



## Seneca

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Seneca [1974]

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 first narrowed his taste 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 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 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 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 but shrunk their land to a toy ranch and he lost the tk trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his tastebuds disappeared over time. Small losses that culminated with the big one:

in 1964, at forty, they learned neither could ever have children.

Now, almost ten years later, 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 attached to 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. Arnette, home from college, wouldn't leave her bed. Harper's boy, called Menus, drunk every weekend since he got back from Vietnam. Roger's granddaughter, Billie-Marie, disappeared into thin air. Jeff's wife, Sweetie, laughing, laughing at jokes no one made. 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 of the others--the ones who wanted to name the Oven "such-and-such-place", and who had decided that the original words on it were 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 the young people, snickering 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 his mother-in-law's famous generosity, jumped out of the pew and had to be held back.

The Methodists, early on, had smiled at the dissension among the Baptists. 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 were among or related to 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. When they assembled at 7:30 the atmosphere was pleasant, people simply curious. And it remained so

right through Misner's opening remarks. Maybe they were nervous, but when the young people spoke, starting with Roy, their voices were so strident the women, embarrassed, looked down at their pocket books; shocked, the men forgot to blink.

It would have been better for everyone if the young people had spoken softly, acknowledged their up-bringing as they presented their views. But they didn't want to discuss; they wanted to instruct.

"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...."

"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. "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 actually interrupted him, the Reverend! "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."**



Everybody was so stunned by the boy's brazenness, they hardly heard what he said.

Pulliam, dismissing the possibility that Roy's parents were there, 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."

The gasps were more felt than heard.

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 believe I have heard as much as I need to. Now, you all listen to me. Close. 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." 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 that oven 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 Roy.

"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."**

**"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, looking strained and close to tears, 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! Hear that, Reverend! Blasphemers need 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, 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 just like you was a hood-eye snake."

Dovey Morgan, chilled by her husband's threat, could only look at the floorboards and wonder what visible 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. Matthew Street--a foreclosure the twins never resold--was becoming more and more home to Dovey. It was close 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. Four months now and no one had taken them down to store for next year. Now they provided light--just a little, just enough--for other

kinds of freedom celebrations going on in its shadows. 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," he'd said. Three streets beyond, 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 on one side of the school were an extension of the garden in front of Pat's own house.

Dovey turned left into St. Matthew 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 at the bottom of the slats. The night sky, like a handsome lid, held the perfume down, saving it, intensifying it, refusing it the slightest breeze on which to escape.



The garden battles--won, lost, still at bay--were mostly over. They had raged for ten years having begun suddenly in 1963 when there was time. The women who were in their twenties when Ruby was founded in 1950, watched for thirteen years an increase in bounty that had never entered their dreams. Things pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed. And there was time: fifteen minutes when no firewood needed tending in a kitchen stove; one whole hour when no sheets or overalls needed slapping or scrubbing on a washboard; ten minutes gained because no rug needed to be beaten; no curtains pinned on a stretcher; two hours because food lasted and therefore could be picked or purchased in greater quantity. Their husbands and sons, tickled to death and no less proud than the women, translated a five time mark-up, a price per pound or bale or live weight into Kelvinators as well as John Deere; into Philco as well as Body by Fisher. The white porcelain layered over steel; belts, valves and Bakelite parts gave them deep satisfaction. The humming, throbbing and softly purring gave the women time.

Front yards were given over to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it. The habit, the interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten spread, and so did the

ground surrendered to it. Exchanging, sharing a cutting here, a root there, a bulb or two became so frenetic a land grab, a few husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the short rows of collards, beets. The women kept on with their vegetable garden, but little by little its produce became like the flowers--driven by desire, not necessity. Iris, phlox, rose and foxglove took up more and more space, quiet boasting--and time.

New butterflies journeyed miles to brood in Ruby. Their chrysalises hung in secret under acacias and from there they joined blues and sulphurs that had been feeding for decades in buckwheat and clover. The redbands drinking from sumac competed with the newly arrived creams and whites that loved jewelflowers and nasturtiums. Giant orange wings covered in black lace hovered in pansies and violets. Like the years of garden rivalry the butterflies were gone now, this cool October evening, but the consequence remained--fat, overwrought yards; clumps and chains of eggs. Hiding. Until spring.

