

The Beat Goes On

When we got back to the program, 911 Hutson had arrived, pushing his electrified wheel chair with its bullet-proof windshield.

A tall, wiry guy, healthy as a horse, 911 was the only child of Tupelo "Hammerhead" Hutson who laid cross ties for the Coast Line Railroad and Freemary "Lint Queen" Foster Hutson who was, in her heyday, a legendary cotton picker. Nevertheless, he spent his time studying about new, obscure maladies that he might have contracted in his extensive, alleged travels.

A big print *Physician's Desk Reference* was his constant companion, and he drew on its professional lore to identify his ever emerging – and worsening – symptoms.

Parking his wheel chair beside the stage, he vaulted onto the platform, disdaining the four shallow steps. He held both hands to his head as he acknowledged his fans' adoration, indicating that his head hurt. So who was surprised?

"If I live through the night," he lamented, "I'm sure gonna be in Gainesville, Florida in the morning to get my head examined. Nothin' on the shelf is gonna ease it off, and I've tried some of all of it."

He paused to press his hands hard against his head and make an exaggerated effort to turn it. Grimacing as he failed that maneuver, he clutched his side and whimpered.

"If them doctors would listen to me, I could tell them what ails me - I got me a bad case of acute chronic pachypodous.

He paused for a massive, sighing moan.

"I guess this is probably my last trip to the Café, so all I can do is buy all y'all a round of Miss Peaches' Magic Elixir.

Go ahead now, and let's get to drinking before I perish in your face."

He pivoted and dove off the stage, like the closet athlete that he is, to join in the beer fest that he was paying for. His audience loved him.

My Marcelene, being so closely associated with the medical profession due to working behind the counter in the Delacroix Drug Store, had to explain to me what it was that 911 was suffering from. The name of the disease is pronounced "pa-kid-o-pus" and means "wide feet."

Didn't I tell you my baby was one smart citizen?

Cool and the Frigid Airs whipped up a few choruses of *Won't You Be My Salty Dog?*, just to prove that they were at home anywhere, and brought on the next act with an appropriate Folsom Prison Blues. Leadbelly would have been proud. That's when Sheriff Frankie Shanklin took the spotlight to apologize for the missing actors who would have played in *Corporal Punishment*. Frankie's gorgeous wife, the former Diane Eloise "Blossom" Feingold - who we privately called "Shake That Thing" Shanklin -

beamed at her suave lawman and threw him a kiss. He threw one back before he addressed the gathering.

"We was gonna have us a play here tonight an' use some of my pris'ners fer actors," he allowed, "but th' judge got wind of it an' sent me word he was gonna go by th' jail an' they better all be behind them bars. So I couldn't git around that. But I tell you what, I'm gonna buy th' next round to show you what a sport can do. An' then, I wanna see if I can git Miss Mazola "Teenintcy" Baker to show me some 'a them new steps Princess Amy an' Night Rider brought back frum Paree. An' if he don't mind, I'd love fer Night Rider to show 'em to my Blossom. Reckon we could do that?"

Blossom had moved close enough to touch the stage, and she was already shaking her booty when her inamorata joined her on the dance floor. That thirsty crowd was crowing and clapping like Frankie, himself, had put on the play.

God, what we'll all do for a free beer.

Together Again

About eleven o'clock, me and Marcelene were snuggled up on our perch, beer in hand, when I noticed White Boy drawing HoJo over for a few words. He must have forgotten we were up there, because they stopped right under where we were.

"Is he here yet?" I heard White Boy ask.

"He just pulled in," says HoJo. "I already told Cool.

We'll be ready in a minute or two."

Marcelene spoke softly in my ear, "I bet I know who they're talkin' about!"

"As, baby, you don't know," I scoffed.

About that time, the music geared back enough for Poole to make a brief announcement. He said they were about to take a break, and that the big number of the night would take place when they started up again.

Ten minutes later, HoJo and Walkman lifted the leather bar stool that was White Boy's prized seat and brought it down on the floor right in front of the bandstand. Then they went behind the bar and got hold of Peaches, telling her the next number was especially for her. She was laughing and going on with them, suspecting that they were going to play some kind of joke on her. But she did take a seat like they asked her.

As soon as the Frigid Airs reclaimed the stage, it went totally dark. I noticed Walkman at the light panel, raising the

light level on the floor as he put out the stage lights. That made seeing what was going on stagewise impossible except for outlines of guys moving around up there.

We all got quiet, waiting for the promised surprise, which came in the next sounds we heard. It was not Kitty's guitar, that's for sure.

Instead, it was single-string, acoustic blues-picking like we just don't hear too much around 'Coochee. If you can imagine such a thing, it was sophisticated turpentine still blues. And there was Slaw Dog's harmonica snaking though the mournful trail.

We hadn't even seen him come in.

We all recognized the number, though we hadn't heard it for a long time.

A dark, rich, male voice sang,

"Train, Train, Train, on the railroad track;
Train, Train, Train, bring my baby back.

I rode th' bus to California,

Got off that bus in th' rain;

I meant to meet my baby

When she got off that midnight train . . .

Train, Train, Train . . ."

I was squeezing Marcelene's hand so tight it's a wonder I didn't break her pretty little fingers, but I thought I knew what

was happening here. Walkman was slowly and carefully bringing the stage lights up, and the mellow voice went on:

"If I git as far as Philadelphia,

I don' fin' my baby there --

I'm gon' come on back to Memphis, Lawd,

An' try my han' at prayer --

Train, Train, Train, on the railroad track . . ."

I was trying to listen to the music and figure out if it meant what I thought it meant. It was making my eyes water.

"I been all across the country,

I been all aroun' th' worl';

I couldn't fin' no woman

Like my sweet Tallulahcoochee girl --

Train, Train, Train, on the railroad track --

Train, Train, Train, bring my baby back . . ."

The light blazed up and there, centerstage, stood Cathead Porter, resplendent in his officer's uniform, captain's bars catching the gleam.

I don't know what the rest of the clocks in the world were doing, but time stood stock-still at Miss Peaches' Café de Lite. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. There was a quick, collective intake of breath and that was all. We were caught up in a time warp.

Peaches eventually broke the spell with, "Chahlie -- oh, Chahlie. You came back . . ."

He bounded off that stage and took Peaches in his arms so she could have a shoulder to cry on. Which she did. I'll always believe Charlie cried, too.

Cool and his boys didn't hesitate. The way *This Love of Mine* poured off that stage, you'd have thought Cool had turned into Glen Gray. I don't guess I need to say it: me and Marcelene cried like it was our own reunion.

Lord, it was beautiful. And you know something? Between happy sobs, she murmured, "I did so, too, know it was Charlie."

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You don't hear much about folks dying of ecstasy, but I think I was close to it that night. From time to time, I would just lose my breath for pure joy.

Before *This Love of Mine* was done, we caught sight of Louvenia and stuffy swagging in from the back door. They were still in their costumes from the Waycross convention they'd played earlier.

They headed straight for Peaches and Cathead, and we realized they had been in on the reunion planning. Now that I think about it, the whole thing did have a dramatic, Louvenia-style touch to it.

When the laughing and hugging tapered off, Stuffy joined Cool and them on the stage, and Louvenia stepped up to do a little singing. She opened up with *Lil Green's Romance in the Dark*, and wound down half an hour later with *Shake a Hand*. Faye Adams, herself, on her best day, couldn't have beat it.

If I'd really died that night, believe me, I would'a died happy.

I Don't Care What Mama Don't 'Low

As the evening wore on, it just got better and better.

Marcelene would watch the best dancers do the new steps and jump right out and do it perfect, the first time. Then she'd pull me into it and next thing you know, we'd be taking the floor.

Tiz and HoJo didn't miss a dance, showing the crowd a thing or two about tearin' it down, and Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris tracked them, step for step. It was born-to-boogie time, too, for Sheriff Shanklin and his baby doll, the ebullient, undulating, effervescent Blossom.

I can't say for sure that Peaches and Cathead actually danced, but they stayed on the floor, desperately holding onto one another. And smiling like fools.

About time I had given up on Ransom "Marblehead" Rhoden making an appearance - it was close to midnight - the front door swung open and there stood Rhoden. He was known about town as a professional widower, having let the world know that he would always be faithful to his deceased wife, Mattie Lou "Mama" Rhoden, who passed about five years earlier.

What was this? Ol' Marblehead was not alone tonight! On his arm was none other than Valencia Faye "Cutter" Higgs. I thought I'd lose my breath. Everybody on the place finally stopped dancing, the band straggled to a ragged stop and we all

got real still. What else is there to^{do} when you're confronted with unexpected, major changes?

I can't say how long that eerie quiet lasted, but finally Cutter breaks into a big smile and says, "Hey -- got a beer in here?"

We should have known she wouldn't stand on ceremony. Not Cutter. She was probably the prettiest, as well as the toughest woman south of Macon. As for me, I couldn't understand how Marblehead Rhoden had snagged a date with her. Especially since damn few men had been so lucky.

Everybody started hollering, "Hey," and "Y'all come on in," and, "We sho' glad y'all cou'd make it." Cool kick-started the *Frigid Airs* and the party took off again.

Cutter was wearing a long, silver dress that had side slits clear up to here, and some high-heeled silver sandals. Her black hair was cut short with bangs to her eyebrows, and her long fingernails were silvered to match the rest of her outfit. I tell you, if I hadn't already mostly committed myself to Marcelene, I might have given Marblehead a tussle for that girl. Even knowing all the time that she was surely armed and, without a doubt, dangerous.

White Boy was the first one to actually go to them, standing just inside the door, and press them to the bar for refreshments. The awkward moment was past.

As soon as he gracefully could, White Boy took the stage again and announced that our own Ramson Rhoden had arrived, along with his guest, and that Ransom would then address the party-goers. I thought - and I'm certain White Boy thought - that he would say something about collecting firearms and other weaponry in case anybody wanted to turn something in until the party was over.

Not so. Rhoden, with a shy smile, took the stage and dropped the bombshell.

"Friends, we stopped by tonight to say that I have accepted a position with the national office of Gun-toters of America, Inc. in Sioux City, Iowa. My job begins there in just two weeks' time, and I'll be leaving on the train tomorrow morning.

"I'll be accompanied by my fiance, Miss Cutter Higgs, and we will be married on Monday in North Georgia. Her uncle, the Reverend Gatewood "Smoothie" Templeton will preside over the ceremony at his Church of a Thousand Earth-bound Angels in Woodstock."

He sort of ducked his head, smiled some more and stepped down off the stage. Not a soul on the place could believe what we had just heard. Married? Rhoden? To Cutter Higgs? We all must be drunker than we thought.

But there it was. We applauded, clapped him on the back, and hugged Cutter. More beer was drawn and consumed, and we did

a bunch of silly toasts, and pretty soon we all went back to dancing. But I couldn't get over it.

However, my baby, who somehow knows the little details before anybody else, and who waits to tell me until she thinks I'm sufficiently braced to hear it, unraveled the mystery for me on the way home.

"You know how come they're going 'way up yonder to get married, don't you, sugar?" she says to me.

"No, I sure don't," I say back.

"It's so Mama won't find out."

"What?"

"It's so his dead wife, 'Mama', won't find out. He knows she wouldn't let him do it if she knew."

"Marcelene, are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

"If I hadn't'a known, I wouldn't'a told you. Marblehead went to see Preacher Hotchkiss about it on Friday, and Mrs. Hotchkiss told Dr. Sam at the drug store when she came in for headache medicine. She said that's what gave her the headache in the first place - trying to figure out how Ransom and Cutter could slip out of town without Mama knowing about it.

"She said they've been going together about six months, meeting over at Broxton so Mama wouldn't throw a wrench in the cog. And Cutter's going to get her daddy to drive her up to

Brookfield to get on the train tomorrow, just to be on the safe side."

See what I mean? I feel sometimes like I'm always the last one to know.

The Night We Hit the Big Time

It came as no surprise that Louvenia and Stuffy were swiftly embraced by the entertainment world. As they should have been, seeing that their act was out-of-bounds unique.

Some days they would whirl by the Café on the way to somewhere, but they sure didn't hang around. It looked like a hard life to me, but Marcelene said that was just my small town attitude.

Anyway, almost a year into their extensive travels, they got booked to a gigantic auditorium in Jacksonville, and she invited all of us to go and see them do their stuff. We hadn't any of us ever seen the real show.

It was two weeks away from the day she asked us, and every hour between then and the minute we left, that's all we could think about. Or talk about. Me and Marcelene made four trips to Valdosta, shopping for the right clothes to wear since we didn't want to show up looking shoddy.

The day finally rolled around, and we all met at the railroad depot at 5 o'clock to make sure everybody was present and ready to roll. Audie and Lorelei and Tiz and HoJo were in the back seat of Audie's Mercedes limousine, and Peaches and Cathead were up front, him at the wheel. I steered my truck up close and we all exchanged greetings, and then we hauled out - a two-car motorcade to Florida.

Louvenia had arranged everything so that when we slid up to the front door of that hall, two guys came and took our vehicles and two more underlings bowed and scraped us inside and to our elite balcony box. Horace Morris, Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris were already there - they having gone early in the Morrieses' new *El Dorado* - sipping champagne and looking elegant. It's a wonder to me how they always managed to look like movie stars.

I don't think Marcelene caught her breath until we were settled in plush, rocking seats. Oh, I swore I'd never use the word, but sometimes it's the only one that will suffice: fabulous!

The star spot - just before intermission - had been reserved for Louvenia and Stuffy. The curtains closed briefly before they appeared, and I was finally able to understand what writers mean when they say, "A hush fell over the audience."

The curtains rolled back and there they were, our very own Café cronies, awash in the adoring tumult that greeted them.

A white, pearlized, concert grand piano was positioned just slightly to the left of the middle of the stage, Stuffy already seated there. Louvenia lounged close by, to the left of him and the piano. A tall, high-backed leather bar stool with arms - a duplicate of the one Peaches bought for Horace Morris at the Café

- was over to the right of the stage, and a table with a telephone stood by it.

Louvenia was wearing an all-over sequined dress that appeared, in the pool of light where she stood, to be dark blue. You might not believe it, but Stuffy was wearing a suit of all-over sequins that matched her dress. He, too, was lighted for the dark blue effect. I just got to say it again: fabulous!

They opened up with Fool Number One and, when it was over, I thought I heard myself hollering along with the mob beneath us in the main section. It was so good I couldn't quit applauding.

Oh, but then, with the next number, we almost uncovered the secret.

