eating rapidly. "Go for miles and don't see a speck of shade."

"True," said Connie. She placed two cups of coffee and a pot of honey on the table. "Too much sunshine in the world. Vex me. Can't take it no more." A cool breeze swept through the kitchen door displacing the food smell with a sweeter one.

Mavis thought she would gulp the coffee when it arrived, but the satisfaction of the hot salty potatoes made her patient. Following Connie's example she spooned honey into her cup, stirring slowly.

"Did you think up anything, about how I can get me some gasoline?"

"Wait a while. Today maybe, tomorrow, maybe. People be out to buy."

"Buy? Buy what?"

"Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves."

"And one of them can take me to get some gas?"

"For sure."

"Suppose nobody comes?"

"Always come. Somebody always come. Everyday. This morning already I sold forty-eight ears of corn and a handful of peppers." Connie patted her apron pocket.



Blowing gently into her cup, Mavis went to the kitchen door and looked out. When she first arrived she was so happy to find someone at home, she had not looked closely at the garden. Now, behind the red chair, she saw flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables. In some places staked plants grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil. One part she originally thought untilled, became a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond.

"You didn't do all that by yourself, did you?"

"Except the corn," said Connie.

"Wow."

Connie put the breakfast bowl in the sink. "You want to clean yourself up a bit?"

The rooms full of rooms Mavis imagined to be lying through the swinging doors had kept her from asking to go to a bathroom. Here in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of wandering beyond it disturbed her. "I'll wait to see who comes by. Then I'll try to get myself together. I know I look a sight." She smiled hoping her refusal did not signal her apprehension.

"Suit yourself," said Connie and, sunglasses in place, patted Mavis' arm as she stepped into her shoes and past her to the yard.

Left alone Mavis expected the big big kitchen to be intimidating. It wasn't. In fact she had an outer rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children--laughing? singing?--two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it. When she opened her eyes, Connie was there dragging a x quart basket over the floor.

"Come on," she said. "Make yourself useful."

Mavis frowned at the load of pecans and shook her head at the nut crackers, picks and bowls Connie was assembling. "No," she said, "think of something else I can do to help. Shelling that stuff would make me crazy."

"No it wouldn't. Try it."

"Uh uh. Not me. Shouldn't you put some newspaper down? Be easier to clean up."

"No newspapers in this house. No radio neither. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face to face."

"Just as well," Mavis said. "All the news these ddays is bad as can be. Can't do nothing about it anyway"

"You give in too quick. Look at your nails. Strong, curved like a bird's, perfect pecan hands. Fingernails like that take the meat out whole every time. Beautiful. Beautiful hands yet you say you can't. Make you crazy. Make me crazy to see good nails go to waste. "

Later, watching her hands, her beautiful hands, moving at the task Mavis was reminded of her sixth grade teacher opening a book: lifting the corner of the binding, stroking the edge to find the bookmark, touching the page, letting the tips of her fingers trail down the lines of print. The melty-thigh feeling she got watching. Now, working pecans, she developed a rhythm, deliberately economizing her gestures without sacrificing their grace. Connie, having launched her into the chore, was gone, saying she had to "see about Mother." Sitting at the table smelling the pleasure the wind brought through the door, Mavis wondered how old Connie's mother was. Judging by the age of her sunglassed daughter, she would have to be in her nineties. Also, how



long before a customer would come? Had anybody bothered the Cadillac yet? At whatever gas station she got to there'd be a map showing the way to California. With luck, she'd be on her way by suppertime. With no luck, she'd be ready to leave in the morning. Back on macadam, listening to the car radio that had got her through nights of non-stop driving--two fingers impatiently punching or twirling for the better song, the nicer voice. Now the radio was across a field, down the road. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was--nothing. Just her self which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the small place at the table where she sat admiring her busy hands the radio-absence spread out. A quiet, secret fire breathing itself and exhaling the sounds of its increase: the crack of shells, the tick of pecan meat thrown to the bowl; cooking utensils in eternal adjustment; insect--whisper, the argue of long grass, the far away cough of cornstalks.

It was peaceful, but she wished Connie would return lest she start up again--imagining babies singing. Just as the length of Connie's absence seemed strange, Mavis heard a car crunching gravel near the house. Then braking. A door slap.

"Hey, old lady." A woman's voice, light, loose.

Mavis turned and saw a dark-skinned woman, limber and moving quickly, mount the steps and halt when she didn't see what she expected.

"Oh. Excuse me."

"That's okay," said Mavis. "She's upstairs. Connie."

"I see."

Mavis thought the woman was looking very carefully at her clothes.

"Oh, lovely," she said coming to the table. "Just lovely." She stuck her fingers

into the bowl of nut meats and gathered a few. Mavis expected her to eat some, but she let them fall back to the heap. "What's Thanksgiving without pecan pie? Not a thing."

