

KNOX'S 'NGA

Avram Davidson

Belle Abernathy was not Grandmother Welles's favorite grandchild, in fact, GW had said semi-publicly more than once that Belle looked "like a plucked chicken," and that, although perhaps Belle could not help being skinny, she needn't show it off like that. These criticisms were heard no more after the skinny chickenny Belle had whispered in Grand's ear the Dreadful News; another grandchild, Lou Anne, who had married Robert Owens in A Lovely Church Wedding following upon a mere Civil Ceremony of vague circumstance, and was now expecting a *child*? Well, Belle *hated* to have to say it, but the birth was a mere five months after the church wedding, and as for the civil wedding, there had been no civil wedding.

"They were just shacked up, that's all," Belle said brutally.

Well, figure it out. Although in her very heart of hearts Grand would have been able to forgive, had they come to her and confessed—*had* they? No. Tried to pull the wool over her eyes. Country going to damnation. Her own grandchild. Hippies. Probably smoked hish-hash, or whatever it was called.

So, to the Quarterly Dinner at the old Welles house, *who* were not invited?

Well, *well*: what to do. Bob Owens didn't care. Lou didn't care much. Lou's mother cared. Lots.

"Only one thing *to* do," Lou said. "Baby must be named 'Philander Knox'."

"Must'?" asked Bob. "Is 'Must' a word to be used to fathers?" Just the sort of thing he would have said. Dry sense of humor. Quiet man, and, well, *small*. To tell the truth. Shacking up hadn't really been his idea. Like more than a mere few men of nowadays he had come home one day to find that the lady who held the extra key had moved in, and that they were now, well, *no*, not shacking *up*, did one shack *down*? But certainly, a fact: living together. "Why, 'Philander Knox'?"

The women exchanged looks. "An ancestor," they said.

"Well, yes, understandable. But surely there are others. Why not, ah, Welles'? Welles Owens, sounds classy. No like? Too many sibilants?" They shook their heads. "Oh, Zz not a sibilant? Oh—"

His wife now pronounced his name in a manner which gave it a sound of having several syllables and a warning to shut his mouth.

"Welles, well, Welles is my mother-in-law's married name. Just as it's *mine*. But Philander Knox was a cabinet member, oh, TR and Taft—"

"Ancestors?"

Getting near the knuckle, Owens. Want a knuckle sandwich, Owens? Want to be accused of implicit misogyny, Owens? Whose enormous phallus rapted and rupted

this virginal little girl, three inches your taller and three years your elder? Owens. Shut the funk up and lissen.

Philander Knox had held cabinet positions. He was a distant cousin of Grandmother Welles's grandmother. True, there had been a Welles who'd been in Lincoln's cabinet but those were different Welleses. Spelled the same? Philander Chase Knox, Secretary of the Whatever It Was. *Nobody* anymore knew who he was. But Grand *thought* they did! And if The Baby were to be named Philander Knox Owens, people were bound to ask How, Come? Enter Ye Dowager Mrs. Welles, with a muscle in her bustle, and Able to Explain.

Well, there are those who say that God is a Woman and this might explain why the baby *was* a boy, *was* named Philander Knox, *did* reduce Old Great-Grand-mother to a puddle of pink flesh and Instant Reconciliation.

Belle Abernathy shrank even further into her plucked chickenanity and was never heard from, almost, again.

The baby was called The Baby as long as was reasonable, and then a bit more. The Baby began to walk, lurch, stagger, teeter, totter, "Come to Great-Grandmother, Knox. Come to Grand," said Guess Who: "Knox."

"Knox" came. Totter, teeter, stagger, lurch, walk. Collapse. "*There*, see he knows who he is and he knows who I am," said the Dragon Lady.

The three Owenses are at home. "Knox," said Bob.

His firstborn shows no sign.

"I *know*," says Lou.

"We *could* call him 'Philander'."

"No, we *could-n't*!"

Bob bares all, did his wife think there was no gamey secret she did not know? Hah! "I had a great-aunt named Rectalyne," says he. Lou screams.