Stuffy started playing and Louvenia eased over to the bar stool, picked up the phone and said, "Operatah, I wants t'place a call t'downtown Washin'ton, D. C., please, ma'am, an' I wants t'talk t'd'head school man. I thaink 'is name be's Harold How-to. Anh-hanh. (pause) I doesn' had 'is numbah, but I 'agine you can find 'im hangin' 'round d'school house. . . ."

She went on talking and pausing to "listen," and the crowd kept laughing and clapping, and me and Marcelene were absolutely overcome at the performance. But what was it that made me imagine I'd heard it before?

It must have gone on for maybe ten minutes or more before she placed the phone back on its base, and the house fell in.

They screamed and yelled and whistled and clapped till I thought they weren't gonna quit. And me and Marcelene, we was helping.

All the time, something important seemed to be trying to capture my attention. I just couldn't call it up.

Whoever the light man was, he knew his stuff. As soon as the first number was done, the lights had changed from dark blue to a sort of sea green, washing Louvenia's dress and Stuffy's suit and the piano in an iridescent blue-green glow. Everything about this night was too grand for mere mortals.

Before the audience actually quit carrying on about their busin' skit, Stuffy wrapped himself around that piano and headed into *Ridin' Around With th' Crackers*. Louvenia was there, all the way, with:

"Did you see that big, ol' yellow bus? An' did you see them young'uns wave at us?

Some of them, I think, belongs t'me -- oh, they're th' ones I never get to see --

They're ridin' -- all their day time, takes all their work an' play time,

That's how you raise a ridin' fool --

Come next Summer, they might be even dumber,
Ridin' Around With th' Crackers on th' way to school . . ."

The song went on and the laughter went on, right to the end.

One more time, the place exploded in applause and screaming. Louvenia and Stuffy accepted it with grace, smiling and bowing, and getting set to do another one.

The lights segued into lavender, the crowd simmered down some, and Stuffy ran the intro to another phone call. This time, she wanted to talk to the railroad station agent at Thalman, Georgia about sending her dead cousin to Philadelphia on a round trip ticket.

Did I mention that she had to pause in all these skits when the laughter simply drowned her out? This was not an exception.

After the call, she sang *Destination Philadelphia, U. S. A.*, tying it all together with style.

Now, what was it I was trying to remember through all the excitement? Something about it all sounded, well, familiar.

Cat Out of the Bag

As their performance went on, I fell to wondering what in the world they would do for the finale. I sure couldn't see them taking any prisoners, so to speak, but neither could I envision anything better than what they'd already done - and were doing, even at that moment.

The lights, of course, had changed with every set and was now charging our batteries with a bright, golden orange. She was talking on the phone to a bail bondsman in Richmond, Virginia - a guy she called "Springer." She was trying to get out of jail in Dodge County, Georgia, "home of W.S. 'Bill' 'Candyman' Stuckey Jr.," as she said.

She complained to the bondsman of Stuckey's roadside ads for white chocolate, offering that as evidence of their "white backlash;" and going on to repeat the arresting officer's claim that Mr. Stuckey was "just tryin' to overcome Dr. King's black divinity."

Not a doubt in my mind that it was the funniest performance I'd ever been exposed to. It was so great to me that I began to worry that they wouldn't give us a suitable, unforgettable ending. I need not have troubled myself.

The lights finally returned to the dark blue hue that had brought them on, and Stuffy got up from the piano, came over to

her and they embraced lightly, bowed to their audience and the lights zoomed up in a silver-white blaze.

Stuffy sat back down at the piano and Louvenia picked up the telephone.

"Operatah, I wants t'place a call t'Moody Fiel', please, ma'am -- tha's Moody Air Fo'ce Base, Moody Fiel' t'Valowsta, Geo'gia -- anh-hanh, I wants to speak t'Chahlie at Comp'ny B -- Chahlie -- naw'm, dis Tallulahcoochee . . .

"Chahlie. Anh-hanh -- Well, I don' know Chahlie's las' name, yet; see, we wuz jes' out las' night. Well, I te'ya what you do, sugah, you git Comp'ny B on d'phone, an' lemme git Chahlie."

You can believe it not, but the damn audience was saying every word, right with along with her. We didn't find out till later that night they had recorded the piece three months before, and that it had sold millions of records; folks had bought it and memorized it!

I closed my eyes to listen to it better, and I heard her say to the guy at the base, "Well, look hyunh, sugah, stick yo' head out d'window an' hollah f'Cathead -- an' he'll come." That's when everything came clear.

Evidently, Marcelene got the drift, too, because she grabbed my arm and whispered, "You know what she's doing?"

I turned to face her and nodded. "Sure, I know. She's mimicking Peaches."

We both turned to get Peaches' and Cathead's reaction to Louvenia and Stuffy, and both of them were bent double with laughter. Maybe they'd known all the time that Louvenia, herself, wasn't funny, but she could sell comedy. Only, Peaches is funny within herself.

The finale - their outlandish, back-breaking, blockbustering finale, Callin' Moody Field -- did what I didn't think could be done. But what the hell did I know?

At the end, the audience outdid itself, laughing and screaming and applauding. That part lasted longer than the last number.

As for me, I was dang near beside myself, having solved the mystery. Sure, Louvenia would come to the Café and sit about, looking and listening, but I used to think she just liked the atmosphere. Instead, she was taking it all in so she could wind it a quarter-turn and spin it back as something hilarious. I do admire ingenuity.

Our evening wasn't over, though. Louvenia had invited us all to dinner at the beach. Till then, I didn't know - nor even suspect - what fine was.

We were all transported out there in a covey of limousines, and escorted into a glass-encased private dining room overlooking the ocean.

Crown Royal and Wild Turkey and similar liquid refreshments got us in the party mode, while a romping, 12-piece dance band provided a high-toned backdrop. All being grounded in Café Life, we danced before, during and after the meal.

It was the first and only time in my life that I ever ate a seven-course meal, and most certainly my first and only experience with between-course servings of champagne sherbet "to clear the palate."

My baby was the prettiest woman there, of course, and we invented a few new dance steps to mark the occasion. I guess it was another first for me: right there on that dance floor, I decided that I could not live without Marcelene. It was something I'd been toying with for a long time, and sometimes I wish I'd told her then. She probably would have liked to hear it.

Riding back to the city, we watched the sun rise over Jacksonville, and I wondered how it would be to live like that all the time.

Didn't Somebody Say, "Let's Kill All the Lawyers?"

One thing's certain: Horace Morris hadn't ever been accused of being dumb. So I took special notice how, from time to time, he'd swing around from the bar and look out on the big weed patch behind the Cafe, kind of like he was studying it. He looked to me like a man with a project on his mind.

"Peaches," he said one day, "How much land did you get with the Cafe?"

"Lord, child, I don' know. It's jes' th' same piece 'a dirt Miss Lula owned."

"Lemme see the deed," he persisted.

She called Dorace, making the request.

In a minute, Dorace showed up with the deed.

"That's funny," she said, "the deed from Miss Lula to you doesn't say exactly how much land; it just says it's the same parcel deeded to Miss Lula by Will and Annie Washington in 1927. So I can't tell from this."

Then, "Maybe I'll cut by the courthouse next time I'm in Raymond City find out about it."

So it was that, three days later, Dorace Morris Morris did, indeed, cut by the courthouse in Raymond City. There she had a look at the deed records, and got a copy of what she was looking for.

Back at the Cafe, she let Peaches and Horace in on the details. The whole plot was ten acres in the Town of Tallulahcoochee, but it excepted a lot that measured 100 feet by 100 feet where Mr. Big Will and Miss Big Annie lived in their three-room house. They had no heirs and the deed specified that the reserved part would go to the Town of Tallulahcoochee at the death of the surviving spouse of the Washington couple.

"What you mean?" asked Peaches. "That the town owns a li'l piece of this place?"

"Yes, but, honey, you own ten whole acres! And you didn't even know about it."

Horace was looking excited.

"Listen, Peaches, we can clean up that mess behind the Cafe and have us a gospel sing. Maybe a bunch of gospel sings -- I can guarantee you there's money in such as that."

"Yeah, but what about them hund'ut feet?"

"Forget that, Peaches. That's where that little old house used to be, way over yonder on the very corner. Don't you remember, it burned several years ago after Miz Washington passed? I guess the Town must have cleaned it up, but it's just lying there, not bothering anybody."

Well, that's how Miss Peaches' Café became the site for a mammoth entertainment, featuring gospel stars from around the

country. Everybody I know was rarin' to go as soon as they got wind of it.

But something else was brewing, and we didn't have an inkling. We might have had, but Dorace Morris Morris had not realized how keenly interested the clerk had been in her research at the courthouse in Raymond City.

Charlotte "Lotto" Tippin, the clerk, was Tallulahcoochee's Town Attorney Reuben Hyland "Ruby" McCauliff's sister-in-law, and she shared the Hadleys' disdain for "that damn, rich, high-falutin' Morris-Appenzeller bunch." Even more, she hated Miss Peaches' Cafe de Lite and "ever" damn, sorry, nigger-lovin' Communist that ever set foot in that hellhole."

As soon as Dorace Morris Morris was down the hall and out of earshot, Lotto had Ruby on the phone.

"Ya bettah gi'cha sorry ass ovah hyunh, pronto, m'boy," she opened. "That damn Morris heifer's been hyunh a-checkin' th' books on that nigger cafe."

Ruby came. Former Councilman Hadley, who had recently become Mayor Hadley due to some rather injudicious stuffing of the 'Coochee ballot box, had him under several severe obligations, and he didn't dare dawdle when hizzoner's interests were imperiled. He got a copy of the thing Dorace Morris Morris had taken with her and, before she ever cleared town, Ruby was whipping his black Chevrolet two-door toward 'Coochee.

He found Rad Hadley at the Diner, holding forth from a back booth on the evils of Sunday movies, and bragging about how he had closed down that "ol' drive-in pi'chur show" because they'd tried to run on the night of the Sabbath.

"We gon' have a upright town long as I'm in charge uv it," he announced. "All forms uv lawlissniss is over. I kin promise ever' 'Coochee cityzun thet they gon' live in a clean town er my name ain't 'Reverend Rad Hadley.'"

That "reverend" thing was something new, but it gave some credence to the rumor out of the Post Office that Rad had sent off a money order for close to \$20 to get "ordained" in a California cult of some description. They said it was so he could gull the IRS and get by with it. Me, I really didn't know, but that was the tale that was going around. Knowing Rad like I did, I'd rather believe he did it so he could get the ministerial discount at the liquor store in Waycross.

When Ruby got through with his report, Rad got him a dingy, used envelope out of his hip pocket and began to make some notes.

"Okay, Ruby," he gloated, "you done good; an' here's what else we gon' do. Better git ready t'fix us some papers."

About that time, Dink's oldest girl, Dinkette, and her boyfriend, Tom Bob "Spider" Clegghorn, muscled their way through the diner from the kitchen, carrying a new sign for the front of

the building. It read, "Deacon Dink's Diner." Look like they had all got religion.

I'd like to say that we didn't turn out that sign at my shop. They must 'a got it done in Douglas. One thing I do know, though: Dink makes the world's worst coffee. I really hate to go in there.

Two days later, Rad's middle boy, Vernon Jackson "Speed" Hadley, along with some Mexican stoop labor Ruby had rounded up and sent down from Raymond City, appeared on the lately-rediscovered 100 foot square of ground. They began to lay a shaky-looking foundation for a small building.

They worked in a furtive hurry, as if they didn't want to be caught at it. But White Boy saw them before they got down from the truck, and he called Peaches and Dorace.

"Look! Something's about to happen that we aren't going to like," he predicted.

"But it's not Peaches' land," Dorace pointed out. "We can't help what they do on Town land."

White Boy continued to watch. And to worry.

In ten days' time, whatever they were building seemed to be finished, and later that same day, Rad, himself, came down and nailed a sign over the door that informed one and all that this new structure housed "Hadley's Mission."

This time, it was Dorace Morris Morris who waxed hot.

"That's Town property!" she fumed. "It's not Hadley's. He can't legally acquire Town property -- not by a long shot! And he most certainly can't use town property for his own operations."

But he had acquired it. Bought it from the Town of Tallulahcoochee, and paid Four Hundred Dollars for the privilege. The six council members looked on it as a damn good deal. Otherwise, it was just one more thing the Town had to worry with. Of course, they did tend to ignore the glaring fact that it was the mayor who had bought it and, in so doing, had violated every rule of law, ethical and otherwise, on the books.

But, bless my time, the mayor had signed an executive order, declaring the entire proceeds of the sale earmarked for councilmen's pay raises. It's hard to argue with self-interest.

All Night Long

Marcelene Dumas has been my girlfriend ever since she threw me a rope and saved me from drowning in the Withlacoochee River that Spring when we had all that rain.

I was down there watching the Coast Line train crew trying to salvage the cargo out of some boxcars that had gone in the water when the trestle gave way. Another part of the trestle that I was standing on broke loose and fell in the river, taking me with it.

Marcelene and two of her brothers were down there watching, too, and she said she was looking at me when I went down. She said she knew I couldn't swim by the way I was flailing, and she thought I was too cute to die.

It's such as that that forges unbreakable ties, and I have never been sorry. She says she hasn't, either.

Marcelene is, by some standards, a little on the hefty side, but, boy, she's light on her feet. I'd rather dance with her than anybody in the county. And pretty, oh, yes! Her hair is long and blond and curly, and it doesn't take long looking at her to forget that her big, brown eyes are crossed. Not a whole lot, though -- just a little bit. I figure as long as she's got one of them beauties focussed on me, my world is okay.

On this particular afternoon, we were down at Miss Peaches' Café having a beer and dancing to some Jerry Lee Lewis stuff on

the Wurlitzer - White Boy kept us a collection on the box, knowing how we loved to get out there and step around to such jewels as *Who's Gonna Play This Ol' Piano?* and *Another Place*, Another Time - while we waited for the gospel concert to start.

When some joker dumped a handful of dimes in the machine to play *Waltz Across Texas With You* eight times in a row, we decided to sit out a few. We strolled over to the bar where White Boy was examining one of the posters announcing the sing. I'd helped Walkman tack two hundred or more of them all over the county, and it must have been effective because a steady parade of cars was turning in just south of the Café. Mayo told us it had been like that since 3 o'clock that afternoon.

