

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

The Marriage Cure

Is Wedlock Really a Way Out of Poverty?

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One July morning last year in Oklahoma City, in a public-housing project named Sooner Haven, twenty-two-year-old Kin Henderson pulled a pair of low-rider jeans over a high-rising gold lamé thong and declared herself ready for church. Her best friend in the project, Corean Brothers, was already in the parking lot, fanning away her hot flashes behind the wheel of a smoke-belching Dodge Shadow. "Car's raggedy, but it'll get us from pillar to post," Corean said when Kim climbed in. At Holy Temple Baptist Church, two miles



down the road, the state of Oklahoma was offering the residents of Sooner Haven three days of instruction on how to get and stay married.

Kim marveled that Corean, who is forty-nine, seemed to know what to wear on such occasions. The older woman's lacquered fingernails were the same shade as her lipstick, pants suit, nylons, and pumps, which also happened to be the color of the red clay dust that settled on Sooner Haven every summer. The dust stained the sidewalks and gathered in the interstices of a high iron security perimeter that enclosed the project's hundred and fifty modest houses.

This forbidding fence, and the fact that most of the adults inside it were female, sometimes prompted unkind comparisons with the old maximum-security women's prison five minutes up the road. But Kim and Corean believed that they could escape Sooner Haven, and so were only mildly irked by what one of their neighbors called "our cage." Besides, other low-income areas had fierce borderlines, too. The distance between Sooner Haven and Holy Temple Baptist Church edged the territories of the street gangs Hoover Crip, Grape Street Crip,

and Rolling Twenties. Kim's brother had been murdered by a gang, but she couldn't keep track of their ever-mutating names, boundaries, and affiliations. And Corean had refused to learn, even when Hoover Crip members started shooting at one of her five children. It was Corean's contention that you could be in the ghetto and not of it. Ignoring the stunts of heavily armed neighbors kept your mind free for more enriching pursuits, such as the marriage class for which Corean had roused her young friend from bed this morning.

Oklahoma has rarely found itself in the vanguard of antipoverty thinking, but the class to which the two women were heading embodies a vigorous new idea -- something known locally as "the marriage cure." Traditionally, singleness has been viewed as a symptom of poverty. Today, however, a politically heterodox cadre of academics is arguing that singleness -- and particularly, single parenthood -- is one of poverty's primary causes, for which matrimony might be a plausible tonic. For the past few years, the state of Oklahoma has been converting this premise into policy. In an initiative praised by the Bush Administration, which aims to seed marriage-promotion programs nationwide, the state has deputized public-relations firms, community leaders, and preachers (among them the pastor at Holy Temple Baptist Church) to take matrimony's benefits to the people. Last summer, that marriage drive reached Sooner Haven. "Come learn about relationships!" said the recruiter who knocked on the housing project's beat-up doors.

Kim happened to be available for edification, having recently quit a job that she had found depressing: selling home-security systems over the phone. The script she'd had to memorize still banged around her brain. "What? You can't afford twenty-nine ninety-nine a month but can afford to run the risk of being robbed and losing everything you've worked hard for in life? Or, even worse, a family member? You say God will protect you, but maybe my call to you today is God's way of telling you that the world he created does possess an element of danger, and he wants you to be as safe as you can be. It is quite possible that God has a reason for my call to you today."

"Most of the people I called were old and scared already," Kim said, sighing. "I wasn't putting enough effort into my rebuttals."

Many of Kim's contemporaries are single mothers and thus eligible for welfare between jobs. But for Kim, who is unmarried, childless, and on a strict regime of Depo-Provera contraceptive injections, the decision to quit a job before lining up the next one had harsh repercussions. She was hungry, and hoped that marriage class would come with free lunch. In any event, it would give her respite from her unit at Sooner Haven, which, despite her liberal use of paper doilies, ceramic angels, and lavender-scented candles, was no longer a pleasant place to spend a day. The roof leaked, and an overnight storm had flooded her living room and

kitchen. Still, food and sanctuary were not the extent of Kim's interest in marriage class. She had recently fallen, as she put it, "heart over heels" in love.

Kim has moist brown eyes, a body that neighborhood males call "ripe" and "aching for my love time," and a bleeding ulcer that an emergency-room doctor ascribes, not implausibly, to stress. It is her habit to think with a fist on her chin, and the puzzle that engrosses her is how to live a life less indigent and criminal than the one in which she was raised. The youngest of seven children, she was the first of her four sisters to forgo having babies as a teenager. She hoped as well to be the first to go to college, and had recently taken a series of tests for a general-equivalency diploma. Although she didn't know anyone from a background like hers who had obtained a college degree, she didn't see why a smart woman couldn't pull it off. For several years, she'd been trying to do the precise opposite of what people around her had done, in the hope of eventually attaining what she termed "a healthy, wealthy, normal-lady life." Marriage, like staying out of jail, struck her as a vital part of normal-lady living.

The man she'd chosen (although he had yet to be informed of his selection) was a tall, soft-spoken construction worker named Derrick, whom she had first spoken to at the International House of Pancakes. He was a graduate of a two-year college and had a one-year-old son "he actually does for." And, unlike her previous boyfriend, he didn't use or sell drugs.

Kim keeps the things that matter to her next to her mattress, in a cardboard box stamped "Fragile -- Eggs." In addition to a handmade card that her father sent from prison on her eighteenth birthday, and a tangle of blond hair extensions that her mother had mailed when Kim turned twenty-two, the box held several poems that Kim had written about the meagerness of what people around her termed love. Many of the men she knew called their women "bitch" when their male friends came to visit, and they hit those women when the male friends went away. After sex, they wanted to leave, pretending not to hear when a girl offered to turn on the hot plate and make breakfast biscuits from scratch. "You know how they wrassle you down and it's wham wham wham, and then when they come they go, 'Say my name!'" she asked. "It's all about their egos, and that's all I ever knew. But the first time I slept with Derrick he asked, 'Is this O.K., does this feel right?' And, after, I just burst out crying. Because when he held me I felt, this is it -- this is something I've been missing my whole life." Holding on to this something was a feat for which her life's experience had provided no strategy, and she hoped that the marriage class to which she was headed might suggest one.

Corean found it moving that, even among city girls like Kim, who had been nourished on rappers named Kingpin Skinny Pimp, Dirty, and Lord-knows-what-all, the word "love" retained the gentle, Barbara Cartland contours of her own Deep South girlhood. But Corean, who had separated from her husband twelve

years ago, was not the romantic she had once been; she applauded Kim's optimism but didn't share it.

So why bother with a three-day seminar at a church whose ceiling, after asbestos removal, appeared to consist of the pelts of a thousand plush toys? Corean Brothers, so outwardly composed that her kids call her the Reverend Doctor Mom, was feeling a little wobbly. In the fall, the youngest of her five babies would enter his final year in high school, and while her grown children were regular, affectionate presences in her life, the cause to which she had devoted herself since her divorce no longer seemed to require her full-time vigilance. Corean had two sets of grandchildren, by her eldest son. But he frequently quarreled with the mothers of the babies, and Corean saw her four grandchildren only intermittently. She busied herself with what she called her "private ministry": visiting nursing-home residents and penitentiary inmates; helping Sooner Haven's younger women, Kim among them, with their monthly budgets or workplace disputes. Still, the days now contained enough hours for a reasonable woman to fret about her future.

