

## A DEEP AND COMFORTING VOICE

Farley's is a huge hardware store, open seven days a week 'til ten. They sell lumber, barbecues, unpainted furniture, shower curtains and telephones. Farley's is my secret ace in the hole. When I become too shaky about being alone, I come down to Farley's where "Everything to Make an Oklahoma House a Home" is on sale. Besides that, all the products come with instructions. And failing those, they offer a courteous staff of men who will explain everything.

But this afternoon is not one of those shaky times. I have a couple of hours before Jenny gets home from school, and I'm going to check on a picnic table with benches attached—a clearance item. I seem to be the only customer interested in this bargain—\$69.95, redwood. A bony-faced clerk with slicked-back black hair is standing beside the floor sample. His name, *Morgan*, is stitched on his white Farley's shirt, showing that he is one of the managers. I hope he will move on, but he just folds his broad arms across his chest. The picnic set is a satisfying, dark rose color, sanded smooth. "What I'm looking for," I say, "is a kind of booth effect. For my kitchen?"

The manager frowns.

“A cozy corner to eat in, sort of enclosed, you know, with a lamp overhead, in front of a window, a good place for homework too.”

Morgan’s frown deepens.

“I don’t have any kitchen furniture,” I say. “This would be a start, wouldn’t it? For the time being.”

He is shaking his head. “I wouldn’t,” he says.

“Oh?” What kind of pitch is this? “You wouldn’t, huh? Well, what would you do?” I sound strident. Morgan glances down the aisle to see if anyone has heard the dissatisfied customer.

“You’d have to build in something like that,” he says softly. He keeps his arms folded, and tightens his grip on the muscles beneath his rolled up sleeves. Damn him. If I were handy, I wouldn’t be considering such a stopgap solution.

“Your husband could—

“My husband was a salesman. Salesmen don’t build things. Robert never fixed a thing in his life. Salesmen play golf!” I am trembling. I turn and make myself walk briskly towards the exit.

I sit in my car in the parking lot and wait for the hot spinning behind my breast bone to slow. I am weakened against these outbursts partly because I seem to have lost the knack of sleeping at night. At first after Robert left, I thought the problem was in our bed. I took Jenny and stayed a few nights with my folks.

“Did you sleep?” my father would ask each morning.

“No.”

“But you rested, right?” As though my time in bed were idle. We went back to our house where I could not sleep in private. I tried all the tricks—exercised myself to exhaustion, drank warm milk, thought happy thoughts as I set aside my book and switched off the lamp. Then, suddenly the dark would harness me to a wheel— *If I’d known the rules had changed, Robert, I would have played a different game!—a better game—If I’d known you’d changed the rules on me, Robert. You changed, Robert—* round and round I tread the same circle. “*If I’d known that was how we were going to conduct ourselves. Robert!*”

It is hot in the car. I turn on the engine, set the air-conditioning on high, and try to get a grip. I am a long time resident of Cadillac. I am a journalist. I am a homeowner. I vote, pay my bills, and most of all, I am a mother, and I must not let myself fall apart publicly.

The school bus lets Jenny off just before the road dips between us and the section line. From the window above the kitchen sink I can see her coming although she’s still half a mile away. She’s only ten, a new fifth grader, but there are already signs that she’s going to be built just like me—not a sprinter, a bit of a trudger I’m afraid, but she’s picking up a little speed. I dry my hands and head for the back door.

“Guess what,” she says as she plunks her papers on the card table next to my typewriter and reaches for the fridge. “Mr. Richter, my teacher, he isn’t married.”

“Yes, I know.” I actually was at O.U. at the same time Ryan Richter was regarded as the cutest football player in A House.

“Mom!” She turns from the fridge with a can of coke in hand. Her eyes are wide with excitement. “He’s extremely handsome, and he’s just your age!”

We stand there facing each other. She thinks I'm slow to get her point. I suddenly feel very heavy—"good farming stock," I once heard my father say referring to that side of the family I have to thank for most of my physical characteristics. Jenny's eyes are bright with her news. She is ready to conspire. She thinks we will sit down now to decide what dress I will wear on my date with Mr. Richter. Jenny is too young, I think, to be introduced to the concept of a woman's market value.

"Sit down, hon. Catch your breath. Do you have any homework?" I sit on my mother's old dresser bench which I use while typing at the card table.

