



Grace

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Friday 26th August, 1994

Grace

Either the pavement was burning or she had sapphires hidden in her shoes. K.D., who had never seen a woman mince or switch like that, believed it was the walk that caused all the trouble. Neither he nor his friends lounging at the Oven saw her step off the bus, but when it pulled away there she was--across the street from them in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair. She crossed Central Avenue toward them taking tiny steps on towering block heels not seen, Aunt Olive said, since 1942.

She walked fast, as though tripping through red coals or else in pain from something stuck in the toes of her shoes. Something valuable, otherwise she would have removed it.

K.D. carried the equipment box through the dining room. Narrow panels of lace spilled from a basket on the side table. Aunt Olive worked thread like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing more lace than could ever be practical. Out back the garden skirting to the left was weed-free and nicely tilled. K.D. turned right toward the shed and entered. The collies were thrilled to see him.

He had to straddle Good to keep her down. Her ears were soft in his fingers and he was steady with the camphor-soaked cotton. The ticks came away like coffee grounds. He put his palm under her jaw; she licked his chin. Ben, the other collie, head on paws, looked on. Life at Steward Morgan's ranch loaded the dogs with mess. They needed a few weeks in Ruby under K.D.'s care twice a year. He took the bristle brush from the box. Dug deep in Good's hair, brushing it smooth and singing, softly in a Motown falsetto, the song he'd made up for her when she was a baby. "Hey good dog; Stay good dog; Old good dog; My good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog."

Good stretched her pleasure.

Just those concerned would be at the meeting tonight. Everybody, that is, except the one who started it all. His uncles Deek and Steward, Reverend Misner, Arnette's father and brother. They would discuss the slapping but not the pregnancy and certainly not the girl with sapphires hidden in her shoes.

Suppose she hadn't been there. Suppose her navel had not peeked over the waist of her jeans or her breasts had just hushed, hushed for a few seconds till they could figure out how to act--what

attitude to strike. In public, all males, without girlfriends hanging around, they would have known. As a group they would have assumed the right tone immediately. But Arnette was there, whining, and so was Billy-Marie.

K.D. and Arnette had separated themselves from the others. To talk. They stood near the dwarf oaks behind the picnic benches and tables for a conversation worse than he ever thought talking could be. What Arnette said was, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" What she meant was I'm going to Langston in September and I don't want to be pregnant or to abort or get married or feel bad by myself or face my family. He said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" thinking you cornered me at more socials than I can remember and when I finally agreed I didn't have to take your drawers down you beat me to it so this ain't my problem.

They had just begun to veil threats and unveil mutual dislike when the bus pulled away. All heads, all, turned.

"If that's the kind of bitch you want, hop to it, nigger."

K.D. looked from Arnette's neat shirtwaist dress to the four grades of hair on her head and then into her face--sullen, nagging, accusatory--and slapped it. The change in her expression worth it.

Somebody said, "Ow!" but mostly his friends were assessing the screaming tits closing in on them. Arnette fled; Billy-Marie too but, like the good friend she was, looked back to see them forcing themselves to look at the ground, the bright May sky or the length of their fingernails.

Good was finished. Her belly hair could stand a light clipping--its knots were otherwise impossible--but she was beautiful. K.D. started on Ben's coat rehearsing his line of defense to Arnette's family. When he described the incident to his uncles they had frowned at the same time. And like a mirror image in gestures if not in looks, Steward spit fresh Blue Boy while Deek lit a fresh cigar. However disgusted both were, K.D. knew they would not negotiate a solution that would endanger him or the future of Morgan money. His grandfather had named his twins Deacon and Steward for a reason. And their family had not built two towns, fought white law, Colored Creek, bandits and bad weather to see ranches and houses and a bank and a bakery and a drugstore end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. K.D., their hope and their despair, was the last male in a line that included a state auditor and two bankers. His behavior, as always, required scrutiny and serious correction. Or would the uncles see it another way? Maybe

Arnette's baby would be a boy, a Morgan grand nephew. Would her lazy father, Arnold, have any rights then that the Morgans had to respect?