Touching the pickets lining the path, Dovey climbed the steps. There on the porch she hesitated and thought of turning back to call on Olive who had left the meeting early. Olive worried her; seemed to



have periods of frailty not related to the death of her sons three years ago. Dovey paused then 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. Dry. One hundred one degrees. 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. Then 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 green

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. At first she thought it was Menus, Harper's son, who drank. But this man was walking straight and 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.

"Afternoon," 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 would



bring--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 sit on his heels 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 veiling 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 twenty years younger than she and perhaps 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. Matthew 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 foreclosed house annoyed with Steward for making it necessary and agitated by the nasty turn the meeting took. She hoped to sit with a cup of hot tea, 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.

Now, at last, the back yard was lovely enough to receive him. The first visit it had been a mess, untended, trashy--home to garden snakes, straying chickens--with only the coral colored wings to recommend it. There was no one to help her fix it up. K.D. balked and had several excuses. And it was hard getting young people interested. Billie-Marie used to be her helper which was surprising since boys dominated her brain otherwise. But something was wrong there, too. No one had seen her for some time and the girl's mother, Pat Best, foreclosed all questions. Still angry, thought Dovey, at the

town's treatment of her father. Although Billie-Marie was not at the meeting, her attitude was. Even as a little girl she pushed out her lips at everything-- but gardening. Dovey missed her and wondered what Billie-Marie thought of changing the Oven's message.

"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.

Early the next day, before morning light, Olive stood in the kitchen of the biggest house in Ruby whispering to the darkness outside the window.

"Look out, quail. Deek's gunning for you. And when he comes 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 newly installed fluorescent light so Olive could not see into the darkness outside as she waited for the



kettle to boil. She wanted to get her tonic properly steeped before her husband returned. One of Connie's preparations lay at her fingertips, a tiny 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 tonic--very much needed now because the air was thinning again. It had started thinning out, as if from too much wear, not when Bryan was killed but two weeks later--even before Bryan's body had been shipped--when they were informed that Easter was dead too. Babies. One 19 the other 21. Both had been home on furlough that Thanksgiving, 1968. The last time she had seen them whole. Connie had sold her already shelled pecans and Olive did two pies. A girl with a broke down car was out there and, although Olive drove her to buy the gasoline she needed to go where she was headed, she'd stayed on. Still, she must have gone off before the Mother died otherwise Connie would not have needed to light a fire in the fields. Nobody would have known except for the plume of black smoke. Anna Flood

saw it, drove out and got the news.

Olive had to hurry then, too. Speak to Roger, go to the bank to telephone strangers up north, collect food from neighbor women and cook some things herself. She, Dovey and Anna carried it out there knowing full well there was no one to eat it but themselves. Hurry, hurry then too, because the body 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 life. K.D., for example. And Arnette. And Sweetie. And now the Oven site was on her mind. 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 be there. The way Arnette and Billie Marie used to.

Folks said these young men needed something to do. But Olive, knowing there was so much to do, didn't believe that was it. Something was going on. Something besides 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 loungers said, no, they hadn't put it there



and no, they wouldn't take it off. Although Kate Golightly and Pat Best, with Brillo, paint thinner and a bucket of hot soapy water, got it off, five days passed during which the town leaders in a hot rage forbid anyone but the loungers to erase it. The clenched fingers, red-tipped and thrust sideways, not up, hurt more than a blow and lasted longer. It produced a nagging, hateful pain that Kate's and Pat's scrubbing could not erase.

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

Maybe they ought to go back to the way they did things when her babies were new. When everybody was too busy building, stocking, harvesting to quarrel or think up devilment. The 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 weeping and the thrill of being safe at last. When the pastor held the women in his arms, lowering them one by one into newly hallowed water. Never letting go. Breathless the others watched. Breathless the women rose. Each in her turn. Their wet, white robes billowing in sunlit water. Hair, face streaming they

looked to heaven before bowing their heads for the command, 'Go, now.' Then the reassurance, "Daughter, thou art saved." The softest note, when it hit sweet 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, congratulate one another.

Now Calvary had an inside pool and Zion and Redeemer had special vessels for dribbling a little water on an upright head.

Minus the baptisms the place had no real value. What was needed back in Haven's early days had never been needed in Ruby.

*Cook Stoves already sat IN*

*✓* The trucks they came in, ~~already had stoves~~. The meat they ate clucked in the yard, or fell on its <sup>cu</sup>knees under a hammer, or squealed through a slice in its throat. Unlike Haven's beginning, in Ruby hunting game was a game. The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed <sup>g</sup>it and re-assembled it. But privately they resented the space given over to it--rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together--hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner. If the plaque was so important--and,



judging from the part of the meeting she had witnessed, she supposed it was--why not just take it , leave the bricks where they had stood for fifty years.