No one could ever hear her bare feet plopping and since the swinging doors had no sound, Connie's entrance was like an apparition.

"There you are!" The woman opened her arms. Connie entered them for a long swaying hug.

"I scared this girl to death. Never saw a guest in here before."

"Our first," said Connie. "Mavis Albright this is Olive Henderson."

"Hello, Olive."

"Henderson. Mrs. Henderson. I know you think I'm young enough to be called Olive, but I'm not. I'm way over fifty."

Mavis' face warmed, but she smiled anyway and said, "Sorry. Mrs. Henderson," while taking note of the woman's expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings in spite of the heat, and the cut of her dress--summer weight crepe, light blue.

Olive opened a white crocheted purse. "I brought you some more, Connie," she said and held up a pair of aviator style sunglasses.

"Good. I got just one pair left."

Olive glanced at Mavis. "She eats sunglasses."

"Not me. This house eats them." Fitting the stems behind her ears, Connie tested the dark lenses at the doorway. She turned her face directly to the sun and the hah! she shouted was full of defiance.

"Somebody order shelled pecans or is this your idea?"



"My idea."

"Make a lot of pies."

"Make more than pie." Connie rinsed the sunglasses under the sink tap.

"Don't tell me. I came for the you-know-what."

Connie nodded. "Can you get this girl some gasoline for her automobile? Take her and have somebody bring her back?" She was drying and polishing the glasses, checking for spots and lint from the towel.

"Where is your car?" Olive asked. There was wonder in her voice, as though she doubted anyone in thongs, jeans and a man's dirty shirt could have a car.

"Walking distance," Mavis told her.

Olive nodded. "Happy to. I'd drive you back here as well, but both my boys on furlough." She looked at Connie. "House full tonight. How's Mother?"

"Can't last."

"You sure Beaver City's not better?"

Connie slipped the aviator glasses into her apron and headed for the pantry. "She wouldn't draw but one breath in a hospital. The second one would be her last."

The package Connie had handed to Olive Henderson could have been a grenade. Positioned on the seat of the Impala between them it emanated tension. The easy talk in the kitchen disappeared. Olive, suddenly formal, said very little, answered Mavis' questions with the least information and asked none of her own.

"Connie's nice, isn't she?"

Olive looked at her. "Yes. She is."

For twenty minutes they traveled. Olive cautious at every rise or turn of the road however slight. Occasionally she touched the packet. They pulled into a one-pump gas station in the middle of nowhere and asked the man who limped to the window for five gallons to carry. There was an argument, peppered with long silences, about the five-gallon can. He wanted Mavis to pay for it; she said she would return it when she came back to fill her tank. He doubted it. Finally they settled for a two dollar deposit. Olive and Mavis drove away, turned onto a different road headed east for what seemed like another half hour. Pointing toward a fancy wooden sign, Olive said "Here we are." The sign read Ruby pop. 360 on top and Lodge 16 at the bottom.

Mavis' immediate impression of the town was how outrageously clean it was; that and very young trees. [fx] The wide street, the enormous lawns cut to dazzle, the roomy houses--it looked to her like an advertisement for Kodak film.

Olive Henderson turned into a side street of flower gardens larger than the houses and snowed with butterflies.

The odor of the five-gallon can had been fierce in Olive Henderson's back seat. But in the boy's truck, propped between Mavis' feet, its gasoline smell was indistinguishable from the others. The glue-y, oily, metal-y combination might have made her retch if he had not done voluntarily what Mavis had been unable to ask of Olive. Turn on the radio. The disc jockey announced the tunes as though they were made by his best friends: King Solomon, Otis, Dinah, Ike and Tina, Dakota, the Temps.

As they bounced along Mavis, cheerful now, enjoyed the music and the shaved part in the boy's hair. Although he was pleasanter than Olive he didn't have



much more to say. They were several miles away from town and listening to the seventh of Jet Magazine's top twenty when Mavis realized she had not seen a single white person.

"Any whites in your town?" she asked him. Already she had forgotten what Olive said his name was when they were introduced.

"Not to live, they ain't. Come on business sometime."

When they passed the mansion on the way to the Cadillac, he asked, "What's it like in there?"

"I only been in the kitchen," Mavis said.

"Two old people in that big old place. Don't seem right."

The Cadillac was unmolested but so hot the boy licked his fingers before and after he unscrewed the gas cap. And he was nice enough to start the engine for her, tell her to leave the doors open for a while before she got in. Mavis did not have to struggle to get him to accept money--Olive had been horrified--and he drove off to the sound of Marvin Gaye[?].

