



## "Relieved to learn..."

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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? Inside."

"You're naked!"

"Yeah. So?"

"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 not help loving the thump of the woman's heart against her own.

"But who is this 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 scruntched but now you back I feel like cooking."

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

"A bit. <sup>Funeral</sup> ~~Food the women brought. Olive.~~ Esther. But now I'll cook."

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

"You put some clothes on!"

"You kiss my ass!"

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

"She ever hear of sunbathing?"

"Go on."

Grace went, exaggerating the switch of both of the cheeks she <sup>offered</sup> ~~had invited~~ Mavis, ~~to kiss.~~

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

"Hush. Soon you'll like her. That's all that's left. Liking. In the end, that's all there is."

No way, Mavis thought. No way at all. Mother's gone but

Connie's okay. This house is still my refuge. With that girl here, <sup>I may</sup> ~~all~~ <sup>as well be</sup> ~~my peace is gone.~~

They did everything but slap each other and finally they did that.



Thursday 15th September, 1994

Not much point to garden peas. May as well use canned. Hardly a tastebud in town could tell the difference. Certainly not Steward's. Blue Boy packed in his cheek for twenty years narrowed his taste first to a craving for spices, then reduced it <sup>altogether</sup> to demands for hot pepper. <sup>a single</sup> "Why not?" asked Olive.

When they got married, Dovey was sure she could never cook well enough to suit the twin known to be pickier than his brother, Deek. Back from the war, <sup>both men were</sup> ~~they were both~~ hungry for down home food, but dreaming of it for three years had raised their expectations, exaggerated the possibilities of lard making biscuits lighter than snow, of the responsibility sharp cheese took on in hominy. <sup>Eventually</sup> Deek hummed with pleasure as he sucked sweet marrow from hocks or crunched chicken bones to powder. But Steward remembered everything differently. Shouldn't the clove be down in the tissue, not just sitting on top of the ham? And the chicken-fried steak--Vedalia onions or white? On her wedding day, Dovey stood facing the flowered wall paper,

her back to the window so her sister, Olive, could see better. Dovey held the hem of her slip up while Olive drew the seams. The little brush tickled the backs of her legs, but she stood perfectly still. There were no stockings in Haven or the world in 1949, but to get married obviously bare legged mocked God and the ceremony.

"I don't expect he'll be satisfied at table," Dovey told her sister.

"Why not?" asked Olive.

"I don't know. He compliments my <sup>o</sup>coking, then makes a suggestion about how to improve it next time."

"Hold still, Dovey."

"Deek doesn't do that to you, does he?"

"Not that. He's picky other ways. But I wouldn't worry about it if I was you. If he's satisfied in bed the table won't mean a thing."

They laughed then and Olive had to do a whole seam over again.

Now, in ~~1973~~, the difficulty that loomed in 1949 had been solved by tobacco. It didn't matter whether her peas were garden fresh or canned. Convent pepers, hot as hellfire, did all the cooking for her. The trouble it took to cultivate peas was wasted. A teaspoon of sugar and a plop of butter in canned <sup>e</sup>ons would do nicely since the bits of



purple-black pepper he would sprinkle over them bombed away any quiet flavor. Take late squash....

Almost all the time, these days, when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost. His sense of taste one example of the many she counted. Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses. The sale of his herd at 1958's top dollar accompanied his defeat in the statewide election for Church Secretary because of his outspoken contempt for the schoolchildren sitting in that drugstore in Oklahoma City. His position had not surprised her since, ten years earlier he'd called Thurgood Marshall a 'stir-up Negro' for handling the N.A.A.C.P.'s segregation suit in Norman. Had even written a mean letter to the brave women who organized the students. The natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet [over five years] on the ranch filled his pockets in 1962 but shrunk their land to a toy ranch and killed the trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his tastebuds disappeared over time. Small losses that began with the big one: in 1964, at forty, they learned ~~neither~~ <sup>neither</sup> ~~or either~~ could have children.