Oh, how the men loved it, how proud it had made them, how devoted. A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine (cautioned against in tk) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self. Nobody better to make the point than the wayward young who turned it into a different kind of oven. The kind where babies <sup>baked</sup> ~~cooked~~.

When Roy and the other two, Destry and the girl Caline, asked for a meeting, it was quickly agreed upon. No one had called a town meeting in years. Everybody, including Olive and Dovey, thought the young people would first apologize for their behavior and then pledge to clean up 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. 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 Africa 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 was news.

Yet there was something more and else in his speech. Not so much what could be agreed or 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, on a weekday, had him blowing out the hearts of quail to keep his own from exploding.

He would be pulling in with a bag of them any minute now, and Olive would have to serve up a platter of their tender, browned halves. So, she contemplated rice or sweet potatoes as the contents



of her cup steeped. When she 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, then."

"No. How many?"

"Twelve. Gave six to Sargeant." 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 picked up the boots 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 door. "Can't tell, exactly. But he has too many reasons for wearing thin shoes."

"Chasing tail, I expect. 'Member that gal dragged herself in town some time back and was staying out to that Convent?"

Olive turned to him, coffee tin at her breast as she eased off the

lid. "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 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 still 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 died, remember?"

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

"Ambulance," said Olive, gathering up his clothes.



"Brought three payments in the next day. Hope he can keep up the rest. Not enough hospital mortuary business around here justify that over-priced buggy 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!"

"Couldn't do a damn thing for my boys. Buried in a bag like kittens."

"They had lovely coffins! Lovely!"

"Yeah, but inside...."

"Quit, Deek. Why don't you just quit."

"I 'spect he'll make out. If I go before he does. In which case, well, you know what to do. I don't feature riding in that van no how, but I want a top of the line box so he'll make out just fine. 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 electric iron. 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?"

"Fleet never has much on hand. And what he has been there too long. That lounge chair changed colors three times sitting in the window all that time."

"That's why," said Deek. "If he can't move old 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 Vietnam, getting married, setting up. Farms doing ok, everybody doing ok." He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure. "Now, well...."

"I don't understand, Deek."

"I do." He smiled up at her. "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.

Every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan got into a brilliant black sedan and drove three fourths of a mile. He started at his own house on St. John Street, turned right at the corner onto Central, passed Luke, Mark and Matthew, then parked neatly in front of the bank. The silliness of driving to where he could walk in less time than it took to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment: how he washed and waxed it himself--never letting K.D. or any enterprising youngster touch it; how he chewed but did not light cigars in it; how he never leaned on it, but if you had a conversation with him standing near it, he combed the hood with his fingernails scraping flecks he alone could see, and buffing invisible stains with his pocket handkerchief. He laughed

along with friends at his vanity because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe. The magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory.

<sup>TK</sup>  
The morning after the meeting at Calvary, pleased with his bird quota and fired, not tired, from no sleep, he decided to check out the Oven before opening up the bank. So he turned left on Central and drove past the school on the right, Ace's Grocery, Fleetwood Housewares and several small houses on the left. When he arrived at the site he circled it. Except for a few soda cans and some paper that had escaped the trash barrels, the place was blank. No fists. No loungers. He should speak to Anna Flood who owned Ace's now--get her to clean up the pop cans and mess that came from purchases made at her store. That's what Ace, her father, used to do. Swept that place like it was his own kitchen, inside, out and if you'd let him he'd sweep all across the road. Deek pulled back onto Central. He could hear schoolchildren group-reciting a poem he'd learned by rote too, except he had had to hear Dunbar's lines only once to memorize them completely and forever. As he drove north on Central, it and the side streets seemed to him as satisfactory as ever. Quiet houses



full of industry; and in them were proud women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting.

He was braking in front of the bank when he noticed a solitary figure ahead. He recognized her right away, but watched her carefully because first of all she had no coat, and second, because he had not seen her out of her house in six years.

