



Chapter 6: Patricia

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CHAPTER SIX

PATRICIA

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Bells and pine trees, cut from green and red construction paper, were piled neatly on the dining room table. All done. Just the glitter was left for the trim. Last year she had made a mistake letting the smaller ones do it. After cleaning their fingers and elbows of glue, after picking specks of silver from their hair and faces, she had to do most of the decorations over anyway. This time she would hand out the bells and trees while monitoring each dot of glue herself. [tr.tk] In staging the ^{school} Christmas ^{play} ~~pageant~~ the whole town helped or meddled: older men repaired the platform, assembled the crib; young ones fashioned new innkeepers and freshened the masks with paint. Women made doll babies and children drew colored pictures of Christmas dinner food, mostly desserts: cakes, pies, candy canes, fruit because roast turkeys were too much of a challenge for their fingers. When the little ones had made the bells and pine trees all silvery

Patricia herself would thread loops at their tops. The Eastern star was Harper's department. He checked it for repair each year making sure its points were sharp and that it would glow properly in the dark cloth sky. And she supposed old Nathan DuPres would deliver the opening remarks once again. A sweet man, but couldn't stay the point to save him. The church programs were more formal--sermons, choirs, recitations by the children and prizes for the ones who managed to get through them without stuttering, crying or freezing up-- but the school program, featuring ^{The Nativity} ~~a pageant~~, and involving everybody was older having started before the churches were even built.

Unlike recent years, the December days of 1974 were warm and windy. The sky was behaving like a showgirl: exchanging its pale, melancholy mornings for sporty ribbons of color in the evening. A mineral scent was in the air, sweeping down from some Genesis time when volcanos stirred and 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 over. 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, provided he could persuade somebody to sell him the property. So the 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. If he secured 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 on it, Patsy, just think on 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.

Pat climbed the stairs to her bedroom and decided to while away the rest of the evening on her history project, or 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 genealogies 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 branches 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 gleaned from her students' autobiographical compositions. Not anymore. Parents complained about their children being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets, even. After that, most of her notes came from talking to people, asking to see bibles and examining church records. Things got out of hand when she asked to see letters and marriage certificates. The women narrowed their eyes before smiling and offering to freshen her coffee. invisible doors closed and the conversation turned to weather. But she didn't want or need any further research. The trees still required occasional alterations--births, marriages, deaths--but her interest in the supplementary notes increased as the notes did and she gave up all pretense to objective comment and the project became unfit for any eyes but her own. It had reached the point were the small m period was a joke, a dream, a violation of law that had her biting her thumbnail in

frustration. Who were these women who, like her mother, had only one name? Celeste, Olive, Sorrow, Iulin, Pansy. Who were these women with generic, untraceable last names? Brown, Smith, Rivers, Stone, Franklin. Women whose identity rested on the men they married--if marriage applied: a Morgan, a Flood, a Blackhorse, a Poole, a Fleetwood. Dovey had let her have the Morgan Bible for weeks, but it was the twenty minutes she spent looking at the Blackhorse Bible that convinced her that a new species of tree would be needed to go further, to record accurately the relationships among the fifteen families of Ruby, their ancestors in Haven and, further back, in ^{Mississippi and} Louisiana. A voluntary act to fill idle hours had become intensive labor streaked with the bad feelings that ride the skin like pollen when too much about one's neighbors is known. The official story elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday School classes and ceremonial speeches had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories. She had wanted proof in documents where possible, in matching stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted--freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance. Her father

told her somethings but he refused to talk about other things.

Girlfriends like Kate and Anna were open but older women--Dovey, Soane and even Lone--hinted the most while saying the least.

There were nine large intact families who made the original journey, who were thrown out and cast away in Fairly, Oklahoma and went on to found Haven. Their names were legend: Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood, and ~~two~~ ^{separate families named} DuPres. ^(over) ^{replace} With their siblings, wives and children they were 79 or 81 in all (depending on whether the two stolen children were counted). Along with them came fragments of other families: a sister and a brother, four cousins, a river of aunts and great aunts shepherding the children of their dead sisters, brothers, nieces, nephews. Stories about these fragments, which made up some fifty more, surfaced in the writing compositions of Pat's students, the gossip and recollections at picnics, weddings and woman-talk over chores and hair preparation. Grandmothers sitting on the floor while a granddaughter scratched their heads like to reminisce aloud. Then bits of tales emerged like sparks lighting the absences that hovered over their childhoods and near the survivors; the spaces that sat with them at the campfire, the mementoes--a ring, a ^{pocket-watch} ~~brooch~~--clamped in

but not unrelated
~~and unrelated~~

The last name represented ^{the} two separate families: of
Juvenal Dupres and Booker Dupres

their fists while they slept; and in the descriptions of the clothes they wore: too big shoes that belonged to a brother; the shawl of a grandmother, the lace trimmed bonnet of a younger sister. They remembered the orphaned, males and females, ages twelve to sixteen, who spotted the travelers and asked to join, and two toddlers they simply snatched up because the circumstances in which they were found wouldn't let them do otherwise. Another eight. So about one hundred and fifty-eight total completed the journey.

