



## Chapter 4: Seneca

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

**SENECA**

1973

There was a light scratching on the glass. Again. Dovey turned over on her stomach refusing to look out of the window each time she heard it. He wasn't there. He never came at night. Deliberately she drove her mind on to everyday things. What would she fix for supper tommorow?

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.



*When they came home*  
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--Uedalia onions or Spanish?

On her wedding day, Dovey *had* stood facing the flowered wall paper, her back to the window so her sister, Soane, could see better. Dovey held *up* the hem of her slip *up* while Soane drew the seams. The little brush tickled the backs of her legs, but she stood perfectly still. There were no silk 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?"

"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 Soane had to do a whole seam over.



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 peppers, 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, for example.

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 hateful 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, Fairy's curse came true: 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 Jury's boy, called Menus, drunk every weekend since he got back from Vietnam. Roger's granddaughter, Billie-Delia, 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) about it; to Mable Fleetwood; to Anna Flood; to a couple of women in



the Club. Opinions were varied, confusing, even incoherent because feelings ran so high over the matter. Also because <sup>some</sup> the young people, snickering at Miss Esther's finger memory, <sup>had</sup> 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?" asked the sons.

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

"If she was blind, Sir, 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 Owen 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 Beauchamp's grandsons, Royal and Destry, 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, Sir. 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, Sir, 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, Sir."

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

"None of them do! Don't know jackshit!" shouted Harper Jury.

"Whoa, whoa!" Reverend Misner interrupted. "Brothers. Sisters. We called this meeting in God's own house to try and find...."

"One of His houses," snarled Sargeant.

"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?"

Harper sat down. "I apologize for the language. To Him," he said, pointing upward.

"That might please Him," said Misner. "Might not. Don't limit your <sup>Respect</sup> love to Him, Brother Jury. 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--"

Royal Beauchamp 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....Sir. "

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

Pulliam, dismissing the possibility that Roy's parents--Luther and Cassie Beauchamp--were there, turned slowly to Misner. "Reverend, can't you keep that boy 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. Real 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 <sup>strong</sup> ~~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, Sargeant, how delicate was the separation, how careful we were, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Seawright, you Harper, 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 mewling lamb. 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."

Twenty varieties of "amen" italicized Deek's pronouncement. The point he'd made would have closed off further argument if Misner had not said:

"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It's because they do

know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life."

The mutter unleashed by his obvious shift to the young peoples' position rose to a roar that subsided only to hear how the antagonists responded.

"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," said Richard Misner. "Think what's been said. Forget naming, naming the Oven. What's at issue is clarifying the motto."

"Motto? Motto? We talking command!" Reverend Pulliam pointed an elegant finger at the ceiling. " 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'! That's what it says clear as daylight. That <sup>is not a</sup> ~~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' on it."

"You wasn't there! Esther was! And you wasn't here either at the beginning! Esther was!" Arnold Fleetwood's <sup>right hand</sup> ~~pointing finger~~ ↑



shook. <sup>With warning</sup>

"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 knew all there was to know <sup>A</sup> bout Haven and Ruby, too. She <sup>visited us</sup> ~~named this town~~ <sup>before we had a road, she helped name it</sup> dammit. 'Scuse me, ladies."

Destry, looking strained and close to tears, held up his hand and asked "Excuse me, Sir. 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, Sir; 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 do what He says?" asked Reverend Pulliam. "You have to obey Him."

"Yes, Sir, but 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 Sargeant.



**"We are the power if we just--"**

**"See what I mean? See what I mean? Listen to that! Hear that, Reverend? 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, ignore, 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 at Calvary, 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 the rest."

"You going to catch your death."

"No I won't. Night chill feels good right now."

"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. *St. Soane*  
*Soane taught longer since she lived so close*  
Pat ran the school by herself now, with Reverend Misner and Anna Flood filling in for Negro History classes and after-school typing lessons. 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 chrysanthemums, foxglove, sunflowers, cosmos, daylilies while mint 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, 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; the 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 peonies 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 Soane who had left the meeting early. Soane worried her; seemed to have periods of frailty not related to the death of her sons five years ago. Maybe it was that other business--the one they argued



over to both their shame. 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 vanished.

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

And once <sup>had</sup> owned the house.  
^



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 <sup>people</sup> 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 slice of bread loaded with applebutter) 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 least, at last, the back yard was lovely enough to receive him. At the first visit it had been a mess, untended, trashy--home to cats, 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 produced several excuses. And it was hard getting young people interested. Billie-Delia 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-Delia was not at the meeting, her attitude was. Even as a little girl she pushed out her lips at everything-- everything but gardening. Dovey missed her and wondered what Billie-Delia 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 Soane. Meantime, the scratching sound was gone and on the cusp of sleep she knew canned peas would do just fine.

(over)

[TK] Steward driving home, house, dogs, changing clothes going to stable.]

His preference was to mount around 4:00 and ride Night till sunrise. Rediscovering the pleasure he took in knowing that on one's own land you could never be lost. Not the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklohoma. On foot



Just thoughts:

Contempt for this  
Coming generations: how they  
always wanted a break. \*

sort of  
like this

Funny how some people felt lost  
in this land. Shrunk and shrivelled  
into children. Steward ~~behind~~ <sup>had no doubts</sup>  
~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> la about his abilities anywhere.  
but here especially he was enlarged

Like K.D.  
\* "Cut me some slack" was their slogan.  
May have to sacrifice that generation  
to get to the next one. The grand  
and great grand <sup>children</sup> who could be trained  
hard as his father and grandfather had  
done his generation. etc. TK

that what they  
wanted on the way

they were. And angry. But not afraid of anything except the condition of the children's feet. By and large they were healthy. But the pregnant women needed more and more rest. Drum Blackhorse's wife, Celeste; his grandmother, Miss Mindy; and Beck, his own mother, were all with child. It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had ~~rocked~~ them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones.