The families who were so unfortunate as to not have a pickup came rolling in with lawn chairs and blankets tied on top of their cars and drink coolers riding precariously on trunk lids and even on the bumpers. Most of pickup contingent had brought outdoor grilling equipment, and you could already smell the fragrant proof of supper being wrought by some experienced hands. Of course, Butterball Burroughs had fired up the Café barbecue pit the afternoon of the day before, so it didn't look like anybody was going hungry that night.

I thought the posters were right pretty - extravagant, four color eye-catchers, with pictures of the more famous of the performers. That kind of hype made them all sound good to me,

and I could hardly wait to settle in on a blanket in that damp, grassy field and let the music take me away. All the week, I'd thought about propping back with one arm around my baby and a cold beer in hand, and we planned to stay until the last note died away at sun-up.

The headliner group, as you might guess, was "Larry LaVonne Lovejoy & The Liberators." Their claim to fame was bound up in their motto: "The World's First Five-man Quartet." Larry preaches between numbers and lots of listeners have reputedly joined some sort of crusade or been healed of death-dealing ailments while he has paced and railed and admonished.

Close behind in name recognition was "Real Sweet Ruthie Mae & The Divinities." The flock ran, in number, from six to 14 comely female singers tearing it down to Ruthie Mae's mammoth, acoustic guitar; but the finished product always sounded exactly the same. HoJo Higgins had seen this sexy conglomeration before, and he'd asked Ruthie Mae how they decided who and how many would go on the road every time. Ruthie Mae told him it depended on who was at the house when the bus left.

"Twice Blessed" was a two-man outfit that specialized in sentimental gospel, I reckon you'd call it. Everett McClintock and Fred Allgood were mostly a colored carbon copy of Leroy Abernathy and Shorty Bradford, who rode the all-white circuit as "The Happy Two." Everything "Twice Blessed" sang was a "Happy

Two" original, but they copied real good, and kept a loyal following who wanted them to do it all again every time. There wasn't a gospel crowd anywhere that could get enough of their rendition of *Wait 'Til You See Me In My New Home*.

The act I was looking forward to was Deacon Hercules Wyson Paige who called himself a "Single Soul Singer," and booked in under the title, "One for the Road." I considered the name right catchy.

Something else that did me good was that "Cool Poole and the Frigid Airs" were going to do about a half-hour warm-up, so that when Peaches hit that stage for the official opener, the crowd would already be primed for a long, hot night of soul-saving music.

One of Cool's best touches was getting the crowd to sing along with *Just A Closer Walk With Thee*, while he blew his alto sax in that Johnny Hodges style that he's so good at. His band would be just dawdling about in the background, weaving in and out of the melody and never forgetting the beat.

I tell you, it wouldn't take much of that to make me leap up and go to hollering "Hallelujah!"

There were other tribes and more singles slated to do their stuff that night. Remember, we're talking about all night long.

Lutie Marie "38" Mason was mighty likely to sing the song she says her grandma wrote -- and taught her to sing -- after the

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Gladys Knight +
The Pips started in
1952, so this mention
should be ok

old soul was on the Other Side. And Wilbert "Cobra" Bascom and his Uncle Tate were certain to be there and sing *I've Been Talking on the Telephone to Jesus*. It was the only number they knew; but their perpetual practice had turned it into a sure-fire show-stopper.

I don't know how it happens, but HoJo, who I see every day, keeps current with a lot of things that I never hear about. For instance, he knows everything about the gospel singing world, even to a popular, mid-west family group that is new to this part of the country. He just about fell out when he saw their names on the posters.

They are this white couple, see, called Knowland and Knellie Knight who, along with their eight children (including two sets of twins), sing authentic black gospel. It's right hard to imagine but, according to this backwoods New-York Times music critic, HoJo, you'd think they were blood kin to the Pips.

The names of their vocalizing offspring -- Knaomi, Knorris, Knancy, Knimrod, Knoreen, Knoble, Knubie and the baby, Knovice -- gave me a start, but I got over that in a hurry in favor of marveling at their group handle, "The White Knight Lights."

I tell you, HoJo tells a lot of stuff that sounds like he makes it up; and then you find out he's been on the level all the time. It tends to keep me off-balance, but it sure contributes to my education.

Another thing about that night, the core appreciation assembly - what, under less righteous circumstances, we generally call "shills" - came in a bus of their own, and numbered in the dozens. They swarmed through the mob of clapping, swaying, sweating, singing-along, paying guests, selling 8 x 10, autographed glossy photographs of the various singers, and bright, plastic hand fans emblazoned with their own logo, "Groupies for Jesus."

First the Act, Then the Costume

When we walked up to the bar, Marcelene asked right off where Miss Peaches was, and White Boy said she's gone home to change into her new outfit bought just for the occasion.

His description of the costume really got Marcelene's attention. He said it was a floor-length dress made with nine layers of silver chiffon and that it had wide sleeves that looked like wings when Peaches raised her arms. Louvenia had brought her a lush, cubic zirconia tiara from Atlanta, along with a new, deep copper wig done in a modified upsweep with long, curly, neck tendrils.

Miss Peaches, being the hostess of the gospel sing, would appear, alone, on the outdoor stage before the singing got started and welcome everybody. Then, at sun-up, she would personally deliver the closing prayer, cutting out ol' Lovejoy and his never-ending tirade aimed at God, Who Lovejoy thinks is deaf.

By then, the sun was sinking pretty fast, and the performers' buses were beginning to trundle onto the grounds. Singers in various stages of dress and un-dress began to climb down from the smoking behemoths that had brought them, and go in search of something strong to drink. Their road managers were stomping into the Café by way of the back door, asking about

ticket sales and where they could set up their tables to display the inevitable collector-item merchandise.

Louvenia's Lincoln limo pulled up at the front door to let her out before her Taiwanese chauffeur, "Roadie," parked in the "Reserved for Cottondale" space.

She swept into the Cafe wearing a long, handsome, faux (meaning fake, but this one cost a bundle) sable coat over a figure-defining gold lame slip dress and a magnificent headpiece of tiny pearls, complete with bangs.

Women tend to catch the undertone of things before men do, and Marcelene kept pressing my hand in a funny way like she was trying to get me to pay attention to something. What, I couldn't figure. I was too busy noticing that White Boy actually stood up (something he doesn't do much of) when he saw Louvenia, and that she glided right to him like he was a magnet. They kept looking straight at one another, and I was doing what I could to take that in without being obvious.

"How 'bout a beer?" he asked her, speaking low, and it did seem like it was a question that was asking something else.

She answered him with a, "Umm-hmmmm," and I'll be dogged if he didn't go behind the bar and draw one for her, himself.

When he came back, they touched mugs and he said, "These are our salad days." She nodded.

Now what did all that mean?

We - that is, me and Marcelene - walked on out toward the concert area and she saw she'd have to fill me in.

"Did you notice her ring?"

"Oh, yeah. It was a nice one, wasn't it?"

"Nice? It was about the most expensive gold ring I ever saw. Lordy, it was pretty -- it had a flower design worked all through it."

Well, so what was she trying to tell me?

"Marcelene, sweetie, everything Louvenia's got is expensive and also pretty."

That's when she dropped the bomb on me.

"It's the same one Horace Morris was wearing on his pinkie for a few days last week."

"What? I didn't ever notice a ring on him."

"Well, he's been wearing one. And it was the same one she's wearing now.

"I happened to see Dorace Morris Morris take a little package to the post office Monday, and it was addressed to Louvenia in Atlanta. As luck would have it, Dora Mae "Do" Mae" Rowland noticed it, too, when it came through the P. O., and she told me that Horace Morris's return address was on the box. Honest, Baby. I'm not fooling you."

What a sweet girl I had. As far as fooling me, it'd never happen.

About that time, HoJo caught up with us and handed me some keys.

"I'm fixin' t'take Roadie down t'ketch th' train back t' Itlanta. His sustah gittin' marri't t'morrah, an' he's a ursher. How 'bout you drivin' Louvenia's cah home when dis thaing is ovuh?"

He cut me a sly look and added, "I 'magine somebiddy -- maybe, White Boy -- won't min' takin' her on t'd'house."

Before I could answer, he assured me, "I'll braing you back t'git yo' truck Mond'y."

I couldn't say anything except, "Okay." Come to think of it, it would be fun to drive my baby home in that big ol' cushmobile. I knew my truck would be all right there, because everybody in the county knew it was mine.

Riding Around for Freedom's Sake

Right around midnight, another bus slid onto the field, but it didn't create much of a stir. Walkman and HoJo, helping Mayo in the security detail for the night, eased over to check it out.

A stout, young, white guy, bearing a turn of what looked to me like the multi-page booklets we often decline to do at the shop (too much work for too little money), stepped off the bus and confronted Walkman.

Pressing one of the booklets against Walkman's chest, he shouted, "Break your chains, brother! Get your white oppressor off your poor, black back! Rise up and take charge of your destiny!"

A totally confused Walkman motioned HoJo, who had fallen back half-way to the bus to flirt with one of the Groupies for Jesus, and waited until he was beside him before he answered the new-comer.

"Say what?"

"You've got to vote, my friend! Vote! That's where it's at! – in the voting booth – and that's why they won't let you in! You can't eat with 'em, you can't succeed because of 'em and you can't vote against 'em, and we're here to help you get redress for the pain your white boss lays on you every day!"

Walkman turned to HoJo, puzzled.

"Peaches ain't white, is she?"

HoJo eyed the stranger who seemed so worked up. He'd never been exposed to this kind of rhetoric. He slowly went over his options: knock this character back on the bus, call White Boy to knock him back for him or just walk away. Neither way appealed to him a whole lot.

He stood there, reading the name tag on the guy's lapel. It said, Clayton T. Sebring, President, Voting Rights Now."

After a while, he asked, "You come to sing, Clayton?"

This was not going the way it usually did. Clayton pulled back a little, reached back and laid the booklets on the floor of the bus and tried again.

"You don't have to be afraid of me! I'm one of yours by choice! I refuse to claim part of the white race in a Country that treats its black citizens the way you are being treated! We are riding over this Great Land for the sake of Freedom, and we've come to lift you up from the mire and set you free from the degradation where the white devils have kept you for generations!"

Looked like his every sentence ended with an exclamation point. Funky.

About the time he finished that speech, Louvenia Cottondale, long-time black separatist, political activist, Cracker-hating executive director of BAC-BAC, stepped into the breach.

"Clayton," she said, her tone quiet but, by God, it was forceful, "I hung it up with BAC-BAC this morning. Your kind made me do it. I've come back home to stay, and we don't need you in Tallulahcoochee 'cause we're not in trouble. You got that? Turn that silly bus around and get it out of town before I call in some reinforcements to make you pray you had."

It was apparent that Clayton knew Louvenia. More, that Louvenia knew Clayton. He kind of snapped his mouth and started to turn toward the bus. But he just couldn't resist one more smart-ass word.

"Everybody knows you're sweet on some low-life, redneck Cracker, and that's why you cut out from BAC-BAC. Some of your friends are gonna be glad to know what kind of goddam white bitch you turned out to be."

Louvenia raised an eyebrow in a dismissing sort of gesture. "So what are you? A nigger bastard?"

And that's when that crazy sonofabitch pulled the gun and fired. Louvenia swayed a little, looked down at the gush of red staining her gold dress; but she kept on standing for a few moments and called, "Horace, Horace. . . ."

White Boy was running toward us, and he got there in time to catch Louvenia as she collapsed. Kneeling beside her, holding her hand, tears rushing down his face, he only whispered, "Louvenia, my love . . ." as he watched her die.

Packin' Up, Gettin' Ready to Go

Somebody used the Cafe phone to call the Tallulahcoochee Police Department to report what happened, but Toddy Timmons wasn't about to get into that. He got Sheriff Frankie Shanklin at Raymond City on the telephone (his radio was out of service) and alerted him.

"It ain't gone come as no surprise," he crowed to Frankie, "that they done had a damn killin' at that nigger jook. You jes' well come on down hyunh an' close that damn, stinkin' place like we been tryin' to gi'chu t'do.

"Anyhow, I got some papers t'serve on that ol', smart-mouther, nigger womern, an' I'm 'one need some back-up."

All Frankie answered was, "Be right there."

When Sheriff Shanklin reached the sing site, pandemonium was already under way. Twice Blessed were both sitting astride Clayton Sebring, punching him at regular intervals and he was yelling at top volume. Didn't seem like anybody heard him.

The singers' buses were cranked and running, and the performers were trying to gather their belongings and get out. Lights were still on at the stage, and grown folks were running, looking under the platform for sleeping kids and hollering for them to come on and get in the car, in the truck.

The Appenzellers and Tiz, Dorace and Glenn, who had been sitting down front on their lawn chairs reveling in Ruthie Mae's

tongue-in-cheek, guitar rendition of *The Devil Came Down to Georgia*, when the shooting took place, were unaware until HoJo came for the doctor. They all went, of course.

Horror stricken, they watched as Audie fell to his knees beside the still form. All he could do was to pronounce her dead.

Horace stood up, seemed to be deciding something, then moved toward the Cafe. He soon returned with her beautiful, new coat and tenderly covered her lifeless body, tucking the folds of her "sable" around her with infinite care.

That done, he sat down beside the body and held her hand -- the one wearing the new ring -- until the funeral home folks came for the body.

Close the Door to Heaven

Right at the beginning of the concert, Louvenia's piano man, Stuffy, had climbed up on the stage so he could sit in with some of the quartet's keyboard pickers.

By midnight, he was having such a good time, he didn't notice that something was going behind him, out on the field. So he didn't know about the shooting until Walkman went and got him. He kept listening, looking at Walkman like he must be crazy or drunk or something worse. But the two of them went right on walking down toward the death scene.

When he got about 30 feet from the center of it all, he stopped and dropped down on his haunches, taking in Sheriff Shanklin and his rough cuffing of Sebring, and his even rougher rolling him into the back of his cruiser; taking in Audie's getting up from the grass, shaking his head; taking in White Boy's coming back with the coat.

When it looked like he'd seen enough, he got up and started walking toward the Cafe. Marcelene and I couldn't help but follow him -- you never know what people are gonna do, you know.

He walked right in the Café, went over to the piano and sat down, just like he always did. He laced his fingers together and bent them backward and forward a time or two, and then he touched the keys.

We had tip-toed in and slid down behind the bar, close together on the leather fainting couch that Louvenia had given Peaches for a Café Opening present. We tried not to make a sound; not even breathe deep.