Lately, besides the symptoms of menopause, a "burning kind of numbness" had been snaking up her arms. Ineligible for Medicaid and unable to afford private insurance, she improvised treatments, just as she'd improvised over the years to keep her children from noticing when a child-support payment didn't come. Her annual income was five thousand dollars, but, except for ten months when she and her husband first separated, she had not received welfare. "The child support was supposed to have covered us, but when it stopped coming I couldn't afford a lawyer," she said. "So I did what you do when you're a girl from the sticks -- you just make do." Amid the four-o'clocks and marigolds in her flower bed, and in defiance of housing-authority rules, she had planted peppers and cantaloupe. She decorated her children's bedrooms with thrift-shop items and roadside salvage. With the castoffs of a woman whose house she cleaned, she sent each child to school sharply dressed.

The standards of parenting at Sooner Haven are not uniformly exacting. One exasperated resident recently named her newborn De Las' One. But it was generally acknowledged in the complex that Corean Brothers had been blessed with mother wit. "I even found great pleasure in hard work," read a passage from Ecclesiastes, which she had underlined and asterisked five times in the disintegrating Living Bible that now accompanied her to Holy Temple church. "The pleasure was, indeed, my only reward for all my labors."

Her husband had remarried six months after the divorce; Corean had had one second date in twelve years. Mornings now, she interrogated the mirror with new ruthlessness, curious about whether Preparation H could, as she'd heard, reduce the puffiness around one's eyes. If five children had altered her face for the worse,

they had at least erased the evidence of her malnourished childhood as a Central Florida field hand. "You're ninety pounds with two bricks in your pockets," boys had teased her then. Now she was shaped like a Coke bottle, and Coke-colored, too –red and gold glints in dark-brown skin. Her cheekbones were still high, her eyes were alive with humor.

One unacknowledged consolation of struggling in the inner city is the lack of time one has to indulge romantic discontent. It was letting go of her children, more than losing her husband, that had caused the Reverend Doctor Mom to notice that she was alone.

Many Oklahoma City maps end where the Sooner Haven neighborhood begins. Pizza places won't deliver here, and local strip malls have been abandoned, their display windows given over to leaflets of undercapitalized entrepreneurs ("Nile Princess Home Braidz 4 Less"). The neighborhood feels connected to the world around it mainly on Sunday mornings, when residents who have moved up and out return to its churches to pray. Nonetheless, the community is an apt setting for a test of whether the government can persuade low-income citizens to marry.

Using federal money to raise the marriage rate among the poor -- the House recently approved a three-hundred-million-dollar White House plan to help states experiment towards this goal -- is an effort to complete what the Administration considers the unfinished business of the 1996 federal welfare-reform law. And Oklahoma turns out to be a quintessential post-welfare state. In the past eight years, its public-assistance rolls dropped ninety-one percent -- among the country's most substantial declines -- but widespread work hasn't brought widespread economic security. Median household income remains among the lowest in the country, and out-of-wedlock childbearing rates are among the country's highest. While a considerable amount of social-science data suggest that two-parent families are good for children, marriage promoters also see matrimony as a means of decreasing crime and welfare dependence in neighborhoods like Sooner Haven. In a recent homage to Oklahoma's marriage-promotion pioneers, Wade Horn, the Bush Administration's marriage-promotion guru, wrote, "If marriage is good for communities, why should government be shy about promoting and strengthening it?"

The 2000 census recorded a decline in marriage rates across all demographic groups, but the least likely to marry are African-Americans, who are also increasingly over represented on national welfare rolls. As Orlando Patterson, of Harvard, a scholar of black marriage patterns, recently observed, African-Americans remain "among the most un-partnered and estranged individuals in the world."

Kim Henderson dreamed of a sunset wedding in a neighborhood park. Corean Brothers' fantasy was simpler still: she'd hire Oklahoma's fastest-talking preacher

and hold matrimonial history's briefest reception, in order to get more swiftly to the honeymoon action. "It's been twelve years," she said, laughing. "I am a religious woman, but not a dead one." The two women were not especially concerned that their romantic ambitions could interest the government. Outsiders were always coming to Sooner Haven to sell opportunity, prying into the residents' business while doing so. Some of the people in the project believed that these help-brokers were counterfeit, that laws had been set in place to push blacks down while helping other minorities prosper. Over-the-clothesline conversation turned periodically to "the tax-free Asians" -- North Vietnamese who, according to rumor, were welcomed to America (after fighting and killing black G.I.s) and exempted from income taxes, which explained how they came to own all those nail salons. Corean and Kim weren't certain about the Asians, but they did believe in the existence of opportunity for black people, somewhere. And it was as likely to be found at Holy Temple Baptist Church as anywhere else.

They arrived at marriage class thirty minutes late but were enthusiastically welcomed. Despite door-to-door solicitation in Sooner Haven and announcements in neighboring churches and social-services agencies, the total turnout was five, not counting the church secretary, a Sooner Haven single mother who, in a barely audible voice, described her divorce as "living death." Kim and Corean chose seats at the far end of a long Formica table, near the exit.

The government's evangelist, Pastor George E. Young, was tall, with a gleaming pate and a cell phone holstered to his khakis. When he folded his arms across his chest after making a point, the women giggled at his resemblance to Mr. Clean. "I am not naive enough to think this class will stop you from having men over," he said as he distributed state-sponsored workbooks of what Oklahoma calls "empirically informed, empirically tested, regularly updated" information on how to make and keep a decent marriage. "What I am hoping is that, when the man does come over, you will have a different conversation."

The curriculum was rich with statistics and poll results, which Pastor Young displayed by overhead projector on a cracked cinder-block wall. What do couples fight about before marriage? (Money, jealousy, future in-laws.) What do couples fight about after marriage? (Money, communication, children, sex.) What percentage of married people feel unhappy in the relationship? (Most.) The data are bleak by design; the social scientists on whom Oklahoma relies believe that a crucial part of making and keeping a marriage is disabusing oneself of sentimental notions. Marriage is not sexual and emotional bliss between soul mates, they contend; it is a job requiring as much patience, self-sacrifice, discipline, and patience as any other.

The students found the statistics depressing and the flowcharts in the workbooks unfathomable, but Pastor Young was neither of those things, and in three days of

class only one student dozed off, briefly, following a Crock-Pot lunch. Christ built his church upon a rock, Young told the students; a marriage requires a similarly unyielding foundation. Value the ability to fight decently and nonviolently, he said, because, "believe me, there will be storms."

Hence, a pillar of the course was a "speaker-listener" technique intended to promote calm, productive conflict resolution. To demonstrate, Young played a state-supplied video of couples working through the sort of conflicts that are seldom encountered in Sooner Haven. (Spouse hogs home computer. Spouse procrastinates about cleaning guest bedroom.) This cultural disconnect was perhaps predictable, as the curriculum used in Oklahoma was actually developed a quarter of a century ago for engaged or married couples. The curriculum's creators, the Colorado psychologists Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, say that their course encourages not just healthy marriages but individuals who are "less reliant on government services including welfare, health care, mental health care, and earning and saving more money." However, testing of the approach has been conducted only minimally in inner-city settings. Marriage education in places like Sooner Haven is, like marriage itself, a venture in optimism.