Steward remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told, and had no trouble imagining the shame for himself. Dovey, for instance, before each miscarriage, her hand resting on the small of her back, her eyes narrowed looking inward, always inward at the baby inside her. How would he have felt if some high falutin men in collars and good shoes had told her "Get away from here," and he, Steward, couldn't do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with free wind blowing Night's mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him tremble and want to shoot somebody.

Seventy-nine. All their belongings strapped to their backs or riding on their heads. Young ones time-sharing shoes. Stopping only to relieve themselves, sleep and eat trash. Trash and boiled meal,



trash and meal cake, trash and game, trash and dandelion greens. Dreaming of a roof, fish, rice, syrup. Raggedy as sauerkraut they dreamt of clean clothes with buttons, shirts with both sleeves. They walked in a line: Drum and Thomas Blackhorse at the head, Big Papa, lame now, carried sitting up on a plank at the tail. After Fairly they didn't know which way to go and didn't want to meet anybody who might tell them or might have something else in mind. They kept away from wagon trails, tried to stay closer to pine woods and stream beds but heading northwest for no particular reason other than it seemed farthest away from Fairly.

The third night Big Papa woke his son and motioned for him to get up, Leaning heavily on two sticks, he moved a ways off from the camp site and whispered, "Us in need. Follow me, you."

Rector, his son, went back for his hat and followed his father's slow painful steps. He thought, with alarm, <sup>that</sup> the the old man was going to try to get to a town in the middle of the night, or apply to one of the farms where dark sod houses nestled up against a hillock. But Big Papa took him deeper into the piney wood where the odor of resin, lovely at first, soon gave him a headache. The sky brilliant with stars dwarfed the crescent moon, turning it into a shed feather. Big

Papa stopped and with groaning effort knelt down.

"My Father," he said. "Zechariah here." Then, after a few seconds of total silence, he began to hum the sweetest, saddest sounds Rector ever heard. <sup>Rector</sup> He joined Big Papa on his knees and stayed that way all night. He dared not touch the old man or interfere with his humming <sup>M</sup>prayer, but he couldn't keep up and sat back on his haunches to relieve the pain in his knees. After a while he <sup>all the way</sup> sat down holding his hat in his hand, his head bowed, trying to listen, stay awake, understand. Finally, he lay on his back and watched the star trail above the trees. The heart-breaking music swallowed him and he felt himself floating inches above ground. He swore later that he did not fall asleep. That during the whole night he listened and watched. Surrounded by thin pine, he felt <sup>e</sup>rather <sup>A</sup>than saw the sky fading at ground line. It was then he heard the footsteps--loud like a giant's tread. Big Papa, who had not moved a muscle or paused in his song, <sup>was quickly silent</sup> ~~paused~~. Rector sat up and looked around. The footsteps were thundering, but he couldn't tell from which direction. As the hem of skylight widened, he could make out the silhouettes of tree trunks. <sup>They</sup> Both saw him at the same time. A small man, seemlike, too small for the sound of his steps. He was walking away from them.



Dressed in a black suit the jacket held over his shoulder with the forefinger of his right hand. His shirt glistening white between broad suspenders. Without help of stick and nary a groan, Big Papa stood up. Together they watched the man walking away from the palest part of the sky. Once he lingered to turn around and look at them, but they could not see the features of his face. When he began walking again they noticed he had a stachel in his left hand.

"Run," said Big Papa. "Gather the people."

"You can't stay here by yourself," said Rector.

"Run!" the old man hissed.

And Rector did.

When everyone was roused, Rector led them to where he and Big Papa had spent the night. They found him right there standing straighter than the pines, his sticks tossed away, his back to the rising sun. No walking man was in sight, but the peace that washed Zechariah's face spread to their own spirits calming them.

"He <sup>is</sup> be with us," said Zechariah. "He <sup>is</sup> leading the way."

From then on, the journey was purposeful, free of the slightest complaints. Every now and then the walking man re-appeared: along a river bed, at the crest of a hill, leaning against a rock formation.

*Only once did*  
Some one gathered courage to ask Big Papa how long might it take.

"This God's time," he answered. "You can't start it and you can't stop it. And another thing: He not going to do your work for you so step lively."

If the loud footsteps continued, they did not hear them. Nobody saw the walking man but Zechariah and sometimes a child. Rector never saw him again--until the end. Until twenty-nine days later. After being warned away by gunshot; offered food by some black women in a field; robbed of their rifles by two cowboys--none of which disturbed their determined peace--Rector and his father saw him together.

I was September by then. Any other travelers would be cautious going into ~~the~~ *Indian* country with no destination and winter on the way. But if they were uneasy, it didn't show. Rector was lying in tall grass waiting for a crude trap to spring--rabbit, he hoped, gound hog, gopher, even. When just ahead, through a parting in the grass he saw the walking man standing, looking around. Then the man squatted, opened his satchel and began rummaging in it. Rector watched for a while, then crawled backwards through the grass before jumping up and running back to the campsite where Big Papa was finishing his *a cold*



breakfast. Rector described what he had seen and the two headed toward the place where the trap had been set. The walking man was still there, removing items from his satchel and putting others back.

<sup>Even</sup> As they watched, the man began to fade. <sup>Like a</sup> When he was completely dissolved, they heard the footsteps again, pounding in a direction they could not determine: in back, to the left, now to the right. Or was it overhead? Then, suddenly, it was quiet. Rector crept forward. Big Papa too, To see what the walker had left behind. Before they had gone three feet they heard a thrashing in the grass. There in the trap, unaided by the pull string or any hand was a guinea fowl. Male. With plumage to beat the band. Exchanging looks, they left it there and moved to the spot where they believed the walker had spread the items from his satchel. Not a thing in sight. Only a depression in the grass. Big Papa leaned down to touch it. Pressing his hand into the flattened grass, he closed his eyes

"Here," he said. "This <sup>is</sup> our place."

Well, it wasn't of course. Not yet anyway. It belonged to a family of State Indians and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear.