Behind the wheel, cooling in the air conditioned air, Mavis regretted not having noticed the station's numbers on the dashboard of the truck. She fiddled the dial constantly as she drove the Cadillac back to Connie's house. She parked it smack in front of the wonderful porch. Cool. Lettuce green. It stayed there for three years.

It was already getting dark when the boy started the engine. Also she had forgotten to ask for a map. Also Connie had stuffed and roasted a chicken. But her decision to spend the night was mostly because of Mother.

The whiteness at the center was blinding. It took awhile for Mavis to see the

shape articulated among the pillows and the bone white sheets, and she might have remained sightless for many more moments had not a voice said "Don't stare, child."

Connie bent over at the foot of the bed reached under the sheets. With her right hand she raised Mother's heels and with her left fluffed the pillows underneath them. Muttering "Toenails sharp as knives," she resettled the feet gently.

When her eyes grew accustomed to dark and light, Mavis saw a bedshape far too small for a sick woman--almost a child's bed--and a variety of tables and chairs in the rim of black that surrounded it. Connie selected something from one of the tables and leaned into the light that ringed the patient. Mavis, following her movements, was startled to see her apply vaseline to lips in a face paler than the white cloth wrapped around the sick woman's head.

"There must be something that tastes better than this," she said, trailing the tip of her tongue over her oily lips.

"Food," said Connie. "How about some of that?"

"No."

"Just a bit?"

"No. Who is this you brought in here? Why did you bring somebody in here?"

"I told you. Woman with a car need help."

"That was yesterday."

"No it wasn't. This morning I told you."

"Well, hours ago then, but who invited her into my privacy? Who did that?"

"Guess. You, that's who. Want your scalp massaged?"

"Now now. What is your name, child?"



Mavis whispered from the dark she stood in. "Mavis Albright."

"Step a little closer, please. I can't see anything unless it's right up on me. Like living in an eggshell."

"Disregard her," said Connie. "Amia Senhora sees everything in the universe." She drew a chair to the little bed, sat down, took the woman's hand and one by one stroked back the cuticles.

Mavis moved closer, resting her hand on the metal footboard.

"Are you all right now? Is your automobile working?"

"Yes, mam. It's fine. Thank you."

"Where are your children?"

Mavis couldn't speak.

"There used to be a lot of children here. This was a school once. A beautiful school. For girls. Indian girls."

Mavis looked at Connie, but when Connie returned her glance, Mavis quickly dropped her eyes.

The woman in the bed laughed lightly. "It's hard, isn't it" she said, "looking in those eyes. When she came here they were green as grass."

"And yours were blue," said Connie.

"Still are."

"So you say."

"What color, then?"

"Same as me--old lady wash-out color."

"Hand me a mirror, child."

"Give her nothing."

"I'm still in charge here."

"Sure. Sure."

All three watched the black fingers gentling the white ones. The woman in the bed sighed.

"Look at me. Can't sit up by myself and arrogant to the end. God must be laughing His head off."

"God don't laugh and He don't play," said Connie.

"Yes, well, you know all about Him I'm sure. Next time you see Him, tell Him to let the girls in. They bunch around the door, but they don't come in. I don't mind in the day time. Do you feed them properly, Consolata? They're always so hungry. There's plenty isn't there? Not those frycake things they like but good hot food the winters are so bad we need coal a sin to burn trees in the desert..."

Connie folded the woman's hands on the sheet and stood, signalling Mavis to follow her.

"I thought she was your mother. I mean the way you talked, I thought she was your own mother." Mavis and Connie walked through the hall and down the stairs.

"She is my mother. Your mother too. Whose mother are you?"

Mavis did not answer partly because she couldn't speak of it but also because she was trying to remember where, in a house with no electricity, the light in Mother's room came from.

After the roast chicken supper, Connie showed Mavis to a large bedroom. From the four cots in it, she chose the one closest to the window where she stood for a long



time. Two milky moons, instead of the one hanging there, would have been just like Connie's eyes. Beneath them a swept world. Tidy. Ample. Forever.

California, which way?

Maryland, which way?

Merle? Pearl?

The lion cub that ate her up that night had blue eyes instead of brown and he did not have to hold her down. When he circled her shoulders with his left paw, she willingly let her head fall back, clearing the way to her throat. Nor did she fight herself out of the dream. The bite was juicy, but she slept through that as well as other things, until the singing woke her.

Mavis Albright left the Convent many times but always she came back, so she was there at the end....[tk]

On that July day she had been aware for months of the deteriorating relationship between the Convent and the town and she might have anticipated the truckload of men prowling the mist. But other things distracted her. She awoke at 3:00 a.m. assaulted by cigarette smoke. But weary from the stress of the evening before, she let herself sleep on. An hour later, shooing pullets out of the schoolroom, she heard footsteps and smelled the merest trace of spearmint.