Jenny sits on the piano stool across from me. "Don't you want to talk about Mr. Richter?"

"Surely there're lots of other things to talk about. What'd they give you for lunch?"

She is suddenly glum. "Meat loaf," she says hardly moving her lips. I've handled this wrong. All summer she's been on the lookout for a good man, and today she found the perfect answer for revenge. Her daddy married a new wife and moved three hundred miles away. She hates him. She misses him desperately. This would have shown him. We found somebody better—a handsome teacher, a man who can play the guitar, a man who wears jeans and boots to school. But stupid Mom has smashed it. Jenny twists off the piano stool, anxious to go upstairs and get on the phone to a friend. I've been so eager for her to come home, and she hasn't been in the kitchen five minutes.

"I'm going to make tacos for supper," I call after her. I pull the typewriter in front of me. I need to finish the piece on the City Commission meeting before I start supper.

In the morning I rise from the labors of the night and prepare for my day job. I drop Jenny at school, then sink wearily down at my desk at the *Courier*. Mr. Tarman has left me a note saying he liked my piece on the city commission and noting the dates of other municipal meetings. I stop in at Farley's on the way home to get some light bulbs. I must not start avoiding this place. I dash down the center aisle and make a left. There seems to be nothing here but paint, stacked to the ceiling—canyon-like, running for miles in either direction. Damn it, where are the light bulbs. I whip around a corner and bump into Morgan.

“Gosh, I'm sorry,” he says.

“I'm sorry. Really.” We have jumped back from each other.

“Pews may be the answer,” he says.

“What?”

“You asked what I would do for the kitchen?”

“Thank you, Morgan.” I am still catching my breath. Maybe this is one of those very literal-minded people who thinks you really want to know when you ask, How are you? Light bulbs. Light bulbs. Just don't get into another scene. I make myself smile. “Thanks, really.”

“No,” he says holding up his hands.

“Pews?” I ask.

“My old church is auctioning off the pews to raise money for the building fund. You could just look at them, maybe get some ideas.”

“Where?”

“Up near Bartlesville. Saturday morning.”

“That's a long way.”

“I could show you. I’m going anyway.” He hands me his card. Morgan Thornton, General Manager.

Friday afternoon Jenny comes in, but doesn’t speak. She has taken forever to get up the hill, and I know there is bad news. She gets a coke from the refrigerator, but doesn’t sit down. Her face is pinched shut, holding in what she isn’t telling me.

“So how was school?”

With great concentration, she opens the pull tab. “Mr. Richter is taking Patty Morrison’s mom to Oklahoma City to a Mac Davis concert.”

Well of course he is, I want to say. She’s just his type, poor thing. Jenny looks up. She’s crying. The good man has gotten away. “Ah, sweetie, don’t cry.” I rush toward her. She pulls away and runs upstairs. I lean on the card table and let myself down in front of the typewriter. I rest my fingers on the space bar.

Ryan Richter was a second string football player, but he was handsome enough to glide along in that social strata where warm, sweet breaths encouraged him to believe that his luck would somehow carry him right into the pros. But when O.U. gets done with its jocks, they often discover that they are not young gods, but grade school teachers—elementary education being the easiest major there.

By 11:00 p.m. I am drowsy. I must let sleep slip over me like a net over a dumb animal. I stretch and close my eyes. “*You must have had a good laugh, Robert— me humming along, no clue. What a laugh, Robert!*”

Cars are parked on both sides of the country road for half a mile. How did all these people find out about an auction at a little country church? As we pull up, a man says hello to Morgan and takes aside a rope that has kept people from parking in the churchyard. It's a pretty church, bigger than I'd expected. The auctioneer has set up a platform with a podium. There are folding chairs, but many people are sitting on the pews, drinking from Styrofoam cups and eating donuts.

Morgan parks behind the church. I can tell already, this isn't going to work. These pews are too big for my kitchen—dark, clumsy things, gummy with age. They look out of place, like beached whales out of their dim, cool element; slung out in the bright sun where people gawk at their scars.

“Come on,” Morgan says. These are his first words in an hour. It was still dark when his new pickup pulled in front of my house. We dropped Jenny at Patty's and drove almost three hours. He has what my dad calls a hatchet face—narrow with high cheek bones and a hook nose, probably some Indian blood. He told me this was his boyhood church, but he moved to Cadillac after he finished business school at O.U. Not much information for a hundred and eighty miles. I didn't ask him if he knew Robert in the Business school or if he'd heard of Ryan Richter.

