

~~a feeling about the place passed~~
no - Orlando doesn't know where
her boss lives
don't like last line (think about God Man
is hard to find)

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number page

check for embellishment places

The Spirit Knows
Dust Devil

By
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Orlando Quick had never laid eyes on The colonel, and now she never would.

When she got out to her car that morning, last day of March, and saw her six year old Sissy and her eight year old Buckeye sitting straight up in back and staring dead ahead she knew in her soul that something was up.

And then she spied the cut-stone profile of their daddy, Froman, fresh out of jail, installed on the other side of the front seat. Not even looking her way, ^{he sat} but waiting for her to lock the side door of the house and get in the car and help ~~him~~ make good on his promise to kill her next time she had him picked up for not paying child support. Which couldn't be the case because she had a restraining order against him.

She knew better.

Freezing, she dropped her stuffed brown pocketbook. Lipsticks rolled, her checkbook slapped the concrete, papers fluttered down. Scatter of stuff. It seemed that all their lives had been in that pocketbook, now dumped. Her children's immunization records, pictures, her driver's license, her Social Security card, judges' judgments and lawyers' reports, plus a

support coming, in addition to what she could beg in the form of food stamps and checks from the State to feed her four little statistics, ages two through ten.

✓ Orlando felt like a beggar just asking ^{only} for child support from the father of her children.

✓ But she reasoned that not begging and badgering ^{were} was worse, because then her children would be victimized by her own pumped-up pride, a sort of sickness she'd been born with, she guessed: she hadn't even cried after her mother had been shot accidentally, or deliberately, by her daddy. The cause of death had never been determined by the law, and didn't matter anyhow because both were *colored* and both had been drinking bad on a Friday night, following a full day of setting out pine seedlings for the white man in whose shack they were living on his farm place.

Orlando never cried, though she had stark recollections of that night and the noise and the blood rimming out the shape of her stocky, usually mouthy, mother on the dusty floorboards. How she came to be lying on the floor, so still, so dead, was a mystery among other nasty mysteries to the little girl named Rosellen standing over her. Orlando recalled like yesterday the funeral, the chanting—*the day Mae died be a happy day in glory. The day Mae died be a sad day on this old earth, the day Mae died...*

Still, she hadn't cried. Which caused her grandmother on her daddy's side to fear that at some point when the tears did burst, the truth would also. So, she sent Mae's sweet-natured four-year-old Rosellen to a sister in Orlando. The chant went with her, lived in her head. Night and day she heard it—*the day Mae died*—but didn't say it. Didn't say anything. She lost her voice, lost her name, then got sent home to South Georgia and the grandmother for refusing to speak. A few years later, in school, a teacher said the word Orlando and she repeated it out loud. Her new name was a lie but it was a name to start over with, a second chance. Orlando didn't have to take the blame for what Rosellen might say.

cherished
much-touched
smudged
rare word
spell check
cherished

~~chemical-reeking~~ copy of the restraining order itself. All proof of who they were and their legal right to be.

Such an eerie sight, her whole family sitting like zombies—a bad movie—she had to make herself move from the top doorstep to the bottom, a kitten or two or three underneath her feet, threatening to trip her with every step. They were bright orange and hairy as fireworms. Their fur so soft, their bodies fine-boned and winding, measuring the hems of her pink uniform pants, the top a repeating pattern of pale blue teddy bears and green party balloon bouquets. All at once it seemed that because of the unwanted kittens, because she might step on them, and besides she'd been fool enough to fall for the restraining-order joke, she had every reason to go crazy and run screaming for help from her neighbor across the street. She needed to call the sheriff and tell him that in spite of the bulletproof document Froman had come to kill her.

Natasha Wells was herding her kids into her truck to drive them to school too. Not exactly friends but friendly, she and Orlando had found they had one thing in common—spring-loaded ex-husbands behind on child support.

Natasha backed her forest green Honda SUV from her driveway and braked on the street and waved; her fake nails measured almost the length of her ^{stubby} fingers and she was always tapping them on things, like clicking ~~imaginary~~ ^{imaginary} keys on a cash register. When a nail broke, she would leave her children with Orlando and head out on an emergency run for the nail salon at the mall in Valdosta. (Orlando considered the children her punishment for being too self-consciously eager and friendly even ~~with~~ people she didn't like.) To Orlando's knowledge Natasha's nails were her sole extravagance, and didn't everybody have one? Her Honda was the cheapest model sold. She worked as a teacher's aid at the little school in Cornerville, Georgia. Earned about enough to pay for the car and the nails alone, as long as "X," as she called him, kept that child

Natasha looked thick and sulky behind the gray tinted window of her truck; conical tree deodorizer swinging from the rear mirror part of the motion of the burr-headed brats capering from seat to seat. At contrast with Orlando's own scared-stiff children in the back seat of her small gray car, not exactly staring at their daddy in the front, who looked bigger and madder since Orlando had last seen him a few months ago. A bear would have been more welcome.

