



## Paradise Draft

---

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Paradise Draft

1 folder

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:57:41 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/9019s706m>

Thursday 8th December, 1994 Thursday 8th December, 1994

30. December: note rev's. ✓

3 January " " ✓

Ruby

### Paradise

Thursday 8th December, 1994

**For many are the pleasant forms which exist in**

**numerous sins,** give first. With the rest they can take their time.

**and incontinencies,** They are five miles from a town which has

**and disgraceful passions** and any other. Hiding places will be

**and fleeting pleasures,** there is time and the day has just begun.

**which (men) embrace until they become**

**sober** They are a force the number of the women they are obliged

**and go up to their resting place.** to capture for either

**And they will find me there,** crosses, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses

**and they will live,** along guns.

**and they will not die again.**

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have

parked Chevrolats near its porch to pick up a jar of honey or have

gone into the kitchen for a gallon can of barbecue sauce; but none has

seen the hall, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they

will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the

light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are

startled by the clothes they are wearing--suddenly aware of being

ill-dressed. For at the dawn of a July day how could they have

guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their t-shirts, work shirts,

and dashikies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn

workshoes are underpinned by the thunder of their steps on marble

1976  
Ruby

Thursday 8th December, 1994

They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are five miles from a town which has seventeen miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent but there is time and the day has just begun.

They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to capture or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, palm leaf crosses, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses along with clean, handsome guns.

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have parked Chevrolets near its porch to pick up a jar of honey or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon can of barbecue sauce; but <sup>only one</sup> none has seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they <sup>All</sup> will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are startled by the clothes they are wearing--suddenly aware of being ill-dressed. For at the dawn of a July day how could they have guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their t-shirts, work shirts, and dashikies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn workshoes are unnerved by the thunder of their steps on marble



floors; those in Pro-Keds by the silence. Then there is the grandeur. Only the two who are wearing ties seem to belong here and one by one each is reminded that before it was a Convent, this house was an embezzler's folly. A mansion where bisque and rosetone marble floors segue into teak ones. Ising glass holds yesterday's light and patterns walls stripped and white-washed fifty years ago. The ornate bathroom fixtures which sickened the nuns were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and toilets, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt. The embezzler's joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room which the nuns converted to a school room where stilled Arapajo girls once sat and learned to forget.

Now armed men search rooms where macrame` baskets float next to Flemish candalabra ; where Christ and His mother glow in niches trimmed in grape vines. The Sisters of the Final Cross [tk] chipped away all the nymphs, but curves of their marble hair still strangle grape leaves and tease the fruit. The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast and butter smell of rising dough.

One of them, the youngest, looks back, forcing himself to see how the dream he is in might go. The shot woman, lying uncomfortably on marble, waves her fingers at him--or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its color. He has never before dreamed in colors



such as these.

The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stop, editing their breath, making friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations: you two over there to the kitchen; two more upstairs; two others into the chapel. He saves himself, his brother and the one who thinks he is dreaming for the cellar.

They part gracefully without words or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below.

Outside the mist is waist high. It will turn silver soon and make grass rainbows low enough for children's play before the sun burns it off, exposing acres of clover and maybe witch tracks as well.

The kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. More shelving than Ace's Grocery Store. The table is fourteen feet long if an inch and it's easy to tell that the women they are hunting have been taken by surprise. At one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of Shredded Wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallion piled like

a handful of green confetti nestles brilliant discs of carrot, but the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on ~~one of the stove's eight burners~~. It is restaurant size <sup>with eight burners</sup> and on a shelf beneath the great steel hood a dozen loaves of bread swell. A stool is overturned. There are no windows.

One man, [called Sargeant], signals the other to open the pantry while he goes to the back door. It is closed but unlocked. Peering out [Sargeant<sup>he</sup>] sees an old hen, her puffed and bloody hindparts cherished, he supposes, for delivering freaks--double, triple yokes, outsized and misshappen. Soft stuttering comes from the coop beyond; fryers padding confidently into the yard's mist disappear, reappear and disappear again, each flat eye indifferent to anything but breakfast. No footprints disturb the dirt around the stone steps. [Sargeant<sup>the man</sup>] closes the door and joins his partner, [Jefferson], at the pantry. Together they scan dusty Mason jars and what is left of last year's canning: tomatoes, green beans, peaches. Slack, they think. August just around the corner and these women have not even sorted, let alone washed, the jars.

[<sup>HE</sup>Sargeant] turns the fire off under the stock pot. His mother bathed him in a pot no bigger than that. In Haven where he was born in the sod house his grandfather built. The house he lives in now is much bigger, much better and this town is resplendent compared to Haven, Oklahoma, which had gone from feet to belly in sixty years. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1930 and were



stomach=

^ crawling by 1948<sup>0</sup>. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out brings rot to the one all-black town worth the pain. All the others <sup>this man</sup> he knew about knuckled to or merged with white towns, otherwise, like Haven, they had shriveled into tracery: foundation outlines marked by the way grass grew there, wallpaper turned negative behind missing windowpanes, schoolhouse floors moved aside by elder trees growing toward the bellhousing. One thousand citizens in 1900 becoming five hundred by 1930. Then two hundred, then eighty as cotton collapsed or railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere. Subsistence farming, once the only bounty a large family needed, became just scrap farming as each married son got his bit which had to be broken up into more pieces for his children until finally the owners of the bits and pieces who had not walked off in disgust, welcomed any offer from a white speculator, so eager were they to get away and try someplace else. A big city this time, or a small town--anywhere that was already built.

<sup>theirs</sup> This town, ~~this~~, the one Sargeant and the others had put together, ] was the exception and the solution. Veterans all, they loved what Haven, Oklahoma had been--the idea of it and its reach. And they carried that idea from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart. And when they got back to the States most of them did what they had promised themselves: took apart the oven that sat in the middle of their hometown and carried the bricks, the hearthstone and its iron plate two hundred and forty miles west--far far from the old Creek



Nation which a witty Government called "unassigned land." <sup>The man</sup> Sargeant remembers the ceremony they'd had when the Oven's iron lip was re-cemented into place and its worn letters polished for all to see. He himself had cleaned off sixty-two years of carbon and animal fat so the words shone as brightly as they did in 1890 when they were new. And if it hurt--pulling asunder what their grandfathers had put together--it was nothing compared to what they had endured and what they might become if they did not begin anew. Could ex-soldiers be no less purposeful than ex-slaves? Would new fathers be less understanding than the Old Fathers? Those who had cut Haven out of mud knew enough to seal their triumphant arrival with this priority. An Oven. Round as a head, deep as desire. Living in or near their wagons, boiling meal in the open, cutting sod and mesquite for shelter, the Old Fathers did that first: put most of their strength into constructing the huge flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done. When it was finished--each pale brick perfectly pitched; the chimney wide, lofty; the pegs and grill secure; the draft pulling steadily from the tail hole; the fire door plumb--then the iron monger did his work. From barrel staves and busted axles, from pot handles and bent nails he fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it at the base of the Oven's mouth. It is still not clear where the words came from. <sup>Bank,</sup> Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he could even read the half dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound

them; finally to announce that they had lost.

Once the letters were in place, but before anyone had time to ponder the words they formed, they raised a roof next to where the Oven sat waiting to be seasoned. On crates and makeshift benches Haven people gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game. Later, when buffalo grass gave way to a nice little town with a road down the middle, wooden houses, one church, a school, a store, the citizens still gathered there. They pierced quinea hens and whole deer for the spit; they turned the ribs and rubbed extra salt into sides of cooling veal. Those were the days of slow cooking, when flames were kept so low a twenty pound turkey roasted all night and a side could take two days. Whenever livestock was slaughterd, or when the taste for unsmoked game was high, Haven people brought the kill to the Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasonings and the proper test for "done." They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shade of the eaves. And any child in ear shot was subject to being ordered to fan flies, haul wood, clean the work table or beat the earth with a tamping block.

