

Paradise Draft

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PARADISE

TONI MORRISON

**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.**

CHAPTER ONE

RUBY

They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety 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 stampede 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 string of peppers or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon of barbecue sauce; but only a few have 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 bluestem and maybe witch tracks as well.

The kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. More shelving than Ace's Grocery Store. The table is fourteen feet long if an inch and it's easy

to tell that the women they are hunting have been taken by surprise. At one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of Shredded Wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallion piled like a handful of green confetti nestles brilliant discs of carrot, but the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on 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 the sod house where he was born. The house he lives in now is much bigger, much better and this town is resplendent compared to his birthplace which had gone from feet to

belly in sixty years. From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma Territory to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma state. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 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 rots the one all-black town worth the pain. All the others he knew about or heard tell of 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 1905 becoming five hundred by 1934. 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.

But he and the others, Veterans all, had a different idea. Loving what Haven had been--the idea of it and its reach; carrying that love--gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart, they made up their minds to do it again. Two years after they got back to the states they 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 once upon a time 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. As new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had out-foxed it; who had not let danger or natural evil keep them from cutting Haven out of mud and who knew enough to seal their triumph with that 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 kettles 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.

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 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; a message in smeary blood; a whip; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the cement neck of a female torso 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, one man directs his partner 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, its bed invisible under a hill of clothes; another room sports two rocking chairs full of dolls; a third the debris and smell of a heavy drinker--but normal at least.

His 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 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 from a quiet, orderly community 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 itself. 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. →

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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 little shelves cut into niches in the wall. Holding a baby or 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.

There were irreconcilable differences among the congregations in

town, but 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 corn, buffalo grass, clover and approached by a gravel track barely seen from the 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 quarter bets with abandon. When the gun went off only three horses left forward. The rest stepped sideways or cut out over lumber stacked near unfinished homes. When the race finally got underway, the women yelled from the meadow while their children shrieked and danced in grass up to their shoulders. The pony finished first, but since it lost its rider two furlongs out, the winner was the auburn mare. The little girl with the most poppies on her head was chosen to present the first place ribbon hung with Ossie's purple heart. The winner was seven years old then and grinning as though he'd won the Kentucky Derby. Now he was somewhere down in the cellar of a Convent watching out for awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, 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 produce, barbecue sauce, good bread and the hottest peppers in the world. For a pricey price you could buy a string of 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, most folks said, but harmless. More than

harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in--lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Early reports were of 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 wd 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 terrible discovery in 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 approaching the cellar 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 thousand 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. Ninety miles from the nearest 0 for operator and ninety from the nearest badge. If the day had

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 over-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?"

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 into 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 could be done by firelight, the Old Fathers told and retold the stories of that journey: the signs God gave to guide them--to watering places, to Creek with whom they could barter their labor for pasture; prairie dog towns fifty miles wide; and Satan's malefactions--abandoned women with no belongings, rumours of river bed gold, .

The twins believed it was when he discovered how narrow the path of righteousness 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

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 twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened--things they witnessed and things they have not. The exact temperature of the weather when the cars circled the girls as well as tk. And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather--the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves. On the journey in 1890 from two Mississippi plantations to Oklahoma, the two hundred and eighty freedman were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo 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 being built. 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

treasure of three inch and four, bent and straight to say something important that would last.

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 street 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 slaughtered, 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 1934 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 boys they had swung overhand from the cottonwood branches leaning over it and hung dangerously above the clear water to admire the reflection of their feet. Time after time they 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. They imagined their 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.]

The twins were born in 1924 and heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. 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.

In 1949, young and newly married, they were anything but fools. Even before the war, Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. The twins stared at their dwindling post-war future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys 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 gravel 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?

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 two hours ago 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 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.

CHAPTER TWO

MAVIS

The neighbors seemed pleased when the babies smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things of course: brought food, telephoned their sorrow, 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 they asked for the husband. Jim? is it Jim Albright? But Mavis said he wasn't feeling so good, couldn't come out, they'd have to go ahead without him. The journalist and the photographer exchanged looks and Mavis 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 center 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 knees 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." Mavis took a deep breath. "I can't think of any. I guess. I."

The photographer squatted, 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 felt tipped pen into place. It was a fine thing. Mavis had never seen anything like it--made ink on the paper but dry, not all blotchy. “I don’t have nothing to say to strangers right now.”

For the second time the photographer adjusted the front window shade 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 me this favor."

"Well." Mavis frowned. She wanted 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 whole 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."

"They wasn't crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. 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 the 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 chucksteak...”

“No mam. Weenies.”

“Right. Weiners.” June was writing quickly but didn’t seem to be crossing out anything. “But what I want to ask is why did it take 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 the most it could of been. I walked in there straight to the dairy section and picked up two packs of Amours 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 weiners 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 jump at the crashing noise from the rear of the house followed by a flushing toilet.

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

color as the reporter's.

"Get enough of the Cadillac?" 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 even have 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 reporter left she wanted to go look at the damage Sal had done to her side, but Frank was still in the bathroom, asleep probably, 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, yet Mavis loved it maybe more than he did and lied to him about losing the second set of keys. It was what she talked about last as June left, saying, "It ain't new, though. It's three years old. A '65." If she could, she would have slept out there, in the back seat, snuggled in the place where the twins had been, the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren't a trial. She couldn't, of course. Frank told her she better not touch let alone drive the Cadillac as long as she lived. 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," or "Cut the eyelashes off a bedbug," eliciting peals of laughter from Sal. When Billy James spit Kool-Aid into Mavis' plate, his father said, "Hand me that catsup, Frankie, and Billy you 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.

Mavis 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 rest. The other 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, Mavis 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.

Would it be quick like most always? or long, wandering, collapsing in wordless fatigue?

It was neither. He didn't penetrate--just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face. She could have been a life-size Raggedy-Ann.

Afterwards he spoke to her in the dark. "I don't know Mave. I just don't know."

Should she say, What? What you mean? What don't you know? Or keep quiet? Mavis chose silence because suddenly she understood that he was not talking to her but to the other children snickering behind the door.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe we can fix it. Maybe not. I just don't know." He let out a deep yawn, then "Don't see how, though."

It was, she knew, the signal--to Sal, to Frankie, to Billy James.

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 red pedal pushers 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 that, when the set broke, had become a catch-all. And the spare keys were pinned under a tear in the purse's lining. 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, 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 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.

The one street light seemed miles away and the sun reluctant to rise, so she had a little trouble finding Peg's house. When, finally, she did, she parked across the street and waited for stronger skylight before knocking on the door. 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. Nothing moved, neither the tiny windmill nor the ivy surrounding it. At the side of the house, however, a rose of sharon, taller than Peg's roof and older, was shaking. Stirred by the air conditioner's exhaust it danced, roughing blossoms and buds to the grass. Wild, it looked, wild and Mavis' pulse raced with it. According to the Cadillac's clock it

wasn't five-thirty yet. Mavis decided to drive around for a while and return at a respectable hour. Six 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, a photograph of it would be in today's paper. When Frank bought it and drove it home the men on the 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 couple of 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 flaking yellow; because its owner sometimes slept behind the wheel of the car he'd traded in--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 a twenty 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 slid from brilliant emergency light into 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 came 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 which she had missed all summer long.

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 reflecting coral in the early light.

"Is that there place open?" she shouted over highway 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's face smiling broadly in the Hines Root Beer mirror by the exit. 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, another bottle with 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. Early September and the northern leaves were already starting 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 against the curb.

It was too soon. Her mother wouldn't be home from the pre-

school 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 boots. Her feet looked as though they belonged to somebody else.

Frank had already called. At five-thirty a.m. when Mavis was staring at Peg's rose of Sharon. Birdie 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 her daughter tapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell which is what she said as soon as she opened the door. "Girl you look like a bat out of hell what you doing up here in little kiddie boots?"

"Ma. Let me come in."

Birdie Goodroe had just enough calf liver for two. Mother and daughter ate in the kitchen, Mavis presentable now--washed, combed, aspirined and swimming a little in Birdie'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 onto 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?"

Birdie pushed her plate toward Mavis. There was a tiny square of liver too and some onions. Mavis scraped it all onto 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 tissue off.

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

Birdie 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 all 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 but I got away.”

**“You’re all I have now your brothers gone and got themselves
shot up like....” Birdie slapped the table. “Does the government give
a shit?”**

“They got no right to kill me.”

“What?”

“He’s making the other children do it.”

“What? Do what? Speak up so I can hear what you saying.”

“I’m saying they are going to kill me.”

“They? Who? Frank? What they?”

“All of them. The kids too.”

“Kill you? Your children?”

**Mavis nodded. Birdie 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, Birdie
asked, “Were the twins trying to kill you too?”**

**Mavis stared at her mother. “No! Oh, no Ma! Are you crazy?
They’re babies!”**

“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 was 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 was.”

Neither woman spoke about it again because Birdie told Mavis she 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 if she said one more word about killing she would call him right away.

In a week Mavis was on the road, but this time she had a plan. Days before she heard her mother talking low into the mouthpiece of the telephone, saying “You better get up here fast and I mean pronto,” Mavis had walked around the house, while Birdie 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 Birdie's jewelry box and stole back the car keys her mother thought she had hidden so well; poured two gallons of lawnmower 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 the Y dormitory until it was sprayed magenta. 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 a white cotton turtleneck. Just right, she thought, for California. Just right.

With a crisp new Mobile map beside her on the seat, she sped out of Newark looking for route 70. As more and more of the East was behind her, the happier she became. Only once had she felt this kind of happiness. On the Rocket ride she took as a kid. When the rocket zoomed on the downward swing the rush made her giddy with pleasure; when it slowed just before turning her upside down through the high arc of its circle the thrill was intense but calm. She squealed

with the other passengers but inside was the stable excitement of facing danger while safely strapped in strong metal. Sal hated it; so did the boys when she took them to the amusement park. Now, in flight to California, the memory of the Rocket ride and its feeling were with her at will.