"I'm not going to lie and say it's easy," Pastor Young, who is in his second marriage, told the class. "So I know some of you will wonder whether it's worth it. But when you know how it feels to go home at night, to have them there every night, to have them trusting you, and to know you trust them back..." For a moment, he seems to have lost his place in the lesson plan. "To find that person and have that feeling -- that is worth struggling toward, it's worth crying over. It is the worthiest of personal goals."

From this counseling, Pastor Young has come to share the belief of many marriage-initiative advocates: that men more than women need convincing on this point. Thus he sees it as an unhappy but unavoidable fact that women are this social policy's beasts of burden. Having already complied with social and economic pressures to work, poor women were now being asked to do something that their government had so far failed at: push their male counterparts into the cultural and economic mainstream.

Kim and Corean found the couples squabbling on the videos "kind of petty" but enjoyed practicing the problem-solving techniques that the couples demonstrated. Pairing off for role-playing, the students learned to refrain from saying to a man who disappointed them, "You're an oily, two-timing toad," and to say instead, "When you did x, in situation y, I felt z." They practiced swallowing their rage, articulating their grievances specifically and respectfully, recognizing when a fight might turn violent, and listening with open-minds to imaginary mates. Acting the part of a neglected wife and mother, Kim channeled her loneliness so convincingly that Pastor Young blinked back tears -- an achievement that left Kim beaming.

"But in real life I'm still back at the beginning," Kim said after the exercise. "I mean, how do you get to the point of even having a bad marriage, when every time you start to say the word 'love' he starts talking about basketball?"

"My thing is: how do you get a man to talk about marriage when you're pretty sure he's still sleeping with his baby's mother?" a nurse's aide asked, expressing a problem so familiar at Sooner Haven that it is known by the term "baby-mama drama." "And then how do you tell if he wants to marry you for the right reasons?" the nurse's aide went on. "When I wear my white uniform, guys around here know I'm working and chase me down the street to get their hands on my paycheck."

"You have to ask to be treated as you deserve," Pastor Young said. "If you don't demand respect from the males, you won't get it."

"Here's what troubles me," Corean said, as another transparency lit up the wall. "Look at all those couples who say they're stable but not happy. I am enjoying these exercises, and I agree our society has too much divorce, but it doesn't seem right to me that a woman should stick with a man when she's miserable, or settle for one who doesn't make her happy. Why isn't it better to be alone?"

"Two parents means two paychecks," Kim said, frowning. On a ledger, as a pooling of resources, marriage made sense. But Kim's experience with males, like that of the other women in the class, pointed toward a more complicated calculation. None of the women were on welfare, and all were determined not to be. And while they wanted men for companionship, sex, and the sort of honest, intimate conversation they were enjoying in marriage class, they weren't entirely sure men were useful to their efforts at self-improvement. All but one of the women in the room had grown up without a father in the home. At least two had been sexually abused in the first ten years of their lives. Those who had children had been left by the children's fathers. Three had been beaten by men they had loved, and two had been involved with violent criminals. In short, it required an imaginative leap to believe that a committed relationship with a man would rescue a woman from poverty. At Sooner Haven, relationships with men were often what stopped an ambitious woman from escaping.

As an urban preacher, Pastor Young grasped this paradox better than the developers of the curriculum he delivered, so he was not shattered when the first tangible result of his marriage instruction was the termination of what had been the most enduring relationship in the group. The nurse's aide, riding to the second day's class with Corean and Kim, passed her unemployed boyfriend's house and noticed another woman's car parked outside. Following an antic period of discovery, and with the encouragement of her classmates, the nurse sent the boyfriend of two years packing.

"Matthew 19:30 tells us the first will be the last and the last will be the first," Pastor

Young said on the final day, as phone numbers were exchanged and sugar cookies were spirited into pocketbooks for later. "You think you are last now, you may be last in the eyes of the world, but if you only believe and live that you are worthy to be who you are, you will be first. You will eke out some respect and happiness from this life." He closed his bible and sighed.

"I wish I could get more men into this room, instead of asking you all to go out and be the messengers for what a meaningful, committed relationship might be," he went on. "But for now it's up to you to go out and teach the men."

Waiting at the bus stop on a withering August afternoon, Kim Henderson shook the front of her white blouse, in the vain hope of keeping sweat stains at bay. She wanted to look nice, as she was bound for one of Oklahoma City's upmarket shopping malls. After her retirement from burglar-alarm telemarketing, she had papered the mall's boutiques with job applications. But while attending marriage class her phone was cut off, owing to an outstanding fifty-nine-dollar bill. Since there was now no way for prospective employers to reach her, and since she had no money to buy toilet paper, let alone pay her phone bill, she had decided to take a bus to the mall and go from shop to shop, asking if anyone had tried to call her about a job.

The mall was a long ride from Sooner Haven. Derrick owned a Pontiac Grand Am that he might have let her use, but Kim hadn't seen or heard from him in ten days. She thought he might be working at a construction site outside Oklahoma City, or might be preoccupied with his baby son. "Derrick's a good person," she said determinedly. "And just because I'm not sure of the reason doesn't mean he doesn't have one."

When a bus turned down her street, she stepped off the curb, but the bus did not slow down. Half an hour later, a second bus cruised by her outstretched, dollar-waving hand. It is an unhappy fact of Oklahoma City life that bus drivers bypass would-be riders in very poor neighborhoods, and blacks in less poor ones. Kim's grandmother, who had died the previous year, bequeathed Kim an aged blue Oldsmobile. But Kim had passed the car on to her mother, who lives in Arkansas. "She's sixty and had to walk all this way to the school cafeteria where her job is at," Kim explained. Recently, several of her girlfriends had applied to a program at the Oklahoma City human-services office, which gave them five hundred dollars to get a car for work. Her friends are eligible for such aide because they are single mothers. Childless Kim must rely on buses.

Kim has tried to develop constructive ways of venting her frustration. She had kept a journal until a relative discovered it and passed it around. She tried to talk into an imaginary tape recorder, but that made her feel crazy. Lately, she had settled on the "weird but hopefully less pathetic" technique of translating her anxieties and hopes into unmetered, blues songs. "Help may not come just when I

want it to," she sang to the street, "but when it comes it might not be too late."

After an hour, a bus pulled over. It took her to the center-city bus depot, which is situated in front of the county jail. Waiting for a transfer bus under a billboard for Crawley 24-Hour Bail Bonds, Kim was propositioned by a man wheeling a baby carriage and smoking a Black & Mild cigar. Kim cut him off in mid-fantasy. "Don't you know me? I'm Frank's daughter, which makes you my cousin. And you know Frank would kill you for this."

The cousin with the carriage peeled away, and another suitor stepped forward. When she told the new guy that she had a boyfriend, he laughed, and said, "Well, then, he must not love you, honey, if he be making you take the damn bus."

"Like flies to apple pies," Corean liked to say of Kim's ability to attract male interest, but Kim's options usually fell short of marriage-class standards. This was a hitch in the uplift-by-marriage method which even Pastor Young understood. "Kim wants to get out of her situation by working, going to school, maybe getting married," he said once, when Kim was out of earshot. "But she lives in an isolated neighborhood where most of the males have abandoned hope in schools, legit jobs, the system. The way they tell it to me, they see three ways to get out of the ghetto: through professional sports, through rapping, and through crime." Half of Oklahoma's black men are out of the labor force, according to the 2000 census. In the neighborhoods around Sooner Haven, the figure is higher still.