Maybe Zechariah never wanted to eat another stick--roasted

rabbit, or cold buffalo meat. Maybe he wanted to make a permanent feature in that open land so different from Louisiana. Anyway, while they set up temporary quarters, lean to's, dug-outs, and hauled wood in a wagon with two horses the State Indians loaned them, Zechariah corralled some of the men into building a cook oven. They had picked and plowed Louisiana since 1789[?], *helped govern it from 1868 to 1873. They were* proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white man's kitchen. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the possibility of intimacy to their women in the kitchen was a certainty. So they exchanged that danger for the relative safety of brutal work. It was that thinking, and the boast that not one of their women had ever worked in a white man's house, that made a community "kitchen" so agreeable. *They were extraordinary —>*

The sun wasn't due to rise for some time and Steward couldn't ride that long anymore. So he urged Night around and headed toward home, thinking of what he would say, or do, to keep Dovey from *staying over* spending nights in town. Sleep without her next to him in the bed was impossible.

At the same moment, before morning light, Soane was standing



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.”

Because the kitchen was flooded with newly installed fluorescent light Soane 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. Its contents representing the second time Connie had saved her. The first time was a terrible mistake. No, not a mistake, a sin.

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 Scout

~~In his & this~~

They had pitched and plowed  
Louisiana <sup>since 1789</sup> where it ~~was~~ included Mississippi,  
when it was a state; they had  
helped govern it from 1865-1873;  
~~afterward~~ they had been reduced to field  
labor; They had denied each other  
nothing; bowed to no one, knelt only to  
their Maker. Remembering their lives  
and works ~~smelled~~ steadied him, cemented his  
resolve. Imagine ~~what~~ <sup>how</sup> Big Papa or  
Drum Blackhorse or Juxenal DuPac  
would think of those puppies who  
wanted to alter iron words. (TK)



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was killed but two weeks later--even before Scout's body had been shipped--when they were informed that Easter was dead too. Babies. One 19 the other 21. How proud and happy she was when they enlisted; had even encouraged them to do so. Their father had served in the forties. Uncles too. Jeff Fleetwood was back from Vietnam none the worse. And although he did seem a little shook-up, Menus Jury got back alive. Like a fool she believed her sons would be safe. Safer in the army than in Chicago where Easter wanted to go. Safer even than anywhere in Oklahoma outside of Ruby. Safer than Birmingham, than Montgomery, Selma, than Watts. Safer than Money Mississippi in 1955 and Jackson Mississippi in 1963. Safer than Newark, Detroit, Washington, D.C. Both had been home on furlough that Thanksgiving, 1968. Seven months after King's murder and Soane had cried like a baby to see both her boys safe and alive. Her sweet colored boys unshot, unlynched, unmolested, unimprisoned. "Prayer works!" she shouted when they piled out of the car. It was the last time she had seen them whole. Connie had sold her shelled pecans enough for two Thanksgiving pies. A girl with a broke down car was out there that day and, although Soane drove her to buy the gasoline she needed to go where she was headed, the girl had stayed on. Still,

Now she had 4 unopened

letters mailed in 1968 - arrived at the P.O. 4 days after she buried the last 16 her sons.



she must have gone off somewhere 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.

Soane 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 Soane 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 Soane thought needed slapping) found reason to be there. The way Arnette and Billie Delia used to.

Folks said these young men needed something to do. But Soane, 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 Anna Flood, with Brillo, paint thinner and a bucket of hot soapy water, eventually 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 Anna's scrubbing could not erase. Soane couldn't understand it. There were no whites (moral or malevolent) around to agitate or incense them, make them ugly-up the Oven and defy the adults. In fact local citizens were prospering, had been on a roll for more than a decade: good dollars for beef, for wheat, gas rights sold, oil fueling purchases and backing speculation. But during the war, while Ruby thrived, anger small pox-ed other places. Evil Times, said Reverend Pulliam from New Zions' pulpit. Last Days, said Pastor Cary at Holy Redeemer. Nothing was said at Calvary right away because that congregation was still waiting for the new preacher who, when he did come in 1970, said Good News: "I will vanquish thine enemies



before thine eyes" saith the Lord, Lord, Lord.

That was three years ago. This was 1973. Her little girl, was it? would be ten years old now if Soane had not gone to the Convent for the help sin always needed. Shortly afterwards standing at the clothesline struggling with the wind to pin up sheets Soane had looked up to see a lady in the yard smiling. She wore a brown wool gown and a white linen old-timey bonnet and carried a peck basket in one hand, a stick in the other. As the lady smiled and waved the stick, Soane returned the stranger's greeting as best she could with a mouthful of clothes pins--a nod she hoped was polite. The lady turned and moved on. Soane noticed two things: the basket was empty but the lady carried it <sup>with two hands</sup> as though it were full which, as she knew now, was a sign of what was to come: the emptiness that weighed her down, the absence too heavy to carry. And she knew who sent the lady to tell her so.

Steam hiss interrupted her menu of regret and Soane 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 girls in his arms, lowering them one by one into newly hallowed water. Never letting go. Breathless the others watched. Breathless the girls rose, each in her turn. Their wet, white robes billowing in sunlit water. Hair and 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; New Zion and Holy Redeemer had special vessels for dribbling a little water on an upright head.

Minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value. What was needed back in Haven's early days had never been needed in Ruby. The trucks they came in brought cookstoves as well. The meat they



ate clucked in the yard, or fell on its knees under a hammer, or squealed through a slice in its throat. Unlike at Haven's beginning, when Ruby was founded, hunting game was a game. The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed it and re-assembled it. But privately they resented the truck 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 hadn't they just taken it by itself, left the bricks where they had stood for fifty years.

Oh, how the men loved putting it back together, 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 Leviticus) 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. One where the warm flesh was human.