According to the map the way was straight. All she had to do was find 70, stay on it until Utah, make a right on down to Los Angeles. Later she remembered traveling like that--straight. One state, then the next just as the map promised. But, other than the first and the last, she could not remember the order of the girls. Picking up girls was easiest. They were company, safe she hoped, and they helped with gas, food and sometimes invited her to a place where they could crash. They dappled primary routes, intersections, ramps to bridges, the verges of gas stations and motels in hole-y jeans low on the hips and flared at the bottom. Flat hair swinging or picked out in Afro's. The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt. But all of them told her about the world before California. Underneath the knowing talk, the bell-chime laughter, the silences, the world they described was just like her own pre-California existence--sad, scarey, all wrong. High schools were

dumps, parents stupid, Johnson a creep, cops pigs, men rats, boys asses.

The first girl was outside Zanesville. That's where, sitting in a roadside diner, counting her money, the run-away appeared. Mavis had noticed her going into the ladies room then, quite a bit later, come out dressed in different clothes: jeans, this time, and a flowing blouse that touched her thighs. Outside in the parking lot the girl ran to the Cadillac's passenger's window and asked for a lift. Smiling happily she jerked open the door when Mavis shrugged then nodded. The girl said her name--Sandra but call me Dusty--and talked for thirty-two miles. Not interested in anything about Mavis, Sany ate two Mallo Bars and chattered, mostly about the owners of the six dog tags that hung from her neck. Boys in her highschool class or whom she had known in junior high. She'd got two from when they dated; the rest she begged from their families--souvenirs. All dead or missing.

Mavis agreed to drive through Columbus and drop Dusty at her girlfriend's house. They arrived in a soft rain. Someone had done the last mowing of the season. Dusty's hair matted in brown licks; the glorified scent of newly cut grass in rain, the clink of dog tags, half a

Mallo. That was Mavis' memory of her first detour with a run-away. Except for the last, the others were out of sequence. Was it in Colorado where she saw a man sitting on a bench under pines in a rest area? He ate slowly, very slowly while he read a newspaper. Or before? It was sunny, cold. Anyway somewhere around that place she picked up the girl who stole her rhinestone clips. But earlier, near St. Louis was it? she opened the passenger door to two girls shivering on route 70. Wind beaten, their army jackets closed tight around their chins, leather clogs, thick gray socks--they wiped their noses while their hands were still pocketed.

Not far, they said. A place just a few miles out, they said. The place, a sparkling green cemetery, was anything but quiet. Lines of cars necklaced the entrance. Groups of people, solitary strollers, all patient in the wind, mixed with boys from a military school. The girls thanked Mavis and got out, running a little to join a set of graveside mourners. Mavis lingered, amazed by the unnatural brightness of the green. What she thought were military students turned out to be real soldiers--but young, so young and as fresh-looking as the headstones they stood before.

It must have been after that when Mavis picked up Bennie--the

one she liked best and who stole her raincoat and Sal's boots. Bennie was glad to know that, like her, Mavis was going all the way to L.A. She, Bennie was heading for San Diego. Not a talker, small or big, Bennie sang. Songs of true love, false love, redemption; songs of unreasonable joy. Some drew tears, others were deliberately silly. Mavis sang along once in a while but mostly she listened and in one hundred and seventy-two miles never got tired of hearing her. Mile after mile rolled by urged and eased by Bennie's beautiful aching voice.

She didn't like to eat at highway stops; if there because Mavis insisted on it Bennie drank only water while Mavis wolfed down cheese melts and fries. Twice Bennie directed them through towns searching for colored neighborhoods where they could eat "healthy," she said. At those places she ate slowly, steadily, with repeat orders, side dishes and always something to go. She was careful with her money but didn't seem worried about it, and shared the cost at every single gas pump.

Mavis never learned what she planned to do, or who meet in L.A. (well, San Diego). "To get it on," was her single answer to Mavis' inquiry. Nevertheless in [tk] she disappeared along with Mavis' clear

plastic raincoat and Sal's yellow boots. Odd, because there was a five dollar bill attached to the gear shift with a rubber band. They had finished the barbecue and potato salad in a tacky restaurant named Hickey's. Bennie's "to go" order was wrapped and sitting on the table. "I'll take care of this," she said nodding toward the check. "You go on to the toilet before we hit the road." When Mavis came out, Bennie and her "ribs-to-go" were gone.

"How the hell I know," was what the waitress said. "She didn't leave even a penny tip."

Mavis fished out a quarter and waited a few minutes in the car before trying to find her way back to sweet 70.

The silence Bennie left in the Cadillac was unbearable. Mavis kept the radio on constantly and if one of Bennie's songs came on, she sang too, mourning the inferior rendition.

Panic struck in an ESSO station.

Returning the restroom key Mavis looked through the plate glass window. Beyond, under the ESSO lights Frank was leaning into the Cadillac window. Could he have grown that much hair in two weeks? And his clothes. Black leather jacket, shirt opened almost to his navel, gold chains. Mavis buckled and when the attendant stared she

tried to make it look like she stumbled. There was nowhere to run. She rummaged the Colorado maps in the rack. She looked again. He was gone. Parked close by, she thought, waiting for her to emerge.

I'll scream, she told herself, pretend I don't know him, fight him, call the police. The car was no longer mint green--but, Oh God the license plate was the same. She had the reg. Suppose he brought the title papers; was there a bulletin out? She could not stand still. There was no retreat. Mavis went forward. Not running. Not tripping. Head down, searching her purse calmly for a twenty dollar bill.

Once back in the car, waiting for the attendant to collect the money, she examined her surroundings in the rear and side view windows. Nothing. She paid and turned on the ignition. Right then the black jacketed, open shirt torso appeared in the right hand mirror. Gold links catching flurescent light. Hard as she tried to control it the Cadillac lurched out of the gas lane. Scared now, she forgot what to look for. Junction what. Turn right to go south. No, west. Leave 70 at what. But this was east. Exit ramp goes where.

An hour later she was travelling road already driven twice before. Exiting as soon as possible, she found herself on a narrow bridge and a street lined with warehouses. Secondary routes, she

decided, would be better anyway. Fewer police, fewer street lights. Trembling at every traffic light, she made it out of town. She was on US tk. when night came and drove on and on until there was nothing but fumes to fuel the engine. The Cadillac neither sighed nor coughed. It simply stopped in a well of darkness, headlights picking out thirty feet of tarmac. Mavis switched off the lights and locked the doors. A little courage, she whispered. Like the girls running away; running toward. If they could roam around, jump in cars, hitch-hike to burials, search strange neighborhoods for food, make their own way alone or with only each other for protection, certainly she could wait in darkness for morning to come. She had done it all of her adult life, was able to sleep well only in daylight. Besides and after all, she was not a teenager; she was a twenty-seven year old mother of--

Early Times didn't help. The tears wet her chin, crept down her neck anyway. What it did eventually was knock her out.

Mavis woke felt-mouthed, ugly, unfocussed and knew she was ravenous because the sun, watermelon red, looked edible. The screaming blue horizon that surrounded her was minus invitation or reproach, and supported by a billion miles of not one thing.

There was no choice; she relieved herself as Dusty had taught

her, got back in the car to wait for another one to pass by. Bennie was smart; she never left anywhere without a dripping box of food. Mavis felt her stupidity close in on her head like a dry sack. A grown woman who could not cross the country. Could not make a plan that accommodated more than twenty minutes. Had to be taught how to dry herself in the weeds. Too rattle-minded to open a car's window so babies could breathe. She did not know now why she had run from the gold links coming toward her. Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her.

During the wait, in which no car or truck or bus approached, she dozed, woke to awful thoughts, dozed again. Suddenly she sat up, wide awake, and decided not to starve--not by herself anyway. Would the road girls just sit there? Would Dusty? Bennie? Mavis looked closely at the surroundings. The billion miles of not-one-thing had trees in the distance. Was this grass or a crop of some kind? Every road went somewhere, didn't it? Mavis collected her purse, looked for her raincoat and discovered it was gone. "Christ!" she shouted and slammed the door.

The rest of the morning she stayed on the same road. When the sun was highest, she turned into a narrower one because it offered

shade. Still tarmac, but not enough room for two automobiles to pass at the same time. When the road ran out of trees, she saw ahead to the left a house. It looked small but close and it took a while for her to discover it was neither. She had to negotiate acres of corn to arrive. Either the house was backwards or it had no driveway. As she drew closer she saw it was stone, sandstone, maybe, but dark with age. There seemed at first to be no windows but then she made out the beginning of a porch and saw the reflection of huge windows on the ground floor. Circling to the right she found the driveway leading not to the front door but around to the side. The grass near the porch was tended. Mavis climbed the front steps and knocked on the door. No answer. She walked around to the driveway side and saw a dark woman sitting in a red wooden chair at the edge of a vegetable garden.

“Excuse me,” Mavis called, her hands funnelling around her mouth.

The woman faced her, but Mavis couldn't tell if she was looking at her. She was wearing sunglasses.

“Excuse me,” Mavis moved closer. No need to shout now. “I broke down a ways back. Can anybody help? Is there someone I can

call?"

The woman stood up, gathering the hem of her apron in both hands, and came forward. The sun was beating hard; a cool wind kicked up, turning the brim of the woman's hat back.

"No telephone out here," she said. "Come inside."

Mavis followed her into the kitchen where the woman dumped pecans from her apron into a box by the stove and removed her filthy hat. Then she slid out of her horrible shoes, propped open the door with a brick and removed her sunglasses. The kitchen was big, full of smells and a woman's solitary mess. Her back turned to Mavis she asked her "You a drinking woman?"

Mavis didn't know if a drink was being offered or solicited.

"No, I'm not."

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

Startled, Mavis breathed 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, well, wrung out. Driving so long and then running out of gas."

The woman busied herself lighting 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 nodded without turning around.

"You work here?"

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

"Is any of the family here? I knocked for 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 the swinging wooden doors. She imagined rooms full of rooms outside that door.

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

Connie laughed. "Scarey things not always outside. Most scarey things is inside." She turned from the stove with a bowl and placed it before Mavis who looked in despair at the steaming potatoes over which a pat of butter melted. The Early Times drunk left her nauseous--not hungry--but she said thank you and accepted the fork in Connie's hand. 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 the woman's face without the sunglasses. Quickly she looked back at the food and poked the fork into the bowl.

"What you say me and you go to California?"

