



## Chapter 8: Lone

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## CHAPTER 8

### LONE

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## EARLY MELONES!

The <sup>way</sup> track was too narrow, the turn too sharp, but she managed to get the Oldsmobile off the dirt and onto the tarmac without knocking the sign down completely. <sup>Earlier</sup> On the way in, with the darkness and the single headlight, Lone couldn't prevent the bumper from scraping it and now <sup>on the way out</sup> the post leaned. <sup>and the sign - was about to fall.</sup> Early Melones! <sup>She thought</sup> One of them can't spell worth poot. The one wrapped in a sheet, most likely. Not much schooling there. But "Early" was correct and not just the letters. July not over and the Convent garden had melons already ripe for picking. Like their heads. Smooth outside, sweet inside but thick. <sup>Lord were they</sup> None of them would listen. Didn't believe a word she said. After driving out there in the middle of the night to tell them, warn them, they just yawned and smiled. Now she had to figure carefully what else to do, otherwise the melons that got split would be their sweet bald heads.

The night air was hot and the rain she had been smelling was far <sup>away</sup> off but still coming which is what she thought two hours ago when she padded around the stream bank <sup>hoping to collect tk while it was</sup> <sup>MAUDE AVE</sup>



still dry. Had she not been, she never would have heard the men or discovered the devilment they were cooking.

The night sky wore its best jewelry and the road to Ruby was familiar as a pension <sup>check</sup> [?]. She squinted, nevertheless, in case something or somebody scampered up ahead--beyond the <sup>Oldsmobile's</sup> single headlight. <sup>It could be</sup> Possum, racoon, white tail deer, or <sup>even</sup> an angry woman since it was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had seen them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. Out here in a gold and copper land cut through now and then with black rock or a swatch of green; out here under skies so star-packed it was disgraceful; out here where the wind handled you like a man, women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. Sweetie Fleetwood had walked it, Billie Delia too. And the girl called Seneca. Another called Mavis. Arnette too and more than once. And not just these days. They had walked this road from the very first. Soane Morgan, for instance, and, when she was young, the white-eyed woman in the Convent. Consolata was her name. <sup>Sosa</sup> Consolata de Socorro. Many of the walkers Lone had seen; others she

learned about. But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women's: Sargeant, K.D., Roger, Menus. And the good Deacon himself of couple of decades back. Well, if she did not get somebody to fix the fan belt and plug the oil pan she would be walking it too, provided there was anything useful left to do.

If ever there was a time for speeding, this was it, but the condition of the car precluded that. In 1960 the wipers, the air conditioning, the radio worked. Now a fierce heater was the only element reminiscent of the Oldsmobile's original power. In 1968, after it had two owners, Steward and then Dovey Morgan, Dovey asked her if she could use it. Lone screamed her joy. Finally at 79, unlicensed but feisty, she was going to learn to drive and have her own car too. No more hitching up the wagon, no more brakes squealing in her yard at all hours, summoning her to emergencies that weren't or to stand-bys that turned into crises. ~~Now~~ she could follow her own mind, check on the mothers when she wished; tool on up to the house in her own car and, most important, leave when she wanted to. <sup>But the gift came</sup> Too late. Just as she became truly auto mobile, nobody wanted her craft. After having infuriated the hooved and terrified the



clawed; having churned columns of gold dust up and down tractor trails for weeks, she had no place to go. Her patients let her poke and examine, but for the <sup>baby's</sup> delivery they traveled two hours (if they could make it) to the hospital in Demby for the cool hands of white men. In spite of her never-fail reputation (which was to say, she never lost a mother as Fairy once had) they refused her their swollen bellies, their shrieks and grabbing hands. Laughed at her clean belly bands, her drops of mother's urine. Poured her pepper tea in the toilet. It did not matter that she had curled up on their sofas, nodded in their kitchens, braided the <sup>ir</sup> children's hair, planted herbs in their gardens and gave good counsel for the past 25 years and for fifty more in Haven before being sent for. No matter she taught them how to comb their breasts to set the milk flowing; what to do with the afterbirth; what direction the knife under the mattress should point; <sup>No matter she searched the county to get</sup> ~~got~~ them the kind of dirt they wanted to eat. No matter she had gotten in the bed with them, pressing the soles of her feet to theirs.\* Or massaged their stomachs with sweet oil for hours. No matter at all. She had been good enough to bring them into the world and when she and Fairy were summoned to continue that work in the new place, Ruby, the mothers sat back in their chairs, spread their knees and

helping them push, push!