When they got to the outskirts of Fairly, it was agreed that Drum Blackhorse, Rector Morgan and his brothers, Pryor and Shepherd, would announce themselves while the others waited with Zechariah who was too lame by then to stand unaided and straight in front of unknown men whose respect he would have demanded and whose pity would have broken ^{him} in two. The wound that forced him to stay behind and let his friend and his sons speak in his stead proved to be a moment of grace because he missed witnessing the actual Disallowing; and missed hearing ^{outrageous} ~~disbelievable~~ words formed in the mouths of men to other men, men like them in all ways but one. Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of

what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the purity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language. First by excluding them; then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Pat knew that everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. But the ramifications of those ramifications were another story.

Pat looked out of the window before shuffling paper to prepare another entry. The wind soughed as though trying to dislodge sequins from the black crepe sky. [tk]

Arnette and K.D., married last July, were expecting a child next March. Or so said Lone DuPres who ought to know. Lone was one of the stolen babies. Fairy DuPres had seen her quiet as a rock sitting outside the door of a sod house. They were on their way to what would become Haven and the sight of the silent child in a filthy shift could have remained just one more lonely picture they came across except that the smell of desolation about the place was unmistakeable. Fairy was fifteen then and bullheaded. She and Missy Rivers went to investigate. Inside was the dead mother and

not a piece of bread in sight. Missy groaned before she spit. Fairy said "God damn it, 'scuse me. Lord," and picked the baby up. When they told the others what they'd found, seven men got up and reached for their shovels: Drum Blackhorse, his sons Thomas and Peter, Rector Morgan, Able Flood, Brood Poole, Sr. and Nathan DuPres's father, Juvenal. While they dug, Fairy fed the baby water soaked mealcake. Praise Compton tore her underskirt to wrap around it. Fulton Best fashioned a sturdy cross. Zechariah, flanked by two of his boys, Shepherd and Pryor, and resting his ruined foot on its heel delivered a burial prayer. His daughters, Loving, Ella and Selanie gathered pink yarrow for the grave. Fairy argued with Bitty Cato over the name, and Fairy won, naming the baby Lone because that's how they found her. And Lone she still was for she never married and when Fairy, who raised her and taught her everything she came to know about midwifery, died Lone slipped right in and took over the birthing for everybody except now Arnette was insisitng on going to the hospital in Demby to give birth. It cut Lone to the quick, (she still believed that decent women had their babies at home and saloon women delivered in hospitals) but she knew the Fleetwoods hadn't given up on thinking she was partly responsible for Sweetie and Jeff's

children, in spite of the fact that she had delivered thirty-two healthy babies to doing-just-fine mothers since the last broken Fleetwood baby was delivered. So she said nothing except that Arnette's time would be March of '75.

Pat located the Morgan file and went to the limb that, so far, contained one line:

Coffee

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

(over)

There wasn't much space beneath but she thought they probably wouldn't need more. If it lived, the baby 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. They were not like

Zechariah Morgan { (aka Big Papa nee Coffee) m. Mindy Flood
[note bene: Anna Flood's great aunt] }

Wandering again who was that boy
Ruby Morgan married. A friend of her brother
it was said. From where? * ~~He had Zechariah's~~
~~Given name and a generic~~

* His first name
same as
was Zechariah's
[before he changed
it to run for state
Congress]; his last
name as generic as
you could get. ~~He was~~
Killed in Europe, nobody
got to know him well - not
even his wife.

who had ^{of 14} 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. Scooting up the margin in Scrips' black ink one of her earlier notes read: "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, threaded out from Zechariah's name and, led by arrows, spread to the back of the page: "He must have named himself. Coffee was his birth name--a misspelling of Kofi, ^{probably} surely. And since no Louisiana Morgans or any of the Haven people had worked for any whites 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? The one who saw scrolls of curses and 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. All of that would fit for Zechariah Morgan: the curse, the women stuffed into a basket with a lid of lead 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 consortia 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 not have trouble imagining the scariness of having everybody he knew thrown apart, thrown into different places in a foreign land and becoming alien to each other. He would be frightened 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 had 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 last name, he'd grunted and said he thought it was "Moyne" originally, not Morgan. Or "Le Moyne" or something but "Some folks called him Black Coffee. 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 crop feeble. One of Zechariah's (Big Papa's) sons, 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 he was right for 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 of the intact nine families 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. Blue black people, 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 whose worthiness was so endemic it got their children elected to rule in state legislatures and country offices. And when thrown out of office without ceremony or proof of wrongdoing, refused to believe what they guessed was the real reason that made it impossible for them to find mental labor. Almost all of the Negro men chased or invited out of office (in Mississippi, in Louisiana, in Georgia) got less powerful but still white collar work following the purges of 1873. One from South Carolina ended his days as a street sweeper. But they alone (Zechariah Morgan and Juvenal DuPres in Louisiana, Drum Blackhorse in Mississippi) were reduced to ^{field labor} seventeen years begging for sweat work in cotton, lumber or rice after five glorious years re-making a country. They must have suspected yet dared not say that thier misfortune's misfortune was due to the one and only feature that dintinguised them from their Negro peers. Eight rock. In 1890 they'd had one hundred and twenty years in this country. So they took those

years, each other and thier uncorruptable worthiness and walked to the 'Run.' Walked from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma 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. This time the clarity was clear: for eight generations they had believed the division was free against slave and rich against poor. *Usually* ~~Maybe~~, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence to Negroes themselves. Serious enough that their *daughters* ~~dauters~~ would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last. The sign of purity *they* ~~that~~ had taken for granted had become a stain. The scattering that Zechariah feared would deplete them was now an even more dangerous level of evil, for if they broke apart and were disvalued by the impure then, certain as death, eight generations would disturb the peace throughout eternity.