Mavis felt, but could not face, the woman's smile. Had she washed her hands before warming up the potatoes? Her smell was walnuts, not pecans. "What about your job here?" Mavis forced herself to taste 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." Connie got up abruptly 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. Uex me. Can't take it no more."

A 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?”

“Sure.”

“Suppose nobody comes?”

“Always come. Somebody always come. Every day. This morning already I sold forty-eight ears of corn and a whole pound of peppers.” She 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. Chickens clucked out of sight. One part of the garden she originally thought gone to weed became, on closer inspection, 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 the refusal did not signal her apprehension.

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

Left alone Mavis expected the big big kitchen to 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 thirty-two quart basket over the floor.

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

Mavis frowned at the 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.” Mavis watched as she organized the tools.
“Shouldn’t you put some newspaper down? Be easier to clean up.”**

**“No newspapers in this house. No radio either. 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 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 touch the
bookmark, caressing the page, letting the tips of her fingers trail
down the lines of print. The melty-thigh feeling she got watching her.
Now, working pecans, she tried 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**

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 would there be a map showing the way back to sweet 70, or better still, to X? With luck she'd be on her way by suppertime. With no luck, she'd be ready to leave in the morning. She would be back on concrete, listening to the car radio that had got her through the silence Bennie left, hours 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 one road then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was--nothing. Just an absence 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 nut meat tossed in 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 the woman's absence seemed much too long, Mavis heard a car crunching

gravel. 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 pecans 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.”

Neither one of them heard the 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 visitor 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 over forty."

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

Olive opened a black crocheted purse. "I brought 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 the sticker.

"I don't want to hear so 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 bring her back?" She was drying and polishing the new 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, wrinkled slacks and a child's dirty shirt could have a car.

"Route x," Mavis told her. "Took me hours to walk here, but in a car..."

Olive nodded. "Happy to. I'd drive you back here as well, but I've got too much to do. Both my boys due on furlough." Proudly, she looked at Connie. "House'll be full before I know it." Then, "How's Mother?"

"Can't last."

"You sure Demby or Middletown's not a better idea?"

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

The packet Connie had given 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 travelled. Olive cautious at every rise or turn of the road, however slight. She seemed to be on the lookout for something. Occasionally she touched the packet. They stopped at 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 into another road heading east for what seemed like an 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 little town was how unpleasantly clean it was: as though no one lived there. That and how new the trees were. 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's car. But in the boy's truck, propped between Mavis' feet, it 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 family or best friends: King Solomon, Brother Otis, Dinah baby, Ike and Tina girl, Sister 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 Ruby pop. 360 and listening to the seventh of Jet Magazine's top twenty when Mavis realized that, other than the gas

station guy, she had not seen a single white.

“Any white people in your town?”

“Not to live, they ain’t. Come on business sometime.”

When they passed the house on the way to the Cadillac, he asked, “What’s it like in there?”

“I only been in the kitchen,” Mavis answered.

“Two old folks in that big of a 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 number 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 and the Cadillac, dark red, like old blood, stayed there for two years.

It was already sunset when the boy started the engine. Also she had forgotten to ask him for directions. Also she couldn’t remember

where the gas station was and didn't want to search for it in the dark. 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 a moment for Mavis to see the shape articulated among the pillows and the bone white sheets, and she might have remained sightless longer had not an authoritative voice said, "Don't stare, child."

Connie bent over the foot of the bed and reached under the sheet. With her right hand she raised Mother's heels and with her left fluffed the pillows underneath them. Muttering "Toe nails 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 woman's head.

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

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

"No."

"Just a bit of chicken?"

"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?"

"Not now. What is your name, child?"

Mavis whispered it from the dark she stood in.

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

'Disregard her,' Connie told Mavis. "She sees everything in the universe." Drawing a chair bedside, she sat down, took the woman's hand and one by one stroked back the cuticles on each crooked finger.

Mavis moved closer, into the circle of light, resting her hand on the metal foot of the bed.

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

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

"Where are your children?"

Mavis could not 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 she returned her glance, Mavis quickly lowered 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 was 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."

"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 daytime but they worry my sleep at night. 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 on the prarie yesterday the snow sifted in under the door Sister Roberta has the onions..."

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

"I thought she was your mother. I mean the way you talked, I thought she was your own mother." They were descending the wide central stairs.

"She is my mother. Your mother too. Whose mother 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 knelt looking out. Two milky moons, instead of the one hanging there, would have been just like Connie's eyes. Beneath them a swept world. Unjudgemental. 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 this time. 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 off and on but always she came back, so she was there in 1976.

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. Cigarette smoke, for example. 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.

CHAPTER THREE

GRACE

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 1949.

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

He 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. First because they seldom, if ever, had seen a bus in the town--Ruby was not a stop on route to someplace else. Second to see why it stopped at all. The vision that appeared when the bus drove away, standing on the road

shoulder between the school house and Holy Redeemer, rivited the attention of everybody lounging at the Oven. She didn't have on any lipstick but, from one hundred and fifty feet, you could see her eyes. The silence had descended and seemed permanent until Arnette broke it.

"If that's the kind of tramp 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 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, Deek's two sons, 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 meeting place. Reverend Misner had thought it best to serve protocol and go to Fleetwood rather than season the raw insult done to the family by making the aggrieved come to the house of the aggressor.

K.D., Deek and Steward had 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 decided to build 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 a nursing infant, 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 X City June voices are doubled by the sunlit water of a swimming pool. K.D. was there once. He had ridden the Missouri, Kansas, Texas line with his uncles and waited outside on the curb while they talked business inside a red brick building. 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 had 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 had not been pleased at having to search downtown X City for him and chastised him, off and on, all the way back to Ruby. Small price then, and small price 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. But unlike the swimming pool, this girl he would see again.

They parked bumper to bumper to the side of Fleetwood's house. When they knocked on the door each man, except for Reverend Misner, 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 came back down the stairs, 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 is 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 naturally 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.

"August, I believe."

"She be ready then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Steward answered. "August'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.

The next morning Reverend Misner was surprised by how well he had slept. The meeting with the Morgans and Fleetwoods the previous night had made him uneasy. There was a grizzley in Fleet's living room--quiet, invisible but making deft movement impossible. Upstairs he'd made the women laugh--well, Mable anyway. Sweetie smiled but clearly didn't enjoy his banter. Her eye was ever on her children. A slide. A lean. A suck of air--she bent over a crib and made quick, practiced adjustments. But her expression was mildly patronizing. What could there be to amuse her? And why would he try? She acquiesced when he asked her to join him in prayer. Bowed her head. Closed her eyes. But when she faced him with a quiet "Amen," he felt as though his relationship with the God he spoke to was vague or too new, while hers was ancient, completely sealed.

He had better luck with Mable Fleetwood, who was delighted enough with his visit to prolong their conversation unnecessarily. Downstairs the men he had assembled once he learned what happened at the Oven waited--and also the grizzley.

Misner fought the pillow for a moment and convinced himself that the ending was satisfactory. Tempers banked, a resolution surfaced, peace declared. Jefferson's skin was thin as gauze, but it was K.D. who worried Misner most. Too quick to please. An oily apology. A devious smile. Misner despised males who hit women--and a fifteen year old? What did K.D. think he was doing? His relation to Deek and Steward protected him of course, but it was hard to like a man who relied on that. Servile to his uncles; brutal with females. Then, later that evening as Misner warmed up the fried steak and potatoes Anna Flood had brought him for his supper, he had looked out of his window and seen K.D. speeding down Central in Steward's Impala. Grinning--he'd bet on it--his devious smile.

Such nagging thoughts he believed would keep him awake most of the

night, but in the morning he woke as if from the sweetest sleep of his life. Anna's food, he supposed. Still, he wondered what was K.D. looking for on the road out of town?

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 tarantulas 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 Gomorrah.

Mikey, however, had touched the body parts and knew for a fact one was a woman, the other a man. "So what?" he said. "They weren't doing it on a highway after all. You had to go way out of the way to find them." Mikey said the Methodists wanted to get rid of them but they wanted them to be there too. That even a bunch of repressed rednecks, too scared to have wet dreams, knew they needed the couple. Even if they never went near them, he said, they needed to know they were out there. At sunrise, he said, they turned copper and you knew they'd been at it all night. At noon they were silvery gray. Then afternoon blue, then evening black. Moving,

moving, all the time moving.

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 three 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 offered.

"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 H, 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," said the waiter. "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 so-called 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 the thing in the wheatfield, 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 by the Feed store 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 toward the Feed store. 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 *real* 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.

"Jesus! 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. And I got to be there not *in* time-- but *on* time."

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 some 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 gone, 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. The sound of the hearse grew fainter and then slipped away.

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 hall ceiling. The curls of hair winding through vines that once touched faces now 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 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. 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?

It was the I-give woman serving her breasts up like two baked Alaska on a platter that took all the kick out of looking in the boy's eyes. Gigi watched him battle his stare and lose every time. He said his name was K.D. and tried hard to enjoy her face as much as her cleavage while he talked. It was a struggle she expected, rose to and took pleasure in--normally. But the picture she woke to an hour ago spoiled it.

Unwilling to sleep on the same floor where a person just died, Gigi had chosen the leather sofa in the used-to-be game room/office. Windowless, dependent on electricity for light, the room encouraged her to sleep deeply and long. She missed the morning entirely and woke in the afternoon in a darkness hardly less than what she'd fallen asleep in. Hanging on the wall in front of her was the etching she had barely glanced at when poking around the day before. Now it loomed into her line of vision in the skinny light from the hall. A woman. On her knees. A knocked-down look, cast-up begging eyes, arms outstretched holding up her present to a lord. Gigi walked over and leaned close to see who was the woman with the I-give-up face. Saint Catherine of Sienna was engraved on a small plaque in the

frame. Gigi laughed-- brass dicks hidden in a box; pudding tits exposed on a plate--but in fact it didn't feel funny. So when the boy she had seen in town yesterday parked his car near the kitchen door and blew his horn her interest in him had an edge of annoyance. Propped in the doorway she ate jam covered bread while she listened to him and watched the war waged in his eyes.

His smile was lovely and his voice attractive. "Been looking all over for you. Heard you was out here. Thought you might be still."

"Who told you that?"

"A friend. Well, a friend of a friend."

"You mean that hearse guy?"

