



## Chapter 5: Divine

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## Chapter Five

DIVINE

~~208~~

~~219~~

223

**"Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody in order to get some thing or some place you want or you believe it has to do with how your body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you but if so doing it for your own good.**

**"Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.**

**"You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love ~~because~~ just because you want it. You can only earn--by practice and careful contemplation--the right to**



express it and you have to learn how to accept it. Which is to say you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God--carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love. Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it.

"How do you know you have graduated? You don't. What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn, and therefore interesting to God who is interested only in Himself which is to say He is interested only in love. Do you understand me? God is not interested in you. He is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest.

"The couple who enters the sacrament of marriage and is not prepared to go the distance, is not willing to get right with the real love of God cannot thrive. They may cleave together like robins or gulls or anything else that mates for life. But if they eschew this mighty course, at the moment when all are judged for the disposition



of their eternal lives, their cleaving won't mean a thing. Amen."

Some of the amens that accompanied and followed Reverend Senior Pulliam's words were loud, others withholding; some people did not open their mouths at all. The question, thought Anna, was not why but who. Who was Pulliam blasting? Was he directing his remarks to the young people, warning them to shape up before their selfish lives collapsed? Or was he aiming at their parents for allowing the juvenile restlessness and defiance that had been rankling him since 1973? Most likely, she thought, he was bringing the weight of his large and long Methodist education to bear down on Richard. A stone to crush his colleague's message of God as a permanent interior engine that once ignited roared, purred and moved you to do your own work as well as His--but if idle rusted, immobilizing the soul like a frozen clutch.

That must be it, she thought. Pulliam was targeting Misner. Because surely he would not stand before the bride and groom--a guest preacher asked to make a few (few!) remarks before the ceremony to a congregation made up of almost everybody in Ruby only a third of whom were members in Pulliam's church--and frighten

them to death on their wedding day. Because surely he would not insult the bride's mother and grandmother who wore like a coat the melancholy of tending broken babies, and who not only had not chastized God for this knockout blow to everything they dreamed of, but whose steadfastness seemed to increase as each year passed. And although the groom had no living parents, surely Pulliam did not intend to embarrass his aunts--to put the feet of those devout women to the fire for caring (too much perhaps?) for the sole "son" the family would ever have now that Soane's boys were dead and Dovey had none, and who had not let mourning for either of those losses tear them up or close their hearts. Surely not. And surely Pulliam was not trying to rile the groom's uncles, Deek and Steward who behaved as if God were their silent business partner. Pulliam had always seemed to admire them, hinting repeatedly that they belonged in Zion not Calvary where they had to listen to the namby-pamby sermons of a man who thought teaching was letting children talk as if they had something important to say that the world had not heard and dealt with already.

Who else would feel the sting of "God is not interested in you."  
Or wince from the burn in "if you think love is natural you are blind".



Who else but Richard Misner who now had to stand up and preside over the most anticipated wedding anyone could remember under the boiling breath of Senior "take-no-prisoners" Pulliam? Unless, of course, he was talking to her, telling her: cleave unto another if you want, but if you are not cleaving to God (Pulliam's God, that is) your marriage is not worth the license. Because he knew she and Richard were talking marriage, and he knew she helped him organize the young disobedients. "We Are the Furrow".

Rogue mint overwhelmed the flower arrangements around the altar. Clumps of it, along with a phlox called Wild Sweet William, grew beneath the church windows that at eleven o'clock were opened to a climbing sun. The light falling from the April sky was a gift. Inside the church the maplewood pews, burnished to a military glow, set off the spring-white walls, the understated pulpit, the comfortable almost picket-fence look of the railing where communicants could kneel to welcome the spirit one more time. Above the altar, high into its clean clear space, hung a two-foot oak cross. Uncluttered. Unencumbered. No gold competed with its perfection or troubled its poise. No writhe or swoon of the body of Christ bloated its lyric thunder.



The women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot's perfume. So the voluptuous odor of phlox and sweet william, disturbed the congregation, made it reel in anticipation of a good time with plenty good food at Soane Morgan's house. There would be music by anyone: July on the upright piano; the Men's Choir; a Kate Golightly solo; The Holy Redeemer Quartet; a dreamy-eyed boy on the steps with a mouth organ. There would be the press of good clothing; silk dresses and starched shirts forgotten as folks leaned against trees, sat on the grass, mishandled second helpings of cream peas. There would be the shouts of sugar-drunk children; the crackle of wedding gift paper snatched from the floor and folded so neatly it seemed more valuable than the gift it had enclosed. Farmers, ranchers and wheat growing women would let themselves be yanked from chairs and clapped into repeating dance steps from long ago. Teenagers would laugh and blink their eyes in an effort to hide their want.

But more than joy and children high on wedding cake, they were looking forward to the union of two families, and an end to the animus that had soaked the members and friends of those families for four years. Animus that centered on the maybe-baby the bride had

not acknowledged, announced or delivered.

Now they sat, as did Anna Flood, wondering what on earth Reverend Pulliam thought he was doing. Why cast a pall now? Why diminish the odor of rogue mint and phlox; blunt the taste of the roast lamb and lemon pies awaiting them. Why fray the harmony; derail the peace this marriage brought?

Richard Misner rose from his seat. Annoyed, no, angry. So angry he could not look at his fellow preacher and let him see how deep the cut. Throughout Pulliam's remarks he had gazed expressionless<sup>ly</sup> at the Easter hats of the women in the pews. Earlier that morning he had planned five or six opening sentences to launch the sacred rite of matrimony, crafted them carefully around Revelations 19:7,9, sharpening the "wedding feast of the Lamb" image, coring it to reveal the reconciliation this wedding promised. He had segued from Revelations to Matthew 19:6, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh," to seal not only the couple's fidelity to each other but the renewed responsibilities of all Morgans and Fleetwoods.

Now he looked at the couple standing patiently before the altar and wondered whether they had understood or even heard what had been laid on them. He, however, did understand. Knew this lethal



view of his chosen work was a deliberate assault on all he believed. Suddenly he understood and shared Augustine's rage at the "proud minister" whom he ranked with the devil. Augustine had gone on to say that God's message was not corrupted by the messenger; "if [the light] should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled." Although Augustine had not met Senior Pulliam, he must have known ministers like him. But his dismissal of them to Satan's company did not acknowledge the damage words spoken from a pulpit could wreak. What would Augustine say as anodyne to the poison Pulliam had just sprayed over everything? Over the heads of men finding it so hard to fight their instincts to control what they could and crunch what they could not; in the hearts of women tirelessly taming the predator; in the faces of children not yet recovered from the blow to their esteem upon learning that adults would not regard them as humans until they mated; of the bride and groom frozen there, desperate for this public bonding to dilute their private shame. Misner knew that Pulliam's words were a widening of the war he had declared on Misner's activities: tempting the young to step outside the wall, outside the town limits, shepherding them, forcing them to transgress, to think of themselves as civil warriors. He knew also



that a public secret about a never born baby poked through the grounds of the quarrel like a fang.

Suitable language came to mind but, not trusting himself to deliver it without revealing his deep personal hurt, Misner walked away from the pulpit to the rear wall of the church. There he stretched, reaching up until he was able to unhook the cross that hung there. He carried it, then, past the empty choir stall, past the organ where Kate sat, the chair where Pulliam did, on to the podium and held it before him for all to see--if only they would. See what was certainly the first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. As children, their fingers drew it in snow, sand or mud; laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen tundra and broad savannahs; as pebbles on river banks; scratched it on cave walls and out croppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Zulu, Laplanders and Druids--all had a finger-memory of this original mark. The circle was not first, nor was the parallel, or the triangle. It was this mark, this, that lay underneath every other. This mark, rendered in the placement of facial features. This mark of a standing human figure poised to embrace. Remove it, as Pulliam had done, and Christianity was like

any and every religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness. Without this sign, the believer's life was confined to praising God and taking the hits. The praise was credit; the hits were interest due on a debt that could never be paid. Or, as Pulliam put it, no one knew when he had "graduated." But with it, in the religion in which this sign was paramount and foundational, well, life was a whole other matter.

See? The execution of this one solitary black man propped up on these two intersecting lines to which he was attached in a parody of human embrace, fastened to two big sticks that were so convenient, so recognizable, so embedded in consciousness as consciousness, being both ordinary and sublime. See? His woolly head alternately rising on his neck and falling toward his chest, the glow of his midnight skin dimmed by dust, streaked by gall, fouled by spit and urine, gone pewter in the hot dry wind and, finally, as the sun dimmed in shame, as his flesh matched the odd lessening of afternoon light as though it were evening, always sudden in that climate, swallowing



him and the other death row felons, and the silhouette of this original sign merging with a false-night sky. See how this official murder out of hundreds marked the difference; moved the relationship between God and man from CEO and supplicant to one on one? The cross he held was abstract; the absent body was real, but both combined to pull humans from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives. This execution made it possible to respect--freely, not in fear--one's self and one another. Which was what love was: unmotivated respect. All of which testified not to a peevish Lord who was his own love, but to one who enabled human love. Not for His own glory--never. God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves; loved the genius on the cross who managed to do both and die knowing it.