Pat was convinced that when the subsequent generations of 8-rock males did scatter, just as ^e~~Z~~achariah feared, into the army, it could have been over and done with. Should have been over and done

with. The rejection, which they called The Disallowing, 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 Disallowing, 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 wayfarers 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, 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 flock noticed and remembered that the Disallowing 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 Jupe Cato left the blankets in the tent with the offering of 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 her sister Sally Blackhorse, to Bitty Cato, and Praise Compton to distribute to the children.

So the rule was set and lived a quietly throbbing life because it was never spoken of, 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, but a threat to those who had disallowed them. 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 slyly not identifying the subject of the sentence or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen nor to whom. So the teen-agers Misner organized who wanted to change it to "We ^{Be} 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.
lost the house he'd bought and
Men^us hadn't been sober since. And though they attributed his weekend drunks to his Vietnam memories, and although 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.

Before she put away the K.D. pages Pat scribbled in the margin: "Somebody beat up Arnette. The Convent women as folks say? Or, quiet as its kept, K.D.?" Then she picked up the file for Best, Roger. On the back of the title page labeled:

Roger Best m. Delia

she wrote: "Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first
customer
~~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. As you and everybody knew I would. Notice how a lot of those Sands who married Seawrights 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 that had nothing to do

with skin color. ^{I know} All of the couples wanted preacher attended marriages, and many had them. but there were many others that practiced what Faairy duPres called "take overs." A young widow might take over a single man's house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects. Like Billy's family. His mother, Fawn, born a Blackhorse was taken over by his grandmother's uncle, August Cato. Or, to put it another way, Billy's mother was wife to 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, took over 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, was wife to 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 took over little Fawn Blackhorse. And he never would have done it without Blackhorse permission. And he never would have received it if he had

a loose reputation because coupling outside marriage or take overs was not only frowned upon, it could get you ostracized so completely it behooved the fornicators to pack up and leave. (as may have been the case with Ethan Blackhorse--Drum's brother--and a woman named Solace, and certainly was believed to be the case with Martha Stone, Menus' mother, although Harper Jury couldn't settle on whom he thought his wife betrayed him with). So August Cato shunned temptation or any thought of looking outside the families and asked Thomas and Peter Blackhorse for Peter's daughter, Fawn. And maybe his advanced age was 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 thirteen 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 underscored the last five words then wrote down her mother's name, drew a line under it, enclosed it in a heart and continued:

* one of whom Aaron was going to name Deep but Sally forbade it so Aaron named him Deeper, and with a humor ^{more} grim than she thought,

And could explain the line
through Ethan's name

"The women really tried, Mama. They really did. Kate's mother, Catherine Jury, you remember her, and Fairy DuPres, ~~the~~ ⁴midwife who delivered me (she's dead now), and Lone 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. Both midwives were in trouble (it was coming too soon, legs folded underneath) and all they wanted was to get one of the nuns at the Convent. Miss Fairy said 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 Moss

DuPres's lived way way out. So did Nathan (who would have hitched Hard Goods and galloped to Jesus for help). So did Steward, the Poole's, the Sands' and the rest. Finally they got Senior Pulliam to agree. But by the time he got his shoes tied it was too late. Miss Fairy rushed from your bedside to Senior's house and hollered through his door--too exhausted to knock, too angry to step inside--and said 'You can take your shoes back off, Senior! Might as well 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 what to do and how long the bodies could last before, father or no father, husband or no husband, you both had to go in the ground. 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 him.

"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, Billy did, 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 drylong-so teaching the children who call me Mrs. Best using Daddy's last name as everybody else does, so short was the time I was Pat Cato. "

The words had long ago covered the back of the page, so she

was using fresh sheets to continue:

"I may as well tell you that except for you and K.D.'s mother nobody in Ruby has ever died. Please note I said *in* Ruby and they are real proud about that believing they are blessed and all because after 1957 anybody ^{who} died did it in Europe or Korea or someplace outside this town. Even Sweeties's children are still alive and God knows there is no reason they should be. And I know the fact of immortality is a rebuke against Daddy's mortuary business since he has to wait for our killed-in-actions or somebody out at the Convent or an accident someplace else otherwise his ambulance is never a hearse. (When Billy died there was nothing left to bury except some "effects" including a gold ring too twisted to poke a finger through.) They think he deserves rebuke because he broke the bloodrule first and I would ^{not} put it past them to refuse to die just to keep Daddy from success. At it turned out war dead and accidents in other towns ^{died on a trip back to Haven} (Miss Fairy ~~was hit by a truck in Norman~~, Ace Flood died in the Demby hospital) were all the work Daddy has had and it was hardly enough. Neither is the ambulance business, so I work hard to convince him that the money the town pays me for teaching is just household money and he doesn't have to borrow anymore on his shares in Deek's

bank and should forget gasoline stations and what-all."

Leaning back in the chair, Pat folded her hands behind her head, wondering what was going to happen when more people got as old as Nathan or Lone. Then would her father's craft be required or would they do what they did on the way out of Louisiana? Bury them where they fell? Or were they right? Was death blocked from entering Ruby? Patricia was exhausted now and ready for sleep, but she couldn't let Delia go just yet.