You land my ass in jail one more time and you a daid bitch. Try me!

Pay me what you're owing and leave me alone and won't be no one more time.

Phone slammed down before she could slam hers down.

Orlando had been letting him slide for Lord knows how long, that's how she put it to Natasha next door.

Longer you let em go, worser it gets. They get behind and go to jail and ain't no way they gone catch up. So they take it out on your hide.

The warm kittens trailed Orlando across the concrete drive, purring, meowing. Last week they had dashed out of hiding around the house and made her fall and bang her elbow. Still, she should have fed them this morning. She hadn't had time. No, she'd forgotten. That was the truth.

Froman cranked his head her way. There was that odd white lick of hair above the cropped line of black kinks growing low on his forehead. He was so black he looked blue, indigo. His eyes were swollen with exhaustion or rage, eyewhites tinged red as diluted blood, and his cheekbones looked bruised. She found it hard to believe that she had ever thought he was handsome, loveable. She had been so young and sure that the right man would bring love and love would bring luck. She would never be a child in the way again, and neither would her own children.

A car passed along the street and Orlando lifted one hand with the jangling keys, at first thinking to flag down whoever was inside. Instead her hand reached and touched the cold dewy handle of the car door.

The dew had been heavy last night and sodden blooms from the budding pecan tree in front of her car had stuck to the windshield. Brown stains like rust from where the worm-shaped blooms had stamped their shapes and slid down. Odors of burnt motor oil mingled with the raw damp of leftover night. The sun rising above the pitch of Natasha's brown roof had begun leaning north. Chilly mornings gave way to noon heat and wind.

Suddenly she recognized her little girl's—her baby's—low scared mewling from inside the car; sounded like the hungry kittens nosing Orlando's cushy white Keds, and their softness combined with helplessness caused her to snatch reflexively at the door pull. It didn't give. It was locked.

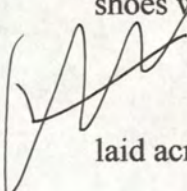
"Open the door, you..." To curse would only frighten the children more, both of them staring wide-eyed and pleading for her to get them out.

She pounded her fist on the window glass with the boy's stricken face behind. A good boy, did everything he was told. Too good because now he was obeying his no-good father in the front seat with a pistol pointed at the boy's head, then her own head, then swinging round to her baby, bowed low and sobbing into her tiny clean hands. The red ribbons on her stuck-out braids shivering. Light quickening from the sun streaming over the rooftop across the street, leaf shadows shivering too. Everything shivering in the wind picking up, but especially the nerves behind Orlando's eyes.

Steadying herself, she stopped pounding on the window. "Just let them go, Froman," she said, speaking to the flare of white in Froman's hair, the flaring whites of his eyes. "This is between us. Please let them go."

The lock system clicked, and the boy popped open the door and bailed out, stumbling, his sister scooting behind him in her favorite blue jeans with embroidered red roses up both legs; timidly, accusingly, peering back at the man who'd shamed her by making like a baby, then ahead at her mother. Tears drying on her cream brown cheeks, so like Orlando when she was Little Rosellen and got sent on a trip to Orlando—she had passed the nickname down with the light skin to her daughter. For luck.

The prowling kittens, recognizing their true caretaker—the one who lugged ten-pound sacks of costly kitty treats from the grocery shelves to the cart, hoisting them up and over and onto Orlando's bread and cheap hamburger, and then left Hansel-and-Gretel trails from the kitchen to the driveway for them to follow—whirled from the dull white Keds to the small tennis shoes with fascinating flickering reflectors, little lights. No socks. Orlando's baby hated socks.

 "Yo mama's daid, y'all say a word," Froman barked. Left arm with the gun in hand was laid across the top of the seat in the manner of any normal man about to depart with his wife and issuing warnings to his children that they'd better behave or else.

He was left-handed, which had made Orlando leery of all left-handed people; her grandmother who raised her after her own mother died had always claimed that left-handed people were of the devil.

The car was full of him, his booming voice, his smell of sweat and filthy clothes (he had on an old gray sweatshirt and navy twill pants, tight in the thighs risen like yeast loaves from the tabby seat).