But Richard Misner could not speak calmly of these things. So he stood there and let the minutes tick as he held the crossed oak in his hands, urging it to say what he could not: that not only is God interested in you; He is you.

Would they see? Would they?



For those who could see it, the groom's face was a study. He looked up at the cross Reverend Misner was holding holding holding. Saying nothing, just holding it there until time became unbearable and the unendurable silence was sprinkled with coughs and soft encouraging grunts. <sup>(over)</sup> The open windows were not enough; suddenly the groom began to perspire in his beautifully cut black suit. Anger shot through him like a .32 bullet. Why was everybody using his wedding, messing up his ceremony, to extend a quarrel he could care less about? He wanted it over. Over and done with so his uncles would shut up; so Jeff and Fleet would stop spreading lies about him, so he could take his place among the married and propertied men of Ruby, so he could burn all those letters from Arnette. But especially so he could flush that Gigi bitch out of his life completely. Like sugar turning from unreasonable delight to the body's mortal enemy, his craving for her had poisoned him, rendered him diabetic, stupid, helpless. Following months of risky sweetness, she had become indifferent, bored, even hateful. In tall corn he had waited for her; in moonlight he had crept behind hen houses to meet her; spent money that was not his to entertain her; lied to get something other than a truck to drive her; planted a marajuana crop for her; carried ice in

1 Citizens  
~~people~~ were already  
unnerved by this  
wedding because buzzards  
had been seen flying  
north.



August heat to cool the inside of her thighs; bought her a <sup>portable radio</sup> transistor she adored, a chenille robe she laughed at. Most of all he had loved her, an aching, humiliating, self-loathing love that drifted from pining to stealth.

He had read the first letter he got from Arnette, but the others he put in a shoe box in his aunt's jam closet and was in a hurry to destroy them (or maybe even read them) before anybody discovered the eleven unopened envelopes posted from Langston, Oklahoma. He assumed they were all about love and grief, love in spite of grief. Whatever. But what could Arnette know of either the way he did? Had she sat through the night in a copse of shin oak to catch a glimpse? Had she trailed a beat up Cadillac all the way to Demby just to see? Had she been thrown out of a house by women? Cursed by women? And still, still been unable to stay away? Not, that is, until his uncles sat him down and gave him the law and its consequences.

So here he was, standing at the altar, his elbow holding the thin <sup>in his pocket</sup> wrist of his bride; aware of the heavy breathing <sup>He was of pain</sup> at his right of his soon-to-be brother-in-law; and the animosity of Billie Delia burrowing into the back of his head. He was certain it would go on forever, this blocked rage, because Misner seemed to be struck dumb by the cross

\*for protection  
the folded of Easter  
palm his bride had given him



he held.

A cross the bride gazed at in terror. And she had been so happy. At last so very very happy. Free of the bleak sadness that encased her as soon as she was home from college: the unrelenting suffocation in her parents' house; the brand new disgust that accompanied the care of her broken niece<sup>s</sup> and nephew<sup>s</sup>; the need for sleep that alarmed her mother, annoyed her sister-in-law and infuriated her brother and father; the flat out nothing-to-do-ness interrupted only by wonder and worry about K.D. Although he had never answered her first twelve letters, she'd kept on writing, but not mailing, forty more. One a week for the whole first year she was away. She believed she loved him absolutely because he was all she knew about her self--which was to say, everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Delia, no one told her there was any other way to think of herself. Not her mother; not her sister-in-law. When, during her senior year, she came home for Easter, he asked to see her, came twice for dinner, took her to <sup>DuPuis'</sup> Steward's ranch to help with the Children's Day picnic, and then suggested they get married it was a miracle that lasted all spring down to this brilliant day in April. Everything perfect: her period had

fix  
come and gone; her gown, made entirely of Soane Morgan's lace, was heavenly; the gold band tucked into her brother's vest was engraved with both their initials intertwined. The hole in her heart had closed finally, and now, at the last minute, the preacher was rocking strange, trying to hold up the marriage, delay, maybe even destroy it. Standing there, his <sup>face like granite</sup> eyes like bullets, holding a cross as though nobody had ever seen one before. She pressed her fingers into the arm that held hers, willing Misner to get on with it. Say it, say it! "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here... We are gathered here." Suddenly, soundlessly, in the muffled silence that Misner imposed, a tiny rent opened in exactly the place where her heart's hole had been. She held her breath and felt its increase, like a run in a stocking. Soon the little heart tear would yawn, stretch wide, wider sapping all her strength until it got what it needed to seal and permit the heart to go on beating. She was acquainted with it, thought marrying K.D. would permanently heal it, but now, waiting for "We are gathered here...", anxious for "Do you take this...", she knew better. Knew exactly what was and would always be missing.

Say it, please, she whispered. And hurry. Hurry. I've got things to do.



Billie Delia shifted her bouquet from her left hand to her right. Tiny thorns pricked through her white cotton gloves and the freesia blossoms were closing as she knew they would. Only the tea roses remained sturdy with promises you could count on to be kept. She had suggested baby's breath to compliment the yellow buds, but was astonished to find that not one garden had any. No baby's breath anywhere. Then, yarrow, she said, but the bride refused to carry to her wedding a weed that cattle ate. So there they were, both of them, holding water hungry freesia and tea roses improperly de-thorned. Other than the damage being done to her palms, the wait Reverend Misner was forcing on everybody did not bother or surprise her. It was just one more piece of foolishness that made up this foolish wedding that everybody thought was a ceasefire. But the battle was not between the Morgans, the Fleetwoods and those who sided with either. It was true that Jeff had taken to carrying a gun; that Steward Morgan and Arnold Fleetwood had shouted at each other in the street; that people wandered into Anna Flood's back room to lounge in Menus' barber shop not for hair cuts but to grunt and sigh over the rumor of an outrage that had taken place out at the Convent;

that based on this gossip Reverend Pulliam had preached a sermon taken from Jerimiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you ." Reverend Misner countered with the Beatitudes. "...the greatest of these is love." But to Billie Delia the real battle was not about infant life or a bride's reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foal. Senior Pulliam had scripture and history on his side. Misner had scripture and the future on his. Now, she supposed, he was making the world wait until it understood his position.

Billie Delia lowered her gaze from Misner's searching eyes to the heavy lace on the bride's head to the back of the groom's neck and thought immediately of a horse she once loved. Although it was the groom who held in his name the memory of a legendary horse race, it was she whose life had been maimed by it. Hard Goods, the winning horse that K.D. had ridden when Ruby was founded, belonged to old Mr. Nathan. Years after that race but before she could walk, Nathan had hoisted her on Hard Goods' bare back which she rode with such glee it made every body laugh. From then on, every month or so, when he came in town on errands, he unsaddled the horse and led it

*Duffies*



around the schoolyard next to her house, holding her waist with the palm of his hand. "Mount up these children," he would say. "Need more horsewomen in this land. Everybody crying for a motor car better mount up they children early! Hard Goods ain't never had a flat!" It continued until Billie Delia was three years old--too little, still, for everyday underwear and nobody noticed or cared how perfect her skin felt against that wide expanse of rhythmically moving animal flesh. While she struggled to grip Hard Goods with her ankles, the grown ups smiled taking pleasure in her pleasure while calling Nathan <sup>Dupres</sup> a retrograde Negro who needed to learn how to shift gears so he could get somewhere on time. Then one day. A Sunday. Hard Goods came loping down the street with <sup>Mr.</sup> Nathan astride. Billie Delia, who hadn't seen horse or rider for a long time, ran toward them begging for a ride. Nathan promised to stop by after Service. Still in her Sunday clothes she waited in her yard. When she saw him coming, negotiating space among the after church crowd, she ran out into the middle of Center Street where she pulled down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto to Hard Goods' back.

Things seemed to crumple after that. She got an unintelligible whipping from her mother and a dose of shame it took her years to

understand. That's when the teasing began, more merciless because her mother was the teacher. Suddenly there was a dark light in the eyes of boys who felt comfortable staring at her. Suddenly a curious bracing in the women, a looking-away look in the men. And a permanent watchfulness in her mother. <sup>Mr.</sup> Old Nathan <sup>did not make</sup> ~~never~~ made her another offer. Hard Goods was lost to her forever, remembered publicly as the horse that won the race with K.D. on his back, privately as the recipient of a little girl's sin. Only Mrs. Dovey Morgan and her sister Soane treated her with easy kindness, and if it had not been for Anna Flood's return her teens would have been unlivable. Nor did Anna or the Morgan ladies make her feel the freakishness of being an only child--perhaps because they had few or no children themselves. Most families boasted nine, eleven, even fifteen children. And it was inevitable that she and Arnette, who had no sisters and just one brother, become best friends.

