



Seneca

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-
Seneca

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:55:08 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/fx719s04g>

Revised by [unclear] 12/19/94
Begin "Seeds" here.

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 ~~altogether~~ to a single demand for hot pepper.

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, both men were 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. Eventually 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~~ ^{crayon} 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 cooking, then ^{suggests} ~~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 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 ones 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. ^{He} Had even written a mean letter to the ~~brave~~ women who organized the students. 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. In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets ~~in 1962~~ ² but shrunk their land to a toy ranch and he lost the trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his tastebuds disappeared over time. Small losses that ~~began~~ ^{Culminated} with the big one: in 1964, at forty, they learned neither ^{even} could have children. ^{Now, almost ten years later} ~~This year~~ he had "cleaned up," as he put it, in a real estate deal in XX and Dovey didn't have to wonder what else he would lose now because he was in an already losing battle with Reverend Misner over the words soldered on the lip of the Oven. An argument fueled in part, Dovey thought, by what nobody talked about: young people in trouble or acting up ^{behind every door.} ~~everywhere.~~ Arnette, home from college,

wouldn't leave her bed. 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, ^{laughing, laughing} ~~running off for a whole week~~. K.D.'s mess with that girl living out at the Convent. Not to speak of the sass, the pout, the outright defiance of ^{some others} ~~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 (and 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. Also because ^{ing} ~~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 invisible words you couldn't even read by tracing letters you couldn't pronounce.

"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 ^{the generosity 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 people in their congregations who had been among the fifteen families to leave Haven and start over.

And the Oven didn't belong to any one denomination. It belonged to

all. And all were asked to show up at Calvary. To discuss it, Reverend MISNER said. ^{Gover} voices seemed strident to Dovey & ^{ident.} The young people spoke seriously in the open meeting Reverend ^{helped them} Misner had called.

They would have been better off if they had spoken softly, acknowledged their up-bringing, *

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

* as they presented their views. But they didn't want to discuss; they wanted to instruct.

When they assembled at 7:30, the atmosphere was pleasant, people simply curious. And it remained so right through Misner's Speech. Maybe they were nervous, but when the young people spoke, starting with Roy, their voices (to #)

* The women looked at their pocketbooks; the men forgot to blink.

"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."

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

"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. Sisters. 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, wirey man--white-haired and impressive. " 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--"

Roy interrupted him. "What is talk if it's not 'back'? You all just don't want us to talk at all. Any talk is 'back-talk' 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 listened and I have heard enough. Nobody, I mean nobody is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to 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 Roy. "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 sticks and 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 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 a row you never hoed."

[quiet, then amens]

"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it." Misner said. "It's because they do know the Oven's 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 Ray.

"Then act like it! I just told you! That Oven already has a history

it don't need you to fix it."

"Wait, now Deek. Think what's been said. Forget naming, naming the Oven. What's at issue is clarifying 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." said Misner. "It says '...the Furrow of His Brow.' There is no 'Beware' there."

were not
"You ~~were~~ not there! ^{And you wasn't here either at the beginning!} 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. 'Scuse me, ladies."

Destry,
~~He~~ 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?"

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

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, his voice thick and shapely with Blue Boy. "If you, any one of you, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off like ^{Just} you ~~was a jackrabbit.~~ ^{I would a ~~six foot snake.~~ hood-eye snake.}"

Dovey Morgan, chilled by her husband's threat, could only look at the floorboards and wonder what shape his loss would take 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.

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 was 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,"

stet he'd said. ^{Dovey's} 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 recently begun that made her furious: bolting 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.

Before that first time, but never again, there was a sign. She had been upstairs tidying the little foreclosed house and paused to look through a bedroom window. Down below the leaf heavy trees were immobile as a painting. July. One hundred one degrees. Dry. Still, opening the windows would freshen the room that had been empty for a year. It took her a moment--a tap here, a yank or two--but she managed finally to raise the window all the way up and lean forward to see what was left of the garden. From her position in the window the trees hid most of the back yard and she stretched a bit to see beyond their spread. Suddenly a mighty hand dug deep into a giant sack and threw fistfuls of petals into the air. Or so it seemed. Butterflies. A trembling highway of persimmon colored wings cut across the tree tops forever--then disappeared.

