

MINUTE MAIDS

an original short story by Rachel Caine

After she'd looked at the blood a while, Olida was able to think of it as a stain. A big old ugly stain from floor to ceiling, throwing red legs over the tub, puddling around the pot. She pulled the last stiff towel down from the rod. The bathmat made a sticky sucking sound as she peeled it loose from the floor; the blood underneath looked black and flowed slow, like syrup. Olida wrapped the mat in the towel and tossed the whole mess to Rita-Mae. The girl made a face and held it at arm's length.

"Shit, don't throw it at me! Think they're gonna want this stuff?" Rita-Mae asked, and pushed her limp blond hair back with a sweaty hand. She'd been scrubbing at the stain in the hallway, the one that came down the hall to the bathroom in sloppy footprints. "I mean, we gonna wash it or what?"

"Rita, did you leave your brain in a jar this mornin'? Just throw it out," Olida said, and wiped at her face with the back of her forearm. Lord, she was tired. Dried blood stuck to her gloves in brown flakes. "They'll be buyin' new towels."

"Think you're so smart. How'd you know?" Rita-Mae shot back. Olida didn't even look at her. Rita-Mae's mouth didn't bother her any more.

"'Cause I would," she said, "and so would you if they was your towels. Get me that pail of hot water, and you put enough Pine-Sol in there that I can smell it this time."

Rita-Mae gave her a dirty glare and walked away swinging her butt like the trailer-park trash she was. Olida sighed and heaved herself off of her knees. At fifty-five, getting up wasn't as easy as it used to be. She caught a look at herself in the stained mirror as she turned -- a wide-hipped black woman, dressed in a white woman's castoffs bought for three dollars at the thrift shop. Good smooth skin, too much gray in her hair. She wondered how much Misty Lee Jackson over at the Le Chic Salon would charge her to dye that out. *Too young to be gray*, she thought. *I still look good.*

She knew she was lying to herself. She looked like any old sorry-assed nigger, sentenced to clean up other people's shit for the rest of her life.

But shit was better than this, Lord, better than seeing what was left after folks done unto each other. Sometimes she felt bad about it, in a quiet way. She sighed and remembered what her momma had always said, bent over scrubbing up drunks' vomit at Joe's Late Nite Place.

"Rich folks get depressed," she said aloud. "Poor folks get back to work."

She reached up to unfasten the Care Bears shower curtain. The plastic rings let go with pops, and the curtain sagged like a carcass into the tub. Blood flaked away and made piles of red grit like old rust.

Well, no sense in staring at it. She turned the hot water on and left it to soak.

The blood wiped right off the glossy wall across from the toilet, gone like a bad dream. She used an old toothbrush to clean it out of the cracks in the tile and looked at the floor with a flashlight to make sure

she'd got it all. When she was satisfied, she stood up to stretch a minute and lifted her arms over her head. Her back felt like it was put together with rubber bands, wrapped twice.

Fifty-five. Sweet Lord Jesus, what a trial it was to get old. Olida sighed and got down on her knees again to sponge off the tile behind the toilet. Some of the blood was solid enough to peel off in a layer, like those Fruit Rollups her grandkids liked to eat. Old Jell-O, that was what it was. Old spilled raspberry Jell-O.

She flushed the Jell-O down the toilet and got down on her knees again to sponge off the thick syrupy film that was left. Rita-Mae had brought her Pine-Sol bucket while her back was turned, and every time she dunked the sponge in it the water turned darker.

She finished that and reached way back to clean off the streaks that had to be hiding where she couldn't see them.

Something hard touched her fingers. She let out a yelp and banged her head on the pot scooting away; her heart felt heavy and thick in her chest, hammering to get out. She took in deep, deep breaths until her chest stopped aching, then crawled under the toilet and reached in and grabbed what she'd found.

It was a little Care Bear, with a big happy rainbow on its chest. One ear had been chewed off, and the other showed child-sized toothmarks.

There were dried bloodstains all over it. Olida took the sponge and scrubbed it, scrubbed it again until her fingers cramped up, then plunged it into the soapy water in the bucket and scrubbed it some more. When it was as clean as she could make it, she set it reverently back up on the shelf where the other Care Bears waited.

The tub was full of hot red water. Olida pulled the plug and rinsed the shower curtain until she saw no more blood, anywhere.

When she cleaned the mirror, there was no sign that anything had happened at all. Just an empty, clean-smelling bathroom waiting for a child.

The Care Bears smiled at her from the shelf.

Rita-Mae had finished her job and was polishing the wood hallway floor with oil, face dark pink and sweaty. She glared. Olida nodded to her and went on into the kitchen, where Zenobia was packing up their supplies into the carrying cases. The cases had faded stickers on them that said MINUTE MAIDS, but they hadn't none of them worked for Minute Maids in twelve years. Olida reminded herself for about the one hundredth time to take those stickers off, and forgot about it as soon as she dropped her rubber gloves into the trash sack piled in the corner.

"We done?" Zenobia asked. Olida nodded and flapped her damp hands to cool them off. "Rita-Mae done a good job on the hall, did you see?"

"I saw. You want your money now or at Charley's?"

"Better now, I got to pick up Mando at school. He got football practice and all. I see you later, okay?"

"Okay, honey. Here." Olida rubbed her hands on her faded work pants and dug ten twenty-dollar bills out of her pocket. She handed them to Zenobia; the Mexican woman's round face puckered in a frown.

"You give me too much, Lida. How much they pay you?"

"Don't matter, you know that. You done a good job. You tell Mando to win on Saturday, hear?" Olida said, and Zenobia frowned at her for another minute, then shrugged and nodded. She waddled out the door to her ancient Woody station wagon with two of the carrying cases, and Olida waved to her as she backed out of the driveway and onto Tattinger Street. The wagon drove away, flapping peeling fake wood like streamers.

That left Rita-Mae. Olida paid her off -- Rita-Mae wasn't as happy as Zenobia, but then she never was -- and helped her carry her share of supplies out to the orange Pinto. It sputtered and roared and belched black smoke as the girl gunned it and drove away.

Olida stood on the porch and felt the sun breathe on her skin while she ticked off the list in her mind. *Check the doors and windows. Take out the trash. Lock the door and drop the key over at Miz Grainger's house.* She went back inside, blinked back sunspots, and turned right to walk down the hall.

A little girl stood at the end of it, by the bathroom. She was wearing a long yellow nightgown with green ribbon on it. Olida stopped and braced herself against the wall. Her head pounded. A numb feeling bled up and down her left arm, and her eyes filled up with tears. She couldn't get her breath, and she felt tired, so tired she couldn't even feel too scared.

She just wished it wouldn't keep happening.

The little girl was white, with blonde hair. She just stood there, watching, waiting. Olida slid down the scrubbed wall to the oiled wood floor, and knew she was sitting right where nice Mrs. Gilbert had died.

The little white girl held something out that caught the setting sunlight. It was a small plastic Care-Bear. She smiled and nodded to Olida.

"Sweet Jesus, make it stop," Olida whispered, so softly she couldn't even hear it herself over the pounding of her heart. Tears broke free to slide like oil down her cold skin. She tried to turn her face away, but she couldn't. The little girl turned and walked back in the bathroom.

It's empty, Olida told herself. *I cleaned it.* Nothing there to see.

She lay there half-propped on the wall for a long while before she felt the numbness in her arm go away. Standing up made her feel light-headed and sick, and scared. Her legs felt weak.

The front door was behind her. She walked down the hall, the way the stains had walked. She walked to the bathroom and looked inside.

Little Isobel Gilbert stood in the middle of a pool of blood. Blood everywhere, on the shower curtain, on the Care Bears, puddled around the pot. Isobel clutched her favorite plastic toy close and cried without making a sound. The whole house was like that, waiting.

Olida felt so tired. The numbness hadn't gone away in her arm like she'd thought; it drilled deep into her bones like termites, cleaned out all her strength and left her empty. *Too old*, she thought. *I'm so old. I don't want to see these things no more.*

Isobel looked up at her, and the tears sliding down her cheeks were blood.

Olida went down on one knee. Something wet soaked into her work pants. Seen at close range Isobel wasn't so solid, more like a flickering TV picture, grainy and glowing.

The little girl held out her arms.

Olida closed her eyes and embraced her. Just for a minute, she felt her, cold and bloody, and then warm and firm like a child should be. And then it was gone, a whisper against her skin and through her body. Olida collapsed back against the cabinets and lay there while her heart fluttered in her chest like a caged bird, and settled down to pound again. It sounded quieter now. Weaker.

Her fingers slid over the floor. Clean, smooth linoleum. Nothing wet.

Olida raised her head and looked at the clean bathroom. She prayed for a while, flat on her back, and waited for her strength to come back to help her home.

Dinner was done, and even though Olida knew she shouldn't let the plates sit there she was too tired to clean up. She went in the living room and turned on the evening news. Her husband Lark stayed in the kitchen, rustling his paper; he pretended to be too deaf to hear the doorbell when it rang. Olida hauled herself out of her threadbare recliner and switched off the TV before she opened the door.

The face on the other side turned out to be a sickly yellow-white. Nervous. It was Miz Cochran from the Calvary Temple, and she tried to smile and didn't do a very good job of it.