"Play with the kittens, babies. I'll be back." Orlando opened the front door—DING

DING DING—and eased under the steering wheel and felt for the squat key with its black square plastic cap. Had trouble fitting the pointed end into the ignition slot. Brave-faced for benefit of the watching children, foot on the brake, she switched on the car and geared down into reverse and began backing from the drive. Praying: God, don't let me run over a cat.

"Make it good," Froman said in a razed voice.

Make it good.

He steadied the pistol on his left thigh, hid from sight of anybody passing, pointed at her slim waist. Like her daddy, she was tall and thin, never gained weight, no matter how much she ate. Her hair, lately straightened, was coarse and cropped at her jawline.

Driving forward up the street of side-by-side cheap brick and frame houses, she could see in the rearview mirror Buck hugging her pocket book and her baby a clutch of fiery kittens. Orlando felt guilty because most of the time she thought of her children as rich and spoiled compared to herself when she was growing up. Secretly she blamed them for her having to beg money for them.

Her mint-scented body lotion ripened from the heat of her body, but couldn't compete with the strong-man odor emanating from Froman.

Rounding the curve of the new blacks-only subdivision, gainfully referred to as a *cul de sac* by the real estate company, she was glad, though sad, when she could no longer see her children. But then her terror really took hold.

"Hear tell you got you a boy friend," Froman said in a razed lover-like voice.

"I've been divorced from you going on two years. He's not a boy friend, just a friend."

"Friend shit!" he shouted.

He was right. But she had no intention of getting serious with Anthony Dell, not with her record of wrong men. He'd never even met her children or been inside her house.

Froman laughed and goosed her in the ribs with the pistol barrel, almost playfully. Not quite.

Then, sobered up, he said in that burned-out voice, "I ain't in no mood," and gazed off at a field of dried weeds, across from the whites-only Methodist Church. "Jail'll do that to a man."

"I know for a fact you were in jail for beating on a girlfriend." She tried to temper her voice; her face was burning up. "Had nothing to do with not paying me... not paying child support."

"You lying. You a lying bitch!" The barrel of the pistol rose, then fell as a sheriff's patrol car motored toward them from the oak-shady side street behind the red-brick courthouse. Then turned ^{right} onto the main road with a nod of the hatted head behind the window. Gone.

Orlando knew this deputy, he knew her. He'd recognized her and surely he'd ^{had} recognized this man he'd had to pick up so often for aggravated assault, not even counting the refusals to pay child support arrests. Maybe the deputy had grown numb, or scared, but Orlando figured he'd just rather not be bothered. Last time he'd ^{had} insinuated that Orlando was just being a bother, out for money from a working man. She knew from experience too that her and Froman being black was mostly what had blinded the deputy to the man in her car. Her only hope was that Anthony would check on her when she didn't show up for work by nine. But how?

At first, Orlando had figured that Anthony must be gay—the pretty-boy types most always were. Besides, what kind of man would become a nurse, a children's nurse at that? Then she'd learned that he had a son, which wasn't sure proof that a man wasn't gay. Then she'd learned that his wife had left him with the little boy—a real turn-around from other men she

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knew. But what broke her heart, what softened her to Anthony, was working with him on a starved dark boy only four years old whose anus had been ripped open by the mother's boyfriend while she was at work. Together, she and Anthony had plucked public hairs from the child's bloody rectum. Later, she had found Anthony sitting on the steps at the rear entrance to the clinic, face buried in his fine light hands. His broad shoulders were shaking. Looking up with teary eyes, managing a smile, he said to her, "White-people problems are a laugh."

"What about Summer?"

"I forgot about Summer."

Summer was the white infant whose teenage parents had beaten to death. Neither would tell on the other, so neither went to jail. It was as if they'd made a pact not to talk, regardless of the fact that they despised each other enough to get a divorce soon after their child had died.

Still, Orlando hadn't been in-love with Anthony, not yet. That had come gradually from just being in the same office, day after day. Close proximity. Orlando figured that even a man less pretty, a man less sweet, would have drawn her to him, and him to her, in a sexual way, streaking fire inside them every time their arms brushed or their eyes met. A curious thing, and humbling too, that people were so simple really, so surface and physical. It made her wonder if there wasn't some spirit at work to throw two people together, male or female, simply because they happened to be where they happened to be. Hate worked the same way. Even death.