Later, as she sat in a rocker under those trees, he came by.

She had never seen him before and did not recognize any local family in his features. He was walking quickly, as though late for an appointment, using this yard as a shortcut to some place else. Perhaps he heard the light cry of her rocker. Perhaps he wondered whether his trespass was safe. In any case, when he turned and saw her he smiled raising a palm in greeting.

"Hello," she called.

He changed his direction and came near to where she sat.

"You from around here?"

"Close," he said, but he did not move his lips to say so.

He needed a haircut.

"I saw some butterflies a while back. Up there." Dovey pointed. "Orange-y red, they were. Just as bright. Never saw that color before. Like what we used to call coral when I was a girl. Pumpkin color, but stronger." She wondered, at the time, what on earth she was talking about and would have stuttered to a polite close--something about the heat, probably, the relief evening had brought--except he looked so interested in what she was describing. His overalls were clean and freshly ironed. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled above the elbows. His forearms, smoothly muscled,

made her reconsider the impression she got from his face: that he was underfed.

"You ever see butterflies like that?"

He shook his head but evidently thought the question serious enough to squat down before her.

"Don't let me keep you from where you're going. It was just, well, my Lord, such a sight."

He smiled sympathetically and looked toward the place she had pointed to. Then he stood up, brushing the seat of his overalls, although he had not sat down in the grass, and said, "Is it all right if I pass through here?"

"Of course. Anytime. Nobody lives here now. The folks who built it lost it. Nice, though, isn't it? We're thinking about maybe using it from time to time. My husband...." She was babbling, she knew, but he seemed to be listening earnestly, carefully to every word. At last she stopped--too ashamed of her silliness to go on--and repeated her invitation to use the short cut whenever he wanted.

He thanked her and left the yard, moving quickly between the trees. Dovey watched his figure melt in the shadow lace surrounding the houses beyond.

She never saw the persimmon wings again. He, however, did return. About a month later, then off and on every month or two. Dovey kept forgetting to ask Steward, or anybody else, who he might be. Young people were getting harder to identify and when friends or relatives visited Ruby, they did not always attend services, as they used to do, and get introduced to the Congregation. She could not ask his age but supposed he was at least ten years younger than she and maybe that alone made her keep his visits secret.

Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said.

By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again.

Once she fed him (a bowl of applesauce) and he ate it all.

More and more frequently she found reasons to remain on St. John Street. Not hoping or looking for him, but content to know he had and would come by there--for a chat, a bite, cool water on a parched afternoon. Her only fear was that someone else would mention him, appear in his company, or announce a prior claim to his

friendship. No one did. He seemed hers alone.

So on the evening of the argument with the young people at Mount Calvary, Dovey stuck the key in the lock of the little forclosed house annoyed with Steward for making it necessary and agitated by the nasty turn the meeting took. She hoped to sit with a glass of iced water, read some verses or a few psalms and collect her thoughts on the matter that was angering everybody in case her friend passed by in the morning.

"Beware the Furrow of His Brow"? "Be the Furrow of His Brow"? Her own opinion was that "Furrow of His Brow " alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross. Wasn't that so? She'd ask her friend. And then tell Olive.

Saturday 10th December, 1994

Sunday 18th December, 1994

"Look out, quail. Deek's gunning for you. And when he comes^e back he'll throw a sack full of you on my clean floor and say something like 'This ought to take care of supper.' Proud. Like he's giving me a

present. Like you were already plucked, cleaned and cooked."

The kitchen was flooded with newky installed flourescent light
so Olive could ^{not} see into the darkness outside as she waited for the
kettl^e to boil. She wanted to get her potion ^oprperly steeped before her
husband returned. One of Connie's preparations lay at her fingertips,
^{tiny}a ^{cloth bag,} folded into a waxed paper packet. She thought it was midnight when
Deek eased out of bed and dressed in hunting clothes. But when he
crept downstairs in sock feet, she'd looked at the clock glow: 3:30.
Two hours more of sleep, she thought, but it was six a.m. when she
woke and she had to hurry. Get breakfast, lay out his business
clothes. Before that, however, her potion--very much needed now
^{the air was thinning again} because ~~things seemed to be breaking apart~~. Ever since the woman^a
Connie worked for died. Or maybe earlier, ~~when~~ she had picked up a
supply of potion x months ago and found a stranger in Connie's
kitchen, ^{She must have} ~~although she'd gone away before the woman died.~~ ^{otherwise} Nobody
would have known except for the ^{smoke} fire Connie ^{would not have needed to light} lit in the fields. X saw
the smoke, drove out and got the news. ^{a fire}