She knew people took her for the wild one, the one who from the beginning not only had no qualms about pressing her nakedness on a horse's back, but preferred it, would drop her drawers in public on Sunday just to have the thrill of it. Although it was Arnette who had sex at fourteen (with the groom) Billie Delia carried its burden.



She quickly learned the cautionary look in the eyes of girls whose mothers had warned her away from Billie Delia. In fact she was untouched. So far. So far. Being helplessly in love with a pair of brothers, the virginity that no one believed existed had become as mute as the cross Reverend Misner was holding aloft

Now his eyes were closed. His jaw muscles working overtime. He held the cross as though it were a hammer he was trying not to bring down lest it hurt somebody. Billie Delia wished he would open his eyes again, look at the groom and bust him over the head with it. But no. That would embarrass <sup>the</sup> and bride who had won, finally, the husband her bridesmaid despised. A husband who had propositioned Billie Delia before and after his thing with Arnette. A husband who, while Arnette was away, had forgotten all about her and chased any dress whose wearer was under fifty. A husband who had left his future bride pregnant and on her own. Billie Delia had never heard of such a thing. Any girl who got pregnant in Ruby could count on marriage--whether the boy was eager or not because he still had to live near her family and with his own. But not this groom. This groom let the bride suffer for three years and only consented to a wedding when he was kicked out of another woman's bed. Kicked so hard he

couldn't get to the altar fast enough. She remembered vividly the day the kicker had arrived in shoes already designed for the groom's behind. Billie Delia's hatred of the strange looking girl was instant and would have been eternal had she not take refuge in the Convent herself one chilly October Day after a quarrel with her mother turned ugly. Her mother fought her like a man that day. She had run to Anna Flood who told her to wait upstairs while she dealt with some delivery man business. Billie Delia cried alone for what seemed like hours, licking her split lip and touching the swelling under her eye. When she spied Apollo's truck, she slipped down the back stairs and, while he was buying soda pop, she got into the cab. Neither of them knew what to do. Apollo offered to take her out to his family's place. But, ashamed of having to explain her face to his parents and put up with the stares of any one of his thirteen brothers and sisters, she asked him to drive her out to the Convent. That was the fall of 1973. What she saw and learned there changed her forever. Agreeing to be Arnette's bridesmaid was the last sentimental thing she would ever do in Ruby. She got a job in Demby, bought a car and probably would have driven it to St. Louis except for her helpless double love.



[ With or without chaw in his mouth, Steward was not a patient man. So he was surprised to find himself calm watching Misner's behavior. All around and in back of him the congregation had begun to murmur, exchange looks, but Steward, believing he was less confounded than they were, did neither in spite of no soothing wad of tobacco. As a small boy he had listened to Big Daddy describe a sixty-five mile journey he'd taken to bring supplies back to Haven. It was 1920. A sickness called rocking pneumonia gripped Haven and Big Daddy was one of the few able bodies able to go. He went alone. On horseback. He got what he needed in X County and, with the medicines bundled under his coat, the other supplies tied to the horse, he lost his way and found himself after sunset unsure of which way to go. He smelled, but could not see, a campfire that seemed to be fairly close by on his left. Then, suddenly, to his right he heard whoops, music and gunshots. But he saw no lights in that direction. Stuck in darkness with invisible strangers on both sides he had to decide whether to ride toward the smoke and meat smells or toward the music and guns. Or neither. The campfire might be warming robbers; the music might be amusing lynchers. His horse decided. Smelling others of its kind it trotted toward the campfire. There Big Daddy

found three Sac and Fox men sitting near a fire hidden in a hole. He dismounted, approached carefully, hat in hand, and said "Evening." The men welcomed him and learning of his destination warned him against entering the town. The women there fight with their fists, they said; the children are drunk; the men don't argue or debate, but speak only with firearms; liquor laws don't apply. They had come to rescue a family member, who had been drinking in there for twelve days. Already one of them was searching for him. What's the name of the town Big Daddy asked. Pura Sangre they answered. At its northern edge was a sign: No Niggers. At its southern edge a cross. Big Daddy spent several hours with them and, before light, thanked them and left--backtracking to find his way home. When Steward heard the story the first time he could not close his mouth, thinking of that moment when his grandfather was all alone in the dark, guns to the right, strangers to the left. But the grown ups laughed and thought of something else. "No niggers at one end; a cross at the other and the devil loose in between." Steward didn't get it. How could the devil be anywhere near a cross? What was the connection between the two signs? Since that time, however, he had seen crosses between the titties of whores; military crosses spread for



miles; crosses on fire in negro<sup>e</sup>' yards, crosses tattoed on the forearms of dedicated killers. He had seen a cross dangling from the rear view mirror of a carfull of whites come to insult the little girls of Ruby. Whatever Misner was thinking, he was wrong. A cross was no better than the bearer. Now he fingered his mustache aware of his twin shifting his feet getting ready to grab the pew in front of him to put a stop to Misner's behavior.

Soane, sitting next to Deek, listening to his heavy breathing, understood how grave her mistake. She was about to touch her husband on the arm to caution him from rising when Misner lowered the cross at last, and spoke the opening words of the ceremony. Deek sat back and cleared his sinuses, but the damage was done. They were right back where they started when Jefferson Fleetwood pulled a gun on K.D.; when Menus had to interrupt a pushing match between Steward and Arnold. And Mable had sent no cake to the All Church Bake Sale. The peace and goodwill summoned by the announcement of the marriage were now shattered. The reception at her house would be a further digest of the problem and, most disturbing and unbeknownst to others, Soane had made the mistake of inviting

Connie and the Convent women to the wedding reception. She was about to hostess one of the biggest messes Ruby had ever seen. When finally Kate Golightly touched the organ keys, and the couple turned around to face the congregation, Soane cried. Partly at the sad bright smiles of the bride and groom, partly in dread of the malice, set roaming now, and on its way to her house.

*Is that what the buzzards meant? That no matter what, this marriage would fix nothing. I*

It had long been noticed that the Morgan brothers seldom spoke to or looked at each other. Some believed it was because they were jealous of one another; that their views only seemed to be uniform; that down deep was a mutual resentment which surfaced in small ways: in their automobile arguments, for example. One's fierce preference for Chevrolets, the other's stubborn defense of Oldsmobiles. In fact the brothers not only agreed on almost everything, they were in eternal if silent conversation. Each knew the other's thoughts as well as he knew his face, and only once in a while needed the confirmation of a glance.

Now they stood in different rooms of Deek's house thinking the same thing. Fortunately, Misner was late, Menus sober, Pulliam triumphant and Jeff pre-occupied with Sweetie. Mabel, who had



attended the ceremony, had relieved her daughter-in-law for the reception. The wedding couple were in line--glazed smiles in place, but in line nevertheless. Reverend Carey--soothing and jovial--was the best bet for keeping things steady. He and his wife Lily were *treasured* ~~loved~~ for their duets, and if they could get some music going....

Steward opened the piano while Deek moved through the guests. As he passed Pulliam, nodding and smiling with Sweetie and Jeff, Deek gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. In the dining room the food table drew appreciative murmurs but as yet no takers but the children. The coos over the gift table seemed strained, excessive. Steward waited at the piano his steel gray hair and innocent eyes in perfect balance. The children around him shone like agate; the women were brillinat but quiet in their still fresh Easter clothes; the men's squeaky new shoes glistened like melon seeds. Everyone was stiff--overly polite. Deek must be having trouble persuading the Cary's, he thought. Steward reached for tobacco silently urging his twin to try somebody else--the male chorus, Kate Golightly--quick before Pulliam took it in his head to pray them back into battle stations or, Lord help us, Jeff would start reciting his U.A. grievances. Once that started his next target would be K.D. who had never served in the military.

Where is Soane, he wondered. Steward could see Dovey unpinning the veil from the bride's hair and <sup>allowed himself a glance to</sup> ~~his innocent eyes~~ enjoyed his wife's figure ~~once more~~. In anything, Sunday dress, white church uniform or even his own bathrobe the look of her body made him smile with satisfaction. But Deek was cautioning him now about distraction, so Steward left off admiring Dovey and saw the success of his brother's efforts. Kate came toward the piano and sat down. She flexed her fingers and began to play. First a preparatory trill, accompanied by friendly coughs and murmurs of anticipation. Then Reverend and Lily Cary arrived, humming, humming while they considered what to begin with. They were a third of the way into [tk]. Smiles had turned toward the direction of the music when they heard the hornblast of an ancient Cadillac.