An older man in an orange jumpsuit was now standing before Kim, balancing a broom on his shoulder. "Now, for my part, I believe you have a beautiful face and a nice body," he said. "Are you over eighteen? I'll be getting out of the halfway house in several months and I'd like to buy you a steak."

Kim sometimes laughed about being a "creep magnet," but Derrick's unexplained absence had lately sapped her humor. Her father had repeatedly pulled vanishing acts, too -- into drink and into prison. For most of her life, Kim's mother had compensated, watching her little girl's back as best she could, but two years ago her mother left Oklahoma City to work in Arkansas.

Before Kim adopted her normal-lady plan, she had had a crew of girlfriends with whom she could share her thoughts on love and men. When the connecting bus arrived at the center-city depot, one of them -- Amanda -- was on it. Amanda's T-shirt said, in large type, "I promise to be a good girl," and, in small type, "if you promise to be a bad boy." Seeing Kim, she reached into a tight back pocket and produced a photograph of a newborn. "Ashley -- I had her six weeks ago Saturday."

Kim's eyes darted to her friend's flat belly. "I know," Amanda said proudly, "I didn't gain any weight with her at all. Now, get this: When my time came, I was seven centimeters dilated and didn't have nobody with me, and still they kicked me out of

St. Anthony Hospital, because they claimed my Medicaid card didn't clear. I had to go clear cross the city to Mercy hospital by myself -- dag, I thought I would never make it. Funny, my Medicaid card cleared there."

Kim wants to have two children, but only when she's married and has financial stability. This plan struck some of her acquaintances as foolish; they thought only white women waited until they were too old to keep up with a toddler. Kim believed that, at twenty-two, she still had time. But in lonely stretches like this one her hunger for the companionship of a baby grew so acute that she borrowed acquaintances' children, took them to Wal-Mart, and had photographs taken of them in her arms.

"Now my new boyfriend wants me to have his baby, too," Amanda was saying when the bus pulled into Penn Square Mall.

The manager of a store that sells jelly beans in ninety-nine flavors said, "Kim Henderson -- yes, I remember your name. You had a good application, but we couldn't get through on the phone, so we hired someone else."

If we had wanted an interview, the managers at Trendz and American Eagle and nine other stores said, we would have called you.

"But after I left my application my phone got cut-off. That's why I came today. I was an assistant manager at Subway."

If we decide we want you, the managers said, we'll call you.

The mall smelled of cinnamon buns, reminding Kim that she hadn't eaten. At one store, she reached for the manager's hand and begged, "The person who comes all this way just to see if you've called, that's a person who is going to work her behind off for you when you hire her." She then learned that the job required her to work until 9 P.M. There is no regular bus service to Sooner Haven or its environs after dark.

"I feel like an ant," Kim said, leaving the fourteenth store. "A little ant that bus drivers and supervisors can't see." A ten-dollar bill fell from the purse of a middle-aged shopper walking ahead of her. Kim scooped it up and returned it to the woman, lowering her lashes to hide the fact that her eyes had filled with tears. "If I don't get a job soon, I don't know what I'll do." Kim broke down outside a boutique called the Buckle, which sells sun hats and turquoise-encrusted belts. On her earlier visit, she had steered clear of the store, along with J. Crew, because she thought that her clothes might be too ghetto. Blowing her nose, she glanced inside. "Maybe if I pretend that I did apply there, and the staff thinks they lost my application, they'll be nice to me."

The gambit worked. A supervisor couldn't find Kim's name in a loose-leaf binder of rejected applications, gave Kim two-minutes to summarize her qualifications, and

then scheduled a phone interview with the manager for that night at eight o'clock. Kim recited Corean's number. When she returned to the bus stop outside the mall, the heat still blasted, but she bounced on and off the curbside like an overwound toy. "The ant has an interview!" she sang.

A slim white woman emerged from Dillard's department store with four shopping bags, a Burberry satchel, and, dangling from her wrist, a silver peace-sign charm. Kim suddenly grew still. "I'd like to be elegant someday, too," she said quietly. "But if I ever did get a healthy, wealthy life, I wonder if my children would grow up looking down on people like me."

When a bus that would have taken her home accelerated past, Kim practiced answers to potential interview questions: "I have a genuine interest in fashion and have been working a cash register since I was fourteen." When the next bus cruised by, she tried a trick that she'd recently invented to manage depression, recalling in detail the happiest days of her life. "Here's one I like -- my mom's birthday, in April, 1990. We had nothing to eat, we were suffering at the time, and the thing to know about my mom is that the only pleasure she ever really had in life was bingo -- Lucky Star Casino, Will Rogers Bingo Hall, she played everywhere, and sometimes took me along to play a card, too. One of those places had a special deal for regulars -- you play free on every Wednesday in the month of your birthday. She went out, and when she came back we were going to bed. She rustled us up and told us to open the door. She'd played U-Pick-Em and won twenty-five hundred dollars in cash and a big old stereo, which was sitting there outside. All eight of us busted out crying. Back then, we thought a hundred dollars was everything, so with twenty-five hundred dollars we could hardly imagine it, we thought we were millionaires. I got a pink-and-blue winter parka, and jeans from the old Fifty-Percent-Off Store. Mom bought some serious groceries and then gave us each ten dollars to spend however we wanted. I went to the 7-Eleven and bought Good & Plenty."

Another bus was coming through the shopping plaza. Kim stepped forward, signaling furiously. When it swerved around her, she sank to the curb. The bus was not only the seventh one to pass her that day; it was the last bus to Sooner Haven until morning. In terms of landmass, Oklahoma City is the third-largest metropolis in America, and she was a five-hour walk from home.

A pretty woman in a tear-and-sweat-soaked blouse will eventually be noticed by somebody. A Chevy Impala pulled over, driven by a black woman not much older than Kim. "I know, I used to have to take the bus, too," said the driver, who, as it turned out, was an assistant supervisor at a gift store in the mall. "I'll drive you home." She went past the alabaster state capitol and into the northeast quadrant, where Sooner Haven is situated, and where TV crews were covering a shooting from the parking lot of a carryout called Leo's BBQ. "It as bad as they say around

here?" the woman asked Kim when they reached the project's gates.

"If you go outside and try to be known, you're going to have trouble," said Kim, her optimism not yet flattened by the Buckle manager, who would not keep her appointment. "But if you live all low and invisible you'll more than likely be O.K."

One fall morning, Corean accompanied her youngest son, Fella, who is eighteen, to parent-teacher day at his magnet school. Fella, suffering from a football injury, limped along in a knee brace. Even so, he could outpace a mother in toe-strangling second-hand shoes. A few paces behind her son, Corean watched a group of lithe classmates embrace him, fretting over his readiness for next week's game. Corean is the rare mother of an Oklahoma high-school footballer who doesn't know what position her boy plays. But in a drawer by her bed she has every standardized-test score he's brought home since preschool.

When Corean reached the school entrance, the girls had dispersed, and her son, looking stricken, was being marched down the hall by an apple-cheeked teacher. "Who-o-o-o," the teacher called out, "is the mother of this spectacular child?"

Other mothers turned to look as the instructor caught Corean in an armlock. "I have been waiting to meet you, Mrs. Brothers. I love your kid, and the smarts aren't the half of it. You've raised one way-cool human being."

