



Patricia

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PATRICIA

The bells and pine trees, cut from green and red construction paper were done. Just the glitter^{was} left for the trim. Last year she had made a mistake letting the ^{smaller} little ones do it. After cleaning their fingers and elbows of glue, picking the tiny specks of silver from their hair and faces, she had to do the decorations over anyway. This time she would hand out the bells and trees for the wrapping paper and monitor each dot of glue herself. Although the pot holders, pin cushions, the painted boxes and paper doilies were like all the Christmas presents she supervised, this was, for her, the best time of the year. [tk] The older ones rehearsed with Kate. The middle ones memorized their speeches. And the whole town helped or meddled: men repaired the platform, strung rope for sheets/curtains and Christmas lights; the women made cookies, punch, taffy and wrapped the peppermint sticks with big red bows. The church programs were more elaborate but the school program involved everybody.

↳ The December days this year were warm and windy; the sky behaving like a showgirl: its pale, melancholy mornings sported long ribbons of primary colors in the evening. A mineral scent was in the air, sweeping down from some Genesis time when volcanos stirred ~~the earth~~; when lava cooled quickly under relentless wind. Wind that

scoured cold stone then sculpted it and, finally, crumbled it to the bits rockhounds loved. The same wind that once lifted streams of Cheyenne/Arapaho hair also parted clumps of it from the shoulders of bison telling both when the other was near.

She had noticed the mineral smell all day and now, finished with grading papers and making decorations, she checked the showgirl sky for a repeat performance. But it was gone now. ~~Nothing spectacular left, nothing outrageously beautiful.~~ Just some lilac shapes running after a day-glo sun.

Her father had gone to bed early, exhausted from the monologue he had delivered at the supper table about the gas station he was planning. Eagle Oil was encouraging him--no use to talk to the big oil companies. Deek and Steward were interested in approving the loan, selling him the property. The only question was where. Across from Anna's store? Good spot, but Holy Redeemer might not think so. North, then? Next to Sargeant's Feed and Seed? There would be plenty of customers--nobody would have to travel ninety miles for gasoline, or keep tanks of it where they lived. The roads? Something might be done to the two dirt ones that extended south and north of Ruby's paved road to the county's route 18. With the franchise, the

county might tarmac them both. It would be a problem though, trying to get local people to agree to petition for it--the old ones would put up a fight. They liked being off the county road, accessible only to the lost and the knowledgeable. "But think of it, Patsy, just think of it. I could fix cars, engines; sell tires, batteries, fan belts. Soda pop too. Something Anna don't stock. No point in getting her riled up."

Patricia nodded. A very good idea, she thought, like all of his ideas. His veterinary practice (illegal, he had no license, but who knew or cared enough to drive a hundred miles to help Wisdom Poole yank on a foal stuck in its mother?); his butcher business (bring him the slaughtered steer--he'd skin, butcher, carve and refrigerate it for you); and of course the ambulance/ mortuary business. Because he wanted to be, studied to be, a doctor most of his enterprises had to do with operating on the sick or dead. The gas station idea was the first non-surgical proposal she could remember (though his eyes did fire when he spoke of taking apart engines). She wished he had been a doctor, had been accepted in a medical school. Chances are her mother would be alive today. Maybe not. Maybe he would have been away at Meharry instead of the mortuary school when Delia died.

As quickly as it came, dazzling color ^{having} disappeared ^{quickly} on these short December days. The wind souged trying to dislodge sequins from the black crepe sky. Pat climbed the stairs to her bedroom and decided to while away the rest of the evening on her history project. Rather what used to be a history project but was nothing of the sort now. It began as a gift to Ruby--a collection of family trees; the geneologies of each of the fifteen families. Upside down trees, the trunks sticking in the air, the branches sloping down. When the trees were completed she had begun to supplement the brances ^h of who begat whom with notes: what work they did, for example, where they lived, to what church they belonged. Some of the nicer touches ("Was Missy Rivers, wife of Thomas Blackhorse, born near the Mississippi River? Her names seems to suggest...") she had gotten from her students' autobiographical compositions. Not anymore. Some parents complained about their children being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets, even. After ^t than most of her notes came from talking to people, asking to see bibles and church records. But she didn't want or need any further research. The trees still required occasional ^{alterations} additions--births, marriages, deaths--but her interest in the supplementary notes grew as they did

as incomplete as the
family's
marked them
with

rendered them
recognizable
by

80
50
8

158

and she gave up all pretense to objective comment. It had reached the point where the small m period was a joke, a dream, a violation of law that had her biting her thumbnail in disgust and fury. ^(over) Dovey had let her have the Morgan Bible for weeks, but it was the twenty minutes she spent looking at x's Bible ^{that taught her} ~~when she learned that~~ a new kind of tree species would be needed to go further, to record accurately the relationships among the fifteen families of Ruby and their ancestors in Haven, ^{in Louisiana}

