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SEVEN STORIES

by

Angela Davis

7015

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
April, 1965

Approved by

Robert Watson  
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DAVIS, ANGELA. Seven Stories. (1965) Directed by:  
Dr. Robert Watson. pp. 146.

This thesis consists of seven stories, the titles of which are: "Mr. Rudishill," "Streetcars," "The Garden," "Summertime," "O, Roger," "A Month of Sundays," and "House of Gifts." The themes of these stories deal in some way with the problem of the individual's shaping his own reality; almost all of them are about love and its bearing on the nature of reality. Most of the characters are at least half mad, the purpose of the eccentricities being to better isolate and delineate certain problems. In all ordinary situations there seems to be eccentricity; in all ordinary eccentricity and in madness there seems to be a kind of frenetic sanity, which, because it clarifies in an odd way, is almost peaceful and reassuring to the observer, even if what it clarifies is sad.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Warmest thanks and appreciation to: Peter Taylor and Dr. Robert Watson, who advised and helped with these stories; Dr. William Blackburn, of Duke University, who encouraged and criticized earlier and without whose help these stories might not have been written; my family and a friend: four good readers.

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## SEVEN STORIES

Mr. Rudishill

"Get me a cup of hot water right now," Mae said.

Mrs. Carson never swore out loud. The water spigot burped and sputtered, then gushed muddy-colored water.

"Hotter than that," Mae said. "It's for my gas."

Mrs. Carson let the water run full force and leaned against the windowsill. Light rain fell against the window bars and splattered Mrs. Carson's back. She thought barred windows silly; in this building, the women were weak and so old they smelled and felt of death. She hated to bring them from the ward to this room each day, for they leaned against her and she could feel the brittle bone beneath the papery skin of their wrists and fingers and smell their loose, unwashed bodies. Their eyes trembled in shrunken faces as they looked at her, pleading.

Mrs. Carson looked at the small grey room, the glass-front cabinets which lined one wall, the picture of braided Gretel made from cloth (Hansel had fallen to the floor), and on the wall opposite her, the mirror bordered with a ruffle. In the mirror she could see the bottom half of her white uniform and athletic legs crossed at the ankles. Her ladies were seated at two tables, Annie, Ruth, and Mae at the one closest to her, Mrs. Conner and Susie at the other. All but Mae were bent over their sewing, their shoulders hunched as they labored their needles through bits of cloth.



Mae sat idle, neglecting her scrapbook. One arm lay on the table; the other rested akimbo on her hip, Mrs. Carson felt, in defiance. Mae stared at her, a mixed expression of anger and defeat on her tilted face. Mrs. Carson put the cup of water before Mae and sat down at the table.

Mae had brought a doll with her; it was an ugly nude rubber one. She poked it in the eye with her scissors.

"Why, Mae," Mrs. Carson said, "don't hurt your sweet baby."

Mae belched, as a prelude. "I'm no mental patient," she said, "so don't take that tone with me, Mrs. Therapy-worker."

"I think I'm mental," Ruth said. She had a sweet, placid face. Mrs. Carson liked her.

"That's a cute dress you've got on, Ruth," she said.

Ruth smiled, "Yeah, isn't it. Look, it buttons and unbuttons." There were two brass buttons at the top of the bodice. She carefully unbuttoned and buttoned them.

"Brass?"

"No!" Ruth looked shocked. "Gold. If they was brass I'd throw'em down and go 'bout my business."

"See," Mae said, "she's mental, I ain't."

"How come you're not?" Ruth said.

Annie dropped her embroidery and looked down at the floor. "Don't you talk back to me, John Chatham," she said to the tiles.

"How come?" Ruth asked Mae again.

"Shut up. How can I talk when you butt in like a mental patient?" Mae began tearing whole pages out of a magazine.

"Now quit that, Mae," Mrs. Carson said. "A new magazine!"

Mae regarded her stonily, then looked at the glass-front cabinet. "That cabinet looks like a hurrah's nest," she said.

Mrs. Carson laughed. Mae was always saying that; she had been a housekeeper and couldn't stand a mess. The shelves were disorderly, piled with cloth, paints and other supplies, but she hated to poke around in them for fear of cockroaches and spiders.

"You haven't told us why you're not mental, Mae," Mrs. Carson said, to make peace.

"Well," Mae said, "I wouldn't try to get away with some things the mentals do. I'm here for somethin' else. Ruth now..." She pointed her scissors at Ruth. "Ruth walks around stark raving naked," she whispered.

"Only in the john." Ruth slammed her hand on the table.

"Uh uh. Everywhere. In the hall, on the ward, and in my lady's chamber. And with Mr. Rudishill around. You gotta watch Ruth," she told Mrs. Carson. "Since you're new, I'll give you that tip, you gotta watch her." Mae ran her tongue over wide, slippery lips. "That Mr. Rudishill," she

said softly, "he's sumpin' else."

"Thread my needle," Susie said in a whining voice. Mrs. Carson moved to the next table in relief. She had not heard of Mr. Rudishill and didn't care to. Mae had irritated her from the first day she had worked here, a little over two weeks ago, but she had enjoyed Mae's stories for a while. They made her feel knowledgable and understanding; they were so obviously the result of the classic persecution complex she had studied at college several years ago. She could remember the page in the text where the complex was described and could remember studying it for the test but here she found a living example. So at first she looked forward to the stories eagerly, but soon discovered they almost all began the same way.

"I used to be paralyzed," was the most frequent. "Yes, that's right, paralyzed, all down this side." Mae would touch her sagging left cheek and draw her hand all the way down the left side of her body to her feet. She would watch Mrs. Carson, not the body she was touching. "An attendant done it. I's just standin' there next up to the ward door waitin' to be let out, just mindin' my own beeswax and the attendant whomped me one on the hip. She's fattern you can imagine," she would say, "and she done it the next day too. That's how come I got the stroke the next Sunday. Eatin' some grapes, sittin' on my bed, and pow the stroke hits. Musta been on account of the attendant took me so by su'prise. An' at first I wouldn't tell the doc on

account of they might make it hard for me on the ward. But finally I said 'Could a lick have done it, doc, could a lick have done it?' and the doc says 'Why Mae? Why Mae?'" In this story, as in all the others, the enemy was punished. The attendant was stricken with gonorrhea and fired: Mae's favorite denouement. Mrs. Carson tried to be attentive; she was afraid not to be. But after all, she reasoned, there were the other ladies who needed attention and understanding too.

Mae belched suddenly, this time very loud. "Hey," she said, after deciding Mrs. Carson wasn't going to respond to the belch, "Hey, you going to sit over there all day?"

"I'm helping Susie." Mrs. Carson began sorting embroidery thread into piles. It bothered her that she had made an excuse; she should have said something firm, yet consoling.

"Lord God have mercy on us," Mae intoned. Her voice was high and chant-like. "Lord God have mercy on all the people in this room worth the saving. God have mercy on me. God have mercy on Ruth. God have mercy on Annie Chatham. And Lord God at the next table forgive and have mercy on two only. God have mercy on Susie Murray. Lord God please have mercy on Eva Conner." Mae turned and looked at Mrs. Carson in triumph. "Lord God save five out of six of us in this room from Mr. Rudishill." Mrs. Carson, feeling awkwardly silent and embarrassed, looked back at her. Mae laughed suddenly: a low rumble and a twitching of shoulders.



"Ain't I a mess?"

"How's that scrapbook, Mae?" Mrs. Carson moved to the other table and looked at the picture Mae had clipped from a magazine. It was another frothy blue-eyed baby and a mother bending over, rich brown hair falling across her cheek. "How sweet," she said.

"You don't know 'em from a bunch of turnip greens," Mae said, "but I know 'em all too well. You won't know nothin' till you've had and lost."

Mrs. Carson smiled and nodded.

"Hey," Ruth said, "your teeth are clean. Mine usta be too but see I only have three now. Brushed em all away." Mrs. Carson raised her eyebrows and Ruth nodded emphatically. "Brushed 'em all away. Can't hardly eat now. I've only had three meals in the last two years."

"Oh, Ruth, that's not so."

"Yes, ma'am." Ruth grinned, then became serious. "A veal cutlet, a grapefruit and uh... an egg." Her eyes were glazed in reminiscence. "A cup of coffee once too, I believe. That's on accounta no teeth. Usta have an eye tooth here and an eye tooth here..." She pointed carefully.

"That Mr. Rudishill," Mae said, "I bet his teeth bite like a hoss."

"All right," Mrs. Carson said, "who in the world is Mr. Rudishill?"

Mae's mouth began to work violently. She dropped her scissors and looked at Mrs. Carson. "That Mr. Rudishill,"

she said, breathing heavily, "that man is after me."

Ruth locked her hands under her armpits and cackled. "If any man is after anybody, it's me."

Mae gave her a scalding look. "Just you hush your mouth, MISS nudity. You might try as you will, look bug-eyed at every man on the bus ride and carry on like you do, you'll never get one if you live to a hundred and ten." She turned to Mrs. Carson, one hand dramatically on her bosom.

"I know plenty plus somethin' when it comes to sex," Ruth said. "But me and my husband didn't marry for that. Only went to bed three times in thirty years."

"How'd you get so many children?" Mrs. Carson said.

"He just touched me on the arm and ping it come out my nose."

Mae threw her doll across the room. She looked at it on the floor. "Elsie, honey." She heaved herself from the chair to retrieve it, then fell back in her seat and turned to Mrs. Carson. "That Mr. Rudishill's got more in mind than touchin' me on the arm." Mrs. Carson drew away from Mae's intense face and her smell of unwashed clothes. Mae leaned closer, her eyes large and full and hypnotic. "He's been watchin' and slurpin' at me for I don't recollect how many months. Everyday I go on a walk, see, up by Brown Building, and there he is, just lookin' from behind the corner."

"Sex is dirty," Mrs. Conner said from across the room. "I'm getting out." Mrs. Carson watched her collect

her crochet needles and wool and push open the door.

"How do you get outside, Mae?" Mrs. Carson said smiling.

Mae looked at her steadily. "Like I tole a judge once, that's for me to know and you to find out, if you can. But don't you worry bout him none. He's after me." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Susie trembled against the table's edge. She had wet her dress. "Back to the ward, please, Susie," Mrs. Carson said. It was almost time for lunch anyway, she thought, time for them all to go.

"Are you going to pay me mind or not?" Mae's hand clenched Mrs. Carson's wrist. "If I am paralyzed again," she said slowly, emphasizing each word, "If I am, it'll be his fault. That man, Mr. Rudishill. You wouldn't save me from him if I was on my deathbed. You wouldn't even give me a piece of candy if it would save my life, you'd just rustle around in that prissy white dress an'say no, Annette Mae Hensley, no candy, you have diabetes. Even if it would save my life you wouldn't." Her face was distorted, sucked in as if she had eaten a big lemon.

"Now Mae," Mrs. Carson said. "Mae, don't be silly."

Mae sighed and released Mrs. Carson's arms.

"Now, Mae," Mrs. Carson said. "you know you don't go outside. Even if you did, there's no one to hurt you."