Connie did not come, but her boarders did. Mavis drove the Cadillac with Gigi and Seneca in the back and a somebody new in the passenger seat. None of them was dressed for a wedding. They piled out of the car looking like Go-go girls: painted eyes, no lipstick, obviously no underwear, no stockings. Jezebel's storehouse raided to decorate arms, earlobes, necks, ankles and even a nostril. Mavis and



Soane greeting each other on the lawn were uncomfortable. Two other women sauntered into the dining room and surveyed the food tables. They said "Hi" and wondered aloud if there was anything other than lemonade and punch to drink. There wasn't, so they did what a few other young people had already done: drifted out of the Morgan's yard and strolled past Anna Flood's store to the Oven. The few local girls already there clumped together and withdrew to the oak tree, leaving the territory to the Poole boys: Apollo, Brood and Hurston. To the Seawrights: Timothy and Spider. To Destry, Vane and Roy. Menus joined them, but Jeff, to whom he had been speaking, did not. Neither did the watching groom. Dovey was removing the fat from a <sup>lamb</sup> ~~ham~~ slice when the music hit. She cut her finger in the blare and sucked it when Otis Redding screamed "Awwwww, lil girl...." obliterating [tk] Inside, outside and on down the road the beat and the heat were <sup>ruthless</sup> merciless.

The Convent women are dancing, throwing their arms over their heads they do this and that and then the other. They <sup>grin</sup> smile and yip but look at no one, just their own rocking bodies. The local girls look over their shoulders and snort. Brood, Apollo and Spider, steel muscled farm boys, sway and snap their fingers. Hurston sings

accompaniment. Two small girls ride their bikes over; wide-eyed they watch the dancing women. One of them, with amazing hair, asks can she borrow a bike. Then another. They ride the bikes down Central Street with no regard for what the breeze does to their long flowered skirts, or how pumping pedals plumped their breasts. One coasts with her ankles on the handlebars. Another rode the handlebars with Brood on the seat behind her. <sup>in the world's shortest shorts is</sup> One <sup>^</sup> seated on a bench ~~has wrapped~~ <sup>wrapped</sup> her arms around herself <sup>She</sup> and looks drunk. Are they all? The boys laugh.

Anna and Kate carried their plates to the edge of Soane's garden.

"Which one?" whispered Anna.

"That one there" said Kate. "The one with the rag for a blouse."

"That's a halter," said Anna.

"Halter? Looks like a starter to me."

"She the one K.D. was messing with?"

"Yep."

"I know that one there. She comes in the store. Who the other two?"

"Beats me."

"Look. There goes Billie Delia."



"Naturally."

"Oh, come on, Kate. Leave Billie alone."

They spooned potato salad into their mouths. Behind them ~~came~~  
Lily Cary <sup>came</sup> murmuring "My, my, my, my, my."

<sup>Aunt</sup>  
"Hello, Lily," said Kate.

"Have you ever in your life seen such carrying on? Bet you can't locate one brassier in the whole bunch." Lily held the crown of her hat in the breeze. "Why you all smiling? I don't think this <sup>is</sup> the least bit funny."

"No. Course not," said Kate.

"This is a wedding, remember?"

<sup>Aunt</sup>  
"You right, Lily. I said you right."

"How would you like to have somebody dancing nasty at your wedding?" Lily's hazel eyes searched Anna's hair.

Kate nodded sympathetically while pressing her lips tightly so no smile could seep through them. Anna tried to look seriously affronted before this stern preacher's wife, thinking "Dear, Jesus, I wouldn't last an hour in this town if I married Richard."

"I'm going to have to get Pastor to stop this," Lily said and moved resolutely off toward Soane's house.

Anna and Kate waited several beats before setting their laughter free. Whatever else, thought Anna, the Convent women had saved the day. Nothing like other folks' sins for distraction. The young people were wrong. We Are the Furrow of Her Brow. Speaking of which, where was Richard anyway?

Down on his knees, Richard Misner was angry at his anger, and at his mishandling of it. Used to obstacles, adept at disagreement, he could not reconcile the level of his present fury with what seemed to be its source. He ~~deeply~~ respected his colleagues. For centuries they had held on. Preaching, shouting, dancing, singing, absorbing, arguing, counseling, pleading, commanding. Their passion burned or smoldered like lava over a land that had waged war against them and their flock without surcease. A lily-livered war without honor as either its point or reward; an unprincipled war that thrived as much on the victor's cowardice as his mendacity. On stage and in print he and his brethren had been the heart of comedy, the chosen backs for parody's knife. They were cursed by death row inmates, derided by pimps. Begrudged even miserly collection plates. Yet through all of that, if the Spirit seemed to be slipping away they had held on to it with their



teeth if they had to, grabbed it in their fists if need be. They took it to buildings ready to be condemned, to churches from which white congregations had fled, to tents, to logs in clearings. Whispered it in cabins lit by moonlight lest the Law see. Prayed for it in sod houses their voices undaunted by roaring winds. From Abbysinian to store fronts, from Pilgrim Baptist to abandoned movie houses; in polished shoes, worn boots, beat up cars and Lincoln Continentals, well fed or mal nourished their light, flickering low or blazing like a comet, pierced the darkness of days. They wiped white folks' spit from the faces of black children, hid strangers from posses and police, relayed life-preserving information faster than the newspaper and better than the radio. At sickbeds they looked death in the eye and mouth. They pressed the heads of weeping mothers to their shoulders before conducting their life-gouged daughters to the cemetary. They wept for chain gangs, reasoned with magistrates. Made whole congregations scream. In ecstasy. In belief. That death was *life*, don't you know, and *every* life, don't you know, was holy, don't you know, in His eyesight. Rocked as they were by <sup>the sight of</sup> evil, its snout was familiar to them. Real wonder, however, lay in the amazing shapes and substances God's grace took. [tk/ex]

*Richard Misner*

He knew all that. Yet, however intact that knowledge and respect, the tremor inside him now was violent. Pulliam had fingered a membrane enclosing a ravenous appetite for vengeance, an appetite he needed to understand in order to subdue. Had the times finally gotten to him? Was the desolation that rose after King's murder, a desolation that climbed like a tidal wave in slow motion, just now washing over him? Or was it the calamity of watching the drawn out abasement of a noxious president? Had the strangely unintelligible war infected him? Behaving like a dormant virus in blossom now that it was coming to a raggedy close? His whole high school football team died in that war. Nineteen broad-backed boys. They were the ones he looked up to, wanted to be like. Was he just now gagging at their futile death? Was that the origin of this incipient hunger for violence?

Or was it Ruby?

What was it about this town, these people that enraged him? They were different from other communities in only a couple of ways: beauty and isolation. All of them were handsome, some exceptionally so. All of them maintained an icy suspicion of outsiders. Otherwise they were like all small black communities : protective, God-loving.



thrifty but not miserly. They saved and spent; liked money in the bank and nice things too. When he arrived he thought their flaws were normal; their disagreements ordinary. They were pleased by the accomplishments of their neighbors and their mockery of the lazy and the loose was full of laughter. Or used to be. Now, it seemed, the glacial wariness they once confined to strangers more and more was directed to each other. Had he contributed to it? He could not help but admit that without his presence there would probably be no contention; no painted fists, no quarrels about <sup>MISSING</sup> the language on an oven's lip. No warnings about meetings he held with a dozen or so young people. Certainly no public, let alone physical antagonism between businessmen. And absolutely no runaways. No drinking. Even acknowledging his part in the town's unraveling, Misner was dissatisfied. Why such stubbornness, such venom against asserting rights, claiming a wider role in the affairs of black people? They, of all people knew the necessity of unalloyed will; the rewards of courage and singlemindedness. Of all people they understood the mechanisms of wresting power. Didn't they?

Over and over and with the least provocation they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and

great grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though rather than children, they wanted duplicates.

Misner was hoping for answers down there on his knees. Not a growing catalogue of questions. So he did what he was accustomed to doing: asked Him to come along as he struck out, late and agitated, for the wedding reception. Being in His company quieted anger. As he left the parsonage and turned into Center Street he could hear the light breathing of his companion, but no word of advice or consolation. He was passing the Drugstore when he saw a crowd gathered near the Oven. From it, in a burst of tune-up-needy engine roar, shot a Cadillac. In less than a minute it passed him, and he recognized two Convent women among the passengers. By the time he got to the Morgan's yard, the crowd had dispersed. The sugar-drunk children were racing and tumbling with Steward's collies. The Oven was deserted. The instant he stepped inside Soane and Deek's house he could see that all was algow. Menus came forward to



embrace him. Pulliam, Arnold and Deek interrupted their deep conversation to shake his hand. The Carey's were singing a duet--a chorus backing them. So he was not startled to see Jeff Fleetwood laughing pleasantly with the very man he had drawn a gun on some weeks ago--the freshly married groom. Only the bride looked askew.