"Uh huh. Said you changed your mind about getting to the train station."

"News sure travels fast out here, even if nothing else does."

"We get around. Wanna go for a ride? Go as fast as you want."

Gigi licked jam from her thumb and forefinger. She looked to the left and thought she saw in the distance a glint of metal or maybe a mirror reflecting light. As from a State Trooper's sunglasses.

"Gimme a minute, she said. "Change my clothes."

In the game room she packed everything and slung her backpack

on the back seat.

“Hey,” said K.D. “we just going for a little ride.”

“Yeah,” she answered, “but who knows? I might change my mind again.”

They drove through mile after mile of skyblue sky. Gigi had not really looked at the scenery from the trainwindows or the bus. As far as she was concerned there was nothing out there. But speeding along in the Impala was more like cruising on a DC 10 and the nothing turned out to be sky-- unignorable, custom-made, designer sky. Not empty either but full of breath and all the eye was meant for.

“That’s the shortest skirt I ever saw.” He smiled his lovely smile.

“Mini’s,” said Gigi. “In the real world they’re called mini skirts.”

“Don’t they make people stare at you?”

“Stare. Drive for miles. Have car wrecks. Talk stupid.”

“You must like it. Reckon that’s what they’re for, though.”

“You explain your clothes; I’ll explain mine. Where’d you get those pants for instance?”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“Nothing. Listen, you want to argue, take me back.”

"No. No, I don't want to argue; I just want to...ride."

"Yeah? How fast?"

"Told you. Fast as I can."

"How long?"

"Long as you want."

"How far?"

"All the way."

The desert couple was big, Mikey said. From any angle you looked, he said, they took up the sky, moving, moving. Liar, thought Gigi, not this sky. This here sky was bigger than everything, including a woman with her breasts on a plate.

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. I've been here three years, and this house is my place. For me. Not her.

They did everything but slap each other and finally they did that. What postponed the inevitable for two months was a very young girl in too tight clothes tapping on the screen door.

"You have to help me," she said. "You have to. It's almost August."

It was.

CHAPTER FOUR

SENECA

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--Vedalia 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 peppers, 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, for example.

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 Anna Flood; 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?" asked the sons.

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

"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 try and find...."

"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," said Misner. "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. Real 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 oven 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."

Twenty varieties of "amen" italicized Deek's pronouncement. The point he'd made would have closed off further argument if Misner had not said:

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

The mutter unleashed by his obvious shift to the young peoples' position rose to a roar that subsided only to hear how the antagonists responded.

"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,” said Misner. “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!” Arnold Fleetwood’s pointing finger shook.

“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."

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.

Four months now and no one had taken them down to store for next year. Now they provided light--just a little, just enough--for other kinds of freedom celebrations going on in its shadows. 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 Anna Flood filling in for Negro History classes and after-school typing lessons. 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 left into St. Matthew Street. The moon's light glittered white fences gone slant in an effort to hold back chrysanthemums, foxglove, sunflowers, cosmos, daylilies while mint

and silver king pressed through the spaces at the bottom of the slats. The night sky, like a handsome lid, held the perfume down, saving it, intensifying it, refusing it the slightest breeze on which to escape.

The garden battles--won, lost, still at bay--were mostly over. They had raged for ten years having begun suddenly in 1963 when there was time. The women who were in their twenties when Ruby was founded in 1950, watched for thirteen years an increase in bounty that had never entered their dreams. Things pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed. And there was time: fifteen minutes when no firewood needed tending in a kitchen stove; one whole hour when no sheets or overalls needed slapping or scrubbing on a washboard; ten minutes gained because no rug needed to be beaten; no curtains pinned on a stretcher; two hours because food lasted and therefore could be picked or purchased in greater quantity. Their husbands and sons, tickled to death and no less proud than the women, translated a five time mark-up, a price per pound, bale or live weight into Kelvigators as well as John Deere; into Philco as well as Body by Fisher. The white porcelain layered over steel; the belts, valves and Bakelite parts gave them deep satisfaction. The humming, throbbing and softly purring gave the women time.

Front yards were given over to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it. The habit, the interest, in cultivating plants that could not be eaten spread, and so did the ground surrendered to it. Exchanging, sharing a cutting here, a root there, a bulb or two became so frenetic a land grab, a few husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the short rows of collards, beets. The women kept on with their vegetable garden, but little by little its produce became like the flowers--driven by desire, not necessity. Iris, phlox, rose and peonies took up more and more space, quiet boasting--and time.

New butterflies journeyed miles to brood in Ruby. Their chrysalises hung in secret under acacias and from there they joined blues and sulphurs that had been feeding for decades in buckwheat and clover. The redbands drinking from sumac competed with the newly arrived creams and whites that loved jewelflowers and nasturtiums. Giant orange wings covered in black lace hovered in pansies and violets. Like the years of garden rivalry the butterflies were gone now, this cool October evening, but the consequence remained--fat, overwrought yards; clumps and chains of eggs. Hiding. Until spring.

Touching the pickets lining the path, Dovey climbed the steps. There on the porch she hesitated and thought of turning back to call on Olive who had left the meeting early. Olive worried her; seemed to have periods of frailty not related to the death of her sons five years ago. Dovey paused then 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 green tree tops forever--then vanished.

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. At first she thought it was Menu, Harper's son, who drank. But this man was walking straight and 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.

"Afternoon," 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 would bring--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 sit on his heels 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 veiling 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 twenty 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 slice of bread loaded with applebutter) 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 cup of hot tea, 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.

Now, at least, at last, the back yard was lovely enough to receive him. At the first visit it had been a mess, untended, trashy--home to cats, garden snakes, straying chickens--with only the coral colored wings to recommend it. There was no one to help her fix it up. K.D. balked and produced several excuses. And it was hard getting

young people interested. Billie-Marie used to be her helper which was surprising since boys dominated her brain otherwise. But something was wrong there, too. No one had seen her for some time and the girl's mother, Pat Best, foreclosed all questions. Still angry, thought Dovey, at the town's treatment of her father. Although Billie-Marie was not at the meeting, her attitude was. Even as a little girl she pushed out her lips at everything-- everything but gardening. Dovey missed her and wondered what Billie-Marie thought of changing the Oven's message.

“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. Meantime, canned peas would do.

Early the next day, before morning light, Olive stood in the kitchen of the biggest house in Ruby whispering to the darkness outside the window.

“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. The last time she had seen them whole. Connie had sold her shelled pecans and Olive did two pies. A girl with a broke

down car was out there and, although Olive drove her to buy the gasoline she needed to go where she was headed, she'd stayed on. Still, she must have gone off before the Mother 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. Speak to Roger, go to the bank to telephone strangers up north, collect food from neighbor women and cook 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 body 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. The way 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, eventually 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 everybody 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 sunlit water. Hair, face streaming they looked to heaven before bowing their heads for the command, 'Go, now.' Then 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, congratulate one another.

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

Minus the baptisms the place had no real value. What was needed back in Haven's early days had never been needed in Ruby. The trucks they came in brought stoves as well. The meat they ate clucked in the yard, or fell on its knees under a hammer, or squealed through a slice in its throat. Unlike at Haven's beginning, in Ruby hunting game was a game. The women nodded when the men took

the Oven apart, packed it and re-assembled it. But privately they resented the space given over to it--rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together--hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner. If the plaque was so important--and, judging from the part of the meeting she had witnessed, she supposed it was--why not just take it, leave the bricks where they had stood for fifty years.

Oh, how the men loved putting it back together, how proud it had made them, how devoted. A good thing, she thought, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine (cautioned against in Leviticus) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self. Nobody better to make the point than the wayward young who turned it into a different kind of oven. One where the hot flesh was human.

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 said they were way out-of-date; that things had changed everywhere but in Ruby. 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 accusation 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 picked up the boots 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. If I go before he does. 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 Demby, 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?"

"Fleet never has much on hand. And what he does have 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. War money. 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 understand 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 most powerful of which was one of his earliest.

Forty-two years ago he had fought for hand room in the rear window of Big Daddy Morgan's Model T; space in which to wave goodbye to his mother and baby sister, Ruby. The rest of the family, Daddy, Uncle Flood, his older brother Elder, and Steward his twin were packed tight against two peck baskets of food. The journey they were about to begin would take days, maybe two weeks. The Second Grand Tour, Daddy said. The Last Grand Tour, laughed Uncle Flood.

The first one had been in 1910 before the twins or Ruby had been

born, while Haven was still struggling to come alive. Big Daddy drove his brother Flood and his firstborn son, Elder, all over the state and beyond to examine, review and judge other Colored Towns. They planned to visit two outside Oklahoma and five within: Boley, Langston City, Rentiesville, Taft, Clearview, Mound Bayou, Nicodemus. In the end, they made it to only four. Big Daddy, Uncle Flood and Elder spoke endlessly of that trip, how they matched wits with and debated preachers, pharmacists, drygoods store owners, doctors, newspaper publishers, school teachers, bankers. They discussed malaria, taxes, the threat of white immigrants, the problems with Creek freedmen, the trustworthiness of boosters, the practicality of high book learning, the need for technical training, liquor laws, lodges and the violence of whites, random and organized, that swirled around them. They stood at the edge of corn fields, walked rows of cotton. They visited print shops, elocution classes, church services, sawmills; they observed irrigation methods and storage systems. Mostly they looked at land, houses, roads.

Some ten years after Tulsa had been bombed, several of the towns Big Daddy, Uncle Flood and Elder had visited were gone. But, against all odds, in 1932, Haven was thriving. The crash had not

touched it: personal savings were substantial, Big Daddy Morgan's bank had taken no risks (partly because white bankers locked him out, partly because the subscription shares had been well-protected), and families shared everything--made sure no one was short. Cotton crop ruined? The sorghum growers split their profit with the cotton growers. A barn burned? The pine sappers made sure lumber "accidentally" rolled off wagons at certain places to be picked up later that night. Pigs rooted up a neighbor's patch? The neighbor was offered replacements by everybody and was assured a ham at slaughter. The man whose hand was healing from a chopping block mistake would not get to the second clean bandage before the wood was finished and stacked. Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their journey from Mississippi to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing; were vigilant to any need or shortage.