"Oh yes. There's Mr. Rudishill." Mae nodded slowly and looked out the window. Her eyes were vague, focused on

a distant point. "Just yestiddy I found out his name. I crep up to his corner at Brown Building and peeked around and I could see him lookin' at me, his eyes all glittery and his nose runnin' and I says 'what's your name man,' an' he says Rudishill. The sun was bearin down so hard I could barely make out anything but that and his glitterin' eyes. An then he says real low, 'Woman, I don't even care what your name is.' And then he shook out everything he had, with me just standin' there like that and he laughed and laughed you never heard the like. I ran like the devil was clutchin' at my shoestrings an fell on my bed to pray to the Lord God our Saviour in Heaven."

Annie slapped her thigh. "Don't you bring no more Bufferin in this house, John Chatham."

"He's after me, all right. And me such a frail thing." Mae touched Mrs. Conner's arm and looked at her sadly. "I don't know what I'll do if he gets me."

"You ain't so frail, honey," Ruth said. "You're just afraid he won't get you, that's what." She plucked at her buttons.

"I'm not comin' back in here again," Mae said. She walked across the room and stopped at the door. "This place is a hurrah's nest," she said, without looking back. She slammed the door behind her and thudded down the hall.

Mr. Rudishill's appearance in Mae's mind frightened Mrs. Carson, frightened her the more because she didn't know why. She often thought of him at home, brooded over Mae's



piece of fiction until it ceased to be fiction and she could see Mr. Rudishill and his glittering eyes and she shuddered, feeling dirty and sinful even though repulsed. She might be doing some little thing, like making the beds or reading her Sunday school lesson, and Mr. Rudishill would come to her like a slap. At work, however, she made Mr. Rudishill a joke, a basis on which to re-establish a rapport with Mae every day so as to avoid lame silence before her stare. "How's Mr. you-kno-who these days?" "Who?" "You-know-who. Starts with an R." "Rogers?" "Nooo..." Some days Mae would clench Mrs. Carson's hand and say, "Mr. Rudishill, he's sumpin' else. Shakin' out everythin he's got with me just standin' there." But usually she would say "Mr. Rudishill, who's he?"

One morning about two weeks after first hearing of Mr. Rudishill, Mrs. Carson arrived at work late with a headache. A sullen nurse watched her enter the building, then looked pointedly at the hall clock. Mrs. Carson hurried the ladies from the ward to the room, avoiding the nurse's eyes. The ladies settled down to work happily, turning their old faces to the window, to the flood of April sunlight and the comfortable noise of workmen talking on the lawn outside.

Mae was electric: giddy and sullen in spurts. Mrs. Carson straightened a shelf in the cabinet, then sat at the table with Annie, Ruth and Mae.

Mae looked at her, waiting, paste brush poised in

the air.

"Well, good morning, sunshine," Mrs. Carson said.

"Good morning, cloud," Mae said. She laughed and laughed, holding her side with one hand.

Ruth scratched her grey head. "A thief came last night. Stole three of my pink silk dresses and threw lead down my throat."

Mrs. Carson wished she had brought her aspirin.

"Men's always been after me," Mae said. She moved her mouth happily and folded her arms across her chest. "In Norfolk one day a sailor looked at me on the bridge so I started walkin'. I walked alla way from that bridge to Gramerley's Shoe Store. Well! I tried on shoes and he tried on shoes! I was in W. T. Grant's and he was in W. T. Grant's! Finally he comes up an' says 'honey, meet me at six-thirty at the Eatwell.' So I smiles an' says 'sure thing' and beats it home. That night I was washin' the dishes and watchin' that clock and laughin'. Mama says 'what you laughin' for, Mae Hensley,' and I tells her. She says 'honey, you done the right thing'." Mae laughed again and Mrs. Carson laughed with her. "I's a mess then, just like now, and a good lookin' mess, too."

Annie walked to the mirror and bent down to look, her arms folded behind her back. She looked at her face as if it were far away and someone had just pointed it out to her. Her eyes were narrow slits behind her glasses; she rocked forward and back gently.

"Weren't you married then, Mae?" Ruth said.

"Huh?"

"Married. Weren't you married. Before, when you told that you were married."

"Yeah. I reckon I was married once. Me and Bill had some time in bed. Uh huh."

"Sex," Mrs. Conner said, "sex, sex, sex."

Ruth patted Mae's hand. "That's all right, dearie, you just have a dirty mind."

Mae's face turned stony. "It's men what has dirty minds." She looked at Mrs. Carson a long time. "My husband did."

"Where's your sweet baby, Mae?" Mrs. Carson said.

"Dead. Stone stiff. Tried to kill me, she did." Mae clutched the table edge. "Tried to kill me." Mae's voice cracked.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mae," Mrs. Carson said.

"Ri-dic-u-lous. You're ridiculous. You'd try to kill me if you could, you'd deny me candy on my deathbed if you had the only piece in the world and the doctor begged and begged." She rapped on the table with the scissors. "You don't know A from bullsfoot cause you haven't lost a baby that tried to kill. That man done it. Mr. Rudishill. Mr. Rudishill." Mae was screaming now.

"Stop." Mrs. Carson slapped Mae's hand. "Stop it right now." Mrs. Carson spoke carefully, trying to reason.

"Mae, we don't want to hear about Rudishill today. My

little boy is sick and we missed a payment on the car..."

"My cataracts are actin' up," Mae said. "I swear. I swear I've been through H E double L and drug up and down the chimney twice."

"Mmmm." Mrs. Carson looked out the window.

Mae belched. "That Mr. Rudishill. My heart palpitates. I'm gettin' nervous."

"It's the change of life," Ruth said. "That's all, dearie."

"I may not look it but I passed that, so shut up. It's that Rudishill." She banged the table with her fist.

"Mae," Mrs. Carson said, "Let's not hear about him today." Mrs. Carson's palms were wet; she felt suffocated. She walked to the window and looked out at the lawn and the trees in the distance. "Just please be quiet."

"No," Mae yelled. "No. Do you know what it's like?" Mrs. Carson turned around and saw Mae rip a button from Ruth's dress and run across the room to the glass-front cabinet.

"Mae now... sit down, honey."

Mae thrust her fist through the pane and held her arm there against the jagged glass. "Mr. Rudishill will get me TODAY," she screamed.

Mrs. Carson ran to the cabinet and jerked Mae's limp arm from the glass. She looked down at it, looked at the blood on the limp wrinkled arm.

"Today. His eyes glitter." She began to cry.



"Calm down now, Mae." Mrs. Carson tried to push her towards the table.

"Lookit Mae," Mrs. Conner said, "her eyes glitter."

"Let's go get a bandaid," Mrs. Carson said. She thought perhaps she should call for the nurse.

"No no," Mae said, "I've gotta tell you." She pulled her hairnet down over one ear. Her old face was wet with tears. "I wanta tell you somethin. I'm no mental patient. I'm in her for threatnin' to kill. But I didn't cause like I tole the judge threats like that are dangerous."

"Come on, Mae, honey."

"NO." She held Mrs. Carson's arms, pinned her against the cabinet. Mrs. Carson felt weak, nauseated by Mae's close hot smell and the blood from the old arm on hers.

"The judge sentenced me to a work farm. I says judge I'm not a goin' cause I didn't threaten. He says how you gonna get out of it. I says that's for me to know and you to find out, if you can."

Mrs. Carson looked at Ruth, who winked and said, "It's Mae's change of life, dearie."

Mae pressed harder on Mrs. Carson's arms. "That afternoon. The trial was on a Wednesday morning. That afternoon I got on the top of the double-decker bunks and put a belt around my neck, just for foolin'." Mae threw back her head and laughed wildly. "Talk about unlockin' a door and gettin' in there quick that sheriff sure did." She

laughed again, then became solemn.

"My husband tole me to do somethin' dirty an me his wife! So dirty an horrible I only tell it when I have to. I told him I'd knife him and I meant it, by sweet Jesus. I threw a kitchen chair through the window to attract attention. He deserted an' my daughter run off an' I haven't seen her since she was fifteen." She began to cry again, this time softly. "That's why I have my baby doll."

"Baby doll," Mrs. Conner echoed.

Mae cocked her head and looked at Mrs. Carson through bright tears. "Don't you never...don't you never feel like you're in a hurrah's nest?"

Mrs. Carson looked at her and Mae's face became vividly clear, as if it were etched and cut out and pasted on the rest of the room. She saw Mr. Rudishill's evil grin, the glittering sunlight on his hair and eyes and teeth and saw Mae, her face heavy with sadness.

"Yes, Mae," she said.

## The Garden

### I

The night breathed softly around Walter Bennett. The moon was full, the air pure and cool after the hot July afternoon. The garden in which he stood was a large circular grassy area; a brick path wound around it and went straight up the hill in steps. The brick path and the circular garden were lined with massive boxwood, coated with silver by the moonlight. The path up the hill lay in half shadow, the red bricks where she would walk tomorrow, white slippers on red, a bride. In the corners of the garden were the butterfly bushes Walter Bennett had planted thirty years before: now tree-tall, they stood gracefully in the night, their slender limbs bent with the heavy lavender blossoms. Crepe myrtle grew there too, at the back of the circle, near the white gate which led to the informal garden. They were old trees, with knotted asymmetrical trunks and branches where Evelyn had climbed as a child and Walter Bennett had watched below, anxious.

Far away, at the top of the hill, was a three-storied white house, his house, lit with a party. Walter Bennett could see vague amorphous forms through the downstairs windows: they moved and blended and separated again gracefully, knotting in groups, then opening, spreading like a flower, always shifting. Music of occasional laughter and of the piano floated in the air, remote, muted, in the quiet garden.

In the center of the garden was a single large box-wood, neatly clipped and sculptured into a winding staircase shape, wide edges at the bottom gradually becoming narrower and crowned with a smooth knob on top: it reminded Walter Bennett of the chess-figured queen in Alice's Looking-glass world. Over the top of the bush he had thrown his jacket; his shoes and socks lay underneath.

Walter Bennett stood quietly, his hands on the small of his back, his feet wide apart, looking into the sky. His shirt was a white blot in the darkness, his long feet pale in the wet grass.

He smiled. Here, on many nights like this, Walter Bennett remembered, he had brought Evelyn to look at the moon and stars through the telescope. "See Orion, baby?" Evelyn, subdued by the quiet and darkness, had watched the sky. She had found the moon in the telescope: "Look, Papa, how fat and bumpy." But lightning bugs were better: "Look, Papa, he turned off." And then she'd sat on his lap on the wide bench in the corner of the garden beside the young butterfly bushes, her sweet smelling hair beneath his chin, and asked him to sing Here Comes Johnny With His Big Gatlin Gun and Papa said never heard of that and then oh Papa, you know, Mr. Moon. And then he had sung it at least five times until she slept, and he had carried her up the brick walk to the house, the moon on her face pale and soft, light blond hair against his shirt. Nancy: "That child should have been in bed hours ago Walter, she'll get circles."

Her Bridal day, which is not long.

He walked on the cool wet grass, on the circular brick path, around once, twice. His stride was long, athletic; he swung his arms together: forward, clap, back; forward, clap, back. The boxwood smelled musty; the moon shone on the pine trees beyond the garden, turned the needles to ice. On bright snow-days this had been fox and hound area: Papa as fox, Evelyn and her friends, hounds. Her face, red-streaked from cold, and her shrill laugh in the whiteness and the quiet garden, blanketed in snow: Walter Bennett had been very young then.