“Do you want to look inside first?” he asks. We climb the three steps of the old clapboard church and stand in the doorway. There is the smell of old hymnals and recent carpentry. The morning sunlight streams through the dusty air into the bare, empty space. On the floor dark holes mark where each pew was unbolted. The chancel, without its pulpit or choir, looks to be nothing but a stage, its holiness stripped away. Only the walls are left—a carcass without its bones. My heart sinks at the sight. “Can't you use the pews in the new church?”

“The majority voted for theater seats.” He says this evenly, looking straight ahead.

“Theater seats and air conditioning is what this is all about.” His jaw pulses leaving me sure how he would have voted if he’d still lived here. “When I was first divorced,” he says, “I felt just like this church—a big old drafty hollow thing that had lost its purpose.”

He escorts me out to a pew in the shade of a big elm tree then heads in the direction of the auctioneer. I hadn’t thought about whether he’d ever been married.

I had known Ryan Richter at O.U. and actually spoke to him once. It was one of those brief interludes that occur at the end of the semester between the good-looking guy who’s hardly attended class and the female grind he approaches for her botany notes.

I feel myself smiling now and straighten in the pew to lift my elbow to see that on the armrest there is a band of carving—a twisting pattern. Fish—gracefully swimming down the armrest. They have long curved bodies like salmon, their backs smoothed by generations of churchgoers whose fingers have traced their silky progress through thousands of sermons. I want this pew. It is comforting. Its gentle curves are better than any fine furniture. It will bring dignity and stability to my home. I look up. Morgan is coming back. He’s got to tell me how to get this.

“You may not like these particular pews,” Morgan says and hands me a cup of coffee and a donut. “There are some from the choir—shorter.” I want to look for them, but the bidding has already started. “Forty, Gemme fifty. Forty, Gemme fifty. Got fifty. Who’ll Gemme sixty,” the auctioneer chants.

“It’s buy the piece and take the pair,” Morgan says softly.

“What does that mean?”

“They are selling them in twos. The price reached in the bidding is for one.”

“So whatever I bid, I will pay twice that, right?”

“Right.”

I will wait for the choir pews.

I had been in one of my reckless frames of mind when I picked up the phone and called him. It was one of those what-the-hell-nothing-else-is-happening-in-my-life moments. The association with Farley’s probably gave him a warranty of safety: This is not a strangler. He told me to bring cash just in case I wanted to bid. I have three hundred dollars in my purse. Numbers seventy-nine and eighty have just sold for a hundred and ten dollars a piece. Morgan is leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. His thin lips are pressed shut, his hatchet profile is harsh. “We’ve got to do better than this,” he says. Of course, this was his church. He wants the bids to go higher. It is only 9:30.

By noon all the long pews have been sold. I feel grateful that after a steady rise, the price has come down, but Morgan is leaning forward, his big hands gripped. He rises when an old couple comes up to thank him for his help. I stand aside and listen. Morgan was in charge of removing the pews. He stoops slightly to listen to the couple. Jenny spurned his gentle greeting this morning, making it clear that the only exciting possibilities for the day awaited at Patty’s.

After lunch one of the little choir pews is lifted onto the platform beside the auctioneer. Number three. It looks rosy in the sunlight, not like the long ones. I turn to look at Morgan. “I rubbed it down with steel wool and Murphy’s soap,” he says. The crowd is scurrying to their seats. “Buy the piece and take the pair,” shouts the auctioneer to start things off. “Who’ll Gemme a hunnert, Gemme a hunnert, Gemme a hunnert,” begins his nasal chant. “Gotta hunnert. Who’ll Gemme hunnert twenty. Got twenty. Got thirty. Got forty. Got fifty.”

Oh, no. I’m out of it, and I didn’t even get to bid.

Morgan is sitting up very tall turning his head from bidder to bidder. He is smiling. The final bid is seven hundred

On the long drive home I keep wanting to say, Listen Mr. Handyman, why didn't you suggest I buy two of the long ones and cut them down? Why did you let me wait for those choir pews?

