

[Note: Inadvertently Chapter 90 was left out of the printed text of THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE NEST OF SPIDERS. Insert it on Page 956. What is now numbered Chapter [90] becomes [91]; [91] becomes [92], and so on, through the final chapter which should be [114] and not [113].]

[90] Residents of Diamond Harbor—and

Gilead—had more or less gotten used to the idea of an aging bachelor captain for the ferry to the mainland, when Captain Ed took off his peaked cap and, holding it nervously, introduced himself to a lawyer a decade his junior from Savannah, a black woman named Holly, who stood at the rail, smiling, in a baggy blue sweater. Clouds had been hammered into irregular plates of lead and steel and heaped in the northern third of the sky. Some had begun to drift south-east and, between, you could see silver edging.

Ed and Holly went for coffee and sat by a drizzly window at Reba's Place. Three months later they were married in a civil ceremony—and moved

into one of the new houses in the Gilead Settlement. They seemed happy enough. When Hannibal came back from graduate school, he stayed on the futon in their attic and occasionally worked with his older brother on the boat.

The new water conduit for the Settlement's north end was a major event in the island's development. A mainland plumbing company finished the work on Ed and Holly's house that had to be done by licensed plumbers. Still, loose ends had to be tied up—mostly a basement john that was all Ed's design and which the builders had warned him was probably not a good idea. Ed had gone ahead with it, anyway.

Then he dropped by to ask Eric and Shit if they'd take a look to see if they could do something with it. "Ain't no water pressure at all down there. The thing just drips." So Shit put on his shoes (at Eric's insistence), picked up the tool box, with his

thumb pulled the canvas strap up on his shoulder, and Eric hefted the sack forward with the adjustable wrench and fifteen pounds of small pipe in it, the acetylene torch, and a bar of solder with a resin core.

Outside under the hickories, they got into Ed's blocky little jeep.

(Shit still thought cars imported from India looked funny. So did Eric. But Shit had to talk about it from when they got in to when they pulled up to the gravel in front of Ed's house—the turf hadn't yet been laid—by which time Ed was stonily silent.)

“You think you two can do anything?” Ed asked pretty much of Eric. In the basement they looked across the sawhorses and the cans of paint still standing about.

“Sure,” Shit said. “You're on the new line.”

Ed said, “Yeah. But it doesn't have the pressure it should—yet.” (Within the last years, they'd helped

out on three or more dozen prefab buildings within six hundred yards of Ed's. Whenever they'd run into Holly outside, she'd been pleasant, with smiles and hellos and good mornings, but Ed—who rose before sunrise anyway, so that five out of six days they didn't see him—had never given more than a grunt to either handyman.)

“We'll see,” Shit said.

“I gotta get back to the boat,” Ed said curtly. “It ain't like when Jay and Mex did the runs. Wasn't nobody out here then. Half the time, they must have made their trips with nobody on the scow. Now people get upset if you're ten minutes late. Holly'll be home in a couple of hours.”

The solution turned out to be going over and looking through two abandoned construction sites. Shit thought he remembered seeing one the last time they were over there: a fifty gallon, plastic-lined

Mertle-Tubman canister, which they carried back between them. They set it up in the maintenance shack out back of Ed's, at ground level, right behind the john, and Eric made a stopcock from an old toilet mechanism. Pipes went from the kitchen line to the canister, then from the canister down to the cellar.

“You see,” Eric took over explaining to Holly, when she got home from her office near the docks (for Shit, who, while he could make these things, often with great skill, was not too good at explaining how they worked), “when nobody's using the water up here, the canister fills out back, and you have about fifty gallons of pressure pushing water down to the basement. As long as you don't flush the basement commode more than three times in an hour, you'll have pressure down there.”

“That's wonderful,” Holly said. “I don't think we'll be using the basement commode that much.”

“It'll do most of its fillin' when you ain't usin' the upstairs water,” Shit said for the third time, only now, with Eric's added explanation it made more sense, and Holly, in her blue jumper cut away from her breasts and her matching blue skull cap, at least *looked* like she understood.

“Ed won't be back till this evening. How much do we owe you for this?”

“Well, I'll tell you—” Shit rubbed behind his ear—“the parts come free. *We* didn't have to pay for 'em; ain't no reason *you* should. Besides, Jay MacAmon always thought a great deal of your feller, there—Ed. That's why he worked so hard to make sure he got the boat run. But Ed's still on the Chamber of Commerce payroll, and while they got great benefits, they don't pay diddly-squat.”

“We worked for the Chamber of Commerce twenty-five years over in the Harbor—so we know

what we're talkin' about," Eric added, having figured out where this was going. "A lot of people were awfully good to us, when we were coming up—people like Jay. So we ain't gonna take your money. And if you ever got any handy work again, you call us; we'll come do it. Your law office does all that pro bono workstuff—so you ain't makin' nothin' either. Other than for parts, you can tell Ed that unless they cost us out of pocket, we ain't takin' a dollar from you."

Holly looked flustered. "Are you *sure*? I mean . . . well, that's . . . *more* than nice!"

"There're enough people in the Settlement here who pay us pretty well for what we do. Ain't no reason to take it from people who don't have it and are busy makin' things right for everybody else. That's what *he* done taught me—" Shit scowled at Eric—"and I just about got it learned."

"That's . . . well, that's an impressive philosophy."

Shit scowled at Eric even harder—because of the word, Eric realized.

Eric looked at the neatly dressed black woman, who stood, all but nonplussed, in her front foyer. As they started for the door, Holly asked suddenly: "Does that come from out of that philosophy book everybody says you're always reading?"

Eric stopped. He looked surprised. "I don't know." He shrugged. "I mean, maybe a little of it does: yeah, sure, some. But most of it comes from Jay MacAmon. And maybe Mr. Kyle. I mean, he gave Ed his job—he gave us our house. That's how you treat your family—"

"Even if they ain't sure they wanna *be* in your family, when all is said and done." Shit grinned slyly. "That's what his book says that he's always readin'."

But you don't have to tell Ed that. Yeah, that's what Jay would've wanted. So that's what we're gonna do. You or Ed come over again, when you need somethin'. We'll see to gettin' it done, ma'am."

They left, to walk through the mild winter, back around the Settlement toward the Bluff, past the Kyle mansion where scaffolding rose over two of its sides for the building's renovation into the Settlement Library, slant shadows cutting tan walls into pale rhomboids, and ambled down the tufted path to their cabin.

And every few months they changed a light switch or puttied a loose pane or looked at what Holly had thought was a leak and explained it was only a pipe sweating at the joint.

After a dozen-and-a-half such jobs over half-a-dozen years, one day Ed came by to say thank you for

something. As he was leaving, with a hand on the screen door's metal frame, he stopped.

Shit said, "You want a cup of coffee, there, Ed? Before you go back home?"

"Thank you, Mr. Haskell—no thanks." One boot on the step below, he stood with the door open behind him. "You know, Mr. Davis—Mama Grace Davis—was right. You're a crude old man. You're *two* crude old men—but you're good people. That's what's important."

Then he was gone.

The screen door swung quick, till the ancient air stopper at the top slowed it, so that it settled closed: a quiet click. "How come it took him so long—" Shit came back from the counter to the kitchen table with his mug—"to figure *that* one out?"

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