A pleasure to teach, a treasure to know: in every classroom Corean entered, she received happy news about her son. Alerted to forthcoming assignments on Gilgamesh and "Silas Marner," clutching a quiz marked 97, Corean retreated as soon as politeness allowed. She was still not entirely at home in school. Her father, an epileptic and an alcoholic, had disappeared when she was six, abandoning a wife and ten children in a Florida shanty without electricity or running water. When she was in seventh grade, her mother had the first of a series of strokes. A year later, Corean quit school and became, at fourteen, a laborer in orange groves and snap bean fields. In those days, she ate so much red dirt and Argo starch that she acquired a taste for them. (She came to tolerate fatback pork, too, but not the consequent tapeworms that dangled pinkly from one's nose.) She had failed to fulfill one promise she made to herself then -- that her children would be spared the experience of poverty. But saw to it that each of them received the education that she had pined for.

Once, Fella was mistaken for a gangbanger, and his blue bandana for a cocky display of Crip colors. Such underestimations crushed Corean; they just made Fella work harder at his calculus. Intent on being a doctor, he was stricter with himself than his teachers tended to be -- an independence that Corean generally admired. But, returning home to Sooner Haven from parent-teacher day, she felt a shadow slip across her sense of satisfaction. Did a boy become self-reliant because the people who could have helped him didn't?

Fella was an A student at a good math-and-science high school, and a state champion in church oratory. Corean had hoped that his achievement would bring him scholarships and a first-rate college education. But as Pastor Young, a former high-school basketball player, observed from his pulpit, colleges recruit inner-city boys with athletic talent, not inner-city boys with good grades. (The vast majority of black students at selective colleges are from middle- or upper-class families.) Fella wasn't big enough to be a serious college football player. "It's fun, I like it," he said. "But the human brain, the science of it -- that's what amazes me." He was already a third of his way through his senior year, however, and had yet to be advised about college by overworked guidance counselors, whose numbers had been reduced by a state budget crisis. "I don't know about any colleges, really," Fella said, "though if I don't get scholarships I can't blame anyone but me. They say the money's out there. I just can't say for sure where it is."

When her older children were finishing high school, Corean had sensed a similar lack of official attention to their futures, and knew less than Fella about how to counter it. Those children were now employed and independent, and, except for the oldest, her rebel son, who held down two jobs as a nursing-home aide -- were strong in the church. But Shandy, twenty, who is a receptionist and writes plays in her free time, had recently dropped out of community college, unable, on her salary, to cover the tuition. Dana, twenty-five years old and very bright, had managed to get an associate's degree at Oklahoma State University and now worked the desk at a local Hertz Rent-A-Car. When Corean fell behind on her phone or electricity bills, Dana would be at her door, waving a check. But Dana's plan of saving enough money to complete her B.A. and go to law school seemed to be perpetually deferred. The help that her children needed now, to become the people Corean believed they might be, seemed beyond the ken of a low-income, eighth-grade-dropout single mother.

When she was eighteen, Corean left fruit-picking for the Job Corps, a Great Society program for the poor which had an opening in Oklahoma City. She became a certified nurse's aide. She also met a funny, conscientious man who worked on a loading dock. She did what the Holy Temple pastor was now recommending, and married. Over the years, she emptied bedpans in a nursing home and cleaned houses for the affluent, but her earnings -- forty-five dollars a day for housekeeping -- didn't cover day-care costs. Eventually, she became a stay-at-home mother. Then her husband, who had become a truck driver for Frito-Lay, declared bankruptcy. "Financially, he was struggling, and with the kids I could only take day work," Corean said. "He was angry at me for not pulling my weight, income-wise, while I believed the kids needed me at home. The fights just tore us apart."

Occasionally, for memory's sake, she drives by a brick house on an elm-lined street three miles from Sooner Haven, where her family spent its happiest years.

A basketball hoops rises from a square of concrete in the back yard, and lace curtains hang in the window of the bedroom where, one night, her husband beat her. "Black as I am," she remembered, "I was blue."

When she cleaned houses in one of Oklahoma City's better neighborhoods, Corean had studied the ways that rich women argued with their husbands -- how they had raised their eyebrows and voices instead of their fists. After the beating, she told her husband to leave. "I still loved him, and once I secured my physical safety I hoped we could work through the anger, try to talk about reconciliation," she said. But almost as soon as her husband left he began dating. "At the divorce hearing, the judge said to me, 'You didn't bother to get a lawyer?' But I had five kids, aged four to fifteen, and I had four hundred dollars in rent, and food and water and electricity and the phone and whatnot. My husband did have a lawyer, a good one, so what happened happened, and off I went to Sooner Haven, where my kids, who love their father, were angry at me for a very long time."

In those days, the Sooner Haven complex was crowded. Now, with the older kids gone and Fella staying late for football practice every weekday, it felt unnervingly roomy. Corean was pleased when Dana came by after work. Over dinner, they discussed a college classmate of Dana's who had announced her engagement, then they turned to Corean's dating prospects. As she had little discretionary income, Corean's most regular outings were walks she took in a nearby city park. On one of those walks, she had struck up a conversation with an educated man who owned a lawn-care business. But he seemed to lose interest when he picked her up several days later for a dinner date. "I think he was shook up when he realized I lived in the projects," she said. Still, it was a date, something she'd never got from the singles gatherings she'd attended at her church for a decade. Often, not one male was in attendance.

"There's a short supply, no question," Dana said, "and a shorter supply for women who aren't going to let the man be the master, shut their mouths, and do what he tells them to do. But I'm not going to settle. I do believe that somewhere in this great big world God has someone in mind for me, someone wonderful who won't cheat on me. But, in the meantime, I've got plans for my life. If he's not bringing anything to the table, then he's just bringing me down." Her voice grew teasing. "But you, Reverend Doctor, you're getting old. You gotta get on it, make your *moo-oove*."

"Well, it used to be all I had to say was 'Five kids' and most men would turn tail and run," Corean replied. "But now I'm exploring my options, don't you worry." She looked down at her hands. "But when you do find a man it's still a game of chance. I thought I was being careful the first time, but that didn't protect me from getting hurt."

Later that night, Corean shut off all the lights in the house except the one she

needed to fold the laundry she'd taken in from her clothesline. In fact, she did know a decent man who wanted to marry her. He had given her a papier-mâché jewelry box and a ceramic rhinoceros, which sat on her dresser, but there was a reason she hadn't mentioned him to Dana.

Corean believed in maintaining appearances. "People may be looking for an excuse to write you off," she'd warned her children. "Don't give them the curse words or dirty clothes to help them do it." Corean knew exactly how those children would react when they learned that Reverend Doctor Mom, while doing charity work at a faraway prison, had had her head turned by a three-time felon.

"Have my eyebrows grown out too scrungy?" Kim asked Derrick, as she dressed for work one autumn morning. Derrick placed his water glass on the cardboard box marked "Fragile -- Eggs" and stared into her heart-shaped face. "They don't look so rough," he concluded after a moment. Kim exhaled; brow waxing and other vanities were not in her monthly budget.

Kim had recently obtained another telemarketing gig, a job whose chief requisite was the ability to absorb a gale force of customer hostility and whose chief benefit, by Kim's lights, was that she could get to it without taking the bus. Instead, every weekday, a colleague named Tiphani dropped her newborn at day care near Sooner Haven and then picked up Kim. In a cavernous warehouse in the northwest section of the city, they worked the phones from 3 P.M. to 11 P.M., after which Tiphani drove Kim home.