Froman's muddy brown work boots showed no traces of tar, meaning he had either quit working asphalt or had been in jail for a while. Nobody from the sheriff's office had called to say he was out; last time whoever had been supposed to call had just forgotten, they said. No reason to call her with the news this time; she did hope they'd called the girl friend. Froman's boots were laid over on their sides, legs spread, like he used to sit when they were going somewhere.

Huge right arm crooked in the open window. She always drove because his driver's license had been suspended, then revoked after several DUIs. She was always in charge of routine matters.

He was always in charge of her. Well, the beatings had been routine.

Idling the car at the end of the road, she could see the distant flashing lights of the school zone on her left. Sun beaming through the haze of the open highway beyond the school running west into the unhindered pine woods, fringes of the Okefenokee Swamp. She hoped Froman didn't tell her to turn left; if he did, that would mean he planned to shoot her and leave her body where it might never be found.

Hope: "Which way?" Her voice cracked.

"Towarge Valdosta." He pointed right with the pistol, still resting on his thigh.

Toward Valdosta. She used to correct him till she learned better.

School children in bright clothes with packs on their backs walked singly and in twos along the sidewalk and the white pipe railing of the courtyard. Chasing and laughing, shrill chatter breaking the still morning. Usually she thought of these children as brats, spoiled as Sissy and Buckeye. Spoiled as the children brought to the doctor's office where she worked. While giving a shot to a frail blond girl, she'd suddenly been attacked. The child had sprung like a snake and bitten Orlando on the arm. Her first thought had been to slap her. She hadn't. She'd stepped aside while the mother hugged her little girl. "Time out if you don't behave, sweetie." But all children weren't brats, these school children before her weren't brats, Sissy and Buckeye weren't brats. Orlando had just been comparing them all to herself as a child with one changing of good clothes she had to wash at night and hope they'd dry by the next morning. This scene was suddenly precious to her, special, the children dear, something to hold to. Or a marker of what had been as opposed to what would be.

The light at the crossing was green, on her right the one-room brick post office, on her left the front corner of the courtyard and the American flag, high on the tall pole, beginning to lift in the wind. At the base of the pole was a tall bushy cedar tree with ancient colored Christmas lights left off till start of the season. Only two stores in Cornerville, the Delta across 129, and farther up, on 94, the Holiday Market. She needed gas. Had planned to gas up before heading to Valdosta where she worked for her children's doctor. She should have brought Anthony to meet them; they would have liked Anthony. Froman would have killed him—that was the real reason she hadn't brought Anthony home to meet her children.

Her children—were they still waiting with her pocket book and the kittens like she told them? Yes, they'd be too scared to move because they knew this man, Daddy, and what happened when he was on one of his rampages. Buck had the memory of a broken arm from his daddy wringing it behind his back last time he defended his mother in a fight.

On the open stretch of highway to Valdosta, Froman cranked up the window, sighed and lay his head against the glass, eyes closed, pistol on her. Pine woods opening up before her. Just as woodsy as behind but soon she'd be passing scattered houses, growing closer on the outskirts of Valdosta, eighteen miles away.

Maybe he would fall asleep. He looked tired. Had he broken out of jail, been running all night? Had he slept in her car? She needed to know how desperate he was in order to figure what he might do. She eyed the black-top road ahead, then the pistol braced on his thigh.

Two miles farther, having passed an old rust and blue house trailer that appeared empty, then an unpainted shack with a leggy pied hound in the yard, she saw Froman's hand relax, then let up and the pistol lay on its side. She looked at his puffy black face, squared by his blocked off hair; his eyes were open, watching her.

“Think about Buck and Sissy before you make up your mind what to do.”

“I done make up my mind.” His lips barely moved with each word but the chrome pistol did. His gaze was set, drilling into her.

His not talking was a bad sign; he definitely meant to kill her. She longed to buckle her seatbelt, longed to feel the familiar snug strap between her breasts, yet knew she didn't need to. She didn't *need* to do anything: she didn't need to go to work or worry about stopping by the grocery store on her way home; she didn't need to get gas or check on the children, at home, alone, after school. At least in Cornerville, she didn't have to worry about child molesters and kidnappers—nothing bad ever happened to children in her neighborhood. Still, she worried about that first time; proof often walked through the door where she worked. She felt faint and light-headed, though calm, calm even in the nervous flickering of sun and shade on the old gravel section of highway. She had to shake her head to break the spell.

wd ? A short distance farther, about halfway to town, she dared another look and the pistol was dangling from his finger on the trigger. His head was rolled away toward the other window. Was he staring through the window or sleeping? She couldn't see his eyes.