Very young, and he had painted often, in the garden: experiments in broken form, Evelyn in the garden on the bench, a wash of brilliant sunset behind her and the pines, red in her skirt and arms, Evelyn crouched by the boxwood with an Easter basket, one leg soft curves of ochre and blue. Nancy: "Why, Walter, you know that doesn't look like my Evelyn. All disjointed and funny." He had painted them together: Nancy serene, flowered skirt against the grass, her blond face impassive, Evelyn as a moving cloud, her white dress a blur, strong white calves flashing against the green: she was quicksilver. Her shapes: bell, circle, triangle, flower. Now, he set his easel before flower-hatted ladies; they paid for flattering photographs.

Walter Bennett walked around the circle, pausing, rocking on each foot, his arm crooked for Evelyn's. Nancy: "Walter, you'll just have to go slower. Start all over."



Dearly beloved, dearly beloved, gathered here in the sight of God and flowerhats to join Evelyn and the pale smiling young man who smells of deodorant and Carlyle first editions. He paused before the white gate and looked across the grass, up the brick walk to the white house: car doors slamming and goodbye. The rehearsal dinner was over. He stood, pipe bowl cupped in his hand, and watched the downstairs windows dim. Nancy: "Evelyn, where is your father?" A light upstairs, Nancy's. Two shapes on the brick walk, gliding slowly, like boats on water, close together, his dark head bent over Evelyn's light one. Her dress, a pale yellow bell in the moonlight, brushed the boxwood and she was a swan, lithe and strong.

Walter Bennett retreated: he closed the white gate gently behind him. The back garden was quiet and dark, a cathedral beneath huge spreading oaks, tall silent pines. Farther back, apple trees stood in a row, between two of them, the rope hammock rocked slightly in the breeze. In one corner was an enclosure, with brick walls ivied over. Walter Bennett rested his arms on the brick wall and looked: beneath the ground were Nancy's father, Nancy's grandparents, and the first child, Nancy Maria.

At Nancy Maria's second Christmas, her last, there had been a puppy for her, a puff of black fur and appealing eyes, and it was lost, then found days later: its life snuffed in an empty large-mouthed turpentine jar in the weeds, suffocated inside. Nancy: "Walter, darling, don't

take on so. It's only a dog." Then, leukemia. The funeral day had been clear and hot, the sky bright. The apple trees were young then, slender, and produced no fruit, the butterfly bushes just beginning. There had been just he and Nancy by the apple trees and afterwards he had cooked supper and she would not eat. He had stayed away, in the garden, most of those days, and then Evelyn came soon after. "Remember," he had said to Nancy later, "remember the dog in the bottle. It reminds me of us." Nancy had walked away, up the brick steps, and he had not followed.

Walter Bennett lay across the rope hammock spread-eagled. Above, a cloud across the moon: a wisp of ethereal smoke. In the garden beyond he could see their shapes on the bench, in shadow, ghostlike. Their cigarettes glowed, they murmured, their voices caressing and intertwining -- music, a slow moving stream, brown leaves carried with it, swirling. He shifted. The hammock creaked. The shapes were silent. Then: "Papa?" Evelyn stood, leaning forward, hands pressed against her thighs, against the bell-shaped yellow dress. "Papa?" He lay silent. "Mother wants you, Papa." He watched them move up the brick steps: she was small, only reaching his shoulder. The young man touched the back of her neck, her long graceful neck and throat, white, shades of blue. Walter Bennett closed his eyes.

Evelyn had stood gamin-like at the top of those steps in the almost-dusk, small, strong, looking down at Walter and Nancy by the easel, their arms about each other. "Come

on down, baby, quick, look at the sunset." Evelyn, skipping steps, running, had fallen, step after step, landed on her back. Nancy: a high scream and "You've killed her." Evelyn, recovering her wind, "Oh, Papa, I wish I was dead." Papa, bending over, "No you don't, sugar. Don't ever say that."

In five minutes she had run again. Afterwards, he had been sick.

Walter Bennett rocked, rubbed his feet against the cool wet grass: he rocked, an almost grandfather, as he watched Evelyn walk up the back steps, turn and smile down at the young man, the strong yellow light on her hair and he saw her as he would paint her: small, red-cheeked in the snow, and then her children like her, quicksilver when Evelyn would be blond, impassive, her quick changing features set, she a ghost and he a grandfather. Her bridal day, which is not long.

Walter Bennett lay lengthwise in the hammock and rubbed a foot against the rope: mosquitoes. The hammock was a deep cup with his weight in the middle; he looked through the rope at the quiet garden, the boxwood lined brick walk, the white house. Upstairs, two lights: Nancy on the second floor, Evelyn on the third. Downstairs, the back porch light was on, harsh yellow against the white wall and steps, waiting for him. The door opened. Nancy stood, holding the door, for a long while, then closed it behind her. From cave-like darkness Walter Bennett watched

her, held to the rope hammock, as she stood in the light, a cotton housecoat wrapped around her, arms hugging her waist, a frilly night bonnet on her head. She stood barefoot, very serene, her shadow black and jagged against the clapboard wall and looked down into the garden.

## II

It is late afternoon. The garden is still hot and throbs with color. Walter Bennett straightens rows of folding chairs on the grass and pulls yellow crepe paper covers over them: his wet hands leave loose, sagging places.

"Mistah Bennett, I declah!" Edith waves from the top of the brick steps, then lumbers down to him. Her black face is wet with perspiration, her blue silk dress stained beneath the arms. Walter Bennett stretches, groaning; he smiles at her.

"You're a bird in this world," she says. Her round fingers flick at his coat. "Lookit you -- mussed." She giggles. "Gwan up to the house -- Miss Evelyn's all ready -- Lordy how she does look! And folk's already comin' -- g'wan now." She nods in the direction of the white house up the hill. "I'll finish this quick."

Walter Bennett walks slowly up the brick path: the boxwood is a foot taller than he. "Mistah Bennett," Edith's voice, soft, calls after him. "She's just like Miss Nancy was, little bitty and sweet in that dress." He turns, looks at Edith, her dark eyes wet, looks at the rows of yellow

chairs on the grass, the pines, the crepe myrtle and butterfly bushes: sweet. "Same garden," Edith says, "only everything's grown so -- same day too seems like." She plucks at the yellow paper on the chair nearest her. "Lawd." She sighs. "Guess I'm a lots older today."

"Yes," he says, and walks to the house.

\* \* \*

Evelyn is in the kitchen. She leans against the sink eating bacon and drinking champagne. Around her bridesmaids flutter like moths in pale green dresses. "Isn't she gorgeous," they say to him. "Isn't she?" and "turn around, Evelyn."

She is young and fragile, lace-covered, soft folds of white dropping from her tiny waist to the floor. "Hi, Papa." She winks at him and whirls on her toes in the middle of the room. Her skirt flies out, brushes the stove and the sink.

"Ooooh," the moths say, "just look."

"Look, Papa." She touches pearls at her throat.

"James sent them."

"Yes." He leans against the wall, his legs crossed at the ankles and smiles down at her. "They're nice."

Evelyn crunches bacon: a piece falls to her dress. A moth spies it on the hem: "A spot!" "No -- not a spot!" They flap and crinkle, taking her from the kitchen up the stairs. Evelyn laughs, looks back at him.

He leans against the wall, eating bacon.



Nancy: "Walter -- there you are." All parts of her seem to move at once, jerkily: her movements are usually slow. She rubs the counter with a striped cloth, moves and stacks boxes, opens the refrigerator door and closes it. She glances at him often: he is not helping. "Evelyn has a bacon spot." She bends, opens a cabinet beneath the sink. Beige lace lies in folds on the floor. "Right on her hem." She looks up.

He stares out the window. "It won't show."

"But it will -- it does." Her voice is shrill.

He touches her arm and she is quiet.

"I guess I'm being silly."

"No, you're not silly." He brushes the front of his white coat with both hands, holding his thumbs upright, stiff.

\* \* \*

"Aren't they silly, Papa. Look, no one would notice." Evelyn holds her white skirt about her in soft puffs and bunches, holds her foot out beneath the hem.

She is ivory against the grass.

Nancy presses them into line. "Hurry now. Edith, get her skirt straight." Edith's dark fingers brush Evelyn's waist. She pulls the skirt out and up: it falls straight.

"Lawd, I better go set." Edith darts from behind the boxwood, smooths herself, walks down the brick steps on a stiff usher's arm.

The sun is lower now, as they stand waiting behind the high boxwood, but still very hot. Walter Bennett looks: two small children in white, the filmy green girls, tall young men to escort them. Their figures waver in the heat. He and Evelyn stand beside a gardenia bush: the flowers are browning. She snaps one off, cradles it in her white gloved hands, her white spray of flowers crushed beneath her arm. She bends her head to smell it. The sun makes her hair a halo; her face is radiant, blooming against the dusty boxwood.

"I should have wiped the box," he says.

She looks at him and smiles, then rubs a hand across the boxwood. "That would have been too much trouble."

"Oh, no," shaking his head, "it wouldn't have been any trouble. I should have done it."

Nancy descends the steps. Her arm lies heavily on the usher's; her face is set. At each step part of her body is cut off by the boxwood.

There is music: the orchestra plays in the back garden.

Evelyn giggles as they watch the procession: the children walking stiffly, the moths swaying, their arms and legs brown and silken in the sun, their lips bright red. "It's all kind of funny," she says.

Walter Bennett, tall, bends over her, holds her elbow. His face is long and white, his nose knife-sharp. "Will you be all right, Evelyn? Happy and..."

"Of course, Papa, what'd you think?" her face is kind, but far away.

"On your first visit I'll have to do a painting..."

"Let's go, Papa. Am I o.k.?"

Her small hand is tight on his arm. They walk: he watches the steps come to meet them. The boxwood rises higher as they descend the steps, slowly. They turn to the left.

His shoulder brushes against lavender: butterfly bushes. He sees Edith: she bobs her head and to her mouth presses a handkerchief, crushed like a white flower. Evelyn smiles. They curve with the walk. They pass row after row of yellow-covered chairs, of bright eyes: as they pass, the row of heads turns with them, then the next and next like waves. Nancy turns, solemn. Walter Bennett pauses, rocks on his left foot, then on his right, slow with the music, making Evelyn trip. "Ooooh": sighs of alarm from row after row. Evelyn turns, laughing, and shakes back her hair, liquid honey in the sun, beneath the lace.

Ahead, before the white gate, beside the spreading crepe myrtles, the others wait. The bridesmaids watch Evelyn, their smiles possessive, maternal: one looks to the hem, for the bacon spot. The afternoon sun reflects against the minister's round glasses: a benevolent owl, prisms of color, rainbows for eyes. The young man, pale, smiling, looks over the boxwood, out of the garden, then glances at Evelyn, swallows, crosses his hands, uncrosses

them, shifts his weight to the left foot, and strains his neck upward: his collar is too tight. Walter Bennett passes him, smells deodorant, Carlyle, old spice. Evelyn smiles and takes her place beside him, calm.

Walter Bennett backs into the circle, presses against softskirts and arms, steps on a foot. The moth turns: surprised blue eyes. "Pardon," he says, too loud, "So very sorry." "Ssh."