In 1910 there were two churches in Haven and the All-Citizens Bank, four rooms in the schoolhouse, five stores selling drygoods, feed and foodstuffs--but the traffic to and from the Oven was greater than to all of those. No family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was. Even in 1930 when



everything else about the town was dying; when it was clear as daylight that talk of electricity would remain just talk and when gas lines and sewers were Tulsa marvels, the Oven stayed alive. Until the Big Drought, running water was not missed because <sup>the well</sup> there was a <sup>was deep.</sup> ~~sweetwater creek nearby.~~ As a boy <sup>the man</sup> Sargeant had swung overhand from the cottonwood branches leaning over it and peered through clear water at the stones beneath. Time after time he heard stories of the blue dresses and bonnets the men bought for the women with cash from the first harvest or the first cuts from the herd. The spectacular arrival of the St Louis piano, ordered soon as Zion's floor was laid. He imagined his mother as a ten year old among other young girls clustered quietly about the piano, sneaking a touch, a keystroke before the deaconness slapped their hands away. Their pure sopranos at rehearsal singing "He will take care of you...." which He did, safe to say, until He stopped.

So in 1949 <sup>he</sup> ~~Sargeant~~, young and newly married, was anything but a fool. Even before <sup>he</sup> ~~he left for the war,~~ Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. He stared at his dwindling post-war future and it was not hard to persuade him to join other veterans who had planned all along to repeat what the Old Fathers had done in <sup>1890</sup> 1889. Lessons had been learned, after all, about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven--headed not



for Muskogee or California as some had, or St. Louis, Houston, Langston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the gravel <sup>contaminating</sup> ~~snaking through~~ the town their grandfathers had made.

"How long?" asked the children from the back seats of the cars. "How long will it be?"

"Soon," the parents replied. Hour after hour the answer was the same. "Soon. Pretty soon." When they saw Beaver Creek sliding through the muzzle of a state shaped like a gun, on through the acres of grass their pooled discharge pay had bought, it was pretty, soon and right on time.

What they left behind was a dream town whose once proud streets were weed-choked, monitored now by eighteen stubborn people wondering how they could get to the post office where there might be a letter from long gone grandchildren. Where the Oven had been, small green snakes slept in the sun. Who could have imagined that twenty-five years later in a brand new town a Convent would beat out the snakes, the Depression, the tax man and the railroad for sheer destructive power?

<sup>The man</sup> Sargeant eyes the kitchen sink. He moves to the long table and lifts the pitcher of milk. He sniffs it first and then, the pistol in his right hand, he uses his left to raise the pitcher to his mouth, taking such

long measured swallows the milk is half gone by the time he smells the wintergreen.

On the floor above, <sup>two off</sup> ~~Roger and Fleet~~ <sup>name</sup> ~~walk~~ <sup>men</sup> the hall and examine each of the four bedrooms with a name card taped on its door. The first, printed in lipstick, is Seneca. The next, Divine, is typed in capital letters. They exchange knowing looks when they learn that each woman sleeps not in a bed like normal people, but in a hammock. Other than that, and except for a narrow desk or end table, there is no additional furniture. No clothes in the closets, of course, since the women always wore no-fit dirty dresses and nothing you could honestly call shoes. But there are strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1963 calendar, large X's marking various dates; astrology charts; a whip; a highschool year book and, for people who swore they were Christians--well, Catholics anyway--not a cross of Jesus anywhere. But what alarms the two men most are the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to the hanging cord of a hammock in the last bedroom they enter. A teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangles among the tiny shoes. Signaling with his eyes, Fleet directs Roger to four more bedrooms on the opposite side of the hall. He himself moves closer to the bouquet of baby shoes. Looking for what? More evidence? He isn't sure. Blood? A little toe, maybe, left in a white calfskin shoe? He slides the safety on his gun and joins <sup>that</sup> ~~Roger's~~ <sup>his companion's</sup> search across the hall.

These rooms are normal. Messy--the floor in one of them is covered



with food-encrusted dishes, dirty cups and a clothes-covered bed; another room sports two rocking chairs full of dolls; a third the debris and smell of a heavy drinker--but normal at least.

<sup>The of one of them</sup>  
Fleet's saliva is bitter and, although he knows this place is diseased, he is startled by the whip of pity flicking in his chest. What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children. Out here in wide open space near a quiet orderly community tucked away in a mansion--no one to bother or insult them--they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew. The winter coat money for which his father saved in secret for two harvests; the light in his mother's eyes when she stroked its seal collar. The surprise party he and his brothers threw for his sister's sixteenth birthday. Yet here not twenty miles away there were women like none he knew or ever heard tell of. In this place of all places. ~~Well there were a few problems, like every other place in the state and in the country for that matter. But~~ unique and isolated, theirs was a town justifiably <sup>satisfied with</sup> proud of its people. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from their town. And the one or two who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of. Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town and the reasons, he thought, were clear. From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she



felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of nothing at all. Lampless and without fear she could make her way. And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else.

The woman could decide to go back to her own house then, refreshed and ready to sleep, or she might stay her direction and walk further down the road past other houses, past the three churches, past the Oven. On out, beyond the limits of town because nothing at the edge thought she was prey.

At each end of the hall is a bathroom. <sup>As</sup> ~~Roger~~ <sup>Each man</sup> steps into one, <sup>Enters one</sup> ~~Fleet~~ the <sup>both</sup> other; <sup>is</sup> neither ~~man~~ working his jaws because <sup>bathroom is the biggest</sup> they believe they are prepared for anything. In <sup>the</sup> one ~~Fleet~~ enters the taps are too small and dowdy for the wide sink. The bathtub rests on the backs of four mermaids--their tails split wide for the tub's security; their breasts

fx  
(statz)

arched for stability. The tile underfoot is bottle green. A Modess box is on the toilet tank and a bucket of soiled things stands nearby. There is no toilet paper. Only one mirror has not been covered with chalky paint and that one <sup>the man</sup> ~~Fleet~~ ignores. He does not want to see himself stalking females or their liquid. With relief he backs out and closes the door. With relief he lets his handgun point down.

<sup>Downstairs neither man smiles</sup>  
Harper ~~doesn't smile~~, although when ~~he and Sharktooth~~ <sup>they</sup> first enter the chapel, <sup>they</sup> ~~he~~ feels like it because it was true: ~~they worshipped~~ <sup>were worshipped here</sup> graven idols. <sup>Men and women</sup> ~~Men and women~~ in white dresses and capes of blue and gold stood on tiny shelves cut into niches in the wall. Holding a baby, gesturing, their blank faces faking innocence. Candles had obviously burned at their feet and, just as Reverend Pulliam said, food had probably been offered as well since there were little bowls on either side of the doorway too. When this was over <sup>they</sup> ~~Harper~~ would tell Reverend Pulliam how right he was and laugh in Reverend Misner's face.

Whatever the differences among the congregations in town, they merged solidly on the necessity of this action: Do what you have to. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue.

Pity. Once the Convent had been a true if aloof neighbor, surrounded by five miles of buffalo grass and clover and approached by a gravel path rather than a road. The mansion-turned-Convent was there long before the town and the last boarding Arapajo girls had already gone



when the fifteen families arrived. That was twenty <sup>five</sup> years ago when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them. [A three mile road straight as a die had been cleared through the center of town, and lined on one side by a paved walk. Side streets, four of them, had been named for the Gospels. Seven of the families had farms of more than three hundred acres, <sup>and</sup> three had five hundred. The Morgan's application for the bank had been approved. And the Oven, perfectly re-assembled within the first month of their arrival, was still a pleasant place to congregate.] <sup>As soon as the road was laid</sup> By and by, Harper's father and a man named Ossie organized a horse race to celebrate its <sup>completion</sup> restoration. From army issue tents, half finished houses and freshly cleared land people rode in bringing what they had. Out came stored away things and things got up on the spot: guitars and late melon, hazel nuts, rhubarb pies and a mouth organ, a wash board, roast lamb, pepper rice, Lil Green, In the Dark, Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five; <sup>Foot</sup> Red Spot beer and groundhog meat fried and simmered in gravey. The women tied bright scarves over their hair; the children made themselves hats of wild poppies and river vine. Ossie <sup>owned</sup> had a two-year old; <sup>and</sup> an auburn mare, both fast and pretty as brides. The other horses were simply company: <sup>ACE'S</sup> Jessie's tk, Miss Esther's ancient featherweight, all four of Nathan's ploughhorses and a half broke-in pony that grazed the creek bank but that nobody claimed.