Passing a neat white farmhouse, set back from the paved road on a sea of scabby plowed furrows, she felt—saw—the pistol slide onto the seat. A foot away from her. The jarring of the car vibrated the pistol closer to the edge.

A long blue metallic car was driving up the farm track, between wire fences and the plowed fields, a dust devil racing behind it. The dull metal mailbox at the start of the lane had its red flag raised to signal the mail carrier that there was mail to be picked up. Orlando took the flag as a warning.

She had to grab the pistol now. She had to do something. She was heading into woods again, tall pines rocking in the wind. He might sleep till she got into town and could signal for help or jump from the car and run, but she might not make it. This could be her only chance.

She took it.

Just as she placed her right hand on the pistol, Froman came alive out of a dead sleep, cursing and shouting and grappling for the pistol she had a grip on, for all the good it would do her. It was pointed at the windshield, a yellow sign with a bold black curved arrow painted on it, *then* the frost-burned grass of a ditch going down. Froman pitched over on top of her, bouncing, heavy and solid as an iron man, then both of them tumbling inside the car, glimpses of green pinetops and flying palmettos, all wheeling with her, shook up and dumped like her pocketbook. Crunching metal and shattering glass—the steering wheel jerking left and right and no longer shaped round. One final lunge of her body and she landed side-slung on what appeared to be the gray felt humped ceiling of the car, a child's dirty handprint she'd never noticed before and was having trouble focussing on now, her eyes dimming, dimming... Seeps of light.

When she came to, Froman was breathing hard above her head, holding to both her wrists and dragging her through woods, over briars and palmettos. The wind was blowing strong and the sky above was blue with racing white clouds. No, maybe jet tracks that had shredded. She wondered which. She wondered why she wondered. She could taste blood and grit, she was chewing on glass and trying to spit. Her arms felt long, longer than her body because she had no feeling from the waist down. It was as if she were stretching to reach something. All her life she'd been stretching to reach something that wasn't even there.

She closed her eyes. She had to play dead. For a fact her head was hurting and her ears throbbed dangerously, made the sound of her dead lower body dragging over stubble too loud, too close, but thankfully unreal. Her arms overhead felt wrung from the sockets.

At last he let her arms go. She just lay there, still, death-like. She had seen on TV a documentary about bears and a man whose voice she could hear clear as then saying that the best defense against a bear is to play dead. *Play dead.*

You just playing dead, I know you are, you better speak to me. Don't you die on me, Mae.

You shoot her, daddy! You kill her!

You ain't see nothing, gal, you hear? Law ax you you ain't see nothing; bossman ax you you ain't see nothing. Don't you cry now neither, do the devil gone get you.

Froman's breathing was now over her, gusts of foul air on her face. His huge hands locked around her neck and squeezing. Her hands flew up prying at the bear's. But she didn't cry.

The Colonel had just come into the house she kept for the young Carpenter couple (always off to work and if they weren't working, they were loafing, burning up the highways in that little foreign car of the wife's). Keeping to her notion of order—not habit, not ritual, which are entirely of a different mindset—she ran a good hot sink full of water: soap in first to suds properly under the guttering of the faucet; glasses and cups placed carefully in soak; plates on the counter stacked alongside, then pots left over from supper (you guessed it, the wife never did dishes at night). In the middle of the kitchen, she wiped the round oak table, circular and then with the grain. She scoured the white stove, to the left of the sink, until it gleamed and showed not a trace of having ever been used.

Now she could look back over what was done and not dwell on the undone while she began washing and rinsing and draining the glassware, each squeaky clean and sparkling as she set the stack of plates into the bubbling suds.

It was at this point that she looked up and out the window, white trim with eight polished panes, and spied a big, black fellow stumbling like a blind man from the west woods and across the plowed field. The leaves of the bay trees were blowing, showing undersides of white selvedge. Chasing after the man was a perfectly formed dust devil, a twister head-high and spinning dirt to dust, erasing his tracks. He stopped and the dust devil went on, whirling straight through him, looked like, then passing from view of The Colonel in the window. The man seemed to follow, chasing after the dust devil along the fence line to the front of the house. From there she could only imagine that he was either heading for the highway or climbing over the fence into the yard, that he was up to no good. Next thing she knew, on the washing of the second plate, he came slinking back along the outer wall of the house, ducking low under the window, as if he couldn't be seen from the window if he couldn't see through the window.

Well, nothing got past The Colonel.

Drying her hands on her white apron, she stepped to the open door of the screen porch and stood with the backsides of her reddened hands resting on her broad hips. The man was stooping behind the blooming azaleas, creeping toward the porch door.