When Royal and the other two, Destry and one of Pious DuPres'

daughters, asked for a meeting, it was quickly agreed upon. No one had called a town meeting in years. Everybody, including Soane 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. Royal, called 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 said they were way out-of-date; that things had changed everywhere but in Ruby. 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 Soane 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~~ <sup>the Blackhouse or Morgan</sup> 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 accusation swole Deek's neck and, on a weekday, had him blowing out the ~~hearts~~ <sup>brains</sup> of quail to keep his own from exploding.

He would be pulling in with a bag of them any minute now, and Soane 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."

"Go on, Deek. 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.

Soane 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?”

Soane 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?”

Soane 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 other folks 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?" Soane 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. I'd be careful if I was you. How many of them now? Four?"

"Three. The Mother died, remember?"

Deek stared at her. "The Mother?"

"Yes. Who'd you think?"

"Right. Yeah." Deek continued stirring the blood in his feet. Then he laughed. "First time Roger got to use his big new van."

"Ambulance," said Soane, 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?" Soane 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?" Soane poured coffee into the big blue cup her husband preferred.

"You all go to Demby, 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 does have 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 Deetnam, getting married, setting up. War money. 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 Soane 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

\* Why, for instance, couldn't Menus have kept the house he bought?

would melt in his mouth.

Every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan ~~got into a~~  
brilliant black sedan ~~and~~ <sup>his</sup> drove three fourths of a mile. He ~~started at~~ <sup>he</sup> ~~From~~  
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 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 <sup>those</sup> ~~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



leavings and cereal under the stairwell. The cat, turned viscious by motherhood, stared at her with warning eyes. "Fifteen families founded this town. Fifteen, not two. One was my father, another my uncle--"

"You know what I mean," Misner interrupted her.

Anna peeped into the darkness trying to see into the box where the litter lay. "I do not."

"The money," said Misner. "The Morgan's had the money. I guess I should say they financed the town--not founded it."

The cat would not eat while being watched, so Anna forfeited a peep at the kittens and turned back to Richard Misner. "You wrong there, too. Everybody pitched in. The bank idea was just a way of doing it. Families bought shares in it, you know, instead of just making deposits they could run through any old time. This way their money was safe."

Misner nodded and wiped his hands. He didn't want another argument. Anna refused to understand the difference between investing and cooperating. Just as she refused to believe the woodstove gave more warmth than her little electric heater.

"The Morgans had the resources, that's all," she said. "From

their father's bank back in Haven. Able Flood was his paartner. Everybody called him Big Daddy, but his real name was--"

"I know, I know. Rector. Rector Morgan, Big Daddy. Son of Zachariah Morgan, Big Papa." And then he quoted a refrain the citizens of Ruby loved to recite. " 'Rector Morgan's bank failed, but he didn't.' "

"It's true. The bank had to close down--back in the thirties--but it didn't close out. I mean they had enough so we could start over. I know what you're thinking, but you can't honestly say it didn't work. People prosper here. Everybody."

"Everybody's prospering on credit, Anna. That's not the same thing."

"So?"

"So what if the credit's gone?"

"It can't be gone. We own the bank, the bank doesn't own us."

"Aw, Anna. You don't get it, do you? You don't understand."

She liked his face even when he was putting down people she liked. Steward, for example, who had taught her the scorpion lesson. When Anna was four. Sitting on the new porch of her father's store-- back in 1959--when everybody was building something a group of



men including Steward were helping Ace Flood finish the shelving. They were inside resting after a quick lunch while Anna derailed ants on the steps; introducing obstacles into their routes , watching them climb over the leaf's edge and go on as though a brand new green mountain was the most natural thing in the world. Suddenly a scorpion shot out near her bare foot and she ran wide-eyed into the store. The talk stopped while the men weighed this infantile interruption, and it was Steward who picked her up in his arms, asked what's bothering you, good lookin'? and relieved her fears. Anna clung to him while he explained that the scorpion's tail was up because it was just as scared of her as she was of it.

When Ace died she came back to Ruby and was about to sell out--the store, the apartment, the car, everything and go back to Detroit--when he came riding into town, alone, in a beat up Ford. Calvary's new minister. Anna folded her arms on the wooden counter. "I own this store. My daddy died--it's mine. No rent. No mortgage. Just taxes, town fees. I buy things; I sell things; the mark up is mine."

"You're lucky. What about the farms? Suppose a crop fails, say, two years in a row. Does old Mrs. Sand, Nathan DuPres get to take out their share? Borrow on it? Sell it to the bank? What?"

"I don't know what they do, but I do know it's no gain to the bank for them to lose it. So they'd give him money to buy more seed, gauano, whatever."

"You mean *lend* them the money."

"You're making my head ache. Where you come from all that might be true. Ruby's different."

"Hope so."

"Is so. Any problem brewing sure ain't money."

"Well, what is it then?"

"Hard to figure, but I don't like the way Deek's face looks when he's checking the Oven. He does it every day God sends now. More like hunting than checking. They're just kids."

"That fist painting scared a lot of peple."

"Why? It was a picture! You'd think somebody had burned a cross!" Annoyed, she started wiping things--jars, case fronts, the soda pop cooler. "He should talk to the parents, not go hunting for the kids like he's a sheriff. Kids need more than what's here."

Misner couldn't agree more. Since the murder of Martin Luther, new committments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. It was as though



something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost. That was what Destry, Roy, Little Mirth and the rest were looking for. Maybe the fist painter was looking for it too. In any case, if they couldn't find the ticket, they might break in the pawn shop. Question was, who pawned it in the first place and why.

"You told me that's why you left--nothing to do-- but you never said why you came back."

Anna wasn't about to explain all of that, so she elaborated on what he already knew. "Yeah. Well. Thought I could do something up North. Something real that wouldn't break my heart. But it was all, I don't know, talk, running around. I got confused. Still I don't regret going one bit--even though it didn't work out."

"Well, I'm glad it didn't, whatever the reason." He stroked her hand.

Anna returned his touch. "I'm worried," she said. "About Billie-Delia. We have to come up with something, Richard. Something more than choir competitions, and Bible class and ribbons for fat vegetables and baby showers..."

"What about her?"