No he *did-n't*! Oh yeah, yes he did. She was long ago and far back on the Coonass and Peckerwood sides of the family, gummed snuff and thought shit was a household word. Her most famous, well, only well-known, wehell only *known* utterance, was, "The government is going to punish this nation because poor Mr. Bryan is dead," came to the attention of H.L. Mencken, who said *Hot diggetty!* and made a note and on finding out the woman's name said, "Hot *diggetty*, poor old Jehovah, woo-hoo, Rectalina with a long *i*? Oh with a *y*. Godfrey Daniel!" and it appeared in some preliminary work on *The American Language* but got cut out of the regular editions. "So my sweet, compared to Rectalyne, I guess we can live with Knox, hey we could call him '*Phil*'!"

It was all in vain. No, they couldn't. He simply was too young and a baby to be a Phil.

They took to calling him My Son. Where's My Son. Come here My Son.

Grand of course, well, what do you think. Grand liked a ride in the country but

Grand did not like to drive. Once there had been a chauffeur, or, as he was called in the highly democratic Welles house, a driver. McDowd. McDowd, returning to *Antrim* for a visit, had been convicted of an uncommonly brutal murder and jerked to Jesus in no time at all. *Anyway*. Grand dearly loved to be called for and driven around with her descendants, whom she would treat to ice-cream cones and Coca-Cola and suggest they drop into country sales and so on and afterwards she would slip something into Bob Owens's hand. He *said* that at first he thought it was a Merry Widow (Lou: A *what?*) a French letter (Lou: a WHAT?). *Oh Hell*. But it was a twenty-dollar bill, folded small and thick.

"Oh look there. *What* does the *sign-y* say, Knox? Read it for Grand. It says, Ya-a-r-d Sale. *Yard* sale. Oh Bob do you think we—"

Bob plays it up. Milk-buckets? he asks. If Grand wants a nice bucket he Bob has a friend who can make them a good price for a dozen. Soon the old lady has passed from *pshaw* and *the idea* into giggles, and there they are, Rumplemayer's or whatever the name of the place was, the worn inhabitata of three generations, out for sale, nary a tear. "What, those old pie-an-o rolls," says Mrs. Rumplemayer, "Oh they blonged to my older sister she had infantile pralysis and my folks got her the player pie-an-o but then she got like pralysis of the brain so nobody had no more use for them, why she died years ago, how much the tag says? Three dollars? Shucks. Why you just take 'em all for two."

Knox is a little bit testy. He does not exactly reject Grand, would he *dare*, all those gravel road bonds, but he doesn't want his parents to move away, either. "He wants his bottle," Grand remarks.

"Want must be his master," Lou says. She read that somewhere.

"*I* always—"

"You had Colored Emma."

Well. True. Mrs. Welles the Elder *did* have, or *had* had Colored Emma. It may be thought that the adjective was here used as a title. But it was really used to distinguish her from Dutch Emma, a foreigner, who was dumb enough to do the heavy dirt work in spite of being in a house with a Nigger in it.

"Well," said Grand, deliberately quirking the corners of her mouth, "I can see that Bob wants to get over and look at the *books*," you *rogue*, you, Bob. *Books*. "So let Mamma and Grand take one each of Knox's hands and we'll go for a little walk-y of our own, did you see any old dress patterns, Lou-lou, dear?"

Philander Knox Owens was not a year and a half, quite. His hair was light silky brown, his skin was a pinkish-brown showing *white-white* inside the elbows and behind the knees, and his eyes were hazel. Sometimes he strode along, sometimes he dawdled, sometimes he swung, now he began to grizzle and mizzle and whimper the syllable, "Da..." The old woman wanted to console him and wanted to carry him but neither was allowed. Suddenly he was leaning against a pile of things For Sale and he put out his arms around it and he said, distinctly, the syllable, "'*Nga*" (ng as in singing). A bit harder to interpret than *Da*.

Afterwards Lou said that her grandmother had paid for it. Later Grand said she had done so because Lou said, "Oh, he might as well have it." All minor parts in the eternal game of trying to assign blame in order that the decrees of the fates might somehow be recalled and reissued. Changed.