"Dearly beloved." Evelyn looks intently at the owl, the young man at Evelyn. "We are gathered..." His voice is a rusty saw. Walter Bennett looks at the army of seated color -- blots and chords of blue, pink, brown, orange on yellow. They strain to hear the words, some bent forward in chairs, lips parted. Tall dusty boxwood, deep green pine trees contain them. He looks beyond them, at the brick walk up the hill, at the white house. The back screen door is still open, propped with a brick: flies. "Do you James, take this woman..." Nancy sits two rows from the front, empty chairs on either side of her, the single sculptured boxwood rising high behind her. Her legs are crossed, her hands folded in her lap, long white hands on beige lace. Her hair, light brown, is smooth and long, drawn to the top of her head. She watches Evelyn's lace back: her lips move in unison with Evelyn's.

A fly lights on Walter Bennett's neck. He shakes his head discreetly. Nancy looks at him, her eyebrows raised, questioning. The fly settles again. He shakes again.

Nancy's forehead is knit: a warning glance, then she turns her head back to Evelyn. Walter Bennett rubs the back of his neck: a white button pops from his coat and lies gleaming on the grass.

"I now pronounce that they are..." The young man's arms wrap around Evelyn. Smiling, they turn together. The music begins, loud, and then the walk around the garden, curving, up the hill-steps. Evelyn holds her skirt in front, gracefully, with one hand; the lace train falls one step behind her, dragging against the brick walk up the hill.

\* \* \*

Walter Bennett, deferential, a fist against his hip, stands on a thick carpet of grass and shakes hands, soft wet white hands. To his left, Nancy nods and smiles, acknowledging, as heads, rows of clean white teeth file by. Her left arm falls to her side, her right is outstretched for hands. A lock of brown hair is loose against her cheek.

She turns to him, giggling. "Look." She points to her feet, to the heels sunk in the grass. She pulls a foot up, the heel up out of the ground and rests it again and it sinks. She giggles and turns away, locked to the garden floor.

Evelyn shines on his right, white against green. Beside her is the young man, his head tilted up and back.

Laughter, rejoinders, pleasantries rise beneath the tall pines, the spreading oaks and are caught there: they



live at the top, with the tree forms etched on the afternoon sky, a hood, a veil of sound over the garden. Across the garden between a group of apple trees and the brick-enclosed graveyard is the marquee, heavy pink satin, pointed at the top, fluttering at the edges. Beneath the pink cover, fountains of champagne and a crowd with outstretched arms and glasses filling slowly. The grass is littered with people, with pastel summer dresses, arms on arms, people in bunches, people walking and smiling: All talking. Red-coated musicians, resting, thread among them -- a long needle twining, a red line sewing them into a pattern, a design, a snake of a line, red, moving through pastel.

Before Walter Bennett, a flower girl rolls on the grass. As she turns he sees she is grass-stained underneath. He touches Evelyn's arm and nods at the girl. "That's something you might have done," he says.

The line breaks. "Champagne, Papa."

The crowd presses around Walter Bennett: he steps, turns, dodges. Against his legs, skirts; around him, arms entwining and smothering; above him, quiet pines.

Then at the other side of the garden he stands, apart from them, two glasses in his hands. He leans against the brick graveyard wall, holding the glasses carefully, the stems held tight at the base of his fingers, his hands cupped about the bowls. His thumbs rub against the glass, up and down.

He sees Evelyn in the middle of the crowd; she is

smiling, her head is bent, lace falls across her cheek. He pushes towards her, glasses held shoulder-high. He is jostled. A stain spreads on a yellow skirt: dark fingers. She looks to her skirt, then to him, smiles too late. "Oh, it's all right, Walter, you couldn't have helped." Others join: "Of course not..." "Such a crowd..."

"I didn't apologize," he says. He leaves them quiet and pushes again. Evelyn has moved. He stands still, drinking.

Nancy touches his arm. "Your hands are shaking, dear. Tired?"

\* \* \*

In the dusk, Walter and Nancy Bennett stand on the front steps. She looks down at her hands, chips red lacquer from her nails. He looks up at the sky: it is ice-lavendar, the moon is a pale wafer, the evening star bright below it. There is a dark rain cloud in the east.

"No one mentioned the bacon spot," she says, looking up. "You were right."

"Mmm."

"Edith," she says, moving closer, "Poor Edith is crying in the kitchen. Says she feels old."

"Do you?" He looks down at her.

She leans her head against his shoulder and smiles. "You're a good man, Walter."

He touches her hair. "I'll go make some sandwiches."

Ham be o.k.?" The door bangs behind him.

### III

Walter Bennett walked barefoot down the hill, down the brick steps, into the garden. The night was dark; clouds covered the stars, most of the moon. The air was quiet, waiting for the rain.

At the end of the steps he turned left, promenading, following the curve of the walk, and brushed against lavender blossoms. The rows of yellow-shrouded chairs were still there, ghostlike in the dim light.

He walked between the last two rows and pulled the covers from the chairs, the chair to the right, the chair to the left, right, left, right right, left left. He folded them neatly over his arm and stood smoothing them with long deliberate strokes. He turned to look at the house: from the dark garden the solitary light in Nancy's room seemed very far away. He could see lace curtains at the window and Nancy's form moving down and up and stretch, down and up and stretch: exercising. He knew how she looked between the exercises, squatting to look at the book on the floor, her face serious, concentrating on the page of diagrams. Nancy: "Walter, find that button please and I'll sew it on. It's such an odd size."

He laid the covers on the ground carefully: they unfolded and fluttered in the breeze. Two rose in the air. Walter Bennett anchored the others with a chair leg and

watched the two fly across the garden and land flat, pressed against boxwood. He raised his arms, stretching, and threw back his head. He closed his eyes and listened to the wind in the pines: Evelyn had said she could fly when no one watched.

Heavy, tired, he walked back down the aisle between uncovered chairs, his hands clasped behind his back and turned, walked toward the back garden, past rows of chairs and the tall sculptured chessqueen boxwood, laced with white roses. Before the crepe myrtles he stopped, stooped for the button: he ran his hands through the cool wet grass and did not find it. Near him, at the base of a crepe myrtle: an empty champagne glass. He picked it up. He stood slowly, a pain in his lower back. He rubbed his back and looked at the glass, turned it round and round in his left hand. Her bridal day.

Her bridal day: palegreen dresses two by two on the brick walk, ushers with carefully arranged handkerchief points rising from pockets, Evelyn's face saintlike, soft next to the dusty boxwood, an almost fall, a rainbowed owl. Then, the young man. Soft hands shaking and another: Thank you we're proud. Proud. Not losing a daughter gaining a pale smiling young first edition. The white gate slammed behind him and this was where Nancy had stood, a cold beige statue sunk in the earth.

The clouds covered the moon now and the back garden was dark and chilly. The pink satin marquee had been

collapsed and lay flat on the grass, dimly glowing. Walter Bennett walked towards it: it was a large empty canvas waiting. Thunder, far in the distance. He had told Evelyn what it was: moving furniture in heaven. The lightning seemed closer: it illumined the sky for a second, its light touched his hands clasped around an apple tree bough, the satin lying on the grass, the wrought iron gate of the graveyard. They burned with dream-like sharpness for what seemed to him a long while.

He pushed open the iron gate and let it swing shut behind him. Apple trees hung over the graves: there was the sweet smell of apples which had fallen, had turned brown, rotten, in the summer afternoons. Three slight mounds and curved upright stones were there, and closest to him, Nancy Maria: a flat smooth stone, white in the darkness. He sat there on the stone, still warm from the day's heat, when the rain began to fall, cool against the warmth, making steam rise. He rested his head against his knees, feeling the cool rain against his neck, his back.

He lay on the grass, his head propped against the flat stone. He held the champagne glass against his stomach and watched it filled slowly, slowly by the rain. Evelyn and the young man would be watching the rain now, perhaps almost asleep, hearing it against the window. His eyes dark now, his hands against her smooth strong back. Dearly beloved dearly beloved, the young man capable and loving. Is he?

On some return a little girl will come with them: go



to grandpapa sugar go to grandpapa. Yes, come to grandpapa, little brown eyes, you in your white dress and I on my cane. She would be like Evelyn, quicksilver, ivory against the grass.

Evelyn: turning, in white, hair brilliant beneath creamy lace, small like a child at Easter, her eyes wide, expectant. She was the flowergirl grass-stained and active, rolling in life's honey, she was Nancy when he had known her in white tennis skirts and here in the garden a bride: her bridal day, which is not long. A wedding, a funeral when apple trees were young, a fall down brick steps at sunset, a wedding: what in between? No matter, they were all yesterday together and tomorrow he would paint it all. Symbol and line and a chartreuse blot here, a yellow triangle above: content and form, content and form. Form: politeness. Nancy the hostess locked to the floor of the garden.

More thunder and then lightning close and the rain fell harder, steadily. It splattered the apple trees, washed away the dust, fell against the brick wall and over its sides in torrents into the graveyard, watering the graves, the stones, and Walter Bennett. Perhaps the enclosure would fill like a pool and he would rise with it, floating on the top, a flower. The champagne glass filled and water flowed over the side, in rivulets, like tears on a smooth face. He drank from it and threw the glass over the wall. It made no sound as it fell onto the wet grass.

Drenched, cold, he rose and smoothed back his wet

hair. He locked his fingers about the top of the curved wrought iron gate, cold and slick. He stood still, listened to the rain of the brick wall, a mad dance, the rain falling into the grass steadily, quietly. He closed the gate behind him and without looking back, walked on the wet grass. He looked through the wet darkness to the house way up the hill: far away. The back porch light was on, a warm glow in the distance and Nancy's light upstairs. Inside, warm, she would be standing on the yellow fuzzy mat beside the tub, patting powder on her body in loose clots. Or perhaps now she sat before her magnifying mirror, a strong light over her head, her eyes and the pores of her skin large, plucking her eyebrows into a thin arch. She would lean forward, intent, her forehead wrinkled in concentration, folds of her dressing gown falling on the floor.

The woods shall to me answer and their echo ring.

Like a child Walter Bennett swung on the white gate: he stood on the wide bottom board and leaned over the top, holding to the white pickets. He pushed forward, swung back, forward, back, in the cold rain beneath the tall wet pine trees, the spreading crepe myrtles, their pink blossoms drooping, heavy with water. He looked across the garden, at the rows of chairs, the yellow covers limp, torn by the rain, the boxwood surrounding, the path up the hill: brick steps where they had walked, brides.

The light in Nancy's room was turned off now. Nancy, lying on her side quietly, a freckled white shoulder showing

above the quilt, a hand holding to the pillow: breathing softly, her lips parted she would hear the rain outside the open window, against the screen and would sleep, holding to the pillow, the part straight and white in her hair, her hair dark against the pillow.

Walter Bennett walked on the circular brick path, past the lavender blossoms fragrant in the rain, past the wet boxwoods, and climbed the hill-steps quickly.

## Streetcars

Mae led the collie dog down the front steps into the sunlight. Her mother stood in the sour darkness of the hall and pressed her nose flat against the screen door. She frowned, watched Mae's hips sway from side to side, straining under the flowered skirt, as she sauntered down the front walk to the street. Mae was tall, with long tanned legs and tiny ankles. She had a thick mane of dark red hair, needled with copper in the sunlight. It was late afternoon: her shadow stretched behind her almost to the front door.

