



Paradise Draft

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Paradise Draft

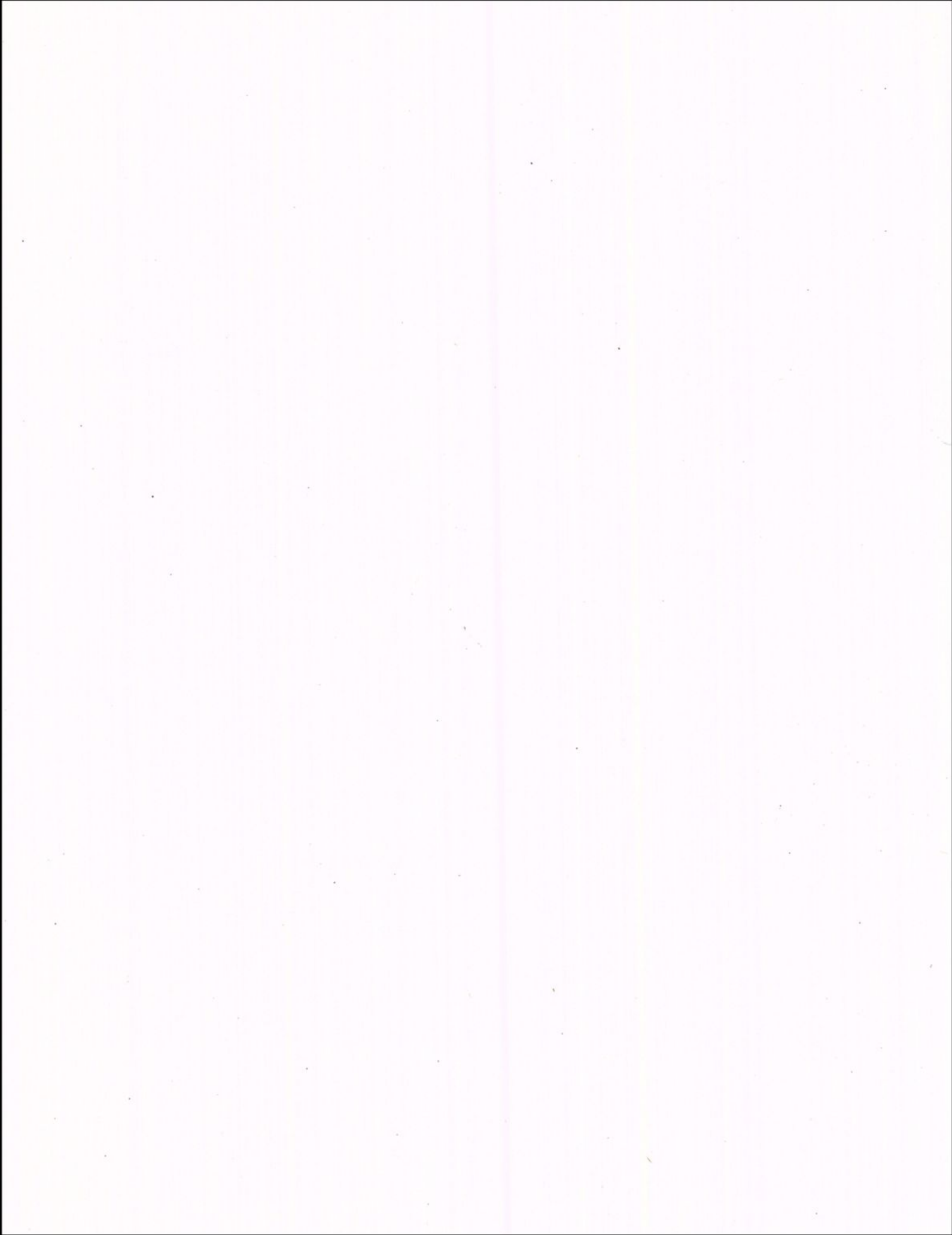
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Paradise

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
numerous sins,
and incontinencies,
and disgraceful passions
and fleeting pleasures,
which (men) embrace until they become
sober
and go up to their resting place.

And they will find me there,
and they will live,
and they will not die again.

Ruby

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 only one has seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they all 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

handful of green confetti nestles brilliant discs of carrot, but the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on the stove. It is restaurant size with eight burners 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 signals the other to open the pantry while he goes to the back door. It is closed but unlocked. Peering out he 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. This man closes the door and joins his partner 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.

He 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 . 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 this man 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.

This town, theirs, 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." He 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. 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 the well was deep. As a boy he had swung overhand from the cottonwood branches leaning over it and hung dangerously over the clear water to admire the reflection of his feet. 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, young and newly married, he was anything but a fool. Even before 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 1890. 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 grovel contaminating 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?

The man 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 two men walk 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 his companion's 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.

One'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. Unique and isolated, theirs was a town justifiably satisfied with 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. As each man enters one, neither is working his jaws because both believe they are prepared for anything. In one bathroom, the biggest, 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 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 the man 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.

Downstairs two men, a father and his son, are not smiling, although when they first enter the chapel, they feel like it because it was true: graven idols were worshipped here. Tiny 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 they 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-five years ago when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them. A road straight as a die had been cleared through the center of town, and lined on one side by a paved walk. Seven of the families had farms of more than three hundred acres, three had five hundred. By and by,

when the road became a named street, a man named Ossie organized a horse race to celebrate. 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; Home made 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 owned a two-year old and an auburn mare, both fast and pretty as brides. The other horses were simply company: Ace's drayhorse, 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 quater bets with abandon. When the gun went off only three horses lept 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, but members, they thought, of some other cult. Nobody knew. But it wasn't important to know because all of them, each in her turn, and like the old 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.

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 everybody knew it was all a lie, a front, a carefully planned disguise for what was really 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. Four 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.

The father 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 shakes his head and joins his son back at the altar. The son points. The father 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.

The brothers were once identical. Although they are twins their wives look more alike than they do. One is tough, loud and smokes Te Amo cigars. The other 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.

The Morgan twin brothers 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 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 heated optimism became cold-blooded obsession. "They don't know we," said one old man. "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 say something important that would last.

So, denied and guarded against, they altered their route and made their way west of the 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 twins' powerful memories. The saddles of the four black-skinned bandits who fed them dried buffalo meat before robbing them of their rifles. The soundlessness of the funnel that twisted through and around their camp; the sleeping children who woke sailing through the air. The glint of the horses on which watching Choctaw sat. At suppertime when it was too dark for any work except that which 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 to bargaining labor with Creek 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, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in.

Now one brother, a leader in everything, smashes the cellar door with the butt of his rifle. The other waits a few feet back with 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.

The nephew always 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 the nephew's mother died. Her funeral--the town's first--stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity. They named the town after one of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby.

It pleased his uncles who could then both mourn the sister and honor the friend and brother-in-law who didn't make it back. But the nephew, 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, 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 game's dark hide.

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

Saturday 7th January, 1995

Friday 29th July, 1994

Monday 15th August, 1994, Sunday 23rd April, 1995

Mavis [1968]

Monday 17th April, 1995

The neighbors seemed pleased when the twins smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they were found had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things: brought food, telephoned, got up a collection, but the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear.

When the journalist came, Mavis sat in the corner of the sofa not sure whether to scrape the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic cover or tuck them further in. But the journalist wanted the photo taken first, so the photographer ordered Mavis to the middle of the sofa with the surviving children on either side of their distraught and grieving mother. Of course he asked for the husband, Jim? is it Jim Albright? but Mavis said he was indisposed, couldn't come out; they'd have to go ahead without him. The journalist and the photographer exchanged looks and she thought they probably knew anyway that Frank--not Jim--was sitting on the edge of the bathtub drinking Seagrams without a glass.

Mavis moved to the middle of the sofa and cleaned her fingernails of potato chip dust until the other children joined her. "The other children" is what they would always be now. Sal put her arm around her mother's waist. Frankie and Billy James were squished together on her right. Sal pinched her, hard. Mavis knew instantly that her daughter wasn't nervous before the camera and all, because the pinch grew long, pointed. Sal's fingernails were diving for blood.

"This must be terrible for you." Her name, she said, was June.

"Yes, mam. It's terrible for all of us."

"Is there something you want to say? Something you want other mothers to know?"

"Mam?"

June crossed her ankles and Mavis saw that this was the first time she had worn the white high heeled shoes. The soles were barely smudged. "You know. Something to warn them, caution them, about negligence."

"Well. I can't think of any...I guess...I...."

The photographer squatted down, cocking his head as he examined the possibilities.

"So some good can come out of this awful tragedy?" June's smile was sad.

Mavis straightened against the success of Sal's fingernails. The camera clicked. June moved her ballpoint pen into place. It was a fine thing. Mavis had never seen anything like it--made ink on the paper when you wrote but dry.

"I don't really have nothing to say to strangers right now."

The photographer re-adjusted the shade at the front window and walked back to the sofa holding a black box to Mavis' face.

"I understand," said June. Her eyes went soft, but the shine was like those of the neighbors. "And I do hate to put you through this, but maybe you could just tell me what happened? Our readers are just appalled. Twins and all. Oh, and they want you to know you are in their prayers every single day." She let her glance sweep the boys and Sal. "And you all, too. They are praying for each and every one of you."

Frankie and Billy James looked down at their bare feet. Sal rested her head on her mother's shoulder while she clenched the flesh at Mavis' waist.

"So could you tell us?" June smiled a smile that meant "do us this favor."

"Well." Mavis frowned. She was trying to get it right this time. "He didn't want the Spam. I mean the kids like it but he don't so, in this heat you can't keep much meat, I had a chucksteak go green on me once so I went and took the car, just some weenies, and I thought, well, Merle and Pearl, I was against it at first, but he said..."

"M, E, R, L, E?"

"Yes mam."

"Go on."

"I understood. I did. You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him I know that ain't right..."

"So you took the twins. Why didn't you take the other children along?"

"It's a weasel out back," said Frankie.