Big Daddy, Elder and Uncle Flood did not take pleasure in the collapse of some of those Colored towns. They simply remarked on the mystery of God's justice and decided to take the young twins and go see for themselves.

What they saw was sometimes nothing, sometimes sad, but Deek remembered everything. Towns that looked like slave quarters picked

up and moved, towns intoxicated with wealth. Other towns affecting sleep--squirrelling away money, certificates, deeds in unpainted houses on unpaved streets.

In one of the prosperous ones he and Steward watched nineteen Negro ladies arrange themselves on the steps the town hall. They wore summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen. Most of the dresses were white, but two were pale blue and one a salmon color. They wore small, pale colored hats: beige, dusty rose hats that called attention to the wide sparkley eyes of the wearer. Their waists were not much bigger than their necks. Laughing and teasing, they posed for a photographer lifting his head from beneath a black cloth only to hide under it again. Following a successful pose, the ladies broke apart in small groups, bending their tiny waists with laughter, walking arm in arm. One adjusted another's hat; one exchanged her pocketbook with another. Slender feet turned and tipped in thin leather shoes. Their skin, creamy and luminous in the afternoon sun, took away his breath. A few of the younger ones crossed the street and walked past the rail fence, close so close, to where he and Steward sat. They were on their way to a restaurant just beyond. Deek heard musical voices,

low, full of delight and secret information and in their tow a gust of verbena. The twins did not even look at each other. Without a word they agreed to fall off the railing. While they wrestled on the ground, ruining their pants and shirts, the women turned around to see. Deek and Steward got the smiles they wanted before Big Daddy interrupted his conversation and stepped off the porch to pick each son up by his pants waist, haul them onto the porch and crack butt with his walking stick.

Even now the verbena scent was clear; even now the summer dresses, the creamy, sun-lit skin excited him. Even now he knew that if he and Steward had not thrown themselves off the railing they would have burst into tears. So, among the vivid details of that journey--the sorrow, the stubbornness, the, cunning, the despair--Deek's image of the nineteen summertime ladies was unlike the photographer's. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal.

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 instead of right on Central and drove past the school on the east side , Ace's Grocery,

Fleetwood Housewares and several small houses on the west. 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 back onto 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. It was a view neither K.D. nor the idleness of the young could disturb.

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 west 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 east side of Central, and although these newer streets were continuations of those on the west--situated right across from them--they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the west become Cross John on the east. 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 took his attention and he

recognized 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.

Anna Flood said, "See. Just look at him."

She was watching Deek's sedan circle the Oven and then cruise slowly past her store. "Why does he have to hover like that?"

Misner looked up from the wood stove. "He's just checking on things," he said, and went back to laying the fire. "Got a right, doesn't he? It's sort of his town, wouldn't you say? His and Steward's?"

"I would not. They may act like they own it, but they don't."

Misner liked a tight fire and the one he was preparing would be just that. "Well, they founded it didn't they?"

"Who you been talking to?" Anna left the window and walked to the backstairs leading to her apartment. There she slid a pan of

sloppy meat leavings and cereal under the stairwell. The cat, turned viscious by motherhood, stared at her with warning eyes. "Fifteen families founded this town. Fifteen, not two. One was my father, another my cousin--"

"You know what I mean," Misner interrupted her.

Anna peeped into the darkness trying to see into the box where the litter lay. "I do not."

"The money," said Misner. "The Morgan's had the money. I guess I should say they financed the town--not founded it."

The cat would not eat while being watched, so Anna forfeited a peep at the kittens and turned back to Richard Misner. "You wrong there, too. Everybody pitched in. The bank idea was just a way of doing it. Families bought shares in it, you know, instead of just making deposits they could run through any old time. This way their money was safe."

Misner nodded and wiped his hands. He didn't want another argument. Anna refused to understand the difference between investing and cooperating. Just as she refused to believe the woodstove gave more warmth than her little electric heater.

"The Morgans had the resources, that's all," she said. From

their father's bank back in Haven. My great uncle. We called him Big Daddy, but his real name was--"

"I know, I know. Rector. Rector Morgan's bank failed, but he didn't."

"The bank had to close down--back in the thirties--but it didn't close out. I mean they had enough so we could start over. I know what you thinking, but you can't honestly say it didn't work. People prosper here. Everybody."

"Everybody's prospering on credit, Anna. That's not the same thing."

"So?"

"So what if the credit's gone?"

"It can't be gone. We own the bank, the bank doesn't own us."

"Aw, Anna. You don't get it, do you? You don't understand."

She liked his face even when he was talking nonsense. She had been about to sell out--the store, the apartment, the car, everything and go back to Detroit--when he came riding into town, alone, in a beat up Ford. Calvary's new minister. Anna folded her arms on the wooden counter. "I own this store. My daddy died--it's mine. No rent. No mortgage. Just town fees. I buy things; I sell things; the

mark up is mine.”

“You’re lucky. What about the farms? Suppose a crop fails, say, two years in a row. Does old Mr. Sand get to take out his share? Borrow on it? Sell it to the bank? What?”

“I don’t know what he does, but I do know it’s no gain to the bank for him to lose it. So they’d give him money to buy more seed, gauano, whatever.”

“You mean *lend* him the money.”

“You making my head ache. Where you come from all that might be true. Ruby’s different.”

“Hope so.”

“Is so. Any problem brewing sure ain’t money.”

“Well, what is it then?”

“Hard to figure, but I don’t like the way Deek’s face looks when he’s checking the Oven. He does it every day God sends now. More like hunting than checking. They’re just kids.”

“That fist painting scared a lot of peple.”

“Why? It was a picture! You’d think somebody had burned a cross!” Annoyed, she started wiping things--jars, case fronts, the soda pop cooler. “He should talk to the parents, not go hunting for

the kids like he's a sheriff. Kids need more than what's here."

Misner couldn't agree more. Since the murder of Martin Luther, new commitments had been sworn, laws introduced but most of it was decorative: statues, street names, speeches. It was as though something valuable had been pawned and the claim ticket lost. That was what Destry, Roy, Caline and the rest were looking for. Maybe the fist painter was looking for it too. In any case, if they couldn't find the ticket, they might break in the pawn shop. Question was, who pawned it in the first place and why.

"You told me that's why you left, but you never said why you came back."

Anna wasn't about to explain all of that, so she elaborated on what he already knew. "Yeah, that's why. I thought I was drying up like a shallow well and I don't regret it one bit--even though it didn't work out."

"Well, I'm glad it didn't, whatever the reason." He stroked her hand.

Anna returned his touch. "I'm worried," she said. "About Billie-Marie. We have to come up with something, Richard. Something more than choir competitions, and Bible class and ribbons for fat vegetables

and baby showers..."

"What about her?"

"What? Oh. She came in here a while back and I knew right away she had something on her mind, but the truck was late with my goods, so I was short with her."

"Which is to say what?"

"She's gone off. At least I think so. Nobody's seen her."

"What does her mother say?"

Anna shrugged. "Pat's hard to talk to. Kate asked her about Billie-Marie--hadn't seen her at practice. Know what she did? Answered Kate's question with another." Anna mimicked Pat Best's soft, cold voice. " 'Why do you need to know that?' She and Kate are close, too."

"You think she's courting harm? She couldn't just disappear without anybody knowing where to."

"I don't know what I think."

"I'll talk to Roger. He should know. He's her grandfather."

"*You* ask him. Not me."

"Say, what is all this feeling about Roger? I've been here three years, almost, and I can't make out why folks freeze around him. Is

it his mortuary business?"

"Probably. That and, well, he 'prepared,' if you get my meaning, his own wife."

"Oh."

"That's something to think about, aint it?"

"Still."

They were quiet for a moment--thinking about it. Then Anna walked around the counter and stood at the window. "You know you right smart about weather. This is the third time I disbelieved you and was proved wrong."

Misner joined her. Just touching the pane they could tell the temperature had dropped suddenly into the teens.

"Go ahead. Light it," she said laughing and happy to be wrong if it made this man she adored right. There were women in church who disapproved of his obvious interest in her--her and nobody else. But Anna thought there was more to it than just their own plans for this widowed, handsome, intelligent man and their various daughters and neices. She was certain the disapproval was mostly because of her unstraightened hair. My God, the conversations she had been forced to have when she came back from Detroit. Strange, silly, invasive

probings. She felt as though they were questioning her pubic hair, underarm hair. And if she had walked completely naked down the street they would have commented only on her hair. The subject summoned more passion, invited more opinions, solicited more anger than that prostitute Menus brought home from Tulsa. She probably would have straightened it again, eventually--it wasn't a permanent change or a statement--except it clarified so much for her in the days when she was confused about so much else. Instantly she could identify friends and those who were not; recognize the well-brought-up, the ill-raised, the threatened, the insecure. Dovey Morgan liked it; Pat Best hated it; Deek and Steward shook their heads; Kate Golightly loved it and helped her keep it shaped; Revered Pulliam preached a whole sermon about it; K.D. laughed at it; most of the young people admired it, except Arnette. Like a geiger counter her hair registered, she believed, tranquility or the intensity of a rumbling, deep-down disorder.

The fire, smelling wonderfully, attracted the mother cat. She curled up behind the stove, though her eyes remained wide to predators--human or otherwise.

"Let me make some coffee," Anna said, eyeing the clouds above

Holy Redeemer. "This might get serious."

Ace Flood's faith had been the mountain-moving kind, so he built his store to last. Sandstone. Sturdier than some churches. Four rooms for his family above; below a spacious storeroom, a tiny bedroom, and a fifteen foot high selling area crammed with shelves, bins, cases and drawers. The windows were regular house type--he didn't want or need display; no big, wasteful "looking in" plate glass for him. Let folks come inside to see what he had. He didn't have many things but he had a lot of what he stocked. Before he died, he saw his store change from a necessary service in Ruby to a business patronized by the loyal for certain items, but who balked at his prices and more and more drove trucks to Demby for cheaper (and better) supplies. Anna changed all that. What Ace's Groc. now lacked in bulk products, it gained in variety and style. She offered free coffee on cold days, iced tea when it was hot. She put out two chairs and a small table for the elderly and those who drove in from farms and wanted to rest a while. And since adults never frequented the Oven next to the store--except for special events--she catered to the appetites of the young who liked to gather there. She sold her own pies, made her own candy along with the lots she picked up in Demby.

