



Chapter 3: Grace

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-

Chapter 3: Grace

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:54:55 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/3r075054s>

1970

Rev/7/2

CHAPTER THREE

GRACE

45 pp

May 1970

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 since 1949.

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

He carried the equipment box through the dining room. Narrow panels of lace spilled from a basket on the side table. Aunt Soane 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 ^{days} ~~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 puppy. "Hey good dog; Stay good dog; Old good dog; My good dog. Everybody needs a good 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, 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 Billie-Delia 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. First because they ~~seldom, if ever~~ ^{never} had seen a bus in the town--Ruby was not a stop on route to someplace else. Second to see why it stopped at all. The vision that appeared when the bus drove away, standing on the road

shoulder between the school house and Holy Redeemer, rivited the attention of everybody lounging at the Oven. She didn't have on any lipstick but, from one hundred and fifty feet, you could see her eyes. The silence ^{that} ~~had~~ decended ~~and~~ seemed permanent until Arnette broke it.

"If that's the kind of tramp 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 well worth it.

Somebody said, "Ow!" but mostly his friends were assessing the screaming tits closing in on them. Arnette fled; Billie ^{Delia} ~~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 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 with mortgages on a feed store and a drugstore end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. Since the loose bones of his cousins, Deek's two sons, had been buried two years ago, K.D., their hope and their despair, was the last male in a line that included a ~~state auditor~~ ^{*congressman, a county clerk mayors.} and two ~~county clerks~~. 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 ^glazy father, Arnold, have any rights then that the Morgans had to respect?

Fondling Ben's coat, picking burrs from the 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?"

* Lieutenant governor [Zechariah] and
a ~~congressman~~ ^{senator} and [Person]
two mayors [Black house]

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 meeting place. Reverend Misner had thought it best to serve protocol and go to Fleetwood rather than season the raw insult done to the family by making the aggrieved come to the house of the aggressor.

K.D., Deek and Steward had 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 decided to build 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 a nursing infant, before his mother, her brothers, his cousins, 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 the steering wheels of their Oldsmobiles ^{and Impalas} and repeated the Old Fathers' refrain: "Oklahoma is Indians, ^{Negroes} ~~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 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.

In two cars they drove less than a mile ^{from Mizer's living room} to Fleetwood's house.

Somewhere in X City June voices are doubled by the sunlit water of a swimming pool. K.D. was there once. 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. Excited voices sounded near and he went to see. Behind a chain-link 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 ^{white} children were bobbing in it, their voices a cascade of the world's purest happiness, a glee so keenly felt it had brought tears. ^{Now As} ~~When~~ the Oldsmobile u-turned at the Oven where Gigi had popped her gum, K.D. felt again the yearning excitement of sparkly water and the June voices of swimmers. His uncles had not been pleased at having to search downtown X City for him and ^{on the train, then their automobile} chastised him, ~~off and on~~, all the way back to Ruby. Small price then, and small price 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. But unlike the swimming pool, this girl he would see again.

They parked bumper to bumper to the side of Fleetwood's house. When they knocked on the door each man, except for Reverend Misner, began to breathe through his mouth as a way of narrowing the house odor of illness.

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 Central Avenue. Sleeping arrangements for his wife and each of 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 would have become a nursery had they not needed it as a hospital ward for Jeff's and Sweetie's children. The way things turned out, Fleet now slept on a hide-a-way in the dining room.

The men sat on spotless upholstery 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 ^{four} ~~last~~ ~~two~~ children alive--so far. Fleet and Jeff, grateful for but infuriated by that devotion, turned their shame sideways. Being in their

company, sitting near them was hard. Conversation harder.

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 came back down the stairs, 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, you all, 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. "I don't call that temper. I call it illegal."

"Well, at that particular moment, he was way out of line."

"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?" Steward 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 is 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 sermon-making 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, ^{Delia} Billie-Marie. ^{Delia} 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. ^{Delia} Billie-Marie was the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second.