"Groundhog," said Billy James.

"Shut." Sal leaned over Mavis' stomach and pointed at her brothers.

June smiled. "Wouldn't it have been safer" she continued, "with other children in the car? I mean they're older."

Mavis slid her thumb under her bra strap pulling it back over her shoulder. "I wasn't expecting no danger. Higgledy Piggledy is just yonder. I could of went to the Convenience, but their stuff sits too long for me."

"So you left the newborns in the car and went in to buy some steak..."

"No, mam. Weenies."

"Okay. But what I want to ask is, how come it took you so long? To buy one item."

"It didn't. Take long. I couldn't of been in there more than five minutes, tops."

"Your babies suffocated, Mrs. Albright. In a hot car with the windows closed. No air. It's hard to see that happening in five minutes."

It could be sweat, but it hurt enough to be blood. She didn't dare swat Sal's hand away or acknowledge the pain even slightly. Instead she scratched the corner of her mouth and said, "I've punished myself over that, but that's pretty near what it was. I walked in there straight to the dairy section and picked up two packs of Armours which is high you know but I didn't even look for the price. Some of them is cheaper but just as good. But I was hurrying so I didn't look"

"You were hurrying?"

"Oh, yes, mam. He was fit to be tied. Spam ain't nothing for a working man to eat."

"And wieners are?"

"I thought about chops. I thought about chops."

"Didn't you know your husband was coming home for supper, Mrs. Albright? Doesn't he come home for supper every day?"

She's a really nice person, Mavis thought. Polite, she didn't look around the room, or at the boys' feet, or acknowledge the crash followed by a flushing toilet.

The sound of the photographer snapping his cases was loud. "Got it," he said. "Real nice meeting you, mam." He leaned in to shake Mavis' hand.

"Get the car?" asked June

"Plenty," he smiled and made an O with thumb and forefinger. "You all be nice, hear."

Sal left off squeezing her mother's waist. She leaned forward and concentrated on swinging her foot, only occasionally hitting Mavis' shin.

From where they sat no one in the room could see the Cadillac parked in front of the house. But it had been seen for months by everybody in the neighborhood and would now be seen by everybody in Hopewell, Maryland, since the photographer had taken more shots of it than he had of them. Mint green. Lettuce green. Cool. But the color wouldn't show in the newspaper. What would show would be the size, the flashiness of the place where babies had died. Babies forever unseen now because the mother did not have even a snapshot of their trusting faces.

Sal jumped up and screamed, "Ow! Look! A beetle!" and stomped on her mother's foot.

Mavis had said, "Yes mam. He come home for supper every day," and wondered what that would be like: to have a husband who came home everyday. For anything. After the journalist left she wanted to go look at the damage Sal had done to her side, but Frank was still in the bathroom and it wasn't a good idea to bother him. She thought to clean the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic covers, but where she wanted to be was in the Cadillac. It wasn't hers; it was his, but Mavis loved it maybe more than he did and lied about losing the second set of keys. It was what she talked about last as the journalist left, saying "It aint new, though. It's three years old. A '65." If she could, she would have slept out there, in the back seat

where her twins died, the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren't a trial. She couldn't, of course. Frank said she better not touch let alone drive the Cadillac ever again. So she was as surprised as anybody when she stole it.

"You all right?" Frank was already under the sheet and Mavis woke with a start of terror which dissolved quickly into familiar fright.

"I'm OK." She searched the darkness for a sign, trying to feel, smell his mood in advance. But he was a blank just the way he had been at supper the evening of the newspaper interview. The perfect meatloaf (not too loose, not too tight--two eggs made the difference) must have pleased him. Either that or he had reached balance: enough in, enough at hand. In any case, he'd been easy, even playful at the table while the other children were downright bold. Sal had Frank's old shaving razor unfolded by her plate and asked her father a series of questions all starting with "Is it sharp enough to cut...?" And Frank would answer "Cut anything from chin hair to gristle," eliciting peals of laughter from Sal. When Frankie spit Kool-Aid into Mavis' plate, his father said "Hand me that catsup, Frankie, and stop playing in your mother's food, you hear?"

She didn't think it would take them long, and seeing how they were at supper, enjoying each other's jokes and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it. The newspaper people would think of something catchy, and June, the only lady journalist the Hopewell Courier had, would do the human interest.

She tried not to stiffen as Frank made settling down noises on the mattress. Did he have his shorts on? If she knew that she would know whether he was looking to have sex, but she couldn't find out without touching him. As if to satisfy her curiosity,

Frank snapped the waistband of his boxers. Mavis relaxed, permitted herself a sigh that she hoped sounded like a snore. The sheet was off before she could complete it. When he pulled her nightgown up he threw it over her face and she let that mercy be. She had misjudged, again. He was going to do this first and then the other. The children would be behind the door, snickering; Sal's eyes as cold and unforgiving as they were when told of the accident. Before Frank came to bed she had been dreaming of something important she was supposed to do, but couldn't remember what it was. Just as it came to her, Frank had asked her was she all right. Now she supposed she was all right because the important thing she'd forgotten would never need doing anymore.

tk

The rest of the night she waited, not closing her eyes for a second. Frank's sleep was sound and she would have slipped out of bed (as soon as he had not smothered or strangled her) and opened the door except for the breathing beyond it. She was sure Sal squatted there--ready to pounce or grab her legs. Her upper lip would be raised showing eleven year old teeth too big for her snarling mouth. Dawn, Mavis thought, would be critical. The trap would be agreed upon but maybe not laid yet. Her sharpest concentration would be needed to locate it before it sprung.

At the first hint of gray light Mavis eased out of the bed. If Frank woke it was all over. Clutching a pair of jeans and a Daffy Duck sweat shirt, she made it to the bathroom. She took a soiled brassiere from the hamper and got dressed fast. No panties and she couldn't go back in the bedroom for her shoes. The big thing was to get past the other children's room. The door stood open and, although there was no

sound coming out, Mavis chilled at the thought of approaching it. Down the hall to the left was the little kitchen /dining room; the living room to the right. She would have to decide which way she was headed before she ran past that door. They would probably expect her to go straight to the kitchen as usual, so maybe she should shoot for the living room. Or maybe they counted on her changing a habit and the trap was not in the kitchen at all.

Suddenly she remembered her purse was in the living room, perched on the television cabinet which, when the set broke, had become a catch all. Holding her breath, eyes wide to the darkness, Mavis padded quickly past the other children's open door. With her back exposed to that much danger she felt feverish--sweaty and cold together.

Not only was her purse where she remembered it, but Sal's galoshes were lying at the front door. Mavis grabbed the purse, stuck her feet in her daughter's yellow boots and escaped onto the front porch. She did not even look toward the kitchen and never saw it again.

Getting out of the house had been so intense, she was pulling the Cadillac away from the curb when she realized she had no idea of what to do next. She drove toward Peg's, a woman she didn't know all that well, but whose tears at the funeral impressed her. She had always wanted to know her better, but Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship. Mavis parked across the street. Peg's house was dark, the shade of the picture window still down. Complete quiet. The wooden girl in the petunias, her face hidden by a fresh blue bonnet, tilted a watering can; a family of carved ducks lined at her heels. The lawn, edged and close

cut, looked like a carpet sample of expensive wool. Neither the tiny windmill nor the hostra surrounding it moved. Left of the porch, however, a rose of sharon, taller than Peg's house and older, was shaking. Stirred by the air conditioner's exhaust it danced roughing blossoms and buds to the grass. According to the Cadillac's clock, it wasn't six yet. Mavis decided to drive around for a while and return at a respectable hour. Seven maybe. But they would be up, too, by then and Frank would see that the Caddie was gone. He would call the police for sure.

Mavis swung away from the curb sad and frightened by how dumb she was. Not only was the whole neighborhood familiar with the car, the photographer's picture would be in today's paper. When Frank bought it and drove it home the men on her street had slapped the hood and grinned, leaned in to sniff the interior, hit the horn and laughed. Laughed and laughed some more because its owner had to borrow a lawn mower every few weeks; because its owner had no screens in his windows and no working television; because two of his six porch posts had been painted white three months ago-- the rest still waiting; because its owner sometimes slept behind the wheel--all night--in front of his own house. And the women, who saw Mavis driving the children to Wendy's wearing sunglasses on cloudy days, flat out stared before shaking their heads. As though they knew from the start that the Cadillac would someday be notorious.

Creeping at twenty-five miles per hour Mavis entered route 121 thankful for the little bit of darkness left. As she passed Harlan County Hospital, a silent ambulance glided out of the driveway. A green cross in a field of white leaving brilliant emergency light for shadow. Fifteen times she had been a patient there--four times for

childbirth. During the next to last admission, when the twins were due, Mavis' mother drove from New Jersey to help out. She kept house and minded the other children for three days. When the twins were delivered, she went back to Patterson--a three hour drive, thought Mavis. She could be there before The Secret Storm.

At an Eagle gas station, Mavis checked her wallet before she answered the attendant. Three ten dollar bills were folded behind her driver's license.

"Ten," she said.

"Gallons or dollars, mam?"

"Gallons."

In the adjacent lot Mavis noticed the window of a breakfast diner, coral in the early light.

"Is that place open?" she shouted over truck roar.

"Yes, mam."

Tripping occasionally on gravel, she walked toward the diner. Inside the waitress was eating crabcakes and grits behind the counter. She covered her plate with a cloth and touched the corners of her mouth before wishing Mavis a good morning and taking her order. When Mavis left, carrying a paper cup of coffee and two honey dips in a napkin, she caught the waitress' face smiling broadly in the Hines Root Beer mirror by the door. The grin bothered her all the way back to the gas station until, stepping into the car, she saw her canary yellow feet.