The silence in the Cadillac was not an embarrassed one. None of the passengers had high expectations of men in suits so they were not surprised to be asked to leave the premises. "Give these little girls their bicycles back," said one. "Get on out of here," said another through a mouthful of tobacco. The younger men who had laughed and cheered them on were ordered away without words. Just a look and a head movement from a man seven feet tall. Nor were they angry about the dismissal--slightly put out, maybe, but not seriously. One<sup>of them</sup>, the driver, had never seen a man who didn't look like an unlit explosion. Another, in the front passenger seat, considered the boring sexual images she had probably incited and re-committed herself to making tracks to somewhere else. A third, who had really been having fun, sat in the back seat thinking that although she knew

what anger looked like, she had no idea what it might feel like. She always did what she was told, so when the man said "Give these little girls..." she did it with a smile. The fourth passenger was grateful for the expulsion. This was her second day at the Convent and the third day of having said not one word to anybody. Except today when <sup>Billie Delia</sup> ~~the~~ girl came to stand near her.

"You all right?" She wore a soft blue gown and instead of the shower cap had tiny yellow roses <sup>pinned</sup> ~~braided~~ into her hair. "Pallas? You Okay?"

<sup>Pallas</sup> She nodded and tried not to shiver.

"You're safe out there, but I'll come by to see if you need anything, all right?"

"Yes," Pallas whispered. Then, "Thanks."

<sup>there</sup> So she had opened her lips a tiny bit to say two words and no black water had seeped in. The cold still shook her bones, but the dark water had receded. For now. At night, of course, it would return and she would be back in it--trying not to think about what swam below her neck. It was the top of the water she concentrated on and the flashlight licking the edge, then darting further out over the black glimmer. Hoping, hoping the things touching below were



sweet little gold fish like the ones in the bowl her father bought her when she was five. Or guppies, angels. Not alligators or snakes. This was a lake not a swamp or the aquarium at the San Diego zoo.

Floating over the water the whispers were closer than their calls: "Here pussy. Here pussy. Kitty, kitty, kitty" sounded far away; but 'Gimme the flash, dickface, iszat her, let go, maybe she drowned, no way" slid into the skin behind her ears.

Pallas stared out of the window at a sky so steady, landscape so featureless she had no sense of being in a moving car. The smell of Gigi's bubble gum mixed with her cigarette smoke was nauseating.

"Here pussy. Here." Pallas had heard that before. A lifetime ago on the happiest day of her life. On the escalator. Last Christmas. The crazy woman whom she could see now in greater detail than when first sighted.

The hair at the top of her head, sectioned off with a red plastic barret, would have been a small pompdour or a curl had it been longer than two or three inches. In the event, it was neither. Just a tuft held rigid by the child's barret. Two other hair clips, one yellow, one powder blue, also held fingerfuls of hair at her temples. Her dark velvet face was on display and rendered completely unseen by the

biscuit size discs of scarlet rouge, the fuschia lipstick drawn crookedly beyond the rim of her lips, the black eyebrow pencil that trailed down toward her cheekbones. Everything else about her was dazzle and clunk: white plastic earrings, copper bracelets, pastel beads at her throat and much, much more where all that came from in the bags she carried: two BOAC carrier bags and a woven metal purse shaped like a cigar box. She wore a white cotton halter and a little bitty red skirt. The hose on her short legs, a cinnamon color thought agreeable to black women's legs, was as much a study in running as her high heels were in run-over. Inner arm skin and a small, sturdy paunch suggested she was about <sup>forty</sup> fifty years old, but she could have been <sup>fifty</sup> eighty or thirty. The dance she danced on the up escalator, the rolling hips, the sway of her head called to mind a by gone era of slow grind in a badly lit room of couples. Not the electric go-go pace of 1974. The teeth could have been done anywhere: Kingston, Jamaica or Pass Partner, Louisiana; Addis Abbaba or Warsaw. Stunning gold, they dated her smile while giving it the seriousness the rest of her clothing withheld.

Most eyes looked away from her--down at the floating metal steps under foot or out at the Christmas decorations enlivening the



department store. Children, however, and Pallas Truelove stared.

California Christmasses are always a treat and this one promised to be a marvel. Brilliant skies and heat turned up the gloss of artificial snow, plumped the green and gold, pink and silver wreaths. Pallas, laden with packages, just managed to avoid tripping off the down escalator. She didn't understand why the woman with the rouge and gold teeth fascinated her. They had nothing in common. The earrings that hung from Pallas' lobes were 18 carat; the boots on her feet were handmade; her jeans custom made and the buckle on her leather belt was handsomely worked silver.

(

Pallas had stumbled off the esclator in a light panic, rushing to the doors outside of which Carlos was waiting for her. The revolting woman's singsong merged with the carols piping throughout the store: "Here's pussy. Want some pussy, pussy."

"Maaa-vis!"

Mavis wouldn't look at her. Gigi always uglified up her name, pulling it out like a string of her sticky bubblegum.

"Can't you go over ten miles an hour? Cha-rist!"

"Car needs a new fan belt. And I'm not going to take it over forty," said Mavis,

"Ten. Forty. It's like walking." Gigi sighed.

"~~No it ain't~~. Maybe I'll just pull over here and let you see what walking's like. Want me to?"

"Don't <sup>fuck</sup> play with me. Drag me out to that bumper-- did you see that guy, Sen? <sup>Menus.</sup> The one who shit himself when he stayed with us?"

Seneca nodded. "He didn't say anything mean though."

"He didn't stop them, either," said Gigi. "All that puke, that shit I cleaned up."

"Connie said he could stay. And we all cleaned it," said Mavis, "not just you. And nobody dragged you. You didn't have to go."

"He had the DT's, for crying out loud."

"Close your window, please, Mavis?" Seneca asked.

"Too much wind back there"?

"She's shaking again. I think she's cold."

"It's ninety degrees! What the hell is the matter with her?" Gigi scanned the trembling girl.

"Should I stop?" asked Mavis. "She might throw up again."

"No, don't stop. I'll hold her." Seneca arranged Pallas in her



arms, rubbing the goose-bumpy arms. "Maybe she's car sick. I thought the party would cheer her up some. Look<sup>s</sup> like it made her worse."

"That stupid, fucked-up town make anybody puke. I can't believe that's what they call a party. Hymns!" Gigi laughed.

"It was a wedding party, not a disco." Mavis wiped the perspiration forming under her neck. "Besides you just wanted to see your love pony again."

"That asshole?"

"Yeah. Him." Mavis smiled. "Now he's married you want him back."

"If I want him back I can get him back. What I want is to leave this fucking place."

"You've been saying that for four years, right Sen?"

Gigi opened her mouth, then paused. Was it four? She thought two. But at least two were spent fooling around with K.D., the ~~nut~~<sup>prick</sup>. Had she let him keep her that long promising to get enough money to take her away? Or was it some other promise that kept her there? Of trees entwined behind cascading water. "Yeah, well now I'm for real," she told Mavis, and hoped she really was.

After a grunt of disbelief from Mavis, the car was silent again. Pallas let her head rest on Seneca's breasts wishing they were gone and that instead Carlos' hard smooth chest supported her cheek as it had whenever she wanted for seventeen hundred miles. Her sixteenth birthday gift, a red Toyota with a built-in eight track tape deck was crammed with Christmas presents. Things anybody's mother would like, but duplicates, a wider variety because she couldn't take a chance on having nothing that would please a woman she had not seen in thirteen years. Driving off with Carlos' at the wheel just before Christmas was a holiday trip to see her mother. Not running away from her father; not eloping with the coolest most gorgeous man in the world.

Everything had been carefully planned: items were hidden, movements camouflaged lest Providence the eagle-eyed housekeeper or her brother Jerome see. Her father wasn't around enough to notice anything. He was a lawyer with a small client list but two were big-time, cross-over black entertainers. As long as Milton Truelove kept them on top, he didn't need to acquire more, although he kept a look-out eye for other young performers who might hit the charts and stay there.