"This aint about no ^{Delia} 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 bear and come to terms. The sudden quiet that followed surprised him. Steward and Deek both cleared their sinuses at the same time. Arnold Fleetwood stared at his shoes. Something, Misner guessed, was askew. In that awkward silence they could hear above their heads the light click of heels--the women pacing, servicing, fetching, feeding--whatever it took to save the children who could not save themselves.

"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 thighs wider, as though to welcome territory that naturally 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." 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. Mable 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.

"August, I believe."

"She be ready then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Steward answered. "August'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 as though breathable air was available again. "God's love is in this house," he said. "I feel 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 keeps us strong. Gentlemen. Brothers. Let us pray."

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

The next morning Reverend Misner was surprised by how well he had slept. The meeting with the Morgans and Fleetwoods the previous night had made him uneasy. There was a grizzley ~~bear~~ ^{wood} in Fleet's living room--quiet, invisible but making deft movement impossible. Upstairs he'd made the women laugh--well, Mable anyway. Sweetie smiled but clearly didn't enjoy his banter. Her eye was ever on her children. A slide. A lean. A suck of air--she bent over a crib and made quick, practiced adjustments. But her expression was mildly patronizing. ^{As if to say} What could there be to amuse her? And why would he try? She acquiesced when he asked her to join him in prayer. Bowed her head. Closed her eyes. But when she faced him with a quiet "Amen," he felt as though his relationship with the God he spoke to was vague or too new, while hers was superior, ancient, and

completely sealed.

He had better luck with Mable Fleetwood, who was delighted enough with his visit to prolong their conversation unnecessarily. Downstairs the men he had assembled, ^{after learning} ~~once he learned~~ ^{had} what happened at the Oven, waited--as did the grizzley.

Misner fought his pillow for a moment and convinced himself that the ending was satisfactory. Tempers banked, a resolution surfaced, peace declared. ^(over) Jefferson's skin was thin as ^{the} gauze, but it was K.D. ^{irritated} who ~~worried~~ [^] Misner most. Too quick to please. An oily apology. A devious smile. Misner despised males who hit women--and a fifteen year old? What did K.D. think he was doing? His relation to Deek and Steward protected him of course, but it was hard to like a man who relied on that. Servile to his uncles; brutal with females. Then, later that evening as Misner warmed up the fried steak and potatoes Anna Flood had brought him for his supper, he had looked out of his window and seen K.D. speeding down Central in Steward's Impala. Grinning--he'd bet on it--his devious smile.

The Morgans always seemed to be
having a second conversation
right next to
underneath

Annals' ~~seems~~ malice was ~~supposed~~ ^{any} =
~~but~~ ^{made} ~~had no~~ formula; expected it but knew it
without merit:

Such nagging thoughts he believed would keep him awake most of the night, but in the morning he woke as if from the sweetest sleep of his ^{of some} life. Anna's food, he supposed. Still, he wondered what ^{had} ~~was~~ K.D. ^{been} ~~looking for~~ ^{Zooming to} on the road out of town?

A man and a woman fucking forever. When the light changes 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 tongue. 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 left. Where the road ends and the serious desert begins, keep going. The tarantulas are poisonous but it is necessary to go on foot because no tires can manage the terrain. One hour, tops, you'll see loving to beat the sky.

Sometimes tender. Other times rough. But they never stop. Not for dust storms or heat hovering at 108°. And if you are patient and catch them in one of the desert's random rainfalls you will see the color of their bodies deepen. But they keep on ^{having it} fucking in the soft

sweet rain--the black couple of Wish, Arizona.

Over and over 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 committee 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--bold as Gomorrah.

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 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. 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, Mikey got ninety days. Gigi was released from the emergency room with an ace bandage on her wrist.

Everything happened so fast they had no time to plan where to meet.

The court appointed lawyer came ^{out} ~~back~~ saying no bail, no probation.