"Oh, I don't know. She came in here a while back and I knew

right away she had something on her mind, but the truck was late with my goods, so I was short with her."

"Which is to say what?"

"She's gone off. At least I think so. Nobody's seen her."

"What does her mother say?"

Anna shrugged. "Pat's hard to talk to. Kate asked her about Billie-Delia--hadn't seen her at practice. Know what she did? Answered Kate's question with another." Anna mimicked Pat Best's soft, cold voice. " 'Why do you need to know that?' She and Kate are close, too."

"You think she's courting harm? She couldn't just disappear without anybody knowing where to."

"I don't know what I think."

"I'll talk to Roger. He should know. He's her grandfather."

"*You* ask him. Not me."

"Say, what is all this feeling about Roger? I've been here three years, almost, and I can't make out why folks freeze around him. Is it his mortuary business?"

"Probably. That and, well, he 'prepared,' if you get my meaning, his own wife."



"Oh."

"That's something to think about, aint it?"

"Still."

They were quiet for a moment--thinking about it. Then Anna walked around the counter and stood at the window. "You know you <sup>are</sup> right smart about weather. This is the third time I disbelieved you and was proved wrong."

Misner joined her. Just touching the pane they could tell the temperature had dropped suddenly into the teens.

"Go ahead. Light it," she said laughing and happy to be wrong if it made this man she adored right. There were women in church who disapproved of his obvious interest in her--her and nobody else. <sup>to from chapel</sup> But Anna thought there was more to it than perhaps their own plans for this widowed, handsome, intelligent man and their various daughters and neices. She was certain the disapproval was mostly because of her unstraightened hair. My God, the conversations she had been forced to have when she came back from Detroit. Strange, silly, invasive probings. She felt as though they were discussing her pubic hair, her underarm hair. That if she had walked completely naked down the street they would have commented only on the hair on her

head. The subject summoned more passion, invited more opinions, solicited more anger than that prostitute Menus brought home from Tulsa. She probably would have straightened it again, eventually--it wasn't a permanent change or a statement--except it clarified so much for her in the days when she was confused about so much else. Instantly she could identify friends and those who were not; recognize the well-brought-up, the ill-raised, the threatened, the insecure. Dovey Morgan liked it; Pat Best hated it; Deek and Steward shook their heads; Kate Golightly loved it and helped her keep it shaped; Revered Pulliam preached a whole sermon about it; K.D. laughed at it; most of the young people admired it, except Arnette. Like a geiger counter her hair registered, she believed, tranquility or the intensity of a rumbling, deep-down disorder.

The fire, smelling wonderfully, attracted the mother cat. She curled up behind the stove, though her eyes remained wide to predators--human or otherwise.

"Let me make some coffee," Anna said, eyeing the clouds above Holy Redeemer. "This might get serious."

Ace Flood's faith had been the mountain-moving kind, so he built his store to last. Sandstone. Sturdier than some churches. Four



rooms for his family above; below a spacious storeroom, a tiny bedroom, and a fifteen foot high selling area crammed with shelves, bins, cases and drawers. The windows were regular house type--he didn't want or need display; no big, wasteful "looking in" plate glass for him. Let folks come inside to see what he had. He didn't have many things but he had a lot of what he stocked. Before he died, he saw his store change from a necessary service in Ruby to a business patronized by the loyal for certain items, but who balked at his prices and more and more drove their trucks to Demby for cheaper (and better) supplies. Anna changed all that. What Ace's Groc. now lacked in bulk products, it gained in variety and style. She offered free coffee on cold days, iced tea when it was hot. She put out two chairs and a small table for the elderly and those who drove in from farms and wanted to rest a while. And since adults, now a days, never frequented the Oven next to her store--except for special events--she catered to the appetites of the young who liked to gather there. She sold her own pies, made her own candy along with the lots she picked up in Demby. She kept three kinds of soda pop instead of one. Sometimes she sold the black-as-eight-rock peppers the Convent grew . She kept hog's head cheese in the cooler as her

father had along with local butter and salted pork. But canned goods, dried beans, coffee, sugar, syrup, baking soda, flour, salt, catsup, paper products--all the items nobody could or wanted to make at home--took up the space Ace Flood once used for cloth, work shoes, light tools, kerosene. Now Sargeant's Feed and Seed sold the shoes, the tools, the kerosene, and <sup>Harper's</sup> ~~his~~ drugstore sold the needles, thread, counter medicine, prescriptions, sanitary napkins, stationery and tobacco. Except for Blue Boy. Steward had relied on Ace for that and wasn't about to change his habits.

In Anna's hands, Ace's Groc. blossomed on variety, comfort and flexibility. Because she let Menus, like his father before him, cut hair in the back on Saturdays, incidental purchases rose. Because she had a nice toilet downstairs, casual users felt obliged to become customers before they left. Farming women came in for peppermint after church; the men for sacks of raisens. Invariably they picked up a little something more from the shelves.

The contentment she drew from Richard's fire made her smile. But she couldn't be a minister's wife. Never. Could she? Well, he had not asked her to be one--so enjoy the stove heat, the nape of his neck and the invisible presence of kittens.



After a while, a station wagon drove up and parked so close to the store, both Misner and Anna could see the fever in the baby's blue eyes. The mother held the child over her shoulder and stroked its hair. The driver, a city-dressed man in his forties, got out and pushed open Anna's door.

"How you all doing?" *he smiled.*

"Fine and you?"

"Look like I'm lost. Been trying to find 18 west for more'n an hour." He looked at Misner and grinned an apology for having violated the male rule of never asking for directions. "Wife made me stop. Said she's had it."

"It's a ways back the way you come from," said Misner, looking at the Arizona plates, "but I can tell you how to find it."

"'Preciate it. 'Preciate it" said the man. "Don't expect there's a doctor around here is there?"

"Not around these parts. You have to get to Demby for that."

"What's wrong with the baby?" Anna asked.