This year he had "cleaned up" as he put it, in a real estate deal

and Dovey <sup>didn't have to wonder</sup> ~~wondered~~ <sup>because</sup> what else he would lose ~~now that~~ he was in  
<sup>already</sup> ~~another~~ losing ~~certainly~~ battle with Reverend Misner over ~~the~~ words  
~~his grandfather had~~ soldered on the lip of the Oven. An argument  
<sup>e</sup> ~~fuel~~ in part, Dovey thought, by what nobody talked about: young  
people in trouble or acting up everywhere. Arnette, home from  
college, wouldn't leave her bed. <sup>(</sup>Harper's boy, the one they called  
Sharktooth, drunk every weekend since he got back from Vietnam.  
Roger's granddaughter, Billie-Marie, disappeared into thin air. Jeff's  
wife, Sweetie, running off for a whole week ~~last year~~. K.D.'s mess  
with that girl living out at the Convent. Not to speak of the sass, the  
pout, the outright defiance of the very young--~~the~~ ones who wanted  
to name the Oven "something-place," and who had decided that the  
original words on it were never "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," but  
something else, something that enraged Steward and Deek. Dovey  
had talked to her sister <sup>(and</sup> ~~sister-in-law~~), Olive, about it, to Mable  
Fleetwood, to a couple of women in the Club. Opinions were varied,  
confusing, even incoherent because feelings ran so high over the  
matter. ~~Maybe~~ <sup>✓</sup> also because ~~of~~ the way the young people laughed at  
Miss Esther's finger memory insulted them all. They had not  
suggested, politely, that Miss Esther may have been mistaken; they



howled at the notion of remembering <sup>what</sup> letters you couldn't read by <sup>the letters</sup> tracing ~~them~~. \*

"Did she see them?" they asked their fathers.

"Better than that. She felt them, touched them, put her finger on them," shouted the fathers.

"if she was blind we could believe her. that'd be like braille. But some five year old kid who couldn't read her own tombstone if she climbed out of her grave and stood in front of it?"

The twins frowned. Fleet, thinking of his mother-in-law, jumped out of the pew and had to be held back.

The Baptists, early on, had smiled at the dissension among the Methodists. The Pentacostals laughed out loud. But not for long. Members in their own churches, young and old, began to voice opinions about the words. Each had <sup>people</sup> members in their congregations who had been among the ~~first~~ fifteen families to leave Haven and start over. And the Oven didn't belong to any one denomination. It belonged to all.

The young people spoke seriously in the open meeting Reverend Misner had called. + TIC

"No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To

\* what wasn't there and you couldn't read by ...  
\* invisible words you couldn't read <sup>or understand by...</sup> ~~anyway~~



"beware" God. To always be ducking and diving trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down. What kind of message is that? No ex-slave who had the guts to make his own way, build a town out of nothing could think like that. No ex-slave...."

"Quit calling him a ex-slave. That's my grandfather you talking about. He wasn't no ex nothing and he wasn't making his own way;

he was part of a whole group making their own way." Deck's anger did not intimidate Ray.

"He was born in slavery times, he was a slave, wasn't he?" → + TK

"Everybody born in slavery time wasn't a slave. Not the way you meaning it."

"There's just one way to mean it."

"You don't know what you talking about!"

"None of them do! Don't know jackshit!" shouted Roger Best

"Whoa, whoa!" Reverend Misner interrupted. "Brothers. Sister<sup>s</sup>.

We called this meeting in God's own house...."  
to  
^

"One of His houses," snarled Harper.

"All right, one of His houses. But whichever one, He demands respect from those who are in it. Am I right or am I right?"

Roger sat down. "You right, and I apologize for the language. To

Him," he said, pointing upward.

"That might please Him. Might not. Don't limit your love to Him, Roger. He cautions every which way against it."

"Reverend." The Reverend Pulliam stood up. He was a dark, <sup>impressive</sup> wirey man--white-haired and ~~big~~. "We have a problem here. You, me. Everybody. The problem is with the way some of us talk. The grown-ups, of course, should use proper language. But the young people-- what they say is more like backtalk than talk. What we're here for is--"

<sup>Ray</sup> He interrupted him. "What is talk if it's not <sup>u</sup>back<sup>v</sup>? You all just don't want us to talk at all. Any talk is <sup>u</sup>back-talk<sup>v</sup> if you don't agree with what's being said."

Pulliam turned slowly to Misner. "Reverend, can't you keep him still?"

"Why would I want to?" asked Misner. "We're here not just to talk but to listen too."

Pulliam narrowed his eyes and was about to answer when Deek Morgan left his seat and stood in the aisle. "Well, sir, I have listend<sup>e</sup> and I have heard enough. Nobody, I mean nobody is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going t<sup>o</sup> mess with a



thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands--not yours." Deek looked steadily at ~~the~~ Ray

"They dug the clay--not you. They carried the hod--not you. They mixed the mortar--not a one of you. They made good red brick for the town when their own shelter was <sup>sticks and</sup> sod. You understand what I'm telling you? And we respected what they had gone through to do it.

Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men--men, hear me? not slaves ex or otherwise--the bricks those men made.

Tell, them, Roger, how delicate was the separation, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Sargeant, you tell

<sup>them</sup> ~~him~~ if I'm lying. Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us.

And if some letters fell off, it wasn't due to us because we packed it in straw like it was a baby. So, understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know

better what men who went through hell to learn knew. Act short with

me all you want, you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect <sup>my daddy's</sup> ~~a~~ <sup>work</sup> ~~or tramp~~ <sup>row</sup> you never hoed."