Away from the pump, parked behind the diner, she put her breakfast on the dashboard while rummaging in the glove compartment. She found an unopened pint of Early Times and another containing an inch or so of scotch whiskey, paper

napkins, a teething ring, several rubber bands, a pair of dirty socks, a battery dead flashlight, a tube of lipstick, a Florida map, rolls of breath mints and a few traffic tickets. She dropped the teething ring into her purse, twisted her hair into a pitiful little pony tail that stuck out from the rubber band like hen feathers, and smeared the stranger's lipstick on her mouth. Then she sat back and sipped the coffee. Too nervous to ask for milk or sugar, she 'd ordered it black and could not force herself to take a third swallow. The stranger's lipstick smirked sloppily from the cardboard rim.

Patterson was four hours, not three, and she had four dollars and seventy-six cents when she saw its sign. The Cadillac needed to drink ten gallons of gasoline every ninety miles. The fuel gauge touched E. Mavis wondered whether to call her mother or simply arrive. The latter seemed smarter. Frank may have called his mother-in-law by now or might do so any minute. Better if her mother could say truthfully "I don't know where she is."

Eighteenth Street looked narrower than she remembered and the stores were different. The northern leaves were beginning to turn. Driving underneath them, in the dappled hall they made, she felt as though the pavement slid forward instead of retreating. The faster she traveled, the more road appeared ahead.

The cadillac shut down a block from her mother's house but Mavis managed to coast across the intersection and incline the automobile toward the curb.

It was too early. Her mother wouldn't be home till the afternoon children had been picked up. The door key was no longer under the reindeer, so Mavis sat on the back porch and struggled out of the yellow galoshes. Her feet looked as though they belonged to somebody else.

Frank had already called. At six a.m. when Mavis was looking at Peg's window shade. Ruth Goodroe told Mavis she had hung up on him after telling him she couldn't think what the hell he was talking about and who the hell did he think he was dragging her out of her sleep? She was not pleased. Not then and not later when Mavis tapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell which is what she said at the window. "Girl you look like a bat out of hell what you doing up here?"

"Ma. Let me in."

Ruth Goodroe had just enough calf liver for two. Mother and daughter ate in the kitchen, Mavis presentable--washed, combed, aspirined and swimming a little in Ruth's housedress.

"Well, let me have it. Not that I need to be told."

Mavis wanted some more of the baby peas and tipped the bowl to see if any were left.

"I could see this coming, you know. Anybody could."

There were a few. A couple of tablespoons. Mavis scraped them on to her plate wondering if there was to be any dessert. Quite a bit of the fried potatoes were still in her mother's plate. "You going to eat those?"

Ruth pushed her plate toward Mavis. There was a tiny square of liver too and some onions. Mavis scraped it all on to her plate.

"You still have children. Children need a mother. I know what you've been through, honey, but you do have other children."

The liver was a miracle. Her mother always got every particle of the tight transparent tissue off.

"Ma. Why couldn't you make it to the funeral?"

Ruth straightened. "You didn't get the money order? And the flowers?"

"We got them."

"Then you know why. I had to choose--help bury them or pay for a trip. I couldn't afford to do both, I told you that. I asked you all straight out, which thing would be the best and you both said the money, both of you said so, both."

"They're going to kill me, Ma."

"Are you going to hold that over my head for the rest of my life? All I've done for you and those children?"

"They already tried to but I got away."

"You're all I have now your brothers are gone."

"They got no right to kill me."

"What?"

"He's making the children do it."

"Do what? Speak up so I can hear what you saying."

"I'm saying they are going to kill me."

"They? Frank? What they?"

"All of them. The kids too."

"Kill you? Your children?"

Mavis nodded. Ruth Goodroe widened her eyes first, then looked into her lap as she held her forehead in the palm of her hand.

They didn't talk anymore for a while but later, at the sink, Ruth asked, "Were the twins trying to kill you too?"

Mavis stared at her mother. "No! Oh, no Ma. They're babies! Are you crazy?"

"All right. All right. Just asking. It's unusual, you know, to think little children...."

"Unusual? It's, it's evil! But they'll do what he says. And now they'll do anything. They already tried, Ma!"

"Tried how? What did they do?"

"Sal had a razor and they were laughing and watching me. Every minute watching me ."

"What did Sal do with the razor?"

"She had it next to her plate and she was looking at me. They all were."

Neither woman spoke about it again because Mrs. Goodroe said Mavis could stay if and only if she never talked that way again. That she wouldn't tell Frank if he called back, or anybody else that she was there, but she must never talk about killing again or she would call him right away.

In a week, Mavis was on the road, but this time she had time to plan. Days before she heard her mother talking low into the mouthpiece of the telephone, saying "You better come up here fast and I mean pronto," Mavis had walked around the house, while Ruth was at the Play Skool, thinking: money, aspirin, paint, underwear; money, aspirin, paint, underwear. She took all she could find of the first two, including two brown government envelopes propped against the photograph of one of her killed in action brothers. She took a pair of rhinestone clips from Ruth's jewelry box and stole back the car keys her mother thought she had hidden well; poured two gallons of lawn mower gasoline into the Cadillac's tank and drove away for more. In Newark she found an Earl Scheib paint shop and waited two days in a Y dormitory until it was

sprayed. The twenty-nine dollars advertised turned out to be for a standard size car only. Sixty-nine dollars is what they made her pay for the Cadillac. The underwear and thong sandals she bought at Woolworth's. At a Goodwill she bought a pale blue pantsuit and white cotton turtleneck. Just right, she thought, for California. Just right.

Picking up girls was easiest. They were company first of all, and they helped with gas, food and many knew where to crash. They dappled the secondary routes in hole-y jeans low on the hips and flared at the bottom. Flat hair swinging or picked out into Afro's. The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt. But all told her about the world before California. Underneath the knowing talk, the bell chime laughter, the silence, the world they described was just like her own pre-California existence--sad, scarey, all wrong. High schools were dumps, parents stupid...tk & fx.

tk 1.: Man eating slowly; pile of newspapers next to his lunch pail; reading about death and mutilation

tk 2.: First hitcher is a girl who is on her way to a cemetery close by; girl looks like Peg, older and competent; turns out to be ten years younger [in her 20's]; at cemetery Mavis sees uniformed children standing about among row upon row of new headstones. The older stones were at some distance. the uniformed children are aimless but somehow focussed; some of them carry their caps in their hands. The girl thanks her and gets out. Walks down the gravel path past grave diggers with plenty to do.

tk 3.: picks up a girl with dog tags of six boys she knew who were killed in Vietnam; the rain is soft, sweet smelling

tk 4.: last hitcher, the sweetest one, steals Mavis' clothes

tk 5.: Mavis sees a man who looks exactly like Frank except for more hair. Could Frank have grown that much hair in two or three[?] weeks. frightens her. Takes another turn. south, heading as far as possible away from Frank double. After a long stgretch of flat "empty" land ends up on a narrow country road going nowhere. Runs out of gas. Cries for the first time. Drinks the Early Times in the glove compartment. Passes out. Wakes. Cries some more, but no tears--just nausea with dry sobs. Leaves car and walks until she sees a house. Walks through field then a road narrowed by encroaching growth. Arrives. Long porch turns left around the house. No front windows. Knocks. No answer. sits on porch. Knocks again. Walks around to right side, thinking the house can't be abandoned because the ground, grass etc. are tended. Goes all the way around the back.

[tense may change in ff.]

A woman is sitting in a red wooden chair at the edge of a vegetable garden.

"Excuse me," Mavis calls out, her hands funnelling around her mouth.

The woman is facing her, but Mavis can't tell if she is looking at her. She is wearing sunglasses.

"Excuse me," Mavis moves closer. No need to shout now. "I broke down a ways back. Can anybody help?"

Woman stands up, gathering hem of apron in both hands, and comes forward.

Windy. the sun beats. Behind the sunglasses the woman scans Mavis. They are the same height. The woman has very dark skin and Mavis feels comfortable with her.

"No telephones out here," she says. "Come inside."

Mavis follows her into the kitchen where the woman dumps the pecan shells in her apron into a box by the stove. [Takes off her shoes] She props open the kitchen door with a brick and removes her sunglasses. The kitchen is big and full of smells and a woman's solitary mess.

"You a drinking woman?"

Mavis thinks she is about to be offered a drink.

"No,"

"Lies not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is OK."

Mavis breathes into her palm. "I drank some of my husband's liquor a while ago. But I'm not what you'd call a drinking woman. I was just wrung out."

The woman lights an eye on the stove.

"I forgot to ask your name. Mine's Mavis Albright."

"They call me Connie."

"I'd appreciate some coffee, Connie, if you got any."

Connie nods without turning around.

"You work here?"

"I work here." Connie lifts her two Hiawatha braids from her chest and drops them behind her shoulders.

"Is any of the family at home now? I knocked for such a long time."

"No family. Just her upstairs. She couldn't answer the door if she wanted to and she don't want to."

"I'm on my way to California. You think you can help me get some gas back to my car? Show me the way out of here? "

The woman sighed at the stove, but didn't reply.

"Connie?"

"I'm thinking."

Mavis looked around the kitchen which seemed to her as large as her junior high school cafeteria, including swinging wooden doors. She imagined rooms full of rooms outside that door.

"You all aint scared out here all by yourself? Don't seem like there's nothing for miles outside."

A light giggle. "Scarey things not always outside. Most scarey things is inside." Connie turned from the stove with a bowl and placed it before Mavis.

Mavis looked in despair at the steaming potatoes over which a pat of butter melted, but she said thank you and accepted the fork Connie offered. Anyway she could smell the coffee.

Connie sat down next to her. "Maybe I go with you," she said.

Mavis looked up. It was the first time she saw Connie's face without the sunglasses. Quickly Mavis looked down again at her food and poked her fork into the bowl.

"What you say, me and you go to California."

"What about your job here?" Mavis tasted a tiny bit of potato. Salty.

"It's by the sea, California?"

"Yeah. Right on the coast"

"Be nice to see water again." Connie kept her eyes on Mavis' face. "Wave after wave after wave. Big water. Blue, blue, blue, yes?"