When Stuffy got with that piano, I tell you I've never heard such mournful blues played in my lifetime. It was slow and aching and unbearably bitter - a whole lot more heart-breaking than tears could ever be.

Still, tears were pouring down Marcelene's face like a salty waterfall, and before long, I realized I had the same problem. Look like we just couldn't stem the tide.

Stuffy went on playing that hurting, haunting blues for maybe half an hour, not paying any attention to the ruckus going on outside; he might not have heard it, the way he was playing. Then, we heard the back door being slammed open, and could hear some of that official, foul-mouthed ranting moving on in to where we were. Toddy Timmons and three ragtag civilians that he'd "debby-tized" busted in and Toddy hollered, "Ever'bidy freeze!"

Stuffy didn't turn around. He just lifted his hands off the keys and sat there. Me and Marcelene sat where we were, too, until one of Toddy's smarter accomplices found the main light switch and flipped it on. Toddy, caught off guard, yanked his

revolver out of its holster and yelled, "Up agin's' th' wall,
goddam drag-ass scum bags!" The three of us complied.

When he saw who it was, and was convinced none of us were
black, he just kind of cussed us out the back door and slammed it
behind us.

We stood out there on the grass and watched that fearsome
foursome padlock the Cafe, front and back, and nail up Mayor
Hadley's Official Order that closed down our haven.

This time, tears couldn't reach the pain.

Crime Doesn't Pay Everybody

Me and Marcelene walked on around to the front of the Café and got in Louvenia's car. Looked like we had to get it away from there, so I drove my baby on home and went home, myself.

HoJo came over right after daylight to tell me what went on at the jail after he and Mayo and Walkman had helped Sheriff Shanklin incarcerate Sebring and his bus-riding associates. Then we decided to go on and get my truck.

Surprise! When we got to the Café, my truck wasn't there. We got out and walked around the place, and read for the first time Mayor Hadley's order that was fastened to the doors, front and back. It said that the Café was in violation of a Town Ordinance in that it was located within 500 feet of a church.

HoJo was livid. Far as that, I was livid. The Café had been in business on that same ground since 1927, and the little shack that Hadley slung up there on the corner was strictly new to the neighborhood. How could he get away with such as that?

We also found a copy of the order under the windshield wiper of Peaches' Dodge "scoop" that was parked under shed

beside the Café. Toddy Timmons hadn't had the gall to confront Peaches, herself.

We read all of that, too, and it said there would be hearing at the Town Hall 30 days hence. This was one hearing I meant to attend. In the meantime, we thought Peaches ought to have these papers, and we went by her place, leaving them off with Walkman. He hadn't been to bed, but he was sitting on the front steps, waiting for them to need him.

Then we drove on up to the Town Hall so I could report my truck stolen. I cursed the thief all the way.

Bobby "Stagger Lee" Martin, the vagrant that pays his ongoing drunk & disorderly fines by cleaning up at the Hall, told us nobody was inside. He said they were all wore out from events of the night before. He also said my truck was not stolen at all. Merely impounded.

Say what?

He said Toddy had ordered one of his "debbydies" to hot-wire my good old truck and drive it to town, where it was hitched up to a wrecker and hauled to Winchester.

"See," he explained, bearing down on that ignorant coloration of reasoning that infects folks like that,
"Coochee ain't got no impound lot 'a hits own."

"Since when have we got wrecker service, either?" I asked him.

"Well, they seen we had t'have it, onc't thet thair Abandoned Vee-hick-le Ordinance come inta effec'. Tha's why Sharkey - y'know Sharkey Hadley - bought hisse'f a wrecker.

So he could take care uv it."

Quoting Toddy, he allowed that the rightful owner - with positive proof of ownership - could claim it any time after Wednesday, since that's how long it would take the GBI to have their crime-busters examine it.

"I tell ya this much," this newly-minted Supreme Court Justice went on, "if they's been a crime commidded wi' thet hair truck, 'Coochee gits t'keep it after th' GBI gits done."

"Take me back to my house, HoJo," I spat at him, like he was the miscreant. "I'm going after my goddam truck today! Right now!"

"Man, they ain't gonna let you have no truck on Sunday," he counseled. "If you can wait, I'll take you up yonder Thursday, and we'll get your old piece of truck. 'Til then, you might as well keep Louvenia's car an' drive it. Excuse me, but she ain't gonna care."

I couldn't do it. I went to the pack house and got out my old newspaper route bicycle, walked it down to Elwood

"Big L" Saddler's Sinclair station for air in the tires, and rode it back to the house. I could go back-and-to to work on that for a day or so.

Marcelene tells me that you just make a fool out of yourself when you get mad with crooks and crazies. When I got home, I knew damn well if I looked in the mirror, I'd be looking at the biggest, straight-out fool on Planet Earth.

I got my truck back on Thursday, but not until I forked over a damn pile of money to the rogue cops up at

Winchester. First, there was their "regular impound fee" off \$150; "out-of-county service" added \$50 to that, plus 78 cents a mile for "in-bound transportation." Storage mounted up at the rate of \$35 a day, and the tankful of gasoline they'd put in it was nothing but premium grade that ran to \$5.10 a gallon. I mentioned that I'd filled up the tank just before we went to the café on Saturday night, and Sherlock Holmes, there, suggested that I probably had a leak in my tank.

Sonofabit.

"Trouble in Mind, I'm Blue . . ."

Peaches' reaction to Louvenia's death was the strangest of all. She stood beside the sable-covered body of her beloved, late sister-in-law until the ambulance came, and never cried a tear.

Her lovely, silver dress was ruined from the dew, the grass stains, the blood. High-heeled sandals were in tatters, wig askew, tiara lying forgotten on the ground beside the sable coat. Peaches took no notice.

The only words anybody heard her utter were, "I wisht Charlie was here."

When the ambulance rolled in and the body was lifted onto the guerneY, Peaches reached out for White Boy's hand.

"He'p me up in th' am-ba-lance," she directed, having, for the moment, abandoned Tiz's elocution lessons.

"Peaches," he said, "don't do this. She wouldn't want you to go with her body to the funeral home."

"Yeah, she would, Baby, and I'm goin'. You wanna go?" That's how it came to be that Peaches and White Boy rode in the vehicle that carried their still and silent treasure to Booker T. Carnegie's Home for Funerals.

And that's how they missed the arrival of Constable Toddy Timmons, armed with a citation signed by the mayor that padlocked the Café until further notice.

Dorace Morris Morris, Glenn Marriss Morris, together with Lorelei and Tiz, had left with Dr. Appenzeller, who had an emergency call to the hospital. And HoJo and Mayo and Walkman had been pressed into service by Sheriff Shanklin to help get the 19 Voting Rights Now bus riders to the jail in Raymond City.

A weary and heartsick Dorace Morris Morris showed up, alone, at the Café early on Sunday morning. With an elaborate, black, mourning wreath, she carefully and deliberately obscured the official padlock on the front door and went on back home.

Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down

When Louvenia came to town, she always stayed with Tiz and HoJo in the guest house, where they had lived since their marriage. Then, when Stuffy joined the group, he often stayed there, too. There was plenty of room.

Mayor Hadley, among others, found it unseemly that such an arrangement could go on, right under their noses, in their moral, segregated hometown. But Lorelei Morris -- later Appenzeller -- could not be dealt with in ordinary ways. They had to content themselves with cursing her behind their hands, and hoping for some dark and despicable end to overtake her.

Somewhat like it, in a way, but not quite as bad, was her letting that grown boy of hers, Horace Morris, hang out at that hell-fired café, day and night, like he was one of them damn niggers. God only knew what they did down there. Besides that, he still lived right there at home. And not a job, nor anything, in his whole life.

The reality that put the defamers in a bind was that they had loved and needed Horace Morris's doctor-daddy, and they had been obliged to transfer that love and need to his step-daddy, Audie Appenzeller. To ice the cake, the infamous Lorelei enthusiastically organized and tirelessly

participated in every conceivable do-good project anybody could name.

I tell you, small town hating is a perilous proposition. As far as I'm concerned, my life would have been just a day-to-day bore and a hard-luck bungle if it hadn't been for the Café and Peaches and the Morrises and the Appenzellers, and all the bunch. Me and Marcelene talk about that a little bit these days, but all we really got now is memories. Things have changed.

The change, of course, was signalled by Louvenia's death, something none of us could have foreseen, and something we could not un-do.

The morning after that defining event, Horace Morris and Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris, along with Charlie Porter -- who had missed the events of the night before, being on duty at Moody Field, like he was -- and ever-faithful Tiz, gathered around Peaches at the guesthouse to comfort one another and to plan the funeral.

Walkman and HoJo stood around in the yard, not feeling up to a crowd that morning -- they'd been through too much the night before. But they wanted to let the others know they were available. That is, hadn't deserted them in their hour of need. Snapper and Glass Eye were already there, and they all just nodded at one another in silent brotherhood.

By the time the first round of strong, black coffee had been poured, Lorelei and Audie came walking in. Since he had been at the hospital for most of the night, the two of them weren't really expected.

Audie, always the very essence of steady control, exerted an immediate sense of decisive purpose to the group. Peaches, for the first time since she heard the gunfire that effectively ended her own life, began to be comforted by their presence.

Lorelei rushed to her and embraced her; then they sat down together on the sofa, holding hands real tight.

Audie just walked around the room some before he spoke.

"I don't want you to think we're trying to be high-handed about this terrible tragedy," says the doc, "but we'd like to make an offer. Will you let Louvenia's body lie in state at our house? And could we have her funeral there? Maybe, on the porch, so we can accommodate the crowd?"

Horace Morris looked up at his step-daddy. He'd loved this man ever since he was four years old -- that is, since he married Mama. But he's always thought Audie was not overjoyed at his unbreakable ties with Peaches, nor at his caring for Louvenia. He caught Audie's eye and winked. And then he got up and went over to Audie and kissed him. It's

the thing none but a Horace Morris would do. White Boy, he was what we call an original.

Agreement swept the room. Not a soul objected, especially seeing as how it had been with Louvenia and Horace Morris.

Going Home in Style

By the time I picked up my girlfriend, Marcelene, and we got to the Morris-Appenzeller house, the body had already been moved to the verandah and the Steinway studio piano had been brought from the guest house. Flowers were banked over the entire porch, almost floor to ceiling, and extending down both sides of the house to the north and south garden gates.

I parked my truck behind the guesthouse and we took the cobblestone path back around to the front. Marcelene is as bad as I am about wanting to look at big cars, and that day we had plenty to look at.

Louvenia's Atlanta friends must have all been millionaires if we can judge by how they cruised into 'Coochee. It was just one show car after another, some of them in colors you just don't see put on cars. My favorite was a Dusenberg touring car in a soft French blue with navy fenders and fender-well wheel covers. The leather inside was kind of off-white -- Marcelene called it "champagne" -- and you could just look at it and feel pampered.

Of course, all the stretch limos were top-notch, such as the one in a deep, velvety, forest green with an iridescent silver dragon lounging across the entire hood.

I couldn't wait to see how the programs were going over. Me and HoJo had busted our tails getting them just right, and Glenn Marriss Morris had stayed with us the whole time, seeing that we didn't vary from his fine design work. They were done on heavy, antique gold stock and the imprint was vividly purple. A glamour photograph of Louvenia adorned the cover, along with her birth and death dates, and just one line under that that read, "Angels Guide and Protect Our Darling."

Every time I checked the copy, I cried. That afternoon, I could see lots of tears falling on the programs, so I figured we did all right.

Harbinger Godchild Fluco, whose mama had wanted – and got – a preacher son, had been brought back in from DeLand, Florida to be the main conductor. He was garbed out in a white, tailed coat, white, pleated and tapered trousers, black, plain-fronted shirt with a gold ascot and black, patent leather slippers. A huge, square-cut diamond ring covered a whole joint of his left middle finger and a diamond bracelet peeked from under his right, French-cuffed sleeve, nicely complementing his square-cut diamond cuff links. On his head was a brilliant, red satin cap reminiscent of a yarmulke.

The reverend was fairly light-skinned, with a wide mouth and a set of the whitest, square teeth you'd want to find in a man's mouth. On first glance - which was a side view - I'd somehow missed his mystical, "third eye" representation, carried out by way of a generously proportioned ruby set in the middle of his forehead.

I already knew he was gonna make me cry.

Louvenia's funeral was a movie. Nothing touched reality at any point.

Horace Morris showed up wearing a pearl-gray silk suit, a black organza shirt with a band collar and black, Italian, sealskin boots. His wild, blond hair was brushed to a sheen and tamed with an ebony clasp. Gold cuff links sported square jade settings.

His expression was as bland as if he's come to an afternoon tea with a new girl on his arm.

His mother, Lorelei, was clad in a long, sleeveless, black chiffon dress with a sheer black cape and unadorned, black silk pumps. She bore the same, still facial expression of disinterested expectation.

She was escorted by her equally controlled, doctor-husband, Audie Appenzeller, who wore a charcoal linen suit, pale blue, French-cuffed shirt and black, thin-soled slippers.

Peaches' attire was more along the lines of a May Day queen -- a white, multi-layered, silk dress, pale pink sandals, the copper wig (re-dressed since last Saturday night) that Louvenia had brought her for the sing and a circle of tiny, fresh, sweetheart roses on her head.

Louvenia's close group from out of town were attired in equally restrained finery, and not a damn one of them gave the outsiders the slightest opportune instance to laugh and point.

Dorace Morris Morris, true to her Cafe days, was spectacular in her black silk jodhpur pants, white, embroidered, Egyptian cotton shirt, black velvet vest, moleskin boots and white silk gloves. She carried a white velour hat. Her husband, Glenn Marriss Morris, bore up handsomely in his black, Summer-weight wool suit, white silk brocade shirt and black silk bow tie. His cuff links were gold with ruby insets.

Tiz, bless her faithful heart, had on a dark blue, floor-length chiffon dress with a pale blue, veiled hat and matching shoes. She was carrying some white string gloves and a white, pleated lace hand fan.

Of course, Henry and Princess Amy, unwilling to let an occasion go by without making a mark, stole the show. She had on a lavender moire dhashiki, pearlized pumps with

square gold buckles, a spectacular, broad-brimmed, purple organza hat, long, purple lace gloves, her trademark Solomonic amulet and some heavy gold earrings that brushed her shoulders.

Her Henry looked like an ambassador in his striped pants, black silk moire waistcoat, white silk, tuck-fronted shirt, black silk ascot, black velvet vest and matching velvet shoes. He was also the only male figure there, except the morticians, wearing gloves; his were gray silk.

