VINTAGE

PARADISE

TONI MORRISON

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Four young women are brutally attacked in a convent near an all-black town in America in the mid-1970s. The inevitability of this attack, and the attempts to avert it, lie at the heart of *Paradise*. Spanning the birth of the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam, the counter-culture and politics of the late 1970s, deftly manipulating past, present and future, this novel reveals the interior lives of the citizens of the town with astonishing clarity. Starkly evoking the clashes that have bedevilled the American century: between race and racelessness; religion and magic; promiscuity and fidelity; individuality and belonging.

Winner of the PEN/Saul Bellow award for achievement in American fiction

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She is the author of many novels, including *The Bluest Eye, Beloved* (made into a major film), *Paradise* and *Love*. She has also received the National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for her fiction.

ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

Fiction

The Bluest Eye
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God Help the Child

Non-Fiction

The Dancing Mind
Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

Lois

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
numerous sins,
and incontinencies,
and disgraceful passions
and fleeting pleasures,
which (men) embrace until they become
sober
and go up to their resting place.
And they will find me there,
and they will live,
and they will not die again.

TONI MORRISON

Paradise

VINTAGE

RUBY

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

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

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have parked Chevrolets near its porch to pick up a string of peppers or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon of barbecue sauce; but only a few have seen the halls, the chapel, the schoolroom, the bedrooms. Now they all will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are startled by the clothes they are wearing—suddenly aware of being ill-dressed. For at the dawn of a July day how could they have guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their T-shirts, work shirts and dashikis soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn work shoes are unnerved by the thunder of their steps on marble floors; those in Pro-Keds by the silence. Then there is the grandeur. Only the two who are wearing ties seem to belong here and one by one each is reminded that before it was a Convent, this house was an embezzler’s folly. A mansion where bisque and rose-tone marble floors segue into teak ones. Isinglass holds yesterday’s light and patterns walls that were stripped and whitewashed fifty years ago. The ornate bathroom fixtures, which sickened the nuns, were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and sinks, which could not be

inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt. The embezzler’s joy that could be demolished was, particularly in the dining room, which the nuns converted to a schoolroom, where stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget.

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

One of them, the youngest, looks back, forcing himself to see how the dream he is in might go. The shot woman, lying uncomfortably on marble, waves her fingers at him—or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its color. He has never before dreamed in colors such as these: imperial black sporting a wild swipe of red, then thick, feverish yellow. Like the clothes of an easily had woman. The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stop, editing their breath, making friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations: you two over there to the kitchen; two more upstairs; two others into the chapel. He saves himself, his brother and the one who thinks he is dreaming for the cellar.

They part gracefully without words or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the target, after all, is detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door. So the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below.

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

. . .

The kitchen is bigger than the house in which either man was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. More shelving than Ace's Grocery Store. The table is fourteen feet long if an inch, and it's easy to tell that the women they are hunting have been taken by surprise. At one end a full pitcher of milk stands near four bowls of shredded wheat. At the other end vegetable chopping has been interrupted: scallion piled like a handful of green confetti nestles brilliant disks of carrot, and the potatoes, peeled and whole, are bone white, wet and crisp. Stock simmers on the stove. It is restaurant size with eight burners and on a shelf beneath the great steel hood a dozen loaves of bread swell. A stool is overturned. There are no windows.

One man signals the other to open the pantry while he goes to the back door. It is closed but unlocked. Peering out he sees an old hen, her puffed and bloody hind parts cherished, he supposes, for delivering freaks—double, triple yolks in outsize and misshapen shells. Soft stuttering comes from the coop beyond; fryers padding confidently into the yard's mist disappear, reappear and disappear again, each flat eye indifferent to anything but breakfast. No footprints disturb the mud around the stone steps. This man closes the door and joins his partner at the pantry. Together they scan dusty mason jars and what is left of last year's canning: tomatoes, green beans, peaches. Slack, they think. August just around the corner and these women have not even sorted, let alone washed, the jars.

