

Mississippi

by Deb Oestreicher

"I won't live here," Beth said, waving her hand to indicate the small Southern town in which they were having dinner—the most delicious fried chicken either of them had ever tasted—in a restaurant located in an antebellum mansion. She looked across the table at Adam and said again, "I won't."

All through the morning, while he was at his day-long interview at the research branch of a chemical company near the river, she had explored the area by car and foot. As far as she could tell, most of the black people lived in tin-roofed shacks along narrow, twisting roads in bad repair and in concrete multi-family developments with rusting playgrounds. The white people's neighborhoods were a bit better cared for, but the whole town looked poor. Broken-down cars on front lawns, not as many trees as there ought to be, cracked or absent sidewalks. Segregation wasn't the worst part—the worst part was the signs. Every other house had one on display. Some were printed, others clearly done by hand, indifferently spelled and emphatically punctuated:

The Wages Of Sin Is Death (Romans 6:23)!
Are you 100% sure your going to heaven?
Jesus Christ is your only hope!

"I can't live next to people like that," she told Adam. "Neither can you. You know you can't."

It wasn't that they were Jewish. They *were* Jewish, but it wasn't about that. They weren't particularly observant. They were probably atheists, if it came down to it. A lot of things—the weather, the scarcity of ethnic restaurants, the lack of a coast—they could get used to. They couldn't get used to the kind of people who put a sign saying "No life but in Christ" on their lawns.

"But Beth—"

She leaned across the table and touched Adam's wrist. "It was good, huh? The lab was what you thought?"

Adam nodded. If he were hired, he'd run the lab from the technical end: design experiments, build research teams, publish results under his own name. A big step up from his current job, which he'd recently realized was a dead end. "Better than I thought," he said.

Beth exhaled through her teeth. "OK then. If you get the job, we can live in the capital. You can drive in."

Adam stared at her. "But that's sixty miles away! I'd be commuting two hours a day!"

"You can't expect to keep walking to work if we're relocating. Not that many places are conducive to walking to work. And this town definitely isn't. Try and find a sidewalk between that lab and our motel!" She pushed her plate away. "Jackson's an easy drive. We drove it yesterday from the airport. It's not like there'll be back-to-back traffic at rush hour. I drove there this afternoon to check it out after I saw what it was like around here. There are some decent neighborhoods. Big old trees, pretty houses."

The waitress, a fiftyish woman with big hair dyed blonde, stepped close to Adam and asked if they wanted anything else. "Our peach cobbler's real good today," she said.

Adam didn't respond so Beth shook her head. "Full," she said. "Thanks, it was all delicious. That fried chicken was amazing."

The waitress nodded. "We been written up in *Travel and Leisure*. Second best fried chicken in the country. But number one just closed down. She died, you know? So I bet we're first next year."

"Good luck." Beth smiled and asked for the check.

In the car on the way to the motel, Adam still wasn't talking. Beth decided to let him stew for a few minutes and turned on the radio. It was set to a country station, playing a song she didn't recognize.

At least it wasn't a preacher. As she parked she said, "You might not even get the job."

"I will," he said. "They're talking about inventing a new position, just for me."

“How long will that take?”

“It's like the government. Who knows? Months, probably.”

“The money's good?”

“They'd match; maybe a little higher. They have to figure out the pay grade.”

Inside the motel room, Beth turned away from Adam and closed the blinds. Then she started to undress. “Where do they all live, your colleagues-to-be?”

Adam was taking off his shoes, and was quiet as if removing the shoes required all the concentration he could muster. Beth got into the bed.

“Adam? Where do they live? Do they live here? I bet they don't.”

“One of them does,” Adam said. “He has an old Victorian right downtown.”

It seemed funny to Beth, calling it downtown, a business district that occupied a single street and went on for just four or five blocks. “Huh. And the rest?”

“Most of them are in Madison.”

“That's almost as far as Jackson. I passed it this afternoon.” She lifted the sheet on Adam's side of the bed and patted the mattress. “It's not just me, then. I can't imagine *scientists* living next to these people.”

Back home, they waited to hear from Mississippi and Beth adjusted herself to the likely future. She bought a bread maker and a paella pan, anticipating a dearth of good bakeries and Spanish restaurants. She started to research real estate in Jackson, found out about farmers' markets, browsed the collection of the art museum online. She calmed friends, who were beside themselves at the idea of Adam and Beth in Mississippi. “We can be happy anywhere,” she assured them.

Years later, after Adam stopped waiting for that job offer, and long after the divorce, this is what their friends and family remembered: how *game* Beth was, even willing to go to Mississippi for him. People thought he'd been the luckiest guy in the world.

What Adam remembered was that she'd been going to make him
drive two hours a day five days a week, fifty weeks a year.
Because of some fucking *signs*.