"Olida, I'm so sorry to bother you, but your husband said it would be all right to come on by. We -- I mean the members of the Calvary Temple -- we took up a collection for Deacon Graham, and we'd like you to -- to -- clean his house for him while he's in the hospital. As a Christian favor."

Miz Cochran found it hard to look Olida in the eye, like she might catch something off the stare. Her eyes kept moving away, down to the cracked concrete porch or off to the hollyhocks blooming in the garden, or over next door to where Fredoric sat on his steps and grinning at the show. Olida stepped aside to let Miz Cochran come in, but the woman just stood there like a mule, shaking her head. Olida came out and let the screen door slam shut behind her.

"Why, sure, Miz Cochran, that would be just fine," she said, and tried to remember what the pastor said about turning the other cheek. "Deacon George, he's a real nice man. Real nice. He fixed my sink when Lark was down with his back problems, and I'd consider it just fair to do something for him in his bad times. How is he?"

"He's fine. The doctors say they plan to let him go by Saturday. We just didn't want him to come home to the --" Miz Cochran flapped her hands, helpless.

"Mess," Olida supplied. "I reckon we can clean all that up. He used a shotgun to kill that burglar, didn't he?"

"I think so," Miz Cochran said weakly. "Lord, I don't really know."

Didn't want to, neither, Olida figured. She shrugged and let it go. She haggled another few minutes, poking at Miz Cochran's squeamishness when she thought it could get her to a better price, and in the end agreed on a perfectly good five hundred dollars. It would get Zenobia through another week of running

her army of kids around, and get Rita-Mae's husband another few good drunks, and get Olida ahead a little on Lark's medical bills.

Miz Cochran couldn't leave fast enough. Olida leaned on the door frame and watched her flowered dress shimmy away. She hadn't dared come by herself; somebody white waited in the car for her. Olida's neighbors Fredoric and Shalimar waved at the car until the white folks drove away, hellions just because they didn't have anything better to do. Olida grinned and went back into her house.

Miz Cochran hadn't made such a good deal. Olida figured she would have done the job for two hundred, and paid Rita-Mae and Zenobia out of her own pocket. Deacon Graham had been good to her and Lark these past years; one of her prize possessions was the bronzed praying hands he'd made for her. He was known for them, at least in the county shows and fairs. Her pair looked like middle-aged hands, gnarled with hard work. Hands like her own.

She went into the kitchen and sat down across from Lark with the phone. He kept his nose in the paper and pretended not to notice her. Rita-Mae's number rang five times, and when it finally got picked up it clattered as somebody dropped it. There were children screaming in the background, one baby, one just a baby at heart. The TV was on loud enough for Olida to pick up the end of the weather report she'd missed. Rain tomorrow. Thunderstorms.

"Lo?" somebody yelled on the other end.

"Rita-Mae?"

"Rita-Mae's in the can. Call back later." The boy was about twelve years old, too much attitude and too little sense. Olida decided he could have taken after either his mother or his father. In the background, a woman's voice yelled at him to put the phone down and asked who it was.

"It's that nigger lady you work for!" the boy yelled back. Olida's back straightened, then relaxed. It didn't do no good to worry about it, not with Rita-Mae's kids.

The boy yelled again, this time in pain as somebody smacked him. The phone picked up with another clatter.

"Olida?" Rita-Mae asked. She was short of breath. "Sorry. If he had a brain, he'd take it out and play with it. Curtis, get in there and watch some TV! Don't bother me no more!"

Olida waited until the fight on the other end died down to just the baby's squalling in the background.

"You want a job tomorrow?" Olida asked.

"How much?"

"Hundred fifty. It'll be quick, in and out. Not like today."

"Huh," Rita-Mae grunted. "Where is it?"

"Deacon Graham's house. You 'member, he shot that burglar?"

"Yeah, I heard that. Expect he keeps a clean place, him being a church man and all. What time you want me?"

"Oh, ten. That'll give Zenobia time to get the kids settled." Olida cleared her throat. "You won't have no trouble getting Richard to keep yours?"

"Richard don't go nowhere until the bars open, you know that. Won't be no trouble. He needs the money."

"We meet there, ten sharp, okay?"

"Okay." Rita-Mae hung up without a goodbye. Olida pushed her glasses back up on her nose and dialed Zenobia's number.

"Ten is fine. God bless you," was Zenobia's answer. She didn't ask questions. She never did. Olida hung up smiling, which was the reason she always called Zenobia last, and looked across the kitchen table at Lark, who was working on the sports page with a deep frown. He didn't read so good, even after long years of trying.

"Don't like you going to the Deacon's house," Lark said suddenly as she got up to take their dinner plates in to the kitchen. She stopped and looked at him, surprised, and got another frown and a rattle from the paper. He cleared his throat.

"How come?" she asked. He turned the page.

"Just don't. Just don't like him."

Lark, Olida had long since resigned herself, was never going to take to any church or any church folk. He'd threatened to throw Reverend Barnaby down the front steps one night when the Reverend came calling about the annual revival collection, and the Reverend was as black as a Georgia midnight.

"Lark, I promised, and I ain't goin' to go back on my word. Ain't nothing wrong with the Deacon."

Lark grumbled under his breath. She carried the dishes to the sink and clattered them until he got up and hobbled out into the living room. Lark wasn't moving so good these days. Back troubles had put him out of work on the loading docks, and now he had trouble sleeping, and the money she made cleaning didn't go far enough to cover his medical bills. She turned the water on hot enough to steam her eyeglasses and scrubbed at the dishes until her mind felt clean.

She ran herself a hot bath and put some rose colored bath crystals in it, the ones Lark had given her last Christmas; the smell was like a hot summer garden, and reminded her of trimming rose bushes in her momma's back yard, back when black folks sat in separate sections and had to use toilets white folks wouldn't have let their dogs pee in. The roses had been blood-red and velvet-smooth, the thorns as sharp as knives. She'd asked momma to plant some yellow ones, the kind that didn't have such sharp thorns, but momma had grinned and told her that the ones that were the hardest to get close to were always the best.

There were blood spots on her work pants. Olida picked at them a minute, then rinsed them in the sink and put the pants in the laundry basket. The bath was hot and steamy, and when she settled into it she felt light, feather-light. Like a little girl.

Olida was half-afraid she'd see the ghost again, but there was only the smell of roses, and rain.

She dozed off and woke up with enough of a jerk to spill water out of the tub. She'd been in the water too long. Her skin looked loose and wrinkled. She felt like she'd gone to sleep in the bath a young firm woman and woke up a bloated, sick, old sack. Wasn't right. She'd mislaid ten or twenty years, somewhere, without even taking notice of them.

When she got out of the tub again she felt heavy and old and mortally tired. Her robe was getting too small for her, and her stomach pouted out through it like it had when she was carrying LaVelle. She belted it tight and went back out in the living room.

Lark was asleep, feet up on his threadbare footstool. The TV blared out wailing sirens and screams. She turned it down and went to her own chair, where she picked up her Bible and began to read her Sunday School assignment.

Deacon George had always taught the adult class. She wondered who'd teach it this week.

She looked at the flickering blue TV again, over the top of her glasses, and turned up her reading light a little to concentrate on the Lord's words.

The keys to Deacon George's house had come from his sister, Charity Graham Warriner, who lived out in Greenfield and never visited town unless she had to. Charity had married money and society, and didn't like to be reminded she came from poor folk just like most everybody else in the county. Folks said she and George had never got along, but Olida had never heard anybody say why. Money, maybe. Charity had a lot of money and Lord, didn't it make people crazy.

The Deacon sure had a whole lot of keys. Most everybody had a key lock in the doorknob, and that was considered sufficient by everybody in town except banks. Deacon George had *three* locks, one in the doorknob and two deadbolts.

"Hey, check that out. What's he got to lock up like that, you think?" Rita-Mae asked.

"None of your business," Olida snapped. Rita-Mae made a funny little O with her mouth. It showed off teeth that would have been better covered up.

"You gonna let her talk to me like that?" the white girl asked Zenobia. Zenobia shrugged cheerfully. She was checking her watch, probably figuring out when she had to pick up her kids again. Zenobia never cared about other people's peculiarities.

Rita-Mae's eyes, on the other hand, lit up. She kept staring at the keys.

"Had to be something to make that guy break in here, don't you think so, Olida? Something good. Maybe he's got money hidden away in there." Rita-Mae sounded convinced, but then she was the kind of silly woman who got convinced by those newspapers in the checkout line, and by men who said they still loved her after they gave her black eyes.

Olida ignored her.

She got the first lock open and studied the other two keys. She guessed right the first time, and slid the second lock back. The other deadbolt was harder to turn, and she felt the strain in her wrist before it finally clicked back. The door swung open without even a creak, and the other two women looked at Olida. A whiff of something evil-smelling blew out at them with the warm air from inside.

"After you," Rita-Mae said, and grinned.

Olida squared her shoulders and carried the first crate of cleaning things inside. She set it against the heavy door to keep it open while they unloaded.

The house sure had the *smell*. Olida had only gone three steps into the entry hall when she saw the cause of it.

Rita-Mae stopped beside her and shifted her carrying case to her other hip. They stood in reverent silence.