Fondling Ben's coat, picking burrs from his silky strands of hair, K.D. tried to think like his uncles--which was hard. So he stopped trying and slipped off into his dream of choice. Only this time it included GiGi and her screaming tits.

"Hi." She cracked her gum like a professional. "Is this Ruby? Bus driver said this was it."

"Yep. Yeah. Uh huh. Sure is." The lounging boys spoke as one.

"Any motels around?"

They laughed at that and felt comfortable enough to ask her who she was looking for and from where had she come.

"Frisco," she said. "And rhubarb pie. Got a light?"

The dream, then, would be in Frisco.

The Morgan men conceded nothing but were uneasy by the choice of the meetingplace. Reverend Misner had thought it best to serve protocol and go to Fleetwood rather than season ^{the new} insult to the
^

family by making them come to the house of the aggressor.

K.D., Deek and Steward sat in the parsonage living room all nods and conciliatory grunts, but K.D. knew what his uncles were thinking. He watched Steward shift tobacco and hold the juice. So far the Credit Union Misner had formed was no-profit--small emergency loans to church members; no-penalty payback schedules. Like a piggy bank, Deek had said. But Steward said, Yeah, for now. The reputation of the church Misner had left to come to Ruby floated behind him: covert meetings to stir folks up; end-runs around white law. He obviously had interest in a state that had once built a whole new law school to accomodate one student--a Negro girl--and protect segregation at the same time. He clearly took seriously the possibility of change in a state that had also built an open closet right next to a classroom for another Negro student to sit in by himself. That was in the forties when K.D. was an infant, a few years before his mother, her brothers and all the rest left Haven. Now, some twenty years later, his uncles listened weekly to Misner's sermons, but at the close of each one they slid behind their steering wheels and repeated the Old Fathers' refrain: "Oklahoma is Indians, Black folks, and God mixed. All the rest is fodder." To their dismay, Reverend

Misner often treated fodder like table food. A man like that could encourage strange behavior; side with a teenage girl; shift ground to Fleetwood . A man like that, willing to throw money away, ^{could give} gave customers ideas. Make them think there was a choice about interest rates.

Still the Baptists were the largest congregation in town as well as the most powerful. So the Morgans sorted Reverend's Misner's opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey.

They drove to Fleetwood's house in two cars.

Somewhere in X City June voices are doubled by the sunlit water of a swimming pool. K.D. was there. He had ridden the Missouri, Kansas, Texas line with his uncles and waited outside on the curb while they talked business inside a red brick building. The voices sounded near and he went to see. Behind a x fence bordered by wide seamless concrete he saw green water. He knows now it was average size, but then it filled his whole horizon. It seemed to him as though hundreds of children were bobbing in it, their voices a cascade of glee. Just that. When the ^{oldsmobile} Buick glided past the Oven where Gigi had popped her gum, K.D. felt again the ~~little boy~~ ^{yearning}

excitement of sparkly water and the June voices of swimmers. His uncles were not pleased at having to search for him and chastised him, off and on, all the way back to Ruby. Small price. Then and now. The eruptions of "How the hell you get in these messes? You should be with people your own age. Why you want to lay with a Fleetwood anyhow? You see that boy's children? Damn!"--all ^{of} them exploded without damage. Just as he had already seen the sparkley water, he had already seen Gigi. And would see her again.

Arnold Fleetwood never wanted to sleep in a pup tent, on a pallet or a floor ever again. So he put four bedrooms in the spacious house he built on St. John Street. Sleeping arrangements for his wife and their two children left a guest room they were proud of. When his son, Jefferson, came back from Vietnam and took, Sweetie, his wife into his own bed, there was still the guest room ^{It} ~~which~~ would have become a nursery had they not needed it as a ^{hospital} ward for Jeff and Sweetie's children. The way things ^{turned out} ~~were~~, Fleet slept on a hide-a-way in the dining room.