"Mae, baby, what if they won't let no dogs on streetcars?"

Mae turned to look at the small clapboard house, then at the front yard, with its scraggly brown grass. Dandelions flourished there in ragged bunches, like large pats of butter melting in the sun. Mae squatted to pluck one. She arranged it in her hair: a yellow button next to her face, a stem sticking out behind her ear. She cocked her head.

"Pretty," her mother said.

Mae laughed. She uncoiled smoothly and walked to the gate.

"Mae, baby, what if they won't let no dogs on streetcars?"

Mae slammed the gate behind her and looked back, laughing. Her mother's face looked anxious and pasty, a

flour white moon against the screen. "Don't call Me no baby, Ma. I'm a full grown woman with a husband and you know what else to prove it." She patted her flat stomach.

"That don't make no nevermind. You'll be my baby if you live to seventy five."

"I'm Switch Iron's baby an' maybe he'll lay off work tomorrow an' take me to Virginia Beach. Take this dog, too." She nodded at the collie. "Gonna buy me a new bathing suit, a two piecer, green or red, maybe, with lil' ol' spaghetti straps. They got some nice ones at W. T. Grant's."

"Bet that man don't like dogs."

"Do too."

"Lord God help you, baby." Her mother shut the door gently.

"He do too like dogs, Ma," Mae yelled at the door. "He do too." She pulled on the dog's rope and walked across the street to the trolley stop. After winding the rope carefully around her wrist, she lit a cigarette. A blue Chevvy rattled by; the boys inside waved and whistled, straining their necks out the window.

"No count buzzards." Mae blew a smoke ring, then looked down at the dog. "No count," she said scornfully. "So many's like that, honey dog, not like Switch Iron, who even Ma says is a gentleman with his short hair and the way he'll always remember to open doors." The dog thumped his tail on the sidewalk. "Aw, honey, he do too like dogs. Don't pay no attention to that Ma."



Mae smiled: it was soft June, the collie leaned against her leg, and she was going home to cook dinner for Switch Iron. He might have been drinking: loud, rough. Then she would tell him, shy, in broken sentences, and his face would soften, his arms would wrap around her, firm and gentle. They would plan and dream, together.

Mae watched the people on the street. Her eyes filled, for they seemed part of her and they were sad. She wanted to help, to reach out and take their hands. Two young girls walking flat footed in high heeled shoes, their bodies thrown slightly forward, a bent over man, blinking glazed blue eyes, a delivery boy with Merita on his shirt in red, a rich looking lady wearing rouge and pearls: she smiled at them all, feeling full and warm inside; they smiled at her dimples and round face and the dog at her feet. Mae watched a convertible pass; it was full of people in bathing suits, headed for a cookout on the beach. The driver's girl gestured to the couples in the back seat; she faced them, her elbows resting on the seat and hair blowing across her face. The driver tickled her: her mouth was wide in laughter. "That's us tomorrow, honey," Mae said, "That's us tomorrow, doggie."

She bent to stroke the collie's rough coat. "Won't he be surprised, honey dog. You're surprise number one, leadin' up to the next. Hey, listen," Mae straightened and looked down the street. "Listen at the streetcar comin'. Hear it whinin' and clickin' an' sparkin'? It's like magic,

see -- takes us right where we want to go. We'll get on and you lay down at my feet and don't act no count." Mae smoothed her hair. The streetcar clicked towards them and stopped.

The door opened, gushed forth heat and the smell of cheap perfume. Mae stepped on, pulling the dog after her.

"Uh uh. No ma'am. No." The bull-faced driver looked down at her. "No ma'am."

"Huh?" Mae's eyes were wide and innocent. "No ma'am what?"

"Number one. No weeds."

Mae threw her cigarette out the door.

"Number two. Where you think you're goin' with that mutt?"

"Gimme some apples, I'll bake you some pies, ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies." She looked at the passengers: a blond snip, a lady so fat she was spilling over the seat, sailors, businessmen. They stared; she smiled at them and giggled.

"Hey lady."

"Yeah."

"Off."

"Aw, sir."

"No siree bob, not on number 402. Absolutely not. No dogs on streetcars." The driver stood to block Mae's way.

"Now listen." Mae drew herself straight. She squinted at the driver. "We'll see what the boss has to say about

dogs."

"Rules is rules." Then, softly, "Get along now." He looked at her closely, at the prettiness and warmth in her wide mouth, her pink round face. "Git along, honey."

"You git along, honey." A passenger guffawed. Mae giggled and spoke louder. "I'se just goin' eleven blocks home and gotta get this dog there quick for my husband. For a surprise."

"No dogs." The man's voice was firmer.

"Well -- I don't mean to incinerate havin' you fired, but my husband works for this flea-bit company. We'll see what the boss has to say about dogs and... Switch Iron Bill," she said triumphantly.

"Switch Iron, huh? Drunken fool." But he stepped back.

Mae leaned forward to whisper. "I'm you know what, too." She pointed at her stomach.

The driver eased himself down into his seat. The leather sighed under his weight. He looked out the front window. "Hurry up then an' make that mutt mind."

Mae dropped two dimes in the slot. "One for me, one for the dog."

"You dadblamed women. Passel of trouble, that's what."

"Humph." Mae found an empty seat in the middle of the car. She pushed the dog to the floor as the trolley lurched forward. She sat down. Dust rose from the seat into the

sunlight: Mae liked to think the specks of dust were sunbeams, grey turned to gold against the window. She crossed her legs and rubbed the dog's neck with her foot. She wore high-heeled patent leather shoes. "Switch Iron'll take care of you too, doggie," she murmured. Mae swung her leg, then held it out in the aisle, admiring, turning her foot from left to right.

"Get you some canned dog food." She touched the collie's neck gently with her foot and whispered to him. "Three for thirty nine at the A & P. Bill'll open the can and wrench off the last little bit of the lid with his hands, not a can opener, and he'll put you some food on the floor in a special little dish, a white rubber one, easy to wash. We'll have you a corner next to the icebox, and you can sleep there, cozy as a baby in a blanket." Mae looked out the window at the stores: Roses, W. T. Grant's, Gramerley's Shoes, The Eatwell Cafe. She could see it now at the Eatwell, when the kid would be grown enough to eat out, five maybe. Switch Iron would take them to the Cafe on Friday nights, would grin at his friends sitting at the counter as he helped her with her coat. Then they would joke and Switch Iron would pull the kid's hair when he put too much ketchup on his hamburger. "You gotta taste the meat," he would say, "and you can't that way." Maybe the kid would steal a sip of Switch Iron's beer and make a face. She and Switch Iron would hold hands across the table and look at the boy, and plan things, like taking him in the waves at the beach next

summer.

"Nice dog there, lady," A sailor across the aisle nodded his head toward the collie. "Get 'im in Norfolk?"

Mae looked at him with narrowed eyes. She knew sailors. But this one was all right. His hair was slicked down nice and he had sweet blue eyes. "Yeah, ain't he sumpin'," she said. "Switch Iron Bill Hensely -- my husband -- he's of this company you know, pulls the iron? -- well, he's just gonna eat him up with a spoon he'll love 'im so. My daddy works for the ferry comp'ny up at Little Creek and this collie got left on one night. Some passenger musta put 'im out - a Yankee goin' home, I'd reckon. Ain't that mean?"

"Sure is." The sailor shook his head slowly side to side. "Terrible."

"I hate anybody who'd do that. Well, I'se just home for a visit with Mama an' she says, 'Mae, why not take this collie', being as she knows how I just love animals. I used to keep lovebirds -- they're fun you know, putting little dishes of water in the cage and somethin' hard for'em to peck at. And Mama won't have no truck with dogs, noways. I near 'bout had a fit an' fell in it, I'se so glad to see this dog."

"Yeah, I guess." The sailor looked at Mae's legs. "You goin' home right now, huh?"

She pulled at her skirt. "Yes, Sir." She looked at him fiercely, then slowly turned her head. She looked at



the brightly colored advertisements over the seats: the fat lady's was a smiling young man and Tums, the prissy blond's was for beer, a well dressed man reading a newspaper had Beneficial Loan. The sailor across the aisle looked out the window glumly: his advertisement was a girl winking and chewing gum.

"Hey, sailor," Mae said. "It's just that I don't mess around none. I'm -- like I said -- married and suspectin' a family too."

"Well," the sailor said, turning, "friends, o.k.? I didn't mean nothin' by it. Just lonesome, sorta." They shook hands across the aisle and looked at each other solemnly. "Lucky man," he said. "Jealous type?"

"Whew. Man, is he ever!" Mae smiled happily. "Why he gets pure T mad if a man even looks at me more'n a minit." She held her leg out straight and looked at her shoe.

"That so." The sailor furrowed his brow sympathetically.

"Lord, yes. Oh, one time he near bout killed a sailor." Her laugh was high and silvery, like a small bell. She leaned toward the sailor. "I'm at the movies all alone, see, and this guy starts to fiddlin' with my legs. Lord, I screamed and hollered and chased him up the aisle lickety split, hittin' him with my pocket book. Heavy pocket book, too. Police got 'im."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Mae leaned back against her seat. "Had him

handcuffed to the pole in front of the theater in a minit. They says, now tell us what happened, honey, and I couldn't and said so, so one of 'em brought me a lemonade so's I could talk -- in one of those plastic cups with the blonde skating, funny how I'll always remember that cup... We were in court the next day -- that fellow got forty bucks slapped on 'im plus five for contempt for havin' his hat on. Plus what Switch Iron done to 'im the next day."

"Jesus." The sailor turned his hat round and round in his hands.

"Yessir. That goes to prove the trouble I've had with men. But Switch Iron, he looks after me, that's for sure. Oh look, here's my stop." The streetcar passed Kay's Grill and Mae stood up. "Bye now. It was sure nice meetin' you. Come on, Doggie."

"Yeah, kid. So long." The sailor watched her walk to the door and step off gracefully, leading the dog.

The door closed behind her with a whoosh. "Come on, honey dog. Only a half block to your new home." She walked slowly, anticipating. The warm air seemed to wrap around her with love; the cars on the street were as exciting as a parade: they honked, a muffler sounded, a loose exhaust pipe clattered. A paper cup rolled across the sidewalk in the slight wind; the dog stopped to sniff at it. "Come on, honey dog." Mae pulled at the rope and clucked at him. "He'll be in the front room waitin', readin' the funnies and drinkin' a Blatz an' just waitin'. I'll walk in smilin'

an' say 'How's this for a surprise' and he'll hug you and me too, and I'll sit on his knee and have a sip of Blatz. We'll look at you and pick out a name. And then -- what'd you think then?" She looked down at the collie and squealed. She skipped a few steps, her brilliant hair alive in the sun, loose curls flopping against her back. "Surprise number two. He'll be so happy and he'll buy me a two piecer an' we'll lay on the beach tomorrow, the sun beatin' down, all three of us, him an' me wrigglin' our feet in the sand and plannin' 'bout our family."

Mae's heels clicked sharply on the front steps. The house was small and white, similar to her mother's, but it had no front yard. Mae looked in the empty mailbox and opened the door. The dog padded behind her.

"Switch Iron," she called. "Look here."

