



## Chapter 9: Save-Marie

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## CHAPTER NINE

### SAVE-MARIE

482

*in  
contemplating*

**"This is why we are here: in this single moment of aching  
sadness--<sup>short</sup> the life and <sup>incomprehensible unacceptable</sup> death of a child--we confirm, defer or lose our  
faith. Here in the tick tock of this moment <sup>is this place</sup> are all our questions, all  
our fear, our outrage, confusion, desolation. <sup>swell before</sup> He, we might say, it is  
time to to halt, reject platitudes about sparrows falling under His  
eye; about the good dying young (this child didn't have a choice about  
being good); or about death being the only democracy. This is the  
time to ask the questions that are really on our minds. Who could do  
this to a child? Who could permit this for a child? And why?**

Sweetie Fleetwood wouldn't discuss it. Her child would not be laid to  
rest on Steward Morgan's land. It was a brand new problem: the  
subject of burial sites had not come up in Ruby for twenty years and



there was astonishment as well as sadness when the task became necessary. When Save-Marie, the youngest of Sweetie and Jeff's children, died, people assumed the rest of them, <sup>Noah</sup> Junior, Esther and Ming, would quickly follow. <sup>insert</sup> Thus the <sup>sense</sup> discussion of a formal cemetery <sup>and the expectation of more funerals,</sup> was not only because of Sweetie's wishes, but a sense that, for complicated reasons, the reaper was no longer barred entry. <sup>to Ruby</sup> Richard Misner was therefore presiding ~~not only~~ over consecrated ground ~~but~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~also~~ launching a new institution. But whether to use the ad hoc cemetery on Steward's ranch--where Ruby Smith lay--was a question out of the question for her Sweetie, <sup>III</sup> under the influence of her brother, Luther, and blaming Steward for the trouble he got her husband and father-in-law into, said she would rather do what Roger Best had done (dug a grave on his own property) and she couldn't care less that twenty-two years had passed since that quick and poorly attended backyard burial took place.

Most people understood why she was making such a fuss (grief plus blame was a heady brew) but Pat Best believed that her stubbornness was more calculated. Rejecting a Morgan offer, casting doubt on Morgan righteousness might squeeze some favors from Morgan pockets. And if Pat's 8-rock theory were correct,

Sweetie's recalcitrance put the 8-rocks in an awkward position: deciding to have a real and formal cemetery in a town full of immortals. Something seismic had happened since July. So here they were, on a mild November day, gathered east of the stream, a mile or so beyond the last Ruby house, which was, of course, Morgan land, but nobody had the heart to tell Sweetie so. Standing among the crowd surrounding the bereaved Fleetwoods, Pat regained something close to stability. Earlier at the funeral service the absence of a eulogy had made her cry. Now she was her familiar dispassionately amused self. At least she hoped she was dispassionate, and hoped amusement was what she was feeling. She knew there were other views about her attitude, some of which Richard Misner had expressed ("Sad. Sad and cold."), but she was a scholar not a doubter and steeled herself against Misner's graveside words.

He and Anna Flood had returned two days after the Convent assault and it took four days for him to learn what happened. Pat gave him the two editions of the official story 1)--that nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air. And 2) (The Fleetwood/Jury Version) that



five men had gone to evict the women; that four others--the authors--had gone to restrain or stop them; these four were attacked by the Convent women but had succeeded in driving them out and they took off in their Cadillac; that unfortunately, some of the five had lost their heads and killed the old woman. What Pat withheld from Richard was her own interpretation. That nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women because a) the women were impure (not 8-rock), b) the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most) and c) because they *could*--which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the "deal" required.

Richard didn't believe either of the gospelized stories, and spoke to Simon Cary and Senior Pulliam who clarified other parts of the tale. But because neither had decided on the meaning of the ending and, therefore, had not been able to formulate a credible sermonizeable account of it, Richard was left dissatisfied. It was Lone who provided him with the vivid details that several people were quick to discredit because Lone, they said, was not reliable. Except for her, no one else overheard the men at the Oven and who knew what they really said?; like the rest of the witnesses she arrived after the shooting took place; besides she and Dovey could be wrong

about whether the two women in the house were dead or wounded and, finally, she didn't see anybody outside the house, living or dead.