"Ooh, I hate it when that happens," Rita-Mae said. Zenobia leaned over her shoulder to look.

"I've seen worse," she said. Rita-Mae rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, I'll bet your kids make a real mess."

"Look, you *ringa*-- "

"We'll start with the brains," Olida interrupted. "Get me a broom."

The brains were mostly stuck up in the spackles on the ceiling, little dried gray clumps like old spilled pudding. Rita-Mae handed Olida the broom and stepped back, all the way to the door. Zenobia stayed where she was, squinting up at the ceiling.

"What are you lookin' at?" Olida asked her. Zenobia shrugged.

"How you get brains all the way up there?" she asked. Olida set the broom butt-end down on the floor and looked. The blood splash started about five feet up on the wall and crawled all the way on up to the ceiling, where strings and clots of brain hung like those stalactite-things in caves Olida had seen on in schoolbooks.

"Practice?" Rita-Mae said helpfully from the corner.

"Shotgun under the chin," Olida sighed. "Seen it before. Don't recall seein' it done this well before -- mostly they just take they faces off when they get scared at the last minute."

"Ain't that a bitch," Rita-Mae marveled. "Then you're depressed *and* ugly."

"You're disgusting." Zenobia threw a pair of gloves at the white woman. Rita-Mae grinned and snapped them on, just like she'd probably seen it done on TV. Olida lifted the broom again. "Wait! I borrow these from my son!"

Zenobia held out a faded brown scarf and some and an old cracked swimming mask. Olida tied the cloth over her hair and pulled the mask on. Zenobia and Rita-Mae laughed at her, but got out of the way.

"What the hell does your son do with this?" she asked. Zenobia shrugged.

"The usual."

Olida decided not to ask. She swiped the broom across the ceiling.

It rained brains. Zenobia and Rita-Mae stood out of range and made jokes Olida didn't hear; keeping her arms over her head made her feel tired and sick again, but she kept sweeping at the ceiling while spackles and brains pattered down. She tried to breathe through her nose.

"Clear?" she asked. Zenobia came back to take a look.

"Looks good. Just the blood now."

Olida sighed and stripped the mask off. The brown scarf had things on it; she shook it off and handed it back. Zenobia tossed it in the trash sack.

Olida handed the broom to Rita-Mae, who looked sour but started sweeping up. It didn't take long.

One little bag of dusty brain.

"I'm tired," Rita-Mae announced, as she always did. Olida handed her a bucket and pointed to the bathroom across the hall. "Why do I have to do all the hard stuff?"

"Cause you're a hard woman," Zenobia said with a smile. "Catch."

She threw a bottle of Pine-Sol at her. Rita-Mae caught it one-handed and did what Olida guessed was an end-zone victory dance in the doorway.

"Fool," Olida muttered, and drug the last crate of supplies away from the door. It swung shut with a hollow click. "Don't know why I put up with all this foolishness."

"Catch," Zenobia said, and Olida straightened up to grab a flying pair of gloves out of the air.

She was too old to do a victory dance, she decided. She just put on her best dignified look.

Zenobia laughed.

"Ain't there no air conditioner in here?" Rita-Mae yelled from the bathroom. The water was still running.

"We ain't supposed to run it," Olida yelled back.

"Well, how do you like that, we're bustin' our asses to clean up his mess and we're not supposed to be comfortable while we do it? Who the hell said that?"

"I did."

"Oh." Rita-Mae mumbled something Olida couldn't make out over the rushing water. The tap shut off with a high-pitched shriek, and the white woman carried a sloshing, steaming bucket out into the hall and thumped it down on the hardwood floor. "Here. Knock yourself out."

Zenobia elbowed her out of the way to dunk a mop in the bucket. She wrung it out and handed it to Rita with a grin.

Olida broke up the fight.

When it was quiet again, except for the muttering, she unfolded the ladder and climbed up to scrub at the blood on the ceiling. The plaster crumbled and rained down in her eyes, and even though she kept scrubbing it didn't look too good to her. It was hot up near the ceiling, and the smell was as thick as fog. She left it to dry as she started on the bloodstains on the wall. Zenobia tossed her up a fresh sponge when the first one got too ragged.

"Hey, 'Lida?" Zenobia called up. Olida looked down and clutched at the metal ladder tighter. Zenobia looked even shorter and fatter from this high.

"What?"

"Where's Rita?"

Olida said a word that would get her in trouble in Sunday School, and climbed down the ladder. She felt better having her feet on the ground again.

"Rita!" she yelled. A toilet flushed across the hall. "Rita!"

"Keep your pants on! I had to pee!"

"You gotta do anything except work!" Zenobia shouted. The bathroom door banged open, and Rita glared at her.

"Mop," Olida said firmly. "Don't mope."

Rita-Mae did both.

It was Zenobia's turn on the wall. Olida sat down on the bottom rung of the ladder to hold it in place. It shook and shimmied with Zenobia's scrubbing.

"Smells bad, don't it?" Zenobia called down. Olida found herself nodding. The whole place smelled bad, like old rotten trash. She wondered if maybe that wasn't it, that there was bad garbage in the kitchen that nobody had bothered to take out. It would be a nice thing to do, to take out the garbage, even though they weren't being paid for that.

"Smells more like the toilet's backed up somewhere," Rita-Mae said from across the way. She was slowly pushing the mop across some muddy footprints.

"Why don't you go find out?" Zenobia grunted. She tossed a sponge down to Olida, who dunked it in the pail and tossed it back up. They needed new sponges. These were falling apart quick.

"I ain't no plumber. Let him fix it, he's a handyman."

Rita-Mae had a real heart of gold, Olida thought. Only problem was, she'd pawned it on her fourteenth birthday about the same time she'd got knocked up with her first kid.

"Finish your mopping," Olida told her. Rita shrugged.

"Mopping, hell, make her get up here," Zenobia grunted as she swiped a sponge across thick blood and rose-colored water ran down like new wounds. "Hey, does this look pink to you?"

She pointed to a place she'd already cleaned. Olida got her flashlight from the heap in the hallway and squinted at the spot.

"Fraidso."

Zenobiasighed.

"We got a problem. It's gonna have to all be repainted to get rid of the stains --it's old paint, or somebody put flat instead of glossy. Won't come clean all the way likethis. "

"Well, we weren't hired asno painters, just to clean. If it's still pink I guess the church can come out and paint it for him." Olida didn't like leaving things half-done, but there wasn't any sense in making more work for themselves than they'd been paid for. Zenobia , just as proud, looked unhappy.

"ButOlida-- "

"You just come on down, let that dry off. We'll get this blood off the floor."

The floor was warped hardwood. The blood looked like old rusty caulking between the boards. Olida picked through the supply cases and found old toothbrushes. Zenobia , climbing heavily down the ladder, muttered and said something in Spanish.

"What?" Olida asked. The ladder groaned as Zenobia took the last step off of it.

"I say you drive me crazy, you and these toothbrushes."

Olida grinned and threw a soapy sponge at her.

The two of them scrubbed on their hands and knees in companionable silence. The sponges turned rusty, rinsed clean in the buckets. The water in the buckets turned red.

"Lark called Antonio this morning," Zenobia said. "After you left. Told Antonio we shouldn't be doing this."

"Cleaning?" Olida sat back on her heels and frowned at her.

"No, no, be here at the Deacon's house."

"Lark's an old fool," Olida snapped. "Old age is makin ' him crazy."

"Antonio said Lark was really worried. He wants me to call him before we leave."

Olida grunted in disgust and dunked her sponge. The soap bubbles floating on the water turned pink, like Easter eggs.

"Old fool. I'll call him when I'm good and ready."

"Sure. Oh, remember, I got to pick up Laura at three and take her to dance class."

She said it the funny way Mexicans did -- La-oo-ra. Olida tried to remember which one La-oo-rawas, and finally figured it must be the younger girl, the tall one with long legs.

"How's Carmen?" Olida asked. She hadn't heard much about the oldest, Carmen, since she'd dropped out of school. Zenobia kept her head down, kept working. Her shoulders bunched up tight under her T-shirt.

"Okay, I guess. You know."

Olida grunted. After a while, Zenobia looked at her.

"You hear from LaVelle?"

It had been a long time since Olida had heard anybody say the name, even herself. She and Lark didn't talk about LaVelle, had given up trying to find her.

"Naw," Olida said. Her sponge made a whispering sound over wood. "She ain't gonna come back. She's gone."

"Carmen's gone too. Just run off with that no-good boy. How they think they can live --" Zenobia blinked back tears and went back to scrubbing. "She call me from Kansas City. Say she got a job as a waitress."

Olida thought about LaVelle. She'd always wondered where the girl was, what she was doing. Waitressing would be good for her. The girl needed to learn to take orders.

"What's Antonio say about it?"

"You know. Nothing. What can he say?"

Lark had said plenty, none of it good. But in the end it had been LaVelle, nobody else, who'd had the last word.

Goodbye, she'd said.

Olida scrubbed.

The blood came up, and there was only a little stain left on the wood. It could have been anything, a water stain, a spilled soft drink. Good enough. Olida wetted down a toothbrush and started scrubbing in the cracks. Zenobia sat back on her heels to stretch.

It took Olida a minute to realize she couldn't hear Rita-Mae fussing around. She sat up and looked around.

