



"my house..."

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my house. I thought she was going to knock, but she turned around and headed back toward Center. Look to me like she was going on home."

"Didn't. Deek said she was way past Sargeant's--marching out of town like a soldier."

"Didn't he stop her?"

Steward stared at Anna as though he couldn't believe her words. "He was opening up the bank, girl."

Misner frowned. Anna cut off anything he might be about to say with "You all want some coffee? Maybe some pumpkin bread?"

Both men accepted.

"Somebody better speak to Jeff." It was Anna's voice but all three glanced at a wall of shelves beyond which was Fleetwood's Furniture and Appliance.

→ Despite the predictions--from Richard Misner's gaze, Steward Morgan's watchfulness--a tiny piece of the sky flashed a water-color palette: orange-peach, minty-green, seashore blue. The rest of the sky, pewter, served to brighten this odd, ^{picture} storybook sunbreak. It lasted a full hour and thrilled everybody who saw it. Then it faded and a leaden sky solidified over the relentless wind. By noon the

first snow came. Stinging pellets, popping, not melting, before the wind. The second snow, two hours later, didn't pop. It lay down quietly and covered everything there was.

Sweetie had 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 walkway, 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 New Zion, Harper's Drugstore, the bank, Mount Calvary. She detoured into Cross Peter, left it and walked past Sargeant's Feed and Seed. 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.

Fifteen years ago, when the broken-hearted hitcher was five years old, she had spent four nights and five days knocking on every door in her 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 1958 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 wetting 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 passed. 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 the 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 loud red marks 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 would 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.

By the time they saw the Convent, Sweetie was cozy. Although she had felt none of the biting cold sweeping the road, she was comforted by the warm snow covering her hair, filling her shoes. And grateful to be so clearly protected from and unassociated with the sin-shape walking next to her. The sign of Sweetie's state of grace was how badly the warm snow whipped the shape, silenced it, froze it and left it breathing heavily, barely able to hang on, while she, Sweetie, marched unbowed through the cutting wind.

Of her own accord Sweetie slogged up the driveway. But she let the demon do the rest.

The woman who opened the door to the banging said "Oooo!" and yanked them both inside.

They seemed like birds, hawks, to Sweetie. Pecking at her,

flapping. They made her sweat. Had she been stronger, not so tired from the night shift of tending her babies, she would have fought them off. As it was, other than pray, there was nothing she could do. They put her in a bed under so many blankets perspiration ran into her ears. Nothing they offered would she eat or drink. Her lips were shut her teeth clenched. Silently, fervently she prayed for deliverance and don't you know she got it: they left her alone. In the quiet room Sweetie thanked her Lord and drifted into a static-y, troubled sleep. It was the baby cry that woke her--not the shivering. Weak as she was she got up, or tried to. Her head hurt and her mouth was dry. She noticed that she was not in a bed, but on a leather couch in a dark room. Sweetie's teeth were rattling when one of the hawks, with a blood red mouth, came into the room carrying a kerosene lamp. It spoke to her in the sweetest voice, the way a demon would, but Sweetie called on the Saviour and it left. Somewhere in the house the child continued to cry, filling Sweetie with rapture--she had never heard that sound from her own. Never heard that clear yearning call, sustained, rhythmic. It was like an anthem, a lullaby, or the bracing chords of the decalogue. All of her children--the two that died, and the two that had not--were silent. Suddenly, in the midst of joy, she

was angry. Babies cry here among these demons but not in her house?

When two of the hawks came back, one carrying a tray of food, she asked them, "Why is that child crying here?"

They denied it, of course. Lied straight through the weeping that sifted through the room. One of them even tried to distract her.

"I've heard children laughing. Singing sometimes. But never crying."

The other one cackled.

"Let me out of here." Sweetie struggled to make her voice shout. "I have to get home."

"I'm going to take you. The car is warming up now." Same sly demon tones.

"Now," said Sweetie.

"Take some aspirin and eat some of this."

"You let me out of this place now."

"What a bitch," said one.

"It's just fever," said the other. "And keep your mouth shut, can't you?"

It was patience, and blocking out every sound except the

admonitions of her Lord that got her out of there. First into a rusty red car that stalled in the snow at the foot of the driveway, and finally, praise, praise His holy name, into her husband's arms.

He was with Anna Flood. They had been on their way from the minute she'd called on her Saviour. Sweetie literally fell into Jeff's arms.

"What you doing way out here? We couldn't get through all night. ^{Where is your mind?} Drove me crazy. Lord, girl. Sweetheart. What happened?"

"They made me, snatched me," Sweetie cried. ^{oh} "Please take me home. I'm sick, Anna. ^{and} I have to look after the babies."

"Shh. Don't worry about that."

"I have to. I have to."

"It's going to be all right now. Arnette's coming home."

"Turn the heater up. I'm so cold. How come I'm so cold?"

Seneca stared at the ceiling. The cot's mattress was thin and hard. The wool blanket scratched her chin, and her palms hurt from shoveling snow in the driveway. She had slept on floors, on cardboard, on nightmare producing waterbeds and, for weeks at a