Central Avenue, three wide graded miles of tarmac, began at the Oven and ended at Sargeant's Feed and Seed. The four side streets east of Central were named after the Gospels. When a fifth street was needed it was named St. Peter. Later on, as Ruby grew, streets were laid on the west side of Central, and although these newer streets were continuations of those on the east--situated right across from them--they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the east become Cross John on the west. St. Luke became Cross Luke. The sanity of this pleased most everybody, Deek especially, and there was always room for additional houses (financed, if need be, by the Morgan brothers bank) in the plots and acres behind and beyond those already built. The woman Deek was watching seemed to be leaving Cross Peter Street and heading toward

Sargeant's Feed and Seed. But she did not stop there. Instead she was moving resolutely north, where Deek knew there was nothing for seventeen miles. What could the sweetest girl, named for her nature, be doing coatless on a chilly October morning that far from the home she had not stepped out of since 1967?

A movement in his rear view mirror took his attention and he recognized the small red truck coming in from south country. Its driver would be Aaron Sand, late, as Deek knew he would be, since he was bringing in the final payment on his loan. After considering letting Sand wait and driving on to catch up with Sweetie, Deek cut off his motor. July, his clerk and secretary, was not due until ten. There should be no occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time.

Sweetie said, "Be back directly, Miss Mable." "Won't be gone but a minute, Miss Mable."

Meant to say it. Maybe she did say it. Anyway it was in her head to say. But she had to hurry quick before one of them gurgled.

On the porch, the sidewalk, Sweetie's stride was purposeful--as though there were somewhere important she had to be. Something



important she had to do and it would take just a few minutes and she would be right back. In time to massage a little bottom to keep the sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing but mostly to watch. To never take her eyes off unless her mother-in-law was there, and to watch then as well because Miss Mable's eyes weren't as sharp as they once had been. Others offered help repeatedly at first, irregularly now, but she always declined. Sweetie was the best at watching. Her mother-in-law second best. Arnette used to be good, but not anymore. Jeff and her father-in-law couldn't look, let alone watch.

The problem had never been watching while she was awake. It was watching while asleep. For six years she slept on the pallet near the cribs, or in bed with Jeff, her breath threaded, her ear tunnel ready, every muscle braced to spring. She knew she slept because she dreamed a little, although she couldn't remember what about. But it was getting harder and harder to watch and sleep at the same time.

When dawn broke and Mable came into the dim room with a cup of coffee, Sweetie stood to take it. She knew Mable had already run her bath water and folded a towel and fresh nightgown over the chair

in the bedroom. And she knew she would offer to do her hair--braid it, wash it, roll it or just scratch her scalp. The coffee would be wonderful, dark and loaded with sugar. But she also knew that if she drank it this one time and went to bed in morning sun this one time she would never wake up and who would watch her babies then?

So she took the coffee and said, or meant to, "Be back in a minute, Miss Mable."

Downstairs, she put the cup and saucer on the dining table then, unwashed, coatless and with uncombed hair, she opened the front door and left. Quickly.

She was not hoping to walk until she dropped or fainted or froze and then slipped into dark nothingness for a while. The small thing she wanted was not to have that dawn coffee, the already drawn bath, the folded nightgown and then the watchful sleep in that order, forever, every day and in particular this here particular day. The only way to change the order, she thought, was not to do something differently, but to do a different thing. Only one possibility arose--to leave her house and step into a street she had not entered in six years.

Sweetie traveled the length of Central Avenue--past the Gospel-



named streets, past Zion, the Drugstore, the bank, Mount Calvary and Sargeant's Feed and Seed--looking straight ahead. North of Ruby, where the quality of the road changed, her legs were doing brilliantly. So was her skin for she didn't feel the cold. The fresh outside air, to which she was unaccustomed, hurt her nostrils and she set her face to bear it. She did not know she was smiling, nor did the girl staring at her from the bed of a brand new '73 pick-up. The girl thought Sweetie was crying and a black woman weeping on a country road broke her heart all over again.

She peered at Sweetie from her hiding place among empty crates. The Ford truck, heading south, slowed as it passed Sweetie, then stopped. In the cab the driver and his wife exchanged looks. Then the driver leaned out the window, twisting his head to holler at Sweetie's back, "You need some help?"

Sweetie did not turn her head or acknowledge the offer. The couple looked at each other and sucked teeth as the husband shifted into drive. Fortunately the road inclined at that point, otherwise the broken-hearted hitch-hiker would have hurt herself when she jumped from the back of the truck. The couple could see in the rear view mirror a passenger they didn't know they had running to join the

pitiful, ill-raised creature who had not even said No, thank you.

When the girl whose heart was breaking caught up with the woman, she knew enough not to touch, speak or insert herself into the determined bubble the crying woman had become. She walked ten or so paces behind, studying the shapely dark ankles above worn white loafers. The wrinkled shirtwaist dress, pale blue with sagging pockets. The sleeper's hair--pressed flat on one side, dishevelled on the other. And every now and then a sob that sounded like a giggle.