It's only five when we get back to Cadillac. "I want to show you something," he says as we pull onto LaFlore Street. "Can we stop a minute at my place?"

I'm hot and tired and eager to get Jenny and try to forget about redoing my kitchen. "Gee, can it wait?" I say. "I really have to pick up Jenny and get home."

Two nights later Morgan calls. He is taking a break at work, and I can tell from his tone that he wants to shoot the breeze awhile. Jenny and I are in the middle of dinner, and she stares at me as I try to make casual conversation standing at the wall phone beside the sink. I feel like I am trying to talk to a boy with my mother listening, but Morgan's deep voice contains no push or program, and it comforts me.

"Not that hardware guy?" Jenny asks when I hang up. The expression on her face makes me want to slap her, but I don't. Mothers are supposed to be constant, placid, sexless beings.

Farley's seven-days-a-week, fifteen-hour-days leave Morgan almost no free time, but we talk on the phone every day. He's good at asking questions and then waiting while I meander and double back into my answers. I like his sense of humor. He's a farm boy—doesn't shy

away from alluding to cow pies and prairie oysters. Yet he can be subtle. Tonight I asked him if he liked fishing.

“Fishing, huh?” he draws out the words. “Yeah, I can fish.”

“Oh,” I say, “and what kind of a fisherman are you?”

“I’d say I’m a fly fisher?”

“Oh?”

“Fly fishermen are very particular. I’m not a trawler.” His voice is deep and slow, and I cannot get enough of it. He says, “Never had any taste for just dragging the net along behind the boat. I won’t sample something just because it jumps into my net, looking flashy.”

I close my eyes and press my forehead against the kitchen wall to savor a moist pang rising in me that I had forgotten I could feel. “We fly fishermen know what we want,” he says. “And we tie a fly, something subtle, irresistible, tailor-made to get the job done. And we have to go to just the right pool where the particular fish we want swims. And we stand there in the cold water, patiently sending out our line just as long as it takes to entice the one we have set our hearts on.” There is silence now on the line, and I know he can hear me breathing.

It’s Sunday morning. The phone is ringing. Jenny is spending the night at Patty’s house. We packed a dress and the patent leather flats for Sunday school. This is all coming back as I struggle to rise from a deep, deep pool of sleep. I feel almost too heavy to swim or to raise my head to look at the clock. 7:20. I pick up the phone. Jenny says I must come get her immediately. What has gone wrong? I throw on my jeans and rush into town without even brushing my teeth.

In the car she sits as far from me as she can get. I know she will run to her room as soon as we get inside, so I step in the back door ahead of her and block her path to the stairs. She sits on the piano stool and wraps her arms around her waist. Finally she looks at me. “Mom, I made a bad mistake.”

“What happened, sweetheart?” My heart is thumping.

She turns slightly and looks at the floor. “Mr. Richter—you know how I wanted you to go out with him?”

“Yes, sweetheart, I know.”

She glances sidelong at me and her chin quivers. I kneel beside her. “I thought he was so wonderful, and—” She gulps and lets me take her in my arms. “I thought he was a nice person, but he did something that hurt Patty’s mom’s feelings, and now she’s crying all night. He’s so nice in school—” She drags in a shaky breath and then in a hot sob, “I hate him.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Oh god, here it is. I struggle not to cry with her.

“Listen, Jenny.” I push her back from me and look her in the eye. “I’m the one who made the mistake. When you wanted me to go out with Mr. Richter, I knew he wouldn’t ask me out, and that made me feel so bad for you that I forgot to tell you that I didn’t even *want* to go out with him.”

She looks at me, incredulous, still shaking. “Why not?” She is so young.

“Well, I’ll tell you, honey, my guess is that Mr. Richter has always been a popular guy—in college and high school and maybe even when he was your age.” I stop and swallow. She’s waiting. “Well, sometimes when a person is that popular and good-looking and has people falling all over them from the beginning, he just never learns how to deserve friends—how to be a really good friend. And, sometimes, he just winds up hurting people, like Patty’s mom.”

“You’re saying he’s a jerk?” Her gaze is direct through her watery eyes.

“Yes. That’s what I’m saying.”

Her face twists, but she presses her lips together and gives a couple of quick nods. She will try to see this.