His client had to do the whole three months. After calculating the

sentence, minus the three weeks spent in jail, ^{Gigi} she sent ^{Mikey} him a

message through the C.A. lawyer. The message was "Wish April 15."

"What?" asked the lawyer.

"Just say it. 'Wish April 15.' "

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.

"Maybe the town I'm looking for is too small for a map," she

offered.

"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 seen some lizards do it in the desert, miss."

"Cactus, 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 ^{county} 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 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 heavy, the men always ready, but ten days later

she woke up crying. She called Alcorn, Mississippi, collect.

"Bring your butt home, girl. World change enough to suit you? Everybody dead anyway. King, another one of them Kennedys, Medgar Evers, a nigger name of X, Lord I can't think who all since you left not to speak of right here remember ^{L.J.} ~~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 plaster wall near the telephone. Outside the bodega a ^{clerk} ~~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 Ramparts rolled in her knapsack. When she boarded the Santa Fe, the train pulled out of tk crowded with air force men in blue. At tk Four H'ers crowded the cars. But 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 polyester 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?"

"Course not."

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

"I'm ^{ain't} not troubled at all. Listen, you. Give him the ice you weren't going to charge me for, Okay?"

"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 principle," said Gigi.

"A five-cent principle ain't no principle at all. The man needs a

nickle. Needs it real bad." The short man smiled.

"I don't need nothing," said the ^{attendant}waiter. "It's the rules."

"Have two," said the man, and flicked ²second nickle into the saucer.

Gigi glaring, the earring man smiling, they left the snack bar 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 made up stories for each other 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 that he once heard about a place where there was a waterfall in the middle of a wheat field. And that behind this waterfall two trees grew in each others arms. And If you squeezed in between them in just the right way, well, you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate. "They say after that, can't nobody turn you

down.”

“Nobody turns me down now.”

“Nobody? I mean no-o body!”

“Where is this place?”

“Ruby. Ruby, Oklahoma. Way out in the middle of nowhere.”

“You been there?”

“Not yet. But I plan to check it out. Say they got the best rhubarb pie in the nation.”

“I hate rhubarb.”

“Hate it? Girl, you ain’t lived. You ain’t lived at all.”

“I’m going home. See my folks.”

“Where’s home for you?”

“Frisco. All my folks live in Frisco. I just talked to my grandfather. They’re waiting on me.”

Dice nodded but said nothing.

Gigi stuffed the brownie wrapper in her empty paper cup. I am not lost, she thought. Not lost at all. I can go see Granddaddy or go back to the Bay or...’

The train slowed. Dice rose to collect his luggage from the overhead rack. He was so short he had to stand on tip toe. Gigi

helped him and he didn't seem to mind.

"Well, I get off here. Nice talking with you."

"You too."

"Good luck. Watch out, now. Don't get wet."

If the boys standing in front of a kind of barbecue grill had said No, this is Alcorn, Mississippi, she probably would have believed them. Same haircuts, same stares, same loose, hick smiles. What her Granddaddy called "country's country." Some girls were there too, arguing, it seemed, with one of them. In any case, they weren't much help but she enjoyed the waves of raw horniness slapping her back as she walked off down the street.

First dust, fine as flour, sifted into her eyes, her mouth. Then the wind wrecked her hair. Suddenly she was out of town. What the locals called Central Avenue just stopped and Gigi was at Ruby's edge at the same time she had reached its center. The wind, soundless, came from the ground rather than the sky. One minute her heels clicked, the next they were mute in swirling dirt. On either side of her tall grass rolled like water.

She had stopped five minutes ago in a so-called drugstore, bought cigarettes, and learned that the boys at the barbecue grill were telling the truth: there was no motel. And if there was any pie it wasn't served at a restaurant because there wasn't one of those either. Other than the picnic benches at the barbecue thing, there was no public place to sit down. All around her were closed doors and shut windows where parted curtains were swiftly replaced.