With Carlos' help it was as easy as it was exciting: the lies told to her girl friends had to be cemented; the items left behind had to signal return, not escape (driver's license, a duplicate, her teddy bears, watch, toiletries, jewelry, credit cards). This last made it necessary to do massive check cashing and shopping on the very day they drove away. She wanted to buy more, much more, for Carlos, but he insisted otherwise. He never took presents from her in all the time she knew him--four months. Wouldn't even let her buy meals. He would close his beautiful eyes and shake his head as though her offer saddened him. Pallas had met him in the school parking lot the day her Toyota wouldn't start. Actually met him that day but had seen him many times. He was the movie-star looking maintenance man at her high school. All the girls went creamy over him. The day he pressed the accelerator to the floor, telling Pallas her gasline was flooded, was the beginning. He offered to follow her home in his Ford to make sure she didn't stall out again. She didn't and he waved goodbye. Pallas brought him a present --an album--the next day and had trouble making him accept it. "Only if you let me buy you a chili dog," he said. Pallas' mouth had gone felt with the thrill of it all. They saw each other every weekend after that. She did everything

she could think of to get him to make love to her. He responded passionately to their necking, but never allowed more. He was the one who said "When we are married."

Carlos was not a janitor, really. He sculpted, and when Pallas told him about her painter mother and where she lived, he smiled and said it was a perfect place for an artist. It just fell into place. Carlos could leave his job with little outcry during the holidays. Milton Truelove would be extra-busy with clients' parties, show-case concerts and television deals. Pallas searched through years of birthday and Christmas cards from her mother for the most recent address and the lovers were off without a hitch or a cloud. Except for the crazy <sup>black</sup> woman ruining the Christmas carols.

Pallas snuggled Seneca's breasts which, although uncomfortable, diluted the chill racking her. The women in the front seats were quarelling again in high pitched voices that hurt her head.

"Exhibitionist bitch! Soane is a friend of ours. What do I tell her now?"

"She's Connie's friend. Nothing to do with you."

"I'm the one sell her the peppers, make up her tonic...."

"Only when Connie's drunk."



**"Keep your nasty mouth off her. She never drank till you came."**

**"That's what you say. She even sleeps in the wine cellar."**

**"Her bedroom is down there! You <sup>are</sup> such a fool."**

**"She's not a maid anymore. She could sleep upstairs if she wanted. She just wants to be close to that liquor is all."**

**"God I hate your guts."**

**Seneca intervened in a soft voice designed for harmony.**

**"Connie's not drunk. She's unhappy. She should have come with us, though. It would have been different."**

**"It was fine. Just fine!" said Gigi. "Til those fucking preacher types came over." She lit a fresh cigarette from a dying one.**

**"Can't you stop smoking for two minutes?" Mavis asked.**

**"No!"**

**"Don't see what that nigger ever saw in you," Mavis continued.**

**"Or maybe I do since you can't seem to keep it covered."**

**"Jealous?"**

**"Like hell."**

**Like hell like hell.  
"Yes ~~you are~~. Nobody's fucked you in ten years, you dried up husk."**

**"Get out!" Mavis screamed braking the car. "Get the hell out of**

my car!"

"You gonna make me? ~~You~~<sup>U</sup> touch me I'll tear your face off," Gigi hissed. "You fucking felon!" and she rammed her cigarette into Mavis' arm.

They couldn't fight really well in the space available, but they tried. Seneca held Pallas in her arms and watched. Once she used to separate them, but now she knew better. When they were exhausted they'd stop and peace would reign longer than if she interfered. Gigi knew Mavis' touchy parts: anything insulting to Connie and any reference to her fugitive state. On her last trip Mavis learned from her mother of the warrant posted for her arrest for grand larceny, abandonment and suspicion of murdering two of her children.

The Cadillac rocked. Gigi was scrappy but vain--she didn't want bruises or scratches to mar her pretty face and she worried constantly about her hair. Mavis was slow but a steady, joyful hitter. When Gigi saw blood she assumed it was her own and scrambled from the car, Mavis scooting after her. Under a metal hot sky absent even one arrow of birds they fought on the road and its shoulder.

Pallas sat up, mesmerized by the bodies roiling dust and crushing weeds. Intent bodies unaware of any watcher under a blank



sky in Oklahoma or a painted one in Mehita, New Mexico. Months after Dee Dee's <sup>Truelove's</sup> excited hugs and kisses; months of <sup>(f)</sup>marveling at the spectacular scenery outside her mother's windows; months of eating wonderful food; after months of artist talk among Dee dee's friends--all kinds of artists: Indians, New Yorkers, old people, hippies, Mexicans, blacks. And months of talk among the three of them, at night under stars Pallas thought only Disney made. "This is where I belong," Carlos said, sighing deeply. "This is the home I've been looking for." His face, moon-drenched, made Pallas' heart stand. Her mother yawned. "Of course it is," said Dee Dee Truelove. Carlos yawned too, and right then she should have seen it--the simultaneous yawns, the settling-in voices. Should have calculated the arithmetic-- Carlos was closer in age to Dee Dee than to her. Had she noticed perhaps she could have prevented the grappling bodies exchanging moans in the grass, unmindful of any watcher. Then there would have been no stupified run to the Toyota, no blind drive on roads without destinations, no bumping, side-swiping trucks. No water with soft things touching beneath.

Feeling again the tickle and stroke of tentacles, of invisible <sup>fighting women spectacle</sup> scales, Pallas turned away from the ~~car window~~ and lifted her arm to

circle Seneca's neck and press her face deeper into that tiny bosom.

Seneca alone saw the truck approach. The driver slowed, maybe to get around the Cadillac hogging the road, maybe to offer help, but he stayed long enough to see outlaw women rolling on the ground, dresses torn, secret flesh on display. And see also two other women embracing in the back seat. For long moments his eyes were wide. Then he shook his head and gunned the motor of his truck.

Finally Gigi and Mavis lay gasping. One then the other sat up to touch herself, to inventory her wounds. Gigi searched for the shoe she had lost; Mavis for the elastic that had held her hair. Wordlessly they returned to the car. Mavis drove with one hand. Gigi stuck a cigarette in the good side of her mouth.

In 1922 the white laborers had laughed among themselves--a big stone house in the middle of nothing. The Indians had not. In mean weather with firewood a sacrilege in tree scarce country, coal expensive, cow chips foul, the mansion seemed to them a demented notion. The embezzler had ordered tons of coal--none of which he got to <sup>we</sup> see arrive. The nuns who <sup>took the property over</sup> followed had endurance, kerosene and layers of exquisitely made habits. But in spring, summer and during some warm autumns the stone walls of the house were a cool



blessing.

Gigi raced up <sup>the</sup> stairs beating Mavis to available bath water. While the plumbing coughed she stripped and looked at herself in the one unpainted mirror. Other than a knee and both elbows, the damage wasn't too bad. Nails broken, of course, but no puffed eye or broken nose. More bruises might show up tomorrow, though. It was the lip swelling around its split that troubled her. With pressure it oozed a trickle of blood and suddenly everybody was running through the streets of Oakland, California. Sirens--<sup>police?</sup> ambulance? firetrucks?--shook the eardrums. A wall of advancing police cut off passage east and west. The runners threw what they brought or could find and fled. She and Mikey were holding hands at first, running down a side street behind a splinter crowd. A street of small houses, lawns. There were no shots--no gunfire at all. Just the musical screams of girls and the steady roar of men in fightface. Sirens, yes, and distant bull horns, but no breaking glass, no body slams, no gunfire. So why did a map of red grow on the little boy's white shirt? She wasn't seeing clearly. The crowd thickened and then stopped, prevented by something ahead. Mikey was several shoulders beyond her, pushing through. Gigi looked again at the boy on the fresh green lawn. He

was so well dressed: bow-tie, white shirt, glossy laced-up shoes. But the shirt was dirty now. He jerked and blood flowed from his mouth. He held his hands out, carefully, to catch it lest it ruin his shoes the way it had already ruined his shirt.

Over a hundred injured the newspaper said, but no mention of gunfire or a shot kid. No mention of a neat little <sup>colored</sup> boy carrying his blood in his hands.

The water trickled into the tub. Gigi put rollers into her hair. Then she got down on her stomach to examine again the progress she had made with the box hidden under the tub. The tile above it was completely dislodged, but the metal box seemed to be cemented in place. Reaching under the tub was the problem. If she'd told K.D. he would have helped her, but then she would have to share the contents. Gold maybe; diamonds, great packets of cash. Whatever it was, it was hers--and Connie's if she wanted some. But no one else.<sup>15</sup> Never Mavis. Seneca wouldn't want any and this latest girl with the splintered-glass eyes and a head thick with curly hair--who knew who or what she was? Gigi stood up, brushed away dust and soil from her skin then stepped into the tub. She sat there going over her options. Connie, she thought. Connie.



In the bathroom at the other end of the hall, an elated Mavis cleaned up at the sink. Then she changed clothes before going down to the kitchen to make supper. Left over chicken, chopped with peppers and onions, tarragon, a sauce of some kind, cheese maybe, and wrapped in that pancake thing Connie had taught her to make. That would please her. She would take a plate of it down to Connie and tell her what happened. Not the fight. That wasn't important. In fact she had enjoyed it. Pounding, pounding, even biting Gigi was exhilarating, just as cooking was. It was more proof that the old Mavis was dead. The one who couldn't defend herself from an eleven year old girl, let alone her husband. The one who couldn't figure out or manage a simple meal, who relied on deli and drive throughs now created crepe-like delicacies without shopping every day.