He turns the fire off under the stockpot. His mother bathed him in a pot no bigger than that. A luxury in the sod

house where she was born. The house he lives in is big, comfortable, and this town is resplendent compared to his birthplace, which had gone from feet to belly in fifty years. From Haven, a dreamtown in Oklahoma Territory, to Haven, a ghosttown in Oklahoma State. Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain. All the others he knew about or heard tell of knuckled to or merged with white towns; otherwise, like Haven, they had shriveled into tracery: foundation outlines marked by the way grass grew there, wallpaper turned negative behind missing window-panes, schoolhouse floors moved aside by elder trees growing toward the bell housing. One thousand citizens in 1905 becoming five hundred by 1934. Then two hundred, then eighty as cotton collapsed or railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere. Subsistence farming, once the only bounty a large family needed, became just scrap farming as each married son got his bit, which had to be broken up into more pieces for his children, until finally the owners of the bits and pieces who had not walked off in disgust welcomed any offer from a white speculator, so eager were they to get away and try someplace else. A big city this time, or a small town—anywhere that was already built.

But he and the others, veterans all, had a different idea. Loving what Haven had been—the idea of it and its reach—they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam, from Iwo Jima to Stuttgart, and they made up their minds to do it again. He touched the stove hood admiring its construction and power. It was the same length as the brick oven that once sat in the middle of his hometown. When they got back to the States, they took it apart, carrying the bricks, the hearthstone and its iron plate two hundred and forty miles west—far far from the old Creek Nation which once upon a time a witty government

called “unassigned land.” He remembers the ceremony they’d had when the Oven’s iron lip was recemented into place and its worn letters polished for all to see. He himself had helped clean off sixty-two years of carbon and animal fat so the words shone as brightly as they did in 1890 when they were new. And if it hurt— pulling asunder what their grandfathers had put together—it was nothing compared to what they had endured and what they might become if they did not begin anew. As new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had outfoxed it; who had not let danger or natural evil keep them from cutting Haven out of mud and who knew enough to seal their triumph with that priority. An Oven. Round as a head, deep as desire. Living in or near their wagons, boiling meal in the open, cutting sod and mesquite for shelter, the Old Fathers did that first: put most of their strength into constructing the huge, flawlessly designed Oven that both nourished them and monumentalized what they had done. When it was finished —each pale brick perfectly pitched; the chimney wide, lofty; the pegs and grill secure; the draft pulling steadily from the tail hole; the fire door plumb—then the ironmonger did his work. From barrel staves and busted axles, from kettles and bent nails, he fashioned an iron plate five feet by two and set it at the base of the Oven’s mouth. It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged. Words that seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally to announce that they had lost.

The man eyes the kitchen sink. He moves to the long table and lifts the pitcher of milk. He sniffs it first and then, the pistol in his right hand, he uses his left to raise the pitcher to his mouth, taking such long, measured swallows the milk is half gone by the time he smells the wintergreen.

On the floor above two men walk the hall and examine the four bedrooms, each with a name card taped on its door. The first name, written in lipstick, is Seneca. The next, Divine, is inked in capital letters. They exchange knowing looks when they learn that each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock. Other than that, and except for a narrow desk or an end table, there is no additional furniture. No clothes in the closets, of course, since the women wore no-fit dirty dresses and nothing you could honestly call shoes. But there are strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1968 calendar, large X's marking various dates (April 4, July 19); a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the plastic neck of a female torso, and, in a place that once housed Christians—well, Catholics anyway—not a cross of Jesus anywhere. But what alarms the two men most is the series of infant booties and shoes ribboned to a cord hanging from a crib in the last bedroom they enter. A teething ring, cracked and stiff, dangles among the tiny shoes. Signaling with his eyes, one man directs his partner to four more bedrooms on the opposite side of the hall. He himself moves closer to the bouquet of baby shoes. Looking for what? More evidence? He isn't sure. Blood? A little toe, maybe, left in a white calfskin shoe? He slides the safety on his gun and joins the search across the hall.

These rooms are normal. Messy—the floor in one of them is covered with food-encrusted dishes, dirty cups, its bed invisible under a hill of clothes; another room sports two rocking chairs full of dolls; a third the debris and smell of a heavy drinker—but normal at least.

His saliva is bitter and although he knows this place is diseased, he is startled by the whip of pity flicking in his chest. What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children? Out here in wide-open space

tucked away in a mansion—no one to bother or insult them—they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew. The winter coat money for which his father saved in secret for two harvests; the light in his mother's eyes when she stroked its seal collar. The surprise party he and his brothers threw for a sister's sixteenth birthday. Yet here, not twenty miles away from a quiet, orderly community, there were women like none he knew or ever heard tell of. In this place of all places. Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from his town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of. Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town and the reasons, he thought, were clear. From the beginning its people were free and protected. A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of nothing at all. Lampless and without fear she could make her way. And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else.