"Sort of pukey. Hot too. *Not too* We're well supplied *but* no aspirin nor cough medicine. Can't think of every damn thing, can you? Jesus."

"Your baby coughing? I don't believe you need cough medicine,"

Anna squinted through the window. "Ask your wife to come in out the cold."

"Drugstore'll have aspirin," said Misner.

"I didn't see no drugstore. Where bouts is it?"

"You passed it, but it don't look like a drugstore--looks like a regular house."

"How am I going to find it then? Houses round here don't seem to have numbers."

"Tell me what all you want and I'll get it for you. Then tell your wife to bring that baby inside." Misner reached for his coat.

"Just some aspirin and some cough medicine. 'Preciate it. I'll get my wife."

The blast from the open door rattled the coffee cups. The man got back in the station wagon; Misner took off in his ratty Ford. Anna thought about making some cinnamon toast. The pumpkin bread would be stale now. Be nice if she had an over ripe banana--the baby looked constipated--mush it up with a little applebutter.

The man came back shaking his head. "I'll just keep the motor running. She says she'll stay put."

Anna nodded. "You got far to go?"



"Lubbock. Say, is that coffee hot?"

"Uh huh. How you like it?"

"Black and sweet."

He'd taken two sips when the station wagon horn sounded.

"Shit. Excuse me," he said. When he came back he bought licorice, peanut butter, crackers and three Royal Crowns and carried them out to his wife. Then he returned to finish his coffee, sipping it in silence while Anna poked the fire.

"You better gas up when you get on 18. Blizzard's coming."

He laughed. "Blizzard? In Lubbock, Texas?"

"You ain't in Texas yet," said Anna. She looked toward the window and saw two figures approach, then Misner shouldered open the door with Steward close on his heels.

"Here you go," said Misner handing over the bottles. The man took them and rushed out to the station wagon. Misner followed to give him directions.

"Who all is that?" asked Steward.

"Just some lost folks." Anna handed him a thirty-two ounce tin of Blue Boy.

"Lost folks or lost whites?"

"Oh, Steward, please."

"Big difference, Anna girl. Big. Right Reverend?" Misner was just stepping back in.

"They get lost like everybody else," said Anna.

"Born lost. Take over the world and still lost. Right Reverend?"

"You just contradicted yourself," Anna laughed.

"God has one people, Steward. You know that." Misner rubbed his hands, then blew on them.

"Reverend," said Steward, "I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance."

Misner smiled and was about to answer when the lost man entered again to pay Misner for the medicine.

"Blizzard's heading in." Steward looked at the man's light clothing and thin shoes. "You might want to ride it out somewhere. Gas station on 18. Wouldn't go no further than that if I was you."

"I'll beat it." The man closed his wallet. "I'll gas up on 18 but we crossing that state line today. Thank you. You all been a big help. 'Preciate it."

"They never listen," said Steward as the station wagon drove



away. He himself, having been around in 1958 when whole herds froze, had been pumping water, nailing down, forking alfalfa, and storing up since Wednesday. He was in town for tobacco, syrup and to pick up Dovey.

"Say, Steward," Misner said. "You seen Roger's grand daughter, Billie-Delia?"

"What should I see her for?"

"Anna says nobody has. Of course we haven't asked her mother."

Steward, picking up on the "we," put a crisp five dollar bill on the counter. "You won't get nothing there," he said, thinking, no major loss if she did run off. Serve Pat right, he thought. She noses about in everybody's business but clams up if you get near hers. "That reminds me, Deek told me he saw Sweetie this morning--just walking on down the road. No overcoat. Nothing."

"Sweetie? Out of her house?" Anna stressed her disbelief.

"Down what road?" asked Misner.

"Not Sweetie."

"Deek swears it was her."

"Must have been," said Misner. "I saw her too. Right outside

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, <sup>picture</sup> 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 <sup>the children</sup> 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 <sup>in time</sup> 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, <sup>twice</sup> 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 *walking* 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 *She could not read the* 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, *saying*

"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. <sup>Where is your mind?</sup> ~~Drove me crazy.~~ Lord, girl. Sweetheart. What happened?"

"They made me, snatched me," Sweetie cried. <sup>oh</sup> "Please take me home. I'm sick, Anna. <sup>And</sup> 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



time, in the back seat of Eddie's car. But she could not fall asleep on this clean, narrow childish bed.

The crying woman had flipped. In the night and the next morning as well. Seneca had spent the whole night up, listening to Mavis and Grace. The house seemed to belong to them, although they referred to somebody named Connie. They cooked for her and didn't pry. Other than discussing her name--where'd she get it?--they behaved as though they knew all about her and were happy for her to stay. Later, in the afternoon, when she thought she would drop from exhaustion, they showed her to a bedroom with two cots.

"Nap a while," said Mavis. "I'll call you when dinner's ready. You like fried chicken?" Seneca thought she would throw up.

They didn't like each other at all, so Seneca had equalized her smiles and agreeableness. If one cursed and joked nastily about the other Seneca laughed. When the other rolled her eyes in disgust, Seneca shot her an understanding look. Always the peacemaker. The one who said yes or I don't mind or I'll go. Otherwise--what? They might not like her. Might cry. Might leave. So she had done her best to please even if the Bible turned out to be heavier than the shoes. ]  
Like all first offenders, he wanted both right away. Seneca had no

trouble with the size eleven Addidas, but XX Indiana didn't sport bookstores, religious or regular. She detoured to Bloomington and found something called The Living bible, and another without color pictures, but lots of lined pages for recording dates of births, deaths, marriages, baptisms. It seemed a marvelous thing--a list of whole families' activities over the years, so she chose it. He was angry, of course; so much that it dimmed his pleasure in the extravagant black and white running shoes.

"Can't you get anything right? Just a *small* Bible! Not a goddamn encyclopedia!"