His nose was bleeding, red as the horn-shaped blossoms, and blood trickled from his scalp, tingeing the white patch of hair red, like one of the flowers picked by a lover and stuck there. The rest of his nappy hair glittered as if wet—blood, she guessed. Course, with all that close black hair you couldn't really tell.

Just as he reached for the door handle, she called out from the kitchen door, "Well, you gonna just stand out there all day or you coming in?"

He snatched his hand away as if the door pull was hot. Peering with those big terrible eyes, the better to see her through the screen.

"You up to no good," said The Colonel, "but I aim to feed you anyway." She turned her boxy back to him, returning to the kitchen to get on with the business of her dishes. She was a big loud woman, tall with wide shoulders and the old-timey print shirtwaist she was wont to wear would have looked better on a man. Regardless, she never wore britches like other women her size. She had bad feet—bunions—so the black orthopedic shoes suited her just fine.

Washing dishes, she listened for him to open the whining screen door, then step onto the back porch. "You can wash up in there," she called out, and swung her left arm out to signal to the mudroom off the kitchen.

But when she looked around, he was standing in the doorway, husky, rigid with a frown on his face, huffing and puffing like the wind outside.

She cut her gray eyes at him, as if to shame him, for what she didn't yet know. "God'll get you," she said and sucked air through the corner of her mouth, as if cutting the fool with somebody she knew. But she meant it.

Gulping like a landlubber fish, he said,
Speaking between breaths, he said, "Where yo car keys at, lady? That what I'm after."

She hung her head, eyes still on him and her grinning now too. Peeping through an overhang of colorless permed bangs (old limp hair wouldn't hold a perm and she was just about ready to give up on that too). Still washing dishes, round and round with her scrubber stuck in a cook pot. "What you mean where's my car keys?"

In two strides he made it to the oak table, pulled out a ladder-back chair and collapsed in it. Head resting on his arms and rocking side to side.

“You take it black?” The Colonel was pouring him a cup of coffee from the glass carafe on the burner of the Mr. Coffee.

✓ He raised his head. “Lady, I ain’t fooling ^{with} you. Now gimme them keys.”

“I ain’t got all day.” She stood poised with the cup of coffee, ready to spoon in the sugar from a green glass cup on the counter behind her—the misses’ depression glass she liked to use everyday and after all the good money she’d spent on it. Trying to prevent chipping or breaking it was a chore The Colonel could have done without.

“I ain’t got all day neither.” He started to stand but stayed seated. His whole body was jerking and he was one second fidgeting and the next scratching. Blood drops bloomed like roses on the white lacy place mat before him—Martha Stewart décor but from of all places K-mart.

The Colonel crossed the kitchen and set the cup of coffee down before him (nothing won’t touch a bloodstain unless you put it in cold water right away). “Now, you straighten up and act like somebody. Drink your coffee while I make you some eggs.”

He watched spellbound as she finickly lifted the place mat between the tip of her thumb and middle finger, and holding it out away from her body bounded over to the sink and dropped it and wrung on the faucet.

Then she crossed the kitchen to the frig, opened it and took out a chrome basket of brown eggs. At the counter next to the stove again, she began cracking the eggs one-handed and quick and dropping them from on high into a Real McCoy blue shoulder bowl. Beating with a wire whisk, her whole huge body shook.

Froman drank the coffee, watching her place the black iron skillet on the stove, turn on the gas, a ring of blue fire, and clank on the edge of the skillet a spoon with a dollop of pale butter. Immediately, it began to sizzle, and she grasped the handle and shuffled the pan on the grate. An unnerving racket with the wind howling around the northwest corner of the house.

"My house, I wouldn't have this gas," she said. "Electricity cooks more even. Course, young folks, what do they know?" She dumped the beaten eggs from the bowl into the pan, then posed with her spatula up and one foot before her like a fashion model at the end of a runway.

Froman looked like an oversized schoolboy, doing as he was told.

"Where are you from?" she asked, pushing with the spatula the cooked eggs for the raw to float to the bottom of the skillet.

"You one crazy white woman," said Froman. He laughed low, forearms resting on the table edge. Drank some more coffee.

"What they tell me." She cackled out, dumping the scrambled eggs onto a white plate with embossed seashells.

She picked up a fork from the dish drainer by the sink, walked over to the table and set the plate before him, then posed again with her hands on her hips and shaking her head at the very notion of such at her table. Then she went back to the stove and took down a can of black pepper from the shelf above it. Carried it to him. "Salt isn't good for you, but here's the pepper." She stood over him, wiping her hands on her white apron.