The musicians' costumes played right into the theme.

The Divinities were outfitted in pale gold chiffon dresses with handkerchief hems and high-heeled, golden slippers; Real Sweet Ruthie Mae provided a foil in her identically-fashioned dress, but hers was a deep, brilliant gold.

Stuffy, I have to say, met every Louvenia requirement: white linen suit, dark blue, tuck-fronted shirt -- buttoned, but no tie -- dark blue Italian boots, and a long, white, fringed silk scarf, looped loosely around his shoulders and touching his boots when he walked.

HoJo and Walkman, Snapper and Glass Eye and me and Marcelene just wore our regular funeral clothes. I hope nobody thought we were being disrespectful of our late friend, Louvenia.

I've often wished I could have taken a photograph of all of them right then, but the memory is as clearly etched in my mind as if I had.

What bothers me the most is how it must have been for them when it was all over, and they got by themselves.

Anguish like theirs - and mine and Marcelene's - is hard to bear.

Play It Again, Stuffy

The Reverend Fluco strode purposefully to the black-draped lectern, raised both arms high and, in a voice deep and strong, implored the Deity:

"Almighty, Eternal, Most Holy Father, forgive us our ignorance as we grieve for one of Your own who has joined You in the glories of Paradise. Instead of Holy rejoicing, we choose to weep; instead of crying, 'Hallelujah,' we bend down to suffering; instead of praising You for Your unfailing perfection, we sink into the mire of recrimination. Grant us mercy in our stupor, grace in our unbelief and understanding in our loss. Amen. And Amen."

Marcelene told me later it was his declaration of independence from grief, and she might have been right. But it didn't keep one tear from falling. Not one of mine, anyway.

That's when I noticed that Stuffy was poised at the piano and, as soon as the rev concluded his opener, he laced his fingers together, bent them backward and forward, and touched the keys. I caught my breath! My God, he was playing their show.

You remember, Fool Number One was their opener, and he went through it just like she was there, singing it. He

followed it with Ridin' Around With the Crackers and Lord, I
Wish I had It Like My Sister-in-Law.

He played Gritsville, Where the Re-Action Is and You
Can't Keep A Bad Man Down and I Had Enough of Them Good, Ol'
Days in 1929. He worked right on through Pore In Style, not
to mention Philadelphia, U. S. A. and Independent
Businessmen and that destined-to-be-a-classic, Callin' Moody
Field.

Well, I lost track of what all he laid out there but,
finally, he swept back into Fool Number One and played it
through one more time. When that last note quit echoing, he
stood up and closed the piano. I never saw anything seem so
final in my life.

Right after that, all 14 of the Divinities took center
stage to close-harmonize on something that almost proved my
undoing:

Real Sweet Ruthie Mae's delicate, somber guitar riff
guided them into:

"When I get to Heaven, I'll be so glad that I kept the
faith, and was true;

First, I want to see my Lord and King, and then I
Want to See You.

I won't ask God for a mansion of gold; my heavenly
wants will be few:

I just want to see my Lord and King, and then I Want to
See You.

Each time I lift up my heart in a prayer,

I always ask Him to let you be there

When I get to Heaven, my tears will be gone; He said
it, and I know it's true,

But Heaven won't be perfect for me unless I can see
you."

Real Sweet Ruthie Mae stepped lightly back to the front
of the porch and played a mournful interlude on her big, old
guitar that sounded a whole lot like that queen of the
acoustic strings, Sister Rosetta Tharpe. And then her girls
moved back in with,

"I want to walk down that heavenly avenue,

But I know I'll be lonesome if I'm not with you;

When I get to Heaven, I know I can't cry, not even a
tear or two,

But I'll know the pain of a heartbreak again unless I
can see you."

Marcelene just broke down, sobbing and wailing and
clinging to me like I was the last of the lifesavers. And
God help me, some of that loudest grieving was coming from
me.

When they were done, Stuffy, who had been standing there all the time by the piano, just walked into the house and down the hall and out the back door.

My guess was that we'd never see him again, and that I'd always be sorry I didn't ever find out his last name.

Bound for Glory

The Reverend Fluco was nothing if not wise to timing.

He returned to the lectern, but he let the unrestrained amongst us have a brief interlude to pull ourselves together before he said a word. When he said it, it was a shocker.

"NO!" he hollered, arms raised.

And again, "NO!"

He paused, leaned forward and whispered, "She can't be gone!"

He drew back, letting that sink in.

"Ah, but you see she's not here.

"Sister Louvenia Savannah Georgia Cottondale, born

November 18, 1943, perished in body on Saturday night, July 20, 1966. She IS gone! Did you see her last Saturday

night? Yes, you did. Did you see her last Sunday morning?

No, you did not. She took her leave of this world before that blessed Sunday ever dawned.

"Sisters and brothers, before you shed another tear, let's talk about WHERE she has gone. But first, let's muse about why she left. Do you think she quit this world at the hand of a wicked man? Do you think, if it hadn't been for him, she would be with us today? Do you imagine that God

had slipped out to a supper club for a little R&R, and He got to enjoying the floor show and didn't see that gun?

"Can you dare to suspend your lamentations long enough to realize that the Almighty Power used that occasion to teach a hard lesson to a poor, midguided soul who must now deal with God, Himself? And who must now confront the hard choices -- do liberating penance before a Just but Loving Father, or take the low, rocky road to eternal damnation? You know God has to work with all of us -- even the vilest amongst us -- one at a time.

Let's look at this thing another way: Sister Louvenia brightened up many of your lives, didn't she? She was beautiful to look upon and gracious to be around; she could sing like a nightingale, and make you laugh till you cried. She had intelligence and taste and a strong personal sense of righteousness. The absence of her makes you remember all that she meant to you; makes you want to cry out, and to hurt somebody for taking your beloved.

"Listen to me, my friends, God is not in the mistake business! He knows all about Sister Louvenia and her talents -- He gave them to her, remember? -- and He knows how much you love her. No matter, for you surely know she had her own allotment of time for earthly doings, just like you and me. Her timetable was set by God, Himself, before

she manifested on this plane. Her time was up last Saturday night.

"So, she's gone -- our unique, wonderful Sister Louvenia. I'm here to assure you that she hasn't gone all that far. She's gone just one step higher, just one universe wider, into the everlasting joy of the Lord.

"Don't close yourself away in grief and dismay, you who are left behind, for you shall join her by and by, and the reunion will be happier than you can ever foretell in your pitiful, earthly imaginings.

"Here's what He said, 'Call upon Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you.' God is as good as His word, every time.

"Bereaved sisters and brothers, I know you are troubled; He knows you are troubled. And He know that no trouble seems so grave, no tears so bitter as the trouble and tears of a broken heart trying to cope with the awesome spectre of death.

"Take comfort in the faith, dearly beloved. Have you forgot that Jesus has already conquered death? If you remember, dry your tears. Restoration is at hand, strength is ours to claim, peace is on our agenda, because God holds our salvation safely in His Eternal Grasp."

He stepped across the porch in an exaggerated gait, whirled at the edge and cried in a loud voice, "Sister Louvenia! Slip your pretty, black hand in the blessed hand of Jesus, the Christ, and step into the Light of Glory with Him at your side! Praise the Lord!"

Turning back to mere mortals, he frowned down upon us all.

"If you have the courage to lift your blind eyes and the will to open your hardened hearts, join me in saying to our dear, departed sister, 'Beloved Louvenia, we wish you Godspeed on your way home! Praise God and don't look back! Hallelujah!'"

The wailing had stopped somewhere in there, and every eye was riveted on the Reverend Fluco.

"SAY IT!" he yelled. "I said, 'SAY IT!'"

And believe me, we all said it -- "Beloved Louvenia, we wish you Godspeed on your way . . ."

Real Sweet Ruthie Mae and the Divinities eased in behind us as we spoke in unison, backing us up with softly lamenting guitar and harmonized humming. When we finished, they broke out with "More Than All," never letting up until the casket was safely ensconced in the hearse and the mourners, to the last one, had been escorted to their waiting automobiles.

That is, all except me and Marcelene. After the others had gone, we struggled up from our chairs and helped one another back to the truck. I just couldn't go to the cemetery.

I drove us on over into Lolacolola county, looking for a quiet little spot. Finally, I pulled the truck up onto a grassy outcropping down by the Alapaha River and we sat there, holding hands, and watched the sun go down.

Thinking back to what White Boy said to Louvenia on the night she died, I realized our salad days were over.

Hear Ye, Hear Ye, Court Is Now In Session

No matter how you fix it in your mind, a day in court finally rolls around. Marcelene brought us a couple of egg salad sandwiches and two milkshakes from the drug store that afternoon so we could eat something quick and get on over to the Town Hall for the hearing on Miss Peaches' Café de Lite.

We could see the Hall from my shop window, and people started flocking in over there around six o'clock although the hearing was set for seven. I guess they wanted to get inside and grab a seat. Seating promised to be a problem since everybody in town wanted to be there, and the place wasn't near big enough to accommodate them.

I would prefer to stand, myself, since I couldn't take a chance on sitting next to some slab-sided gorilla that wanted the Café closed. It's probably more illegal to kill somebody in the Hall than it is out on the streets.

We didn't start out until we saw the Appenzeller car drive up and all the bunch begin to get out. Horace Morris and Peaches and Tiz climbed out of the back seat and Audie and Lorelei got out the front. I saw HoJo's truck pull up behind them, and he and Walkman and Snapper piled out.

Glass Eye came sliding up on his ol' clatterbox motorcycle,

and Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris came in sight, walking across the street from We Party. Looked like the defense had its quorum.

When they cut on the lights in the Hall, we could see Mayor Hadley, Ruby McClintock, Sharky Hadley, Dink Hadley, Dinkette Hadley, Spider Clegghorn and old man Richard P. Q. "Ducky" Dawkins, the tax assessor, all milling around, and all looking a right smart uneasy. Bastards.

Once the town clock struck seven, everybody was in that could get in. The rest of them - and it was a mob - were pressed against one another, jockeying for space at the opening of the double doors, craning to see, and shushing each other so they could hear.

Mayor Hadley slams his gavel down on his desk and calls for order, saying that this hearing is about deciding to close down a nuisance in town. Then, he tells Ruby to read the complaint against Miss Peaches' Café de Lite.

Ruby, he murmurs on and on, and I never can hear too much of what he is saying. But I am pretty far back in the crowd. It was something about the Café being in violation because it was situated within 500 feet of a Christian mission. The same being illegal, he says.

When he quits jawing, Mayor Hadley asks the six councilmen if any of them have anything to say. They sit

there, to a man, with their eyes down on the tabletop and never say a mumbling word.

Then, Mayor Hadley says that, since he owns the mission in question, he has been advised by Ruby that he has a conflict of interest and cannot rule on the issue. So, in the interest of fairness, he's asked an impartial judge, Ducky Dawkins, to take over and make the decision.

Marcelene whispers in my ear, "Ducky is married to Rad's wife's sister, "Two-Step" -- used to be Clorine Rudesel before she married. And besides, Ducky runs Rad's logging business up around Ocilla."

I love it when that kind goes to advertising ethics.

Ducky takes Hadley's chair and then he bangs the gavel.

"Anybidy got air thaing t'say about closin' thi' chyre colored café thet is constytewtin' a newsnce in ar' town?"

Mayor Hadley raises his hand.

"Yer honor, I'd lov't' say thet tryin' t'have servises at m'mission is jest about IM-possible. We cain't never tell when a stray bullet's gon' take out one'a our Christian breth'ern. Hit's a longshot chaince we cain't keep on a-takin'."

There is some scattered, half-hearted applause, and he forges ahead.

"We jes' found out this week thet thet there café is built on wetlands, an' th' envir'a-mental folks in Itlanter's gon' git after 'em fer that. I know that's so 'cause Chief Toddy Timmons e-fficially r'reported t'me tht some 'a them folks a-settin' down there fer tht dern gossipel saing wuz plumb wet when they got up off'a tht grass."

Dinkette and Spider offer a few desultory hand claps.

"An', now! Now, they've went t'de-facin' ar' mission.

They been a-breakin' in ar' house'a worship an' a-writin' racial slurs on th'walls."

You remember it was Dorace Morris Morris who spearheaded the Cussin Room at the Café. More, you remember that Dorace Morris Morris has never, in all her sweet life, ever been heard to speak so much as a slang word, say nothing of having resorted to profanity.

Everybody changes with time.

Dorace Morris Morris rises from the window sill where she has been sitting at the back of the hall, strides to the front and leans down to stare into the mottled face of Mayor Hadley. When she's sure she's got his eye, she yells loud enough to be heard to Alapaha.

"That's a lyin' crock, you low-runnin' sonofabitch!"

Glass Eye is suddenly galvanized into a public display.

"Hush yo' mouf, Baby Sustuh!"

And the crowd, already wrapped tight, begins to laugh and holler and applaud.

Police Chief Tom Mix "Toddy" Timmons, whose daddy was a one-term sheriff in earlier times, bustles around the table and confronts Dorace.

"Them's fightin' words in Tallulahcoochee, an' yer under arrest fer disturbin' th' peace an' also udderin' fightin' words."

A totally in-control Dorace Morris Morris eyes him calmly and firmly declares, "You're one, too, you fat jackass."

You might not believe this, but not one soul in that place moved or said a word. They just sat, looking on, like this was a stage play.

Dorace Morris Morris, she stands there real easy, acting like she's interested in watching his official maneuvering as he fumbles for his rusty handcuffs and awkwardly fastens them upon her wrists.

Once she's cuffed, Toddy seems unsure of the procedure.

"Lock 'er up!" yells Mayor Hadley.

"Whur 'm ah gone putt 'er, Mayor?"

The reverend-mayor, stung by her words and by the suggestion of disfavor toward him amongst the crowd, is now on fire for justice.

"I don't give a rat's ass damn whur y'putt 'er -- goddam it, jes' PUTT 'er!"

Toddy gingerly takes her arm and walks his compliant prisoner out the side door to his cruiser. He'll be obliged to take her to Raymond City since 'Coochee has no detention facility.

He wonders if the mayor forgot about that.

If I Had the Wings of an Angel

Being in two places at the same time is getting too hard for me to handle, so me and Marcelene decided that Raymond City would offer us the best chance to stay ahead of this mess. We slipped out through the crowd at the Hall and ran, hand-in-hand, back to the shop for my truck.