Kim's task was to persuade people in California and Ohio and New York to switch their local phone service to A.T. & T. She was not actually employed by A. T. & T. Her employer was an A.T. & T. subcontractor that paid two hundred dollars a week to start. But Tiphani said that after they memorized A.T. & T.'s catalogue of products -- call waiting, call forwarding, and so on -- they'd have an edge on other people who wanted a job at the bona-fide A.T. & T. In the meantime, Kim found the work preferable to frightening old people into buying home security, and preferable as well to the offer that she'd received recently, while walking down the street, "to play pool and do adult activities" under the auspices of a neighborhood fixture called Da Pimp.

Some women Kim knew posed for pornographers, or slept with men in exchange for money, clothes, and diapers. But the run-in with Da Pimp reminded Kim of why escaping the city's underworld was worth a stress ulcer. She had grown up around gangbangers, warrant dodgers, and woman beaters. "When I was young, I loved school so much I cried when I couldn't go on weekends," she said. "School, and not my crazy home, was the only place I could find peace."

But in the legit world Kim kept botching things. In the six weeks between leaving her burglar-alarm job and taking the new one, she had applied for emergency

food stamps and been denied. Corean eventually accompanied her to the welfare office and pleaded her case, successfully, but in the meantime Kim bounced several checks to Wal-Mart. Oklahoma penalties for bad checks are stiff, and are a politically popular income-generator for the District Attorney's office. For writing a twelve-dollar-and-eighteen-cent check, she now faced a hundred-and-fourteen-dollar penalty, including "victim restitution" to Wal-Mart and a fee to the D.A. And then there were two more bounced checks, and, as the letter from the D.A. said, if she didn't come up with four hundred and ninety-five dollars and fifty-three cents in ten days she could face a year-long jail sentence.

Corean pointed out that the District Attorney's wife, a plastic surgeon and former Miss Oklahoma, had just pleaded guilty to illegally obtaining narcotics, for which she received community service and permission to resume doing nose jobs. But Kim, who had seen her own father and brother face less forbearing jurist, did not anticipate lenient treatment.

Kim was guzzling Hawaiian Punch to soothe her ulcer, but at least Derrick had reappeared. Back in the summer, she suspected he was keeping her from his friends and family. Now he introduced her warmly, saying, "This ain't my girl. This is my woman." He came over with candles when her gas and electricity were cut off. And when his toddler son took his first steps they were toward Kim.

Corean worried about how hard Kim was falling. "Maybe you don't get the love you need from your family, then you grow up and go out all desperate to find it," she said. "And if and when you don't find the right thing you try to tell yourself the wrong thing is right." But Kim was mindful of Pastor Young's advice -- "It's up to you to go out and teach the men" -- and she began to express her wish for commitment. "I don't want to pressure you," she said to Derrick, "but I care about you so much and feel serious about this relationship."

"I know, baby," he invariably replied, but she didn't know what to do next to nudge things closer to a sunset wedding. The problem-solving techniques that she'd learned in marriage class did, however, help her to learn more about her would-be husband. Using the "When you do x, I feel y" technique in order to convey her frustration at his failure to help her resolve her problem with the courts and the world's largest retailer, she learned that his construction job paid two hundred and fifty dollars a week, and that he didn't think often about marriage. He thought more about how to pay for his son's food and diapers while avoiding the repossession of his Grand Am, which he'd bought before he lost a job as a supervisor at Coca-Cola, and which was crucial to keeping his new, less remunerative job, "building houses in the middle of nowhere."

She checked her watch. Tiphani should have arrived by now to take her to work, but the only cars in the parking lot were a Cutlass Supreme, whose vinyl top appeared to be suffering from multiple stab wounds, and a wheelless Toyota

bearing the bumper sticker "Americans Kick Ass."

For Kim, given the bad-check problem, losing a day's pay would be financially disastrous. She tried to focus on a giveaway magazine called *American Baby*, which contained an article she loved: "They say here the five most important values to give your children are trust, patience, respect, empathy -- is that how you pronounce it? And then the last one, self-reliance. That's the one where you teach your child that he can't depend on hardly anyone for anything, because in the end they're probably going to let you down."

Suddenly, Tiphani hollered from the parking lot, and *American Baby* hit the floor. Kim bolted out of her rusted screen door, the most eager cold-caller in the city.

The visiting room at Great Plains Correctional Facility holds six plastic chairs, a wall painting of a leafy lane (prisoners pose for snapshots in front of it), and a slew of posted rules that remind Corean of the ones she enforced in her own home when her kids were adolescents. "Only handholding is allowed!" the signs say. "Any other form of contact and your visit will be terminated."

Great Plains sits on the prairie an hour's drive west of Oklahoma City, a journey that provided a workout for Corean's Dodge Shadow. But the family of Steven Bruner, the inmate whom Corean was now visiting, lived even farther away. Five years ago, they'd asked Corean, a family friend, to check in on him when they couldn't. Since then, her car had occasionally given up before it reached the facility, and more than once she had felt unwelcome in the white, working-class towns surrounding Great Plains. Still, on the nights before her visits, she would catch herself spreading skirts on her bed, wondering whether Steven would prefer the leopard-print or the pink one with the pleats.

In northeast Oklahoma City, the question "Where he away at?" is widely understood to mean, In what prison is he serving time? Nearly one in ten black men is a prison inmate -- one of the highest incarceration rates in the country. Steven, who started his criminal career at fifteen, had passed most of his adult life behind bars. Now he was thirty-eight, with maximum-security forearms and a broader range of reading interests than most other men Corean knew. Since his first imprisonment, educational and vocational programs for prisoners had been drastically curtailed, but he had availed himself of what remained, learning to inlay carpets with animal faces and craft ceramic knick-knacks. He visited the library three times a week, the maximum permitted. And, three years after Corean first began talking to him about her faith, he became, to her delight, a Christian.

Corean struggled to explain even to herself how a bleak room separated from the outside world by three layers of razor wire, two sturdy guards, motion detectors, and a phalanx of armed guards (one of them assigned to sit beside her and Steven) had become a place where she could relax. Steven couldn't help get Fella

into college. He couldn't even hold her. Their conversations, given the presence of the guard, were often self-conscious and sometimes, given the limited range of events in their respective lives, outright boring. Still, Steven listened with unwearied attention, a luxury Corean hadn't known since her divorce: "Well, Steven, the mechanic looked at the car and did the fan with some black tape, but when he fixed the brakes he didn't bleed them, so they still jump all the way down to the floor. I'll take it when I have some change in my pocket. Anyway, I did try to fix the radio myself, took a pair of tweezers..."

"You don't have to take it in to get the brakes fixed. When you go home, get yourself some break fluid at the autoparts store, open the engine, and put it in the big round mouth."

"There's a lot of round things in that motor, you know darn well."

"There's a little screw on the side, and it's connected to the square -- look, take a photo of the engine, send it to me, and I'll show you what's what. You'll see, it ain't hard."

Corean stretched her legs, letting her foot graze the instep of his state-issue sneaker.

Corean still termed their relationship a friendship, and she had told him not to count on her, but it had been some time since she'd signed a letter to him the way she'd signed the first, "Cordially, Corean." Steven wore his desires on his chest. A fellow-inmate, using a piece of wire and some ingenuity, had tattooed there the words "Corean's Playground." Only after she'd seen the tattoo did she choose to learn the particulars of his sentence: assaulting an undercover police officer with a car, fifty years.