"That's what they say. Sunny California, beaches, oranges...."

"Maybe too sunny for me." She stood up and went to the stove.

"Can't be sunnier than here." The butter, salt and pepper mashed into the potatoes weren't all that bad. Mavis was eating rapidly. "Go for miles and don't see a speck of shade."

"True," said Connie. She placed two cups of coffee and a pot of honey on the table. "Too much sunshine in the world. Vex me. Can't take it no more." A cool breeze swept through the kitchen door displacing the food smell with a sweeter one.

Mavis thought she would gulp the coffee when it arrived, but the satisfaction of the hot salty potatoes made her patient. Following Connie's example she spooned honey into her cup, stirring slowly.

"Did you think up anything, about how I can get me some gasoline?"

"Wait a while. Today maybe, tomorrow maybe. People be out to buy."

"Buy? Buy what?"

"Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves."

"And one of them can take me to get some gas?"

"For sure."

"Suppose nobody comes?"

"Always come. Somebody always come. Everyday. This morning already I sold forty-eight ears of corn and a handful of peppers. " Connie patted her apron pocket.

Blowing gently into her cup, Mavis went to the kitchen door and looked out. When she first arrived she was so happy to find someone at home, she had not looked closely at the garden. Now, behind the red chair, she saw flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables. In some places staked plants grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil. One part she originally thought untilled, became a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond.

"You didn't do all that by yourself, did you?"

"Except the corn," said Connie.

"Wow."

Connie put the breakfast bowl in the sink. "You want to clean yourself up a bit?"

The rooms full of rooms Mavis imagined to be lying through the swinging doors had kept her from asking to go to a bathroom. Here in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her. "I'll wait to see who comes by. Then I'll try to get myself together. I know I look a sight." She smiled hoping her refusal did not signal her apprehension.

"Suit yourself," said Connie and, sunglasses in place, patted Mavis' shoulder as she stepped into her shoes and past her to the yard.

Left alone Mavis expected the big big kitchen to be lose its comfort. It didn't. In fact she had an outer rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children--laughing? singing?--two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it. When she opened her eyes, Connie was there dragging a x quart basket over the floor.

"Come on," she said. "Make yourself useful."

Mavis frowned at the load of pecans and shook her head at the nut crackers, picks and bowls Connie was assembling. "No," she said, "think of something else I can do to help. Shelling that stuff would make me crazy."

"No it wouldn't. Try it."

"Uh uh. Not me. Shouldn't you put some newspaper down? Be easier to clean up."

"No newspapers in this house. No radio neither. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face to face."

"Just as well," Mavis said. "All the news these days is bad as can be. Can't do nothing about it anyway"

"You give in too quick. Look at your nails. Strong, curved like a bird's, perfect pecan hands. Fingernails like that take the meat out whole every time. Beautiful. Beautiful hands yet you say you can't. Make you crazy. Make me crazy to see good nails go to waste. "

Later, watching her suddenly beautiful hands moving at the task, Mavis was reminded of her sixth grade teacher opening a book: lifting the corner of the binding, stroking the edge to find the bookmark, touching the page, letting the tips of her fingers trail down the lines of print. The melty-thigh feeling she got watching. Now, working pecans, she tried hard to economize her gestures without sacrificing their grace. Connie, having launched her into the chore, was gone, saying she had to "see about Mother." Sitting at the table smelling the pleasure the wind brought through the door, Mavis wondered how old Connie's mother was. Judging by the age of her sunglassed daughter, she would have to be in her nineties. Also, how long before a customer

would come? Had anybody bothered the Cadillac yet? At whatever gas station she got to there'd be a map showing the way to California. With luck, she'd be on her way by supertime. With no luck, she'd be ready to leave in the morning. Back on macadam, listening to the car radio that had got her through nights of non-stop driving--two fingers impatiently punching or twirling for the better song, the nicer voice. Now the radio was across a field, down the road. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was--nothing. Just a space for her self which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the table where she sat admiring her busy hands the radio-absence spread out. A quiet, secret fire breathing itself and exhaling the sounds of its increase: the crack of shells, the tick of pecan meat thrown to the bowl; cooking utensils in eternal adjustment; insect-whisper, the argue of long grass, the far away cough of cornstalks.

It was peaceful, but she wished Connie would return lest she start up again--imagining babies singing. Just as the length of Connie's absence seemed strange, Mavis heard a car crunching gravel near the house. Then braking. A door slap.

"Hey, old lady." A woman's voice, light, loose.

Mavis turned and saw a dark-skinned woman, limber and moving quickly, mount the steps and halt when she didn't see what she expected.

"Oh. Excuse me."

"That's okay," said Mavis. "She's upstairs. Connie."

"I see."

Mavis thought the woman was looking very carefully at her clothes.

"Oh, lovely," she said coming to the table. "Just lovely." She stuck her fingers

into the bowl of nut meats and gathered a few. Mavis expected her to eat some, but she let them fall back to the heap. "What's Thanksgiving without pecan pie? Not a thing."

No one could ever hear her bare feet plopping and since the swinging doors had no sound, Connie's entrance was like an apparition.

"There you are!" The woman opened her arms. Connie entered them for a long swaying hug.

"I scared this girl to death. Never saw a guest in here before."

"Our first," said Connie. "Mavis Albright this is Olive Morgan."

"Hi, Olive."

"Morgan. Mrs. Morgan. I know you think I'm young enough to be called Olive, but I'm not. I'm way over fifty."

Mavis' face warmed, but she smiled anyway and said, "Sorry. Mrs. Morgan," while taking note of the woman's expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings in spite of the heat, and the cut of her dress--summer weight crepe, light blue.

Olive opened a white crocheted purse. "I brought you some more, Connie," she said and held up a pair of aviator style sunglasses .

"Good. I got just one pair left."

Olive glanced at Mavis. "She eats sunglasses."

"Not me. This house eats them." Fitting the stems behind her ears, Connie tested the dark lenses at the doorway. She turned her face directly to the sun and the hah! she shouted was full of defiance.

"Somebody order shelled pecans or is this your idea?"

"My idea."

"Make a lot of pies."

"Make more than pie." Connie rinsed the sunglasses under the sink tap and peeled away its sticker.

"Don't tell me. I came for the you-know-what."

Connie nodded. "Can you get this girl some gasoline for her automobile? Take her and have somebody bring her back?" She was drying and polishing the glasses, checking for spots and lint from the towel.

"Where is your car?" Olive asked. There was wonder in her voice, as though she doubted anyone in thongs, jeans and a man's dirty shirt could have a car.

"Walking distance," Mavis told her.

Olive nodded. "Happy to. I'd drive you back here as well, but both my boys on furlough." She looked at Connie. "House full tonight. How's Mother?"

"Can't last."

"You sure Beaver City's not better?"

Connie slipped the aviator glasses into her apron and headed for the pantry. "She wouldn't draw but one breath in a hospital. The second one would be her last."

The package Connie had handed to Olive Morgan could have been a grenade. Positioned on the seat of the Impala between them it emanated tension. The easy talk in the kitchen disappeared. Olive, suddenly formal, said very little, answered Mavis' questions with the least information and asked none of her own.

"Connie's nice, isn't she?"

Olive looked at her. "Yes. She is."

For twenty minutes they traveled. Olive cautious at every rise or turn of the road however slight. Occasionally she touched the packet. They pulled into a one-pump gas station in the middle of nowhere and asked the man who limped to the window for five gallons to carry. There was an argument, peppered with long silences, about the five-gallon can. He wanted Mavis to pay for it; she said she would return it when she came back to fill her tank. He doubted it. Finally they settled for a two dollar deposit. Olive and Mavis drove away, turned onto a different road headed east for what seemed like another half hour. Pointing toward a fancy wooden sign, Olive said "Here we are." The sign read Ruby pop. 360 on top and Lodge 16 at the bottom.

Mavis' immediate impression of the town was how outrageously clean it was; that and very young trees. [fx] The wide street, the enormous lawns cut to dazzle, the roomy houses--it looked to her like an advertisement for Kodak film.

Olive Morgan turned into a side street of flower gardens larger than the houses and snowed with butterflies.

The odor of the five-gallon can had been fierce in Olive Morgan's back seat. But in the boy's truck, propped between Mavis' feet, its gasoline smell was indistinguishable from the others. The glue-y, oily, metal-y combination might have made her retch if he had not done voluntarily what Mavis had been unable to ask of Olive. Turn on the radio. The disc jockey announced the tunes as though they were made by his best friends: King Solomon, Otis, Dinah, Ike and Tina, Dakota, the Temps.

As they bounced along Mavis, cheerful now, enjoyed the music and the

shaved part in the boy's hair. Although he was pleasanter than Olive he didn't have much more to say. They were several miles away from town and listening to the seventh of Jet Magazine's top twenty when Mavis realized she had not seen a single white person.

"Any whites in your town?" she asked him. Already she had forgotten what Olive said his name was when they were introduced.

"Not to live, they ain't. Come on business sometime."

When they passed the mansion on the way to the Cadillac, he asked, "What's it like in there?"

"I only been in the kitchen," Mavis said.

"Two old people in that big old place. Don't seem right."

The Cadillac was unmolested but so hot the boy licked his fingers before and after he unscrewed the gas cap. And he was nice enough to start the engine for her, and tell her to leave the doors open for a while before she got in. Mavis did not have to struggle to get him to accept money--Olive had been horrified--and he drove off to the sound of Marvin Gaye[?].

Behind the wheel, cooling in the air conditioned air, Mavis regretted not having noticed the radio station's numbers on the dashboard of the boy's truck. She fiddled the dial constantly as she drove the Cadillac back to Connie's house. She parked it smack in front of the wonderful porch. Cool. Lettuce green. It stayed ther for three years.

It was already sunset when the boy started the engine. Also she had forgotten to ask for a map. Also Connie had stuffed and roasted a chicken. But her decision to

spend the night was mostly because of Mother.