So much for Ruby, she thought. Mikey must have sent her that *lying* freak on the train. She just wanted to see. Not just the thing in the wheatfield, but whether there was anything at all the world had to say for itself (in rock, tree or water) that wasn't bodybags or little boys spitting blood into their hands so as not to ruin their shoes. So. Alcorn. She might as well start over in Alcorn, Mississippi. Sooner or later one of those trucks parked by the Seed and Feed store would have to start up and she would hitch out of there.

Holding on to her hair and squinting against the wind, Gigi considered walking back toward the Feed store. Her back pack felt heavy in high heels and if she didn't move, the wind might topple her. As suddenly as it had begun the wind quit; in its absence she heard an engine coming toward her.

Narrow straw

"You headed out to the Convent?" A man in a ~~wide-brimmed~~ hat opened the door of his van.

Gigi tossed her backpack on the seat and climbed in. "You kidding? Anything but. Can you put me near a *real* bus stop or train station or something?"

"You in luck. Take you right to the track."

"Great!" Gigi dug around in the pack between her knees.

"Smells new."

"Brand new. You all my first trip."

"You all?"

"Have to make a stop. Another passenger going to take a train ride too." He smiled. "My name's Roger. Roger Best"

"Gigi."

"But you free. The other one I charge," he said, cutting his eyes away from the road. Pretending to examine the scenery through the passenger window, he looked at her navel first, then further down, then up.

Gigi pulled out a mirror and, as best she could, repaired the wind damage to her hair, thinking, Yeah. I'm free all right.

And she was. Just as Roger Best said, there was no charge to

the living, but the dead cost twenty-five dollars.

Every now and then the woman sitting on the porch steps lifted her aviator's glasses to wipe her eyes. One braid from under her straw hat fell down her back. Roger leaned on his knee and spoke to her for what seemed to Gigi a long time, then they both went inside. When Roger came out, he was closing his wallet and frowning.

"Ain't no help out here. You may's well wait inside. Going to take me a while to get the body down."

Gigi turned to look behind her, but couldn't see through the partition.

"Jesus! This here's a hearse?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's a ambulance. Today it's a hearse." He was all business now. No quick glances at her breasts. "Got to get it on board the MKT at 8:20 P.M. And I got to be there not *in* time-- but *on* time."

Gigi was quick but clumsy stepping out of the van-now-hearse, but she made it up the wide wooden stairs and through the front doors in no time at all. He had said "Convent" so she thought sweet but stern women floating in sailboat hats above long black sleeves. But there was nobody and the woman in the straw hat had

disappeared. Gigi walked through a marble foyer into another one twice the size. In the dimness she could see a hallway extending to the right and to the left. In front of her more wide stairs. Before she could decide which way to go, Roger was behind her carrying a metal something with wheels. He moved toward the stairs, mumbling "Not a bit of help, not a bit." Gigi turned right, rushing toward light coming from under a pair of swing doors. Inside was the longest table she had ever seen in the biggest kitchen. She sat there, chewing her thumbnail, wondering just how bad could it be, riding with a dead person. There was some herb in her pack. Not much but enough, she thought, to keep her from freaking. She reached out and pinched off a bit of crust from a pie sitting before her and noticed for the first time the place was loaded with food, mostly untouched. Several cakes, more pies, potato salad, a ham, a large dish of baked beans. There must be nuns, she thought. Or maybe all this was from the funeral. Suddenly, like a ^{legitimate} ~~true~~ mourner, she was ravenous.

Gigi was gobbling, piling more food onto her plate even while she scooped from it, when the woman entered without her straw hat or her glasses and lay down on the stone cold floor.

Her mouth was full of baked beans and chocolate cake so Gigi

could not speak. Outside Roger's horn blasted. Gigi put her spoon down but held on to the cake as she walked over to where the woman lay. Squatting down, she wiped her mouth and said "Can I help you?" The woman's eyes were closed but she shook her head no.