"That must have been some ride, Mama, 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 sherriff'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 and worse to say you were his wife? 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 or the following year, when the river came back, baptize you just so they could speak to you directly, look you in the eyes?

"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."

Pat stopped and rubbed the callous on her middle finger. Her elbow and shoulder ached from gripping the pencil so hard. Across the hall through the bedroom door she could hear her father snoring. As always she wished him pleasant dreams--something to assuage the unhappiness of his days, days spent trying to please, to make up for. Except for marrying her mother, she couldn't think what rule he had broken that made him so eager for the approval of those who despised him. He had described to her once what Haven looked like when he got out of the army. He said he sat on his father's porch coughing so nobody would think he was crying. His father, Fulton Best, and his mother, Olive, were inside reading with great sorrow the applications he had filled out for the G.I. Bill funding. He wanted a college education so he could go to medical school but he was also their only surviving child--all the others having died in the flu epidemic. His parents could not bear either the thought of his leaving

again or of his staying in a town slipping into blankness. Erased forever and in every place except the heart. He was looking up and down the cracked concrete street tk when Ace Flood and Harper Jury walked up to him saying there was a plan. Deek and Steward Morgan had a plan. When he heard what it was the first thing he did was write to the hazel eyed girl with light brown hair to whom he had been writing all during the war. Good thing he didn't tell them about her. They would have ^{disuaded} ~~persuaded~~ him the way, later on, they ^{did} ~~persuaded~~ Menus. Maybe he knew they would which is why he just sent for her. "Darling Delia, Come on. Right now. Here is the money order. I am going to have a lot of trouble keeping my heart quiet. Until you get here I will be a crazy man..." Their jaws must have dropped when she arrived but, other than Steward, nobody said anything directly. They didn't have to. Olive took to her bed. Fulton kept grunting and rubbing his knees. Only Steward had the gall to say out loud "He's bringing along the dung we leaving behind." Dovey shushed him. Soane too. But Fairy DuPres cursed him, saying "God don't love ugly ways. Watch out He don't deny you what you love too." A remark Dovey must have thought about a lot until 1964 when the curse was complete. But they were just women and what they

said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise. They got there, too, and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing the dung buried. Most of it anyway. Some of it is still above ground instructing their grandchildren in a level of intelligence they will never acquire.

Pat sucked her teeth and pushed aside the Best file. She selected a ~~student~~ composition notebook and without label or introduction continued to write.

"She won't listen to me. Not one word. She works in Demby at a clinic--cleaning up, I think, but she makes out like she's a nurses' aide because of the uniform she has to wear. I don't know how she lives. I mean she has a room, she says, in the house of a nice family. I don't believe it. Not all of it. ^{anyway} One of those Poole boys, both of them probably, is visiting her. I know because the littlest one, Dina, told the class about her big brother showing her a house with a Santa claus and Christmas lights all over the porch. Well that was some place other than Ruby for sure. She is lying and I would rather be bit by the serpent himself that have a lying child. I didn't mean to hit her so hard. I didn't know I had. I just meant to stop her lying mouth telling me she didn't do anything. I saw them. All three of them back

behind the Oven and she was in the middle. Plus I am the one who washes sheets around here."

Pat stopped, put down her pencil and, covering her eyes with her hand, tried to separate what she had seen from what she feared to see. And what did the sheets have to do with it? Was there blood when there should not have been or no blood where there should have been? It was more than a year ago and she thought everything was seared in her memory. The fight took place in October of 1973. Afterward Billie Delia ran off and stayed at the Convent for two weeks and one day. She came back during the morning session while Pat was teaching the under twelves and stayed long enough to say she wasn't going to. They'd had ugly words, but both were afraid to get near the other lest the quarrel get physical as it had before. She left with one of those Poole boys and didn't come back till early this year to describe her job and write down her address. Since then Pat had seen her twice: once in March and then at Arnette's wedding where she was a bridesmaid and a maid of honor both since Arnette would not have anybody else, and no other girl wanted the honor anyway if it meant walking down the aisle with Billie Delia. Or so Pat thought. She had gone to the wedding, not the reception, but she

hadn't missed a thing since she had a perfect view of the goings on at the Oven with those women from the Convent. She saw them. She saw those Poole boys. And she saw Billie Delia sit down and talk to one of the women like they were old friends. She saw Reverend Pulliam and Deek Morgan argue with the women and when they drove off she saw Billie Delia throw her bouquet in Anna's trash can before she strolled off, Apollo and Brood Poole in tow.

Billie Delia drove off the next day in her very own car, and never said a word to her about the wedding, the reception, the women or anything. Now she tried to remember how that pressing iron got into her hand, what had been said that had her running up the stairs with a 1950's GE ^{Royal Ease} electric iron clutched in her fingers to slam against her daughter's head. She, the gentlest of souls, missed killing her own daughter by inches. She who loved children and protected them not only from each other but from too stern parents, lunged after her own daughter in a blood hot rage. She who had been trained to reasoning and soft manners and discretion and dignity, falling down the stairs and bruising herself so badly she had to cancel two days of class. Educated but self-trained also to make sure that everybody knew that the daughter of the woman with sunlight skin and no last

name was not only lovely but of great worth and inestimable value. Trying to understand how she could have picked up that pressing iron all she could think of was that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, Pat thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like. Was it that business of pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three then. Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was--only an innocent child would have done that, surely? Have I missed something? Was there something else? But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether or not she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still? The ^{Royal Ease} iron in her hand as she ran up the stairs was ^{there} to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks; not the girl her daughter was.