We passed Toddy's smoking, gasping cruiser before he got to the Russellville Still Road. He was hustling that old sedan like he was on an emergency call, but his act wasn't very effective, even with his one blue light daring the darkness.

We pulled in at the Little Dixie station until he could catch up, and then followed him on around to the jail that's at the back of the courthouse.

Franklin Eugene "Frankie" Shanklin, as you know, is sheriff of Kyle Corbett County, and he enjoys a kind of semi-friendly, ongoing battle with the 'Coochee P. D. We were hoping Frankie would be there when Toddy showed up and, thank God, he was. Sitting in his outer office, one boot off and his sock foot propped on top of his oak desk, Frankie wasn't exactly looking for trouble that night.

When he saw who was fixing to disturb his reverie, he slid his boot back on and stood up. The very words, "Todd Timmons," were synonymous with "screw-up."

So here comes a scowling Todd with his prominent, blond lady prisoner in tow.

Frankie sighed. What now?

When Todd tries to tell him what has happened, Frankie just loses it and busting out laughing. Deputy Geraldine "Hot Spot" Amerson, his dispatcher, comes out of the other office to ask what's going on and Shanklin, between fits of whooping, tells her.

"Dorace Morris Morris, here, called Rad Hadley a low-runnin' sonuvabitch tonight, right in Council meeting -- he pauses to laugh some more, almost losing his breath before he goes on, "She told Todd, here, that he was one, too, and then called him a fat jackass . . ."

Shanklin might have been tickled, but not a circumstance to the screams of appreciative laughter that issue from Amerson.

In the meantime, our still-cuffed Dorace Morris Morris has walked over to the sheriff's chair and sat down behind his desk. She opens the middle drawer, searches around in there and comes out with a little key - you got it, a handcuff key. She sets about unlocking her restraints and,

when she's loose, she returns the key to the drawer and flings the 'Coochee cuffs in the metal trash bin beside the desk. Toddy is so caught up in being mortified by the mirth that he doesn't so much as turn around.

Dorace Morris Morris then pulls open a bottom drawer where she props her booted "pedal extremities," as Fats Waller used to say. She leans back in the sheriff's rocking swivel chair, laces her hands behind her head and joins in the laughter.

Toddy just stands around, waiting for them to get through laughing. When they finally subside, he lays out his thorny problem that he wants them to solve.

"You know we ain't got no place t'putt pris'ners," he whines, "'speshly no dern females, an' th' county's done promised we cou'd use yore facilties. So you gotta lock 'er up. Right now."

Shanklin switches immediately to his practiced, bogus-reasonable voice to respond to the demand.

"Well, I tell ya, Toddy, our jail is as full as a tick right now -- they ain't room fer nair 'nuther pris'ner. I would'nt mind t'commode ya, but ya know them federalis is awready been on my tail about overcrowdin', an' I jes' cain't take th' chance. I'm sorry as a feller can be, but

that's th' way it is. You gonna havta take this here pris'ner t'Waycross, I reckon."

Toddy Timmons knows good and well that Mayor Hadley won't stand still for a trip clean to Waycross, even if the cruiser would hold together for that many miles. His heart sinks. If he doesn't lock her up, there'll be hell to pay; and if he takes her all the way to Waycross, there'll damn sure to be hell to pay.

"How 'bout Lolacolola County?" Shanklin asks, focussing his eyes on the ceiling to keep from exploding with suppressed laughter. "Sheriff Royster might have a little room he could letcha have."

"Not there," says Toddy. "Off limits."

"Are ya'll still buttin' heads 'cause Deputy O'Steen took yore mayor an' his baby brother, Dink, in fer drunk an' disorderly, an' kept 'em overnight? That 'uz two or three years ago, wuzn't it."

"I tol' you: off limits."

Shanklin, he just can't stop.

"He mighta let 'em go if Dink hadn't pulled that damn .22 pistol on 'im."

Toddy is so busy squirming under Frankie's heckling that he doesn't notice Dorace Morris Morris casually walking past him, wiggling her fingers at the sheriff, and on into

the radio room where Hot Spot is sitting, taking it all in and still laughing.

They listen and giggle while Toddy does a lot of backing and filling about Rad and Dink, and they hear him fall back to his original subject. By then, he's openly pleading.

"Well, kin you jes' keep 'er 'til mornin'? I bet some 'a them damn Morrises'll putt up 'er bail money by then, an' so we'll all be in th' clair."

Frankie nods slowly, as if he's weighing the enormous cost of being a pal to his 'Coochee neighbors.

"Awright. But, Toddy, by God, you owe me one, y'hear?"

Toddy turns and starts out before he remembers Dorace Morris Morris, and panics.

"Whur's m'damn pris'ner?" he hollers.

"Go on home, Toddy," says Frankie, "I'll find 'er."

Toddy hadn't more than backed into the road before

Glenn Marriss Morris comes walking in through the courthouse corridor.

"Hey, here, Frankie," he says to the sheriff, "I thought Toddy was going to spend the night with you."

They laugh and shake hands, and Dorace Morris Morris gets up and goes over to where they're standing. Glenn Marriss Morris puts his arm around her.

"Somebody told me you didn't swear," he teases.

"I'm havin' a medal struck fer 'er," says Frankie, and they all laugh some more.

"Are you going to set her bond, Sheriff? If so, how much?" That was Glenn Marriss Morris, reaching for his wallet.

"Yeah, tha's m'job, Glenn. Since she's got ties t' th' community, I reckon she ain't gon' run. That ortta cuddown on 'er bond some. Tell ya sumpin else -- my faingerprint man is off t'night, an' so is m'pitchur-takin' guy, so I ain't gone be able t'print 'er ner mug 'er like we always do them crim'nal types. How 'bout, say, oh, 'bout Five Dollars fer 'er bail? Kin ya come up wi'that? If ya cain't, I'll stretch a point an' take a IOU."

Glenn Marriss Morris selects him a five-spot from his wallet and hands it over to Frankie.

"Ya want a receipt?"

"Nah, that's all right."

"Say Glenn, how 'bout takin' them damn rusted-out cuffs back t' Coochee with ya? I got enough 'a them damn thaings 'round here t'cuff th' State of Idy-ho. An' don't never use none of 'em."

The Morrises, each carrying one loop of Toddy's cuffs, sauntered on out to their new, British racing green, Fiat

roadster. When she backed around, they saw us. Knowing how much I admired that air horn on their new playpretty, she tossed us a shave-and-a-haircut before they turned toward Tallulahcoochee, land of free speech and home of brave speakers.

Another incipient tragedy had been transformed into victory for the pure-in-heart, all because me and Marcellene had been alert. Whew.

You May Already Have Won

When I turned in at Marcelene's house, my lights picked up HoJo, sitting on her front steps. That meant there was big news that couldn't wait until morning.

I parked and we got out, walking swiftly to meet HoJo, who had got up when he saw us. Coming closer, I could see his expression -- completely and utterly dumbfounded.

"You ain't gonna believe it," he opened.

Marcelene unlocked the door, urging us to come in the house. Which we did, following her to the kitchen where she started making coffee. You don't have to draw Marcelene a picture.

When she got coffee underway, she sat down at the table with us, and HoJo, clearing his throat, set off to tell the most amazing tale I'd heard in a long time.

Right after we left to trail the cop car to Pearson, Ducky Dawkins asked the council members for a vote on closing the Cafe. Every damn one of them 'nighted scudders raised his hand to shut 'er down. I really suppose we were all expecting that, but expecting is not the same as digesting.

Well, Peaches, she gets right up and goes to the front.

Remember, Ducky Dawkins had never even asked if there was

any objection to closing the cafe. Another thing I guess we were braced for.

Anyhow, there she is. They had not expected that, either, and Ducky and Rad are both looking like they'd rather be somewhere else. But they don't have an escape route, so they hang in.

In her very best, Tiz-taught and Louvenia-copied voice, Peaches delivers what the Morris Morrises would probably call the "coup de grace."

"I certainly appreciate you having this hearing with reference to my Cafe. Since none of you elected gentlemen ever came to my place of business, you can never know what an inviting and happy place it was.

"Since Miss Lula opened in 1927, the Café has been famous for the fun and fellowship that was the hallmark of that sweet spot. By reflection, the entire town of Tallulahcoochee has enjoyed a similar reputation.

"Seeing, as I do, that it is my personal presence that give you so much distress, an' feeling pretty sure you would unanimously decide to put me out of business, today I made a momentous decision.

"Yes, I will go. Miss Peaches' Café de Lite is now a memory. In honor of the good years - an' in compliance with the Biblical admonition that urge us to 'destroy not the

ancient land marks,' I here deliver to Mayor Radley Hadley, as chief executive officer of the Town of Tallulahcoochee, a legally-executed warranty deed to all my interest in the Café property.

"I am confident you'll be able to work with the Office of Economic Opportunity and other lenders with reference to their security interest, as we have specified in the deed, and which run to a round figure of right at Fifty-five Thousand Dollars."

"Gentlemen, I thank you for your close attention to all that I have said." She was smiling her best smile.

"And now, good night. And good-bye."

With that, head up, she strolled toward the double doors and disappeared outside.

Shock waves rolled over the crowd. There was loud murmuring from the audience; officialdom, caught completely off guard, fell to yelling at each other.

Right in the midst of the commotion, Dr. Appenzeller stood up. He kept standing, patiently waiting out the upheaval. One of the idiots up front belatedly noticed this community pillar's obvious intent to say something, and he commenced to try restoring order.

When the decibel level had dipped a little bit, Audie walked down front like Peaches had done.

"This seems an opportune time, gentlemen, for me to announce that my clinic will be closing on the last day of this month, and I will no longer be available to dispense medical services from that location.

"I appreciate those who, over the years, have entrusted their health care to me and my staff, and their medical records will be available to them during regular business hours between now and our closing date.

"One last thing: should the notion ever cross any of your minds that I made my decision to abandon my practice here because of your actions against Miss Peaches' Café de Lite, let me assure you that you are most certainly, precisely, undeniably goddam right!"

He, too, made his way to the double doors. Lorelei and the rest of the back-up crew, as one, filed out behind him to join Peaches, who was waiting in the car.

They all got in – or, as for Glass Eye, on – their various modes of transportation and drove away into the night.

Gettin' Ready to Leave This World

Their little motorcade kept on down Viceroy Street to the Appenzeller house where they all got down and went inside.

Lights were on in the kitchen and, when they walked in, who should be there but Stuffy, the piano man? The big coffee pot was percolating, the bar was set up and the blender was whipping away at a milkshake. Cathead was sitting on a bar stool.

All that set HoJo back a turn, but he rallied and asked, "How come y'all didn't go to the Hall?"

Stuffy said he avoided government at every level as a matter of principle, and Cathead offered an unarguable excuse.

"I couldn't go. If I had, I'd would've had to hurt somebody."

Audie laughed at that.

"If you'd hurt every nitwit down there that needed it, you'd have been there 'til daylight."

About that time, the Morris Morrises come waltzing in, dying to tell about their Raymond City adventure. They spill their story while Tiz cuts cake and gets out the brownies and the ice cream.

Eventually, everybody gets something to eat and drink, and they sit down for the real news. Here's the part I hate, because it shows me I failed to keep up with the times. HoJo declares they all apologized, saying that they felt obligated to keep it under wraps until it was done.

Here's the story: Louvenia -- maybe prompted by intuition to get her affairs in order -- gave Peaches her play book on the afternoon of the night she died.

With Louvenia gone, Peaches concluded that her life had to make some major changes. So, after the funeral, Peaches sat down and looked at the book. That's when she realized that she could do those same skits, sing those same songs; it was like a message from the Great Beyond. She found Stuffy's phone number under the back cover of the book, and called him to come and see her.

Together, they spent the most of the time before the hearing in practicicing the act. The studio piano, you know, was at the guest house, so their sessions were out of the public eye. And ear.

Day after tomorrow, the new act, "Miss Peaches and Stuffy," will take to the road, filling all the play dates that Louvenia had contracted for. After they have met her booking obligations, they will go on with their own show.

Excitement was running high, so everybody adjourned to the parlor to hear the new partners prove their claims of excellence. HoJo swears that Peaches sings even better than Louvenia. Something else, she won't have to mimic anybody since she was Louvenia's mimickee all the time. Damn, that's outside, ain't it?

Another part of the Peaches news was that she had got a letter from a lawyer in Atlanta pretty soon after Louvenia died, and he said Louvenia had left her entire estate to Peaches. The same included that expensive house that

Louvenia had bought just a year ago, up on the north side. I hadn't seen it, myself, and neither had Marcelene, but HoJo drove Tiz and Peaches up there for a visit right after she bought it, and he said it was swell. I can believe that.

So Peaches and Stuffy were going to be working out of Atlanta, and there's another couple of blank spaces for Tallulahcoochee.

The Appenzellers hung back a little, hating to speak the words that would essentially strike a note of finality to their plans not only to leave 'Coochee, but to leave the State. They did dread separating themselves from the friends that were so dear.

"We've been through a lot together," says Lorelei. "I don't see how I could have withstood the bad times nor enjoyed the good times without you all. My heart will always be with you, wherever you are."

"As for us," says Audie, "Lorelei and I are leaving for our new home in Charleston, South Carolina, in two weeks. We've invited Tiz to come along and bring her favorite man-about-town, HoJo; but she wouldn't ask him until after our little bout with the 'Coochee Council.'

HoJo said he like to have fainted, but Tiz went over to him and took his hand, pleading, "Honey, will you go? Can we go? Please?"

What could he say except, "Aw, yeah, baby. Why not?" He hung onto her hand, asking, "Tiz, you wouldn't happen to know where this place is at, would you?"

Snapper figured right then that he was looking at retirement. If the Appenzellers were gone, he could not envision the actual house and grounds being left.

"What's gonna be did with your house and all?"

"Oh, we haven't got to the rest of it: a really nice couple from Charlotte bought the place a week ago, and they're going to run a bed-and-breakfast here. Snapper, I hope you'll accept employment with them. I told them how great you are, and they are eager for you to stay on."

"I kin stay," says Snapper, grinning at Glass Eye. "I reckon they know I need my help to work with me."

That was something for everybody except Walkman, the perpetual retiree. HoJo claims Walkman won't miss a step, and I bet he'll be all right. Except for the heartache.

Location, Location, Location

"HoJo!" I got right into it with him when he got to the shop the next morning. "You didn't even mention the Morris young'uns! What do you think they're going to do? Stay here? If so, where do you think they'll live? Talk to me, man!"