Arnette and K.D., married last July, were expecting a child. Pat located the Morgan file and went to the limb that was, so far, one line:

Cato Smith (aka K.D. [as in Kentucky Derby] m. Arnette
Fleetwood

There wasn't much space beneath but they probably wouldn't need more. If it lived, the child they were expecting would certainly be an only child. Arnette's mother had only two children, one of whom had fathered only defectives. In addition these later Morgans were not as prolific as the earlier ones. Like Zechariah Morgan (aka

Who were these women ^{who,} like her mother had only
single names? Celeste, Oline, Sorrow, Julia
Who were the women with ^{generic} untraceable last names: Brown, Smith,
Rivers, Stone, Franklin. Their fame
rested on the men they married - if
marriage applied - ^aMorgan, ^aFlood. Blackhorse

Big Papa nee Coffee) m. Mindy Flood [note: Anna Flood's great aunt] who had nine children survive. Pat ran her finger over their names: Pryor Morgan, Rector Morgan, Shepherd Morgan, Ella Morgan, Loving Morgan, Selanie MOrgan, Governor Morgan, Queen Morgan and Scout Morgan. One of her notes said: "It took seven births for them to get around to giving a female child an administrative, authoritative sounding name, and I bet they called her 'Queenie.'" Another comment, threading out from Zechariah's name, was "He must have named himself. Coffee was his birth name--a misspelling of Kofi, surely. And since no Louisiana Morgans or any Haven people worked for anybody named Morgan, he must have chosen his last name as well as his first from something or someplace he liked. Zacharias, father of John the Baptist? or the Zechariah who had visions? Scrolls of curses; women in baskets; the one who saw Joshua's filthy clothes changed into rich ones; who saw the result of disobedience. The punishment for not showing mercy or compassion was a scattering among all nations and land once pleasant made desolate. That would fit for Zechariah Morgan: the curse, the women stuffed into a basket with a leaden lid and hidden away in a house, but especially the scattering. The scattering would have frightened him. The break up

of the group or tribe or consortium of families or, in Coffee's case, the splitting up of a contingent of families who had lived with or near each other since before Bunker Hill. He would have imagined the terror of being thrown apart into foreign land and becoming alien to each other. Of not knowing a jawline that signified one family, a cast of eye or a walk that identified another. Of not being able to see yourself duplicated in a third or fourth generation grandchild. Of not knowing where the generations before him were buried or how to get in touch with them if you didn't know. That would be the Zechariah Coffee would choose for himself. That would have appealed to him if he heard some mighty preacher tell that story of Joshua crowned. He would not name himself after Joshua, the king, but after the witness to whom God and angels spoke on a regular basis about things Coffee knew something about."

When she asked Steward where his grandfather got his name, either of them--"Zachariah" or "Morgan"--he'd grunted and said he thought it was "Moyne" originally, not Morgan. Or "Le Moyne" or something but "We called him Big Papa. Called my daddy Big Daddy" as though that ended it. Insulted-like, because he himself wasn't a papa or a daddy, big or otherwise. Because the Morgan line was

slackening. One of Zechariah's (Big Papa's) sons, named Rector, had seven children with his wife, Beck, but only four survived: Elder, the twins Deacon and Steward, and K.D.'s mother, Ruby. Elder died leaving his wife Susannah (Smith) Morgan with six children--all of whom moved from Haven to northern states. Zechariah would hate that. Moving would be "scattering" to him. And sure enough, from then on the fertility shrivelled even while the bounty multiplied. The more money, the fewer children; the fewer children, the more money to give the fewer children. Assuming you amassed enough of it which was why the richest ones--Deek and Steward--were so keen on the issue of K.D.'s marriage. Or so Pat supposed.

All of them, however, each and every one had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names. 8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Those with blue black skin, tall and graceful, whose wide innocent eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them. Descendents of those who had been in Louisiana when it was French, when it was Spanish, when it was French again, when it was sold as territory to Jefferson and when it became a state in 1812. Who spoke a patois part spanish, part French, part English and all their own.