He was guilty as charged and she had known him for only six months, but already he knew how hopeless she was. He accepted the enormous Bible nonetheless, and told her to leave it and the shoes at the desk with his name and his number. Made her write the numbers down as though she might have trouble remembering five numbers in a row. She had brought ham sandwiches too (his letter said they could have a picnic-type lunch in the visitors' quarters) but he was too nervous and irritated to eat.

The other visitors seemed to be having a lovely time with their prisoners. Children teased each other; curled up in the arms of their



fathers playing with their faces, hair, fingers. Women and girls touched the men; whispered, laughed out loud. They were the regulars--familiar with the bus drivers, the guards and coffee wagon personnel. The prisoners' eyes were soft with pleasure. They noticed everything, commented on everything. The report cards little boys brought to them in fat brown envelopes; the barretts in the little girls' hair; the state of the women's coats. They listened carefully to details of friends and family not there; had advice and instruction for every piece of domestic news. They seemed terribly manly to Seneca--leader-like in their management of the visit. From where to sit, where put the paper wrappings to medical advice and books to send. What they never spoke of was what was going on inside and they did not ever acknowledge the presence of the guards. Perhaps Attica was on their minds.

Maybe, she thought, as his sentence wore on, Eddie would be like that. Not furious, victimized, as he was on this their first visit since he was arraigned. Whining. Blaming. The Bible so big it embarrassed him. Mustard instead of mayo on the sandwiches. He didn't want to hear anything about her new job at a school cafeteria. Only Sophie and Bernard interested him: their diets. Was she letting

them out at night. They needed a good long run. Use their muzzles  
only <sup>when they are</sup> outside.

She left Eddie Turtle in the <sup>visitors</sup> hall promising him four things. To  
send pictures of the dogs. To sell the stereo. To get his mother to  
cash the saving bonds. To call the lawyer. Send, sell, get, call. That's  
how she would remember.

Heading for the bus shelter, Seneca tripped and fell on one knee.  
A guard stepped forward and helped her up.

"Watch it, there, miss."

"Sorry. Thanks."

"How you girls expect to walk in those things I don't know."

"Supposed to be good for you," she said, smiling.

"Where? In Holland?" He laughed pleasantly, showing two rows  
of gold fillings.

Seneca adjusted her string bag and asked him "How far is  
Wichita from here?"

"Depends on how you traveling. In a car it'd be oh ten twelve  
hours. Bus, longer."

"Oh."

"You got family in Wichita?"



"Yes. No. Well, my boyfriend does. I'm going to pay his mother a visit."

The guard removed his cap to smoothe his crewcut. "That's nice," he said. "Good barbecue in Wichita. Make sure you get you some."

Somewhere in Wichita there probably was very good barbecue, but not in Mrs. Turtle's house. Her house was strictly vegetarian. Nothing with hooves, feather, shell or scales appeared on her table. Seven grains and seven greens--eat one of each (and only one) each day and you lived forever. Which she planned to do and no, she wasn't about to cash in the savings bonds her husband left her for anybody let alone somebody who drove a car over a child and left it there even if that somebody was her only son.

"Oh, No, Mrs. Turtle. He didn't know it was a little kid. Eddie thought it was a, a..."

"What?" asked Mrs. Turtle. "What did he think it was?"

"I forgot what he told me, but I know he wouldn't do that. Eddie loves kids. He really does. He's really very sweet. He asked me to bring him a bible."

"He's sold it by now."

Seneca looked away. The television screen flickered. On it grave-faced men lied softly, courteously to each other.

"Little girl, you've known him less than a growing season. I've known him all his life."

"Yes, mam."

"You think I'm going to let him put me in the poor house so a slick lawyer can stay rich?"

"No, mam."

"You been watching those Watergate lawyers?"

"No, mam. Yes, mam."

"Well, then. Don't say another word about it. You want some supper or not?"

The grain was wheat bread; the green was kale. Strong iced tea helped wash them both down.

Mrs. Turtle did not offer a bed for the night so Seneca hoisted her bag and walked down the quiet street in Wichita's soft evening air. She had not quit her job to make this trip, but the supervisor made it clear that an absence this soon was not to a new employee's advantage. Perhaps she was already fired. Maybe Mrs. Turtle would let her telephone her housemates to see if anyone had called to say



"Don't bother coming back." Seneca turned around retracing her steps.

At the door, her knuckles lifted for the knock, she heard sobbing. A flat out helpless mothercry--a sound like no other in the world. Seneca stepped back, then went to the window, pressing her left hand to her chest to keep her heart together. She kept it there--imagining its small red valves stuttering, faltering, trying to get back on line--as she fled down the brick steps out to the sidewalk skirting dirt streets, then macadam then concrete all the way to the bus station. Only when she was sitting frog-legged on a molded plastic bench did she surrender to the wails that continued to careen in her head. Alone, without witness, Mrs. Turtle had let go her reason, her personality and shrieked for all the world like the feathered, finned, and hooved whose flesh she never ate--the way a gull, a cow whale, a mother wolf might if her young had been snatched away. Her hands had been in her hair; her mouth wide open in a drenched face.

Short-breathed and dry-mouthed, Seneca had escaped from the porch. <sup>the sobs</sup> Rushing down broad streets and narrow, slowing when near the business part of town. Upon entering the station she bought peanuts and ginger ale from the vending machines and was

immediately sorry, since she really wanted sweet--not salt. Ankles crossed, knees spread, she sat on a bench in the waiting room, pocketed the nuts and sipped the ginger ale. Finally, her panic subsided and the screams of a hurt woman were indistinguishable from everyday traffic.

Nighttime coming and the station was as crowded as a morning commuter stop. The warm September day had not cooled when the sun set. There was no worthy difference between the thick air of the waiting room and the air outside. Passengers and their companions appeared calm, hardly interested in the journey or the farewell. Most of the children were asleep on laps, luggage and seats. Those who were not tortured anyone they could. Adults fingered tickets, blotted dampness from their necks, patted babies and murmured to each other. Soldiers and sweethearts examined the schedules posted behind glass. Four teen aged boys with stocking caps on their heads sang softly near the vending machines. A man in a grey chauffeur's uniform strolled the floor as though looking for his passenger. A handsome man in a wheelchair navigated himself gracefully through the entrance--only slightly annoyed by the inconvenient design of the door.