"Is it anybody else here I can call?"

She opened her eyes then and Gigi saw nothing--just a faint circle where the edge of the iris used to be.

"Hey, girl. You coming?" Roger was shouting, his voice puny and distant over the throb of his engine. "I get a train to meet. On time! I got to be on time!"

Gigi leaned down closer, gazing into eyes with nothing to recommend them.

"I said is anybody else here?"

"You," she murmured. "You here." Each word sailed toward Gigi on a wave of whiskied breath.

"You hear me? I can't wait all day!" Roger warned.

Gigi waved her free hand across the woman's face to make sure she was blind as well as drunk.

"Stop that," said the woman, whispering but annoyed.

"Oh," said Gigi, "I thought. Why don't you let me get you a

chair?"

"I'm gone, hear? Gone!" Gigi heard the engine rev and the hearse shift from neutral into drive.

"I'm missing my ride. What you want me to do?"

The woman turned over on her side and folded her hands under her cheek. "Be a darling. Just watch. I haven't closed my eyes in seventeen days."

"Wouldn't a bed do the trick?"

"Be a darling. Be a darling. I don't want to sleep when nobody there to watch."

"On the floor?"

But she was asleep. Breathing like a child.

Gigi stood up and looked around the kitchen, slowly swallowing cake. *At least there were no dead people here* The sound of the hearse grew fainter and then slipped away.

Fright, not triumph, spoke in every foot of the embezzler's mansion. Shaped like a live cartridge, it curved to a deadly point at the north end where, originally, the living and dining rooms lay. He must have believed his persecutors would come from the north because all the first floor windows huddled in those two rooms. Like look-outs. The southern end contained signs of his desire in two

rooms: an outsize kitchen and a room where he could play rich men's games. Neither room had a view, but the kitchen had one of the mansion's two entrances. A veranda curved from the north around the bullet's tip, continued along its wall, past the main entrance and ended at the flat end of the ammunition--its southern exposure. Except from the bedrooms no one in the house could see the sun rise, and there was no vantage point to see it set. The light, therefore, was always misleading.

He must have expected or hoped to have a lot of good time company in his fortress: eight bedrooms, two giant bathrooms, a cellar of storerooms that occupied as much space as the first floor. And he wanted to amuse his guests so completely they would not think of leaving for days on end. His efforts to entertain were no more sophisticated or interesting than he was--mostly food, sex and toys. After two years of semi-covert construction, he managed one voluptuous party before he was arrested, just as he feared, by northern lawmen, one of whom attended his first and only party.

The four teaching sisters, who moved into his house when it was offered for sale at a pittance, diligently canceled the obvious echoes of his delight, but could do nothing to hide his terror. The closed off,

protected "back", the poised and watchful "tip", an entrance door guarded now by only the claws of some monstrous statuary which the sisters had removed at once. A rickety, ill-hanging kitchen door the only vulnerability.

Gigi, as high as possible on her limited supply, and roaming through the mansion while the drunken woman slept on the kitchen floor, immediately recognized the conversion of the dining room into a school room; the living room into a chapel, and the game room alteration to an office. Then she discovered the traces of the sisters' failed industry. The female torso candle holders in the candleabra hanging from the hall ceiling. The curls of hair winding through vines that once touched faces now chipped away. The nursing cherabim emerging from layers of paint. The nipple-tipped door knobs. Lay-a-bouts half naked in old-timey clothes drinking and fondling each other in prints stacked in closets. She even found the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from sinks and tubs packed away in a chest of sawdust, as if, however repelled by the hardware's demands, the sisters valued nevertheless its metal. Gigi toyed with the fixtures, turning the testicles designed to release water from the penis. She sucked the last bit of joint--ming one--and lay the roach on one of

the alabaster vaginas in the game room. She imagined men contentedly knocking their cigars against those ash trays. Or perhaps just resting them there, knowing without looking that the glowing tip was slowly building a delicate head.