Morgan picks us up in his truck on a Saturday morning. I told Jenny that I wanted to go see his house, and that he had a cat she could play with if she wanted to come along. She’s been very quiet all week. She and I have agreed that she is doing very well in school, that she has a good teacher. She struggles to reconcile love and hate for Ryan Richter and for her father. I wish she were a baby again, so I could rock her to soothe the pain.

Morgan’s house, a small ranch like the others on its street, has two spindly oaks in front, each circled by a heavy wreath of fine mulch. A garden hose is coiled on a shiny, wheeled rack beside the driveway. The place looks like a Farley’s ad in the Sunday magazine section.

A gray and white cat is waiting on the porch and, like a good hostess, she trots up to meet Jenny. “Come around in the back,” Morgan says to the two of them. On the cement back steps a bag of kibble has been placed. Morgan stoops down, takes a bit of kibble between his thumb and middle finger and holds it above the cat’s nose. The cat sits back on her hind legs and raises her front paws with the pads together as though she is praying. “That’s right,” he says, “say the blessing.” Then he tosses the kibble in the air, and like a show dog the cat leaps and seizes it.

“My goodness,” I say, “that’s evidence of a very smart cat.”

He hands the bag of kibble to Jenny, and he and I start in the back door. “That’s evidence,” he says quietly to me, “of a man with too much time on his hands.”

Inside the house looks bare, unlived-in. The flecked beige kitchen wallpaper looks like something chosen by a computer. He ushers me down the basement steps and flips on a large, overhead fluorescent light. As the bulbs flicker and light up, I see that before us, sitting on a heavy white drop cloth, is a beautiful little cherry choir pew. I gasp. The old finish has been rubbed to a soft, rosy glow. In the corner is another, its surface still dark, its base broken so badly that one end of the seat rests on the floor.

“Numbers one and two,” I say softly. I had meant to ask where they were.

“They got wrecked in the removal. The fools just started rocking them. That’s when they called me. The auctioneer wouldn’t take these, so I gave the church a hundred dollars for each and put all the pieces in the truck. This one is almost finished.” He runs his long fingers down the curved arm. I see now that there are still pipe clamps attached to the bases.

“Can the other one be restored?”

“Oh sure, it’s not so bad off as this one was. Only one end is splintered. I’ll have them finished up by next week if you’re interested.”

“Yes, yes!” I press fingers against the carving—bread and wine.

“The other one’s got the fish,” he says.

“Why didn’t you just bring me here first, before the auction?”

“I wasn’t sure I was going to let you have them.” He smiles. “And I wanted to get to know you better, mostly have you get to know me. I knew Robert in school, but didn’t know you were divorced until that day in the store—when you got going about salesmen playing golf.” He chuckles.

“So, at the auction, what did you think?”

“Well,” he says slowly, “even if I hadn’t liked what I found—” He stops, glances at the floor, then looks up grinning, “you were just a feast to look at.”

I’m stunned. It is the first extravagant thing he’s said. My cheeks burn.

“What’s going on?” It is Jenny standing at the top of the stairs. The cat appears, curving around the leg of her jeans.

“Hi, hon, come on down,” I say.

She looks soberly from one of us to the other and begins to step slowly down the stairs.

“Jenny,” Morgan says, “your mother and I are about to strike a bargain.” He says this gravely. Jenny’s eyes widen. She steps heavily off the last step and comes to stand beside me. The cat follows, and she picks her up. “I’m making her an offer,” he says.

I fumble to open my purse. “Three hundred,” I say.

“Two hundred,” he says.

“Three hundred,” I say, opening my checkbook, “delivered and installed.” He frowns. “Take it or leave it,” I say. Jenny frowns at us as she struggles to hold the weight of the large, purring cat.

“I don’t know, lady,” Morgan draws his chin down and gives me a business-like look, “whether you’re aware of what you’re getting into. This kind of furniture,” he says turning now to Jenny, “can’t be rearranged all the time, you know.”

I watch his face. “These pews—” he says looking dead level back at me, “we’ll have to bolt them down—right through your floor joists.”

“Oh?” I say giving him the arch of my eyebrow.

“Represents a major commitment.” He’s still trying to deadpan it, but his nostrils flare with the effort.

“That’s all right,” says Jenny, “we trust you.” She shifts the load of the cat up onto her shoulder and starts back up the stairs. She seems to have decided it’s all right to leave us alone.

THE END