The riders quarrelled so long over saddle or bare back the mothers of nursing babies told them to mount or change roles. The men argued handicaps and placed <sup>quarter</sup> dollar bets with abandon. When the gun went



off only three horses left forward. The rest stepped sideways or cut out over lumber stacked near unfinished homes. When the race finally got underway, the women yelled from the meadow while their children shrieked and danced in grass up to their shoulders. The pony finished first, but since it lost its rider two furlongs out, the winner was the auburn mare. The little girl with the most poppies on her head was chosen to present the first place ribbon hung with Ossie's purple heart. The winner was seven years old then and grinning as though he'd won the Kentucky Derby. Now he was somewhere down in the cellar of a Convent watching out for awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, ~~they belonged to some other cult.~~ but novices, they thought, or lay workers. Nobody knew. But it wasn't important to know because all of them, each in her turn, and like the <sup>old</sup> Mother Superior and the servant who used to, still sold honey, good bread and the hottest peppers in the world. For a pricey price you could buy from them either the purple-y black peppers or a relish made from them. Either took the cake for pure burning power. The relish lasted years with proper attention, and though many customers tried planting the seeds, the pepper grew nowhere outside the Convent's garden.

~~They met at the Con in spite of the teenagers because, as~~  
Strange neighbors, every body said, but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in--lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Guests reported kindness, profound silence and very good food. But now ~~Harper and~~ everybody ~~else~~ knew it was all a lie, a front, a carefully planned disguise for what was really

\* But members of  
Some other cult.

going on. Once the emergency was plain, representatives from all three churches met at the Oven because they couldn't agree on which, if any, church should host a meeting to decide on what to do now that the women had ignored all warnings.

It was a secret meeting, but the rumors had been whispered for more than a year. Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed son. ~~Three~~<sup>Four</sup> damaged infants born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other dead on New Year's Eve. Trips to Middleton for ud shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. So when nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flashlights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women.

They met at the Oven in spite of the teenagers because, as representatives of three churches that had differed on a lot of things over the years, the Oven was one of the things they agreed upon. Once upon a time it was practically a church itself. Harper and Sharktooth both waved flashlights over the worn down words on the Oven's lip:



### THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

W That much was clear. What was in dispute were the missing words, or (according to some) the one word that began and completed the original sentence. The letters had broken off and been lost either when the Oven was disassembled or on the journey west. The oldest inhabitant, Fleet's mother-in-law, said that when she was a girl in Haven, she had traced the whole sentence with her finger, and she knew from bone finger memory that the original sentence was:

### BEWARE THE FURROW OF HIS BROW

*The man*  
Harper walks the aisle checking the pews right and left. He runs a frond of light from his Black and Decker under each seat. The knee rests are turned up. At the altar he pauses. One window of pale yellow floats above him in the dimness. Things look uncleaned. He steps to one of the bowls positioned on the walls to see if any food offerings remain there. Except for grime and spider webbing, the marble is empty. Maybe they are not for food but for money. Or trash? There is a gum wrapper in the dirtiest one. Doublemint.

*He*  
Harper shakes his head and joins *his friend* Sharktooth back at the altar. *The friend* Shark points. *The man* Harper beams the wall below the yellow window where, just barely, the sun announces. The outline of a huge cross comes into view. Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus.

*[M]*  
The Morgan brothers were once identical. Although they are twins

their wives look more alike than they do. One, ~~Deek~~ Morgan, is tough, loud and smokes Te Amo cigars. The other Morgan hides his face when he prays. But both have money and both are as singleminded now standing before a locked door as they were in 1942 when they enlisted. Then they were looking for an out--a break, away from a life where all was owed, nothing owned. Now they want in. Then, in the forties, they had nothing to lose. Now everything requires their protection. From the beginning when the town was founded they knew isolation did not guarantee safety. Men strong and willing were needed when lost or aimless strangers did not just drive through hardly glancing at a sleepy town with three churches within one hundred feet of each other but nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital. Sometimes, if they were young and drunk or old and sober, the strangers might spot three or four colored girls walk-dawdling along the side of the road. Walking a few yards, stopping as their talk required; skipping on, pausing to laugh or slap another's arm in play. The men get interested in them, perhaps. Three cars, say, a '55 Buick green with cream colored interior license number 085 B; a '39 Chevvy black, cracked rear window; and the '53 Oldsmobile with Arkansas plates. The drivers slow down, put their heads out the windows and holler over the fenders. Their eyes crinkled in mischief they drive around the girls making U turns and K's, churning up lawn in front of the houses, flushing cats in front of Ace's Grocery Store. Circling. The girls' eyes freeze as they back into one another. Then, one at a time, the men come out of the houses, the store, the back yards, off the



scaffold of the bank, out of the barber shop. One of the passengers has opened the front of his trousers and hung himself out the window to scare the girls. The girls' little hearts stand up and they cannot close their eyes fast enough, so they jerk their heads aside. But the townsmen do look at it, see the wish in this most militant of gestures, and smile. Smile reluctantly and in spite of themselves because they know that from this moment on, if not before, this man, till his final illness, will do as much serious damage to colored folks as he can.

More men come out, and more. Their guns are not pointing at anything, just held slackly against their thighs. Twenty men; now twenty-five. Circling the circling cars. Seventeen miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety from the nearest badge. If the day had been dry the dust spuming behind the tires would have discolored them all. As it was just a little gravel kicked up in the tread they left behind.

<sup>brothers</sup>  
The ~~Morgan~~ twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened--things they witnessed and things they have not. The exact temperature of the weather when the cars circled the girls as well as tk. And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather--the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descedants could tolerate anybody but themselves. On the journey from two Mississippi

plantations to Oklahoma, the two hundred and eighty freedman, one of whom was the elder Morgan, were unwelcome on each grain of soil from tk to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites; chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already established. The headline of a feature in the Herald, "Come Prepared or Not at All," could not mean them, could it? Young, eager to work their own land, they believed they were more than prepared--they were determined. It stung them into confusion to learn they did not have enough money to satisfy the restrictions the "self-supporting" Negroes required. In short they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders. This contemptuous dismissal by the lucky changed the temperature of their blood twice. First they boiled at being written up as "people who preferred saloons and crap games to homes, churches and schools." Then they cooled. What began as <sup>hot</sup> optimistic determination became cold-blooded obsession. "They don't know we," said the <sup>one of old men</sup> elder Morgan. "Never met we. Us free like them; was slaves like them. What be the difference?" The twins believed it was when he discovered how different difference could be that their grandfather chose the words for the Oven's lip. Furniture was held together by wooden dowels because nails were so expensive, but he sacrificed his treasure of three inch and four, bent and straight to <sup>say something that would last,</sup> ~~forge~~ ~~language to keep them strong.~~

So they altered their route and made their way west of the

denied and  
guarded against



unassigned lands, south of Logan County, across the Canadian River into Arapaho Territory. Becoming stiffer, prouder with each misfortune, the details of which were engraved in to the ~~Morgan~~<sup>brothers</sup> ~~Wills~~<sup>one brother</sup> powerful memories.

~~{narrative tk}~~ insert attached.

Now ~~Beek~~<sup>one brother</sup>, a leader in everything, smashes the cellar door with the butt of his rifle. The other ~~Morgan~~ waits a few feet back with ~~K.B.~~, their nephew. All three descend the steps ready and excited to know.

They are not disappointed. What they see is the devil's bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen.

<sup>The nephew</sup>  
~~K.B.~~ knew that his mother had tried as hard as she could to hang on. She had managed to see him ride the winning horse, but beyond that she had no strength. Not even enough to get interested in the debates about what to call this place she had traveled to with her brothers and her little boy. For three years New Haven had been the name most agreed to, although a few were loud in suggesting other names--names that did not speak, they said, of failure new or repeated. Pacific veterans liked Guam and Incho. Those who fought in Europe kept coming up with names only the children enjoyed pronouncing. The women had no firm opinion until ~~K.B.~~<sup>the nephew's</sup> mother died. Her funeral--the town's first--stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity. ~~They~~<sup>the two</sup> named the town after one of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby.