Staring up at her, he began peppering his eggs with a jerky motion.

✓ "Ain't met the man yet ^{didn't} pepper his eggs."

Froman began eating furiously.

"Bad sign."

“What?” he said with his mouth full, washing the eggs down with coffee.

“You being left handed,” she said.

He stared down at the fork in his left hand, up at her, then scooped more eggs onto the fork. “Wonder somebody ain’t kilt you already. That mouth!”

“God’ll get you.” She wheeled in her heavy black shoes—SAS, cost a whole week’s work pay.

Washing dishes while he ate, she kept cutting her eyes back at him. Cutting the fool with him? He couldn’t tell.

Done, he pushed his plate away and emptied the dregs of his coffee in his mouth. “Now, them keys.”

“About how high does your electricity bill run every month?”

“What?” Looking tamed, he reared on the hind legs of the chair and crossed his arms over his great chest.

“Well, I just mailed mine this morning and I can tell you it was a whopper. A hundred dollars to the cent.”

“A hundred dollars.” He laughed, then thunked the front legs of the chair to the white Congoleum floor, speaking to himself. “Damned if I can’t pick em.”

“These folks I work for here run up more than two hundred in electricity. Both of them work. Can afford it. Poor people like us are who it hurts.”

“What you know about *pore* and you white, you old biddie?”

“Well, I’m not working for my health, I can tell you that.”

“Work! You call what you doing work?”

For an answer she picked up one black SAS for him to take a look at. "On my feet all day."

"You oughta try working asphalt on a hot day."

"So you *can* work. I was beginning to wonder." She grinned at him. "Figured you for a loafer and boozer."

"Cause I'm black, you figure that?"

"Nope, cause you're sorry—sorry as all get-out as they say. Here it is a Monday and you come stumbling out of them woods there." She pointed out the window at the blowing dust and the same or another dust devil skirling end to end of the field. "Out to steal some poor old white woman's car. And God only knows how you got all bloodied up."

"I kilt somebody. My own wife at that." Tension seemed to gather in his features and thicken the area around his nose. "Now, I wouldn't be telling you that if I was planning on leaving you alive, would I?"

If The Colonel was shocked, she didn't show it. Or maybe she didn't even hear; she was busy rubbing the bloodstain from the place mat, fists working against each other like pistons. The dust devil was still whirling, roving, seemed to be the source of the wind's howling. Or was it a siren?

"You hear that?" she asked.

"What?"

"A siren."

"You beat all, I swear," he said. "Think I'm gone get up and run check, don't you?"

Deep in concentration, The Colonel asked, "She have children with you?"

He had to think about what she'd said, then, "Not that it's any of your damn business but we got two—boy and a girl."

Still, she didn't turn, continued scrubbing and then stopped to check the bloodstain.

"Guess who'll take over and their mother dead and gone?"

He didn't answer. Reared again on the legs of the chair. Figuring.

"Course a man'd do something like that isn't any too worried about his children, right? Might sack em up like kittens and throw em in the river."

"You a nosy old bitch."

"Just passing time with you. Just a-passing time." She sighed, staring out the window while rinsing the pot. "Calls himself a farmer, young man I work for. Course if he was a real farmer he'd likely be ashamed of such a title. But then I guess he wouldn't have all those high-faluting architects he works with to impress with claims of doing something a little different on the side.

"The wife, she's a baby doctor. Has her own practice up there in Valdosta. No children of her own, and I expect part of it is all those pitiful children she doctors every day. She's always coming home with stories of children beat up and what-all. Makes you wonder." Drying the pot, she turned, facing him. "Looks like the devil just gets into some people, don't it?"

"I don't b'lieve in the devil if you meaning me."

"What about God?"

"Done with all that after I got up some size. Had enough church to make me crazy."

"Hum. So, that's what happened to you."

"Nothing ain't *happened* to me. I just do what I have to do to get by."

"Like killing your wife."

"Like waiting on you, I reckon, to finish washing them dishes." He stood and slammed the chair back and it landed backside down on the floor. Leaning over the table, he balled his fists. "Them keys, give em to me now."

"Well, I figured to take my time since you're gonna kill me anyway."

"You mean stall so somebody might happen up and save your hide."

"That's what you'd do, right?"

"Right."

✓ "Then how come you to begrudge me what's left of my time?" She turned, opened the cabinet ^{door} under the sink and began re-stacking the pots to make them nest with the one she'd just finished.