She avoided the bedrooms because she didn't know which one had belonged to the dead person, but when she went to use one of the bathrooms she saw that no toilet activity was not meant to be reflected in a mirror that reflected in another. Most, set firmly into wall tile, had been painted. Bending to examine the mermaids holding up the tub, she noticed a handle fastened to a slab of wood surrounded by floor tile. She was able to reach and lift the handle, but not able to budge it.

Suddenly she was fiercely hungry again and returned to the kitchen to eat and do as the woman had asked: be a darling and watch while she slept. Like an antique version of a tripper afraid to come down alone. She was finished with the macaroni, some ham and another slice of cake when the woman on the floor stirred and sat up. She held her face in both hands for a moment, then rubbed her eyes.

"Feel better?" asked Gigi.

She took a pair of sunglasses from an apron pocket and put them

on. "No. But rested."

"That is better."

The woman got up. "I suppose. Thank you--for staying."

"Sure. Hangover's a bitch. I'm Gigi. Who died?"

"A ^{love} friend," said the woman. "I ^{only} had two; she was the last." ^{first and the}

"Aw, I'm sorry," Gigi said. "Where's he taking her? The ^{dude} guy in the hearse."

"Far. To a lake named for her. Superior. That's how she wanted it."

"Who else lives here? You didn't cook all this food, did you?"

The woman filled a saucepan with water and shook her head.

"What ^{gonna} will you do now?"

"Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi. That's what frogs sing. What did your mother name you?"

^{Oh, her.}
"She gave me her own name."

"Well?"

"Grace."

"Grace. What could be better?"

Nothing. Nothing at all. If ever there came a morning when mercy and simple good fortune took to their heels and fled, grace

alone might have to do. But from where would it come and how fast?
In that holy hollow between sighting and following through could
grace slip through at all?

It was the I-give^{-up} woman serving up her breasts like two baked
Alaska on a platter that took all the kick out of looking in the boy's
eyes. Gigi watched him battle his stare and lose every time. He said
his name was K.D. and tried hard to enjoy her face as much as her
cleavage while he talked. It was a struggle she expected, rose to and
took pleasure in--normally. But the picture she woke to an hour ago
spoiled it.

Unwilling to sleep on the same floor where a person just died,
Gigi had chosen the leather sofa in the used-to-be game room/office.
Windowless, dependent on ^{no longer available} ~~non-existent~~ electricity for light, the room
encouraged her to sleep deeply and long. She missed the morning
entirely and woke in the afternoon in a darkness hardly less than
what she'd fallen asleep in. Hanging on the wall in front of her was
the etching she had barely glanced at when poking around the day
before. Now it loomed into her line of vision in the skinny light from
the hall. A woman. On her knees. A knocked-down look, cast-up

begging eyes, arms outstretched holding up her present on a platter to a lord. Gigi tiptoed over and leaned close to see who was the woman with the I-give-up face. Saint Catherine of Sienna was engraved on a small plaque in the frame. Gigi laughed-- brass dicks hidden in a box; pudding tits exposed on a plate--but in fact it didn't feel funny. So when the boy she had seen in town yesterday parked his car near the kitchen door and blew his horn her interest in him had an edge of annoyance. Propped in the doorway she ate jam covered bread while she listened to him and watched the war waged in his eyes.

His smile was lovely and his voice attractive. "Been ^{hiding around} looking all over for you. Heard you was out here. Thought you might be still."

"Who told you that?"

"A friend. Well, a friend of a friend."

"You mean that hearse ^{dude} guy?"

"Uh huh. Said you changed your mind about getting to the train station."

"News sure travels fast out here, even if nothing else does."

"We get around. Wanna go for a ride? Go as fast as you want."

Gigi licked jam from her thumb and forefinger. She looked to the

toward the garden
left and thought she saw in the distance a glint of metal or maybe a mirror reflecting light. As from a State Trooper's sunglasses.