"Aw, yeah, I forgot to tell you. The Morris Morrises is gonae stay right at the house when them new people git here. They ain't going. Far's White Boy, I don't know what he's gonna don."

"We got to find out."

"Yeah, I reckon so."

"Well, go on down there and find out now. I can do without you for awhile."

When HoJo came back in an hour, he came in laughing.

"We ought to have known that boy ~~wasn't~~ gonna let Peaches leave him. He say he going where she goes. I asked him about going with his mama and daddy, and he said, 'They don't need none of me up yonder in Charleston.'"

"Wait a minute! That means he'll be leaving tomorrow with Peaches and Stuffy, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure does."

"HoJo, how in the hell did we all get in this mess? I don't think I can stand it - none of it. Man, this won't do. I can't live in 'Coochee without you and without them."

"Yeah, but you did befo'," says HoJo.

I hate it when he gets reasonable.

"I'll be back after while," I say, and walk out.

When I get to the drug store, Marcelene is behind the fountain, fixing some little girl a chocolate soda. I butt right in and say we got to talk. She looks at me funny, turns around and asks Mamie "Flame Thrower" Wasserman to finish the order, and we walk out the front, stopping on the sidewalk.

"What is it, baby?" she asks me, looking worried.

"Marcelene, we can't do it. We can't stay here."

"What?"

"I said, 'we can't do it. We can't stay here.'"

"Where?"

"Here. Here, Marcelene. Here in 'Coochee."

"We can't?"

"No, ma'am, we can't. I don't want to argue about it, but we just can't."

There's one thing you got to give Marcelene - when she finally understands something I'm trying to tell her, she falls right in and goes to agreeing with whatever I say.

She stands there a minute or two, looking at me like I'm a specimen under some dang microscope. She reaches up and brushes my hair back out of my eyes and then, right there on the street, she kisses me.

"All right," she says, mild as clammer.

Then, "Honey, I have to go back to work."

"Okay," I say.

And I go back to the shop to try to figure out where in the hell it is I think we're gonna go.

It's a good thing I kept the names and addresses of all the guys I'd run across in the printing business, because I thought I would need every one of them to help me find a new location. This was something that couldn't wait.

That night I stayed late at the shop and picked out what I considered the most successful ones, and then I got on the telephone. It had been awhile since I'd been in direct touch, and it's surprising how many of them had moved somewhere else or gone out of business.

I could kind of see us somewhere around Atlanta, hoping we could keep in touch with Peaches and them, but the ones I talked to up there said print shops were on every corner. No need to try to beat that kind of competition.

Around 11:30, I got Marvin "Tootsie" Spires on the line. He was in Ft. Pierce, Florida. He got my voice right off.

"Hey, you ol' son of a gun, how's that secret Garden of Eden you claim to live in?"

"It's fell on hard times," I told him, "and I'm looking for greener pastures. That's what I'm calling you about - reckon there's a opening for a print shop somewhere down there?"

He damn near jumped through the phone. He said old man "Kermit, the Hermit" Flanders had the only decent shop right there in Ft. Pierce, and that he had hung on this long only because there wasn't anybody to "take my place in the community," as Tootsie quoted him. Tootsie, himself, had closed up his shop two years before this in favor of some kind of sheetrock business, so he, personally, didn't care.

"I'll give you old man Flanders's number," says Tootsie, "and you can call him, y'self."

And he did. I called Flanders right then, close to midnight, and me and him had a deal in less than 15 minutes. I'd buy his shop name and location, and move my own, newer equipment down there.

"It ain't gone take me long to clear out up here," I told him, promising to get with him on Saturday morning to swap assets.

To the Ends of the Earth

Me and Marcelene drove up in front of the Appenzeller house about time White Boy was putting the last of the suitcases in the trunk of the late Louvenia's former limousine and closing the lid.

Peaches and Lorelei were standing out there, arms around each other and both of them crying. Audie and Stuffy were looking over the guest house to make sure they weren't leaving anything they would need. And Tiz and HoJo were standing by the iron fence, looking like two orphans. I didn't know if I could bear up under this kind of sorrow.

I don't think I had ever seen Princess Amy nor Henry acting as if they'd run out of chat, but this time was different. Somehow, both of them had begun to look kind of old. Damn, I hated that.

Snapper and Glass Eye came around the corner of the house about that time, bringing a huge bouquet of fresh-cut flowers to Peaches, and I caught sight of Walkman coming down the middle of the street, moving as fast as he could.

Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris drove up and parked behind my pickup. They'd already been down and opened *We Party* for the day's business. They got right out and commenced to hug everybody and shed some more tears.

In less time than it takes me to tell it, Stuffy was behind the wheel of the Lincoln, cranking it up, and White Boy was at the controls of Peaches' Dodge scoop. Audie hugged Peaches one last time and handed her into the car beside White Boy. The rumble seat was open and the No Cussin in this Place sign was standing in there, edgewise.

Then those two cars, bearing three of the dearest people in the world to me and to all of us, pulled out, tooted their horns at their good-bye party and were gone.

I drove us real slow back to town. When we got to the Delacroix Drug Store, Marcelene didn't get out right at first, and I decided it was as good a time as any to lay out the plan.

"Reckon you can be ready to go to Ft. Pierce, Florida by Friday?"

"To stay?"

"Unh-hunh. To stay."

"I guess so. What time?"

"We ought to start early -- it's a pretty good piece down there. I'd say we better try to pull out no later than 8 o'clock."

"Lemme go in here and tell Dr. Sam I'm leaving, and you can take me on to the house now. I got to pack."

While I waited for my baby to end her career with Sam Delacroix, I thought how lucky a guy I am to have her. Some women, I bet, would'a argued.

When I got back to the shop, I saw why Dorace Morris Morris and Glenn Marriss Morris had come to town so early. A Tifton realtor had a big sign positioned in front of We Party. It read "FOR SALE."

In a few minutes, Glenn Marriss Morris came across the street to my shop, looking fagged out and mournful. He said he and Dorace Morris Morris had decided the night before that they couldn't hold the fort alone, and had signed on with the Tifton group that morning to get rid of their shop. They hadn't decided where they were going, but anywhere but here would be an improvement. And I told him about Ft. Pierce.

"How did this happen?" he asked me. "We had all the joys of heaven on earth right here in Tallulahcoochee."

"Yeah," I said, "but the Café was our headquarters for heaven. It just got away from us."

"You ever been to the Pacific Northwest?"

I felt a chill when he asked that.

"Nope. Why?"

"We kind of thought about Seattle."

I knew I couldn't go through another episode of watching my nearest and dearest leave, so all I could do was hope Friday would hurry and get here so they could watch me leave, for a change.

Seattle! Hell's bells!

About that time, HoJo eased in at the back door, also looking like he'd been tortured on the rack.

I told him what was up, and he turned away toward the feed store. I knew he was crying, but I didn't say anything. After all, he was going to South Carolina with Tiz and the Appenzellers - what was it to him that me and Marcelene would go to Florida?

Pretty soon after that, we got busy with finishing up all the jobs that were in and, about sundown, we started sorting out and packing up. My life here was over.

By 5 o'clock Friday morning, we were ready to load the U-Haul I had hitched to my pickup. The whole bunch was there to help -- Snapper and Glass Eye and Walkman, along with HoJo. After we got it all on the trailer, the empty shop looked kind of shabby and pitiful, but I couldn't worry about that. I had to get on with my life, as they say.

All that was left to do then was to cut by Marcelene's and load her things. That's one time I was glad she was renting. The day before, I'd made my third cousin, Waldo

Arvin "Tadpole" Gleason and his wife, the former Mackie Vernelle "Romper" Van Brackle, a deed to my little old house, and was glad to be shed of it.

And they were sure glad to move out of their house trailer. In fact, they had two pickups full of their belongings parked in my front yard that next morning while I was trying to get my own stuff loaded.

Then, as now, I didn't want to own a sewing thread in Tallulahcoochee, Georgia.

"Mine, All Mine -- My, My!" Fats Waller

When we got to Marcelene's house, she was standing on the front porch with a suitcase down by her side. An old steamer trunk was blocking the front door, and a couple of cardboard boxes and a drink cooler were at the bottom of the steps. My baby was ready to ride.

She was wearing some carefully-pressed jeans and a little pink plaid shirt with the tail out and her sandals we'd got in Valdosta that she hadn't ever worn. Her curly hair was tied back and plaited and she had a straw hat in her hand. God bless a woman that knows how to be ready on time.

Our helpers were right behind me in Snapper's old truck, and they got down and we loaded everything Marcelene wanted to take with us. It didn't take ten minutes.

And then, there was that damnable good-bye thing again.

I hurt so bad I didn't know if I could even drive, but I knew I had to. As we pulled out, I turned on my alternate horn and blew Dixie at the guys and we hauled out to Florida -- another world.

There wasn't anything either of us could say for a long time. I just drove, working my jaw and trying not to bawl, and Marcelene looked out the right side of the pickup like she didn't know anybody else was in there with her.

Eventually, we got to Folkston and I pulled up the long way in front of one of that town's many wedding chapels.

"Marcelene," I said, after I switched off the motor, "would you do me the courtesy of becoming my wife?"

She was looking straight out the windshield like she was busy watching something going on out there. And she kept on doing that for a few minutes. When she answered me, I wasn't sure what she meant.

"Why is that?"

"Why is what?"

"Why is it you want to marry me?"

"Marcelene, I want to marry you because, well, because I been thinking that's what we been leading up to. Ain't that right?"

"Yeah, but why?" That girl knew how to insist.

"You don't want to?"

"I didn't say that. I want to know why you want to."

"Oh. Well, see, it's because I, uh, I . . . love you, Marcelene." I'd said that to myself a million times, but it was not easy to say it right to her face.

"Okay. But I'm not dressed for it. Don't have no weddin' dress."

"Marcelene, my baby, I don't have no weddin' britches, neither, an' do you see me actin' like I care? Come on,

let's go on in here - they call this a one-stop weddin' chapel, blood tests, license and all. Hurry, baby. I can hardly wait for somebody as sweet as you to be my wife."

Two other couples had beat us to the line by the time we got our blood tests, and the preacher - who we could hardly hear over the Nelson Eddy-Jeannette McDonald record of "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life" - announced that he was going to marry all of us at the same time.

The first two were not a day over 17, and they looked to me like a pair of young'uns that was running away from disapproving parents. Had'a been me in that preacher's shoes, I wouldn't 'a done it.

But the second pair were dang near over the hill. He had a big gut and not much hair and was wearing some scuffed-up cowboy boots; his bride was twittering around, adjusting her pillbox hat with the veil, giggling a tad too much and trying to get everybody to join hands. I wasn't about to. Neither me nor Marcelene. Truth to tell, I think they had spent some slosh time in a bar before they made it to the chapel.

None of that really mattered, though. I got a wife out of the deal. The wife I really, truly, honest-to-God wanted. Wanted real bad.

So that's how we got married. I was relieved to get it done in Folkston, before we crossed into Florida. They tell me the law's hard on men who take women across state lines like that, and I like to be safe.

"Together again, my tears have stopped fallin'. . ."

If there's any one thing I've come to hate, over the years, it's the reminder of the passage of time. You know in advance that the toll time takes can never be reversed. You just can't go back.

By the time Peaches' letter came about the reunion, I had almost come to the point of disbelieving that there ever was a place called Miss Peaches' Café de Lite, ever was a time in my life when my very soul rejoiced over every hour of every day. In fact, I half-hoped that I had imagined it all. That way, I would not be forced to acknowledge our awful, monumental, irretrievable loss.

One annual reminder, though, was the elaborate Christmas greeting we always got from that ageless rakehell, Harman Jarman. He had been living in Italy in the most art-oriented city in the world since right after me and Marcelene got to Ft. Pierce, and our impression was that he was living the life he had always aspired to. Back in the old days, he said a whole lot about wanting to live in Florence, and I, for one, knew he wasn't talking Alabama. He never had married, and Marcelene found that curious.

I don't know how he found out about it, but he mentioned in his first card that Miss Lula had died in Tallulahcoochee the day after Audie and them left for

Charleston. I hated we didn't know. We could have at least sent flowers.

He kept us up with other bits of history in the making, too. For instance, he passed the word about Horace's marrying Peaches' manager -- some New York Irish type named Hybernia McKinney -- just six months after Peaches hired her. According to Harman Jarman, Hybernia was an auburn-haired knockout in the looks department and a stompdowm whiz in the management arena.

She and Horace, he reported, gifted the world with twin girls, Mary and Martha, and we figured them to be about eight years old by reunion time. He also warned us that nobody but HoJo called Horace "White Boy" any more.

We were all more than 12 years older by reunion time. My little print shop had proved successful, had been upgraded three times, and we owned a real nice house outside of Ft. Pierce. We had two little boys, Royce, 8, and Audie, 5, and I guess you could say we were all happy with each other. Marcelene and I had about quit talking about the glamour and the glory of our earlier days.

Three years into our Ft. Pierce adventure, we got the call that I'll always remember as the shock of my life: Uncle Mary and Aunt Viola's son, Ringgold, had telephoned to say that both his parents were dead. They had lost their

lives the day before in a hot air balloon accident over Grand Junction, Colorado.

Stunned with grief and disbelief, I flew alone to Texas for the funeral. When I got back, my dearest treasure, Marcelene, eased the pain somewhat by saying, "Tell me about it when you can." This far, I never have.

In my estimation, having a reunion with all of them was tricky. I knew I had changed a right smart, and so had Marcelene; I'd put on a little weight and my head of thick, glossy, black hair had thinned some. I'd even gone to letting a barber keep my neck clean, not like in the old days when my mane swung in a defiant swirl down my back. My baby was a trifle heavier, too, but sweeter than ever. Her hair was short these days because of the heat, and also because she didn't have time for messing with a lot of hair, trying to raise two young'uns.

We knew, though, that we couldn't stay away from the party, so we made our plans to go to Atlanta. We would leave at least a day early and swing through 'Coochee to say hey to Walkman and Snapper and Glass Eye, and to see if anything had changed since we left. I was glad I'd gone on and bought the new pickup with the extended cab. We could all be comfortable.

It was sure enough early on Friday morning when we loaded up and turned north. If I put my mind - and my foot - to it, we could get to 'Coochee in time to do some looking around and some reminiscing with our old friends by daylight, and maybe all go to supper together that night.