Well, Grand *did* find some old dress patterns. Lou had gotten a *damn* fine bargain on the player piano rolls, *sure* Bob found not only books but some excellent early paperbacks at an excellent two-bits each. "And Knox has his taxidermical item." said Bob, feeling good for all of them. "Was it a bargain My Son? Is that what happens with my loose change?"

What has it got in its pocketses? What in the Hell *IS* this thang?" Just then old Mrs. Welles espied a store which sold what to her was a Sunday afternoon special/staple. "Oh what kinds of ice-cream do they have?" And the choice between them caused the other things to be forgotten.

Knox, a.k.a. My Son, who has begun—with weaning—to be rather querulous of nights, sleeps like slugged. Satisfaction changes in Lou's bosom to something like alarm, "Oh I was going to take it away and have it dry-cleaned or *washed* or something." She gets up, returns soonly. My Son, a.k.a. Knox, is wrapped all around it. In the morning.

In the morning everybody feels just fine. Everybody has had a good night's sleep. Mom and Dad have by the way had more than just sleep, being undisturbed throughout every inch and sigh of sweet dalliance, but it melted sweetly into sleep, so—same thing. Argal, instead of the day's being Rotten Monday it is Marvelous Monday. Followed by Tremendous Tuesday, Wonderful Wednesday... well, wonderful until about half-way through din-din with My Son ("Knox") in his hi-chair, zumbling and drooling... but *eating*, mind you: *eating*... hear Louie give a frightful scream, worthy of the discovery that one has on the wrong nail polish—

The Kid seems mildly interested, rewards the scream with the word,
" 'Nga!'"

The Dad has no such thing to say. Gapes. Why is his wife screaming, why waving her hands and why writhing? He would know these answers? *Would* he? Tough. The Mom has become aware of something very urgent, it requires her to get out of the breakfast *nook*, *fast*! Her figure is still, a year and a half after childbirth, thicker than it was when she was a junior in high school: *good*, though.

Good.

But she cannot simply slip out from behind the bar. The too, too solid flesh refuses to melt. Why doesn't her husband realize that she, *needs*, to get *out*? Why doesn't she just tell him? A dumb question. Her mouth is still full, that's why.

"My God, Lou-lou, what's the *matter*?"

The dumb son of a bitch; finally she, with upturned face and look of agony, Belinda going down for the third time in the whirlpool, sucks in her gut, slides under the immovable and comes up the other side; see Knox give a gurgle of delight, cry,

"Nga, 'Nga," and throw up his tiny arms. What is that which falls to the floor, p'tah-*thud*, upon which Louis all but throws herself: "*Here* it is! I don't know, maybe some kind of irradiation would be best to get rid of all those germs, no: I'm going to throw it out." Her march towards the neat-and-clean plastic-bag-lined garbage cans in The Back is arrested.

Knox is screaming. Face red as not before, ever. Arms waving wildly. Drool, slaver, howl. And before his Da can seize hold and turn him upside down to dislodge the tesseract or *what* is it, Knox finds enough breath to scream, clearly as clear can be, "'Nga! 'Nga! 'Nga!'"— glottal stops and all.

How is it that, already, so soon? at once they understand?

"It's his security blanket! He wants it!"

"He wants it! It's his security blanket!"

Knox the Kid, with a strangled "sob", takes the thing in his arms and buries his face in its surface. There are no more screams.

"After all," says Lou, "he's had it all night Sunday night, all day Monday morning, all day Monday afternoon, all night Monday night," Bob nods and nods and when she concludes with "... all day Wednesday afternoon," Bob says: "And his dick didn't drop off, either." They nod solemnly. Lou says, "A, it's got to be *washed*, I'm an American *mother*, you see how my teeth are clenched? And B, what the Hell is it?"

Debating A reminds them of old middle-aged Dr. Horn whose word of wisdom was, "No miracle drug has ever equalled the miracle of warm, soapy water." A solution of such is made, a clean sponge by Du Pont is broken out of wrapping, and, very, very cautiously and while Knox grasps one side in a deathgrip, his mother slowly soaps it. What is *it*?