The front room was quiet and dark. Mae pulled up the window shades and blew on the table in front of the window. "Lord, how dusty." She picked up three empty Blatz cans from the floor. "Here his traces, doggie, see if you c'n find him." The dog curled up on the plastic covered couch.

Mae stepped out of her shoes and carried the empty cans to the kitchen, then tiptoed to the bedroom door. She opened the door quietly, a finger over her lips. She frowned at the dog: "Ssh." She peeked in, then released the knob, letting the door bang against the bedroom wall, and walked back to the small front room.

"Why, he don't seem to be here, honey dog." She

looked around the room carefully. "Switch Iron, baby?.. Why, he ain't here." She looked surprised, then resigned. "And me with no dog food in the house, not a smidge. Lord. He'll be back terrectly, though," she said, noddng at the collie, "and will he be evermore surprised." Mae sank onto the couch, making the plastic crackle. She tucked her legs beneath her and looked at the dog. "Ain't that man awful? Well..." She took a compact from her pocket-book and examined her face in the mirror, puckering her wide lips, then smiling with her face turned at different angles. Satisfied, she snapped the compact shut and patted the collie's neck.

She sat on the couch a long while; she scratched the dog's neck, pulling back the fur to look at his white skin, and looked out the window into the slowly darkening street. "I do wish he'd come, doggie. He'll be on the next street-car, though, I'll betcha.

"Look at us -- mopin' in the dark!" Mae turned on the overhead light. It washed the middle of the room with harsh yellow, deepened the shadows in the corners. "Bet you're hungry, huh, boy? Switch Iron'll bring some hamburger meat for us, most prob'ly, and you can have some too -- as celebration of your first day here. That'll do ya until the A & P opens tomorrow." Mae stood in the middle of the room and stared out the window, her eyes vague. She wet her lips, then shook back her hair. "That'll do ya," she said softly. She turned to the dog and nodded to him politely, as if he were an important guest. "He ain't always

this late," she said, "in fact, hardly never."

Mae touched a lamp on the table before the window. She stroked the shiny pink surface, caressed the crystal drops bordering the shade. "He gave me this, Switch Iron did." Her eyes were softly bright. "See, boy. Real crystal. He brought it alla way from North Carolina last year, right before we was married -- an' he was on a street-car convention then." She laughed and turned to the dog. "You wouldn't believe it, maybe, but he's a big man in streetcar circles. And look, this ashtray too. I never use it 'cause it's special. She held it up to the light. "Look, yellow -- and wavy edges, with Natural Bridge, 7th wonder of the world printed on it. Charlottesville -- that's where it's from. Guess that counts for somethin', huh?" She kissed the ashtray, her eyes closed, then placed it on the table carefully, as if on an altar.

Mae sat next to the collie on the sofa. Each time a streetcar whirred and crackled on the street outside she tensed, sitting straight and quiet, her lips slightly parted, and waited for steps on the sidewalk.

"Switch Iron, Switch Iron," she crooned. Her head fell to her knees; she watched the pattern her finger drew on the grey rug. "Why Switch Iron, where have you been, you silly dear?" She looked at the chair in front of the window and laughed softly. "I bet you been to N.C. again and brought me a present." Her bright eyes looked up coyly. "You did? Oh, sweetie, a two piecer, that's what I



wanted and wanted like I tole Mama and this collie here. But you'd never guess who this dog belongs to. Yes, siree he's for you, honey, but that's not the half -- but wait -- let me get you a beer first." Her voice was shrill. "No, I'll get it." She jumped up, shaking her head. "You set. You're tired after a long trip, I'd guess." Mae giggled and walked to the kitchen. She walked quickly, with self-conscious mincing steps. She returned in a few minutes, still smiling, and put a glass on the table before the window. She poured it half full of beer, then put the can beside it. "There, honey." She clasped her hands behind her back and rocked forward and back. "Oh, I'm fine -- but this sailor on the streetcar, he nearly ..." She sighed and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. "Oh, let's not talk about it. Calm down, Switch Iron." She stamped her foot. "Think about the beach tomorrow, how I'll look in that green suit, just matchin' my eyes, and the nice cold water.. and honey..." she sat on the arm of the chair. "A surprise." She looked down at her clasped hand. "A kid, honey .. yes yes its true, really."

The collie whined. "Aw hell," Mae said. "Hellfire." She sipped at the beer, then stretched out on the sofa, her face against the dog's fur. "Come on, Switch Iron," she said. "Come on home. We got surprises."

Mae awoke when the door slammed. She stretched slowly, like a slender cat, until her feet touched the end

of the couch. "Switch Iron, baby," she said, sleep in her voice, "I'se just dreamin' about you an' now you're here ... lookit what I brought." She sat up rubbing her eyes.

"Oh... who're you?" A strange man stood in the middle of the room. He was short and wore round glasses; he gave the impression of greyness. He coughed and stepped toward Mae.

Mae screamed. "You buzzard, you filthy buzzard, get outa here. I'll sic my dog on you. Get'im, collie." The dog yawned and licked Mae's hand.

"Listen, lady, I'm o.k., I just..."

"Oh... Get away. Gwan. This is the second time today -- sailor tryin' to fiddle with me and when I tole Switch Iron just now he's mad as hell." Mae's eyes blazed. She held tight to the back of the sofa. "Git outa here. Switch Iron's in the bedroom asleep, an' if you know what's good for you you'll leave instead of fiddlin' around."

The man's mouth looked unhinged: he closed it, it fell open again. Mae looked at him steadily, at his head, flat on top, and his large ears and eyes. "Friend," he said, "I'm a friend."

"Oh." Mae relaxed and laughed awkwardly. "I bet you're Switch Iron's boss an' me with nothin' to feed you. He tole me how nice you was -- he's asleep right now, tuckered, an' I just can't wake him, you know. Lord, I guess I'm a mess." She patted her hair.

"No. That is, I'm an officer, Mrs. Hensely. Name's

Miller. Fred Miller." His voice was hearty.

"Oh, Lordy. Here, sit down." Mae's hand fluttered toward a chair. "It's about Switch Iron beatin' up the sailor ain't it -- I tole him once -- more'n once, that is, You c'n understand, I'se in the movies, a sailor starts fiddlin', just like today -- well, Lord, you c'n understand." Mae looked around the room anxiously. "Look -- look here. Seventh wonder of the world." She walked to the table and picked up the ashtray. She thrust it at the man. "Look -- from Charlottesville. He brought it."

The man placed the ashtray on the table gently. "That's very pretty," he said. "Now, lady." He took her hands.

"Oh! You buzzard... get your hands..."

"Mrs. Hensely." The man's eyes were kind. Mae stared at him. "You husband has another wife. In North Carolina -- He's at the station now, arrested, an' bein' as you had no phone..." The man spoke rapidly, then stopped. He chewed his lip and frowned.

"I'll be damned," Mae said. She laughed silently, her lips closed tightly, as if she might explode, her back and shoulders shaking. She looked at the man's wide eyes and stopped abruptly, then pushed back her hair. "Now you leave," she said. "That's the silliest excuse I have ever in my life heard for breakin' and enterin'."

"Lady..." The man shook his head side to side in protest; his hands were flat against his chest. "Her name's

Osborne, formerly, I swear."

"I'll get Switch Iron if you don't leave..he's in the bed asleep. ..be out here any minit with all this carryin' on."

"Three children," the officer said. "He's got three. Look..." He pulled some papers from his coat pocket and shuffled through them.

Mae looked at him angrily. "Listen," she said. "Quit spoilin' my surprises. Dog and..." She pointed at her stomach.

The man stared.

"It's grand," she said, "he'll have a little sand bucket and shovel an' we'll take pictures of him, kinda crouched over like, diggin'." Mae hunched her shoulders to show him what she meant. "We're goin' to the beach." She looked at the man, her eyes soft, not seeing him. "Alot." Mae could feel the sun on her back and Switch Iron's hand and hear the waves and feel him next to her, wet after swimming. Coke bottles lay next to the towel, empty, wet, covered with sand. The kid was in the waves, his little black head bobbing. She sat up to look at him, shading her eyes: "Switch Iron, maybe he's too far out."

"Mrs. Hensely, you need a drink or something." He tried to push her to the couch.

"Oh, no," Mae said. "Switch Iron, he'd not allow that." Her eyes were bright. "Listen -- I'm gonna tip out quiet, so's not to wake him. I'll be back later, when

everything's all right, hear?" Mae walked around the room, touching things -- a chair, the lamp. She stopped at the sofa and pulled at the dog's rope. "Come on, honey dog... he might be in the way, huh? If you're here later, tell'im I'll be back when everthing's allright." Mae smiled at the man, nodded her head up and down. "O.k.?" She put on her shoes, walked to the door, then turned around, confused. "Maybe I oughta leave a note?" The man stood dumb, his hand stretched out to her. "Naw, I guess he'll know." She slammed the door behind her.

"Lady .. Mrs. Hensely..."

She ran across the street. A trolley was waiting. She pulled the dog on after her.

"No dogs, ma'am," the driver said, looking down at her, "absolutely no dogs."

"Oh, but..." Mae looked at him, pleading.

The man shook his head sadly. "Nope." The light in the streetcar was harsh, unfriendly; the passengers looked at Mae sullenly, wanting to be home.

Mae, suddenly very tired, stepped off the trolley. "That's all right, honey dog, maybe the next." She watched the streetcar move away, looked at the sparks on the wire above. It moved faster and faster and it was bright inside. The light shone on the passengers' heads and the advertisements, gleamed on the steel rims of the seats, and it grew smaller, swallowed by the darkness. "Please wait," she called, and began to run.



## Summertime

Fireflies jewelled the dark porch. Laughing to herself (her private laugh sounded like a child's whimper), Mary Frances cupped her hands and advanced, tiptoeing. After each capture she sank into the slat swing; it rocked sideways, crazily, knocking the front of the house. Sometimes there were angry resulting voices from inside: "Hey, what the hell, Mary Frances?" Her father. Or her mother: "Don't ruin the reception like that, dear. Ed Sullivan is wavering." Her father: "Stupid! That's not Sullivan, that's, that's..." Mary Frances only mouthed silent replies to the clapboard and went on rocking. She turned her cupped hands side to side, liking the warm red glow between her fingers: she must be on fire!

Each time she opened her fingers, uncurling her fingers slowly (like a day lily opening, she thought) and each firefly hesitated and then circled upwards, winking, she remembered things. She remembered being very young, so young she was still called little Francie -- when would that have been? She chased fireflies on the lawn at dusk; Granny, now long dead, bought whole mason jars full, ten fireflies for a penny. "Oh, my stars!" Granny would say, "Oh, my stars!" rocking, smiling vaguely, as she searched her bosom for a coin purse.