Olive had to hurry then, too. Getting food from neighbors. She,
Dovey and ~~or~~ women, cooking up some things herself. Sweetie drove
out there knowing full well there was no one to ea^{t it} but ^ethmselves.

Hurry, hurry then too, because the women^a had to be shipped quickly up north. In ice. Connie seemed strange, broken somehow and Olive added her to her list of people who worried her. K.D., for example. And Arnette. And Sweetie. And now the Oven site was on her mind^d. A few young men had taken to congregating there with out-of-state liquor, people said, and the small children who liked to play there had been told to go home. Or so their mothers said. Then a few girls (who Olive thought needed slapping) found reason to b^e there-- including Arnette and Billie Marie. Which, she supposed, was why K.D., whenever Deek or Steward let him alone, hung out there too.

Folks said these young men needed something to do. But Olive, ^{stet} knowing there was^{How} so much to do, didn't believe that was it. Something was going on. Something besides^e the fist. Jet black with red fingernails painted on the back wall of the Oven. no body claimed responsibility--but more shocking than collective denial was the refusal to remove it. The ^e ^{lounge} ~~ons who lounged~~ there said, no, they hadn't put it there and no, they wouldn't take it off. Although Kate^{Golightly} and Pat Best, with a bucket, Brillo, paint thinner and soapy water, got it off, five days passed during which the ^{own} leaders in a rage forbid anyone but the loungers to erase it. The clenched fingers, red-tipped

and thrust sideways, not up, hurt more ⁺han a blow and lasted longer. It produced a nagging, hateful pain that Kate and Pat's scrubbing could not erase.

Steam hiss roused her and Olive poured hot water into a cup over the little muslin bag ~~of~~ ^{of} ~~potion~~. She placed a saucer over the cup and let the medicine steep.

~~maybe~~ ^{maybe} they ought to go back to the way they did thing^s twenty-odd years ago. When everubody was too busy building, stocking, harvesting to quarrel or think up devilment. They way it was before Mount Calvary was completed. When baptisms were held in sweet water. Beautiful baptisms. Baptisms to break the heart, full of major chords and tears and the thrill of being safe at last. When the pastor held the wom^en in his arms, lowering them one by one into ^{newly} ~~now~~ hallowed water. Never letting go. Breathless the others watched. Breathless the women rose. Each in her turn. Their wet, white robes heavy and billowing in the sunlit water. Hair, face streaming they looked to heaven before bowing their heads for the command, 'Go,now.' and the reassurance, "Daughter, thou art saved." The softest note when it hit ^{sweet} the water doubled, trebled itself; then other notes from other throats came and traveled along with the

first. Tree birds hushed and tried to learn. Slowly, then, hand in hand, heads on supporting shoulders, the blessed waded to the banks and made their way to the Oven. To dry, embrace and congratulate one another.

Now the Baptist church had an inside pool and the others had ^{Special} ornate vessels for dribbling a little water on a ^{an upright} bowed head.

When Roy and the other two, Destry and the girl Caline, asked for a meeting, it was quickly ^{agreed} upon, ^{although} no one had called town ^{meeting} in years. Everybody, including Olive and Dovey, thought the young people would first apologize ^{for their behavior} and then pledge to cleanup and maintain the site. Instead they came with a plan--of their own. A plan that completed what the fist had begun. Roy took the floor and without notes, gave a speech perfect in every way but ^{intelligibility,} ~~comprehension~~. Nobody knew what he was talking about and the parts that could be understood were plumb foolish. He wanted to give the oven a name, to have meetings there to talk about how pretty they were while giving themselves ugly names--like black. Like not-American. Like African. All ^{olive} knew about Africans ^{was} the seventy-five cents she gave to the missionary society collection. She

had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none. But Roy talked about them like they were neighbors, or worse, family. And he talked about white people as though he had just discovered them and seemed to think ^{what he'd learned} ~~it~~ was news.