"Gimme a minute, she said. "Change my clothes."

In the game room she packed everything and slung her backpack on the *near* ~~back~~ seat.

"Hey," said K.D. "We just going for a little ride."

"Yeah," she answered, "but who knows? I might change my mind again."

They drove through mile after mile of skyblue sky. Gigi had not really looked at the scenery from the trainwindows or the bus. As far as she was concerned there was nothing out there. But speeding along in the Impala was more like cruising on a DC 10 and the nothing turned out to be sky-- unignorable, custom-made, designer sky. Not empty either but full of breath and all the eye was meant for.

"That's the shortest skirt I ever saw." He smiled his lovely smile.

"Mini's," said Gigi. "In the real world they're called mini skirts."

"Don't they make people stare at you?"

"Stare. Drive for miles. Have car wrecks. Talk stupid."

"You must like it. Reckon that's what they're for, though."

"You explain your clothes; I'll explain mine. Where'd you get those pants for instance?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing. Listen, you want to argue, take me back."

"No. No, I don't want to argue; I just want to...ride."

"Yeah? How fast?"

"Told you. Fast as I can."

"How long?"

"Long as you want."

"How far?"

"All the way."

The desert couple was big, Mikey said. From any angle you looked, he said, they took up the sky, moving, moving. Liar, thought Gigi, not this sky. This here sky was bigger than everything, including a woman with her breasts on a plate.

When Mavis pulled into the driveway near the kitchen door she slammed the breaks so hard her packages slid from the seat and fell beneath the dashboard. The figure sitting in the garden's red

chair was totally naked. She could not see the face under the hat's brim but she knew it wore no sunglasses. A mere month she'd been away and for three weeks of that time couldn't wait to get back. Something must have happened, she thought. To Mother. To Connie. At the squeal of the brakes the sunning figure did not move. Only when she slammed the Cadillac door did the person sit up and push back the hat. Calling out, "Connie! Connie?" Mavis hurried toward the garden's edge.

"Who the hell are you? Where's Connie?"

The naked girl yawned and scratched her pubic hair. "Mavis?" she asked.

Relieved to learn she was known, spoken of, at least, Mavis lowered her voice. "What are you doing out here like that? Where's Connie?"

"Like what? She's inside."

"You're naked!"

"Yeah. So?" *So take the cigar.*

"Do they know?" Mavis glanced toward the house.

"Lady," said Grace, "are you looking at something you never saw before or something you don't have or you a clothes freak or what?"

"Blessed! Blessed! Blessed one!" Connie came bounding down the steps, her arms wide, toward Mavis. "Oh how I missed you!" They hugged and Mavis could ^{loved} ~~not help loving~~ the thump of the woman's heart against her own.

"Who is she, Connie, and where are her clothes?"

"Oh, that's little Grace. She came the day after Mother died."

"Died? When?"

"Seven days now. Seven."

"But I brought all the things. I have it all in the car."

"No use. Not for her anyway. My heart's all scrunched but now you back I feel like cooking."

"You haven't been eating?" Mavis shot a cold glance at Grace.

"A bit. Funeral foods. But now I'll cook fresh."

"There's plenty," said Grace. "We haven't even touched the..."

"You put some clothes on!"

"You kiss my ass!"

"Do it, Grace" said Connie. "Go, like a good girl. Cover yourself we love you just the same."

"She ever hear of sunbathing?"

"Go on now."

Grace went, exaggerating the switch of both the cheeks she had offered Mavis.

"What rock did she crawl out from under?" Mavis asked.

"Hush," said Connie. "Soon you'll like her."

No way, Mavis thought. No way at all. Mother's gone but Connie's okay. I've been here ^{almost} three years, and this house is my place. For me. Not her.

They did everything but slap each other and finally they did that. What postponed the inevitable ~~for two months~~ was a very young girl in too tight clothes tapping on the screen door.

"You have to help me," she said. "You have to. It's almost August."

It was.