No Rita in sight. The bathroom door was open, so she wasn't in there pretending to be on the pot. Zenobia looked around, too, and made a face.

"Can't count on nobody these days," she sighed. Olida grunted as she got to her feet.

"Damn woman. I'll find her."

"Okay," the Mexican woman shrugged. "Hey, before you go, you want me to look in the closet for stains?"

She pointed to the door a few feet away.

"Go on," Olida nodded; they'd both seen blood end up in stranger places. Zenobia, still on her knees, shuffled over to the door and swung it open.

The coat closet was full of shoes. They spilled out on the floor in front of her.

Hundreds of shoes. Olida opened her mouth to say something and then shut it. Zenobia reached out to stir through the pile.

"Something we don't know about the Deacon?" Zenobia asked. Olida reached in and pulled out a tennis shoe. It was about the size a girl of ten would wear, decorated with beads and ribbons that the girl had probably glued on herself. It didn't look store-bought.

No laces in the shoe, but girls did that these days, thought that tripping over their own feet made them *cool*.

There were so many shoes. Mens, womens, girls, boys.

Zenobia dug in the pile, fascinated.

"You think he buy them at garage sales?" she asked as she held up a man's black dress shoe, worn at the heel, missing its laces.

"I don't know. Maybe he was collecting them to give to missionaries." That made Olida feel better, a warm glow where her stomach had twisted all up. "You know, people send clothes and such."

"He send shoes with no shoelaces?" Zenobia held up the one she held.

"Some of them-- "

"None of them. Look," she said, and pointed to the rows she had set out. There were thirteen pairs of tennis shoes, six pairs of men's dress shoes. No shoelaces.

"Well-- " Olida searched for an answer and didn't find one. She shrugged. "It's his business, I guess. Put them back."

"But-- "

"But nothin', it ain't our business. Put them back."

Zenobia, frowning, stacked them back in the closet. Olida caught herself staring.

Shoes. If he was collecting for the church, why hadn't he sent them on to the missionaries? Why shut them up in the closet?

"Olida!"

Rita-Mae, finally. What the hell had she got into? Olida took a step or two down the hall. Rita's voice sounded hollow and quiet.

"Where are you?" Olida called. "Girl, you better get out here and -"

"I'm in the kitchen."

Leave it to a white girl to find someplace to poke around instead of doing the work she was paid for. Olida shook her head and went down the long narrow hall. At the end were two doors, one into a faded-looking sitting room, the other into the kitchen.

The smell almost made her gag. She took a deep breath and held it while she walked on in.

Rita-Mae was standing in the center of the kitchen, facing a pile of things on the floor.

"What the hell--" Olida stopped dead in her tracks and stared, too. "Why'd you do make a mess like that?"

"*Ididn't*," Rita-Mae said. It sounded like a wail. "It was *like* this."

Can openers. Spoons. Forks. Butter knives. Soup ladles. Every single kitchen thing Olida could name was piled in a heap on the floor. She nudged it with a foot. A cockroach as big as her finger ran out from underneath, and she and Rita-Mae both jumped back.

"See?" Rita-Mae sounded hysterical. "See? It ain't *right*."

Olida had to admit the truth of that. She went over to one of the drawers that should have held silverware and pulled it open.

The drawer was lined in red velvet. On it, screwdrivers lay in neat, even rows.

Phillips-heads in different sizes. Flat heads. Ratchet sets.

The next one had hammers. Big claw-headed hammers, gleaming like new. Small delicate hammers. Ball peen hammers.

The next had hacksaws, five different kinds, as clean as if he'd never used them.

She moved over to a drawer next to the sink. Electric drills and drill bits.

"Olida?" Rita-Mae asked behind her. She sounded faint and scared. "Olida, there's something wrong."

"Ain't none of our business what a man wants to do in his own house," Olida said. She sounded a lot more sure about it than she felt.

One side of the sink was full. Murky. It smelled awful.

The other side was full of what looked like gravel, the kind people put in fish tanks.

She didn't want to see no more. She backed away and almost stumbled over the pile of kitchen utensils. A rusty-looking cheese grater slid under her foot like a skate.

Rita-Mae's face was blank. Her eyes looked wide and scared.

"Ain't none of our business," Olida said again in her best I'm-in-charge-here voice, and Rita-Mae blinked and nodded. "Come and help us finish up in the hall, and we'll go home."

Rita-Mae was glad to go but went slowly, and kept her head turned over her shoulder all the way down the hall.

"What you lookin' at?" Olida growled. Rita-Mae's shoulders pulled up in what might have been a shrug if they'd ever relaxed again.

Zenobia scooted over to make room and passed Rita-Mae a gray-looking toothbrush. Rita-Mae dunked it in water and started scratching at the cracks in the floor; Zenobia gave Olida a grin, but that died as she got a good look at Olida's face.

"Anything wrong?" she asked. Olida blinked and looked down at her; the Mexican woman's face was screwed up in a frown. "You look strange."

"I feel strange," Olida said, and shrugged. *Poor folks get back to work.*

"You *are* strange," Rita-Mae said. If it was supposed to be a joke, none of them laughed. Rita-Mae kept scrubbing at the blood and didn't look at anything or anybody else.

There was nothing much left to do. Olida folded up the ladder and set it aside, went down the other hall a little ways to look for blood drops. She found a smear on the wall and wiped it off with her sponge. It left a little pink stain on the crumbling paint. She bent over to look at something on the floor -- and it scuttled off, cockroach or damn big spider.

Damn, she didn't like it here. No more than Rita-Mae did, or Zenobia. She wanted to go home and listen to Lark grumble on about the television or her church or the food she should have been cooking up.

She didn't want to be here no more.

As she looked up from the faded carpet, she saw a shadow move at the end of the hall. No cockroach, not that big. Her hair tightened on her head. She swallowed hard and started to call for Rita-Mae and Zenobia, but they were working. *Nothing*, she told herself. *I ain't seein' nothing.*

There were stairs at the end of the hall, and a door about halfway down. Olida took a few steps that way, looked back.

Rita-Mae was scrubbing at the floor, head down, face hidden by sweaty blond hair. Zenobia had her back turned.

Olida went to the door and looked inside.

The first thing she noticed in the confusion was a fur coat, lying over a chair like a dead dog. It was moth-eaten, and one sleeve had come apart in spirals. On the floor beside it was a pink dress, frilly, the kind little girls only wore to church at Easter or to parties too fancy for them to enjoy. On the bed, a new-looking ski jacket. A pair of faded blue jeans. A silky pair of women's underwear.

There were clothes everywhere, thrown in piles, spilling over a dusty bed and crowding open the closet door like animals that died trying to escape. Olida took a step inside and heard a rustle as something small ran for cover. Rats, probably. And more cockroaches.

Nobody lived in this room.

The ski jacket was new, though. The underwear looked new, too.

The curtains were pulled completely shut, but a few rays of sunlight tore through holes in the dusty fabric and fell on the water-stained carpet. It didn't make the room look any more cheerful.

There was a lopsided dresser against the wall. One drawer hung open like a tongue sticking out at her. Olida picked her way through the hills and valleys of clothes to reach it and look inside. She saw a tangle of things that looked like leather.

She lifted out a wallet. It was a man's wallet, well-worn. Inside there were about thirty dollars and a faded Nevada drivers license that belonged to a stranger, a knobby-faced white man in his late fifties.

The license had expired in 1984. Olida put it down and pulled out another one, a woman's, stuffed with pictures of smiling children. Another stranger. The address on her drivers license was in Bloomington, Illinois. She was about thirty, pretty, red-haired.

Her license was still current.

There were thirty or forty wallets piled in the drawer, along with loose change, folding money, loose pictures. Olida fished out a coin and looked at it. A silver dollar, solid silver, from the '60s.

She figured there must be more than a thousand dollars lying loose in the drawer. And that was just the one that was open.

The whole room smelled like dry rot. She turned away and stumbled back to the door, took deep gulps of the tainted air of the hall. The silver dollar felt cool in her palm.

"Zenobia," she called.

"*Aqui.*"

"You seen a phone here?"

"No. Maybe in the kitchen?"

Olida tried to remember. She kept seeing the velvet-lined drawers, the tools, the pile of things on the floor.

"Never mind that. I want you to leave and call the police."

"Police!" Zenobia echoed. She scuffled around as she got to her feet. "What we got to call the police about?"

"Just do what I say. Take your car and call them," Olida said, and came back down the hall. The sunlight was murky in the entryway, barely struggling in through warped yellow panes of glass next to the Deacon's triple-locked door. Rita-Mae's face looked ghostly and strained, and she clutched her red-stained toothbrush in front of her like a weapon. Zenobia just looked confused. "Rita-Mae, you go on home, too. I'll wait for the police in my car."

"But -- "Zenobia shrugged and dumped her toothbrush in the pail. "Okay, we're done anyway. What do I tell them?"

"Tell them I gotsomethin ' to show them,"Olida said. Would the police even listen to an old nigger woman? Her heart felt fluttery in her chest again. She didn't like the police, but what else could she do?