All those first June nights, when China Grove was

asleep, Mary Frances sat on the porch with memories pressing close: she was almost always alone. Sometimes her father, on his way to bed, would push open the screen, and hesitating, whisper, "Mary Frances?" Startled, as though from sleep, her voice husky like that, she would say, "Oh, daddy." He'd sit beside her noisily, clap her on the back, and shout, "How's my old girl? How was that first year of college? How many boys did you kiss?" Other times it was her mother, pressing her nose against the screen, craning her neck to look at Mary Frances in the swing. "What are you doing all alone? You'll get sniffles sure enough." Mary Frances would look at her mother's face, like a round meringue against the screen (this made her giggle and her mother wanted to know why) and she answered each time, "Yes ma'am. Going to bed right soon." Then she did not look at the face so she would not see her mother's lips move silently in unison with hers. Her mother, clearing her throat, swept away upstairs, noiselessly, like a dignified ghost. But most of the hours were private, just Mary Frances and her other, young self together. She caught fireflies and sat on the swing and looked down the street at the high houses pale in the moonlight. For there was no one she especially wanted to see, not even her oldest friend Priscilla across the street (they had collected Tab Hunter pictures together); Priscilla now smirked a good deal and wore her hair ratted tall.

The swing creaked, the darkness was warm against her

skin, making her feel fragile and loved: she remembered things. Gestures, sounds, the shape of a nose, the way someone looked running, laughing back over his shoulder: images like snapshots, motion held in stillness. Now China Grove seemed changed, slightly acrid and uneasy in tenor -- or was it her, she wondered?; to remember was a comfort. She put the images together; each night she watched the same stream, as a movie, over and over.

It was early childhood, the endless heavy-lidded days becoming one long summer twilight; the sky bloomed and the air was silky. It was always almost time to go home and the play electric. They, the children, flushed and treble-voiced, had roller skated down the streets, flying over asphalt which had humped and buckled in the heat. Shade trees spread over the street, the green almost meeting above, making ribbons of the sky. They played red rover in the Reese's side yard (old Mrs. Reese handed gingerbread out the window on her good days) and they skinned the cat on the low limbs of their magnolia tree, the girls squealing, their curls hanging almost to the grass. (What a commotion when Priscilla fell on her head on purpose, making like some puffy-cheeked boy had pushed her!) There was baseball in the street and cowboys and Indians all over everybody's yards: they could never quite hear mothers calling. Fathers straggled home and bent for their newspapers, already wet with dew in the tall grass near the street; they sprawled white-shirted on porch swings and read

and nodded to their neighbors. It grew darker. The children, playing tag, flashed through the side yards. Then the kitchens looked and sounded cozy, with shadows of mothers flickering across the lighted windows and the comfortable noises of pots and dishes being unstacked and rearranged inside. Smells of dinner cooking blended with the heavy odor of magnolias and the first dim stars appeared. The children, turning back to wave, scattered.

It was one of those June evenings when Mary Frances mused in the swing, after her parents had finished one round of quarreling and the moon was full, that Stephen Mallison loped up the front walk. "Thank God," she thought, "Thank God," rousing herself, for she realized that she was boiling inside, chafing for event and change. He climbed the steps like a proud, shy heron and hung over her a second; looking into her startled eyes, he called her lovely. Just like that: "lovely." He settled down -- just as if he were used to it! just as if he'd been there before! (but he hadn't) -- and, with his legs angled, proclaimed himself. "I am a poet now," he said. "A poet." She tucked her feet beneath her and let him lull her with his poems, read in a mellow voice by the the light of the moon. Mary Frances watched him as he read: his nose was long, his chin pointed, and his cheeks looked as if he were sucking in all the time. Even then Mary Frances felt something begin in her: he was such a surprise!

He came back every evening and they sat on the quiet



porch until her mother wanted to know was he glued to that swing, and what were they doing all that time, please?; then they walked. Then Mary Frances remembered his childhood too, for such connection between them made their warming together all the more a surprise. There was not much: he had just been one of those scrubby boys playing baseball in the twilight. Once, she recalled, when they were both about ten or so, he had chased her into the wooded lot that separated their houses, bound her to a tree, gagged her and left her for hours, not out of love, but indifference. They had been in the same grades in grammar school: his awkwardnesses, his protruding ears, his affinity for mischief had been average enough. Only two distinct memories there: he had drawn birds legs with the proper angles (not mere straight sticks like the other children's) and he liked erasers. He would work a whole sheet of blank paper, his thin shoulders hunched with concentration, covering it with flecks of art gum. Yet such connection was almost not enough, for Mary Frances discovered that she wished for flow as well as surprise. Sometimes in those June evenings when they walked together she watched him, long and brown under the street lamps and wished that he had been as she imagined the boy Shelley, pale and ineffectual, looking down from his room in the eaves at the other children playing. Then there could have been a subtle bond between them even as children: he the sensitive child poet, she the sensitive child receptor. Perhaps it was such mulling,



such looking for connection, or perhaps it was merely the feel of the soft air as they walked together in those summer evenings that caused Mary Frances to identify the texture of her love with the serenity and grace of those half-twilight evenings of childhood.

But it was only in texture, Mary Frances felt, for college had awakened both of them. Mary Frances had brought home a footlocker and a new set of attitudes. The house irritated her. It was exactly the same: the arrangement of the heavy walnut furniture in the living room, the grey and white striped wallpaper on the first floor, the cracked oval mirror in the front hall, the stolid female ancestor hanging in a gilt frame over the dining room fireplace. Even the red smear on the living room ceiling remained. Mary Frances remembered, years ago, having thrown a lipstick at it; her father, characteristically, had somehow never gotten around to removing it. Vases and bowls and china figurines cluttered the downstairs rooms: they sat precisely where they always had, in the same positions on the same tables and mantelpieces. Yet such things made her sad, too: the familiar smells, the rancid odor of the carpet and over-stuffed chairs, the smells of furniture polish mixed with that of the honeysuckle outside the open windows stirred her painfully, so that she could almost feel it physically, as something hard in her throat. With her vague resentments was coupled a feeling of vague poignancy.

Her frilly little girl's room dissatisfied her. She threw out the pink chintz bedspread and curtains, the furry white rug with the clown face embroidered on it, the stuffed pandas and dolls which had covered her bed. On the ceiling was her own private Orion, stars which had glowed her to sleep as a child. She sealed these in an envelope and locked them in her jewelry box. She took down the lace curtains and hung orange drapes; she removed her Degas ballerinas in favor of Matisse and Miro prints. She often sat there in the late afternoons, looking out her window into the side yard and brushing her newly-long copper hair. She listened to string quartets and tried not to hear the angry voices downstairs when her father came home.

She dreaded the long supper each night, with all its ritual and tension. The only times her parents did not quarrel was in their siding together against her: they thought her notions, acquired at school and from Stephen, horrifying. When she was silent they fought, fought with a bitterness, a vindictiveness that Mary Frances had not remembered, over the most trifling sorts of things. Her mother once scalded her father with a pot of hot tea in an argument which began when he forgot to fill the ice trays. He was irritable when supper was cold; she said he shouldn't stop to drink and do the Lord only knew what else on the way home. They pulled Mary Frances back and forth in their arguments. Her mother would say, "Why I spent three full hours on this casserole, recipe of the month in Woman's Day,

and just fretted over the rolls, waiting for you to come home. Isn't that so, Mary Frances?" turning tired grey eyes to her daughter. Her father picked at his food. "I bet you have better stuff at school, hey sugar?" glancing sidewise at his wife.

One night, drying the supper dishes while her mother washed, Mary Frances fought with her over Stephen. Her mother said she went out with him too much, that she worried and turned in bed when she thought what they must be doing so late! Besides, she said, he was coarse and didn't smell like a gentleman should. Mary Frances argued that she could not appreciate genius and that she had no conception of spiritual love. Her mother finally cried piteously. "I'm only trying to protect you, Mary Frances. If you don't heed my words you'll end up with a coarse man like your father and then you'll remember your poor old mother." Not knowing why she said it, hating herself while she said it, Mary Frances screamed at her, "He's better than you are, he's a hell of a lot better than you are" and ran upstairs to her room. Curled on her bed, clenching the spread, Mary Frances heard her mother wailing below and her father's voice, "Now, Marion, Marion, the girl didn't mean it." She heard her mother go out, slamming the door, and soon, there were slow footsteps on the stairs and a gentle knock at her door. Her father came in and sat on the bed beside her. He stroked her hair; she jerked away. She must try to understand, he began, that her mother hadn't been herself of

late. Not all her fault: his too, for he had made some big mistakes. Mary Frances turned to the wall and he tried again.

"Why she's tried poison, Mary Frances," he said in a trembling voice, "poison. Put arsenic in both our ice cream sundaes. I knew right off that the chocolate tasted queer, so I .... Can't make her go to a psychiatrist -- it's my fault, I ..."

Mary Frances turned to face him, stared at his short white fingers clenched together. "Then why don't you leave her alone, for God's sake?"

He stuttered. "None of us are perf- perfect. I own up to mistakes, big mistakes..."

Mary Frances wanted no confession. "Get out," she whispered. "Just go on."

"Allright." He sidled to the door. "Wouldn't you like to tell me about anything, baby? College? Frat men?"

"Please leave, daddy."

He started to slam the door, pulling hard on the knob, but changed his mind at the last instant: it made a sound like "whhh--ick."

Mary Frances lay on the bed and waited for Stephen as she did every evening.

Mary Frances hated to think of her wrongness, of her parents' wrongnesses. It was too confused and complex; besides, it hurt too much. The vague, half-formed nature of



her judgments forced her to see how vague and half-formed her other ideas and judgments were. Although at first shy, Stephen grew assured and positive with her: he became her interpreter of the world.

In the evenings he came, dirty and stubble-chinned, from his construction job and whistled from the sidewalk. Mary Frances ran down the stairs and walked sedately past the living room where her parents watched television. Her father: "Walking out again, eh? Give'im what for." Her mother: "Not again!" Then, with a significant raise of the eyebrows: "Remember, you were born and raised a lady."

She ran to catch Stephen's arm and they walked, he talked. She watched him, striding long and easy, his hands shoved in the back pockets of his jeans, his narrow feet splayed as he walked, and listened. He talked as rapidly and easily as he talked, once he got started. Opinions spilled out, sometimes complicated ones with illustrations and involved examples; his talk turned and turned and pirouetted, his observations related by their very sinuousness, so that Mary Frances often felt as if she were hearing a river with curves and bends and rapids, and it dizzied her. Those long sweet weeks she looked at his soft hair in the dim light, watched him scratch his crooked nose, and strained her mind to distill his ideas and make them her own. She had never heard such talk: Socialism was good and inevitable; Schlitz beer was inferior except on draught; Negroes should be hired on purpose and paid extra; neon signs and billboards



were immoral; people who went to church (especially the China Grove First Baptist which her parents attended) were meek fools; Gertrude Stein was queer; Dylan Thomas was second cousin to God. He saw things for her too: the initials scratched in a sidewalk (poured when they were children) was like a tombstone, a monument to their childhood; the pine needles were like ice in the moonlight, brittle and cracking when the breeze stirred them.

Sometimes he turned all his attention to her, talking of her graceful neck, the sweet curve of the instep of her foot. Once he kissed her forehead and said, "I think I love you. You will make poems." He often stepped into the shadows and pulled her to him; Mary Frances, feeling his heart beating fast against her cheek, pressed close. But when his touch became insistent, Mary Frances always remembered her mother. She envisioned her bolt upright in bed, her head small and flat with the hair pin-curled in tight, neat rows, her face set in a frown. Her lips moved: a prayer? a command? Her father, beside her, hogging the sheet, snored lustily. Then Mary Frances pulled away from Stephen and hung her head, unwilling to meet his eyes, ashamed of her confusion.