INSERT p. 22 Chapter One: RUBY

THE SADDLES OF THE FOUR BLACK-SKINNED BANDITS WHO  
FED THEM DRIED BUFFALO MEAT BEFORE ROBBING THEM  
OF THEIR RIFLES. THE COLOR OF THE FUNNEL THAT TWISTED  
THROUGH AND AROUND THEIR CAMP: THE SLEEPING CHILDREN  
WHO OKE UP SAILING THROUGH THE AIR. THE STILLNESS  
OF THE HORSES ON WHICH WATCHING CHOCTAW SAT. AT  
SUPPERTIME WHEN IT WAS TOO DARK FOR ANY WORK EXCEPT  
THAT WHICH COULD BE DONE BY FIRELIGHT, THE OLD FATHERS  
TOLD AND RETOLD THE STORIES OF THAT JOURNEY: THE  
SIGNS GOD GAVE TO GUIDE THEM--FROM WATERING PLACES  
TOBARGAINING LABOR WITH CREKK FOR LAND.

THE BROTHERS WERE BORN IN 1924 AND LISTENED FOR FORTY  
YEARS TO WHAT THE PREVIOUS FORTY HAD BEEN. THEY  
LISTENED TO, IMAGINED AND REMEMBERED EVERY SINGLE  
THING BECAUSE EACH DETAIL WAS A JOLT OF PLEASURE,  
PURPOSEFUL AS A DREAM, OUT-THRILLING EVEN THE WAR  
THEY HAD FOUGHT IN.



<sup>the brothers</sup>  
It pleased Deek and the other Morgan who could then both mourn the sister and honor the friend and brother-in-law who didn't make it back. But <sup>the nephew</sup> K.D., winner of Ossie's purple heart, heir to his father's dog tags, witness to his mother's name painted on signs and written on envelopes for the rest of his life, was displaced by these sad markings. The heart, the tags, the post office name outsized him somehow. The women who had known and tended his mother spoiled Ruby's boy. The men who grew up and enlisted with his father favored Ruby's husband's boy. The uncles took him for granted. When the decision was taken at the Oven, he was not there. But when the plan was being carried out, <sup>an uncle</sup> Uncle Deek simply knocked on his door and said We got coffee in the truck get your rifle. Which he did but he took the palm cross too.

<sup>four</sup>  
It was ~~three~~ in the morning when they left; <sup>five</sup> ~~four~~ when they arrived because, not wanting engine hum or headlights to ruin their cover of darkness, they walked the final miles. They parked the trucks in a copse of shin oak for light could signal uninterrupted for mile upon mile in this country. When casingheads for fifty miles were invisible, a lit birthday cake could be spotted as soon as the match was struck.

*most surprised them.*

(over) →

In the school room, that used to be a dining room and now has no function except storage of desks pushed to the wall, the view is clear. The men of Ruby bunch at its windows. Finding nothing but confirming evidence elsewhere in the Convent, they gather in the schoolroom.

Half a mile ~~from~~<sup>before</sup> their destination a cold  
fog (mist?) ~~came~~ out of nowhere  
Surrounded them,  
crept ~~up~~ to their ~~waists~~<sup>hips</sup>.

~~when~~ They reached the Convent just  
seconds before the sun did and had a  
moment to ~~register~~<sup>see and for all time</sup> how the mansion  
floated, ~~sun~~<sup>dark and malevolently</sup> moored ~~from~~ God's  
earth.

disconnected?



So is  
the  
mist

The New Fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma. The chill they first encountered is gone; <sup>^</sup>they are animated--warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness. The view is clear.

Track. That's all ~~K.D.~~ <sup>he</sup> can think of. Five hundred yard dashers or even the three mile runners. The heads of two of them are thrown back as far as their necks will allow; fists tight as their arms pump and stretch for distance. One has her wooly head down, butting air and time wide open, one hand reaching for a winner's wire nowhere in her future. Their mouths are open, pulling in breath, giving up none. The legs of all are off the ground, split wide above the clover.

They are like panicked doe leaping blindly toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the dark skin of the quarry.

God at their side, <sup>g</sup>right? the men take aim. For Ruby.

the decision was taken at the Oven, he was not there. But when the plan was being carried out, an uncle simply knocked on his door and said We got coffee in the truck get your rifle. Which he did but he took the palm cross too.

It was four in the morning when they left; going on five when they arrived because, not wanting engine hum or headlights to ruin their cover of darkness, they walked the final miles. They parked the trucks in a copse of shin oak for light could signal uninterrupted for mile upon mile in this country. When casingheads for fifty miles were invisible, a lit birthday cake could be spotted as soon as the match was struck. Half a mile from their destination a cold fog out of nowhere surrounded them to their hips. They reached the Convent just seconds before the sun did and had a moment to see and register for all time how the mansion floated, dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth.

In the school room, that used to be a dining room and now has no function except storage of desks pushed to the wall, the view is clear. The men of Ruby bunch at its windows. Finding nothing but confirming evidence elsewhere in the Convent, they gather in the schoolroom. The New Fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma. The chill they first encountered is gone; so is the mist. They are animated--warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness. The view is clear.

Track. That's all he can think of. Five hundred yard dashers or even



the decision was taken at the Oven, he was not there. But when the plan was being carried out, an uncle simply knocked on his door and said We got coffee in the truck get your rifle. Which he did but he took the palm cross too.

It was four in the morning when they left; going on five when they arrived because, not wanting engine hum or headlights to ruin their cover of darkness, they walked the final miles. They parked the trucks in a copse of shin oak for light could signal uninterrupted for mile upon mile in this country. When casingheads for fifty miles were invisible, a lit birthday cake could be spotted as soon as the match was struck. Half a mile from their destination a cold fog out of nowhere surrounded them to their hips. They reached the Convent just seconds before the sun did and had a moment to see and register for all time how the mansion floated, dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth.

In the school room, that used to be a dining room and now has no function except storage of desks pushed to the wall, the view is clear. The men of Ruby bunch at its windows. Finding nothing but confirming evidence elsewhere in the Convent, they gather in the schoolroom. The New Fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma. The chill they first encountered is gone; so is the mist. They are animated--warm with perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness. The view is clear.

Track. That's all he can think of. Five hundred yard dashers or even

the three mile runners. The heads of two of them are thrown back as far as their necks will allow; fists tight as their arms pump and stretch for distance. One has her wooly head down, butting air and time wide open, one hand reaching for a winner's wire nowhere in her future. Their mouths are open, pulling in breath, giving up none. The legs of all are off the ground, split wide above the clover.

They are like panicked doe leaping blindly toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the dark skin of the game.

God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby.

Saturday 7th January, 1995



Thursday 8th December, 1994

Grace

1970  
Either the pavement was burning or she had sapphires hidden in her shoes. K.D., who had never seen a woman mince or switch like that, believed it was the walk that caused all the trouble. Neither he nor his friends lounging at the Oven saw her step off the bus, but when it pulled away there she was--across the street from them in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair. She crossed Central Avenue toward them taking tiny steps on towering block heels not seen, ~~Aunt Olive said~~<sup>later</sup>, since 1942.

She walked fast, as though tripping through red coals or else in pain from something stuck in the toes of her shoes. Something valuable, otherwise she would have removed it.

K.D. carried the equipment box through the dining room. Narrow panels of lace spilled from a basket on the side table. Aunt Olive worked thread like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing more lace than could ever be practical. Out back the garden skirting to the left was weed-free and nicely tilled. K.D. turned right toward the shed and entered. The collies were thrilled to see him.

the three mile runners. The heads of two of them are thrown back as far as their necks will allow; fists tight as their arms pump and stretch for distance. One has her wooly head down, butting air and time wide open, one hand reaching for a winner's wire nowhere in her future. Their mouths are open, pulling in breath, giving up none. The legs of all are off the ground, split wide above the clover.

They are like panicked doe leaping blindly toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the game's dark hide.

God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby.