The whiteness at the center was blinding. It took awhile for Mavis to see the shape articulated among the pillows and the bone white sheets, and she might have remained sightless for many more moments had not a voice said "Don't stare, child."

Connie bent over at the foot of the bed and reached under the sheets. With her right hand she raised Mother's heels and with her left fluffed the pillows underneath them. Muttering "Toenails like razors," she resettled the feet gently.

When her eyes grew accustomed to dark and light, Mavis saw a bedshape far too small for a sick woman--almost a child's bed--and a variety of tables and chairs in the rim of black that surrounded it. Connie selected something from one of the tables and leaned into the light that ringed the patient. Mavis, following her movements, was startled to see her apply vaseline to lips in a face paler than the white cloth wrapped around the sick womans' head.

"There must be something that tastes better than this," she said, trailing the tip of her tongue over her oily lips.

"Food," said Connie. "How about some of that?"

"No."

"Just a bit?"

"No. Who is this you brought in here? Why did you bring somebody in here?"

"I told you. Woman with a car need help."

"That was yesterday."

"No it wasn't. This morning I told you."

"Well, hours ago then, but who invited her into my privacy? Who did that?"

"Guess. You, that's who. Want your scalp massaged?"

"Now now. What is your name, child?"

Mavis whispered from the dark she stood in. "Mavis Albright."

"Step a little closer, please. I can't see anything unless it's right up on me. Like living in an eggshell."

"Disregard her," said Connie. "Amia Senhora sees everything in the universe." She drew a chair to the little bed, sat down, took the woman's hand and one by one stroked back the cuticles.

Mavis moved closer, resting her hand on the metal footboard.

"Are you all right now? Is your automobile working?"

"Yes, mam. It's fine. Thank you."

"Where are your children?"

Mavis couldn't speak.

"There used to be a lot of children here. This was a school once. A beautiful school. For girls. Indian girls."

Mavis looked at Connie, but when Connie returned her glance, Mavis quickly dropped her eyes.

The woman in the bed laughed lightly. "It's hard, isn't it" she said, "looking in those eyes. When she came here they were green as grass."

"And yours were blue," said Connie.

"Still are."

"So you say."

"What color, then?"

"Same as me--old lady wash-out color."

"Hand me a mirror, child."

"Give her nothing."

"I'm still in charge here."

"Sure. Sure."

All three watched the black fingers gentling the white ones. The woman in the bed sighed. "Look at me. Can't sit up by myself and arrogant to the end. God must be laughing His head off."

"God don't laugh and He don't play," said Connie.

"Yes, well, you know all about Him I'm sure. Next time you see Him, tell Him to let the girls in. They bunch around the door, but they don't come in. I don't mind in the day time but they worry my sleep at night. Are you sure you're feeding them properly? They're always so hungry. There's plenty isn't there? Not those frycake things they like but good hot food the winters are so bad we need coal a sin to burn trees in the desert yesterday the snow sifted in under the door Sister Roberta has the onions..."

Connie folded the woman's hands on the sheet and stood, signalling Mavis to follow her.

"I thought she was your mother. I mean the way you talked, I thought she was your own mother." Mavis and Connie walked through the hall and down the stairs.

"She is my mother. Your mother too. Whose mother are you?"

Mavis did not answer partly because she couldn't speak of it but also because she was trying to remember where, in a house with no electricity, the light in Mother's room came from.

After the roast chicken supper, Connie showed Mavis to a large bedroom. From the four cots in it, she chose the one closest to the window where she stood for a long time. Two milky moons, instead of the one hanging there, would have been just like Connie's eyes. Beneath them a swept world. Tidy. Ample. Forever.

California, which way?

Maryland, which way?

Merle? Pearl?

The lion cub that ate her up that night had blue eyes instead of brown and he did not have to hold her down. When he circled her shoulders with his left paw, she willingly let her head fall back, clearing the way to her throat. Nor did she fight herself out of the dream. The bite was juicy, but she slept through that as well as other things, until the singing woke her.

Mavis Albright left the Convent many times but always she came back, so she was there at the end....[tk]

On that July day she had been aware for months of the sourness between the Convent and the town and she might have anticipated the truckload of men prowling the mist. But other things distracted her. She awoke at 3:00 a.m. assaulted by cigarette smoke. But weary from the stress of the evening before, she let herself sleep on. An hour later, shooing pullets out of the schoolroom, she heard footsteps and smelled the merest trace of spearmint.

Sunday 23rd April, 1995

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 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.

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 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, 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 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. Since the loose bones of his cousins had been buried two years ago, K.D., their hope and their despair, was the last male in a line that included a state

auditor and two county clerks. His behavior, as always, required scrutiny and 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 change 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, his cousins, 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 their 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.

In two cars they drove less than a mile to Fleetwood's house.

Somewhere in K 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. Excited 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 the world's purest happiness. A glee so keenly felt it brought tears. When the Oldsmobile u-turned at the Oven 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.

They parked bumper to bumper on the side of Fleetwood's house. Except for Reverend Misner, each man began to breathe through his mouth as a way of narrowing the house odor of illness.

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 Central Avenue. Sleeping arrangements for his wife and each of 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 now slept on a 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 Mrs. Fleetwood's spent all their energy, time and affection on the last two children alive--so far. Fleet and Jeff, grateful for but 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. "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 speeding up 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 bear 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-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. Mable 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. The committee 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 Gommorah.

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.

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

When they got split up, Mikey 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. The court appointed lawyer came back saying no bail, no probation. His client had to do the whole six months. 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.' "

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."

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

"Cactus, 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 heavy, the men always 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 plaster wall near the telephone. Outside the bodega 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 Ramparts rolled in her knapsack. 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. But 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 polyester 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, you. Give him the ice you 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 snack bar 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 right 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 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 a bus stop or train station or something?"

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

"Great!" Gigi dug around 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 Best"

"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.

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

And she was. Just as Roger Best 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 sweet but stern 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, 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 puny and 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 murmured. "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.

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

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

"I'm missing my ride. What 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 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 misleading.

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 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", an entrance door 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 candleabra 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 sucked the last bit of joint--ming one--and lay the roach on one of the alabaster vaginas in the game room. She imagined the men contentedly knocking their cigars against 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 meant to be 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 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."

"Aw, 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 six 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?

When Mavis pulled into the driveway near the kitchen door she slammed the breaks so hard her packages slid from the seat and fell beneath the dashboard. The figure sitting in the garden's red chair was totally naked. She could not see the face under the hat's brim but she knew it wore no sunglasses. A mere month she'd been away

and for three weeks of that time couldn't wait to get back.

Something must have happened, she thought. To Mother. to Connie.

At the squeal of the brakes the sunning figure did not move. Only when she slammed the Cadillac door did the person sit up and push back the hat. Calling out, "Connie! Connie?" Mavis hurried toward the garden's edge.

"Who the hell are you? Where's Connie?"

The naked girl yawned and scratched her pubic hair. "Mavis?" she asked.

Relieved to learn she was known, spoken of, at least, Mavis lowered her voice. "What are you doing out here like that? Where's Connie?"

"Like what? She's inside."

"You're naked!"

"Yeah. So?"

"Do they know?" Mavis glanced toward the house.

"Lady," said Grace, "are you looking at something you never saw before or something you don't have or you a clothes freak or what?"

"Blessed! Blessed! Blessed one!" Connie came bounding down the steps, her arms wide, toward Mavis. "Oh how I missed you!"

They hugged and Mavis could not help loving the thump of the woman's heart against her own.

"Who is she, Connie, and where are her clothes?"

"Oh, that's little Grace. She came the day after Mother died."

"Died? When?"

"Seven days now. Seven."

"But I brought all the things. I have it all in the car."

"No use. Not for her anyway. My heart's all scrunched but now you back I feel like cooking."

"You haven't been eating?" Mavis shot a cold glance at Grace.

"A bit. Funeral foods. But now I'll cook."

"There's plenty," said Grace. "We haven't even touched the..."

"You put some clothes on!"

"You kiss my ass!"

"Do it," said Connie. "Go, like a good girl. Cover yourself we love you just the same."

"She ever hear of sunbathing?"

"Go on now."

Grace went, exaggerating the switch of both the cheeks she had offered Mavis.

"What rock did she crawl out from under? Mavis asked.

"Hush," said Connie. "Soon you'll like her."

**No way, Mavis thought. No way at all. Mother's gone but
Connie's okay and this house is a place for me. Not her.**

They did everything but slap each other and finally they did that.

Saturday 10th September, 1994

Friday 9th December, 1994

Monday 17th April, 1995

Seneca [1974]

Not much point to garden peas. May as well use canned. Hardly a tastebud in town could tell the difference. Certainly not Steward's. Blue Boy packed in his cheek for twenty years first narrowed his taste to a craving for spices, then reduced it altogether to a single demand for hot pepper.

When they got married, Dovey was sure she could never cook well enough to suit the twin known to be pickier than his brother, Deek. Back from the war, both men were hungry for down home food, but dreaming of it for three years had raised their expectations, exaggerated the possibilities of lard making biscuits lighter than snow; of the responsibility sharp cheese took on in hominy. Eventually Deek hummed with pleasure as he sucked sweet marrow from hocks or crunched chicken bones to powder. But Steward remembered everything differently. Shouldn't the clove be down in the tissue, not just sitting on top of the ham? And the chicken-fried

steak--Uedalia onions or white?

On her wedding day, Dovey stood facing the flowered wall paper, her back to the window so her sister, Olive, could see better. Dovey held the hem of her slip up while Olive drew the seams. The little brush tickled the backs of her legs, but she stood perfectly still. There were no stockings in Haven or the world in 1949 but to get married obviously bare legged mocked God and the ceremony.

"I don't expect he'll be satisfied at table," Dovey told her sister.

"Why not?" asked Olive.

"I don't know. He compliments my cooking, then suggests how to improve it next time."

"Hold still, Dovey."

"Deek doesn't do that to you, does he?"