The woman could decide to go back to her own house then, refreshed and ready to sleep, or she might keep her

direction and walk further down the road, past other houses, past the three churches, past the feedlot. On out, beyond the limits of town, because nothing at the edge thought she was prey.

At each end of the hall is a bathroom. As each man enters one, neither is working his jaws because both believe they are prepared for anything. In one bathroom, the biggest, the taps are too small and dowdy for the wide sink. The bathtub rests on the backs of four mermaids—their tails split wide for the tub's security, their breasts arched for stability. The tile underfoot is bottle green. A Modess box is on the toilet tank and a bucket of soiled things stands nearby. There is no toilet paper. Only one mirror has not been covered with chalky paint and that one the man ignores. He does not want to see himself stalking females or their liquid. With relief he backs out and closes the door. With relief he lets his handgun point down.

Downstairs two men, a father and his son, are not smiling, although when they first enter the chapel they feel like it because it was true: graven idols were worshipped here. Tiny men and women in white dresses and capes of blue and gold stand on little shelves cut into niches in the wall. Holding a baby or gesturing, their blank faces fake innocence. Candles had obviously burned at their feet and, just as Reverend Pulliam said, food had probably been offered as well, since there were little bowls on either side of the doorway. When this was over they would tell Reverend Pulliam how right he was and laugh in Reverend Misner's face.

There were irreconcilable differences among the congregations in town, but members from all of them merged solidly on the necessity of this action: Do what you have to. Neither the Convent nor the women in it can continue.

Pity. Once, the Convent had been a true if aloof neighbor, surrounded by corn, buffalo grass, clover and approached by a dirt track barely seen from the road. The mansion-turned-Convent was there long before the town, and the last boarding Arapaho girls had already gone when the fifteen families arrived. That was twenty-five years ago, when all their dreams outstretched the men who had them. A road straight as a die had been cleared through the center of town and lined on one side by a paved walk. Seven of the families had more than five hundred acres, three had nearly a thousand. By and by, when the road became a named street, a man named Ossie organized a horse race to celebrate. From army-issue tents, half-finished houses and freshly cleared land people rode in, bringing what they had. Out came stored-away things and things got up on the spot: guitars and late melon, hazelnuts, rhubarb pies and a mouth organ, a washboard, roast lamb, pepper rice, Lil Green, “In the Dark,” Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five; homemade beer and groundhog meat fried and simmered in gravy. The women tied bright scarves over their hair; the children made themselves hats of wild poppies and river vine. Ossie owned a two-year-old and a four, both fast and pretty as brides. The other horses were simply company: Ace’s spotted horse, Miss Esther’s ancient featherweight, all four of Nathan’s plow horses plus his mare and a half-broke pony that, unclaimed, grazed the creekbank.

The riders quarreled so long over saddle or bareback, the mothers of nursing babies told them to mount or change roles. The men argued handicaps and placed quarter bets with abandon. When the gun went off only three horses leapt forward. The rest stepped sideways or cut out over lumber stacked near unfinished homes. When the race finally got under way, the women yelled from the meadow, while their children shrieked and danced in grass up to their shoulders. The pony finished first, but since it lost its rider two furlongs out, the winner was Nathan’s auburn mare. The

little girl with the most poppies on her head was chosen to present the first-place ribbon hung with Ossie's Purple Heart. The winner was seven years old then and grinning as though he'd won the Kentucky Derby. Now he was somewhere down in the cellar of a Convent watching out for awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but members, it was thought, of some other cult. Nobody knew. But it wasn't important to know because all of them, each in her turn, and like the old Mother Superior and the servant who used to, still sold produce, barbecue sauce, good bread and the hottest peppers in the world. For a pricey price you could buy a string of the purply black peppers or a relish made from them. Either took the cake for pure burning power. The relish lasted years with proper attention, and though many customers tried planting the seeds, the pepper grew nowhere outside the Convent's garden.