The men sat ^{on} ~~in a~~ spotless ^{upholstery} ~~living room~~ waiting for Reverend Misner to finish seeing the women who were nowhere in sight. Both of the Mrs. Fleetwood's spent all their energy, time and affection on

^{the two}
children left. Fleet and Jeff, grateful for and infuriated by that
devotion, turned their shame sideways. Being in their company,
sitting near them was hard. Conversation ^{harder} ~~worse~~.

K.D. knew that Fleet owed his uncles money. And he knew that Jeff wanted very much to kill somebody. Since he couldn't kill the Veteran's Administration others just might have to do. Everybody was relieved when Misner returned, smiling.

"Yes. Well." Reverend Misner clasped his hands, gave them a little shake near his shoulder as though he'd already knocked the contestant out. "The ladies promise to bring us coffee and I believe they said rice pudding later. That's the best reason I know of to get started." He smiled again. He was very close to being too handsome for a preacher. Not just his face and head, but his body, extremely well made, called up admiring attention from practically everybody. A serious man, he took his obvious beauty as brake on sloth--it forced him to deal carefully with his congregation; to take nothing for granted; not the adoration of the women, nor the envy of the men.

No one returned his smile concerning dessert. He pressed on.

"Let me lay out the situation as I know it. Correct me, please, if I get it wrong or leave out something. My understanding is that K.D.

here has done an injury, a serious injury, to Arnette. So right off we can say K.D. has a problem with his temper and an obligation--"

"Ain't he a little old to have his temper raised toward a young girl?" Jefferson Fleetwood, seething in a low chair farthest from the lamplight, interrupted in a voice soft with menace. "I don't call that temper. I call it illegal."

"Well, at that particular moment, he--"

"Beg your pardon, Reverend. Arnette is fifteen." Jeff looked steadily into K.D. 's eyes.

"That's right," said Fleet. "She ain't been hit since she was two years old."

"That may be the problem." Steward, known for inflammatory speech, had been cautioned by Deek to keep his mouth shut and let him, the subtle one, do the talking. Now his words blew Jeff out of his chair.

"Don't you come in my house dirt-mouthing my family!"

"Your house?" Deek looked from Jeff to Arnold Fleetwood.

"You heard me! Papa, I think we better call this meeting off before somebody gets hurt!"

"You right," said Fleet. "This my child we talking about. My

child!"

Only Jeff was standing but now Misner did too. "Gentlemen. Whoa!" He held up his hands, and, towering over everybody, put to good use his powerful sermon voice. "We are men here; men of God. You going to put God's work in the gutter?"

K.D. saw Steward struggling with the need to spit and stood up also. "Look here," he said. "I'm sorry. I am. I'd take it back if I could."

"Done is done, friends." Misner lowered his hands.

K.D. continued. "I respect your daughter--"

"Since when?" Jeff asked him.

"I always respected her. From when she was that high." K.D. leveled his hand around his waist. "Ask any body. Ask her girlfriend, Billie-Marie. Billie-Marie will tell you that."

The effect of the genius-stroke was immediate. The Morgan uncles held in their smiles while the Fleetwoods, father and son, bristled. Billie-Marie was the fastest girl in town and getting faster by the second.

"This aint about no Billie-Marie," said Jeff. "This is about what you did to my baby sister."

"Wait a minute," said Misner. "Maybe we could get a better fix, K.D., if you could tell us why you did it. Why? ^{What happened?} Were you drinking? Did she aggravate you somehow?" He expected this forthright question to open up a space for honesty, where the men could stop playing and come to terms. The sudden quiet that followed surprised him.

Steward and Deek both cleared their sinuses at the same time. Arnold Fleetwood ^o stared at his shoes. ^{over their heads} In that awkward silence they could hear ~~from upstairs~~ the light click of heels--the women pacing, ^{servicing}, fetching, ~~holding~~, feeding--whatever was needed to ^{save} service the children who could not ^{save} help themselves. Something, Misner guessed was askew.

"We don't care about why," said Jeff. "What I want to know is what you going to do about it?" He shot his forefinger into the chair arm on the word "do."

Deek leaned back and spread his legs wider, as though to welcome territory that belonged to him, "What you have in mind?" he asked.

"First off, apologize," said Fleet.