Descendents of those who, after the Civil War, had defied or hid from whites doing all they could to force them to stay and work as sharecroppers in Louisiana. Descendents of those who had walked to the 'Run.' Walked, like pilgrims to Mecca, from Louisiana to Oklahoma in 1890 and got to the place described in advertisements carefully folded into their shoes or creased into the brims of their hats only to be shooed away.

Pat was convinced that when the next generation of 8-rock males did scatter, just as Zachariah feared--into the army--it could have been over and done with. Should have been over and done with. The Rejection of the pilgrims was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn't it? Oh, no. Those that survived that particular war came right back home, saw what had become of Haven, heard about the missing testicles of other ex-colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy--and recognized Rejection Part Two. It would have been like watching a parade banner that said WAR WEARY SOLDIERS! UNWELCOME HOME! So they did it again. And just as the original pilgrims never sought another colored townsite after being cold-shouldered at the first, this generation joined no organization, fought no civil battle. They

consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved further west. The New Fathers: Deacon Morgan, Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Senior Pulliam, Nathan DuPres, Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edwards Sands and her father, Roger Best, who was the first to violate the blood rule. The one nobody admitted existed. The one established when the Louisiana pilgrims noticed and remembered that the Rejection came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though, as the story went. Gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them, but were unmoving in their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night's rest. The story went that Zechariah Morgan and Drum Blackhorse forbade the women to eat the food. That August Cato left the blankets in the tent with the three dollars and nine cents neatly stacked on top. But Soane said her grandmother, Celeste Blackhorse, sneaked back and got the food secretly passing it to Bitty Cato, Praise Compton and her sister Sally Blackhorse to distribute to the children.

So the rule was set and lived a solid forever life because it was never spoken, except for the hint in words Zechariah forged for the

Oven. More than a rule. A curse: "Beware the furrow of his Brow" in which the You (understood) nominative case was not a command to the believers, the pilgrims looking for Paradise, but a threat to those who had stood in the way. ^{TK see notes re "Disallowing"} It must have taken him months to think up those words--just so--to have multiple meanings; to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but neutral, not identifying the subject of the sentence nor specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen. So the teen-agers Misner organized who wanted to change it to "We Are the Furrow of his Brow" were more insightful than they knew. Look what they did to Menus, forcing him to give back or return the woman he brought home to marry. The pretty sandy-haired girl from Virginia. Menus hadn't been sober since. And though they attributed his weekend drunks to his Vietnam ~~war~~ ^{though} memories, and they laughed with him as he cut their hair, Pat knew love in its desperate state when she saw it. She believed she had seen it in her father's eyes, poorly veiled by his business ventures.

Now in the margin next to

Roger Best m. Delia

she wrote: "Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first

client. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me and although I married Billy Cato who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter. A lot of those Sands seem to marry the Seawrights but they are careful to make sure that their children marry into other 8-rock families. We were the first visible glitch, but there was an invisible one too. In Billy's family. Because his mother, Fawn, was born a Blackhorse and married his grandmother's uncle, August Cato. Or, to put it another way, Billy's mother married her own great uncle. Or another way: my husband's father, August Cato, is also his grandmother's (Bitty Cato Blackhorse's) uncle and therefore Billy's great granduncle as well. (Bitty Cato's father, Sterl Cato, married a woman named Honesty Jones. It must have been she who insisted on naming her daughter Friendship, and was probably riled at hearing the child called Bitty for the rest of her life.) Since Bitty Cato married Peter Blackhorse, and since her daughter, Fawn Blackhorse, married Bitty's uncle, and since Peter Blackhorse is Billy Cato's grandfather--well, you can see the problem with blood rules. It's distant, I know, and August Cato was an old man when he married little Fawn Blackhorse. And maybe that's why she had just the one child, my

husband Billy. Still the Blackhorse blood is there and that makes my daughter, Billie Delia a fifth? cousin to Soane and Dovey because Peter Blackhorse was brother to Thomas Blackhorse and Sally Blackhorse, and Thomas Blackhorse was Soane's and Dovey's father. Now Sally Blackhorse married Aaron Poole and had eleven children, two of whom Billie Delia is in love with, and there is something wrong with that but other than the blood rules I can't figure out what."