Pat licked her bottom lip, tasted salt and wonder ^{red} who the tears were for.

Nathan DuPres, believed to be the oldest male in Ruby,

welcomed the audience. He disputed the claim of seniority every year pointing to his cousin Moss, then saying Reverend Simon Cary was three months older than he was. But he let the town persuade him in the end because Reverend Cary talked too long, besides which he was not among the first families, having moved to Ruby during the Vietnam War. A stalwart man of such lovingkindness even Steward Morgan admired him, Nathan had married Elder Morgan's daughter, Mirth. Because they had no surviving children he favored ^{other peoples' children} ~~them~~ excessively: hosting the annual Children's Picnic, fine tuning the ~~pageant~~ rehearsals, keeping cough drops and fireballs in his pockets to pass out.

Now, smelling slightly of the horse he'd just dismounted, he climbed the platform and surveyed the audience. The females, young | fx and old, holding baby dolls in the crook of their arms; the males carrying hammers. Nathan cleared his throat and surprised himself. Whatever he'd prepared to say had left him and the words he did say seemed appropriate to some other event.

"I was five," he said, "when we left Louisiana and sixty-five when I hopped in the truck leaving Haven behind for this here new place. I know I wouldn't have done it if Mirth was alive or any of our

children was still above ground, but I never regretted it. Never.

There is honey in this land sweeter than any I know of and I have cut cane in places where the dirt itself tasted like sugar so that's saying a heap. No, I never had a ^{gnat-} minute's worth of regret. But there's a sadness in me now. Maybe in this season of my Lord's birth I'll learn what it is. ^{The parch} This ~~drought~~ in my throat. The water that stays in my eyes. I know I've seen more years than God usually allows a man, but this dryness is new. The eye water too. When I run my mind over it, all I can come up with is a dream I had a while back."

In the last but one row, Lone sat next to Richard Misner; Anna on his other side. She leaned forward to glance at Anna and learn whether she, too, was losing her mind. Anna smiled but did not return her look, so she sat back to endure another one of Old Nathan's incoherent dreams.

Nathan ran his fingers over his head, closed his eyes as if to get the details straight.

"Was an Indian come up to me in a bean row. The ^{vin'es} shoots were green, tender. He told me the water was bad; said there was plenty of it but it was foul. I said but the ^{Blossoms coming out everywhere} shoots is green, tender. Looks like a top crop to me. He said ^{look here - loaded with blossoms.} they ain't green; they's red. And I

^{No these flowers aint white}

looked at the row and shook his head - sorrowful like. then he

too bad

Change to white blossoms?

6/15

said no those flowers ain't white, they's red. And I looked and sure enough they was turning pink, then red. Like blood-drops. Scared me some. But when I looked back he was gone. And the petals was white again. I reckon that sighting is like this here story we going to tell again this evening. It shows the strength of our crop if we understand it. But it can break us if we don't. And bloody us too. May God bless each and every one of you and may nothing keep us apart from each other nor from the One who does the blessing. Amen."

When Nathan left the platform, amidst murmurs of kindness if not gratitude, Richard Misner took advantage of the pause to whisper something to Anna and leave his seat. He was hoping to relieve the nascent waves of claustrophobia that had not plagued him since he was jailed with thirty-eight others in a tiny cell in Alabama. He had embarrassed himself then, because the sweat and nausea resembled fear to his companions. And it was a hard lesson knowing that whatever risks he took, however eager he was for the dangerous confrontation, a crowded cell could humiliate him before teenagers without pity. Now, feeling the onslaught of suffocation in this tightly packed schoolroom, he joined Pat Best standing in the hall watching

the pageant and the audience through the door. A long table of cakes, cookies and punch lined the wall behind her.

"Hello, Reverend," Pat did not look at him, but adjusted her body to accomodate him in the doorway.

"Evening, Pat," he said, blotting moisture from his neck with his handkerchief. "Out here is better for me."

"Me too. See everything from here. Without stretching or peeping between two hats."

They looked over the heads of the audience as the curtains, made of percale sheets--fresh and carefully ironed--wavered. Children in white surplices filed through the parting, ^{the perfection of} their serious faces and flawless hair undone occasionally by a knee sock sliding down to an ankle or a bow tie too far to the right. After a glance at Kate Golightly they took a uniform breath ^{for} O holy night, the stars are gently shining....