As for Lone, at first she went rigid at the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good. Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting misinformation. Although the DuPres, Beauchamps, Sands and the Floods backed up her version even their reputation for precision and integrity could not prevent the alteration of the truth. If there were no victims the story of the crime was play for anybody's tongue. So Lone shut up and kept what she knew folded in her brain: God had given Ruby a second chance. Had made Himself so visible and unarguable a presence even the outrageously prideful (like Steward) and the uncorrectibly stupid (like his lying nephew) ought to be able to see it. He had actually swept away His servants in broad daylight, for goodness sake! right before their very eyes, for Christ's sake! Since they were calling her a liar, she decided to keep quiet and watch the hand of God work the disbelievers and the false witnesses. Would they know they'd been spoken to? Or



would they drift further from His ways? One thing, for sure, they could see the Oven; they couldn't misread or misspeak that, so they had better hurry up and correct its slide before it was too late--which it might already be for the young people had changed its words again. No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffitti on the hood of the Oven was We Are the Furrow of His Brow.

However sharp the divisions about what really took place, Pat knew the big and agreed upon fact was that everyone who had been there left the premises certain that law men would be happily swarming all over town (they'd killed a white woman, after all)--arresting virtually all of Ruby's businessmen. When they learned there were no dead to report, transport or bury, relief was so great, they began to forget what they'd done or seen. Had it not been for Luther Beauchamp--who told the most damning story-- and Pious, Deed Sands and Aaron--who corroborated much of Lone's version--the whole thing might have been sanitized out of existence. Yet even they could not bring themselves to report unnatural deaths in a house with no bodies which might lead to the discovery of natural deaths in an automobile full of bodies. Though not privy to many



people's confidence, Pat gathered from talks with her father, Kate and from deliberate eavesdropping that four months later they were still chewing the problem, asking God for guidance if they were wrong; if white law should, contrary to everything they knew and believed, be permitted to deal with matters heretofore handled among and by them. The difficulties churned and entangled everybody: distribution of blame, pleas for understanding and forgiveness; arrogant self-defense; outright lies and a host of unanswered questions which Richard Misner kept putting to them. So the funeral came as a pause but not a conclusion.

Maybe they were right about this place all along, Pat thought, surveying the mourners. Maybe Ruby is lucky. No, she corrected herself. This luck is superficial. Although the evidence of the assault was invisible, the consequences were not. There was Jeff, his arm around his wife, both looking properly sorrowful, but slightly majestic too for Jeff was now entire owner of his father's furniture and appliance store. Arnold, suddenly a very old man with a persistent headache, and enjoying his own bedroom now that Arnette had moved out, stood with bowed head and roaming eyes that traveled everywhere but the coffin. Sargeant Person looked as smug as ever :

he had no landlord expecting a field fee and unless and until the county auditor got interested in a tiny hamlet of quiet Godfearing black folk, his avarice would go unabated. Harper Jury, uncontrite, was wearing a dark blue suit and a head wound that like a medal gave him leave to assume the position of bloodied but unbowed warrior against evil. Menus was the most unfortunate. He had no customers at Anna's anymore in part because his ruined shoulder restricted his facility with barber tools but also because his drinking had extended itself to many more days of the week. His dissipation was rapidly coming to its own conclusion. Wisdom Poole had the toughest row to hoe. Seventy family members held him accountable just as they had his brothers, Brood and Apollo, giving him no peace or status, reprimanding him daily. Arnette and K.D. were building a new house on Steward's property. She is pregnant again and they both hope to get in a position to make life unpleaasant for the Poole's, the DuPres, the Sands and the Beauchamps, especially Luther who takes every opportunity to insult K.D. The most interesting development was with the Morgan brothers. Their distinguishing features were eroding: tobacco choices (they gave up cigar and chaw at the same time), shoes, clothes, facial hair. Pat thought they looked more alike than



they probably had at birth. But the inside difference was too deep for anyone to miss. Steward took K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making him (and his children) rich (thus the new house) while waiting for Dovey to come around, which she seemed to be doing because there was a marked coolness between her and Soane. It was Deacon Morgan who had changed the most. It was as though he had looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore. to everyone's surprise he had form a friendship (well, a relationship, anyway) with somebody other than his brother, the cause, reason and basis of which were a mystery. Richard Misner wasn't talking, so all anyone knew was the barefoot walk that took place in public.