There were two hours and twenty minutes before Seneca's bus departed so she wondered if she should spend it at one of the movies she'd passed. *Serpico*, *The Exorcist*, *The Sting* were the hot choices, but it felt like betrayal to see any one of them without Eddie's arm around her shoulder. Thinking of his predicament and her bumbling efforts to help him, Seneca sighed heavily, but there was no danger of tears. She had not shed even one since she found Jean's letter next to the Lorna Doones. Well cared for, loved perhaps, in both of the foster homes, she knew it was not her self that the mothers had approved of but the fact that she took reprimand quietly, ate what given, shared what she had and never ever cried.

The ginger ale was rattling through the straw when the chauffeur stood before her and smiled.

"Excuse me, miss. May I speak to you for a moment?"

"Sure. I mean. Sure." Seneca scooted over to make room on the bench but he did not sit down.

"I'm authorized to offer you five hundred dollars for some complicated but quite easy work, if you're interested."

Seneca opened her mouth to say: complicated *and* easy? His eyes were cloudy gray and the buttons on his uniform glimmered like

ancient gold.

"I'm on my way out of here," she said. "My bus leaves in two hours."

"I understand. But the work won't take long. Perhaps if you'd talk to my employer--she's right outside--she can describe it to you. Unless , of course, you have to be somewhere in a hurry?"

"She?"

"Yes. Mrs. Fox. Step this way. It'll take just a minute."

A limosine throbbed under bright street lights a few yards from the station entrance. When the chauffeur opened the door, the head of an amazingly beautiful woman turned toward Seneca.

"Hello. I'm Norma. Norma Keene Fox. I'm looking for some help." She didn't hold out her hand, but her smile made Seneca want to touch her. "Can I talk to you about it?"

The white linen blouse she wore was sleeveless, cut low. Her beige skirt was long. When she uncrossed her legs Seneca saw bright sandals, coral painted toenails. Champagne-colored hair rushed back behind ears with no earrings.

"What kind of help?" Seneca asked.

"Come inside so I can explain. It's hard talking through an open



car door."

Seneca hesitated.

Mrs. Fox's laugh was a warm tumble of bells. "It's okay, Dear. You don't have to take the job if you don't want it."

"I didn't say I didn't."

"Well then. Come. It's cooler in here."

The door click was soft, weighty and Mrs. Fox's Bal du Versaille was irresistible.

Something confidential, she said. Nothing illegal, of course, just private. You type? A little? I want somebody not from around here. I hope five hundred is enough. I could go a little higher for a really intelligent girl. David will drive you back to the bus Station--even if you decide not to take the job.

Only then did Seneca realize the limosine was no longer parked. The interior lights were still on. The air was cooled. The limosine floated.

This is a lovely part of the world, she said. But narrow-minded, if you know what I mean. Still, I wouldn't live anywhere else. My husband doesn't beleive me, neither do my friends because I'm from New Orleans. When I go back there, they say *Wichita?* like that. But I

love it here. Where are you from? I thought so. They don't wear jeans like that around here. They should though, if they've got the bottom, I mean. Like you do. Yes. My son's at Rice. Lots of people work for us, but it's only when Leon is away--that's my husband--that I can get anything accomplished. That's where you come in, if you agree, I mean. Married? Well, what I need done only an intelligent female can do. You don't wear lipstick, do you? Good. Your lips are lovely like that. I told David, find an intelligent girl, please. No farm girls. No dairy queens. He's very good. He found you. Our place is out of town a ways. No thank you I can't digest peanuts. Oh dear, you must be starving. We'll have a very good supper and I'll explain what I want done. Really simple if you can follow directions. It's confidential work so I prefer to hire a stranger rather than someone local. Are those your own lashes? Gracious. David? Do you know if Mattie cooked a real supper tonight? No fish, I hope, or do you like fish? Trout's wonderful in Kansas. I think some chicken, fried, might do the trick. We have beautifully fed poultry here they eat better than most people do. No don't put them away. Give them to me. Who knows? They might come in handy.

Seneca spent the following three weeks in gorgeous rooms, with



gorgeous Norma and food too pretty to eat. Norma called her many sweet things, but not once asked what her name was. The front door was never locked and she could leave anytime she wanted to. She didn't have to stay there moving from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse; from caviar tartlets to dirt. But the pain framed the pleasure, gave it edge. The humiliation made surrender deep, tender. Long lasting.

When Leon Fox telephoned his immanent return, Norma gave her the five hundred dollars and some clothes, including a cashmere serape. As promised, David drove her to the bus station, his buttons extra gleamy in the sunlight. They did not speak during the drive.

Seneca wandered Wichita for hours, stopping in a coffee shop, resting in a city garden. At a loss as to where to go or what do. Get a job near the prison and stand by him?--meaning follow his instructions, apologize for not getting his mother's savings. Go back to X? Pick up her life-before-Eddie? Instant friends. Catch-quick jobs. Temporary housing. Stolen food. Eddie Turtle had been settled life to her for six months and now he was gone. Or should she just move on? The chauffeur had picked her up for Norma like a stray puppy. No, not even that. A pet you wanted to play with for a while-

-a little while, but not keep. Not love. Name it. Feed it. Return it to its own habitat. She had five hundred dollars and, other than Eddie, no one knew where she was. Maybe she ought to keep it that way.

Seneca hadn't decided much of anything when she saw the first place to hide. A flat bed loaded with heavy sacks. When she was discovered and told to leave, she walked until she found another and another until she ended up among crates in a brand new '73 pick-up. Jumping out of it to follow a coatless woman was the first pointedly uninstructed thing she had ever done.

The sobbing--or was she giggling?--woman was gone now. The snow had stopped. Downstairs someone was calling her name.

"Seneca? Seneca? Come on, baby. We're waiting for you."