At the second verse Richard Misner leaned over to Pat. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"No. Go ahead." She thought he was going to ask for a donation because he had been having difficulty raising money (in the quantities he hoped for) to aid the legal defense of four teenagers arrested in tk

and charged with possession, resisting, arson, disorderly, inciting and whatever else the prosecution could ferret out of its statutes to level against black boys who said No or thought about it. They had been in jail, Richard Misner told his congregation, for ^{almost two years} ~~a year~~. When arraigned they'd been behind bars for twenty months. The trial date was about to be set and lawyers needed to be paid for services already rendered and more to come. So far Richard had collected only what the women had given. Women who thought more about the pain felt by the boys' mothers than of the injustice of their ^{sons'} situation. The men, however, Fleetwoods, Pulliam, Sargeant Person and the Morgans had been adamant in their refusal. Clearly Richard had not carefully enough shaped his plea. He should have built a prodigal sons foundation rather than a political one. Then ^{as he stood} outside the church ^{Mount Calvary} as he continued ^{ing} his requests, he would not have had to listen to "I don't hold with violence," from men who had handled guns all their lives. Or "Little illegal niggers with guns and no home training need to be in jail." This from Steward, of course. However much Richard insisted they had no guns; that demonstrations were not illegal, they kept their wallets closed. Pat decided ^{if asked directly} to donate as much as she could ~~but~~ ^{Richard Misner's} that was ^{not} at all what was on ~~his~~ mind. ^{She was annoyed to learn}

"I'm trying to smooth a situation out at the Poole's and I think I'd do well to talk to Billie Delia, if you don't mind. Is she here tonight?"

Pat held on to her elbows and turned to look at him. "Can't help you Reverend."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure that whatever's going on out there has nothing to do with Billie Delia. Besides she doesn't live here anymore. Moved to Demby." She would have liked to stop being so hostile to him, but *with the mention of her daughter,* couldn't control it now.

"Her name's come up once or twice. But the Poole's won't give me anything to go on. Something's tearing that family apart."

"They don't like prying, Reverend. It's a Ruby thing."

"I understand but something like this has a way of spreading, touching more than one family. When I first came here it was plain. If there was a problem brewing a delegation was formed to see about it. Keep people from falling out with one another. Seen it with my own eyes." *And done it too.*

"I know."

"This community used to be tight as wax."

"It still is. In a crisis. But they keep to themselves otherwise."

"Don't you mean 'we'? 'We' keep to ourselves"?

"If I did, would you be asking me to explain things?"

"Pat please. Don't take anything I say amiss. I just remembered that the young people in Bible class say 'they' too when talking about their parents"

"Bible class? More like a war class. Kind of military from what I hear."

"Militant maybe. Not military."

"No budding panthers?"

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know what to think."

"tk Strategies of defense, that's all."

"They know the difference"?

He didn't have to reply right away because the applause began and lasted until the last member of the children's choir disappeared behind the curtain.

Someone turns off the ceiling lights. Quiet coughing domesticates the dark. Slowly on a well-oiled pulley the curtains part. Under lights positioned in the wings, throwing large shadows

behind them, four figures in felt hats and too big suits stand at a table counting giant dollar bills. The faces of each one is hidden by a yellow and white mask featuring gleaming red eyes and snarling lips red as a fresh wound. Above a sign tacked to the table front that read INN, they count money, make slurping noises and do not stop when a parade of holy families dressed in torn clothes and moving in a slow two-step approach them. Seven couples line up before the table of money. The boys carry staffs; the girls cuddle baby dolls.

Misner looked at them and, giving himself more time to think of a reply to Pat's question, concentrated on identifying the children on stage. The four youngest Cary girls: Hope, Chaste, Lovely and Pure; Dina Poole and one of Pious DuPres' daughters--Linda. Then the boys manfully grasping staffs while they two-stepped toward the money counters. Peace and Solarine Jury's two grandsons Ansel and one they called Fruit; Joe-Thomas Poole paired with his sister Dina; Drew and Harriet Persons's son, James; Payne Sands' boy, ^{Loreas} Lucas, and two of Timothy Seawright's grandsons, Steven and Michael. Two of the masked ones were obviously Beauchamps--Royal and Destry--fifteen and sixteen year olds who were already over six feet tall but he wasn't sure of the other two. This was the first time he had attended

the play. It was held two weeks before Christmas when he returned to tk for his annual visit to his family. This year the trip was postponed because an all-family reunion was scheduled for New Year's. He would take Anna, if she agreed, let the folks look her over and, he supposed, let her look them over. He had hinted to the bishops that he was up for a new parish. Nothing urgent. But he was not sure he was well used in Ruby. He had thought anyplace was fine as long as there were young people to be taught, to be told, that Christ was judge and warrior too. That whites had no patent on Christianity. That until Montgomery, Selma, they had proved themselves the last people to know what real religion was. He wanted these kids to know that they did not have to beg for respect. It was already in them and they needed only to display it. But the resistance he'd found in Ruby was wearing him out. More and more his students were being chastised about the beliefs he helped instill. Now Pat Best--with whom he'd taught Negro History every Thursday afternoon, was chipping away at his Bible class, confusing self-respect for arrogance; defense with aggression. Did she think education was knowing just enough to get a job? She didn't seem to trust these Ruby hard heads with the future anymore than he did, but

neither did she encourage change. Negro history and lists of old time achievements was enough for her but not for this generation. Somebody had to talk to them and somebody had to listen to them. Otherwise.....

"You know better than anybody how smart these young people are. Better than anybody..." His voice trailed off under Silent Night.

"You think what I teach them isn't good enough?"

Had she read his mind? "Of course it's good. It's just not enough. The world is big and we're part of that bigness. They want to know about Africa--"

"Oh, please, Reverend. Don't go ^{sentimental} romantic on me."

"If you cut yourself off from the roots, you'll wither."

"Roots that ignore the branches turn into termite dust."

"You despise Africa."

^{I don't}
"No. It just doesn't mean anything to me."