"How come you doing all that and you bout to die?" He set the chair upright, then sat in it again.

She stood straight, face red from bending. "Got any better ideas?"

→ "Hey, how come you ain't afraid?" "Dying?" "Yeah, dying. How come you ain't afraid?"

He seemed to be thinking, then back to his devilish way. "I'm done talking. Now go get the keys."

"Well, I'm not done." She faced the sink again, washing a shallow stoneware pan. "So, what did your wife do?"

"I tell you *what*," he shouted. "Evertime I turn around she land my ass in jail for not paying child support."

"I bet."

"What that mean?"

"A fellow like you wouldn't want to be taking care of his children."

"I do. I did. I..."

So strange for a woman of her size and age. Too dignified to screw up for yourself. "Well, I never planned figured on not-dying? Again, she posed like a model at the end of the runway. "You've got to admit, a lot of people have already done it... died, I mean. You, yourself, said you'd just killed one."

✓ She peeped over her shoulder, cutting ~~her~~^{her} eyes at him. "The truth now. Ain't nobody to hear but me and you and who'm I gonna tell?"

"She had her a boyfriend. How I know how she spend my money? Younguns bout didn't see a dime of my money."

"Your money, her money. Same thing. She work?"

"Where she get the boyfriend—at work. Baby doctor in Valdosta."

"The boyfriend's a doctor, huh?"

"No. Just work in the same office, ain't no tar nigger like me."

"Wait!" She lit up. "His name wouldn't be Anthony, would it?"

"How I know what his name be?"

"But you know your wife's, don't you? Orlando. Many's the time she's called up here with a message from the missus, her boss lady."

"You just messing with me now." He slid the table away, about a foot. "Trying to sidetrack me. Mess me up."

She could see fear in his eyes, the spooked reaction of her revelation, maybe. "Orlando. Not Orlando." She was speaking to herself, way off in a daze. "How could anybody harm Orlando—sweet girl like that. And us right here... me and you." She turned to finish washing out the placemat in cold soak. "Funny how life works out, isn't it?"

Next time she cut her eyes around, he was standing square behind her. "You want to step back over there," she said. "Afraid I might knock you with my elbows."

"Where yo pocketbook at?"

"Do I look like the type for a *pocketbook*?"

"Don't tell me."

She smiled—thin lipped, tight lipped. “Afraid I don’t.” Her weak pale eyes blazed in their sockets.

“You queer or what?”

“Nope. Just look like it. One reason they call me The Colonel.”

You do look like a man, now I think about it. *A colonel?*”

She could smell the blood on him, like heating orange juice. “Nurse in the army—Vietnam.”

“Lady, I don’t give a shit about where you been or what you is or ain’t. Get it!” He picked up the dripping blood-tinged place mat and mopped his brow where blood was trickling afresh from his hair to his forehead.

“Ank!” she scolded and snatched it away and dropped it into the sink of water again.

He stared mean at her, wrinkling his purplish forehead. His mean stare was lost on her because she was now gazing fixated out the window at the dust devil now whipping like a tornado across the plowed field. “Look at that, will you. Same old dust devil after you when you come up out of the woods. It’s like it’s searching for you. Or trying to tell us something, one.”

Again she heard either the siren, or the shrill screaming of a woman. She couldn’t be sure.

He glanced at the window, maybe hearing it too, then glared at her again. “I gotta get out ^{er} here. Give me the keys or I’m gonna haf to kill you.”

“Just watch it, will you?” She laughed, fascinated, leaned over the sink to peer out the window. “Mighty restless looking, ain’t it?”

The dust devil spun toward the house, just beyond the window, just over the fence. Inside it she could see a dark core, shape of a woman, like film developing a picture from a negative.

"You see *that*?" She didn't look at him but she could feel him looking. Scared to death.

"Shit!"

She reached into her bosom and pulled out a single brass key on a loop of white cotton twine. "Take it and go."

He grabbed for it, missed it. It landed on the floor. As he bent down to retrieve it, she caught him under the chin with a quick-jacked knee. He fell back, upper part of his body caught on his elbows and his head sprung. Then he took her down, arms about her legs and struggling.

The windows of the old house shook in their frames and the dishes in the cupboards rattled like

~~in an earthquake.~~ *a washing machine spun off balance.*

Tussling, the two of them, he finally gained a grip with his knees straddling her broad body, hard though it appeared soft. His hands flew up to her neck and locked around it.

Her eyes bulged like a frog's. "God'll get you," ~~she strangled out.~~

~~The last sound she heard was the end and beginning strains of crying.~~