Strange neighbors, most folks said, but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion. They took people in—lost folk or folks who needed a rest. Early reports were of kindness and very good food. But now everybody knew it was all a lie, a front, a carefully planned disguise for what was really going on. Once the emergency was plain, representatives from all three churches met at the Oven because they couldn't agree on which, if any, church should host a meeting to decide on what to do now that the women had ignored all warnings.

It was a secret meeting, but the rumors had been whispered for more than a year. Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. So when

nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flashlights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women.

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

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

The brothers approaching the cellar were once identical. Although they are twins, their wives look more alike than they do. One is smooth, agile and smokes Te Amo cigars. The other is tougher, meaner, but hides his face when he prays. But both have wide innocent eyes and both are as single-minded now standing before a closed door as they were in 1942 when they enlisted. Then they were looking for an out—a break away from a life where all was owed, nothing owned. Now they want in. Then, in the forties, they had nothing to lose. Now everything requires their protection. From the beginning when the town was founded they knew isolation did not guarantee safety. Men strong and willing were needed when lost or aimless strangers did

not just drive through, hardly glancing at a sleepy town with three churches within one mile of one another but nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital. Sometimes, if they were young and drunk or old and sober, the strangers might spot three or four colored girls walk-dawdling along the side of the road. Walking a few yards, stopping as their talk required; skipping on, pausing to laugh or slap another's arm in play. The strangers get interested in them, perhaps. Three cars, say, a '53 Bel Air, green with cream-colored interior, license number 085 B, six cylinders, double molding on rear fender pontoon, Powerglide two-speed automatic transmission; and say a '49 Dodge Wayfarer, black, cracked rear window, fender skirts, fluid drive, checkerboard grille; and a '53 Oldsmobile with Arkansas plates. The drivers slow down, put their heads out the windows and holler. Their eyes crinkled in mischief they drive around the girls, making U-turns and K's, churning up grass seed in front of the houses, flushing cats in front of Ace's Grocery Store. Circling. The girls' eyes freeze as they back into each other. Then, one at a time, the townsmen come out of the houses, the backyards, off the scaffold of the bank, out of the feed store. One of the passengers has opened the front of his trousers and hung himself out the window to scare the girls. The girls' little hearts stand up and they cannot close their eyes fast enough, so they jerk their heads aside. But the townsmen do look at it, see the wish in this most militant of gestures, and smile. Smile reluctantly and in spite of themselves because they know that from this moment on, if not before, this man, till his final illness, will do as much serious damage to colored folks as he can.

More men come out, and more. Their guns are not pointing at anything, just held slackly against their thighs. Twenty men; now twenty-five. Circling the circling cars. Ninety miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety

from the nearest badge. If the day had been dry, the dust spuming behind the tires would have discolored them all. As it was, just a little gravel kicked up in the tread they left behind.

The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not. The exact temperature of the weather when the cars circled the girls as well as the bushel yield of every farm in the county. And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather—the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves. On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. The headline of a feature in the *Herald,* "Come Prepared or Not at All," could not mean them, could it? Smart, strong, and eager to work their own land, they believed they were more than prepared— they were destined. It stung them into confusion to learn they did not have enough money to satisfy the restrictions the "self-supporting" Negroes required. In short, they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders. This contemptuous dismissal by the lucky changed the temperature of their blood twice. First they boiled at being written up as "people who preferred saloons and crap games to homes, churches and schools." Then, remembering their spectacular history, they cooled. What began as overheated determination became cold-blooded

obsession. “They don’t know we or about we,” said one man. “Us free like them; was slave like them. What for is this difference?”

Denied and guarded against, they altered their route and made their way west of the unassigned lands, south of Logan County, across the Canadian River into Arapaho territory. Becoming stiffer, prouder with each misfortune, the details of which were engraved into the twins’ powerful memories. Unembellished stories told and retold in dark barns, near the Oven at sunset, in the Sunday afternoon light of prayer meetings. About the saddles of the four black-skinned bandits who fed them dried buffalo meat before robbing them of their rifles. About the soundlessness of the funnel that twisted through and around their camp; the sleeping children who woke sailing through the air. The glint of the horses on which watching Choctaw sat. At suppertime, when it was too dark for any work except that which could be done by firelight, the Old Fathers recited the stories of that journey: the signs God gave to guide them—to watering places, to Creek with whom they could barter their labor for wagons, horses and pasture; away from prairie-dog towns fifty miles wide and Satan’s malefactions: abandoned women with no belongings, rumors of riverbed gold.