"What does, Pat? What does mean something to you"?

"The table of elements and valences."

Richard Misner turned away.

[#]
Lucas Payne leaves the group of families and in a loud but breaking voice addresses the masks: "Is there room"?

The masks turn toward each other then back to the supplicant, then back to each other, after which they roar, shaking their heads like angry lions. "Get on way from here! Get! There's no room for you!"

"But our wives are pregnant!" Lucas points with the staff.

"Our children going to die of thirst" Pure Cary holds a doll aloft.

The masked ones wag their heads and roar.

"Africa is our home, Pat, whether you like it or not."

"I'm really not interested, Reverend. You want some foreign Negroes to identify with why not South America? Or Germany for that matter. They have some brown babies over there you could have a good time connecting with. Or is it just some kind of past with no slavery in it you looking for?"

"Why not? There was a whole lot of life before slavery. And we ought to know what it is. If we're going to get rid of the slave mentality, that is."

"You're wrong and, if that's your trail you always will be. Slavery is our past."

Bobbing and bowing the masked ones reach under the table and lift up big floppy cardboard squares pasted with pictures of food.

"Here. Take this, and get on out of here." Throwing the food pictures on the floor, they laugh and jump about. The holy families rear back as though snakes were being tossed at them. Pointing forefingers and waving fists they chant: "God will crumble you. God will crumble you." The audience hums agreement: "Yes He will. Yes He will."

"Into dust!" That was Lone DuPres.

"Don't you dare to mistake Him. Don't you dare."

"Finer than flour he'll grind you."

"Say it, Lone."

"Strike you in the moment of His choosing!."

And sure enough the masked figures wobble and collapse to the floor while the seven families turn away. Something within me that banishes pain; something within me I cannot explain. Their frail voices are accompanied by stronger ones in the audience and at the last note more than a few are wiping their eyes. The families cluster camp-fire style to the right of the stage. The girls rock the dolls. Away in the manger no crib for his head. Slowly from the wings a boy enters. He wears a wide hat and carries a leather bag. The families make a half circle behind him. The big-hat boy kneels and draws bottles and packages from the satchel which he arranges on the floor.

The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head.

What's the point? Richard asked himself. Just enjoy the show and let Pat alone. He watched the children's movements with mild affection at first, ~~and~~ ^{growing} then with interest. He had assumed it was in order to please as many children as possible that there were four ~~in~~keepers, seven Marys and Josephs. But perhaps ~~it was deliberate~~ ^{there were} ~~for~~ other reasons. Seven holy families? Richard tapped Pat on the shoulder. "Who put this together? I thought you told me there were nine original families. Where the other two? And why only one Wise Man? And why is he putting the gifts back in the satchel"?

"You don't know where you are, do you?"

"Well help me figure this place out. I know I'm an outsider, but I'm not an enemy."

"No, you're not. But you know to some folks in this town those two words mean the same thing."

Amazing grace how sweet the sound. In a shower of gold paper stars the families lay down the dolls, the staffs and form a ring. The voice of the audience peal as one. I once was lost but now am found.

Richard felt bitterness take the place of the nausea that had driven him from his seat. Twenty, thirty years from now, he thought,

all sorts of people will claim pivotal, controlling, defining positions in the rights movement, A few would be justified. Most would be frauds. But what could not be gainsayed, but would remain invisible in the newspapers and the history books, were the ordinary folk. The janitor who turned off the switch so the police couldn't see; the grandmother who kept all the babies so the mothers could march; the backwoods women with fresh towels in one hand and a shotgun in the other; the little children who carried batteries and food to secret meetings; the ministers who kept whole churchfuls of hunted protesters calm till help came; the old who gathered up the broken bodies of the young; the young who spread their arms wide to protect the old from batons they could not possibly survive; parents who wiped the spit and tears from their children's faces and said "Never mind, honey. Never you mind. You are not and never will be a nigger, a coon, a jig, a jungle bunny nor any other thing white folks teach their children to say . What you are is God's." Yes, twenty, thirty years from now those people will be dead or forgotten. Their small stories part of no grand record, or even its footnotes although they were the ones forming the spine on which the televised ones stood. Now, seven years after the murder of the man he would have happily

taken the sword ^{for} in his stead, he was herding a flock that believed not only had it created the pasture it grazed but that any generation offering other solutions to new kinds of brutality could be sacrificed. No matter who they are, he thought, or how special they think they are, a community with no politics is doomed to pop like Georgia fatwood. Was blind but now I see.

"Do they?" It was phrased as a question but it sounded like a conclusion to Pat.

"They are better than you think."

"They are better than they think. Why are they satisfied with so little?"

"This is their home, mine too. Home is not a little thing."

"I'm not saying it is. But can't you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home where if you go back past your great great grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past

the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poisons bows, on back to when rain was new before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good! there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that, Pat. That place. Who was God talking to if not to my people living in my home?"

"You preaching, Reverend."

"No, I'm talking to you, Pat. I'm talking to you."