It took a minute to pack up, but it was done in silence. Rita-Mae dumped bottles into her box without worrying about spilling anything, and stuffed sponges in still wet on top of paper towels.Zenobia , catching nerves from Rita-Mae, piled things haphazardly into her crate and lifted it with a grunt. She balanced it on her hip and turned the doorknob.

It didn't open.Zenobia sighed and checked the deadbolts.

It still didn't open. Rita-Mae flew over and clicked the locks, on-off, yanked on the knob. Nothing happened.

Rita-Mae kicked the door, threw her whole weight against it.Olida , light-headed, braced herself against the wall.

"It won't open! It won't open!" Rita-Mae panted.Zenobia pushed her aside and tried it herself.

Finally, she stopped rattling the knob, and the three of them just looked at each other. Rita-Mae was shaking all over, face white and damp.Olida could feel her own sweat sliding down her forehead.Zenobia just looked surprised.

"Olida?"Zenobiaasked. "What do we do now?"

Pray,Olida thought. "Look for the back door."

They left the carrying cases and crates in the hallway and went back to the kitchen.Olida kept hold of Rita-Mae's arm. Every once in a while she felt the skin shake, like a horse's trying to get rid of a biting fly.

"In the kitchen,"Zenobia said decisively. "Everybody has a back door in the kitchen.Madre deDios!"

She stopped in the doorway and covered her mouth and nose, squinted her eyes until they were little brown lines in her face.Olida coughed the smell out of her mouth and hauled Rita-Mae along past garbage bags and the pile of metal in the floor.Zenobia followed more slowly, staring.

There was a screen door at the back of the kitchen, hidden behind a rickety metal table.Olida shoved it out of the way and pulled the door handle; the door opened with a rusty squeal. The room on the other side was dark; she felt along the wall and found the cool plastic of the light switch.

She stopped, because she didn't want to see what the Deacon had hidden in the dark.

Damn if she was going to start being spooked.Olida flicked the switch up.

Rita-Mae trembled once, a whole-body shiver, and laughed out loud.And kept laughing, crazy as a loon.

It was a laundry room, washer and dryer, antique-looking but just the same kind Olida had in her own house. A blue laundry basket with most of its plastic rim broken off squatted on top, and a box of laundry detergent with the lid ripped off sat over to the side. He had a box of fabric softener sheets on the windowsill.

Everything was dusty.

There wasn't any way out, not even a little window.

"Come on," Olida sighed, and turned away. The screen door slammed closed. Rita-Mae stood there staring at it, hands clenched into white fists.

"Used to be a door," she muttered. "Crazy bastard took it out. How come he took out the goddamn door?"

"Don't matter, Rita, let's just look for the phone," Zenobia said steadily. Rita-Mae glared at her, blew stringy hair back from her red face.

"You look for the goddamn phone. I just want out. I ain't stayin' here. No way am I stayin' here. I don't get paid enough for this."

Olida left them and went on across the hall.

The sitting room across the hall was dusty but neat. Olida picked up one of the magazines on the coffee table -- a church magazine, put out by the district. And he had a few old woodworking and craft magazines, too. Nothing too new.

Rita-Mae was still muttering, and getting louder as she paced. Olida heard metal skitter loudly over the kitchen floor and looked back to see the white woman kicking at the pile of forks and spoons, jaw knotted up and trembling.

Zenobia, coming into the sitting room, shrugged and rolled her eyes and mouthed *crazygringa*. She walked over to the big window next to the television set and pulled the curtains back.

"Hey, look, Lida, I can see your house," she said. Olida came over. Zenobia was right; over a scrubby-looking tree and two fences she caught sight of her green-painted house, and the hollyhocks blooming. "We got to keep our heads. We're okay. Can't be too bad if we can wave to Lark, huh?"

Funny how home looked strange now -- the porch, the sagging chairs, the new red shingles that had cost her almost all their savings last month. Looked like somebody else's house, Olida thought. That made her feel kind of sick and light-headed.

"The hell we're okay," Rita-Mae said, and stomped into the room and over to the window. "This is *stupid*. I don't care if we have to rip a hole in the fucking wall, I'm getting out of here."

"We can't do that," Zenobia said patiently. Rita-Mae's jaw got tighter and whiter.

"Why? You think he got a right to lock us up in here?"

"Because if we're wrong we'll have to pay for it," Olida said wearily. "Rita-Mae, why don't you sit down, watch some TV or something while we figure this out?"

Rita-Mae glared and stalked over to twist the knob. Nothing happened.

"Hell," she muttered. "Asshole doesn't even have a decent TV."

"Try plugging it in," Zenobia suggested. Olida tried the locks on the window. They just turned, useless. *What now*, she thought. She couldn't stop staring at her house across the way, with its pretty new shingles and the hollyhocks waving in a breeze she couldn't feel.

Rita-Mae grabbed hold of the TV and pulled on it. It slid out from the wall with a hiss of wood on carpet, and she crouched to look.

Olida tried to pull the window up. It didn't even creak.

"I ain't believin' this," the white woman said. She pointed behind the TV set. Olida bent and looked with her.

The set had no back. And nothing inside, just the glass, painted gray on the inside. And a thick layer of creamy-looking dust.

Olida straightened up and wiped her forehead. It was too hot, and she was too old to understand any of this.

"This is crazy," Rita-Mae said with conviction. For Rita, a gutted-out TV was worse than slaughtered babies. "Man, this guy's really *sick*."

There was a faded family picture on the sitting room wall. There was old Reverend James Graham, looking like a tyrant, one hand on the shoulder of his mousy wife Evelyn Graham. And little George, tucked between them. He looked big-eyed, like any child at that age. And his sister Charity huddled behind their mother. Olida walked over to look at it close up.

"I hate this fucking place," Rita-Mae declared, and went off down the hall. Zenobia stared wide-eyed after her, then followed.

Olida watched the photograph.

She was seeing double. The picture looked out of focus. Lord, she thought, I believe I'm going to faint.

The second little George Graham blinked. His eyes were bright with the camera flash. Charity Graham sank down even farther. Her eyes looked swollen. Mother Evelyn turned around to look at her, held her hand.

They'd had their picture taken right here, right in this room. Olida was looking at a reflection of something over her own shoulder.

She turned to look at the sofa, where they'd sat for the picture.

Their lips moved, but they weren't really there, not really seeing her. Little big-eyed George Graham stared off into space, in her direction, and his image flickered and faded out just like an old TV picture.

Reverend James Graham was the last one to go, staring straight ahead. When he was only a shadow

against the flaking wallpaper, he turned and looked right at Olida .

She covered her eyes. When she looked again, he was gone.

They were all gone.

Zenobia was calling for her, down the hall. Olida wiped her forehead with trembling fingers and went. Her arm felt numb again.

She walked down the hall anyway. It didn't seem too hard.

"The door to the garage is locked," Zenobia reported. Rita-Mae leaned against the wall, arms wrapped around herself for comfort. "I don't find no other doors."

"This is bullshit, Olida . I want out of here. Out. Now," Rita said. Olida sighed.

"I know, honey. We'll find a way."

"You want a way? I'll show you the goddamn way." Rita-Mae pushed past Olida down the hall, to the sitting room. Olida got to the door just as Rita-Mae picked up the gutted TV and threw it at the window.

"Hey!" Olida yelled -- too late. Rita-Mae had thrown it hard, and straight.

It bounced off.

They all stared at it as it thumped back on the carpet, and then stared at the window. It vibrated, and stopped. The TV screen was cracked right across in a jagged line like a streak of lightning.

"Would you look at that," Zenobia murmured. She went to the window and tapped on it. "Not glass. Some kind of plastic."

"Plastic?" Rita-Mae said. Her eyes opened wider, and wider, until Olida thought they were going to pop out and roll around on the floor. Pink skin turned beet-red all along her cheeks and nose. "*Plastic?* *PLASTIC?*"

She picked up the TV. Olida grabbed for it, yelled for Zenobia to help her, and together they got it away and Zenobia wrestled Rita-Mae back to the dusty old couch. Rita-Mae stopped fighting and sat there, panting, glaring out of red-rimmed eyes.

"Olida?" Rita asked. Olida nudged the TV back up against the wall. "Olida, Ifuckin' quit. Do you hear me? I QUIT!"

Olida leaned against the wall and wished, just for a second, that she had a gun. She was mortally sure she could use it.

"The front door," Zenobia said suddenly. Olida looked up, and Zenobia was grinning, ear to ear. "Tools in the kitchen. We take the hinges off!"

"Yeah!" Rita-Mae cheered. "Take the hinges off! Yeah!"

Olida felt her lips slide into a smile. It felt good.

They were going to do it. They were.

An hour later, Zenobia sat back and blew on her reddened fingers. The hinges weren't moving. The Deacon had soldered them somehow, and even against the hacksaw, they were still holding.

Rita-Mae wasn't.

"Give me that," Rita ordered. Zenobia handed it over. Rita-Mae worked for about two minutes before her patience ran out, and she started hammering on the door with her bare hands.

Olida couldn't stand it anymore, and she walked off into the hall to catch her breath. The hammering sounded like her fluttering heartbeats as it got softer in the distance.

Shadows moved at the end of the other hall, next to the staircase. *I ain't going down there*, Olida told herself. She tried the front door again, rattled it, pulled as hard as she could.

I ain't going down that hall.