Well, really, it is not a blanket. But what ? Well, it is about half the size of a rather small cheap kiddy blanket. It is rather thinner than a cushion and it is stuffed with something. The top half is a sort of fur and the bottom half is a sort of hide, a very soft leather, rather like chamois. "Some home-made combo comforter and stuffed animal," says Bob.

"Yes. There's... sort of... the head... see, the ah, *nose*? and oh look the eyes." Really, no, there are no eyes. But suppose at one time there to have been eyes? the eyes say of glass to have been firmly tied on? and some other child to have tugged... tugged... tugged... night after night, year after year... The "eyes" had long ago vanished. But there were two, well, sort of, very small protuberances. Where the "eyes" had been. "Are those *legs*? Here? Here?"

Bob has a different idea. It was never intended to be a real animal stuffed toy. It had no existence in zoology, anymore than the Country Dutch *Distelfink* had in ornithology. "We see eyes and ah arms and legs because we expect to see 'um, old Hans Yost or gee whatever, he or rather she, Tanta Tessa Hoo-Hah, merely cut and sewed in a sort of dream-state. No eyes, no arms, no legs, no tail."

"No nose, no... No *dirt*... well, hardly *any*... well, how do you *like* that!" The Rumpelmayers, or whoever, whatever, where the, ah, 'Nga, well, ah, they'd seemed pretty *clean* ... ? But no, says Lou. "Even if they'd cleaned it just before they sold it, and it didn't feel damp, you know, well, what, uh, *Knox*, has been *getting* on it, milk, cereal, smudgy tears, snot, *the floor*, the *yard*—Where's it all gone to?"

A thoughtful silence. Then Bob makes a show of pounding hand in fist, silently, pronounces the curious word, "Coatimundi."

"Co ?"

"Coatimundi. An article I read somewhere. This animal, kind of like a raccoon? Has the gift of sort of, well, *it* doesn't, no. Pelt. Its pelt does. Sort of self-cleans itself. Article I—"

The dictionary confirmed the existence of such an animal but did not say anything about its supposedly self-polishing pelt. *Be that as it may*. Lou lost her fears of the what-was-it's having picked up God knows what disease(s). The Kid, "Knox," was allowed to have his kidly way with it. They were seldom seen apart henceforth.

Nothing is perfect, however, not even the love of a boy for his 'Nga; Bob came home from work one evening to find, instead of a cocktail shaker already shaken and a plate of snacks, his wife close-lipped and flushed. Even the Bobs of this world, the little men nobody looks at twice, have their moments of supernal wisdom. Bob repaired to the bar cabinet and, ignoring the staple six o'clock specials, martini, gibson, manhattan, made something sticky and bright-colored and sweet: *sure* he knew that Lou-lou loved it; why didn't he make it more often, then? Ha. He replenished her glass before she had finished it; by and by she began to soften.

"Well, in a word—or two—Clemmi and his Mommi came across the street to visit and while we were talking, Clemmi tried to hijack 'Nga. She tilted, drained her glass, set it down, he poured, she sipped. "Little prick," she murmured, her hair soft and ringletty as she tilted her head and smiled Haifa smile. "Served *him*, *right*." ("What happened?") "Knox bit him. Well bit him or *clawed* him. Kid was sure bleeding. Clemmi's Mommi took off to put a tourniquet on his scalp, the proverbial scalp wound, and I've been waiting ever since for the cops to come and take Your Son away. The pricks." She drained the last of her Pink *Magoon* (One jigger of kirsch, one jigger of maraschino, one jigger of vodka, *lots* of cream, top off with club soda, and shake, stir, jostle, or bump. *Deadly*. The Greeks had a word for it, but preferred hemlock.) and sat smiling while Bob made supper. For a change.

By and by Clemmi's Poppi came across the street. One could not say he accused. One could not say he apologized. He said that small children were both by nature aggressive and territorial. Poppi's real name was Ferenc, rhymed with Terence, and he did something at the local college/university, whose residential exclaves were everywhere. Bob Owens broke out the one and only bottle with a green tax stamp on it. Partly because of a *small* desire to make amends. Furthermore he had noticed of educated foreigners that while they may not like the government, the economy, the educational system, in the USA, they are all without exception in like with US bonded 100% whiskey. As why *not*?

