



## "would melt in his mouth..."

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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. The most powerful of which was one of his earliest.

Forty-two years ago he had fought for hand room in the rear

window of Big Daddy Morgan's Model T; space in which to wave  
goodbye to his mother and baby sister, Ruby. The rest of the family,  
Daddy, Uncle Pryor, his older brother Elder, and Steward his twin  
were packed tight against two peck baskets of food. The journey  
they were about to begin would take days, maybe two weeks. The  
Second Grand Tour, Daddy said. The Last Grand Tour, laughed Uncle  
Pryor. The first one had been in 1910 before the twins or Ruby had been  
born, while Haven was still struggling to come alive. Big Daddy drove  
his brother Pryor and his firstborn son, Elder, all over the state and  
beyond to examine, review and judge other Colored Towns. They  
planned to visit two outside Oklahoma and five within: Boley,  
Langston City, Rentiesville, Taft, Clearview, Mound Bayou, Nicodemus.  
In the end, they made it to only four. Big Daddy, Uncle Pryor and Elder  
spoke endlessly of that trip, how they matched wits with and debated  
preachers, pharmacists, drygoods store owners, doctors, newspaper  
publishers, school teachers, bankers. They discussed malaria, taxes,  
the threat of white immigrants, the problems with Creek freedmen,  
the trustworthiness of boosters, the practicality of high book  
learning, the need for technical training, liquor laws, lodges and the



violence of whites, random and organized, that swirled around them. They stood at the edge of corn fields, walked rows of cotton. They visited print shops, elocution classes, church services, sawmills; they observed irrigation methods and storage systems. Mostly they looked at land, houses, roads.

Eleven years later Tulsa was bombed, and several of the towns Big Daddy, Pryor and Elder had visited were gone. But, against all odds, in 1932, Haven was thriving. The crash had not touched it: personal savings were substantial, Big Daddy Morgan's bank had taken no risks (partly because white bankers locked him out, partly because the subscription shares had been well-protected), and families shared everything--made sure no one was short. Cotton crop ruined? The sorghum growers split their profit with the cotton growers. A barn burned? The pine sappers made sure lumber "accidentally" rolled off wagons at certain places to be picked up later that night. Pigs rooted up a neighbor's patch? The neighbor was offered replacements by everybody and was assured a ham at slaughter. The man whose hand was healing from a chopping block mistake would not get to the second clean bandage before the <sup>cord</sup> wood was finished and stacked. Having been refused by the world in 1890

on their journey from Louisiana to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing; were vigilant to any need or shortage.


The Morgans did not admit to taking pleasure in the collapse of some of those Colored towns--they carried the rejection of 1890 like a bullet in the brain. They simply remarked on the mystery of God's justice and decided to take the young twins and go on a second tour to see for themselves.

What they saw was sometimes nothing, sometimes sad, and Deek remembered everything. Towns that looked like slave quarters picked up and moved. Towns intoxicated with wealth. Other towns affecting sleep--squirrelling away money, certificates, deeds in unpainted houses on unpaved streets.

In one of the prosperous ones he and Steward watched nineteen Negro ladies arrange themselves on the steps of the town hall. They wore summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen. Most of the dresses were white, but two were pale blue and one a salmon color. They wore small, pale hats of beige, dusty rose, powdery blue; hats that called attention to the wide sparkley eyes of the wearer. Their waists were not much bigger than their necks. Laughing and teasing, they preened for a



photographer lifting his head from beneath a black cloth only to hide under it again. Following a successful pose, the ladies broke apart in small groups, bending their tiny waists with laughter, walking arm in arm. One adjusted another's brooch; one exchanged her pocketbook with another. Slender feet turned and tipped in thin leather shoes. Their skin, creamy and luminous in the afternoon sun, took away his breath. A few of the younger ones crossed the street and walked past the rail fence, close so close, to where he and Steward sat. They were on their way to a restaurant just beyond. Deek heard musical voices, low, full of delight and secret information, and in their tow a gust of verbena. The twins did not even look at each other. Without a word they agreed to fall off the railing. While they wrestled on the ground, ruining their pants and shirts, the Negro ladies turned around to see. Deek and Steward got the smiles they wanted before Big Daddy interrupted his conversation and stepped off the porch to pick each son up by his pants waist, haul them both onto the porch and crack butt with his walking stick. Even now the verbena scent was clear; even now the summer dresses, the creamy, sun-lit skin excited him. Even now he knew that if he and Steward had not thrown themselves off the railing they

would have burst into tears. So, among the vivid details of that journey--the sorrow, the stubbornness, the cunning, the wealth--Deek's image of the nineteen summertime ladies was unlike the stand photographer's. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal. 