Saturday 7th January, 1995



He had to straddle Good to keep her down. Her ears were soft in his fingers and he was steady with the camphor-soaked cotton. The ticks came away like coffee grounds. He put his palm under her jaw; she licked his chin. Ben, the other collie, head on paws, looked on. Life at Steward Morgan's ranch loaded the dogs with mess. They needed a few weeks in Ruby under K.D.'s care twice a year. He took the bristle brush from the box. Dug deep in Good's hair, brushing it smooth and singing, softly in a Motown falsetto, the song he'd made up for her when she was a baby. "Hey good dog; Stay good dog; Old good dog; My good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog."

Good stretched her pleasure.

Just those concerned would be at the meeting tonight. Everybody, that is, except the one who started it all. His uncles Deek and Steward, Reverend Misner, Arnette's father and brother. They would discuss the slapping but not the pregnancy and certainly not the girl with sapphires hidden in her shoes.

Suppose she hadn't been there. Suppose her navel had not peeked over the waist of her jeans or her breasts had just hushed, hushed for a few seconds till they could figure out how to act--what

attitude to strike. In public, ~~all males~~<sup>all</sup>, without girlfriends hanging around, they would have known. As a group they would have assumed the right tone immediately. But Arnette was there, whining, and so was Billie-Marie.

K.D. and Arnette had separated themselves from the others. To talk. They stood near the dwarf oaks behind the picnic benches and tables for a conversation worse than he ever thought talking could be. What Arnette said was, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" What she meant was I'm going to Langston in September and I don't want to be pregnant or to abort or get married or feel bad by myself or face my family. He said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" thinking you cornered me at more socials than I can remember and when I finally agreed I didn't have to take your drawers down you beat me to it so this ain't my problem.

They had just begun to veil threats and unveil mutual dislike when the bus pulled away. All heads, all, turned.

"If that's the kind of ~~bitch~~ you want, hop to it, nigger."

K.D. looked from Arnette's neat shirtwaist dress to the four grades of hair on her head and then into her face--sullen, nagging, accusatory--and slapped it. The change in her expression well worth



it.

Somebody said, "Ow!" but mostly his friends were assessing the screaming tits closing in on them. Arnette fled; Billie-Marie too but, like the good friend she was, looked back to see them forcing themselves to look at the ground, the bright May sky or the length of their fingernails.

Good was finished. Her belly hair could stand a light clipping--its knots were otherwise impossible--but she was beautiful. K.D. started on Ben's coat rehearsing his line of defense to Arnette's family. When he described the incident to his uncles they had frowned at the same time. And like a mirror image in gestures if not in looks, Steward spit fresh Blue Boy while Deek lit a fresh cigar. However disgusted both were, K.D. knew they would not negotiate a solution that would endanger him or the future of Morgan money. His grandfather had named his twins Deacon and Steward for a reason. And their family had not built two towns, fought white law, Colored Creek, bandits and bad weather to see ranches and houses and a bank and a bakery and a drugstore end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. K.D., their hope and their despair, was the last male in a line that included a state auditor two county clerks and two bankers. His behavior, as always, required scrutiny and

The bones of Mrs. Cousins  
were ~~loose~~ in body bags  
had been buried ~~behind the house~~ Now  
~~about 100 years ago~~

\* Since the loose bones of  
his cousins had been buried  
two years ago,



serious correction. Or would the uncles see it another way? Maybe Arnette's baby would be a boy, a Morgan grand nephew. Would her lazy father, Arnold, have any rights then that the Morgans had to respect?

Fondling Ben's coat, picking burrs from his silky strands of hair, K.D. tried to think like his uncles--which was hard. So he stopped trying and slipped off into his dream of choice. Only this time it included GiGi and her screaming tits.

"Hi." She cracked her gum like a professional. "Is this Ruby? Bus driver said this was it."

"Yep. Yeah. Uh huh. Sure is." The lounging boys spoke as one.

"Any motels around?"

They laughed at that and felt comfortable enough to ask her who she was looking for and from where had she come.

"Frisco," she said. "And rhubarb pie. Got a light?"

The dream, then, would be in Frisco.

The Morgan men conceded nothing but were uneasy by the choice of the meetingplace. Reverend Misner had thought it best to

serve protocol and go to Fleetwood rather than season the raw insult to the family by making them come to the house of the aggressor.

K.D., Deek and Steward sat in the parsonage living room all nods and conciliatory grunts, but K.D. knew what his uncles were thinking. He watched Steward shift tobacco and hold the juice. So far the Credit Union Misner had formed was no-profit--small emergency loans to church members; no-penalty payback schedules. Like a piggy bank, Deek had said. But Steward said, Yeah, for now. The reputation of the church Misner had left to come to Ruby floated behind him: covert meetings to stir folks up; end-runs around white law. He obviously had interest in a state that had once built a whole new law school to accomodate one student--a Negro girl--and protect segregation at the same time. He clearly took seriously the possibility of <sup>Change</sup>improvement in a state that had also built an open closet right next to a classroom for another Negro student to sit in by himself. That was in the forties when K.D. was an infant, a few years before his mother, her brothers <sup>his cousins</sup> and all the rest left Haven. Now, some twenty years later, his uncles listened weekly to Misner's sermons, but at the close of each one they slid behind the steering wheels of <sup>their</sup> ~~thier~~ Sunday Oldsmobiles and repeated the Old Fathers'



refrain: "Oklahoma is Indians, Black folks, and God mixed. All the rest is fodder." To their dismay, Reverend Misner often treated fodder like table food. A man like that could encourage strange behavior; side with a teenage girl; shift ground to Fleetwood. A man like that, willing to throw money away, could give customers ideas. Make them think there was a choice about interest rates.

Still the Baptists were the largest congregation in town as well as the most powerful. So the Morgans sorted Reverend's Misner's opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey.

They drove to Fleetwood's house in two cars.

Somewhere in X City June voices are doubled by the sunlit water of a swimming pool. K.D. was there once. He had ridden the Missouri, Kansas, Texas line with his uncles and waited outside on the curb while they talked business inside a red brick building. The voices sounded near and he went to see. Behind a chain-link fence bordered by wide seamless concrete he saw green water. He knows now it was average size, but then it filled his whole horizon. It seemed to him as though hundreds of children were bobbing in it, their voices a cascade of glee. Just that. When the Oldsmobile ~~glided past~~ <sup>U- turned at</sup> the Oven

<sup>world's</sup> The purest happiness. A glee so powerful it brought tears, <sup>7</sup>

where Gigi had popped her gum, K.D. felt again the yearning excitement of sparkly water and the June voices of swimmers. His uncles were not pleased at having to search for him and chastised him, off and on, all the way back to Ruby. Small price. Then and now. The eruptions of "How the hell you get in these messes? You should be with people your own age. Why you want to lay with a Fleetwood anyhow? You see that boy's children? Damn!"--all of them exploded without damage. Just as he had already seen the sparkley water, he had already seen Gigi. And would see her again.

# Arnold Fleetwood never wanted to sleep in a pup tent, on a pallet or a floor ever again. So he put four bedrooms in the spacious house he built on <sup>Central Avenue</sup> ~~St. John Street~~. Sleeping arrangements for his wife <sup>each of</sup> and their two children left a guest room they were proud of. When his son, Jefferson, came back from Vietnam and took, Sweetie, his wife into his own bed, there was still the guest room. It would have become a nursery had they not needed it as a hospital ward for Jeff's and Sweetie's children. The way things turned out, Fleet slept on a <sup>now</sup> hide-a-way in the dining room.

The men sat on spotless upholstery waiting for Reverend Misner to finish seeing the women who were nowhere in sight. Both of the

\* They parked bumper to bumper ~~to~~ the side of Fleetwood's house. Except for Rev. Misner, each man <sup>with</sup> began to breathe through his mouth.

house  
the odor of illness,  
as a way of narrowing



Mrs. Fleetwood's spent all their energy, time and affection on the <sup>last</sup> two <sup>alive,</sup> children <sup>but</sup> left. Fleet and Jeff, grateful for ~~and~~ infuriated by that devotion, turned their shame sideways. Being in their company, sitting near them was hard. Conversation harder.