After only one drink, lo, a knocking at the door, it was not O'Reilly, it was not a Raven, it was a Dr. Nudge, a *paisan* of Poppi who, having called across the street, had been directed thence to hither. Dr. Nudge raised no objection to a draft from God's bonded warehouses. He and Ferenc exchanged a few words in their own, perhaps, language. Ferenc said, "Dr. Nudge is a world's great authority on pelage." He pronounced it to rhyme with *dressage, pe-ldzh*. And, anticipating the Owens's next question, Dr. N. himself said, "Pelage, or you would say *pel-lij*, or sometimes called *pile*, is in two words, hair or wool. Hair *and* wool. Pelage."

Immediately Lou said, "What do you know about the skin or fur of the coatimundi?"

"Well "

"One on the couch where My Son is snoozing. Take a sight. In fact," she wrinkled her nose, "take a sniff." There was indeed in the room what Our British Cousins call a Pong. It struck Bob suddenly that he had smelled the smell before...

Nudge cast a swift, surprised look at the couch. Immediately he said, "No." Then his nostrils twitched. They were large, Lou noted, and rather hairy. Both she and Bob had also sipped of that which had lain hid six years in the cave, and both were a bit quick to resent Nudge's quick denial. "Why *No*?" was their common cry. Mouth pursed in a manner not meet between guest and host, the authority rose and went towards the couch, "It is *No* because coatimundi—" wee little Knox shifted and his 'Nga shifted with him and whatever the odor was just *rolled* across the room. Nudge stopped. Nudge's nose flared, froze. Nudge's face went sick. We have all heard, read, seen cartoons of people's hair standing on edge: Nudge had but a ring of bristles: they now bristled. He gasped. He put out his hands. He staggered. He looked at Ferenc. Ferenc whispered something. Nudge whispered something back. Ferenc said, "Yoy..." Something passed between them. A glint. A... surely not a *knife*? Owens was heaving himself upward and outward and Nudeward when there was a smaller but quicker convulsion on the couch. He was not able to figure out what had been doing by whom to whom to which or what to whom or whence whither widdershins, and Nudge screamed. Fell back. Something else fell, a pair of small scissors of slightly odd, doubtless foreign design. Blood on it. Blood on the couch, rug, blood on Nudge's hand, face—

Ferenc, Clemmi's Poppi, screams, stands there stooping to Lou and Bob Owens, hands clawed. "I will report to police, you are butcher people, *mord*, you are murder people, you try killing my *kis* child, you shall be punish—" Ferenc turns and flees, a hoarse breath not a scream comes and goes with him. But now watch Nudge!

In a way, Nudge is admirable.

In a corner, a far corner, is, a, the vacuum cleaner. On a small end table a day-old newspaper. Nudge walks backward like Shem and Japheth in the tent of Noah. Nudge stoops, spreads paper, slowly without taking his eyes from the couch (what's there? "*Knox*" is there, rhythmically rocking himself and crooning, "'Nga... 'Nga... 'Nga..." He is cradled in the odd fur, the odd hide, the—) Nudge unscrews the dust-bag from the vacuum and takes out the inner paper sack and wraps it in the

newspaper. A sudden stare into their faces. Nudge is gone. *Do* the police come? Do these perhaps justifiably nervous foreigners actually report—?

"What *do you* think?"

Lou perhaps answers the question, perhaps not. "I figured it out. First he wanted to cut some of the hair off the 'Nga. It defended itself. See? So he figured that there has to be some of its hair taken up from the floor into the vacuum-cleaner bag. Eh? And he, one of the world's greater authorities on pelage, he is going to find out what, kind, *of hair*, it is!"

"Is My Son a monster?"

"You know he's not!"

"Yes... Is My Son in danger from that... from 'Nga?"

"Oh, you know he's not!"

The Ferenc family moves, suddenly. Nudge does not return. The Kid is, equally suddenly, two. How old is 'Nga?

"Knox" is three

"Knox" is four—

Great-Grandmother Welles dies. Sure enough about the will; no tricks there. Now they can change the boy's name. Hank! Buster! Dale! Chris!—No they can't. Somehow.