Pat drew a line from her mother's name, tipped it with an arrow and wrote:

"The women really tried, Mama. They really did. Kate's mother, Catherine Jury, you remember her, and Fanny DuPres, the midwife who delivered me (she's dead now), and Dovey Morgan and Charity Flood. But none of them could drive. You must have believed that deep down they hated you, but not all of them, maybe none of them, because they begged the men to go get help. I heard them. Dovey Morgan was crying as she left to find somebody, going from house to house: to Harper Jury, Catherine's own husband, to Charity's husband, Ace Flood, and to Sargeant Person's (how come that ignorant Negro doesn't know his name is Pierson?) All of the excuses were valid, reasonable. Even with their wives begging they came up

with excuses because they looked down on you Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering. The two midwives were in trouble (it was coming too soon, feet first and folded underneath) and all they wanted was to get one of the nuns at the Convent. They knew one of them was a nurse. Catherine Jury went to Soane's to see if Deek was there. He wasn't, but Dovey was. It was ⁼⁼dovey who went to Seawright's, then Fleetwood's. Went to every house in walking distance. The ^{Nathan}DuPres's lived way way out. So did Steward, the Poole's, the ^{Sands}~~Dupres~~ and the rest. Finally they got Senior Pulliam to agree. But by the time he got his shoes tied it was too late. Fanny DuPres hollered through his door--too frustrated to knock, too angry to step inside--and said 'You can take your shoes back off, Senior. Get your preacher clothes ready so you'll be in time for the funeral!' Then she was gone from there.

"When Daddy got back everybody was worried sick about how long the bodies could last before you both had to go in the ground, Roger or no Roger, husband or no husband. But Daddy came back the second day. No time for a decent wake. So you were his first job. And a wonderful job he did too. You were beautiful. With the baby in

the crook of your arm. You would have been so proud of Daddy.

"He doesn't blame anybody except himself for being at mortuary graduation. We have quarrelled about it and he doesn't agree with me that those 8-rock men didn't want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn't want to drive out to a white's house begging for help; or else they just despised your pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go. Daddy says more than one woman has died in childbirth and I say who? So the mother without one died and the baby whom you planned to name Faustine if a girl, or Richard after Daddy's oldest brother, if a boy, died too. Faustine. My baby sister. We would have grown up together. Patricia and Faustine. Too light, maybe, but together it would not have mattered to us. We'd be a team. I have no aunts or uncles, remember, because all of Daddy's sisters and brothers died of what they called walking pneumonia but what must have been the 1919 influenza epidemic. So I married Billy Cato when I finished that school in Texas, partly because he was beautiful, partly because he made me laugh, and partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Cato's and the Blackhorse's along with that Blackhorse feature of stick straight hair. Like Soane's and Dovey's hair, and like Easter and Scout had. But he died, did Billy,

and I took my lightish but not white-ish baby and moved back in your pretty little house with the mortuary in back and have been contented teaching the children who call me Mrs. Best as everybody else does, so short was the time I was Pat Cato. “

The words had run to the back of the page, so she used blank sheets to continue:

“That must have been some ride from Haven to here. You, Mama, among those skinny blue black giants, neither they nor their wives staring at your long brown hair, your honey speckled eyes, but the babies unable not to. Did Daddy tell you Don’t worry your head; it was going to be all right? Did they ever need you, use you to go into a store to get supplies or a can of milk while they parked around the corner? If so, that was the only thing your skin was good for. Otherwise it bothered them. Reminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place. The one-drop law the whites made up was hard to live by if nobody could tell it was there. When you drove through a town, or when a sheriff’s car was near, did Daddy tell you to get down, to lie on the floor of the car because it would have been no use telling a stranger that you were colored? Did Soane or Dovey, new brides too, talk woman-talk with you? You were

pregnant and so were they (you were carrying me and that was Dovey's first miscarriage). So did you talk together about how you all felt? Make tea for hemorrhoids, give one another salt to lick or copper dirt to eat in secret? I craved baking soda when I carried Billie Delia. Did you when you carried me? Did the older women with children advise you, like Aaron's wife Sally with four children already? What about Alice Pulliam--her husband wasn't a reverend yet but he had already heard the Call and decided to become one so they must have had some charitable, some Godly feelings then when they were young. Did they make you welcome right away or did they all wait for the Oven to be re-assembled and the following year re-baptize you in the river?

"What did Daddy say to you at that AME Zion picnic? The one held for colored soldiers stationed at the base in Tennessee. How could either of you tell what the other was saying? He talking Louisiana, you speaking Tennessee. The music so different, the sound coming from a different part of the body. It must have been like hearing lyrics set to scores by two different composers. But he must have said I love you and you understood that and it was true too, because I have seen the desperation in his eyes ever since--no

matter what business venture he thinks up."