breathed with relief. Now that Fairy was dead, leaving one midwife for a population which needed and prided itself on families as large as neighborhoods, the <sup>mothers</sup>~~women~~ took their wombs away from her. But Lone believed that there was more to it than the fashion for Demby. She had delivered the Fleetwood babies and each of the defectives had stained her reputation ~~just~~ as if she had *made* the babies, not <sup>just</sup>~~simply~~ delivered them. The suspicion that she was bad luck and the comforts of the Demby hospital combined to deprive her of the work she was trained for. One of the mothers told her that she simply loved the week of <sup>sleep</sup> rest, the serving tray, the thermometer, the blood pressure tests, <sup>loved dose of daytime</sup> the ~~sleeping~~ and pain pills, but mostly she said she loved the fact that people kept asking her how she felt. None of that was available to her if she delivered at home. There she'd be fixing X's breakfast the second or third day and worrying about the quality of the cow's milk as well as her own. Others must have felt the same--the luxury of sleep and being away from home, the newborn taken away each night for somebody else's care. And the fathers, well, Lone suspected they too were happier with closed doors, waiting in the hall, being in a place where other men were in charge instead of some toothless woman gumming gum to keep her gums



strong. "Don't mistake the fathers' thanks," Fairy had warned her. "Men scared of us, always will be. To them we <sup>are</sup> death's handmaiden standing ~~as we do~~ <sup>g</sup> between them and the children their wives carry." During those times, Fairy said, the midwife is the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so much depended and the dependency irritated them. Especially here in this place where they had come to multiply in peace. Fairy was right as usual, but Lone had another liability. It was said she could read minds, a gift from <sup>him</sup> something that, whatever it was, was not God, and which she had used as early as two when she positioned herself to be found in the yard when her mother was dead in the bed. Lone denied it; she believed everybody knew what other people were thinking. They just avoided the obvious. Yet at 85 she did know something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best's history. <sup>books</sup> <sup>She</sup> Knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the "trick" of life and its "reason." <sup>those fields</sup> <sup>But there was no mistaking the mist</sup>

In any case, her livelihood over ( she had been called on twice in the last eight years) Lone was dependent on the generosity of congregations and neighbors. She spent her time collecting medicinal herbs, flitting from one church to another, driving her collapsing



Oldsmobile, and surveying the fields which she loved not because they were open but because they were full of secrets. Like the carfull of skeletons she'd found a few months ago. If she had been paying attention to her own mind instead of gossip, she would have investigated the <sup>Lenten</sup> Easter buzzards as soon as they appeared--two years ago at spring thaw, March of 1974. But because they were seen right when the Morgan's and Fleetwoods' had announced the wedding, people were confused about whether the marriage was summoning the buzzards or protecting the town from them. Now everybody knew they had been attracted to a family feast of people lost in a blizzard. Arkansas plates. Harper Jury's label on some cough medicine. They loved each other, the family did. Even with the disturbance of birds of prey, you could tell they were embracing as they slept deeper and deeper into that deep cold.

At first she thought Sargeant must have known all about it. He raised corn in those fields. But there was no mistaking the mute astonishment on his face. Or on any of the others' when they heard. The problem was whether to notify the law or not. Not, it was decided. Even to bury them would be an admission of something they had no hand in. When some of the men went to look, much of their

April 14  
Easter  
in 1974

attention was not on the scene at hand, but a few miles west on the  
Convent that loomed in their sightline. She should have known then  
what they were thinking. Had she been paying attention, first to the  
buzzards then to the minds of men, she would not be using up all her  
Wrigley's and her <sup>gasoline</sup> energy on a mission she hoped would be her last.  
Eyesight too dim, joints too stiff, this was no work for a gifted  
midwife. But God had given her the task, bless His holy heart, and at  
thirty miles an hour on a hot July night she knew she was traveling in  
His time, not outside it. It was He who placed her at the stream bank;  
encouraged her to look for the ~~it~~ <sup>plant Mandrake</sup> that was best picked dry at night.  
The stream level was low; the coming rain would remedy that even as  
it washed away the ~~it~~ <sup>Softened the plant's root</sup> blossoms. She heard light laughter and radio  
music traveling from the Oven. Young couples courting. At least they  
were in the open, she thought, not scrambling up into a hay loft or  
under a blanket in the back of a truck. Then the laughter and the  
music stopped. Deep male voices gave orders; flashlights slashed.  
Without a murmur, the couples left but the men didn't. They sat  
down, clustering together in darkness. Lone snapped off her own  
flashlight and would have tramped along the bank to where her car  
was parked had she not remembered the other events she had



ignored or misunderstood: the <sup>Lenten</sup> Easter buzzards; Apollo's new  
handgun. At that moment <sup>flashlight clicking herself</sup> she realized that she had to stop nursing  
resentment at the townspeople's refusal of her services; stop <sup>denied</sup> paying <sup>stealing penny revenge</sup>  
~~them back~~ by ignoring what was going on. She <sup>and letting evil go free</sup> had to start paying  
attention again. Close attention. Playing blind was to avoid the  
language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper  
messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who  
taught <sup>you</sup> how to learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear,  
abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid  
attention to His world. He wanted her to hear the men gathered at  
the Oven to <sup>and figure out</sup> decide how to run the Convent women off, and if He  
wanted her to witness that, He must also want her to do something  
about it. At first she didn't know what was going on, or what to do.  
But, as in the past when she was confused, she closed her eyes and  
whispered, "Thy will. Thy will." The voices rose then and she heard, as  
clear as if she had been standing among them, <sup>and what they meant.</sup> what they said to one  
another. What they vocalized and what they did not.