K.D. knew that Fleet owed his uncles money. And he knew that Jeff wanted very much to kill somebody. Since he couldn't kill the Veteran's Administration others just might have to do. Everybody was relieved when Misner returned, smiling.

"Yes. Well." Reverend Misner clasped his hands, gave them a little shake near his shoulder as though he'd already knocked the contestant out. "The ladies promise to bring us coffee and I believe they said rice pudding later. That's the best reason I know of to get started." He smiled again. He was very close to being too handsome for a preacher. Not just his face and head, but his body, extremely well made, called up admiring attention from practically everybody. A serious man, he took his obvious beauty as brake on sloth--it forced him to deal carefully with his congregation; to take nothing for granted; not the adoration of the women, nor the envy of the men.

No one returned his smile concerning dessert. He pressed on.

"Let me lay out the situation as I know it. Correct me, please, if

I get it wrong or leave out something. My understanding is that K.D. here has done an injury, a serious injury, to Arnette. So right off we can say K.D. has a problem with his temper and an obligation—"

"Ain't he a little old to have his temper raised toward a young girl?" Jefferson Fleetwood, seething in a low chair farthest from the lamplight, interrupted in a voice soft with menace. "I don't call that temper. I call it illegal."

"Well, at that particular moment, he—"

*was way out of line."*

"Beg your pardon, Reverend. Arnette is fifteen." Jeff looked steadily into K.D. 's eyes.

"That's right," said Fleet. "She ain't been hit since she was two years old."

"That may be the problem." Steward, known for inflammatory speech, had been cautioned by Deek to keep his mouth shut and let him, the subtle one, do the talking. Now his words blew Jeff out of his chair.

"Don't you come in my house dirt-mouthing my family!"

"Your house?" Steward looked from Jeff to Arnold Fleetwood.

"You heard me! Papa, I think we better call this meeting off before somebody gets hurt!"



"You right," said Fleet. "This my child we talking about. My child!"

Only Jeff was standing but now Misner did too. "Gentlemen. Whoa!" He held up his hands, and, towering over everybody, put to good use his powerful sermon voice. "We are men here; men of God. You going to put God's work in the gutter?"

K.D. saw Steward struggling with the need to spit and stood up also. "Look here," he said. "I'm sorry. I am. I'd take it back if I could."

"Done is done, friends." Misner lowered his hands.

K.D. continued. "I respect your daughter--"

"Since when?" Jeff asked him.

"I always respected her. From when she was that high." K.D. leveled his hand around his waist. "Ask any body. Ask her girlfriend, Billie-Marie. Billie-Marie will tell you that."

The effect of the genius-stroke was immediate. The Morgan uncles held in their smiles while the Fleetwoods, father and son, bristled. Billie-Marie was the fastest girl in town and <sup>Speeding up</sup> getting faster by the second.

"This aint about no Billie-Marie," said Jeff. "This is about what

you did to my baby sister."

"Wait a minute," said Misner. "Maybe we could get a better fix, K.D., if you could tell us why you did it. Why? What happened? Were you drinking? Did she aggravate you somehow?" He expected this forthright question to open up a space for honesty, where the men could stop playing <sup>^</sup> <sup>bear</sup> and come to terms. The sudden quiet that followed surprised him. Steward and Deek both cleared their sinuses at the same time. Arnold Fleetwood stared at his shoes. Something, Misner guessed, was askew. In that awkward silence they could hear above their heads the light click of heels--the women pacing, servicing, fetching, feeding--whatever it took to save the children who could not save themselves.

"We don't care about why," said Jeff. "What I want to know is what you going to do about it?" He shot his forefinger into the chair <sup>^</sup> arm on the word "do."

Deek leaned back and spread his thighs wider, as though to welcome territory that belonged to him, "What you have in mind?" he asked.

"First off, apologize," said Fleet.

"I just did," said K.D.



**"Not to me. To her. To her!"**

**"Yes, sir," said K.D. "I will."**

**"All right," Deek said. "That's first. What's second?"**

**Jeff answered. "You better never lay your hand on her again."**

**"I won't lay a thing on her, sir."**

**"Is there a third?" asked Deek.**

**"We need to know he means it," said Fleet. "Some sign it's meant."**

**"Sign?" Deek managed to look puzzled.**

**"My sister's reputation is messed up, ain't it?"**

**"Uh huh. I can see that."**

**"Nothing can fix that, can it?" Jeff's question combined defiance and inquiry.**

**Deek leaned forward. "Well, I don't know. Hear she's going to college. That'll put all this behind her. Maybe we can help out some."**

**Jeff grunted. "I don't know about that." He looked at his father. "What you think, Papa? Would that--"**

**"Have to ask her mother. She's hit by this too, you know. Hit worse'n I am, maybe."**

**"Well," said Deek, "whyn't you talk it over with her then. If**

she's agreeable--stop by the bank. Tomorrow."

Fleet scratched his jaw. "Can't make no promises. <sup>Mable</sup>~~Esther~~ is a mighty proud woman. Mighty proud."

Deek nodded. "Got a reason to be, daughter going to college and all. We don't want nothing to stand in the way of that. Credit to the town."

"When that school start up, Fleet?" Steward cocked his head.

"September, I believe."

"She be ready then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Steward answered. "September's a long way off. This here is May. She might change her mind. Decide to stay on."

"I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind."

"Right," said Steward.

"Settled then?" Deek asked.

"Like I say. Have to talk to her mother."

"Of course."

"She's the key. My wife's the key."

Deek smiled outright for the first time that evening. "Women always the key God bless 'em."



Reverend Misner sighed as though breathable air was available again. "God's love is in this house," he said. "I feel it every time I come here. Every time." He looked toward the ceiling while Jefferson Fleetwood stared at him with stricken eyes. "We treasure His strength but we mustn't ignore His love. That's what keeps us strong. Gentlemen. Brothers. Let us pray."

They bowed their heads and listened obediently to Misner's beautifully put words and the tippy tap steps of women who were nowhere in sight.

Sunday 28th August, 1994

A man and a woman fucking forever. When the light changes every four hours they do something new. At the desert's edge they fuck to the sky tide of Arizona. Nothing can stop them. Nothing wants to. Moonlight arches his back; sunlight warms her tongue. There is no way to miss or mistake them if you know where they are. Right outside Tucson on I - 3 in a town called Wish. Pass through it; take the first left. Where the road ends and the serious desert begins, keep going. The trantulas are poisonous but it is necessary to go on foot because no tires can manage the terrain. One hour,

tops, you'll see loving to beat the sky.

Sometimes tender. Other times rough. But they never stop. Not for dust storms or heat hovering at 108°. And if you are patient and catch them in one of the desert's random rainfalls you will see the color of their bodies deepen. But they keep on fucking in the soft sweet rain--the black couple of Wish, Arizona.

Over and over Mikey told Gigi how they looked and how to find them outside his hometown. They would have been, could have been a tourist attraction, he said, except they embarrassed local people. A committee of concerned Methodists, organized to blow them up or disguise them with cement, got started, but collapsed after a few preliminary investigations. <sup>Committee</sup> The members said their objections were not anti-sex at all, but anti-perversion since it was believed by some, who had looked very carefully, that the couple was two women making love in the dirt. Others, after an equally careful examination (close up and with binoculars) said No, they were two males--bold as Gomorrah.

Mikey, however, had touched the body parts and knew for a fact one was a woman, the other a man. "So what?" he said. "They weren't doing it on a highway after all. You had to go way out of the



way to find them." Mikey said the Methodists wanted to get rid of them but they wanted them to be there too. That even a bunch of repressed rednecks, too scared to have wet dreams, knew they needed the couple. Even if they never went near them, he said, they needed to know they were out there. At sunrise, he said, they turned copper and you knew they'd been at it all night. At noon they were silvery gray. Then afternoon blue, then evening black. Moving, moving, all the time moving. No town so small they don't know it."

Gigi loved to hear him say that part: "Moving, moving, all the time moving."

When they got split up, <sup>he</sup> got ninety days. Gigi was released from the emergency room with an ace bandage on her wrist.