→ Quiet + Amen TK

"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it." Misner said. "It's because they do know the <sup>Oven's</sup> value that they want to give it new life."

"They don't want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change

it into something they made up>

"It's our history, too. Not just yours," said ~~the~~ <sup>Ray</sup> instrument if

"Then act like it! I just told you! That Oven already has a history it don't need you to ~~top~~ <sup>fix</sup> it."

"Wait, now Deek. Think what's been said. Forget naming, naming the Oven. What's at issue is <sup>clarifying</sup> the motto."

"Motto? Motto? We talking command! 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'! That's what it says clear as daylight. That aint no suggestion; that's an order!"

Well  
"No. It's not clear as daylight. <sup>," said Mrs. Ver. "</sup> It says "...the Furrow of His Brow. There is no <sup>mean?</sup> "Beware" there."

"You were not there! Esther was!"

"She was a baby. She could have been mistaken."

Fleet moved into the aisle. "Esther never made a mistake of that nature in her life. She named this town, dammit. <sup>Scuse me,</sup> ladies."

~~The~~ looking strained held up his hand and asked "What's so wrong about 'Be the Furrow'? 'Be the Furrow of His Brow'?"

"You can't be God, boy!"

"It's not being Him; it's being His instrument, His justice. As a



race--"

"God's justice is His alone. How you going to be His instrument if you don't obey him?" asked Reverend Pulliam.

"We are obeying Him. If we follow His commandments, we will be His voice, His retribution. As a people--"

*Harper cut him off.*

"It says 'Beware'. Not 'Be.' Beware means 'Look out. The power is mine! Get used to it!'"

"'Be' means you putting Him aside and you the power," said Roger.

"We are the power if we just--"

"See what I mean? See what I mean?"

*Blasphemer!*

"Listen to that. Have mercy. Did Reverend hear that? That boy needs a strap...."

?TK

As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word--or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. "Listen here," he said. "If you, any one of you, change, take away, or add to the <sup>words</sup> ~~letter~~ in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off like you was a jackrabbit."

Dovey Morgan, chilled by her husband's <sup>threat</sup> ~~word~~, could only look at the floorboards and wonder what <sup>shape his loss would take now.</sup> ~~he would lose now.~~

Days later she still hadn't made up her mind about who or which side was right. And in discussion with others, including Steward, she tended to agree with whomever she was listening to. This matter was one she would bring to her Friend--when he came back to her.

They Sunday 18th September, 1994

Driving away from the meeting, Steward and Dovey had a small but familiar disagreement about where to go. He was headed out to the ranch. It was small now that gas rights had been sold, but in Steward's mind it was home--where his American flag flew on holidays; where his honorable discharge papers were framed; where Ben and Good could be counted on to bang their tails maniacally when he appeared. But the little house they kept on St. Paul Street--a foreclosure the twins never resold--was becoming more and more home to Dovey. It was closer to her sister, to Mount Calvary, the Club. It was also where her Friend chose to pay his calls.

"Drop me right here, Steward. I'll walk."

"Girl, you a torment," he said, but he patted her thigh before she got out.

Dovey walked slowly down Central Avenue. In the distance she



could see lanterns from the Juneteenth picnic hanging near the Oven.

On her left <sup>was</sup> the bank, lower than any of the churches but seeming nevertheless to hog the street. Neither brother had wanted a second floor like the Haven bank had, where the Lodge kept its quarters.

They didn't want traffic into their building for any reason other than bank business. The Haven bank their father owned collapsed for a whole lot of reasons and one of them, Steward maintained, was having Lodge meetings on the premises. "Ravels the concentration," he'd said. On her right, next to Patricia Best's house, was the school where Dovey had taught while the ranch house was being completed. Pat ran the school by herself now, with Reverend Misner and tk filling in for tk and tk. The flowers and vegetables surrounding the school were a luxuriant extension of the garden in front of Pat's own house.

Dovey turned into St. Paul Street. The moon's light glittered white fences gone slant in an effort to hold back foxglove, iris, sunflowers, cosmos, daylilies while alba and silver king pressed through the spaces between the slats below. The night sky, like a handsome lid, held the perfume down, saving it, intensifying it, refusing it the slightest breeze on which to escape.

Touching the tk lining the path, Dovey climbed the steps. There

on the porch she hesitated and thought of turning back to call on Olive who had not attended the meeting. She changed her mind and opened the door. Or tried to. It was locked--again. Something Steward had begun and made her furious. Locking the house as though it were a bank too. Dovey was sure theirs was the only locked door in Ruby. What was he afraid of? She patted the dish under a pot of hosta and picked up the skeleton key.

If the boys standing across from the bus stop 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, slick 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.

Tuesday 6th September, 1994

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,