They moved this way for more than a mile. The walker going somewhere; the hitcher going anywhere. The wraith and her shadow.

The morning was cold, cloudy. Wind streamed the tall grasses on either side of the road.

Twenty years ago, when the broken-hearted hitcher was four years old, she had spent four nights and five days knocking on every door in the building.

"Is my sister in here?"

Some said no; some said who?; some said what's your name, little one? Most didn't open the door at all. That was 1953 when a little girl could play all over brand new government housing in safety.

The first two days, after making her rounds on floors ever



higher, higher and making sure she had not missed a single door, she waited. Jean, her sister, would be coming back anytime now because dinner food was on the table: meat loaf, string beans, catsup, white bread, and a full pitcher of kool-aid was in the refrigerator. She occupied herself with two coloring books, a deck of cards and a nursing baby doll. She drank milk, ate potato chips, saltines with apple jelly, and little by little, the whole meat loaf. By the time the hated string beans were all that was left of the dinner, they were too shrivelled and mushy to bear.

The third day, she began to understand why Jean was gone and how to get her back. She cleaned her teeth and washed her ears carefully. She also flushed the toilet right away--as soon as she used it--and folded her socks inside her shoes. She spent a long time wiping up the kool aid and picking up the pieces of glass from the pitcher that crashed when she tried to lift it from the refrigerator. She remembered the Lorna Doones that were in the bread box, but dared not climb up on a chair to open it. Those were her prayers: if she did everything right without being told either Jean would walk in or, when she knocked on one of the apartment doors--there'd she be! Smiling and holding out her arms.

Meantime, the nights were terrible.

On the fourth day, having brushed her eighteen milk teeth until the toothbrush was pink with blood, she stared out of the window through warm rain-sprinkle at morning people going to work, children to school. Then for a long time no one. Then an old woman with a man's jacket roofed above her head against the fine rain. Then a man tossing seed on bare places in the grass. Then a tall woman walked past the window. No coat and nothing on her head, she touched her eyes with the back of her arm, the inside of her wrist. She was crying.

Later, the sixth day, when the case worker came, she thought about the crying woman who looked nothing at all like Jean--was not even the same color. But before that, on the fifth day, she found--or rather saw--something that had been right there for her all along. Demoralized by unanswered prayers, bleeding gums and hunger she gave up goodness, climbed up on a chair and opened the bread box. Leaning against a box of Lorna Doones was an envelope with a word she recognized instantly: her own name printed in lipstick. She opened it, even before she tore into the cookie box, and pulled out a single sheet of paper with more lipstick words. She could not



understand any except her own name again at the top, "Jean" at the bottom and "I love you" somewhere in between.

Soaking in happiness, she folded the letter back in the envelope, put it in her shoe and carried it for the rest of her life. Hiding it, fighting for the right to keep it, rescuing it from waste baskets. She was six years old, an ardent first-grade student, before she could read the whole page. Over time, it became simply a sheet of paper smeared Chen Yu red, not one decipherable word left. But it was the letter, safe in her shoe, that made leaving with the case worker for the first of two foster homes possible. She thought about the crying woman briefly then, more later, until the sight of her became an occasional heart-breaking dream.

The wind that had been stirring the grass was carrying snow now--scarce, sandy and biting like glass. The hitcher stopped to pull a sarape from her duffel, then ran to catch up and wrap it around the walker's shoulders.

Sweetie flailed her hands until she understood that she was being warmed not prevented. Not once, while the wool cloth was being wrapped around her shoulders, did she stop walking. She kept on moving, chuckling--or was it sobbing?

The hitcher remembered passing a large house about a half hour ago as she hid among the crates. What took thirty minutes in a truck might take pedestrians several hours, but she thought they ought to be able to reach the place before dark. The question was the cold; another was how to stop the crying woman and get her to rest and, once they reached shelter, to get her inside it. Eyes like those were not uncommon. In hospitals they belonged to patients who paced day and night; on the road, unconfined, people with eyes like that would walk forever. The hitcher decided to spend the time talking and started out by introducing herself.

Sweetie heard what she said and, for the first time since she'd left her house, stumbled as she turned her smiling--or crying--face toward the uninvited companion. Sin, she thought. I am walking next to sin and wrapped in its cloak. "Have mercy," she murmured and gave a little laugh--or whimper.