"I just did," said K.D.

"Not to me. To her. To her!"

"Yes, sir," said K.D. "I will."

"All right," Deek said. "That's first. What's second?"

Jeff answered. "You better never lay your hand on her again."

"I won't lay a thing on her, sir."

"Is there a third?" asked Deek.

"We need to know he means it," said Fleet. "Some sign it's meant."

"Sign?" Deek managed to look puzzled.

"My sister's reputation is messed up, ain't it?"

"Uh huh. I can see that."

"Nothing can fix that, can it?" Jeff's question combined defiance and inquiry.

Deek leaned forward. "Well, I don't know. Hear she's going to college. ^{That'll put all this behind her} Maybe we can help out some."

Jeff grunted. "I don't know about that." Then he looked at his father. "What you think. Papa. Would that--"

"Have to ask her mother. She's hit by this too, you know. Hit worse'n I am, maybe."

"Well," said Deek, "whyn't you talk it over with her then. If she's agreeable--stop by the bank. Tomorrow."

Fleet scratched his jaw. "Can't make no promises. Esther is a mighty proud woman. Mighty proud."

Deek nodded. "Got a reason to be, daughter going to college and all. We don't want nothing to stand in the way of that. Credit to the town."

"When that school start up, Fleet?" Steward cocked his head.

"September, I believe."

"She be ready then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Steward answered. "September's a long way off. This here is May. She might change her mind. Decide to stay on."

"I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind."

"Right," said Steward.

"Settled then?" Deek asked.

"Like I say. Have to talk to her mother."

"Of course."

"She's the key. My wife's the key."

Deek smiled outright for the first time that evening. "Women always the key God bless 'em."

Reverend Misner sighed. "God's love is in this house. I see it

every time I come here. Every time." He looked toward the ceiling while Jefferson Fleetwood stared at him with stricken eyes. "We treasure His strength but we mustn't ignore His love. That's what makes us strong. Gentlemen. Brothers. Let us pray."

They bowed thier heads and listened to Misner's beautifully put words and the tippy tap steps of women who were nowhere in sight.

Sunday 28th August, 1994

A man and a woman fucking forever. When the light changed every four hours they do something new. At the desert's edge they fuck to the sky tide of Arizona. Nothing can stop them. Nothing wants to. Moonlight arches his back; sunlight warms her skin. There is no way to miss or mistake them if you know where they are. Right outside Tucson on I - 3 in a town called Wish. Pass through it, take the first right. Where the road ends and the serious desert begins, keep going. It is necessary to go on foot because tk. One hour, tops, you see the ^{loving to beat} ~~lovers looming into~~ the sky.

Sometimes tenderly. Other times violently. But they never stop. Not for dust storms or heat hovering at 108°. And if you are patient and catch them in one of Arizona's rare rainfalls you will see the color

of their bodies deepen. But they keep on in the soft sweet Arizona rain--^{the} a black couple ^{of} near Wish, Arizona.

Mikey told Gigi how they looked and how to find them outside his hometown. They ^would have been, could have been a tourist attraction, he said, except they embarrassed local people. A committee of concerned Methodists, organized to blow them up or disguise them with cement, got started, but collapsed after a few preliminary investigations. The members said their objections were not anti-sex at all, but anti-perversion since it was believed by some, who had looked very carefully, that the couple was two women making love in the dirt. Others, after ^{an} equally careful examination {close up and with binoculars) said No, they were two ^{males} ~~make~~--bold as Gommorah.

Mikey, however, had touched the body parts and knew for a fact one was a woman, the other a man. "So what?" He said. "They weren't ^{doing it} ~~not~~ on a highway after all. You had to go way out of the way to find them." ⁾⁾ Mikey said the Methodists wanted to get rid of them but they wanted them to be there too. That even a bunch of repressed rednecks, too scared to have wet dreams, knew they needed the couple. Even if they never went near them, he said, they needed to

know they were out there--all the time. At sunrise, he said, they turned copper and you knew they'd been at it all night. At noon they were silvery gray. Then afternoon blue, then evening black. Moving, moving, all the time moving.