There were pictures on the walls all the way down. She flipped on a light and looked at them. There was George Graham as a child, a fat baby in a sailor suit. Charity, two or three, looking sullen. Charity disappeared from the wall after about the age of twelve, but George continued in class pictures and high school graduation. Toward the end Evelyn Graham dropped off the wall, too; Olida remembered the funeral. Reverend Graham appeared one more time.

George had framed his obituary.

"GRAHAM, REVEREND JAMES. Passed away on August 17, after a lengthy illness. Survived by his beloved son George and daughter Charity Graham Warriner. Services will be held at the Calvary Temple on August 23 at 2:00 p.m." That much was right, she remembered. But not the sentence typed on after. "He died too late."

She kept reading it over. *Died too late*.

The last picture was of Deacon George, dressed in his Sunday best, shaking hands with Reverend Hillyard from over at Hemple Baptist.

There were shadows at the bottom of the stairs. Olida pushed through them and went up the steps. The third creaked like her old bones, the fourth didn't make any sound at all. There was a light switch halfway up but the lights didn't work. Deacon George didn't go upstairs often, she figured.

Or didn't need the light.

"Olida?"

Olida yelped and almost tripped. Zenobia stood in the shadows at the foot of the stairs, looking scared. She still had her hacksaw. Behind her Rita-Mae waited, hunched against a cold that sure wasn't in the air. The house was hotter than a blacktop in July.

"Don't go up there," Zenobia said more quietly.

"What about the door?"

"I can't get it open. Please, don't go up there."

"If the door ain't gonna open, I got to," Olida said. "Phone must be up there. I've called the man. I know he's got a phone."

She took another step up into the dark. Behind her, she heard a step creak.

"Then we all go. Come on, Rita."

"No way!"

"You want to stay here alone?"

"I-- "

Rita-Mae sounded like she was out of breath, or crying. But when Olida looked back, she saw two shadows following her.

The staircase sounded like something alive, all creaks and groans and whispers. Olida found the top and something that felt like carpet. She reached up along the wall. Nothing.

"Rita-Mae, go back and get us some flashlights," she ordered.

"Why me?"

"You want to go up here in the dark?"

The stairs creaked again. On the way back Rita-Mae ran, feet pounding on the groaning wood, breath whistling. Her light wavered and bobbed, nearly blinding Olida as Rita handed over the heavy metal flashlights.

Olida switched hers on and felt better for the butter-yellow light, but it made the dark look that much darker on the sides. She aimed the light along the wall on her left, then her right. She found the switch.

The lights didn't work. She took a deep breath and started down the hall. Funny how there wasn't any noise. In most houses the air conditioner was blowing, and the refrigerator was humming, and the clocks ticking, all those noises, all the time.

It was quiet as the grave, up here.

There was a closed door three steps along the hall, and she turned the knob and opened it.

It was empty. Just a carpet of --

"What the hell is that?" Zenobia asked, leaning over Olida's shoulder. Olida elbowed her back. "Would you look at that. He must have one bad rat problem."

Olida looked at it for a long time. Nothing but mousetraps, side by side, covering the whole floor. In the

corner there were bigger traps, some kind of hunting traps with sawteeth. All empty, set, waiting.

"Ain't forno rats," Rita-Mae said. Her voice was very soft, kind of childlike. The other two women looked at her. "Ain't no cheese in those traps."

It took a few seconds for Olida to catch on, but when she did she felt sick and faint. Rita-Mae was shaking all over.

Zenobia didn't say anything, but she didn't look so good either, in the backwash of light.

"Let's go on," Olida said.

Rita-Mae nodded. Maybe it was just the shudders.

Zenobia went a little down the hall and stopped at another door. In the light of Olida's flashlight she looked pale like Rita-Mae. Olida wondered if she looked white, too. She remembered lying in her bed at night as a child, dreaming about going anywhere she wanted, any time. Dreaming about being *white*.

She didn't want to die white like this.

"Want me to look?" Zenobia asked. Olida nodded.

"No, don't," Rita-Mae whispered. Zenobia swung the door open and shone the flashlight inside.

"Bedroom," she said, and stepped back to let them see. This one had a big comfortable bed, made up, covered with a rainbow crocheted spread. On the dresser lay a man's watch and some change and a hairbrush. Everything was dusted and clean.

His curtains were pulled shut, too. Zenobia walked over and opened them, tapped the window. She rolled her eyes and didn't say anything.

Plastic, Olida knew.

Rita-Mae looked less scared once she was in the room. She sat down on the bed, looked on the nightstands. Opened the drawers.

"What you looking for?" Olida barked. The white woman flinched and almost dropped a picture she'd picked up.

"The phone."

"Well that ain't it. Here. Let me see that."

Rita-Mae passed over the picture. It had a big bulky frame around it, silver, and inside a photograph of Reverend James Graham with one hand on his son's shoulder. Little George Graham, no older than ten, looked like a chubby little angel. He was dressed in a white robe, and his fair hair fluffed around his face in curls. He was on his knees praying, hands clasped together.

It should have looked nice, but it didn't. Something about it was all wrong, and Olida couldn't figure out what it was except maybe the way Reverend James looked, all grim and angry.

She put the picture back on the nightstand where Rita-Mae had found it.

"I wasn't gonna steal it," Rita said sullenly. Olida started looking along the walls for a phone outlet. There was one behind the bed, no sign of a phone to go with it. "I wasn't. Swear to God."

"Olida, what you think about maybe making a fire?" Zenobia asked. She was poking carefully through a pile of things in the corner, dirty clothes, old threadbare towels. "Get the Fire Department to come? Wouldn't that help?"

"Don't think so," Olida said. Zenobia cocked her head over and frowned. "If we can't get out, they damn sure won't have an easy time gettin' in. What if the fire-- "

"Oh," Zenobia agreed. Rita-Mae stopped in the act of running her hand under the pillow on the bed. Her eyes went wide.

"We could burn to death in here, couldn't we? If somethin' happened?" she said. Olida shrugged. "Damn. Damn, I want out of here. Swear to God-- "

"Why don't you look in that closet, baby, see if he put the phone in there," Olida interrupted.

"In the *closet*? Are you kidding?" When nobody answered, Rita got up with a grunt of disgust and jerked the closet door open.

And screamed. She scurried back from the closet door and bumped into the bed and fell backward, still screaming. Zenobia hurried over to her.

Olida turned to look in the closet. And found a tangle of dark barbed wire looking back.

The whole space was packed with it, twists and spikes and coils like a live thing. She started to close the door and then aimed her flashlight inside again.

About five feet off the ground she saw hanks of hair tangled in the barbs. She reached in and pulled a strand out. In the light it was red.

She shut the door, quietly. Rita-Mae had stopped screaming and was just crying, and Zenobia looked a whole lot whiter than before.

"Come on," Olida said quietly. She wasn't sure they would, but they followed her back out into the hall. She turned to look at them. Rita-Mae was a wreck, a bawling little girl with red eyes and shaking shoulders. No spit and venom in her now. Zenobia looked better, but she was no Rock of Ages.

Olida's heart was fluttering like a butterfly in the spring, and her fingers felt clumsy and slow. She wanted to sit down and knew she couldn't, not here. There had to be a phone. She remembered calling the Deacon to come fix her sink. The thought occurred to her that he might have had somebody here, somebody in that mousetrap room or in that barbed wire closet, while he was talking to her about leaky drains. Maybe somebody had been screaming and she hadn't even heard it.

She felt sick to her stomach, and wished she could find a quiet place, someplace safe. She wanted to go home and tell Lark he was right, she never should have come here.

She wanted to know where her daughter LaVelle had been for these last six years. *Please, Sweet Jesus,*

don't let her have been here in this house. I couldn't stand that.

Her flashlight painted the walls in bright circles and found another door, this one gaping open. She went to it and shone the light inside.

Just a bathroom. The toilet had the seat up, just like in any man's house. The sink looked clean and well-scrubbed. The bathtub was one of the oldkind, the ones she'd seen in rich white antique stores for the price of a good-running car. Claw-feet and all. It didn't have a shower curtain.

Something hung over it. She shone the light up and it glittered on a thick steel chain that came down from the ceiling. There was a big sharp hook on the end over the tub.

She didn't want to know any more, or see anymore. She backed away and found her back to the wall, and Zenobia and Rita-Mae staring at her in the shadows.

"You okay?" Zenobia asked. She sounded scared. Olida nodded and took a breath; it was hard to do, as if she was too tired to breathe. Her left arm felt all pins-and-needley.

There were no more doors at this end of the hall, but as Olida turned something brushed her face and made her jump back. Her flashlight swung wildly around until she found the cord she'd walked under.

Just a simple cotton cord, there to pull on to bring the attic stairs down.

"I don't want to go no further," Rita-Mae said as Olida went past her, and grabbed her arm. Olida felt it as kind of a pressure on her skin, like water. "Please, Olida, let's just wait here."

"For what, baby?" Olida asked. She was so tired it was hard to stay on her feet. "Ain't nobody gonna come."

"Lark and Antonio will come if we don't come home," Zenobia argued. "They'll bring police if they can't get in."

"You want to wait for them? Rita?"