She kept three kinds of soda pop instead of one. Sometimes she sold the black-as-eight-rock peppers the Convent grew . She kept hog's head cheese in the cooler as her father had along with local butter and salted pork. But canned goods, dried beans, coffee, sugar, syrup, baking soda, flour, salt, catsup, paper products--all the items nobody could or wanted to make at home--took up the space Ace Flood once used for cloth, work shoes, light tools, kerosene. Now Sargeant's Feed and Seed sold the shoes, the tools, the kerosene, and K's drugstore sold the needles, thread, counter medicine, prescriptions, sanitary napkins, stationery and tobacco. Except for Blue Boy. Steward had relied on Ace for that and wasn't about to change his habits.

In Anna's hands, Ace's Groc. blossomed on variety, comfort and flexibility. Because she let Menus, like his father before him, cut hair in the back on Saturdays, incidental purchases rose. Because she had a nice toilet downstairs, casual users felt obliged to become customers before they left.

Farming women came in for peppermint after church; the men for sacks of raisens. Invariably they picked up a little something more from the shelves.

The contentment she drew from Richard's fire made her smile. But she couldn't be a minister's wife. Never. Could she? Well, he had not asked her to be one--so enjoy the stove heat, the shape of his head and the invisible presence of kittens.

After a while, a station wagon drove up and parked so close to the store, both Misner and Anna could see the fever in the baby's blue eyes. The mother held the child over her shoulder and stroked its hair. The driver, a city-dressed man in his forties, got out and pushed open Anna's door.

"How you all doing?"

"Fine and you?"

"Look like I'm lost. Been trying to find 18 west for more'n an hour." He looked at Misner and grinned an apology for having violated the male rule of never asking for directions. "Wife made me stop. Said she's had it."

"It's a ways back the way you come from," said Misner, looking at the Arizona plates, "but I can tell you how to find it."

"Preciate it. 'Preciate it" said the man. "Don't expect there's a doctor around here is there?"

"Not around these parts. You have to get to Demby for that."

"What's wrong with the baby?" Anna asked.

"Sort of pukey. Hot too. We're well supplied but no aspirin nor cough medicine. Can't think of every damn thing, can you? Jesus."

"Your baby coughing? I don't believe you need cough medicine," Anna squinted through the window. "Ask your wife to come in out the cold."

"Drugstore'll have aspirin," said Misner.

"I didn't see no drugstore. Where bouts is it?"

"You passed it, but it don't look like a drugstore--looks like a regular house."

"How am I going to find it then? Houses round here don't seem to have numbers."

"Tell me what all you want and I'll get it for you. Then tell your wife to bring that baby inside." Misner reached for his coat.

"Just some aspirin and some cough medicine. 'Preciate it. I'll get my wife."

The blast from the open door rattled the coffee cups. The man got back in the station wagon; Misner took off in his ratty Ford. Anna thought about making some cinnamon toast. The pumpkin bread would be stale now. Be nice if she had an over ripe banana--the

baby looked constipated--mush it up with a little applebutter.

The man came back shaking his head. "I'll just keep the motor running. She says she'll stay put."

Anna nodded. "You got far to go?"

"Lubbock. Say, is that coffee hot?"

"Uh huh. How you like it?"

"Black and sweet."

He'd taken two sips when the car horn sounded. "Excuse me. Shit," he said. When he came back he bought licorice, peanut butter, crackers and three Royal Crowns and carried them to his wife before returning to finish his coffee.

"You better gas up when you get on 18. Blizzard's coming."

He laughed. "Blizzard? In Lubbock, Texas?"

"You ain't in Texas yet," said Anna.

Misner shouldered open the door with Steward close on his heels. "Here you go," he said Misner handing over the bottles. The man took them and rushed back out to the station wagon. Misner followed to give him directions.

"Who all is that?" asked Steward.

"Just some lost folks." Anna handed him a thirty-two ounce tin

of Blue Boy.

"Lost folks or lost whites?"

"Oh, Steward, please."

"Big difference, Anna girl. Big. Right Reverend?" Misner was just stepping back in.

"They get lost like everybody else," said Anna.

"Born lost. Take over the world and still lost. Right Reverend?"

"You just contradicted yourself," Anna laughed.

"God has one people, Steward. You know that." Misner rubbed his hands, then blew on them.

"Reverend," said Steward, "I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance."

Misner smiled and was about to answer when the man entered again to pay Misner for the medicine.

"Blizzard's heading in." Steward took in the man's light clothing and thin shoes. "You might want to ride it out somewhere. Gas station on 18. Wouldn't go no further than that if I was you."

"I'll beat it. I'll gas up on 18 but we crossing that state line today. Thank you all. You been a big help. 'Preciate it."

"They never listen," said Steward as the station wagon drove away. He himself, having been around in 1958 when whole herds froze, had been pumping water, nailing down, forking alfalfa, and storing up since Wednesday. And was in town for tobacco, syrup and to pick up Dovey.

"Say, Steward," Misner said. "You seen Roger's grand daughter, Billie-Marie?"

"What should I see her for?"

"Anna says nobody has. Of course we haven't asked her mother."

Steward, picking up on the "we," put a crisp five dollar bill on the counter. "You won't get nothing there," he said, thinking, no major loss if she did run off. "That reminds me, Deek told me he saw Sweetie this morning--just walking on down the road. No overcoat. Nothing."

"Sweetie?"

"Out of her house?" Anna stressed her disbelief.

"Down what road?" asked Misner.

"Not Sweetie."

"Deek swears it was her."

"Must have been," said Misner. "I saw her too. Right outside my house. I thought she was going to knock, but she turned around and headed back toward Center. Look to me like she was going on home."

"Didn't. Deek said she was way past Sargeant's--marching out of town like a soldier."

"Didn't he stop her?"

Steward stared at Anna as though he couldn't believe her words. "He was opening up the bank, girl."

Misner frowned. Anna cut off anything he might be about to say with "You all want some coffee? Maybe some pumpkin bread?"

Both men accepted.

"Somebody better speak to Jeff." It was Anna's voice but all three glanced at a wall of shelves beyond which was Fleetwood's Furniture and Appliance.

Despite the predictions--from Richard Misner's gaze, Steward Morgan's watchfulness--a tiny piece of the sky flashed a water-color palette: orange-peach, minty-green, seashore blue. The rest of the sky, pewter, served to brighten this odd, sweet sunbreak. It lasted a full hour and delighted everybody who saw it. Then it faded and a

leaden sky solidified over the relentless wind. By noon the first snow came. Stinging pellets, popping, not melting, before the wind. The second snow, two hours later, didn't pop. It lay down quietly and covered everything there was.

Sweetie had said, "Be back directly, Miss Mable." "Won't be gone but a minute, Miss Mable."

Meant to say it. Maybe she did say it. Anyway it was in her head to say. But she had to hurry quick before one of them gurgled.

On the porch, the sidewalk, Sweetie's stride was purposeful--as though there were somewhere important she had to be. Something important she had to do and it would take just a few minutes and she would be right back. In time to massage a little bottom to keep the sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing but mostly to watch. To never take her eyes off unless her mother-in-law was there, and to watch, then, as well because Miss Mable's eyes weren't as sharp as they once had been. Others offered help repeatedly at first, irregularly now, but she always declined. Sweetie was the best

at watching. Her mother-in-law second best. Arnette used to be good, but not anymore. Jeff and her father-in-law couldn't look, let alone watch.

The problem had never been watching while she was awake. It was watching while asleep. For six years she slept on the pallet near the cribs, or in bed with Jeff, her breath threaded, her ear tunnel ready, every muscle braced to spring. She knew she slept because she dreamed a little, although she couldn't remember what about. But it was getting harder and harder to watch and sleep at the same time.

When dawn broke and Mable came into the dim room with a cup of coffee, Sweetie stood to take it. She knew Mable had already run her bath water and folded a towel and fresh nightgown over the chair in the bedroom. And she knew she would offer to do her hair--braid it, wash it, roll it or just scratch her scalp. The coffee would be wonderful, dark and loaded with sugar. But she also knew that if she drank it this one time and went to bed in morning sun this one time she would never wake up and who would watch her babies then?

So she took the coffee and said, or meant to, "Be back in a minute, Miss Mable."

Downstairs, she put the cup and saucer on the dining table then,

unwashed, coatless and with uncombed hair, she opened the front door and left. Quickly.

She was not hoping to walk until she dropped or fainted or froze and then slipped into dark nothingness for a while. The small thing she wanted was not to have that dawn coffee, the already drawn bath, the folded nightgown and then the watchful sleep in that order, forever, every day and in particular this here particular day. The only way to change the order, she thought, was not to do something differently, but to do a different thing. Only one possibility arose--to leave her house and step into a street she had not entered in six years.

Sweetie traveled the length of Central Avenue--past the Gospel-named streets, past New Zion, Harper's Drugstore, the bank, Mount Calvary. She detoured into Cross Peter, left it and walked past Sargeant's Feed and Seed. North of Ruby, where the quality of the road changed, her legs were doing brilliantly. So was her skin for she didn't feel the cold. The fresh outside air, to which she was unaccustomed, hurt her nostrils and she set her face to bear it. She did not know she was smiling, nor did the girl staring at her from the bed of a brand new '73 pick-up. The girl thought Sweetie was crying

and a black woman weeping on a country road broke her heart all over again.

She peered at Sweetie from her hiding place among empty crates. The Ford truck, heading south, slowed as it passed Sweetie, then stopped. In the cab the driver and his wife exchanged looks. Then the driver leaned out the window, twisting his head to holler at Sweetie's back, "You need some help?"

Sweetie did not turn her head or acknowledge the offer. The couple looked at each other and sucked teeth as the husband shifted into drive. Fortunately the road inclined at that point, otherwise the broken-hearted hitch-hiker would have hurt herself when she jumped from the back of the truck. The couple could see in the rear view mirror a passenger they didn't know they had, running to join the pitiful, ill-raised creature who had not even said No, thank you.