Steven confronted the difficulty of the relationship as visiting time drew to a close. "If you decide to wait for me, I worry that you're doing time, same as I am -- just marking off days -- and I don't know if that's right. I mean, I want you to..." He stopped and shook his head. "You know. But I'd be lying if I said I could make the argument on your end."

Back home, sitting outside in a plastic chair just like those at the prison, Corean took no pleasure in the spectacular red and yellow pansies growing in her garden. She was staring grimly through Sooner Haven's fence. She could see two of her young grandchildren standing in a yard across the busy street. She had been barred from seeing the children because their mother was once again feuding with Corean's son. The toddlers, oblivious of the commands of a woman who was minding them, were staring right back at Corean through the fence. Inside her house, Corean had bibs and placemats on which their names had been emblazoned, and Dr. Seuss books, and a tiny bucket and shovel for digging in the garden. But this evening they were fenced off from her, as Steven was. She

figured that this was what people meant by a midlife crisis -- the sense that everything you wanted was just outside your reach.

Fella, home with the flu, sensed his mother's mood. A do-rag on his head and a black-and-white composition book in his hand, he came outside and plopped his large self on his mother's small lap. "Mommeee," he said, "I need your help with this speech." This spectacle prompted some little girls who were playing by the fence to shriek with laughter, and Corean couldn't help but laugh, too.

When she came home after prison, Fella unbuckled his mother's sandals, unmasked, and pressed her swelling feet. After football practice or the late shift at the Taco Bueno, he often joined her in the house's one lighted room, where they compared their days until they drifted into sleep. Corean remembered how, when she was a child, hardship had turned members of her family against each other, and was grateful for her own family's closeness. But she also knew that single mothers could be seduced by it. Husbandless, they treated their Danas as confidantes and their Fellas as stand-in partners, and were shattered when those companions left them behind.

Eventually, Dana arrived for dinner, and conversation turned to Fella's college plans. He'd found a book and some pamphlets on scholarship options and discovered that in-state tuition could be covered by an Oklahoma program for poor children with good grades. He also saw that four years of college fees and books would leave his mother with nothing to live on, even if he avoided paying room and board by living at home.

When Corean imagined Fella at college, she saw him as being relaxed. "I don't see him fretting over how his mom can pay the phone bill -- I see him free to study, and having enough change to take a girl out to lunch if he likes," she said. When Fella pictured himself at college, he dreamed of a dorm, not a tiny bedroom in Sooner Haven. And after reviewing his scholarship options he decided it would behoove him to unearth some Native American roots.

In the neighborhood, the "Indian option" was an opportunity discussed with as much avidity as marriage. Cherokee, Shawnee, and Kickapoo reservations encircle Oklahoma City, and many city residents suspect that they are of mixed heritage. Those families which are able to document sufficient Native American blood can secure housing, health-care, and scholarship benefits far in excess of those available to families who are simply poor. "Benefits offered through official Native American status!" a video available from a Web site called Blackindians.com trumpets. Corean and her children knew several people who had pursued those benefits.

When Corean was young, her older siblings had told her that her high cheekbones were the Cherokee legacy of their father. Her paternal grandmother

had thrilled Corean's siblings by demonstrating that she could sit on her hair. "Black hair just doesn't grow that long," Corean said. But to prove the rumor and secure Fella a scholarship required producing ancestral birth certificates to which tribal codes had been affixed. Corean's father had taken his family history with him when he vanished; all she really knew was that he was born in a southwest-Georgia peanut-farming town and died in another, four-miles away. Still, as housekeeping work paid so poorly and no economically advantageous marriage was in the offing, this avenue of opportunity tempted her, and possessed an irony she appreciated. "I feel bad to say this," she told Fella and Dana, "but my father might be more help to this family dead than he ever was alive."

As the dinner dishes were washed and put away, Corean's children dropped the Indian option and began chiding their mother about her strictness. "No playing cards in the house, having to come in for family prayers and singing every night, not even a phone call from a boy until we turned sixteen -- you were so mean when I was a teenager, it was pathetic," Dana said, wringing out a dish towel. "By the time I was seventeen, I was so itching to get away from you I bought my own tissue and soap and stored it in a box beneath my bed. And, when I finally did get my own place, me and the preacher's daughter went and got ourselves a bottle of Bacardi and we cut up, I can assure you."

Corean said what she always said in the face of her children's mock recriminations: "When I see the Lord, I'm telling Him, look, if I messed up, I messed up trying." And that was the thing about the Indian idea. It reminded a make-do woman that there was usually something else to try.

"They're all telling me, 'I'm here for you, we love you, I'll never let you go, our baby,' but it's too late," went a poem that Kim had written and placed in her cardboard box. "My feet is slowly walking the sand under the water." Her "Fragile - Eggs" depository now rested beside a concave orange-brown couch in the small home where her father, disabled by a stroke after leaving prison, lived. Kim was "in hiding" there, fearing that she would be arrested on the bad-check-writing charge. She still went to work every day, even when her friend Tiphani quit, forcing Kim back onto the bus. But the D.A.'s office knew that Kim lived in Sooner Haven. She gave up her unit and moved in with her father, three miles away.

Before leaving Sooner Haven, she had received results of her general-equivalency exam. She'd aced everything except math. A teacher at a local community college had offered to help her master the math and apply for college. But the tutoring conflicted with Kim's telemarketing hours, which were non-negotiable. "Still, I've come this far, I'm not going to give up," she said. She now owed around nine hundred dollars in fines from the bounced checks. Increasingly fearful of doing jail time, she had decided to take out a loan from "a guy named Dave, whose whole business is helping people who have hot-check charges

against them."

Kim still wanted to be Derrick's wife, and he had agreed to move in with her when they had the means for an apartment. Marriage class had helped her grasp the work involved in achieving a deeper level of commitment; in addition, it reinforced her sense that the child she longed for should have two parents. But steady proximity to Derrick had also given her a sense of how married life would and wouldn't change her general circumstances. Her father's couch was too narrow for two, so when she slept with Derrick now it was at his mother's apartment, where he was living to save money. "He goes to work in the early morning, I get home after midnight, and sometimes we both work six or seven days a week because of his son and my debts. So even when we coordinate our schedules we're tired. We play this video game called Tetris and go to sleep."

Some nights while Kim was trying to pitch A.T. & T.'s services to residents of Long Beach or Dayton or Scarsdale, the computers connected her to women who, she suspected, were struggling even harder than she was to get by -- women who didn't want to switch phone carriers, who just wanted to keep another voice on the line. Sometimes Kim's supervisor listened in, and he would cut off the call. But when he wasn't listening Kim asked the women about their jobs, the men who disappointed them, the bills they couldn't pay. She learned the callers' names, gave them her own, promised to stay in touch.

One frigid morning, Corean's daughter Shandy, who was weak from mononucleosis, drove Corean to the Oklahoma City Greyhound sta

It felt odd not to have a child in tow. "This is the future," she said. "I best get used to it." The strangeness was tempered by the fact that on the Greyhound people treated her with more respect than she was used to getting in the project -- even when, in the Ozarks, drug-enforcement dogs were unleashed on the passengers' luggage. One bus driver reserved the front seat -- farthest from the toilet smells -- for Corean and an enormous pink church hat with dotted-swiss netting which she carried along with her Bible. "It's obvious you're a lady," he said. At the edge of the Mississippi delta, another driver pulled to the side of the road and held her elbow as she climbed stiffly off the bus. A minute later, she returned triumphant, brandishing a six-and-a-half-foot stalk of sugarcane. She hadn't seen cane since she was a child in the fields.