The twins believed it was when he discovered how narrow the path of righteousness could be that their grandfather chose the words for the Oven’s lip. Furniture was held together by wooden dowels because nails were so expensive, but he sacrificed his treasure of three-inch and four, bent and straight, to say something important that would last.

Once the letters were in place, but before anyone had time to ponder the words they formed, a roof was raised next to where the Oven sat waiting to be seasoned. On crates and makeshift benches, Haven people gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game. Later, when

buffalo grass gave way to a nice little town with a street down the middle, wooden houses, one church, a school, a store, the citizens still gathered there. They pierced guinea hens and whole deer for the spit; they turned the ribs and rubbed extra salt into sides of cooling veal. Those were the days of slow cooking, when flames were kept so low a twenty-pound turkey roasted all night and a side could take two days to cook down to the bone. Whenever livestock was slaughtered, or when the taste for unsmoked game was high, Haven people brought the kill to the Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasonings and the proper test for “done.” They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shade of the eaves. And any child in earshot was subject to being ordered to fan flies, haul wood, clean the worktable or beat the earth with a tamping block.

In 1910 there were two churches in Haven and the All-Citizens Bank, four rooms in the schoolhouse, five stores selling dry goods, feed and foodstuffs—but the traffic to and from the Oven was greater than to all of those. No family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was. Even in 1934 when everything else about the town was dying; when it was clear as daylight that talk of electricity would remain just talk and when gas lines and sewers were Tulsa marvels, the Oven stayed alive. Until the Big Drought, running water was not missed because the well was deep. As boys, the twins had swung overhand from the cottonwood branches leaning near it and hung dangerously above the clear water to admire the reflection of their feet. Time after time they heard stories of the blue dresses and bonnets the men bought for the women with cash from the first harvest or the first cuts from the herd. The theatrical arrival of the Saint Louis piano, ordered soon as Zion’s floor was laid. They imagined their mother as a ten-year-old among other young girls clustered quietly about the piano, sneaking a touch, a

key stroke before the deaconess slapped their hands away. Their pure sopranos at rehearsal singing “He will take care of you . . .,” which He did, safe to say, until He stopped.

The twins were born in 1924 and heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in.

In 1949, young and newly married, they were anything but fools. Long before the war, Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. The twins stared at their dwindling postwar future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old Fathers had done in 1890. Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized evil erupted when and where it chose —behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead. But lessons had been learned and relearned in the last three generations about how to protect a town. So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks even before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven— headed not for Muskogee or California as some had, or Saint Louis, Houston, Langston or Chicago, but deeper into Oklahoma, as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made.

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

“Soon,” the parents replied. Hour after hour, the answer was the same. “Soon. Pretty soon.” When they saw Beaver Creek sliding through the muzzle of a state shaped like a gun, on through the acres of grass (cheaper than cheap after the tornadoes of 1949) that their pooled discharge pay had bought, it was pretty, soon and right on time.

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

Now one brother, a leader in everything, smashes the cellar door with the butt of his rifle. The other waits a few feet back with their nephew. All three descend the steps ready and excited to know. They are not disappointed. What they see is the devil’s bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen.

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

of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby.

It pleased his uncles who could then both mourn the sister and honor the friend and brother-in-law who didn't make it back. But the nephew, winner of Ossie's Purple Heart, heir to his father's dog tags, witness to his mother's name painted on signs and written on envelopes for the rest of his life, was displaced by these sad markings. The heart, the tags, the post office designation outsized him somehow. The women who had known and tended his mother spoiled Ruby's boy. The men who enlisted with his father favored Ruby's husband's boy. The uncles took him for granted. When the decision was taken at the Oven, he was there. But two hours ago, when they'd swallowed the last piece of red meat, an uncle simply tapped him on the shoulder and said, "We got coffee in the truck. Go get your rifle." Which he did, but he took the palm cross too.

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

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

perspiration and the nocturnal odor of righteousness. The view is clear.

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

Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game.

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

MAVIS

THE NEIGHBORS SEEMED pleased when the babies smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things, of course: brought food, telephoned their sorrow, got up a collection; but the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear.

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

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

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

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

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