When the girl whose heart was breaking caught up with the woman, she knew enough not to touch, speak or insert herself into the determined bubble the crying woman had become. She walked ten or so paces behind, studying the shapely dark ankles above worn white loafers. The wrinkled shirtwaist dress, pale blue with sagging pockets. The sleeper's hair--pressed flat on one side, dishevelled on

the other. And every now and then a sob that sounded like a giggle.

They moved this way for more than a mile. The walker going somewhere; the hitcher going anywhere. The wraith and her shadow.

The morning was cold, cloudy. Wind streamed the tall grasses on either side of the road.

Fifteen years ago, when the broken-hearted hitcher was four years old, she had spent four nights and five days knocking on every door in her building.

“Is my sister in here?”

Some said no; some said who?; some said what’s your name, little one? Most didn’t open the door at all. That was 1958 when a little girl could play all over brand new government housing in safety.

The first two days, after making her rounds on floors ever higher, higher and making sure she had not missed a single door, she waited. Jean, her sister, would be coming back anytime now because dinner food was on the table: meat loaf, string beans, catsup, white bread, and a full pitcher of kool-aid was in the refrigerator. She occupied herself with two coloring books, a deck of cards and a wetting baby doll. She drank milk, ate potato chips, saltines with apple jelly, and little by little, the whole meat loaf. By the time the

hated string beans were all that was left of the dinner, they were too shrivelled and mushy to bear.

The third day, she began to understand why Jean was gone and how to get her back. She cleaned her teeth and washed her ears carefully. She also flushed the toilet right away--as soon as she used it--and folded her socks inside her shoes. She spent a long time wiping up the kool aid and picking up the pieces of glass from the pitcher that crashed when she tried to lift it from the refrigerator. She remembered the Lorna Doones that were in the bread box, but dared not climb up on a chair to open it. Those were her prayers: if she did everything right without being told, either Jean would walk in or, when she knocked on one of the apartment doors--there'd she be! Smiling and holding out her arms.

Meantime, the nights were terrible.

On the fourth day, having brushed her eighteen milk teeth until the toothbrush was pink with blood, she stared out of the window through warm rain-sprinkle at morning people going to work, children to school. Then for a long time no one. Then an old woman with a man's jacket roofed above her head against the fine rain. Then a man tossing seed on bare places in the grass. Then a tall woman walked

past the window. No coat and nothing on her head, she touched her eyes with the back of her arm, the inside of her wrist. She was crying.

Later, the sixth day, when the case worker came, she thought about the crying woman who looked nothing at all like Jean--was not even the same color. But before that, on the fifth day, she found--or--rather saw--something that had been right there for her all along. Demoralized by unanswered prayers, bleeding gums and hunger she gave up goodness, climbed up on a chair and opened the bread box. Leaning against the box of Lorna Doones was an envelope with a word she recognized instantly: her own name printed in lipstick. She opened it, even before she tore into the cookie box, and pulled out a single sheet of paper with more lipstick words. She could not understand any except her own name again at the top, "Jean" at the bottom and loud red marks in between.

Soaking in happiness, she folded the letter back in the envelope, put it in her shoe and carried it for the rest of her life. Hiding it, fighting for the right to keep it, rescuing it from waste baskets. She was six years old, an ardent first-grade student, before she could read the whole page. Over time, it became simply a sheet of paper

smearred Chen Yu red, not one decipherable word left. But it was the letter, safe in her shoe, that made leaving with the case worker for the first of two foster homes possible. She thought about the crying woman briefly then, more later, until the sight of her became an occasional heart-breaking dream.

The wind that had been stirring the grass was carrying snow now--scarce, sandy and biting like glass. The hitcher stopped to pull a sarape from her duffel, then ran to catch up and wrap it around the walker's shoulders.

Sweetie flailed her hands until she understood that she was being warmed not prevented. Not once, while the wool cloth was being wrapped around her shoulders, did she stop walking. She kept on moving, chuckling--or was it sobbing?

The hitcher remembered passing a large house about a half hour ago as she hid among the crates. What took thirty minutes in a truck would take pedestrians several hours, but she thought they ought to be able to reach the place before dark. The question was the cold; another was how to stop the crying woman and get her to rest and, once they reached shelter, to get her inside it. Eyes like those were not uncommon. In hospitals they belonged to patients who paced day

and night; on the road, unconfined, people with eyes like that would walk forever. The hitcher decided to spend the time talking and started out by introducing herself.

Sweetie heard what she said and, for the first time since she'd left her house, stumbled as she turned her smiling--or crying--face toward the uninvited companion. Sin, she thought. I am walking next to sin and wrapped in its cloak. "Have mercy," she murmured and gave a little laugh--or whimper.

By the time they saw the Convent, Sweetie was cozy. Although she had felt none of the biting cold sweeping the road, she was comforted by the warm snow covering her hair, filling her shoes. And grateful to be so clearly protected from and unassociated with the sin-shape walking next to her. The sign of Sweetie's state of grace was how badly the warm snow beat the shape, silenced it, froze it and left it breathing heavily, barely able to hang on.

Of her own accord Sweetie slogged up the driveway. but she let the demon do the rest.

The woman who opened the door to the banging said "Oooo!" and yanked them both inside.

They seemed like birds, hawks, to Sweetie. Pecking at her,

flapping. They made her sweat. Had she been stronger, not so tired from the night shift of tending her babies, she would have fought them off. As it was, other than pray, there was nothing she could do. They put her in a bed under so many blankets perspiration ran into her ears. Nothing they offered would she eat or drink. Her lips were shut her teeth clenched. Silently, fervently she prayed for deliverance and got it: they left her alone. In the quiet room Sweetie thanked her Lord and drifted into a static-y, troubled sleep. It was the baby cry that woke her--not the shivering. Weak as she was she got up, or tried to. Her head hurt and her mouth was dry. She noticed that she was not in a bed, but on a leather couch in a dark room. Sweetie's teeth were rattling when one of the hawks, with a blood red mouth, came into the room carrying a kerosene lamp. It spoke to her in the sweetest voice, the way a demon would, but Sweetie called on the Saviour and it left. Somewhere in the house the child continued to cry, filling Sweetie with rapture--she had never heard that sound from her own. Never heard that clear yearning call, sustained, rhythmic. It was like an anthem, a lullaby, or the bracing chords of the decalogue. All of her children--the two that died, and the two that had not--were silent. Suddenly, in the midst of joy, she was

angry. Babies cry here among these demons but not in her house?

When two of the hawks came back, one carrying a tray of food, she asked them, "Why is that child crying here?"

They denied it, of course. Lied straight through the weeping that sifted through the room. One of them even tried to distract her.

"I've heard children laughing. Singing sometimes. But never crying."

The other one cackled.

"Let me out of here." Sweetie struggled to make her voice shout. "I have to get home."

"I'm going to take you. The car is warming up now." Same sly demon tones.

"I'm ready. Now," said Sweetie.

"Take some aspirin and eat some of this."

"You let me out of this place now."

"What a bitch," said one.

"It's just fever," said the other. "And keep your mouth shut, can't you?"

It was patience, and blocking out every sound but the admonitions of her Lord that got her out of there. First into a rusty

red car that stalled in the snow at the foot of the driveway, and finally, praise, praise His holy name, into her husband's arms.

He was with Anna Flood. They were on their way from the minute she'd called on her Saviour. Sweetie literally fell into Jeff's arms.

"What you doing way out here? We couldn't get through all night. Drove me crazy. Lord, girl. Sweetheart. What happened?"

"They made me, snatched me," Sweetie cried. "Please take me home. I'm sick, Anna. I have to look after the babies."

"Shh. Don't worry about that."

"I have to. I have to."

"It's going to be all right now. Arnette's coming home."

"Turn the heater up. I'm so cold. How come I'm so cold?"

Seneca stared at the ceiling. The cot's mattress was thin and hard. The wool blanket scratched her chin, and her palms hurt from shoveling snow in the driveway. She had slept on floors, on cardboard, on nightmare producing waterbeds and, for weeks at a time, in the back seat of Eddie's car. But she could not fall asleep on

this clean, narrow child like bed.

The crying woman had flipped. In the night and the next morning as well. Seneca had spent the whole night up, listening to Mavis and Grace. The house seemed to belong to them, although they referred to somebody named Connie. They cooked for her and didn't pry. Other than discussing her name--where'd she get it?--they behaved as though they knew all about her and were happy for her to stay. Later, in the afternoon, when she thought she would drop from exhaustion, they showed her to a bedroom with two cots.

"Nap a while," said Mavis. "I'll call you when dinner's ready. You like fried chicken?" Seneca thought she would throw up.

They didn't like each other at all, so Seneca had equalized her smiles and agreeableness. If one cursed and joked nastily about the other Seneca laughed. When the other rolled her eyes in disgust, Seneca shot her an understanding look. Always the peacemaker. The one who said yes or I don't mind or I'll go. Otherwise--what? They might not like her. Might cry. Might leave. So she did her best to please even if the Bible turned out to be heavier than the shoes. Like all first offenders, he wanted both right away. Seneca had no trouble with the size eleven Addidas, but XX Indiana didn't sport bookstores,

religious or regular. She detoured to Bloomington and found something called The Living bible, and another without color pictures, but lots of lined pages for recording dates of births, deaths, marriages, baptisms. It seemed a marvelous thing--a list of whole families' activities over the years, so she chose it. He was angry, of course; so much that it dimmed his pleasure in the extravagant black and white runners.

"Can't you get anything right? Just a *small* Bible! Not a goddamn encyclopedia!"

He was guilty as charged and she had known him for only six months, but already he knew how hopeless she was. He accepted the enormous Bible nonetheless, and told her to leave it and the shoes at the desk with his name and his number. Made her write the numbers down as though she might have trouble remembering five numbers in a row. She had brought ham sandwiches too (his letter said they could have a picnic-type lunch in the visitors' quarters) but he was too nervous and irritated to eat.

The other visitors seemed to be having a lovely time with their prisoners. Children teased each other; curled up in the arms of their fathers playing with their faces, hair, fingers. Women and girls

touched the men; whispered, laughed out loud. They were the regulars--familiar with the bus drivers, the guards and coffee wagon personnel. The prisoners' eyes were soft with pleasure. They noticed everything, commented on everything. The report cards little boys brought to them in fat brown envelopes; the barretts in the little girls' hair; the state of the women's coats. They listened carefully to details of friends and family not there; had advice and instruction for every piece of domestic news. They seemed terribly manly to Seneca--leader-like in their management of the visit. From where to sit, where put the paper wrappings to medical advice and books to send. What they never spoke of was what was going on inside and they did not ever acknowledge the presence of the guards. Perhaps Attica was on their minds.