"People are quite friendly and interesting when you get out into the world," she said, feeling almost regretful when the bus pulled up to a secondhand furniture store ("No Cash, No Credit, No Problem") that doubled as the bus depot of Sylvester, Georgia.

W.E.B. Du Bois, in "The Souls of Black Folk," called this part of southwest Georgia "perhaps the richest slave kingdom the modern world ever knew." As the

proprietor of the furniture store watched her things, Corean set out on foot through the shabby downtown toward the county courthouse. The entrance hall, lined with framed portraits of white civic leaders, was being mopped by a black female prison crew, one of whom directed her to the public-records office. There, she was no longer the first lady of the cross-country Greyhound bus. A records search showed that her father had no birth certificate, let alone a tribal number. "Lotta poor folks just had their babies in the woods and didn't tell no one," a young black clerk tried to console her, directing her to the Corinthian-columned public library across the street. In the genealogy room there, two elderly white couples were paging through books like "Men of Mark in Georgia" and tapping intently into a stretch of new computers. "Before this, we were in Salt Lake City, doing the Mormon Church records," one of the men said to the other. "We have it nailed down to 1830." The burning numbness in her arm had kept Corean awake for two nights. She sat at a table before a pile of thick brown books, trying to make sense of twentieth-century county censuses. Decade after decade, her father's family -- her family -- had not been counted. Corean got a second wind in the evening when she called home to check on Fella. "Harvard, Yale, I don't know about them. I guess those are places for the extremely wealthy," she said. "But if we could pay for the best school in Oklahoma, and then medical school..."

The next day, Corean gave a man fifteen dollars to drive her to Albany, Georgia, just west of Sylvester. Her father had gone there after he left his wife and children in the citrus fields, and had died there in 1981. If he was an Indian, she reasoned, some deed or public filing might have noted his tribe. Approaching the courthouse, she met a black man in a cowboy hat who was emerging from a new BMW. He turned out to be a Cherokee chief, a successful exerciser of the Indian option, which she took to be an excellent omen.

Once her sugarcane had been scanned by a metal detector and scrutinized by a puzzled security squad, she set up shop in the county office of public records. Around her, young couples on lunch breaks were applying for marriage licenses. Corean bore down on a drawer of black plastic microfilm canisters. She queried clerks who consulted databases, after which she paged through land records and worn manila files. And after several hours she realized only this: that her father had no records of deeds, no liens, no civil or criminal suits, no taxes owed nor businesses owned. Whether black or Indian, the man had been destitute enough, and law-abiding enough, to leave no trace in public record.

She asked a secretary for the local phone book. Her family's surname was Smith, and as she scanned the pages she found a given name, Daisy, that sounded familiar. She phoned, and soon an old car arrived at the courthouse to take her to the pink cinder-block home of Miss Daisy, a woman she'd never met, who turned out to be her father's only sister.

There were four generations of women in Daisy's house. A seven-week-old girl, born to a single mother, slept between a toddler wearing a T-shirt that said "Just Be Glad I'm Not Your Child." Daisy, a birdlike octogenarian, sat on a plaid recliner surrounded by Ragu spaghetti-sauce jars filled with tobacco-flecked spit. She had recently suffered a stroke, and was attended by a visiting speech therapist. "You can hardly swallow, Miss Daisy. Spit out the chaw so we can do this." When the therapist moved between Daisy and an NBC soap opera called "Passions," Daisy extended a wasted arm and tapped the woman out of the way.

Corean sat uneasily on the edge of the couch, asking questions about her father and the grandma who could sit on her hair. The younger women had also grown up believing they were part Cherokee, but they, too, had no proof. It was only when Corean was leaving that she noticed on a shelf behind the television a leatherette family Bible as worn as her own. Forgetting her manners, she seized it. In the centerfold she found what she suspected: a family tree filled out by a meticulous hand. One name differed from the others.

"Anyone know this Suzanna Sunbeam?" Corean's voice was hoarse, the way it got when she prayed too extravagantly on Sundays. The women shook their heads.

"Aaaaaz-uh," croaked the old woman, her eyes fixed on the TV screen. She didn't say anything else until "Passions" broke for a commercial. Then she said, "Suzanna was the Indian Girl."

Corean clapped her hands, elated. "I knew it would be in the family Bible," she said. "I felt it!" But after a series of hugs among newfound relatives, themselves enamored of the Indian option, Corean returned to the family Bible and registered that Suzanna Sunbeam was not her father's mother but her grandmother's mother, which meant there wasn't enough Indian blood in Corean's son Fella to do his doctor dreams a lick of good.

The signage in the Albany bus station where Corean fanned herself late that night was much as it had been in 1961, when the station was a staging area of the civil-rights movement. Probably then, as now, men kicked cardboard boxes of worldly goods across the station's greasy floor. But now the people in the station, waiting and working and scrawling "Lil Bit wuz here" on the historic bathroom wall, were black. Waiting for the bus, Corean opened her Bible. "And when we obey Him, every path He leads us on is fragrant with loving kindness." Eventually, the belly of a Greyhound opened to receive a stalk of sugarcane destined for furtive planting in Sooner Haven.

When she returned to Oklahoma, Corean applied to be a guinea pig in a pharmaceutical trial, to earn thirteen hundred dollars for Fella's tuition. After a physical, the testers rejected her, saying she was too ill and tired. Shortly

afterward, she discovered that the mother of two of her grandchildren was living in a house where people with guns came and went. Corean hurried the toddlers back to Sooner Haven and did her best to raise them, despite losing financial help from Dana, who had been laid off from her longtime job. In the spring, Fella graduated with honors and found work moving furniture at a warehouse. He would stay in Oklahoma City for college.

One afternoon, Kim stopped to visit. She had paid off her bad-check charges and earned an award for being the third-most-productive salesperson in her office -- just before the prospect of a National Do Not Call Registry led her employer to cut its workforce in half. Worried, she had applied for another job, as an aide to the homebound elderly. "It's only six dollars an hour, and no commissions," she said, "but some money is better than none." She and Derrick now shared a small apartment with a lockbox in a closet, for saving dimes and quarters. "This year," they told each other, "we're going to make something of ourselves."

Corean also saw Pastor Young, who was conducting another marriage seminar at Sooner Haven, and preaching to a larger crowd. "We're learning how to do this as we go, but we're getting there," he said. One day soon, he predicted, the training would produce its first wedding.

It could be Kim's, Corean thought. She suspected that it wouldn't be her own. Lately, she had been pulling back from Steven -- "fading out," as he put it. "Anyway, when he's released, who knows if he will even want me," she said sadly. "Who knows what a person wants when he has choices." She still attended the mostly female singles meetings at her church, trying to heed what her kids said about not hiding her light under a bushel. But she was more broke than ever, the toddlers were exhausting, and the brakes on her car had given out. So most days she stayed inside the fence.

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Imagine a late-night television commercial aimed at Washington's wonks: Tired of your same old tax credits and grant proposals? Ever dreamed of a policy tool that improved children's health, bolstered income and eradicated poverty — all without costing the government a penny? Then, a smash cut to a wedding scene. With Democrats and Republicans pitted against one another in a vicious election-year battle over how to alleviate poverty, marriage is the policy solution du jour.