But she was stung by Gigi's reference to her sexlessness--which was funny in a way. When she and Frank married she did like it. Sort of. Then it became required torture, longer but not much different from being slapped out of her chair. These years at the Convent were free of all that. Still, when the thing came at night she didn't fight it anymore. Once upon a time it had been an occasional nightmare--a lion cub that gnawed her throat. Recently it had taken another form--

-human--and lay on top or approached from the rear. "Incubus," Connie had said. "Fight it with everything you got," she said. But Mavis couldn't or wouldn't. Now she needed to know if what Gigi said about her was the reason she welcomed it. She still heard Merle and Pearl, felt their flutter in every room of the Convent. Perhaps she ought to admit, confess, to Connie that adding the night visits to laughing children and a "mother" who loved her, shaped up like a happy family. Better. When she took Connie her supper, she would tell her about the reception, how Gigi had embarrassed everybody, especially Soane, then ask her what to do about the night visits. Connie would know. Connie.

#  
Norma Fox's cashmere serape came in handy once more. Seneca wrapped it around Pallas and asked if she wanted anything. Water? Something to eat? Pallas signalled no. She can't cry, thought Seneca. The pain was down too far. When it came up, the tears would follow and Seneca wanted Connie to be there when it happened. So she warmed the girl up as best she could, tried to smoothe the heavy hair, and carrying a candle led her down to Connie.

Part of the cellar, a huge cold room with a domed ceiling, was lined with racks of bottles. Wine as old as Connie. The nuns seldom



touched it, Connie told her, only when they could get a priest out there to say the mass they were starved for. And on some Christmasses they made a moist cake soaked in a 1915 Deuue Cliquot instead of rum. All around in shadow lurked the shapes of trunks, wooden boxes, furniture, disused and broken. At the farthest end was the door to Connie's room. Although it was not built for a maid, as Mavis said, its original purpose was unclear. Connie used it, liked it, for its darkness. Sunlight was not a menace <sup>to her</sup> there.

Seneca knocked, got no answer and pushed open the door. Connie was sitting in a wicker rocking chair snoring lightly. When Seneca entered she woke instantly.

"Who's carrying that light?"

"It's me, Seneca. And a friend."

"Set it down over there." She motioned to a chest of drawers behind her.

"This is Pallas. She came a couple days ago. She said she wants to meet you."

"I don't believe that," said Connie.

Candle flame made it difficult to see, but Seneca recognized the Virgin Mary, the pair of shiney nun shoes, the rosary and, on the

dresser, something taking root in a jar of water.

"Who hurt you, little one?" asked Connie.

Seneca sat down on the floor. She had <sup>scant</sup> little hope that Pallas would say much if anything at all. But Connie was magic. She just stretched out her hand and Pallas went to her, sat on her lap talking-crying at first, then just crying while Connie said "Drink a little of this," and "What pretty earrings," and "Poor little one, poor, poor little one. They hurt my poor little one."

It was wine soaked and took an hour; it was backwards and punctured and incomplete, but it came out, little one's story of who <sup>" "</sup> had hurt her.

She lost her shoes, she said, so at first nobody would stop for her. Then, she said, the Indian woman in a fedora. Or rather a truckful of Indians stopped for her as she limped barefoot in shorts by the side of the road. A man drove. Next to him the woman with a child on her lap. Pallas couldn't tell if it was a boy child or a girl. Six young men sat in the back. It was the woman who made it possible to accept the offer of a lift. Under the brim of her hat the sleet gray eyes were expressionless but her presence among the men civilized them--as did the child in her lap.



**"Where you headed?" she asked.**

**That was when Pallas discovered that her vocal chords didn't work. That for sound-making power she couldn't rival the solitary windmill creaking in the field behind her. So she pointed in the direction the truck was going.**

**"Get in back then," said the woman.**

**Pallas climbed among the males--her age mostly--and sat as far away from them as she could, praying that the woman was their mother sister aunt--or any restraining influence.**

**The Indian boys stared at her but said nothing at all. Arms on knees, they looked without a smile at her pink shorts, day-glo tee shirt. After a while, they opened paper bags and began to eat. They offered her a thick baloney sandwich and one of the onions they ate like apples. Afraid a refusal would insult them Pallas accepted but found her self eating all of it like a dog, gulping, surprised by her hunger. The truck's sway and rock put her to sleep for a few minutes off and on; each time it happened she woke fighting out of a dream of black water seeping into her mouth, her nose. They passed places with scattered houses, highways, a gas station, but did not stop until they reached a sizable town. By then it was late afternoon. The**

truck moved down an empty street slowing in front of a Baptist church that had "Primitive" in its sign.

"You wait there," the woman said. "Somebody'll come and take care of you."

The boys helped her climb down and the truck drove off.

Pallas waited on the church steps. There were no houses that she could see and no one was in the street. As the sun dipped, the air turned chilly. Only the soles of her feet, raw and burning, distracted her from the cold overtaking her marrow. Finally she heard an engine and looked up to see the Indian woman again--but alone this time driving the same truck.

"Get in," she said, and drove Pallas several blocks to a low corrugated aluminum building. "Go in there," she said. "It's a clinic. I don't know if you was bothered or not. You look like it to me. Like a bothered girl. But don't tell them in there. I don't know if it's true but don't mention it, you hear? Better not to. Just say you was beat up or throwed out or something."

She smiled then, though her eyes were very grave. "Your hair's full of <sup>algae</sup> kelp." She took off her hat and placed it on Pallas' head. "Go on," she said.



Pallas sat in the reception room along with patients as silent as she. Two elderly women with headscarves, a feverish baby in the arms of its sleeping mother. The receptionist looked at her with unwholesome curiosity, but didn't say anything. It was threatening to get dark when two men came in, one with a *partially* severed hand. Pallas and the sleeping mother were yet to be attended to, but the man seeping blood into a towel took precedence. As the receptionist led him away Pallas ran out of the entrance and around to the side of the building where she lost every bit of the onion and baloney. Retching violently she heard, before she saw, two women approach. Both wore shower caps and green uniforms.

"Look at that," one said.

They came toward Pallas and stood, heads cocked, watching her heave.

"You on your way in or out?"

"Must be pregnant."

"You trying to see the nurse, honey?"

"She better hurry up."

"Let's take her to Rita."

"You take her, Billie. I got to go."

"She got a hat on but no shoes. Okay, go head. See you tomorrow."

Pallas straightened up clutching her stomach, breathing hard through her mouth.

"Listen to me. Clinic's closing less you an emergency. You sure you ain't pregnant?"

Pallas, trying to control another retch, shuddered.

Billie turned to watch her friend's car leave the lot then looked down at the vomit. Without making a face she kicked dirt until it was out of sight.

"Where your pocket book?" she asked, moving Pallas away from the buried sick. "Where you live? What they call you?"

Pallas touched her throat and made a sound like a key trying to turn in the wrong lock. All she could do was shake her head. Then, like a child alone in a deserted playground, she drew her name in the dirt with her toe. <sup>then</sup> Slowly, imitating the <sup>woman's</sup> earlier erasure, she kicked her name away, covering it completely with red dirt.

Billie took off her shower cap. She was much taller than Pallas and had to bend to see into the downcast eyes.

"You come with me, girl," said Billie. "You a pitiful case if ever I



*TK - car journey to court*  
see one. And I seen some."

After handing her over to Mavis she said, "Call on me if you want. *You remember me, don't you?* Name's Billie Cato."

The candle had burned down to an inch but its flame was high. Pallas wiped her *mouth* ~~face~~ with the back of her hand. The rocking chair rocked. Connie's breathing was so deep Pallas thought she was sleeping. She could see Seneca, hand on chin, elbow on knee, looking up at her, but candleflame, like moon light in Mehita, distorted faces.

Connie stirred.

"I asked who hurt you. You telling me who helped you. Want to keep that other part secret for a little longer?"

Pallas said nothing.

"How old are you?"

Eighteen, she started to answer, but then chose the truth.

"Sixteen," she said. "I should be a senior next year."

She would have cried again for her lost junior year but Connie nudged her roughly. "Get up. You breaking my lap." Then in a softer voice. "Go on and get some sleep now. Stay as long as you like and tell me the rest when you want to."

Pallas stood and wobbled a bit from the rocking and the wine.

"Thanks. But. I better call my father. I guess."

"We'll take you," said Seneca. "I know where there's a telephone."