"No," Rita said. Her voice got higher and faster, packing words so tight Olida could hardly understand them. "I wanna go home. Please, please, let me go home now, I done good work for you, I always worked hard, I never did nothing wrong in my life, please let me go, please let me go I don't wanna stay here!"

She stopped suddenly, gasping for air, looking like a big-mouthed bass out of water. Olida patted her on the arm.

"Wegonna get out of this, honey. Now you come with me, and hold my hand, and wegonna find that phone and call the police."

Rita-Mae gave her a panicked look but took her hand, and her fingers felt cold and shaky. *Probably the first time she's ever held a black hand*, Olida thought. *Probably scares her as much as anything else in this house.*

Zenobia trotted two steps ahead, flashlight nodding up and down and making a halo around her body. She passed the stairs and put her hand on the first doorknob on the right.

"Ready?" she asked.

Olidanodded, realized she couldn't be seen in the dark and turned her flashlight up toward her own face. Zenobia let out a little scream and jumped back.

"Jesus, don't do that!" Zenobia yelled. "You look like some spook in the haunted house!"

Olida felt a long cold chill. The haunted house. If she let herself think about it --

She wondered what she'd see, and then prayed to God that she wouldn't see anything at all, ever, even if it meant being blind to the end of her days.

Zenobia opened the door and shone her flashlight inside.

Just a storage closet, full of old sagging boxes and dusty ragged stacks of papers. One of the papers slid off the top of the stack nearest the door and drifted down to nudge at Olida's foot. She bent down to pick it up and felt her head pound with the effort.

"What is it?" Rita-Mae asked. Olida squinted at it.

"It's a picture somebody drew."

"A kid?"

"Naw, it's good, in pencil or-- "

She stopped and just stared at the picture. It was so good she could see the tears running down the little boy's cheeks as he knelt on the floor with his hands together, praying.

Except his hands were *tied* together.

And behind him a big dark shadow held something like a whip, with teeth on it.

The face of the little boy was the same as the picture in the bedroom. George Graham, dressed up in his little angel-suit, praying. With his hands together, and something terrible behind him.

Olida bit her lip and put the drawing down. She bent over and picked up another one.

The little boy was wearing a crown of thorns, only they weren't thorns, they looked like twists of barbed wire.

She let it fall and backed out of the closet. Zenobia and Rita-Mae looked at her anxiously.

She crossed the hall and opened up the last door. It didn't make any noise at all, and she smelled fresh oil in the puff of air it made opening. Her flashlight stabbed inside.

A white face looked back at her.

Zenobia screamed.

Rita-Mae ran away, screaming.

Olida's heart fluttered in her chest like a dying bird, and she thought, *Lord, I'm sorry I am so weak.*

It was a picture of Reverend James Graham, blown up to life-size and standing up in the middle of the room. He had his arms outstretched; somebody had looped barbed wire over his hands and driven nails through his cardboard eyes.

There were old flowers lying in heaps around him, some of them old funeral wreaths with sun-bleached black ribbons. A big old family Bible lay at his feet, open and marked with hanks of what looked like human hair.

On the walls were pictures of George Graham, hundreds of them, all dressed up like Daddy's little white angel. There were more pictures on the floor, all turned to face toward the giant image of Reverend Graham like a congregation listening to his last sermon. Olida started to back out from the room.

Her flashlight swung up a little.

She thought at first they were streamers, black streamers, then she thought they were those things the wind spun around, mobiles. But they were only strings, hanging from hooks, with things tied on the ends.

One of them turned a little in the breeze from the hallway. The thing on the end of the string was a figure-eight lying on its side, like one of those symbols Olida had seen that were supposed to mean infinity.

There were hundreds swinging from the ceiling.

"Olida!" Zenobia called. She sounded scared. Olida reached up and touched the nearest figure-eight. It swung away from her and back. It felt thick and stiff.

"In a minute," she said, and reached up to take the thing off the hook that held it.

She was looking at a shoelace.

It was in a figure-eight because it had once held somebody's wrists tied tight together.

It was stiff because it had been soaked with blood and left to dry.

She couldn't hold onto it any more. It landed on top of one of George Graham's pictures, and she looked at the small size of the loops in it and realized that it must have held a child, or a very small woman.

There were no more rooms. There was no phone.

No hope of getting out of this, ever. This was hell.

Rita-Mae screamed again. It sounded like she had gone downstairs.

"Zenobia, would you please go get Rita-Mae?" she asked. Her voice sounded small, dead in her ears.

"No," Zenobia said again, and her voice was shaking. Olida turned to look toward the beam of Zenobia's

shaking flashlight. "No, you come down with me. Let's go."

"You go on," Olida said. Her eyes hurt, ached like they might bleed. She felt tired and empty. *No sense in going*, she thought. *Might as well be here as anywhere else*. Here, at least, the ghosts were all sad and scared.

She knew she was never going to leave.

Zenobia started jabbering something at her in Spanish, something that sounded angry and scared. Olida just waved it off and sat down against the wall. The flashlight felt hot on her skin. She closed her eyes and let herself relax.

Wasn't so bad, now. The numbness in her arm felt like it was growing, touching her cold all along her neck and chest.

Like a ghost's hug.

Zenobia kept on jabbering, hauling at her shoulder. Olida just ignored her. Zenobia started to cry.

"You go on," Olida said again. *Poor little George Graham*, she thought. *Poor little man, so scared*.

She wasn't really scared anymore at all.

"Get your fat ass up!" Zenobia screamed at her, and yanked on her arm. Olida opened her eyes to squint at her.

There was somebody coming out of the door behind Zenobia. Olida wondered for a minute how she could see her so clearly in the dark. And then she knew.

The woman was white, flabby-fat, older. Her hair stuck out in white clumps.

She was crying, hands over her face.

Maybe that was because of the mousetraps pinching her feet and hands and hanging like hungry rats from her sagging skin.

"Oh," Olida whispered. "Oh, no, don't cry, honey."

Zenobia thought she was talking to her, and sniffed and wiped her eyes.

"I ain't crying," she said, and sniffed. "You got to get up, 'Lida, you got to."

There was somebody else coming down the hall, now. He was a young kid, about sixteen, tall and gawky as hell. He was all cut up.

Barbed wire. It looped all around him like a cage, sliced open his face, hooked in his lips when he opened them to scream.

Olida reached out her hands to Zenobia and let the Mexican woman pull her up to her feet.

"Where's Rita-Mae?" she asked. Zenobia shook her head. Her flashlight bobbed and trembled.

"Ran away. Don't know where."

There were other folks in the hall now, all crying, all wearing their fears all over them. Olida hugged herself for warmth and watched Zenobia as she turned and waddled for the stairs.

She walked right through a knobby-faced old man who was kneeling on the floor, hands tucked under his armpits. He shivered out of focus, but when Zenobia was past he was solid again, glowing like a light bulb.

Olida walked to him. He looked up at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, and reached down a hand to him. "I'm so sorry, honey."

He reached out for her and he didn't have any hands. Blood splashed out over her in a cold spray. She yelled and held her hands up in front of her face, feeling the cold blood all over her skin, in her eyes, in her mouth.

Lord, it had never been this bad, never, never . . .

Zenobia came back and grabbed her, towed her right on through the line of ghosts reaching out for her. Olida felt the cold brush of their skins and wanted to stop and hold them, let them know it was all right now, that God was with them, but she couldn't stop and Zenobia wouldn't let go.

Her legs were weak. She sat down on the top step without meaning to, and Zenobia had to come back up a step.

"Where we goin'?" Olida asked. Zenobia just pulled stubbornly at her hand. "We goin' back to the parlor to look at my house through the window? Don't make no sense, does it?"

"You sure don't make no sense, Olida. Get up! Get up and come on!"

Olida was thinking about that, about making her legs work enough to go down the stairs, and something happened that made her forget about that.

The door downstairs opened. All the air in the house seemed to just wave, like water in a pond. And Olida and Zenobia swayed with it.

"Who is it?" Zenobia whispered. There was a heavy thud as the door closed again.

Somewhere downstairs, in the distance, Rita-Mae was cursing and crying, all in the same breath. Olida heard her running back toward the front door.

"Hey! Hey, we couldn't get the door open, don't close it, let me out! Let me out, I gotta get home, let me --" Rita-Mae's running footsteps slowed and stopped. "Ain't you supposed to be in the hos--"

Rita-Mae stopped talking. Stopped making any noise at all.

The whole house was silent.

"Dios Mio," Zenobia breathed, and Olida saw her cross herself. Her face looked yellow now, all sunk in

with fear. "It's him."

Something was being dragged downstairs.

Olida turned her flashlight off. Zenobia clung tight to hers, wouldn't let Olida touch it until Olida slapped her fingers hard and yanked it away. She fumbled with the sliding switch and heard it click. The light went off.

Dark, now. Darker than before. At the bottom of the stairs the light was gray, like fog.

Something came out of the fog, something tall.

Olida grabbed Zenobia's arm and half-dragged her up to the top of the stairs again. In the dark, with only the ghosts' light to see by, she turned to her right and pulled Zenobia with her, weeping and praying, all the way to the end of the hall.

Ghosts everywhere, reaching out to touch her with arms that ended in bloody stumps.