It was September then and still hot when Deacon Morgan walked toward Central. Chrysanthemums on the right, chrysanthemums to the left of the brick path leading from his imposing white house. He wore his hat, business suit, vest and a clean white shirt. No shoes. No socks. He entered St. John where twenty years ago he had planted trees fifty feet apart so great was his optimism. He turned right on Central. It had been ten years at least since the soles of his shoes, let alone his bare feet, had traveled that much concrete. Just past Arnold Fleetwood's house, near the corner of St. Luke, a couple

said "Morning Deek." He lifted his hand in greeting, his eyes straight ahead. Liza Cary hello-ed from the porch of her house near Cross Mark but he did not turn his head. "Car broke down?" she asked staring at his feet. At Harper Jury's drugstore, on the corner of Central and St. Matthew he felt rather than saw watchful eyes traveling alongside him. He didn't turn to see nor did he glance through the window of the Morgan Saving and Loan Bank as he approached St. Peter. At Cross Peter he crossed and made his way to Richard Misner's house. The last time he was here, eight years ago, he was angry, suspicious but certain he would prevail. What he felt now was exotic to a twin--an incompleteness, a muffled solitude that took away appetite, sleep and sound. Since July other people seemed to him to be speaking in whispers, or shouting from long distances. Soane watched him but, mercifully, did not initiate conversation. It was as though she understood that had she done so, what he said to her could never be unsaid. He might tell her that all the green springtime had been sapped away; that outside of that loss, she was grand, more beautiful than he believed a woman could be; that her untameable hair framed a face of planes so sharp he wanted to touch; that after she spoke the smile that followed made the sun look like a



fool. He might tell his wife that he thought at first she was speaking to him --"You're back"--but knew now it wasn't so. And that instantly he longed to know what she saw, but Steward, who saw nothing or everything, stopped them dead lest they know another realm.

Earlier that September morning he had bathed and dressed carefully but could not bring himself to cover his feet. He handled the dark socks, the shiney black shoes for a long while, then put them aside.

He knocked on the door and removed his hat when the young man answered.

"I need to speak to you, Reverend."

"Come on in."

Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions. He spoke to his wife in the opaque manner he thought appropriate. None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner. His words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith--hot,

misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow. He spoke of a wall in Italy, white in the late afternoon sun with wine colored shadows pressing its edge. Of two children on a beach offering him a sea shell formed like a horseshoe- how open their faces were, how loud the bells. Of saltwater burning his face on a troop ship. Of colored girls in slacks waving from the door of a canning factory. Then he told him of his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance.

Richard listened intently, interrupting once to offer cool water. Although he did not understand what Deacon was talking about, he could see that the man's life was uninhabitable. Deacon began to speak of a woman he had used; how he had turned up his nose at her because her loose and easy ways gave him the license to drop and despise her. That while the adultery preyed on him for a short while (very short) his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different.

"Who is this woman?" Richard asked him.

Deacon did not answer. He ran his finger around the inside of his shirt collar, then started on another story. It seemed his grandfather,



Zechariah, was subject to personal taunts as well as newspaper articles describing his malfeasance in office. He was an embarrassment to Negroes and both a threat and a joke to whites. No one, black or white, could or would help him find other work. He was even passed up for a teaching job at a poor country elementary school. The Negroes in a position to help were few (the depression of 73 was severe), but they took Zechariah's dignified manner for coldness and his studied speech for arrogance, mockery or both. The family lost the nice house and were living (all six of them) with a sister's family. Mindy, his wife found work sewing at home and the children did odd jobs. Few knew and fewer remembered that Zechariah had a twin and before he changed his name, they were known as Coffee and Tea. When Coffee got the state house job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he shared his rage and his humiliation. One day, years later, when he and his twin were walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably accommodated the whitemen, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot

instead. From that moment they weren't brothers anymore. Coffee began to plan a new life elsewhere. He contacted other men, former legislators who had the same misfortune as his--Juvenal DuPres and Drum Blackhorse. They were the three who formed the nucleus of the Old Fathers. Needless to say, Coffee didn't ask Tea to join them on their journey to Oklahoma.