Gigi loved to hear him say that part: "Moving, moving, all the time moving."

When they got split up, he got ninety days. She was ^erelaxed from the emergency room with an ace bandage on her wrist. They had already agreed on where to meet. She sent him a message through the C.A. lawyer that she would meet him there after he got out. The message was "Wish April 15."

"What?" asked the lawyer.

"Just say it. Wish April 15."

The lawyer came back saying no bail and complete sentence.

What did Mikey say to her message?

"Right on," he said. "Right on."

There was no Mikey, ^{there was} no Wish, and nobody was fucking in the desert. Everybody she spoke to in Tucson thought she was crazy.

"The town is too small for a map," she said.

"Then ask the troopers. No town so small they don't know it."

"The rock formation is off the road. Looks like a couple making love."

"Well, I know some lizards do it in the desert, miss."

"Sequoia, mebbe?"

"Now there's a possibility."

They laughed themselves breathless.

After running her finger down columns in the telephone directory and finding no one in the state with Mikey's last name, Curl, Gigi gave him up. Reluctantly. The eternal desert coupling, however, she held on to for dear and precious life. Underneath gripping dreams of social justice, of an honest people's guard; more powerful ^{than} ~~that~~ her memory of the boy spitting blood into his hands, the desert lovers broke her heart.

Mikey did not invent them. He may have put them in the wrong place, but he had only summoned to the surface what she had known all her life existed--somewhere. Maybe Mexico, which is where she headed.

The dope was great, the men ready but ten days later she woke up crying. She called Acorn, Mississippi collect.

"Bring your butt home, girl. World change enough to suit you?"

Everybody's dead. King, another one of them Kennedys, Medgar Evers
Lord I can't think who all since you left not to speak of right here
remember Cato used to work down at the route 2 mall somebody
walked in there broad daylight with a pistol shaped like nothing
nobody ever seen before..."

Gigi let her head fall back on the glass of the booth. Outside the
restaurant a waiter swung a broom at some children. Girls. Without
underwear.

"I'm coming, Granddaddy. I'm heading home right now."

Most of the time she had both seats to herself. Space to spread
out. Sleep. Read back issues of tk rolled in her knapsack. Once ~~when~~
the train left tk crowded with air force men in blue. At tk four ~~H~~^Hers
crowded the cars. When she transferred to the MKT, the cars were
never full again.

The man with the earring didn't come looking for her. She
sought him out. Just to talk to somebody who wasn't encased in
polyesther and who looked like he might smoke something other than
Chesterfields.

He was short, almost a dwarf, but his clothes were East Coast
hip. His Afro was neat not scarey and he wore seeds of gold around

his neck--one matching stud in his ear.

They stood next to each other at the snack bar which the attendant insisted on calling the dining car. She ordered a Coke without ice and a brownie. He was paying for a large cup of ice only.

"That ought to be free," Gigi said to the man behind the counter.

"He shouldn't have to pay for the cup."

"Excuse me, mam. I just follow rules."

"I ordered no ice. Did you deduct anything?"

"Of course not."

"Don't trouble yourself," the short man said.

"I'm not troubled at all. Listen. Give him the ice you were going ^{nk} to charge me for ~~to give me no charge, Okay?~~ ^{at extra}

"Miss, do I have to call the conductor?"

^{If} ~~You~~ don't, I will. This is trains robbing people."

"It's all right," said the man. "Just a nickel."

"It's the principal."

"A five-cent principle ain't no principle at all. The man needs a nickle. Needs it real bad."

"I don't need nothing. It's the rules."

"Have two," said the man, and flicked second nickle into the

saucer.

Gigi glaring, the earring man smiling they left the dining car together. She sat down across the aisle from him to expand on the incident while the man crunched ice.

"Gigi." She held out her hand. "You?"

"Dice," he said.

"Like chopping small?"

"Like pair of."

He touched her with a cool cool hand and they told each other stories for miles. Gigi even got comfortable enough to ask him had he ever seen or heard tell of a rock formation that looked like a man and a woman making out. He laughed and said no, but he knew of a place where