They left then, stepping carefully through the darkness, eyes trained on the low light the candleflame shed. Pallas, bred in the over-light of Los Angeles in houses without <sup>basements</sup> cellars, associated <sup>cellars</sup> them with movie-evil or trash or crawly things. She gripped Seneca's hand and breathed through her mouth. But the gestures were expressions of anticipated not genuine alarm. In fact, as they climbed the stairs images of a grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice soothed her. The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a domain protected, free of <sup>hunters</sup> predators but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here--<sup>an</sup>unbridled, legitimized, <sup>self</sup>but which she thought of as a "cool" self--in one of this house's many rooms.

A platter of tortilla-looking things sat on the table. Gigi, spruced up and quiet with only a lopsided lip to mar her make up, was fooling with her wide band radio trying to find the one station that played what she wanted to hear--not the agricultural news; country music or bible stuff. Mavis, muttering cooking instructions to herself, was



at the stove.

"Connie okay?" Mavis asked when she saw them enter.

"Sure. She was good for Pallas. Right. Pallas?"

"Yes. She's nice. I feel better now."

"Wow. It talks," said Gigi.

Pallas smiled.

"But is it going to puke some more? That's the question."

"Gigi. Shut the hell up. You like crepes?" Mavis looked eagerly at Pallas.

"Um. Starved," Pallas answered.

"There's plenty more. I put Connie's aside and I can make <sup>even</sup> more <sup>if</sup> too if you want."

"It needs some clothes." Gigi was scanning Pallas closely.

"Nothing I got will fit."

"Stop calling her 'it'."

"All it's got worth having is a hat." <sup>Where'd you put it?</sup>

"I've got jeans she can have," said Seneca.

Gigi snorted. "Make sure you wash them first."

"Sure."

"Sure? Why you say 'sure'? I haven't seen you wash one thing

since you came here including yourself."

"Cut it out, Gigi!" Mavis spoke from behind closed teeth.

"Well, I haven't!" Gigi leaned over the table toward Seneca.

"We don't have much, but soap we do have."

"I said I'd wash them, didn't I? Is it okay to open the bottle, Mavis?"

"Not just okay; it's an order. We got to celebrate Pallas, don't we?"

"And her voice." *said Seneca*

"And her appetite. *Look* at her." *Gigi laughed*

Carlos had killed Pallas' appetite. ~~For the eight months~~ <sup>*while*</sup> he loved her (or seemed to), food, other than that first chili dog, was a nuisance to her, an excuse to drink Cokes or a reason to go out. The pounds she had struggled with since elementary school melted away. Carlos never commented on her weight, but the fact that from the first, when she was a butterball, he liked her ~~anyway~~, chose her, made love to her, sealed her confidence in him. His betrayal when she was at her thinnest <sup>*sharpened*</sup> ~~froze~~ her shame. The nightmare event that forced her to hide in a lake had displaced for a while the betrayal, the hurt, that had driven from her mother's house. She had not been able



even to whisper it in the darkness of a candlelit room. Her voice had returned but the words to say her shame <sup>Clung</sup> stuck like polyps in her throat.

The melted cheese covering the crepe-tortilla thing was tangy; the pieces of chicken had real flavor, like meat; the pale, almost white butter dripping from early corn was nothing like what she was accustomed to; it had a creamy, sweetish taste. There was a warm sugary sauce poured over the bread pudding. And glass after glass of wine. The fear, the bickering, the nausea, the awful dirt fight, the tears in the dark--all of the day's <sup>g</sup>strange, unruly drama dissipated in the pleasure of chewing good food. <sup>When</sup> Mavis returned from taking Connie her supper, Gigi had found her station and danced the radio over to the open back door for better reception. She danced back to the table then and poured herself more wine. Eyes closed, hips grinding, she circled her arms to enclose the neck of a magic dancer. The other women watched her as they finished the meal. When last year's top tune, Killing Me Softly, came on, it was not long before they all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other.

They slept deep as death that night. Gigi and Seneca in one

bedroom. Mavis alone in another. So it was Pallas, asleep on the sofa in the office/study, who heard the knocking.

The girl was wearing white silk shoes and a cotton sundress. She carried a piece of wedding cake on a brand new china plate. And her smile was regal.

"I'm married now," she said. "Where is <sup>he</sup> ~~she~~? Or was it a <sup>she</sup> ~~he~~?"

TK  
mood?

Later that night, Mavis said, "We should have given her one of those dolls. Something."

"She's crazy," said Gigi. "I know everything about her. K.D. told me everything about her and she's the whole nuthouse. Boy is <sup>his ass</sup> ~~he~~ in trouble."

"Why'd she come here on her wedding night?" asked Pallas.

"Long story." Mavis <sup>dabbed alcohol on</sup> ~~rubbed~~ the bloody scratches on her arm.

Comparing them to the ones Gigi had given her last night.

"Came here years back. Connie delivered her baby for her. She didn't want it, though."

"So where is it?"

"With Merle and Pearl I think."

"Who?"

Gigi cut her eyes at Mavis. "It died."

"Don't she know that?" asked Seneca. "She said you all killed



it."

"I told you she's the whole house of nuts."

*right after*  
"She left," Mavis said. "I don't know what she knows. She wouldn't even look at it."

They paused then, seeing it: the turned away face, hands covering ears so as not to hear that fresh cry. There would be no nipple, then. Nothing to put in the little mouth. No mother shoulder to snuggle against. None of them wanted to remember or know what had taken place afterwards.

*cutting*  
"Maybe it wasn't his. K.D.'s." Said Gigi. "Maybe she was stepping out on him."

"So? So what if it wasn't his? It was hers," Seneca sounded angry.

"I don't understand." Pallas moved toward the stove where the leftover bread pudding sat.

"I do. In a way." Mavis sighed. "I'll make us some coffee."

"Not for me. I'm going back to bed." Gigi yawned.

"She was really mad. You think she'll get back all right?"

"St. Seneca. Please."

"She was screaming," Seneca said, staring at Gigi.

**"So were we." Mavis measured coffee into the percolator basket.**

**"Yeah but we didn't call her names."**

**Gigi sucked her teeth. "How do you know what to call a psycho who's got nothing better to do on her wedding night but hunt down a dead baby?"**

**"Call her sorry?"**

**"Sorry my ass," Gigi answered. "She just wants to hang on to that asshole she married."**

**"Didn't you say you were going to bed?"**

**"I am. Come on Seneca."**

**Seneca ignored her roommate. "Should we tell Connie?"**

**"What for?" snapped Mavis. "Look. I don't want that girl anywhere near Connie."**

**"She bit me." Pallas appeared surprised. "Look. Teeth marks."**

**"What do you want, a rabies shot? Come on. Sen. Hey, Pallas. Lighten up."**

**Pallas stared. "I don't want to sleep down here by myself."**

**"Who said you had to? That was your idea."**

**"They're no more beds up stairs."**



"Oh, Christ." Gigi started toward the hall, Seneca following.

"What a baby."

"I told you. The others are stored in the cellar. I'll put one up tomorrow. You can sleep with me tonight," said Mavis. "Don't worry. She won't be back." She locked the back door then stood watching the coffee percolate. "By the way what's your name? Last name I mean."

"Truelove."

"No kidding. And your mother named you Pallas?"

"No. My father."

"What's her name? Your mother."

"Divine."

"Oooo. I love it. Gigi! Gigi! You hear that? Her name's Divine,

*Divine*  
7 Truelove."

Gigi ran back to stick her head in the door way. Seneca too.

"It is not! That's my mother's name."

"She a stripper?" Gigi was grinning.

"An artist."

"They all are, honey."

"Don't tease her," murmured Seneca. "She's had a long day."

*back*  
"Okay, okay, okay. Goodnight...Divine." Gigi vanished through the door.

"Don't pay her any attention." Seneca <sup>said</sup> smiled, then whispering quickly as she left, "She has a small mind."

Mavis, smiling, poured coffee and cut breadpudding. *she* served Pallas and sat down next to her, blowing into the coffee steam. Pallas picked at <sup>her third helping of</sup> the dessert with her fingers.

"Show me the tooth marks," said Mavis.

Pallas turned her head and pulled at the neck of her T shirt, exposing her shoulder.

"Umm," Mavis groaned, ~~touching the dents.~~

"Is every day like this here?" Pallas asked her.

"No, no." **Frowning** Mavis stroked the wounded skin. "This is the most peaceful place on earth."

"You'll take me to call my father tomorrow?"

*Yep.*  
"~~Of course.~~ First thing."

*S* They *N* finished the nighttime snack in silence. Mavis picked up the lamp and the *Y* left the *Z* kitchen in darkness. When they were in front of Mavis' bedroom door she didn't open it. Instead she stood stock still. "Hear that? They're happy," she said. "I knew it. They love that



baby. Absolutely love it." She turned to Pallas. "They like you too.  
They think you're divine."