"Knox" is five and sitting in the crutch of a tree with Guess. Has nobody caught on outside his family? Ha Ha Ha *Ho!* Half the boys at that end of town have said to the other half, say and say in turn, "Nobuddy knows whut it really is but he keeps it tame." They have of course given up mentioning anything of it to Mumma and Daddy. Philander Knox Owens is a rather odd boy, just slightly odd, certainly immature, that was what one of the savants over from Europe, having wangled stuff out of Nudge, said. "In a way he is of course perceptibly less mature than his compeers. One must attribute this to his having to do less to establish his own position." We are skipping the accent. The accents. "On the other hand his position is one of a certain sophistication."

Q. Why 'Nga? What does it mean? A. It may be the first syllable uttered by primal pre-Man, it is uttered very far back in the throat.

Q. What is 'Nga? A. We may say only that the same type of hair or fur is found in the Caspian Cave, along with scattered pollen, dried flowers, two braided gold-wire torques studded with eleven pieces of amber, and bones not all of which have been positively identified.

Please identify them tentatively. A. (A gentle academic smile.)

Conversation: Q. Knox, who is 'Nga? A. My friend. Q. What is 'Nga? A. Just... 'Nga. Q. Where did he come from? A. Nowhere... Perhaps as unstimulated by this as the Owenses are by the "bones not all of which, etc.," the savants go back to Europe; by and by comes a folder of reports, all wrapped in white linen and cold as

the clay. They are in English and while it is only necessary to know Latin to understand that English, a knowledge of all four languages spoken in Switzerland helps a lot.

Local talk: Well, I don't say one thing proves another. I say that's the tree you always see that boy and last week I seen eyes, I seen bur-nin eyes, a-up in that tree. Boys' eyes don't burn. Vail know.

Lou doesn't tell anyone of the night the old rogue runaway shepherd dog called Timber came prowling round the Owens home. Oh God what noises followed next. She heard something die real soon and all night long she heard something being eaten real slow. In the morning... what? A forensic lab might find out... something. Who tells them? No one. Here.

Philander Knox Owens is five. Sometimes his mother sighs, silently, Whoever took my little boy please give him back! My poor Mowgli with his own cub-mate not of this world! One of the people called oddly enough, Developers, ruptures part of an ancient swamp and pathways dry up and reveal themselves. Lou Owens, followed by, very languidly, "Knox," walks slowly along one such path. There are brakes of wild cane. There is a cave, she cannot quite find a dry way yet to go into it, but she can see it down there in the thicketry. She can smell it, oh *God* it is rank, like the jock-strap of an elephant seal, like the foreskin of a moose and the groins of a musk ox and the pizzle of an Arctic wolf: that cave. Nothing like it could she have ever imagined to exist. Like the armpits of an orang-utan. And yet and yet...

Doesn't she know that awful scent?—or something rather like it?

Doesn't she know what sort of scent it is?—She does, doesn't she?

The flat wind falls, the awful stench ebbs. But within the cave, *what* is that? Is it? it surely is! no how can it be? here they *come*. "Has 'Nga been with you all this time?" Slow nod. A yawn. Well, and if so, *what* had she seen in the cave? What had she smelled in the cave? And, oh dear God what is she smelling now from the cave? Philander Knox Owens, what hast thou in thy bosom? What is it which seems to creep up his arm? To, almost, stand? that not-blanket, un-toy, nul-rug. *Does* it, so to speak, poise? *Point*? A flash. It is not there! Where is it? She sees it rush past her through the thick grass, hears a shocked cry, "' Nga!" hears the canes crashing, sees the reunion at the mouth of the cave, observes them fade from the mouth ... to what epithalamion?

The boy leans against his mother, whimpering, "'Nga... 'Nga..." Far away, and yet not so far away, the voices of boys, one can almost hear... one hears... "Philly, hey Philly! C'mon Philly we got a ball Philly..."

The most extraordinary change comes over the child. He jumps up and down and claps his hands together. His face gleams. He shouts,

"Heyyy! Yeay!! A ball, a ball, a—" In an instant he is running, running far from her, crying, "Give us the ball, give us the ball, give us the ball..."

Philly. Of course.