There were nine of them. Some smoked, some sighed as one by  
one they began to speak. Much of what they said, Lone had heard  
before although without the rough beard hair that the words grew as

— small merge by



they <sup>snaked</sup> seeped through the <sup>black air</sup> night: the ruination that was upon them, the cause of which was becoming clearer and clear. They honed the evidence till each piece fit an already sanded groove.

Remember how they scandalized the wedding? What you say? Uh huh and it was that very same day X caught them kissing on each other in the back of that nasty-looking Cadillac. Very same day and if that wasn't enough to please Satan two more was fighting over them in the dirt. Right down in it. Lord I hate a nasty woman. Sweetie said they tried their best to poison her. I heard that too. Got caught in a snow storm out that way and took shelter with them. Should have known better. Well, you know Sweetie. Anyway said she heard noises coming from somewhere in that house. Sound to her like little babies crying. What in God's name little babies doing out there? You asking me? Whatever it is it ain't natural. Well it used to house little girls, didn't it? Yeah, I remember. Said it was a school. School for what? What they teaching out there? Sargeant found marijuana growing in the middle of the alfalfa. That don't surprise me. All I know is they beat Arnette up some when she went out there to confront them about the lies they told her. She thinks they kept her baby and told her it was still born. You believe it? I don't know but I

wouldn't put it past them. What I do know is how messed up her face was. Aw, man. We can't have this. Roger told me that the Mother, you know, the white one used to shop here sometimes? Well he said when she died she weighed less than fifty pounds and shone like sulphur. Jesus! Said the girl he dropped off there was openly flirting with him. That's the one half naked all the time? I knew something was wrong with her from the time she stepped off the bus. How she get a bus to come out here anyway? Guess, why don't you? You think they got powers? I *know* they got powers, question is whose power stronger. Why don't they just get on out, leave? Huh! Would you if you had a big old house to live in without having to work for it? Something's going on out there and I don't like none of it. No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away. Jesus! No telling what *else*. Look what happened to Billie Delia after she started hanging around out there. Knocked her mama down the stairs and took off for that place like a shoat looking for teat. I hear they drink like fish too. The old woman called Connie was always drunk when I saw her and remember the first words out their mouths when they came to the wedding? Anything to drink is what they asked for and when they got a glass of lemonade, they acted like they'd been insulted and walked



on out the door. I remember that. Bitches. More like witches. But look here, brother, the bones beat all. I can't believe a whole family died out there without nobody knowing it. They wasn't all that far away, know what I'm saying? Can't nobody tell me they left the road and got themselves lost in a field with a big old house less than <sup>two</sup> miles away, They would have seen it. Had to. The man would have got out and walked to it, see what I mean? He could reason, couldn't he and even he couldn't reason he could see. How you going to miss a house that size out here in land flat as a <sup>nail head</sup> ~~iron~~? You saying they had something to do with it? Listen, nothing ever happened around here like what's going on now. Before those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom. The others before them at least had some religion. These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickle they ain't thinking about <sup>one</sup> ~~either~~. They don't need men and they don't need God. Can't say they ain't been warned. Asked them first and then warned. If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. <sup>but</sup> they don't. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow, polluted and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. Can't have it, ya'll. Can't have it at all.

*Lone thought*  
So. The fanged head is somewhere else. Out yonder all nicely packaged in a house full of women. Lone shook her head and adjusted her doublemint. She was listening only half heartedly to the words; trying hard to divine the thoughts behind them. Some of it she got right away. Sargeant, she knew would be nodding his head at every shred of gossip and *half-* ~~partial~~ truth, but he would be thinking how much less his outlay would be if he owned the Convent land. He wanted a stable community, no talk-back young folks threatening or trying to move out. Yes, but if the women are gone from the Convent land, he would be in a better position to own the land. Wisdom Poole would be looking for a reason to explain why he had no control anymore over his brothers and sisters. To explain how it happened that those <sup>who</sup> used to <sup>to</sup> worship him, listen to him, <sup>on their own</sup> were now strays. The shooting last year between Brood and Apoll<sup>o</sup>a would be enough reason for him to go galavanting off to throw some women in the road. As for the Fleetwoods, Arnold and Jeff, well they've been wanting to blame somebody for Sweetie's children for a long time. Maybe it was the midwife's fault. Maybe it was the government's fault, but the midwife could only be dis-employed and the government was not accountable, and although Lone had delivered