Everything happened so fast they had no time to plan where to meet. After calculating the sentence, minus the three weeks spent in jail, she sent him a message through the C.A. lawyer. The message was "Wish April 15."

**"What?" asked the lawyer.**

**"Just say it. 'Wish April 15.' "**

The lawyer came back saying no bail, no probation. His client had to do the complete sentence.

What did Mikey say to her message?

"Right on," he said. "Right on."

There was no Mikey; there was no Wish, and nobody was fucking in the desert. Everybody she spoke to in Tucson thought she was crazy.

"Maybe the town I'm looking for is too small for a map," she said.

"Then ask the troopers. No town so small they don't know it."

"The rock formation is off the road. Looks like a couple making love."

SCEN  
"Well, I know some lizards do it in the desert, miss."

Cactus  
"Sequoia, mebbe?"

"Now there's a possibility."

They laughed themselves breathless.

After running her finger down columns in the telephone directory and finding no one in the state with Mikey's last name, Curl, Gigi gave him up. Reluctantly. The eternal desert coupling, however, she held on to for dear and precious life. Underneath gripping dreams of social justice, of an honest people's guard; more powerful than her memory of the boy spitting blood into his hands, the desert lovers



broke her heart.

Mikey did not invent them. He may have put them in the wrong place, but he had only summoned to the surface what she had known all her life existed--somewhere. Maybe Mexico, which is where she headed.

The dope was <sup>heavy</sup> great, the men <sup>always</sup> ready, but ten days later she woke up crying. She called Alcorn, Mississippi, collect.

"Bring your butt home, girl. World change enough to suit you? Everybody dead anyway. King, another one of them Kennedys, Medgar Evers, a nigger name of X, Lord I can't think who all since you left not to speak of right here remember Cato used to work down at the route 2 mall somebody walked in there broad daylight with a pistol shaped like nothing nobody ever seen before..."

Gigi let her head fall back on the glass of the telephone booth. Outside the restaurant a waiter swung a broom at some children. Girls. Without underwear.

"I'm coming, Granddaddy. I'm heading home right now."

Most of the time she had both seats to herself. Space to spread out. Sleep. Read back issues of tk rolled in her knapsack. <sup>Ramparts</sup> But once

When she boarded the Santa Fe,  
the train pulled out of tk crowded with air force men in blue. At tk  
Four H'ers crowded the cars. <sup>But</sup> When she transferred to the MKT, the  
cars were never full again.

The man with the earring didn't come looking for her. She  
sought him out. Just to talk to somebody who wasn't encased in  
polyesther and who looked like he might smoke something other than  
Chesterfields.

He was short, almost a dwarf, but his clothes were East Coast  
hip. His Afro was neat not scarey and he wore seeds of gold around  
his neck--one matching stud in his ear.

They stood next to each other at the snack bar which the  
attendant insisted on calling the dining car. She ordered a Coke  
without ice and a brownie. He was paying for a large cup of ice only.

"That ought to be free," Gigi said to the man behind the counter.  
"He shouldn't have to pay for the cup."

"Excuse me, mam. I just follow rules."

"I ordered no ice. Did you deduct anything?"

"Course not."

"Don't trouble yourself," the short man said.

"I'm not troubled at all. Listen. Give him the ice <sup>you</sup> weren't



going to charge me for, Okay?"

"Miss, do I have to call the conductor?"

"If you don't, I will. This is trains robbing people."

"It's all right," said the man. "Just a nickel."

"It's the principle," said Gigi.

"A five-cent principle ain't no principle at all. The man needs a nickle. Needs it real bad." The short man smiled.

"I don't need nothing. It's the rules."

"Have two," said the man, and flicked second nickle into the saucer.

Gigi glaring, the earring man smiling, they left the <sup>snack bar</sup> dining car together. She sat down across the aisle from him to expand on the incident while the man crunched ice.

"Gigi." She held out her hand. "You?"

"Dice," he said.

"Like chopping small?"

"Like pair of."

He touched her with a cool cool hand and they made up stories for each other for miles. Gigi even got comfortable enough to ask him had he ever seen or heard tell of a rock formation that looked

like a man and a woman making out. He laughed and said no, but that he once heard about a place where there was a waterfall in the middle of a wheat field. And that behind this waterfall two trees grew in each others arms. And If you squeezed in between them in just the rihgt way, well, you would feel an ecstasy no human could invent or duplicate. "They say after that, can't nobody turn you down."

"Nobody turns me down now."

"Nobody? I mean no-o body!"

"Where is this place?"

"Ruby. Ruby, Oklahoma. Way out in the middle of nowhere."

"You been there?"

"Not yet. But I plan to check it out. Say they got the best rhubarb pie in the nation."

"I hate rhubarb."

"Hate it? Girl, you ain't lived. You ain't lived at all."

"I'm going home. See my folks."

"Where's home for you?"

"Frisco. All my folks live in Frisco. I just talked to my grandfather. They're waiting on me."



Dice nodded but said nothing.

Gigi stuffed the brownie wrapper in her empty paper cup. I am not lost, she thought. Not lost at all. I can go see Granddaddy or go back to the Bay or...

The train slowed. Dice rose to collect his luggage from the overhead rack. He was so short he had to stand on tip toe. Gigi helped him and he didn't seem to mind.

"Well, I get off here. Nice talking with you."

"You too."

"Good luck. Watch out, now. Don't get wet."

If the boys standing across from the bus stop in front of a kind of barbecue grill had said No, this is Alcorn, Mississippi, she probably would have believed them. Same haircuts, same stares, same loose, hick smiles. What her Granddaddy called "country's country." Some girls were there too, arguing, it seemed, with one of them. In any case, they weren't much help but she enjoyed the waves of raw horniness slapping her back as she walked off down the street.

First dust, fine as flour, sifted into her eyes, her mouth. Then the wind wrecked her hair. Suddenly she was out of town. What the locals called Central Avenue just stopped and Gigi was at Ruby's edge at the same time she had reached its center. The wind, soundless, came from the ground rather than the sky. One minute her heels clicked, the next they were mute in swirling dirt. On either side of her tall grass rolled like water.

She had stopped five minutes ago in a drugstore, bought cigarettes, and learned that the boys at the barbecue grill were telling the truth: there was no motel. And if there was any pie it wasn't served at a restaurant because there wasn't one of those either. Other than the picnic benches at the barbecue thing, there was no public place to sit down. All around her were closed doors and shut windows where parted curtains were swiftly replaced.

So much for Ruby, she thought. Mikey must have sent her that freak on the train. She just wanted to see. Not just it, but whether there was anything at all the world had to say for itself (in rock, tree or water) that wasn't bodybags or little boys spitting blood into their hands so as not to ruin their shoes. So. Alcorn. She might as well start over in Alcorn, Mississippi. Sooner or later one of those trucks



parked on the street would have to start up and she would hitch out of there.

Holding on to her hair and squinting against the wind, Gigi considered walking back to the drugstore. Her back pack felt heavy in high heels and if she didn't move, the wind might topple her. As suddenly as it had begun the wind quit; in its absence she heard an engine coming toward her.

"You headed out to the Convent?" A man in a wide-brimmed hat opened the door of his van.

Gigi tossed her backpack on the seat and climbed in. "You kidding? Anything but. Can you put me near <sup>test</sup> a bus stop or train station or something?"

"You in luck. Take you right to the track."

"Great!" Gigi <sup>around</sup> dug in the pack between her knees. "Smells new."

"Brand new. You all my first trip."

"You all?"

"Have to make a stop. Another passenger going to take a train ride too." He smiled. "My name's Roger. Roger <sup>Best</sup> H."

"Gigi."

"But you free. The other one I charge," he said, cutting his eyes

away from the road. Pretending to examine the scenery through the passenger window, he looked at her navel first, then further down, then up.

<sup>pulled out a mirror and</sup> Gigi repaired the wind damage <sup>to her hair</sup> as best she could, thinking, Yeah. I'm free all right.

<sup>Best</sup> And she was. Just as Roger said, there was no charge to the living, but the dead cost twenty-five dollars.