Maybe, she thought, as his sentence wore on, Eddie would be like that. Not furious, victimized, as he was on this their first visit since he was arraigned. Whining. Blaming. The Bible so big it embarrassed him. Mustard instead of mayo on the sandwiches. He didn't want to hear anything about her new job at a school cafeteria. Only Sophie and Bernard interested him: their diets. Was she letting them out at night. They needed a good long run. Use their muzzles

only outside.

She left Eddie Turtle in the hall promising him four things. To send pictures of the dogs. To sell the stereo. To get his mother to cash the saving bonds. To call the lawyer. Send, sell, get, call. That's how she would remember.

Heading for the bus shelter, Seneca tripped and fell on one knee. A guard stepped forward and helped her up.

"Watch it, there, miss."

"Sorry. Thanks."

"Why you girls wear those things on your feet I don't know."

"Supposed to be good for you," she said, smiling.

"Where? In Holland?" He laughed pleasantly, showing two rows of gold fillings.

Seneca adjusted her string bag and asked him "How far is Wichita from here?"

"Depends on how you traveling. In a car it'd be oh ten twelve hours. Bus, longer."

"Oh."

"You got family in Wichita?"

"Yes. No. Well, my boyfriend does. I'm going to pay his mother

a visit.”

The guard removed his cap to smoothe his crewcut. “That’s nice,” he said. “Good barbecue in Wichita. Make sure you get you some.”

Somewhere in Wichita there probably was very good barbecue, but not in Mrs. Turtle’s house. Her house was strictly vegetarian. Nothing with hooves, feather, shell or scales appeared on her table. Seven grains and seven greens--eat one of each (and only one) and you lived forever. Which she planned to do and no, she wasn’t about to cash in the savings bonds her husband left her for anybody let alone somebody who drove a car over a child and left it there even if that somebody was her only son.

“Oh, No, Mrs. Turtle. He didn’t know it was a little kid. Eddie thought it was a...”

“What?” asked Mrs. turtle. “What did he think it was?”

“I forgot what he told me, but I know he wouldn’t do that. Eddie loves kids. He really does. He’s really very sweet. He asked me to bring him a bible.”

“He’s sold it by now.”

Seneca looked away.

“Little girl, you’ve known him less than a growing season. I’ve known him all his life.”

“Yes, mam.”

“You think I’m going to let him put me in the poor house so a slick lawyer can stay rich?”

“No, mam.”

“You been watching those Watergate lawyers?”

“No, mam. Yes, mam.”

“Well, then. Don’t say another word about it. You want some supper or not?”

The grain was wheat bread; the green was kale. Strong iced tea helped wash them both down.

Mrs. Turtle did not offer a bed for the night so Seneca hoisted her bag and walked down the quiet street in Wichita’s soft evening air. She had not quit her job to make this trip, but the supervisor made it clear that an absence this soon was not to a new employee’s advantage. Perhaps she was already fired. Maybe Mrs. Turtle would let her telephone her housemates to see if anyone had called to say “Don’t bother.” Seneca turned around.

At the door, her knuckles lifted for the knock, she heard sobbing.

A flat out helpless mothercry--a sound like no other in the world.

Seneca stepped back, then went to the window, pressing her left hand to her chest to keep her heart together. She kept it there--imagining its small red valves stuttering, faltering, trying to get back on line--all the way to the bus station. There she curled up on a molded plastic bench and surrendered to the wails that continued to caroom in her head. Alone, without witness, Mrs. Turtle had let go her reason, her personality and shrieked for all the world like the feathered, finned, and hooved whose flesh she never ate--the way a gull, a cow whale, a mother wolf might if her young had been snatched away. Her hands had been in her hair; her mouth wide open in a drenched face.

Short-breathed and dry-mouthed, Seneca had fled from the porch. Rushing down the broad streets, slowing when near the business part of town. Upon entering the station she bought peanuts and ginger ale from the vending machines and was immediately sorry, since she really wanted sweet--not salt. She pocketed the nuts and sipped the ginger ale.

Nighttime coming and the waiting room was as crowded as a morning commuter stop. The warm September day had not cooled when the sun set. There was no worthy difference between the thick

air of the waiting room and the air outside. Passengers and their companions appeared calm, hardly interested in the journey or the farewell. Most of the children were asleep on laps, luggage and seats. Those who were not tortured anyone they could. Adults fingered tickets, blotted dampness from their necks, patted babies and murmured to each other. Occasionally they examined the schedules posted behind glass. Four teen aged boys with stocking caps on their heads sang softly near the vending machines. A man in a grey chauffeur's uniform strolled the floor as though looking for his passenger. A handsome man in a wheelchair navigated himself gracefully through the entrance--only slightly annoyed by the inconvenient design of the door.

There were two hours and twenty minutes before Seneca's bus departed so she wondered if she should spend it at one of the movies she'd passed. *Serpico*. *The Exorcist*, *The Sting* were the hot choices, but it felt like betrayal to see any one of them without Eddie's arm around her shoulder. Thinking of his predicament and her bumbling efforts to help him, Seneca sighed heavily, but there was no danger of tears. She had not shed even one since she found Jean's letter next to the Lorna Doones. Well cared for, loved perhaps, in both of the foster

homes, she knew it was not her self that the mothers had approved of but the fact that she took reprimand quietly, ate what given, shared what she had and never ever cried.

The ginger ale was rattling through the straw when the chauffeur stood before her and smiled.

“Excuse me, miss. May I speak to you for a moment?”

“Sure. I mean. Sure.” Seneca scooted over to make room on the bench but he did not sit down.

“I’m authorized to offer you five hundred dollars for some complicated but quite easy work, if you’re interested.”

Seneca opened her mouth to say: complicated *and* easy? His eyes were cloudy gray and the buttons on his uniform glimmered like ancient gold.

“I’m on my way out of here,” she said.

“I understand. But the work won’t take long. Perhaps if you’d talk to my employer--she’s right outside--she can describe it to you. Unless , of course, you have to be somewhere in a hurry?”

“She?”

“Yes. Mrs. Fox. Step this way. It’ll take just a minute.”

A limosine throbbed under bright street lights a few yards from

the station entrance. When the chauffeur opened the door, the head of an amazingly beautiful woman turned toward Seneca.

“Hello. I’m Norma. Norma Keene Fox. I’m looking for some help.” She didn’t hold out her hand, but her smile made Seneca want to. “Can I talk to you about it?”

The white linen blouse she wore was sleeveless, cut low. Her beige skirt was long. When she uncrossed her legs Seneca saw bright sandals, coral painted toenails. Champagne-colored hair rushed back behind ears with no earrings.

“What kind of work?” Seneca asked.

“Come inside so I can explain. It’s hard talking through an open car door.”

Seneca hesitated.

Mrs. Fox’s laugh was a warm tumble of bells. “It’s okay, Dear. You don’t have to take the job if you don’t want it.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t.”

“Well then. Come. It’s cooler in here.”

The door click was soft, weighty and Mrs. Fox’s Bal du Versailles was irresistible.

Something confidential, she said. Nothing illegal, of course, just

private. You type? A little? I want somebody not from around here. I hope five hundred is enough. I could go a little higher for a really intelligent girl. David will drive you back to the bus Station—even if you decide not to take the job.

Only then did Seneca realize the limosine was no longer parked. The interior lights were on. The air was cooled. The limosine floated.

This is a lovely part of the world, she said. But narrow-minded, if you know what I mean. Still, I wouldn't live anywhere else. My husband doesn't beleive me, neither do my friends because I'm from New Orleans. When I go back there, they say *Wichita?* like that. But I love it here. Where are you from? I thought so. They don't wear jeans like that around here. They should though, if they've got the bottom, I mean. Like you do. Yes. My son's at Rice. Lots of people work for us, but it's only when Leon is away--that's my husband--that I can get anything accomplished. That's where you come in, if you agree, I mean. Married? Well, what I need done only an intelligent female can do. You don't wear lipstick, do you? Good. Your lips are lovely like that. I told David, find an intelligent girl, please. No farm girls. No dairy queens. He's very good. He found you. Our place is out of town a ways. No thank you I can't digest

peanuts. Oh dear, you must be starving. We'll have a very good supper and I'll explain what I want done. Really simple if you can follow directions. It's confidential work so I prefer to hire a stranger rather than someone local. Are those your own lashes? Gracious. David? Do you know if Mattie cooked a real supper tonight? No fish, I hope, or do you like fish? Trout's wonderful in Kansas. I think some chicken, fried, might do the trick. We have beautifully fed poultry here they eat better than most people do. No don't put them away. Give them to me. Who knows? They might come in handy.

Seneca spent the following three weeks in gorgeous rooms, with gorgeous Norma and food too pretty to eat. Norma called her many sweet things, but not once asked what her name was. The front door was never locked and she could leave anytime she wanted to. She didn't have to stay there moving from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse; from caviar tartlets to dirt. But the pain framed the pleasure, gave it edge. The humiliation made surrender deep, tender. Long lasting.

When Leon Fox telephoned his immanent return, Norma gave her the five hundred dollars and some clothes, including a cashmere serape. As promised, David drove her to the bus station, his buttons

extra gleamy in the sunlight. They did not speak during the drive.

Seneca wandered Wichita for hours, stopping in a coffee shop, resting in a city garden. It was like life before Eddie. Instant friends. Catch-quick jobs. Temporary housing. Stolen food. Eddie Turtle had been settled life to her for six months and now he was gone. She wasn't thinking much of anything when she saw the first place to hide. A flat bed loaded with heavy sacks. When she was discovered and told to leave, she walked until she found another and another until she ended up among crates in a brand new '73 pick-up. Jumping out of it to follow a coatless woman was the first pointedly uninstructed thing she had ever done.

The sobbing--or was she giggling?--woman was gone now. The snow had stopped. Downstairs someone was calling her name.

"Seneca? Seneca? Come on, baby. We're waiting for you."