"I always thought Coffee--Zechariah-- was wrong," said Deacon Morgan. "Wrong in what he did to his brother. Tea was his twin, after all. Now I'm thinking different. I'm thinking Coffee was right because he saw something in Tea that wasn't just going along with some drunken whiteboys. He saw something that shamed him. The way his brother thought about things; the choices he made when up against it. Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again. Know what I mean?"

"It must have been hard," said Richard.

"I'm saying he never said another word to him and wouldn't allow anybody else to call his name."

"Lack of words," Richard said. "Lack of forgiveness. Lack of



love. To lose a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that's worse than the original shame wouldn't you say?"

Deacon looked down at his feet for a long time. Richard stayed quiet with him. Finally he raised his head and said,

"I got a long way to go, Reverend."

"You'll make it," said Richard Misner "No doubt about it."

"Right," said Misner, but he didn't sound convinced.

"It's been weeks now and nobody has come around asking

Richard and Anna doubted the convenient mass disappearance of the victims and, as soon as they got back, went to look for themselves. Other than a sparkling white crib in a bedroom with the word DIVINE taped to the door, and foodstuff, there was nothing recently lived-in about the place. The chickens were wilding or half eaten by four-footed prowlers. Pepper bushes were in full flower, but the rest of the garden was lost. Sargeant's cornfield the only human touch. Richard barely glanced at the cellar floor. Anna however, examining it as closely as her lamp permitted, saw the terribleness K.d. reported, but it wasn't the prnography he had seen nor was it Satan's scrawl. She saw instead the stuttering turbulence of females trying to bridle without being trampled the monsters that

slavered them. On the drive back from the Convent, Richard was silent and uneasy. Anna said,

"Listen. One of them or maybe more wasn't dead. Nobody actually looked--they just assumed. Then between the time folks left and Roger arrived, they got the hell out of there. Taking the killed ones with them. Simple, right?"

"Right," said Misner, but he didn't sound convinced.

"It's been weeks now and nobody has come around asking questions. They must not have reported it, so why should we?"

"Whose baby was in there? That crib is new."

"I don't know but it sure wasn't Arnette's."

He said it again, "Right," with the same level of doubt. Then, "I don't like mysteries."

"You're a preacher. Your whole life's belief is a mystery."

"Belief is mysterious; faith is mysterious. But God is not a mystery. We are."

The wind picked up a bit but not enough to make anyone uncomfortable that November day. Thoughts of death were mingled



with plans for Thanksgiving just six days away. Richard thought about the girl whose hands he had once been permitted to hold. Now he concluded his remarks before the coffin was lowered.

"May I suggest, those are not the questions. Or rather those are the questions of pain but not of intelligence. And my God is an intelligent God. Complicated. Complex. Intricate. tk Has He no compassion you ask. O yes. He has given us Mind. tk

Billie Marie walked slowly away from the other mourners. She had stood with her mother and grandfather and smiled encouragingly at Arnette. She was perhaps the only one who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: when will they return? Will they re-appear with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this hateful prison calling itself a town. A town that had broken her grandfather, impaled her mother and grossly midjuged herself. A blackward noplacé ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who having seen in lively, free, unarmed females the lessening of that power and so got rid of them. She hoped with all her heart

that the women were out there, biding their time, darkly burnished, filing their teeth, sharpening their nails--but out there. Which is to say she hoped for a miracle. Not so unreasonable a wish since a mini-miracle had already occurred: Brood and Apollo had reconciled agreeing to wait for her to make up her mind. She knew, as they did, that she never could and that the threesome would end only when they did. The Convent women would roar at that. She could see their pointy teeth.