The clapping began when the children broke the circle and lined up for their bows. Anna Flood got up when the audience did pushing her way through to where Pat and Richard stood, animated, eyes locked. [Both women had been subjected to speculation about which one the new and young and single and handsome preacher would favor. Anna and Pat, being the only single women of a certain age available. Unless the new preacher liked them much younger, he'd have to choose between these two. Two years ago Anna had won-- she was sure of it--hands down. So far.]tr? She moved toward Richard smiling broadly hoping to freeze the tongues of anyone who might think otherwise seeing him prefer Pat's company to hers ^{for} to see

the Christmas play. [They were careful in their courtship, never touching in public. When she cooked supper for him they made sure the parsonage blazed with light and he drove or walked her home by 7:30 for all Ruby to see. Still having set no date, tongues might get restive. More than seemly behavior, however, was on her mind. Richard's eyelight. It seemed dulled to her lately. As though he'd lost a battle on which his life depended.

She got to him just before the crowd surged out, pressing toward the food tables, chatting, laughing.

"Hi, Pat. What happened to you, Richard?"

"Sick as a dog there for a minute," he said. "Come on. Let's stand outside before it starts up again."

They said goodbye and left Pat to decide whether she wanted to talk to happy parents, mind the food table or leave. She had decided on the last when Carter X stepped on her foot.

"00. Excuse me Miss Best. I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Carter, but please calm yourself down."

"Yes ma'am."

"And don't forget. Right after the holidays you and I have a make-up lesson. January 6, you hear"?

"I be there, Miss Best."

"Is that 'I'll'? 'I'll be there'?"

"Yes ma'am, Miss Best. I will."

In the kitchen heating water for tea, Pat banged the cupboard door so hard the cups rattled. It was a toss up as to whose behavior had annoyed her most: Anna's or her own. At least she could understand Anna: protecting her stake. But why had she defended people and things and ideas with a passion she did not feel? The deep weeping pleasure the audience took from the play disgusted her. All that nonsense she had grown up with seemed to her like an excuse to be hateful. Richard was right to ask. Why seven and not nine? Pat had seen the play all her life although she had never been chosen for any part other than the choir. That was when Soane taught school--before she even noticed the singularity of the numbers. It was some time later--when exactly?--that she saw there were only eight. By the time she understood that the Cato line was cut there was another erasure. Who? There were only two families who were not part of the original nine, but had come to Haven early enough to have a kind of associate status: The Jury's (although their grandson, Harper, had

married a Blackhorse original--good for him) and her father's father: Fulton Best. They didn't count as originals so it had to be--who? Surely not the Floods if Anna married Richard Misner. Wouldn't that count? Could Richard save the Flood line? Or was it the Poole's because of Billie Delia? No. There were shiploads of males in that family. It would be proof of Apollo's or Brood's dalliance, but if that were a deterrent the Morgans themselves had been in grave danger until K.D. married Arnette. And if she had a son rather than a daughter how much safer their position would be. The Fleetwood's too. Since Jeff and Sweetie had not measured up Arnette was the key for both families.

The tea was ready and Pat leaned over it frowning and so intent on puzzling it out she did not hear Roger enter until he stood in the doorway.

"You left too early," he said. "We caroled some."

"Yes? Oh. Well." Pat dredged up a smile.

"Missed some good cake too." He yawned. "Took up a good collection for Lone afterwards. Lord that's a crazy woman." Too tired to laugh, Roger shook his head and smiled. "But she was good in her day." He turned to leave, saying, "Well, good night, baby. I have to

squeal tires early tomorrow."

"Daddy." Pat spoke to his back.

"Uh huh?"

"Why do they change it? There used to be nine families in the play. Then eight for years and years. Now seven."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know."

"No. I don't know."

"The play. How somehow the holy families get fewer and fewer."

"Kate does all that. And Nathan. Picking the children, I mean. Maybe they didn't have enough for the usual size."

"Daddy." He must have heard the doubt in her tone.

"What?" If he did it didn't show.

"Nothing," Pat blew in her cup.

"I thought it was pretty nice, myself. We have to do something about Nathan though. He ain't the sharpest knife in the drawer anymore." Then, as an afterthought, "What Reverend Misner have to say for himself? Looked awful serious back there."

She didn't look up. "Just...talk."

"Anything happening with you two?"

"Daddy, please."

"No harm in asking is there?" He paused for an answer and when there was none, he left murmuring something about the furnace.

Yes, there is. Harm. Pat sipped carefully from a spoon. Ask Richard Misner. They have closed him out to anything but the obvious, the superficial. And I know exactly what that feels like. Not good enough, even to be represented by eight year olds on a stage.

Fifteen minutes later Pat stood in the far part of the garden. The evening was chilly but still not cold enough for snow. The lemon mint had shrivelled but lavender and sage bushes were full and noisome. No wind to speak of so the fire in the oil barrel was easily contained. One by one she dropped cardboard files, sheets of paper--both stapled and free--into the flames. She had to tear the covers off of the composition notebooks and hold them up with a stick so they would not smother the fire. The smoke was bitter. She stepped back and gathered clumps of lavender and threw it in as well. It took some time but finally she turned her back on the ashes and walked back into her house trailing the odor of burnt lavender along. At the

kitchen sink she washed her hands and dashed water on her face. She felt clean. Perhaps that was why she began to laugh. Lightly at first and then heavily, her head thrown back as she sat at the table. Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who? Well, to stay alive maybe they could, maybe they should, since nobody dies in Ruby.

She wiped her eyes and lifted the cup from its saucer. Tea leaves clustered in its well. More boiling water, a little steeping and the black leaves would yield more. Even more. Until.

That was it! Unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That must be the formula.

Immortality.