Yet there was something more and else in his speech. Not so much what could be agreed ^{on} ~~on~~ disagreed with, but a kind of accusation. Against whites, yes, but also against them--the townspeople listening, their own parents, grandparents, the Ruby grownfolk. As though there was a new and more manly way to deal with whites. Not M.L.'s way, but some African type thing full of new words, new color combinations and new haircuts. Suggesting that out-smarting whites was craven. That they had to be told, rejected, confronted. Because the old way was slow, limited to ^{just} ~~a few~~, and weak. This last swole Deek's neck and had him blowing out the hearts of quail on a weekday to keep his own from exploding.

He would b^e pulling in with a bag of them any minute now, and Olive would have to serve up a platter of ^{their tender, browned} ~~the brown, tender~~ halves. ^{so}, she contemplated rice or sweet potatoes as the contents of her cup steeped. By the time she had swallowed the last drop, the kitchen door opened.

"What's that?"

She liked the smell of him. Windy-wet and grassey. "Nothing."

Deek tossed his sack on the floor. "Give me some of it."

"No. How many?"

"Twelve. Gave six to K." Deek sat down and before taking off his jacket unlaced his boots. "Enough to take care of two suppers."

"K.D. go with you?"

"No. Why?" He grunted with the effort of de-booting.

Olive took them away and put them on the back porch. "He's hard to find these days. Up to something, I bet."

"You put coffee on? Like what?"

Olive sniffed the dark air, testing its weight, before closing the porch door.

"Can't tell, exactly. But he has too many reasons for wearing thin shoes."

"Chasing tail, I expect. Some gal dragged herself in town and was staying out to that Convent.

Olive turned to him. ^{Coffee tin aloft.} "Why you say 'dragged'? Why you have to say 'dragged' like that? You see her?"

"No, but others did."

"And?"

Deek yawned. "And nothing. Coffee, baby. Coffee, coffee."

"So don't say 'dragged.' "

"Okay okay. She didn't drag in, Deek laughed dropping his outer clothes on the floor. "She floated in."

"What's wrong with the closet, Deek?" Olive ^{looked at the} ~~stooped to~~ gather the waterproof pants, the black and red jacket, the flannel shirt.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Heard her shoes had six inch heels."

"You lying."

"And flying."

"Well. If she's at the Convent, she must be all right."

Deek massaged his toes. "You just partial to those women out there. How many of them now? Four?"

"Three. The Mother just died, remember?"

"Right. Yeah. Roger got to use his big new van."

"Ambulance," said Olive, ^{gathering up his clothes.}

"Brought three payments in. Hope he can keep it up. Not enough hospital mortuary business around here justify that over-priced ^{buggy} ~~thing~~ he got."

The coffee smell was starting and Deek rubbed his palms.

"Is he hurting?" Olive asked.

"Not yet. But since his profit depends on the sick and the dead, I'd just soon he went bankrupt."

"Deek!"

"Fleet's the one in trouble." He stood at the sink and lathered his hands.

"You keep saying that. How come?"

"Mail order."

"What?" Olive poured coffee into the big blue cup her husband preferred.

"You all go to Denby, don't you? When you want a toaster or a XX. And if you don't, you order out of a catalogue and go all the way out there to pick it up. Where's that put him?"

"He never has much on hand. And what he has ^been there too long. That loune chair changed colors three times sitting in the window so long."

"That's why," said Deek. "If he can't move inventory, he can't buy new."

"He used to do all right."

Deek tipped a little coffee into the saucer. "Ten years ago. Five." The dark pool rippled under his breath. "Boys coming out of

Deetnam, getting married, setting up. Farms doing ok so everybody doin ok." He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure. "Now, well...."

"I don't understand, Deek."

"I do," he smiled. "You don't need to."

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends money problems to help them out. But Olive didn't try to explain; she just looked closely at his face. Smooth, still handsome after twenty-six years and beaming, now, with satisfaction. Shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be. Coffee the right color; the right temperature. And later today quail without their hearts would melt in his mouth.

Monday 19th December, 1994