each of Jeff's sick children long before the first woman arrived, he wouldn't let a little thing like that keep him from finding fault anywhere but in his own blood. Or Sweetie's. Menus, he'd be ripe for a raid on somebody. spending those weeks out there drying out. you'd think he'd be grateful, but they must have witnessed some things, saw some things he didn't want ranging around in anybody's mind in case they fell out of their mouths. Or maybe it was just to erase the shame he felt at having let Harper and the rest of the men talk him out of marrying that woman he brought home. That pretty red bone girl they told him was not good enough for him; <sup>she said she</sup> was more like a fast woman than a bride. And he didn't have the courage to leave and go on and live with her someplace else. He let out like he drank because of what Vietnam had done to him, but Lone thought the pretty girl's loss <sup>red bone</sup> was more to the point. Getting rid of some unattached women who had <sup>wiped him and cleaned</sup> wiped up after him might convince him he was right to let the red bone go. <sup>Lone could not count</sup> How many times had she sat in Holy Redeemer and heard Harper <sup>start to</sup> testifying and ending up going on about loose women and do you want to know who and where your children are? He'd married a Blackhorse woman, Catherine, and <sup>who she was seeing</sup> worried her to an early grave about what she was doing and this and

that and was she properly instructing their daughter Kate. Kate got married as fast as she could just to get out from under his hand. His first wife, Menus' mother, Martha, must have given him a bad time. \*

Then there was K.D., the family man. Talking about how strange the girl was and how he knew it right away. <sup>Soon as he saw her get off the bus</sup> Ha ha. He's a daddy now of

a three-month old <sup>girl</sup> son with all its fingers and toes and who knows maybe a full brain too <sup>tesy</sup> courtesy of the doctor willing to treat black

folks in Demby. So he and Arnette both sniffed their noses at her, Lone, and however happy now Arnette must be and willing to pass her

earlier 'mistake' off on the Convent women tricking her, K.D. would have another grudge. <sup>The strange girl he was mocking now stalked her</sup> One of those women he tracked for years till

she threw him out the door. Take a whole lot of healthy babies to make him forget that. He's a Morgan, after all, and they haven't

forgotten a thing since 1789.

Lone understood these private thoughts and some of what Steward's and Deacon's motives might be. <sup>Neither put up with what he couldn't control.</sup> But she could not have

imagined the rancor Steward <sup>felt</sup> for toward the women <sup>deep in the meat</sup> How close to the ~~bone~~ it was. He remembered ~~clearly~~ how close his brother came to

breeding up his marriage to Soane. How off the course Deek slid when he was involved with those poison green eyes. For months they'd met

\* So bad  
\* ~~After~~ he never  
let ~~the son~~  
forget it.

Steward's rancor - how deep in the meat it was



secretly and just suppose she had gotten pregnant? Had a mixed-up child? He seethed at the thought of that barely averted betrayal of all they had planned together and lived for. But there was <sup>a</sup> ~~another~~ blister in his heart that <sup>neither shrank nor came to a head</sup> ~~never~~ receded. A betrayal not just of the fathers' law, the law of continuance and multiplication, but, worse, a betrayal of his cherished memory of himself. The women in the Convent were for him a <sup>per version</sup> diseased parody of the nineteen Negro ladies <sup>& his brother's</sup> of his youthful memory. They were the degradation of that <sup>recollection</sup> memory of sunlit skin and verbena. They, with their mindless giggling outraging the dulcet tones, the tinkling, <sup>of</sup> in the merry and welcoming laughter of the nineteen who lived forever in pastel shaded dreams.

Nor did Lone know the bloody mind of Deacon Morgan. She knew ~~nothing~~ about his relationship with Consolata shortly after he first arrived to build Ruby. <sup>But</sup> <sup>have</sup> <sup>ed</sup> so she could not fathom his personal shame. Or fathom how important it was, ~~now Consolata was dead~~, for Deek to <sup>erase</sup> ~~bury~~ both the shame and the kind of woman he believed she was. An uncontrollable, gnawing woman who had bitten his lip just for the blood it shed, a beautiful, golden-skinned, outside woman with moss green eyes that entrapped, a Salome' from whom he had escaped just in time or she would have had his head on a dinner plate. That

\* And he couldn't get rid of the thought that maybe his grand nephew had been abused killed in that place

ravenous ground-fucking woman who had not left his life but had weasled her way into Soane's affections and, he suspected, was plying her with evil potions to make her less loving than she used to be and it was not the eternal grieving for thir sons that froze her, but the mess she was swallowing given to her her by the woman whose own name she made into a travesty and a mockery of what a woman should be.