Of course, she thought as she hauled Zenobia's weight along. *He didn't untie those shoelaces from around their arms. He just cut their hands off and slipped the shoelaces off that way.*

At the end of the hall, she waved her hands around over her head.

What did he do with the hands?

"Olida?"

"Damn," Olida muttered.

"What are you doing?" Zenobia sounded calm now, or like somebody who was too scared to sound scared anymore.

Olida's fingers touched the cotton cord. She took a deep breath, wrapped both hands around it, and pulled.

The stairs came down from the ceiling in a thick creaking fall. One corner caught Olida on the shoulder and knocked her out of the way, almost to her knees. She braced herself with one hand on a wood riser.

Up the stairs into the dark, pulling Zenobia behind her. Zenobia stumbled and almost pulled Olida down with her; Olida's fingers were slick and cold with sweat, both hers and the other woman's.

Or ghost's blood. Could be that, too, she supposed.

There was a trap door at the top of the stairs, a heavy one. Olida pushed on it with one hand, then dropped Zenobia's to push with both. It didn't want to move.

She went up one more step and put her shoulders up against it.

It groaned up; she groaned with it. She was seeing stars, and they weren't ghosts this time, they were in her head, and she felt so tired she thought she might just lay down on the stairs and sleep for a while. Instead, she took the last three steps up into the hot, stuffy dark at the top of the house.

She didn't hear anybody coming upstairs yet. She hauled Zenobia up into the attic, closed the trap door, and switched on her flashlight.

It was full of the stuff most people kept in attics, old boxes, dusty broken sticks of furniture, old pictures jumbled up in the corners. And, at the very end, Olida's light slid over something black.

It was an old rotary-dial telephone, round and shiny, sitting in a clutter of junk.

"Thank you Jesus," she whispered, and felt all her strength surge back into her bones. She went over and picked it up. The junk rattled off on to the floor, and she tried to catch it before it hit but was too late. One of the pieces of metal clunked and rolled to a stop.

It was one of the Deacon's home-made Praying Hands. Olida nudged it with a toe. The set he'd given her had old, weathered-looking fingers. These were a woman's hands, long and thin, pointy nails.

The dial tone was the sweetest sound in the world.

She meant to dial the police, but her fingers dialed all by themselves. She held the cold plastic close to her face and felt it cool her skin; drops of her sweat fell on it like tears and ran off to drip on the dusty wood floor.

"Hello," Lark said. She felt the numbness in her chest go away.

The pain came to stay.

"Lark," she whispered. Her head was all filled up with blood. "Oh, Lark --"

"Olida?"

"Please," she whispered, and started to cry out all that blood in her head in hot, thick tears. *Call the police*, she wanted to say, as soon as she could get it out of her head and her throat. Then it would be over.

Zenobia screamed, across the room. Olida fumbled for her flashlight and pointed it back toward her friend.

The trap door was opening up, and a pair of hands were reaching out of the hole.

Olida dropped the phone and ran, and jumped.

Landed. The trap door slammed down on his head like a hammer hitting a watermelon, and it jammed at a slant, her butt flat against it.

Zenobia kept screaming. She'd dropped her flashlight and it rolled back and forth, back and forth, lighting and hiding everything in the room.

The hands were caught in the trap door. They were long, thin, white hands, splattered here and there with liver spots and bright red streaks. Olida watched the fingers wiggle.

He wasn't dead, Lord, he wasn't dead. And she couldn't get up and let him fall, because he was going to come up and kill them if she did, and she couldn't just sit here forever, she hadn't told Lark to call the

police and the old fool would just come over here and get himself killed and then she'd be all alone --

She looked at Zenobia. The flashlight lit their faces up in flickers. Zenobia looked white again.

Bled out white.

She lifted what she had in her hand, what she'd carried upstairs.

The hacksaw.

"We can't," Olida said faintly. Zenobia's eyes were narrowed again, little slits, fiery eyes.

"I got six kids, Olida," she said in a voice that Olida didn't even recognize. "This fucker, he going to kill both of us, going to kill more people, going to kill my kids maybe. He already kill Rita. She got kids too."

"It ain't right."

"It ain't right," Zenobia agreed. She leaned over and put the hacksaw on the Deacon's white wrist. "But I'm damn sure gonna do it."

Olida turned her face away. The sound of the saw was like a hiss, hardly loud enough to hear over Zenobia's rapid loud Spanish and the screams from the other side of the trap door.

She turned back once, and saw the blood everywhere, spurting out over Zenobia's face and hands and T-shirt. Zenobia's eyes were closed.

She kept sawing, though. By touch.

I ain't cleaning this up, Olida thought to herself, and knew she was about to start screaming, so she jammed her fingers in her mouth. It wasn't until Zenobia stopped sawing that she realized she'd bitten through her skin, and the blood in her mouth was her own.

Zenobia pushed the bloody severed hands away with the end of the hacksaw and stood up. Olida looked up at her from where she sat on top of the trapdoor. Zenobia looked fearsome, like some crazy Aztec warrior, until her eyes filled up with tears and she collapsed in a heap and started screaming and crying things that Olida didn't understand except for the *Jesus* and *Maria* and *Dios*.

Olida scooted off the trap door and raised it a little.

The Deacon hit the stairs and slid down them, fell over the side. She heard him scuffle weakly, and picked up the flashlight and pointed it down toward him.

He looked just like his father, all dressed up in black, face all white like one of the ghosts in the hall. He sat propped against the wall with his eyes open, staring up at her. She thought he was dead, then knew he wasn't.

Oh, God, so much blood. Pumping out so fast. He didn't have long, just a minute, maybe less. Even though he was staring at her, she didn't think he really saw her. He kept trying to push his wrists together.

Trying to pray. Oh dear sweet Jesus, trying to pray. His Daddy wanted him to pray, made him pray. He had to pray.

She didn't really think about it, just slid over the edge of the hole and down onto the steps, down one bump at a time. Down on her knees in all that blood next to him, holding his wrists in her hands, the smell of burnt copper making her choke. Blood flooded out over her fingers, warm like a fountain in summer.

"Our father who art in Heaven," she mumbled. Too slow. He was going so fast, so fast. "-- hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done-- "

The pain hit her, hard. Her fingers jerked and locked on his cool skin, slick with blood. His eyes were wide and pretty and dying so fast, faster, she had to go faster.

" --earth as -- it -- in heaven -- "

She couldn't get her breath against the pain. *Oh Jesus* , she thought. *Oh Jesus I can't do it. I can't.*

"Forgive," the Deacon said for her, his last whisper. She gasped for air, fell forward against him.

" --trespasses -- " she mumbled, and forgot what she was saying.

Somebody was talking to her, a quiet whispering drone like bees.

Was that a siren? Were they coming?

It's time, she thought. Her heart beat two or three times more, and then the pain was bad, very bad, like the weight of the whole house was on her chest, and she couldn't get her breath and Zenobia was there holding her but she had blood all over her and Olida couldn't stop thinking about Lark on the other end of the phone and LaVelle gone all these years and all these sad scared people still here in this house and then she was downstairs.

Walking.

The smell was still there. Funny how they hadn't understood it before, smells of pain and fear, stinks that never went away. Olida breathed it in as she walked. Somebody came running around the corner and bumped into her.

Rita-Mae looked back at her from a tangle of wild blond hair. She opened her mouth and nothing came out, just blood. It ran down her chin and her eyes filled up with tears of frustration and she tried to say something, but she couldn't make a sound.

Olida put her arms around her and held her close, felt her melt away.

"You can go home now, baby," she told her. "I love you."

When she opened her eyes the man who'd left his brains on the wall was in the hall and he was crying, and his wife was with him, the pretty little redhead from Bloomington who'd died upstairs in the barbed wire closet. He'd come looking for her, Olida guessed, and the Deacon had been waiting.

Poor pitiful things. Olida hugged them close and sent them home.

Upstairs there were so many, so many, and she prayed for enough time and strength to help them. Little

children who pressed cold against her, like Isobel. Old ladies crying naked. Men too proud to cry, to scared to hold back from her.

In Deacon Graham's bathroom she found a young black woman hunched over in a little ball. Her hands were missing. Olida hugged her close. It wasn't LaVelle, but that didn't matter now, LaVelle was everywhere, in every face she saw.

One after another, they came, and she accepted them and the house felt emptier with each one gone.

In the end there were only two left. One sat on the stained attic stairs, weeping, terrified.

She finished the prayer with him and led him home, and all the heat of her love warmed the cold places in his soul and he went singing.

The last one was taller, blacker. In his hand he carried a Bible and a whip and a coil of rope and his eyes were as cold as poison.

"What about me?" he said, and his voice was poison, too. "Aren't you going to save me, sister?"

Even though he was afraid, he was so cold, like dirty ice that grew in the freezer, old dirty ice with secrets locked inside. Olida looked him over and shook her head.

"No," she said. "You died too late, Reverend Graham."

She turned her back and walked away, up the attic steps. If he tried to stop her, he couldn't touch her; when she looked back, he was standing there, just a shadow, all his power gone.

The house was so quiet.

She laid down there in Zenobia's arms again, as if she had never moved.

Her body became light, as light as a girl's, and the warmth went through her and took her away.

She heard Zenobia praying. It was a sweet sound.

--end --