We crossed the county line about three o'clock that afternoon, and Marcelene was telling the boys how we'd escorted Dorace Morris Morris and her new husband into town on that very road, siren screaming. They were downright almost disbelieving, but enchanted to hear of their parents' outlandish adventures, and were laughing and exclaiming,

"Aw, Mama!"

They weren't the only ones enchanted. It was all coming back, beautiful and bright and divine in its perfection. I reached for Marcelene's hand to let her know she would always be that wonderful young woman I'd loved so much, and she took my hand in both of hers to let me know she got the message and returned the sentiment.

Pretty soon we entered the city limits of our Elysian Fields, and I cut back south so we could go by the Café first. I wish now that I hadn't done that.

The dirt road had been dragged by a fool who had churned all the dirt right up in the middle of the thoroughfare, and deep ditches had been pulled along the

sides. It was a crude and monstrous obstacle course. As well as the first of many shocks.

Nothing, though, like the shock that assailed us when we got to the Blessed Spot. The Café had been about half-way torn down; the part still standing had been gutted so that it formed a shed under which sat two worn-out road machines. I figured them for the unwise dragging and ditching. Sharkey's wrecker, left front wheel missing, was jacked up in the field next to the shed.

Mobile homes, about three or four to the acre, covered the entire area behind the Café, not a skirt nor an awning on a one of them. I think "stark" was the word I was looking for, not to mention "third world." Marcelene read the sign aloud, Sharkey's Mobile Home Park.

The former Christian mission had been converted to the business office for that grotesque operation. A light breeze carried waste paper across the premises, where rank stands of weeds and discarded beer cans abounded. I guess the Hadley religious zeal had expired. One broad hint of that was Sharkey, himself, slouched in the office door, a can of Colt .45 in hand.

Marcelene was hugging herself like a refugee might do before being loaded onto a truck bound for the ovens, and her sobs were wrenching my own soul. Royce and Audie,

frightened, I guess, at the way we were acting, had lapsed into wide-eyed silence. I got by there as quickly as I could and headed for town. On the way, we passed what once was Audie's clinic. A sorry-looking sign, probably done in Douglas, hung across the blacked-out, double front doors.

It proclaimed, *Spider's Place -- Billiards*.

I didn't slow down going by but, if I'm not badly mistaken, "billiards" was misspelled.

No Man's Land

Up town 'Coochee presented us a gritty, tattered, run down, thrown-away tableau. The streets were littered, and the few cars on the street were old rattlettraps, lots of them skipping and smoking. Seems like they all had more passengers than they were built to accommodate. One aging, rusty Chevrolet sedan with a flat tire was parked in front of the police station. I pulled my pickup alongside it and started to get out.

A big, black cop saw us and was on the curb before I could get loose from my seat belt.

"Yeah?" he asked. I put him down as insolent, but I kept from showing it in my face.

"We used to live here," I said, "long time ago. We're just passing through, and thought you might tell us where we can find some folks we used to know."

He walked right up to the truck, leaned down, gripping the doorframe with both hands, and looked in.

Ignoring what I'd said, he asked, "Where you people from?"

"Ft. Pierce, Florida."

"Where you heading?"

"Atlanta."

"At-lanter, hamm. This your wife an' chi'ren?"

"Yeah, they're all mine."

He squinted at me, letting me know he was not altogether convinced.

"Umm-hmm. Now, what is it you was wantin' t'know?"

"Do you happen to know where we could find Stanford Tison? We used to call him, 'Snapper'."

He turned his mouth down and shook his head.

"How about Gideon McConico? Called him 'Glass Eye,' 'cause he had one."

Officer Tyrone Slater was losing interest. He looked back toward the station and hollered, "Romey! Come out here."

Romey, who had been standing in the doorway, sucking his teeth and gazing our way, lumbered out. White, fat, pig-eyed, also suspicious, he propped up on Marcelene's side of the truck and peered inside. I hoped the boys weren't scared by all this hick cop attention.

Finally, his little eyes got to me and he asked,

"Yeah?"

I went through the drill with him again, and he produced an elaborate frown. He needs to watch that expression in the mirror so he'd quit making such a face.

"Ain't you talkin' 'bout that nigger thet used t'ride thet hair ol' tore-up motorcycle?" He pronounced it

"motorsickle," and said it with a certain amused, bitter tinge.

"That's him," I answered. "You know where I could find him?"

"Gone. Dunno whur he's at, but we got thet ol' motorsickle back thair in th' station. We takened 'im off thet thaing fer loud muffler, an' he didn't never come in 'n pay 'is fine, so we still got it."

His tiny eyes made another sweep of the inside of my truck, and I was beginning to tire of Romey. Still, I had one more question. Before I could ask it, he decided to spill a little more information.

"They wuz a ol' man he wuz kin'ly hangin' out with, an' they tell me he died in thet thair yard at th' ol' bed-'n-breakfus'. Thet musta been ten er 'leb'n yairs ago. An' 'n, that thair Glaiss Eye run. I wudden be su'prised he didn't kill that other nigger. I jes' know he ain't been 'round hyunh fer a dern long time."

My stomach was churning, and I wanted to get out and whip the flying hell out of both these bastards. Marcelene must have felt it, because she laid her hand on my knee and squeezed it, trying to tell me to calm down.

"How about John Henry Mincey? Do you know him?"

Romey leaned back from the truck and favored us with a raucous, snorting laugh. Lord, I wanted to hit him.

"You tawkin' 'bout 'Walkman?' Aw, lemme tel ya 'bout thet crazy nigger!"

He laughed some more before he could go on.

"One night, right soon after thet Glass Eye run off, thet thair Mincey set f'ar t' his own house an' burnt th' summrbitch t'th' groun'. An' then he come up town an' laid down on th' Coas' Line tracks an' th' damn Dixie Flyer plowed 'im under! They wuz bits 'n pieces 'a thet nigger fer a damn mile 'n a half up an' down them tracks."

He leaned against my truck to laugh. I fired up the engine and threw it in reverse, throwing him off-balance and he grabbed for one of my prized, twin, radio aerials, wrenching it out of the socket as he righted himself. I scratched off with him standing there, holding my damn chrome-plated antennae in his miserable, grubby hand.

By now, mine was a mission. I drove purposefully to Viceroy Street and turned in. I just couldn't quit.

The Morris-Appenzeller mansion stood empty. The front door was open and it looked as if it had been standing that way for a long time. A realtor sign, faded and frayed, hung dispiritedly and crooked on the ornate iron gate. The grounds were weed-choked and littered, and the wrought iron

fence bent low at the corner, as if it had been struck by a powerful, passing vehicle.

I parked the truck and me and Marcelene got out. As luck would have it, Ronald Leroy "Parson" Dubose's wife, Priscilla Tarzana "Prissy T." McPhail Dubose, saw us and came down off her porch and walked over to where we were. I'd have preferred not to see her, but she didn't seem to recognize either one of us.

"Evenin'," she opened, pinching up her long, sharp nose the way I remembered she would do when she'd catch Parson at the Café.

"Howdy," I answered, hearing in my head Harman Jarman's long ago assessment of this contentious, meddlesome, old heifer. It was like he was standing right there, saying it again: "I'll say this about Prissy T. Dubose: she's ugly, (a two-beat pause) but she's mean."

"You folks ain't thainkin' about buyin' thi' chyere place, are ye?"

"No, ma'am."

"Tha's a good thaing. I'm a-lookin' fer it t'fall any day. Th' sooner, th' quicker, I say. It ain't been nuthin' but a eyesore ever since hit's been hyere."

She adjusted her glasses and went on.

"I used t'tell m'husban' -- he's dead, y'know -- that
thet thair bunch thet stayed hyere wuz hell-bound. I
couldn't come by hyere, day ner night, but what they wuz a-
laiffin' an' carryin' on, an' wuz a-playin' thet ol' pianner
an' some of 'em'ld be a-saingin'. Hit wuz a mess. I tell
ya, they jes' ain't all thet much funny in th' world, but
they wuz a-laiffin', anyhow. I've shore felt lots better
since they all pulled outta hyere."

She wasn't finished.

"An', well, a couple did buy th' place after thet --
from Car'lin, I thaink -- but they didn't stay mor'n a
coupl'a months. Hit's lak I tol' m'husban', ya jes' cain't
lick th' devil."

Absent some input from us, Prissy T. turned back and
took her seat on her porch again, still looking our way.

We stood there at the gate, wordless, looking in, for a
long time. The devil had laid eternal, hellish claim on a
Holy Place -- our own sweet Eden, our lost Paradise.

If That's All There Is . . .

It was almost noon the next day when we pulled up at Peaches' big house in Atlanta. HoJo hadn't stretched the truth -- it was one swell place. Damn swell.

A new Lincoln limo stood on the tarmac in front of the four-car garage, and a Caddy limo right behind it. A Chrysler convertible, top down, was to the left, and I could see Peaches' Dodge scoop parked in the far slot. Off to the side, a blue and silver Dodge pickup was angled in by the building like it probably belonged to the yard man. At least, they had transportation.

The Silver Cloud II parked on the grass, I just knew, had to belong to Henry and Princess Amy. Who but the two of them would need a Rolls? We later found out they'd had it shipped from Miami because Henry refused to drive rental cars.

HoJo was the first man out to greet us, with the rest of them pretty close behind him. There was Peaches, herself, and Charlie, Tiz, Stuffy, White Boy and his pretty wife, Hybernia; then Lorelei, holding onto a slow-moving, cane-assisted Audie. Princess Amy and Henry stood in the doorway, holding onto two little girls, and it looked to me like they were crying.

We knew right off that something was about to be said that we didn't want to hear. Every face was set, every expression anguished. We got out of the truck and helped the kids out, glad that both of them had been overtaken with a shy silence. It was obviously not the time for merry-making.

HoJo's voice was low, but we heard him very clearly when he told us,

"Dorace Morris Morris an' Glenn Marriss Morris wuz bof kilt in a plane crash las' night. Dey wuz on d'way hyunh."

Well, we commenced to embrace our dear, old friends and say the shocked, wild, inane things you say when life gets to be more than you can bear.

Somehow, we all got in the house where we were gravely greeted by an Asian couple, obviously house servants. It took me a few minutes to realize that the small foreigner who was serving our extravagant meal was Louvenia's driver from the old days, Roadie. The woman, Peaches' cook/housekeeper, was his wife, Matsu. The pickup, I concluded, must belong to them.

In the long-remembered sense of propriety that marked this group, they had a separate luncheon table set on the verandah for the four children where they could be shielded from the dispiriting aura of new grief that dominated the

adult table. Their high-pitched, childish laughter could be heard from time to time, and it gave us some comfort.

Except for a few muffled sobs, we carried on a subdued conversation, them telling us about how thrilled the Morrises had been about the reunion, and how they had all talked on the phone every day for two weeks before they had boarded that ill-fated plane.

Our sense of sorrow deepened when we heard that Dorace Morris Morris, at 38, had been three months' pregnant with their first child.

They told us about Audie's stroke of five weeks before, and how he seemed to be getting some better. Peaches was putting her house up for sale because she and Stuffy were retiring; and they, Charlie and White Boy were planning to move to Grand Cayman Island. Princess Amy and Henry had settled in Costa Rica right after we all left 'Coochee, and they weren't budging. Lorelei, Audie, Tiz and HoJo intended to stay in Charleston, especially since Audie's doctors were there.

I looked at all of them, mindful of how awful much I loved them and, against my heart's grieving judgment, saw that they were a lot older and quite a bit fraailer than I remembered.

After lunch, we all went down to the funeral home at Spring Hill for them to make arrangements to have the Morris Morris bodies brought to Atlanta for final rites. We were told that it would be four or five days before firm plans could be in place. That meant that me and Marcelene would not be there for the double funeral.

When we got back to the house, HoJo took Mary and Martha and our little boys outside to admire all the cars and Peaches guided me and Marcelene on a quiet tour of her grand premises. Everything we encountered confirmed rich, gracious living, including a spacious library. In there, on an ebony writing desk, was a stack of new, hardcover books and I noticed that the entire eight or nine of them were identical. Only then did we learn that White Boy's considerable writing talents had earned him substantial acclaim in the literary world, as well as some extraordinary money in exchange for his unique brand of story-telling. Those volumes were from the first run of his just-released, tenth novel.

Under happier circumstances, we would have been celebrating his writing triumphs; instead, it hadn't been mentioned at all until we came upon the books. When I opened a cover, I saw that he had dedicated this one, *Queen of the Cafe*, to "my beloved twin sister, Dorace Morris

Morris," noting that she was his "unfailing, lifelong inspiration toward perfection."

We had a good supper and sat up late that night, talking about the wonder of the old days. We didn't tell them we had stopped by 'Coochee on the way up. They didn't seem to know that the bed-and-breakfast was closed, and we didn't mention anything to the contrary.

Shifting our plans, we got up early the next morning and told them we had decided to go on back, but that we would come again later on. We all knew that was not true, but what else could we say?

Out at the truck, me and Marcelene both took a lot of time to hold each one of them and try to say how much we cared for them all. I can only hope they know how absolutely, sincerely heartfelt our words were.

The Long Road Home

Conversation was over for me and Marcelene for the first hundred miles. It had all been just too damn much. Then we started kind of half-way discussing how we might just go back by Tallulahcoochee and tell the whole goddam stinkin' burg how little we thought of every sonofabitch there. We named some of the ones we'd take the message to, direct, and I mentioned throwing a few punches while I was at it.

It wasn't all that long before the exit to 'Coochee loomed up ahead, and I slid the truck up to the top of the exit ramp. I put my arms around Marcelene, knowing she was crying again. As well as myself. At least, our boys were asleep on the back seat, so they were spared another round of their parents' sorrow.

We sat there, motor running, for awhile. Like the song says, "The Georgia sun was glowin' red and goin' down," and we knew our own reality hung in the balance.

Uncle Mary strolled across my mind. He was saying something.

"Don't cry boy; what you missed is swallowed up in what you escaped. God's version of Miss Peaches' Café de Lite is already under construction in what we used to call 'Up Yonder.' I'll meet you there for a beer one of these days."

He was grinning, but I could see a tear in his eye.

I'd almost forgot how much I still miss him.

At last, my Marcelene drew away from me a little bit, smiled her dear, sweet, timid smile, and tried to put our plain world back into perspective.

"My sweetheart, le's me an' you take these young'uns an' go on back home. We still got some livin' t'do."

I wiped my eyes and pulled across the road to the entrance ramp, and we lit out for Ft. Pierce, Florida. There might be some more salad days down there, but ours would never be so green again.

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