"Not that. He's picky other ways. But I wouldn't worry about it if I was you. If he's satisfied in bed the table won't mean a thing."

They laughed then and Olive had to do a whole seam over again.

Now the difficulty that loomed in 1949 had been solved by tobacco. It didn't matter whether her peas were garden fresh or canned. Convent pepers, hot as hellfire, did all the cooking for her. The trouble it took to cultivate peas was wasted. A teaspoon of sugar

and a plop of butter in canned ones would do nicely since the bits of purple-black pepper he would sprinkle over them bombed away any quiet flavor. Take late squash....

Almost all the time, these days, when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost. His sense of taste one example of the many she counted. Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses. The sale of his herd at 1958's top dollar accompanied his defeat in the statewide election for Church Secretary because of his outspoken contempt for the schoolchildren sitting in that drugstore in Oklahoma City. He had even written a mean letter to the women who organized the students. His position had not surprised her since, ten years earlier he'd called Thurgood Marshall a 'stir-up Negro' for handling the N.A.A.C.P.'s segregation suit in Norman. In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk their land to a toy ranch and he lost the tk trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his tastebuds disappeared over time. Small losses that culminated with the big one: in 1964, at forty, they learned neither could ever have children.

Now, almost ten years later, he had "cleaned up," as he put it, in

a real estate deal in XX and Dovey didn't have to wonder what else he would lose now because he was in an already losing battle with Reverend Misner over the words attached to the lip of the Oven. An argument fueled in part, Dovey thought, by what nobody talked about: young people in trouble or acting up behind every door. Arnette, home from college, wouldn't leave her bed. Harper's boy, called Menus, drunk every weekend since he got back from Vietnam. Roger's granddaughter, Billie-Marie, disappeared into thin air. Jeff's wife, Sweetie, laughing, laughing at jokes no one made. K.D.'s mess with that girl living out at the Convent. Not to speak of the sass, the pout, the outright defiance of some of the others--the ones who wanted to name the Oven "such-and-such-place", and who had decided that the original words on it were something that enraged Steward and Deek. Dovey had talked to her sister (and sister-in-law) Olive, about it; to Mable Fleetwood; to a couple of women in the Club. Opinions were varied, confusing, even incoherent because feelings ran so high over the matter. Also because the young people, snickering at Miss Esther's finger memory, insulted them all. They had not suggested, politely, that Miss Esther may have been mistaken; they howled at the notion of remembering invisible words you couldn't

even read by tracing letters you couldn't pronounce.

"Did she see them?" they asked their fathers.

"Better than that. She felt them, touched them, put her finger on them," shouted the fathers.

"If she was blind we could believe her. That'd be like braille. But some five year old kid who couldn't read her own tombstone if she climbed out of her grave and stood in front of it?"

The twins frowned. Fleet, thinking of his mother-in-law's famous generosity, jumped out of the pew and had to be held back.

The Methodists, early on, had smiled at the dissension among the Baptists. The Pentacostals laughed out loud. But not for long. Members in their own churches, young and old, began to voice opinions about the words. Each had people in their congregations who were among or related to the fifteen families to leave Haven and start over. And the Oven didn't belong to any one denomination. It belonged to all, and all were asked to show up at Calvary. To discuss it, Reverend Misner said. When they assembled at 7:30 the atmosphere was pleasant, people simply curious. And it remained so right through Misner's opening remarks. Maybe they were nervous, but when the young people spoke, starting with Roy, their voices

were so strident the women, embarrassed, looked down at their pocket books; shocked, the men forgot to blink.

It would have been better for everyone if the young people had spoken softly, acknowledged their up-bringing as they presented their views. But they didn't want to discuss; they wanted to instruct.

"No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To "beware" God. To always be ducking and diving trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down. What kind of message is that? No ex-slave who had the guts to make his own way, build a town out of nothing could think like that. No ex-slave...."

"Quit calling him a ex-slave. That's my grandfather you talking about. He wasn't no ex nothing and he wasn't making his own way; he was part of a whole group making their own way."

"He was born in slavery times, he was a slave, wasn't he?"

"Everybody born in slavery time wasn't a slave. Not the way you meaning it."

"There's just one way to mean it."

"You don't know what you talking about!"

"None of them do! Don't know jackshit!" shouted Roger Best.

"Whoa, whoa!" Reverend Misner interrupted. "Brothers. Sisters. We called this meeting in God's own house to...."

"One of His houses," snarled Harper.

"All right, one of His houses. But whichever one, He demands respect from those who are in it. Am I right or am I right?"

Roger sat down. "I apologize for the language. To Him," he said, pointing upward.

"That might please Him. Might not. Don't limit your love to Him, Roger. He cautions every which way against it."

"Reverend." The Reverend Pulliam stood up. He was a dark, wirey man--white-haired and impressive. "We have a problem here. You, me. Everybody. The problem is with the way some of us talk. The grown-ups, of course, should use proper language. But the young people--what they say is more like backtalk than talk. What we're here for is--"

Roy actually interrupted him, the Reverend! "What is talk if it's not 'back'? You all just don't want us to talk at all. Any talk is 'back-talk' if you don't agree with what's being said."

Everybody was so stunned by the boy's brazenness, they hardly heard what he said.

Pulliam, dismissing the possibility that Roy's parents were there, turned slowly to Misner. "Reverend, can't you keep him still?"

"Why would I want to?" asked Misner. "We're here not just to talk but to listen too."

The gasps were more felt than heard.

Pulliam narrowed his eyes and was about to answer when Deek Morgan left his seat and stood in the aisle. "Well, sir, I have listened and I believe I have heard as much as I need to. Now, you all listen to me. Close. Nobody, I mean nobody is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands." Deek looked steadily at Roy. "They dug the clay--not you. They carried the hod--not you. They mixed the mortar--not a one of you. They made good red brick for that town when their own shelter was sticks and sod. You understand what I'm telling you? And we respected what they had gone through to do it. Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men--men, hear me? not slaves ex or otherwise--the bricks those men made. Tell, them, Roger, how delicate was the separation, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Sargeant, you tell

him if I'm lying. Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us. And if some letters fell off, it wasn't due to us because we packed it in straw like it was a baby. So, understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew. Act short with me all you want, you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect a row you never hoed."

[quiet, then amens]

"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it." Misner said. "It's because they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life."

"They don't want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into something they made up."

"It's our history, too. Not just yours," said Roy.

"Then act like it! I just told you! That Oven already has a history it don't need you to fix it."

"Wait, now Deek. Think what's been said. Forget naming, naming the Oven. What's at issue is clarifying the motto."

"Motto? Motto? We talking command! 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'! That's what it says clear as daylight. That aint no

suggestion; that's an order!"

"Well, no. It's not clear as daylight." said Misner. "It says '...the Furrow of His Brow.' There is no 'Beware' there."

"You were not there! And you wasn't here either at the beginning! Esther was!"

"She was a baby. She could have been mistaken."

Fleet moved into the aisle. "Esther never made a mistake of that nature in her life. She named this town, dammit. 'Scuse me, ladies."

Destry, looking strained and close to tears, held up his hand and asked "What's so wrong about 'Be the Furrow'? 'Be the Furrow of His Brow'?"

"You can't be God, boy!"

"It's not being Him; it's being His instrument, His justice. As a race--"

"God's justice is His alone. How you going to be His instrument if you don't obey Him?" asked Reverend Pulliam.

"We are obeying Him. If we follow His commandments, we will be His voice, His retribution. As a people--"

Harper cut him off. "It says 'Beware'. Not 'Be.' Beware means

'Look out. The power is mine! Get used to it!' "

"'Be' means you putting Him aside and you the power," said Roger.

"We are the power if we just--"

"See what I mean? See what I mean? Listen to that! Hear that, Reverend! Blasphemers need a strap."

tk

As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word--or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. "Listen here," he said, his voice thick and shapely with Blue Boy. "If you, any one of you, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake."

Dovey Morgan, chilled by her husband's threat, could only look at the floorboards and wonder what visible shape his loss would take now.

Days later she still hadn't made up her mind about who or which side was right. And in discussion with others, including Steward, she tended to agree with whomever she was listening to. This matter was one she would bring to her Friend--when he came back to her.

Driving away from the meeting, Steward and Dovey had a small but familiar disagreement about where to go. He was headed out to the ranch. It was small now that gas rights had been sold, but in Steward's mind it was home--where his American flag flew on holidays; where his honorable discharge papers were framed; where Ben and Good could be counted on to bang their tails maniacally when he appeared. But the little house they kept on St. Matthew Street--a foreclosure the twins never resold--was becoming more and more home to Dovey. It was close to her sister, to Mount Calvary, the Club. It was also where her Friend chose to pay his calls.

"Drop me right here, Steward. I'll walk."

"Girl, you a torment," he said, but he patted her thigh before she got out.

Dovey walked slowly down Central Avenue. In the distance she could see lanterns from the Juneteenth picnic hanging near the Oven. On her left was the bank, lower than any of the churches but seeming nevertheless to hog the street. Neither brother had wanted a second floor like the Haven bank had, where the Lodge kept its quarters. They didn't want traffic into their building for any reason other than

bank business. The Haven bank their father owned collapsed for a whole lot of reasons and one of them, Steward maintained, was having Lodge meetings on the premises. "Ravels the concentration," he'd said. Three streets beyond, on her right, next to Patricia Best's house, was the school where Dovey had taught while the ranch house was being completed. Pat ran the school by herself now, with Reverend Misner and tk filling in for tk and tk. The flowers and vegetables on one side of the school were an extension of the garden in front of Pat's own house.