Every now and then the woman sitting on the porch steps lifted her aviator's glasses to wipe her eyes. One braid from under her straw hat fell down her back. Roger leaned on his knee and spoke to her for what seemed to Gigi a long time, then they both went inside. When Roger came out, he was closing his wallet and frowning.

"Ain't no help out here. You may's well wait inside. Going to take me a while to get the body down."

Gigi turned to look behind her, but couldn't see through the partition.

"This here's a hearse?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's a ambulance. Today it's a hearse."

He was all business now. No quick glances at her breasts. "Got to get it on board the MKT at 8:20 P.M. Plenty time. Plenty."



Gigi was quick but clumsy stepping out of the van-now-hearse, but she made it up the wide wooden stairs and through the front doors in no time at all. He had said "Convent" so she thought <sup>Nice stern</sup> ~~sweet~~ women floating in sailboat hats above long black sleeves. But there was nobody and the woman in the straw hat had disappeared. Gigi walked through a marble foyer into another one twice the size. In the dimness she could see a hallway extending to the right and to the left. In front of her more wide stairs. Before she could decide which way to go, Roger was behind her carrying a metal something with wheels. He moved toward the stairs, mumbling "Not a bit of help, not a bit." Gigi turned right, ~~almost~~ <sup>at</sup> rushing toward light coming from under a pair of swing doors. Inside was the longest table she had ever seen in the biggest kitchen. She sat there, chewing her thumbnail, wondering just how bad could it be, riding with a dead person. There was a little herb in her pack. Not much but enough, she thought, to keep her from freaking. She reached out and pinched off a bit of crust from a pie sitting before her and noticed for the first time the place was loaded with food, mostly untouched. Several cakes, more pies, potato salad, a ham, a large dish of baked beans. There must be nuns, she thought. Or maybe all this was from the

funeral. And like a true mourner she was ravenous.

Gigi was gobbling, piling more food onto her plate even while she scooped from it, when the woman entered without her straw hat or her glasses and lay down on the stone cold floor.

Her mouth was full of baked beans and chocolate cake so Gigi could not speak. Outside Roger's horn blasted. Gigi put her spoon down but held on to the cake as she walked over to where the woman lay. Squatting down, she wiped her mouth and said "Can I help you?" The woman's eyes were closed but she shook her head no.

"Is it anybody else here I can call?"

She opened her eyes then and Gigi saw nothing--just a faint circle where the edge of the iris used to be.

"Hey, girl. You coming?" Roger was shouting, his voice <sup>puny and</sup> distant over the throb of his engine. "I get a train to meet. On time! I got to be on time!"

Gigi leaned down closer, gazing into eyes with nothing to recommend them.

"I said is anybody else here?"

"You," she <sup>murmured</sup> muttered. "You here." Each word sailed toward Gigi on a wave of whiskied breath.



"You hear me? I can't wait all day!" Roger warned.

Gigi waved her free hand across the woman's face to make sure she was blind as well as drunk.

"Stop that," said the woman, whispering but annoyed.

look-outs. The southern end contained signs of his desire in two rooms: an outsize kitchen and a room where he could play rich men's games. Neither room had a view, but the kitchen had one of the mansion's two entrances. A veranda curved from the north around the bullet's tip, continued along its wall, past the main entrance and ended at the flat end of the ammunition--its southern exposure.

Except from the bedrooms no one in the house could see the sun rise, and there was no vantage point to see it set. The light, therefore, was ~~always ambiguous~~ <sup>mis-leading</sup>.

He must have expected or hoped to have a lot of good time company in his fortress: eight bedrooms, two giant bathrooms, a cellar of storerooms that occupied as much space as the first floor. And he wanted to amuse his guests so completely they would not think of leaving for days on end. His efforts to entertain were no more sophisticated or interesting than he was--mostly food, sex and toys. After two years of semi-covert construction, he managed one

"Oh," said Gigi, "I thought. Why don't you let me get you a chair?"

"I'm gone, hear? Gone!" Gigi heard the engine rev and the hearse shift from neutral into drive.

"I'm missing my ride. What do you want me to do?"

The woman turned over on her side and folded her hands under her cheek. "Be a darling. Just watch. I haven't closed my eyes in seventeen days."

"Wouldn't a bed do the trick?"

"Be a darling. Be a darling. I don't want to sleep when nobody there to watch."

"On the floor?"

But she was asleep. Breathing like a child. Gigi stood up and looked around the kitchen, slowly swallowing cake.

Fright, not triumph, spoke in every foot of the embezzler's mansion. Shaped like a live cartridge, it curved to a deadly point at the north end where, originally, the living and dining rooms lay. He must have believed his persecutors would come from the north because all the first floor windows huddled in those two rooms. Like



voluptuous party before he was arrested, just as he feared, by northern lawmen, one of whom attended his first and only party.

The four teaching sisters who moved into his house when it was offered for sale at a pittance, diligently canceled the obvious echoes of his delight, but could do nothing to hide his terror. The closed off, protected "back", the poised and watchful "tip", <sup>AN</sup> entrance doors guarded now by only the claws of some monstrous statuary which the sisters had removed at once. A rickety, ill-hanging kitchen door the only vulnerability.

Gigi, as high as possible on her limited supply, and roaming through the mansion while the drunken woman slept on the kitchen floor, immediately recognized the conversion of the dining room into a school room; the living room into a chapel, and the game room alteration to an office. Then she discovered the traces of the sisters' failed industry. The female torso candle holders in the candelabra hanging from the ceiling in the hall. The curls of hair winding through vines that once touched faces chipped away. The nursing cherabim emerging from layers of paint. The nipple-tipped door knobs. Lay-a-bouts half naked in old-timey clothes drinking and fondling each other in prints stacked in closets. She even found the brass male genitalia

that had been ripped from sinks and tubs. Packed away in a chest of sawdust, as if, however repelled by the hardware's demands, the sisters valued nevertheless its metal. Gigi toyed with the fixtures, turning the testicles designed to release water from the penis. She (over) flicked ash from her joint into one of the alabaster vaginas in the game room. She <sup>imagined</sup> ~~could almost see the~~ men contentedly knocking their cigars <sup>against</sup> ~~into~~ those ash trays. Or perhaps just resting them there, knowing without looking that the glowing tip was slowly building a delicate head.

She avoided the bedrooms because she didn't know which one had belonged to the dead person, but when she went to use one of the bathrooms she saw that no toilet activity was not reflected in a mirror that reflected in another. Most, set firmly into wall tile, had been painted. Bending to examine the mermaids holding up the tub, she noticed a handle fastened to a slab of wood surrounded by floor tile. She was able to reach and lift the handle, but not able to budge it.

Suddenly she was fiercely hungry again and returned to the kitchen to eat and do as the woman had asked: be a darling and watch while she slept. Like an antique version of a tripper afraid to come



Sucked <sup>last</sup>  
pressed the <sup>hot</sup> bit of a joint and  
lay the ~~thin~~ roach in

[ her cigarette <sup>was</sup> boating

Ming I

Ming II

Bon on the paper

Collected roaches re-rolled

down alone. She was finished with the macaroni, some ham and another slice of cake when the woman on the floor stirred and sat up. She held her face in both hands for a moment, then rubbed her eyes.

"Feel better?" asked Gigi.

She took a pair of sunglasses from an apron pocket and put them on. "No. But rested."

"That is better."

The woman got up. "I suppose. Thank you--for staying."

"Sure. Hangover's a bitch. I'm Gigi. Who died?"

"A friend," said the woman. "I had two; she was the last."

<sup>Oh</sup>  
"I'm sorry," Gigi said. "Where's he taking her? The guy in the hearse."

"Far. To a lake named for her. Superior. That's how she wanted it."

"Who else lives here? You didn't cook all this food, did you?"

The woman filled a saucepan with water and shook her head.

"What will you do now?"

"Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi. That's what frogs sing. What did your mother name you?"

"She gave me her own name."



**"Well?"**

**"Grace."**

**"Grace. What could be better?"**

**Nothing. Nothing at all. Mercy and simple good fortune seemed to have fled on a July day <sup>6</sup> years later. Grace alone might have to do. But from where would it come, she wondered, and how fast? In that holy hollow between sighting and following through could grace slip through at all?**