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 instead of right on Central and drove past the school on the west side, Ace's Grocery, Fleetwood Housewares and several small houses on the east. 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 store 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, noticed Misner's beat-up Ford parked at Anna's. Beyond, to his left 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. When he and Steward had enlisted there was a lot to learn--from how to tie an army tie to how to pack a bag. And they had been first to understand everything, remember everything, just as they had in Haven's schoolhouse. But none of it was as good as what they learned at home sitting on the floor in a firelit room listening to war stories; to stories of great migrations--those who made it and those who did not; to the failures and triumphs of intelligent men--their fear, their bravery, their confusion; to tales of love deep and permanent. All there in the one book they owned then. Black leather covers with gold lettering; the pages thinner than young leaves, than petals. The spine frayed into webbing at the top, the corners fingered down to skin. The strong words, strange at first, becoming familiar, gaining weight and hypnotic beauty the more they heard them, made them their own.

As Deek drove north on Central, it and the side streets seemed to him as satisfactory as ever. Quiet white and yellow 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. It was a



view he would be damned if K.D. or the idleness of the young would disturb. It was a far cry from the early days of Haven and his grandfather would scoff at the ease of it--buying property with dollars ready to hand instead of trading four years of labor for it. He would be embarrassed by grandsons who worked twelve hours five days a week instead of the eighteen to twenty hour days Haven people needed just to keep alive, and who could hunt quail for pleasure rather than the desperate need to meet a wife and eight children at table without shame. And his cold, rheumy eyes would narrow at the sight of the Oven. No long the meeting place to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings and goings. The Oven that had witnessed the baptized entering sanctified life was now reduced to watching the idle young. Two of Sargeant's boys, three of Poole's, two Seawrights, two Beauchamps, a couple of DuPres children--Sut's and Pious' girls; even Pat Best's only child. All of whom ought to be somewhere chopping, canning, mending, fetching. The Oven whose every brick had heard live chords praising His name was now subject to radio music, record music, music already dead when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna's store

to the Oven like a snake. But his grandfather would be pleased too. Instead of children and adults convening at night in those early days to scratch letters and figures with pebbles on scraps of shale, learning to read from the two who could, there was a schoolhouse here too. Not as big as the one they'd built in Haven but it was open eight months a year and no begging the state for money to run it. Not one cent.

And just as Big Papa foretold, if they stayed together, worked, prayed and defended together, they would never be like Downs, Lexington, Sapulpa, Gans where colored were run out of town overnight. Nor would they be among the dead and bloody of Tulsa, Norman, Oklahoma City, not to mention victims of spontaneous whippings, murders and depopulation by fire. Except for a crack here, a chink there everything in Ruby was intact. Recently Deek had begun to wonder if moving the Oven had been a mistake. That it needed its original soil as foundation for the respect and wholesome utility that was its due. No. No, Big Papa. No, Daddy. We did right.

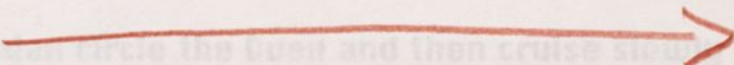
He was braking in front of the bank when he noticed a solitary figure ahead. He recognized her right away, but watched her carefully because first of all she had no coat, and second, because he



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 west--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 Poole, late, as Deek knew he would be, since he was bringing in the final payment on his loan. After considering letting Poole 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. 

Anna Flood said, "See. Just look at him." She was watching Deek's sedan circle the Oven and then cruise slowly past her store. "Why does he have to hover like that?"

Richard Misner looked up from the wood stove. "He's just checking on things," he said, and went back to laying the fire. "Got a right, doesn't he? It's sort of his town, wouldn't you say? His and Steward's?"

"I would not. They may act like they own it, but they don't."

Misner liked a tight fire and the one he was preparing would be just that. "Well, they founded it didn't they?"

"Who you been talking to?" Anna left the window and walked to the backstairs leading to her apartment. There she slid a pan of meat