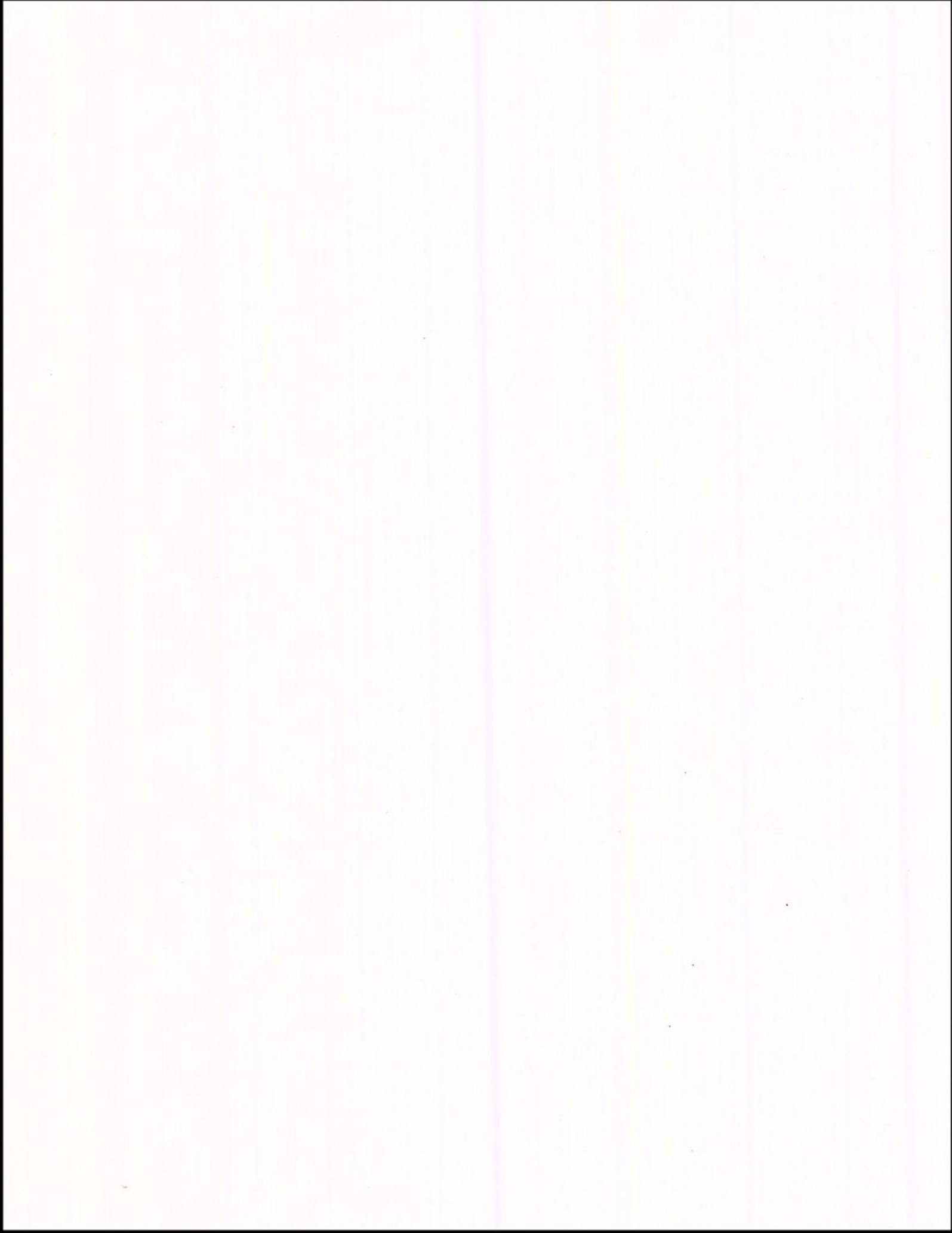
Dovey turned into St. Matthew Street. The moon's light glittered white fences gone slant in an effort to hold back foxglove, iris, sunflowers, cosmos, daylilies while alba and silver king pressed through the spaces between the slats below. The night sky, like a handsome lid, held the perfume down, saving it, intensifying it, refusing it the slightest breeze on which to escape.

Touching the picckets lining the path, Dovey climbed the steps. There on the porch she hesitated and thought of turning back to call on Olive who had not attended the meeting. She changed her mind and opened the door. Or tried to. It was locked--again. Something Steward had recently begun that made her furious: bolting the house

as though it were a bank too. Dovey was sure theirs was the only locked door in Ruby. What was he afraid of? She patted the dish under a pot of hosta and picked up the skeleton key.

Before that first time, but never again, there was a sign. She had been upstairs tidying the little foreclosed house and paused to look through a bedroom window. Down below the leaf heavy trees were immobile as a painting. July. Dry. One hundred one degrees. Still, opening the windows would freshen the room that had been empty for a year. It took her a moment--a tap here, a yank or two--but she managed finally to raise the window all the way up and lean forward to see what was left of the garden. From her position in the window the trees hid most of the back yard and she stretched a bit to see beyond their spread. Then a mighty hand dug deep into a giant sack and threw fistfuls of petals into the air. Or so it seemed. Butterflies. A trembling highway of persimmon colored wings cut across the tree tops forever--then disappeared.

Later, as she sat in a rocker under those trees, he came by. She had never seen him before and did not recognize any local family in his features. He was walking quickly, as though late for an



appointment, using this yard as a shortcut to some place else. Perhaps he heard the light cry of her rocker. Perhaps he wondered whether his trespass was safe. In any case, when he turned and saw her he smiled raising a palm in greeting.

"Hello," she called.

He changed his direction and came near to where she sat.

"You from around here?"

"Close," he said, but he did not move his lips to say so.

He needed a haircut.

"I saw some butterflies a while back. Up there." Dovey pointed. "Orange-y red, they were. Just as bright. Never saw that color before. Like what we used to call coral when I was a girl. Pumpkin color, but stronger." She wondered, at the time, what on earth she was talking about and would have stuttered to a polite close--something about the heat, probably, the relief evening had brought--except he looked so interested in what she was describing. His overalls were clean and freshly ironed. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled above the elbows. His forearms, smoothly muscled, made her reconsider the impression she got from his face: that he was underfed.

"You ever see butterflies like that?"

He shook his head but evidently thought the question serious enough to squat down before her.

"Don't let me keep you from where you're going. It was just, well, my Lord, such a sight."

He smiled sympathetically and looked toward the place she had pointed to. Then he stood up, brushing the seat of his overalls, although he had not sat down in the grass, and said, "Is it all right if I pass through here?"

"Of course. Anytime. Nobody lives here now. The folks who built it lost it. Nice, though, isn't it? We're thinking about maybe using it from time to time. My husband...." She was babbling, she knew, but he seemed to be listening earnestly, carefully to every word. At last she stopped--too ashamed of her silliness to go on--and repeated her invitation to use the short cut whenever he wanted.

He thanked her and left the yard, moving quickly between the trees. Dovey watched his figure melt in the shadow lace surrounding the houses beyond.

She never saw the persimmon wings again. He, however, did return. About a month later, then off and on every month or two.

Dovey kept forgetting to ask Steward, or anybody else, who he might be. Young people were getting harder to identify and when friends or relatives visited Ruby, they did not always attend services, as they used to do, and get introduced to the Congregation. She could not ask his age but supposed he was at least fifteen years younger than she and perhaps that alone made her keep his visits secret.

Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said.

By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again.

Once she fed him (a bowl of applesauce) and he ate it all.

More and more frequently she found reasons to remain on St. Matthew Street. Not hoping or looking for him, but content to know he had and would come by there--for a chat, a bite, cool water on a parched afternoon. Her only fear was that someone else would mention him, appear in his company, or announce a prior claim to his friendship. No one did. He seemed hers alone.

So on the evening of the argument with the young people at

Mount Calvary, Dovey stuck the key in the lock of the little foreclosed house annoyed with Steward for making it necessary and agitated by the nasty turn the meeting took. She hoped to sit with a glass of iced water, read some verses or a few psalms and collect her thoughts on the matter that was angering everybody in case her Friend passed by in the morning.

“Beware the Furrow of His Brow”? “Be the Furrow of His Brow”? Her own opinion was that “Furrow of His Brow “ alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross. Wasn’t that so? She’d ask her Friend. And then tell Olive.

Saturday 10th December, 1994

Sunday 18th December, 1994

“Look out, quail. Deek’s gunning for you. And when he comes back he’ll throw a sack full of you on my clean floor and say something like ‘This ought to take care of supper.’ Proud. Like he’s giving me a present. Like you were already plucked, cleaned and cooked.”

The kitchen was flooded with newly installed fluorescent light

so Olive could not see into the darkness outside as she waited for the kettle to boil. She wanted to get her tonic properly steeped before her husband returned. One of Connie's preparations lay at her fingertips, a tiny cloth bag folded into a waxed paper packet. She thought it was midnight when Deek eased out of bed and dressed in hunting clothes. But when he crept downstairs in sock feet, she'd looked at the clock glow: 3:30. Two hours more of sleep, she thought, but it was six a.m. when she woke and she had to hurry. Get breakfast, lay out his business clothes. Before that, however, her tonic--very much needed now because the air was thinning again. It had started thinning out, as if from too much wear, not when Bryan was killed but two weeks later--even before Bryan's body had been shipped--when they were informed that Easter was dead too. Babies. One 19 the other 21. Both had been home on furlough that Thanksgiving, 1968. Connie had sold her two bags of already shelled pecans. A girl with a broke down car was there and, although Olive drove her for gasoline, she stayed on for a long time afterwards. She must have gone away before the woman died otherwise Connie would not have needed to light a fire in the fields. Nobody would have known except for the plume of black smoke. Anna Flood saw it,

drove out and got the news.

Olive had to hurry then, too. Getting food from neighbor women and cooking some things herself. She, Dovey and Anna carried it out there knowing full well there was no one to eat it but themselves. Hurry, hurry then too, because the woman had to be shipped quickly up north. In ice. Connie seemed strange, broken somehow and Olive added her to her list of people who worried her life. K.D., for example. And Arnette. And Sweetie. And now the Oven site was on her mind. A few young men had taken to congregating there with out-of-state liquor, people said, and the small children who liked to play there had been told to go home. Or so their mothers said. Then a few girls (who Olive thought needed slapping) found reason to be there. Like Arnette and Billie Marie used to.

Folks said these young men needed something to do. But Olive, knowing there was so much to do, didn't believe that was it. Something was going on. Something besides the fist. Jet black with red fingernails painted on the back wall of the Oven. No body claimed responsibility--but more shocking than collective denial was the refusal to remove it. The loungers said, no, they hadn't put it there and no, they wouldn't take it off. Although Kate Golightly and Pat

Best, with Brillo, paint thinner and a bucket of hot soapy water, got it off, five days passed during which the town leaders in a hot rage forbid anyone but the loungers to erase it. The clenched fingers, red-tipped and thrust sideways, not up, hurt more than a blow and lasted longer. It produced a nagging, hateful pain that Kate's and Pat's scrubbing could not erase.

Steam hiss roused her and Olive poured hot water into a cup over the little muslin bag. She placed a saucer over the cup and let the medicine steep.

Maybe they ought to go back to the way they did things when her babies were new. When everubody was too busy building, stocking, harvesting to quarrel or think up devilment. The way it was before Mount Calvary was completed. When baptisms were held in sweet water. Beautiful baptisms. Baptisms to break the heart, full of major chords and weeping and the thrill of being safe at last. When the pastor held the women in his arms, lowering them one by one into newly hallowed water. Never letting go. Breathless the others watched. Breathless the women rose. Each in her turn. Their wet, white robes billowing in the sunlit water. Hair, face streaming they looked to heaven before bowing their heads for the command,

'Go,now.'" and the reassurance, "Daughter, thou art saved." The softest note when it hit sweet water doubled, trebled itself; then other notes from other throats came and traveled along with the first. Tree birds hushed and tried to learn. Slowly, then, hand in hand, heads on supporting shoulders, the blessed waded to the banks and made their way to the Oven. To dry, embrace and congratulate one another.

Now Calvary had an inside pool and Zion and Redeemer had special vessels for dribbling a little water on an upright head.

When Roy and the other two, Destry and the girl Caline, asked for a meeting, it was quickly agreed upon. No one had called a town meeting in years. Everybody, including Olive and Dovey, thought the young people would first apologize for their behavior and then pledge to clean up and maintain the site. Instead they came with a plan--of their own. A plan that completed what the fist had begun. Roy took the floor and, without notes, gave a speech perfect in every way but intelligibility. Nobody knew what he was talking about and the parts that could be understood were plumb foolish. He wanted to give the oven a name, to have meetings there to talk about how pretty they

were while giving themselves ugly names--like black. Like not-American. Like African. All Olive knew about Africa was the seventy-five cents she gave to the missionary society collection. She had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none. But Roy talked about them like they were neighbors, or worse, family. And he talked about white people as though he had just discovered them and seemed to think what he'd learned was news.

Yet there was something more and else in his speech. Not so much what could be agreed or disagreed with, but a kind of accusation. Against whites, yes, but also against them--the townspeople listening, their own parents, grandparents, the Ruby grownfolk. As though there was a new and more manly way to deal with whites. Not M.L.'s way, but some African type thing full of new words, new color combinations and new haircuts. Suggesting that out-smarting whites was craven. That they had to be told, rejected, confronted. Because the old way was slow, limited to just a few, and weak. This last swole Deek's neck and, on a weekday, had him blowing out the hearts of quail to keep his own from exploding.

He would be pulling in with a bag of them any minute now, and Olive would have to serve up a platter of their tender, browned

halves. So, she contemplated rice or sweet potatoes as the contents of her cup steeped. When she swallowed the last drop, the kitchen door opened.

"What's that?"

She liked the smell of him. Windy-wet and grassey. "Nothing."

Deek tossed his sack on the floor. "Give me some of it, then."

"No. How many?"

"Twelve. Gave six to Sargeant." Deek sat down and before taking off his jacket unlaced his boots. "Enough to take care of two suppers."

"K.D. go with you?"

"No. Why?" He grunted with the effort of de-booting.

Olive took them away and put them on the back porch. "He's hard to find these days. Up to something, I bet."

"You put coffee on? Like what?"

Olive sniffed the dark air, testing its weight, before closing the door. "Can't tell, exactly. But he has too many reasons for wearing thin shoes."

"Chasing tail, I expect. 'Member that gal dragged herself in town some time back and was staying out to that Convent?"

Olive turned to him, coffee tin at her breast as she eased off the lid. "Why you say 'dragged'? Why you have to say 'dragged' like that? You see her?"

"No, but others did."

"And?"

Deek yawned. "And nothing. Coffee, baby. Coffee, coffee."

"So don't say 'dragged.' "

"Okay okay. She didn't drag in." Deek laughed dropping his outer clothes on the floor. "She floated in."

"What's wrong with the closet, Deek?" Olive looked at the waterproof pants, the black and red jacket, the flannel shirt. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Heard her shoes had six inch heels."

"You lying."

"And flying."

"Well. If she's still at the Convent, she must be all right."

Deek massaged his toes. "You just partial to those women out there. How many of them now? Four?"

"Three. The Mother died, remember?"

"Right. Yeah. First time Roger got to use his big new van."

"Ambulance," said Olive, gathering up his clothes.

"Brought three payments in the next day. Hope he can keep up the rest. Not enough hospital mortuary business around here justify that over-priced buggy he got."

The coffee smell was starting and Deek rubbed his palms.

"Is he hurting?" Olive asked.

"Not yet. But since his profit depends on the sick and the dead, I'd just soon he went bankrupt."

"Deek!"

"Couldn't do a damn thing for my boys. Buried in a bag like kittens."

"They had lovely coffins! Lovely!"

"Yeah, but inside...."

"Quit, Deek. Why don't you just quit."

"I 'spect he'll make out. Less he dies before I do. In which case, well, you know what to do. I don't feature riding in that van no how, but I want a top of the line box so he'll make out just fine. Fleet's the one in trouble." He stood at the sink and lathered his hands.

"You keep saying that. How come?"

"Mail order."

"What?" Olive poured coffee into the big blue cup her husband preferred.

"You all go to Denby, don't you? When you want a toaster or a electric iron. And if you don't, you order out of a catalogue and go all the way out there to pick it up. Where's that put him?"

"He never has much on hand. And what he has been there too long. That lounge chair changed colors three times sitting in the window all that time."

"That's why," said Deek. "If he can't move old inventory, he can't buy new."

"He used to do all right."

Deek tipped a little coffee into the saucer. "Ten years ago. Five." The dark pool rippled under his breath. "Boys coming out of Deetnam, getting married, setting up. Farms doing ok everybody doing ok." He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure. "Now, well...."

"I don't understand, Deek."

"I do." He smiled up at her. "You don't need to."

She had not meant that she didn't undestand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't

worried enough by their friends money problems to help them out. But Olive didn't try to explain; she just looked closely at his face. Smooth, still handsome after twenty-six years and beaming, now, with satisfaction. Shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be. Coffee the right color; the right temperature. And later today quail without their hearts would melt in his mouth.

Every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan got into a brilliant black sedan and drove three fourths of a mile. He started at his own house on St. John Street, turned right at the corner onto Central, passed Luke, Mark and Matthew, then parked neatly in front of the bank. The silliness of driving to where he could walk in less time than it took to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment: how he washed and waxed it himself--never letting K.D. or any enterprising youngster touch it; how he chewed but did not light cigars in it; how he never leaned on it, but if you had a conversation with him standing near it, he combed the hood with his fingernails scraping flecks he alone could see, and

buffing invisible stains with his pocket handkerchief. He laughed along with friends at his vanity because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe. The magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory.

The morning after the meeting at Calvary, pleased with his bird quota and fired, not tired, from no sleep, he decided to check out the Oven before opening up the bank. So he turned left at Central and drove past the school on the right, Ace's Grocery, Fleetwood Housewares and several small houses on the left. When he arrived at the site he circled it. Except for a few soda cans and some paper that had escaped the trash barrels, the place was blank. No fists. No loungers. He should speak to Anna Flood who owned Ace's now--get her to clean up the pop cans and mess that came from purchases made at her store. That's what Ace, her father, used to do. Swept that place like it was his own kitchen, inside, out and if you'd let him he'd sweep all across the road. Deek pulled on to Central. He could hear schoolchildren group-reciting a poem he'd learned by rote too, except he had had to hear Dunbar's lines only once to memorize them completely and forever. As he drove north on Central, it and the side

streets seemed to him as satisfactory as ever. Quiet houses full of industry; and in them were proud women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting.

He was braking in front of the bank when he noticed a solitary figure ahead. He recognized her right away, but watched her carefully because first of all she had no coat, and second, because he had not seen her out of her house in six years.

Central Avenue, three wide graded miles of tarmac, began at the Oven and ended at Sargeant's Feed and Seed. The four side streets east of Central were named after the Gospels. When a fifth street was needed it was named St. Peter. Later on, as Ruby grew, streets were laid on the west side of Central, and although these newer streets were continuations of those on the east--situated right across from them--they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the east become Cross John on the west. St. Luke became Cross Luke. The sanity of this pleased most everybody, Deek especially, and there was always room for additional houses (financed, if need be, by the Morgan brothers bank) in the plots and acres behind and beyond those already built. The woman Deek was

watching seemed to be leaving Cross Peter Street and heading toward Sargeant's Feed and Seed. But she did not stop there. Instead she was moving resolutely north, where Deek knew there was nothing for seventeen miles. What could the sweetest girl, named for her nature, be doing coatless on a chilly October morning that far from the home she had not stepped out of since 1967?

A movement in his rear view mirror got his attention and he saw the small red truck coming in from south country. Its driver would be Aaron Sand, late, as Deek knew he would be, since he was bringing in the final payment on his loan. After considering letting Sand wait and driving on to catch up with Sweetie, Deek cut off his motor. July, his clerk and secretary, was not due until ten. There should be no occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time.