One July morning Mary Frances' mother killed herself. That morning Mary Frances awoke feeling uneasy, hating to face her parents; she had stayed with Stephen until two-thirty the night before. As she had stood on the front porch saying a warm goodnight to Stephen, Mary Frances had

looked up to her parents' room and seen her mother watching, her face pale and bloated, seeming to float angrily in the darkness. She had tiptoed up the stairs and eased into bed; she had lain a long while without sleeping, listening to the low voices in the next room, straining to make them out. Once there had been laughter (her father) and a crack (a slap?) and then continuation of the low tones. She had not slept well, for the voices became part of her dream. Now she lay tense and tired, clutching her hot pillow. Only when she heard her father's heavy step in the next room and dresser drawers being opened and slammed did she sit up. She leaned forward and raised the venetian blind to let in the morning sun.

Mary Frances, then, was the one to find her: she looked out the window into the side yard and saw her mother swinging from a low branch of the magnolia tree, swinging gently in the shade of the dusty green leaves. Her bare feet, turned in, almost brushed the grass.

She went with her father. Leaning together, with eyes lowered, they cut her down. Then her father cried: "It's the only selfish thing she ever did," he said. Mary Frances turned away from his screwed-tight eyes. She saw her mother's saddle shoes, arranged neatly at the trunk of the tree, the cotton socks rolled up inside them. The note was there; it was about a woman named Lorraine. Mary Frances did not read it all; she burned it and washed the ashes down the kitchen sink and locked herself in her room.

The next weeks carried Mary Frances greyly, in a dream; the days and hours wrapped about her and lingered. She would not go to the funeral; she would not see the investigator; she would not see the ladies who came with cake and fried chicken and whom she often heard downstairs murmuring and clucking. She saw Stephen only briefly and could not respond; she rarely saw her father, and when she did, she avoided his eyes. She cried for days until her eyes were swollen shut and then, limp and dopey, sat alone in her room, her mind turning awkwardly and slow. She listened to her father walking, walking downstairs in the living room, through the hall, into the kitchen (fainter steps then) and back to the living room. Once he broke something: she heard the tinkle of china against a wall and felt her hate ebb. But she must hate him, she thought, she must; the memory of him, after a day of hunting, helped. She closed her eyes and could see in that distant autumn, the car coming down the street, the dead black bear strapped to the top, the bear's lips curled back from his teeth and gums, smiling in horrible ecstasy in the face of the wind, and she saw the prideful glow of her father's face. Mary Frances sat and rubbed the green-patterned wallpaper for hours at a time. She traced the small flowers with her index finger over and over and tried to pattern the memories, the colors and shapes that swam about in her mind.

It was August before she could leave the chair in her room and the green-patterned wallpaper. One evening she

heard Stephen's low whistle: then she realized that she had been waiting for him these weeks, waiting to be ready for his help. She found him on the front steps. He stood; she ran to him, flung her arms around him and cried comfortably until she forgot why she cried, only aware of his shoulder and his arms pressed about her waist. After a time he said "hush" and lifted her chin. Mary Frances thought he looked a saint, with his eyes worried and his long face haloed by the street light, the light rainbow colored by her tears. "Go read this," he said. He handed her an envelope, kissed an eyebrow, and backed down the steps. "I hope it will help," he said.

Mary Frances raced up the stairs. The odor of magnolias hung sweet and heavy in her room. In the envelope was a poem, "In Summer, for Mary Frances." It was a poem about her mother, her mother as Stephen remembered her from their childhood, young-faced and gentle in the summer evenings. She herself was an active, alive poem as he pictured her, with the expressions of her face changing and her graceful quick movements, and yet she was moving within a still picture, held firm and immobile. Mary Frances never considered whether or not it was a good poem: it was utilitarian. As her feelings about her mother's death gradually quieted, she used the poem to form the pattern of her feelings. So categorized, her sorrow became less confused, more manageable. Her mother was flour-covered from baking sugar cookies for her as a child; she tried not to



extend her further, to the times when she nagged and cornered her father. Her father became a pitiful pudgy man in a brown-checked shirt, a pacer about the living room, getting his just rewards; she hardened against him and turned all her love, her strings and shreds of ideas to Stephen.

In mid-August the heat was intense. Thick grey dust and hard sunlight shrouded the streets and houses; the nights were still and oppressive. The grass burned, the magnolias folded and turned brown. Housewives and children sat on front porches and talked listlessly, their newspaper fans moving slowly, their legs spread wide. Mary Frances turned and turned in her hot unmade bed most afternoons, not reading, not thinking, just staring at the ceiling and wallpaper, drawing in the dust on the windowsill. Sometimes, in frantic boredom, she listened to the radio and brushed her long red hair, pulling it in front of her to watch it take fire in the sunlight. At five she cooked supper and ate alone at the kitchen table. Her father came home with the first shadows and ate alone in his room with the television tuned loud. He left his dishes outside the door and Mary Frances washed them quickly, hating to touch what he had touched. Then Mary Frances came alive: she wrapped her hair around her head in braids, put on her sandals and powdered her shoulders and face a dull ivory. Stephen came and they walked, holding themselves together against the still night and Stephen talked softly, on and on.



Now their walks always ended at the wooded lot between their houses; they lay wrapped together on the hot, dry ground and watched the heat lightning above the pines. Then Mary Frances talked. She stroked Stephen's long hard arms and back and talked about their children, their marriage, the garden they would have, while Stephen smiled up at the pines. When his eyes turned vague Mary Frances knew he was thinking poems and lay silent, pressing herself closer against him to share the poems.

One night his long silence made her restless: Mary Frances felt that he had forgotten her. She pressed her hand against his stomach tentatively. He looked at her, surprised. "Will you, then?" and leaned over her. His touch was liquid. Then Mary Frances saw her mother's horrified face and she saw her father, his mouth a lascivious curve, he sweating in the dark as he caressed a long ripe back.

Mary Frances jerked upwards.

"What the devil?"

She looked at him, her eyes wounded. "My mother," was all she could explain.

"Oh," he said, and patted her hand. He stretched out silent for a long while. Again he seemed to have forgotten her.

"Let's go home," she said.

Stephen stood and brushed pine needles from his jeans.

"That was the best poem I ever wrote, wasn't it?" his eyes

fixed on some distant point.

"What?"

"You know... about your mother."

"That was a callous thing to say." She ran crying and fell on the slick pine needles. He picked her up and sat with her in his lap, stroking her hair and humming softly, as if she were his child: they were reconciled.

But she slept poorly that night, turning and fighting the sheet. Nightmares shook her from sleep several times; she lay trembling, watching the shadows move on the walls and waiting for them to congeal and strangle her.

The next morning, a Saturday, Mary Frances awoke late with her pillow and face washed in sunlight and a dreary grinding noise in her ears. The noise seemed so wearily insistent that when she first struggled away from sleep, she thought it was part of her dream. She sat up, kicked away the sticky sheet and lifted her hair from her damp back and neck. The noise persisted; Mary Frances shook herself and looked around the room. Then there were men's voices.

"Pull, dammit."

"What do you think I'm doing, you ass?"

Mary Frances leaned forward to look out the window. Two men, at opposite ends of a red-handled saw, were cutting into the magnolia tree. Mary Frances stared, hypnotized, at the men's wet muscular backs and the long saw, one end shining silver in the morning light, the other end hidden in the darkness of the tree. The men swore and pushed and the silver

end disappeared, the other end appeared, the thin metal shimmying from the force applied. The upper limbs shuddered; brown magnolia blossoms pelted the dry grass. The saw was thrust out the other side again, a long silver tongue.

Then, suddenly, Mary Frances understood: it was if the saw were pressing into her own stomach. She gasped and leaned forward. She was not dreaming. Total strangers were cutting down the magnolia tree.

She leaned out the window. "What do you mean?" Her voice was tinny and small.

"Look what you're doing, you bastard." One of the men glared round the trunk at his companion who was looking up into the branches.

Mary Frances ran downstairs, pulling on a robe as she went. She found her father in the kitchen. He sat at the linoleum table, his head resting against the window sill. His eyes were closed. On the table before him were a bottle of rye, half empty, and a box of shredded wheat lying on its side. He crumbled a biscuit of the cereal between two fingers slowly, absentmindedly.

Mary Frances stamped her foot and he looked up.

"Darling," he said. His face was ashen, his eyes vacant.

"They're cutting the tree," she said, accusing him, stepping closer.

Her father looked down and moved his fingers in a circle through the cereal on the table. "I couldn't stand

it there," he said. He spoke so softly that Mary Frances had to lean towards him. "I-I-we can't move away - - away -- sell the house-- our house." He strained his eyes at her and passed a hand across his face. "But I couldn't stand it there," he said, rushing the words out in one breath and he drooped as if exhausted.

Furious, she pushed at his shoulder. "You could at least sit up."

"They'll even move the stump later. That's free." He looked out the window. "And grass will cover it."

"Absence of it will be worse than the presence," she said, hating him as pity grew in her. He shrugged and she backed out of the room and ran upstairs to her room, screaming inside herself.

She pulled both her windows down and let the blinds clatter to the sills. She stood in the middle of her room in the half darkness. "I hate him," she said outloud. "I hate him." By begging attention for himself her father had disturbed her tidy organization of things; hurting for her mother and her father filled her so entirely that it became the confusion which hurt most of all. Her mother's memory had been like a callus, not often hurting, only in the way a little, thanks to Stephen.

Stephen. She brushed her hair and dressed quickly in shorts and an old blue shirt. She was out of her room and the house, walking down the sidewalk, slow in the sunny part, faster in the shade as she had as a child going to

Sunday school, before she realized where she was going. She climbed the board steps to Stephen's front porch and knocked on the door.

"Why, hello, honey." Stephen's mother opened the door; she smiled and blinked her little deep-set eyes.

"Come on in and have some lemonade."

The living room was dark; the draperies were pulled to keep out the heat. A small fan rotated in the middle of the room, stirring warm dust; a piece of string caught on the frame stood straight out.

Mary Frances sank into a deep chair. "Where's Stephen?"

His mother was bent over the fan, trying to focus it on Mary Frances. She looked up and blinked. "Why, he's at work, of course. At least I reckon that's where he's at."

"Oh, hell." Mary Frances leaned back as the fan's slight breeze touched her. "Of course."

Stephen's mother cocked her head to one side; her mouth hung open, slightly crooked. Mary Frances thought she looked like a titmouse. "What did you say, dear?"

"I said I'm going to use your phone." She went to the hall and called Stephen. When she came back to the living room, Mrs. Mallison handed her a tall glass of lemonade and sat beside her on the sofa.

"You called him home from work?" she asked after a long silence.

"Yes."



"Oh. Well..."

They sat quiet in the darkness, clicking ice in their glasses, eating vanilla wafers. Mrs. Mallison cleared her throat several times and once ventured "Well, I'll be..." but Mary Frances stared at the fan, her face closed, so Mrs. Mallison said, "Well" again and bent forward to scratch her leg. "Them mosquitoes," she said, shaking her head solemnly. Finally they heard Stephen at the door. Both stood. Mary Frances upset her glass: tiny melted ice cubes slid onto the carpet. She and Mrs. Mallison bent together, knocking heads.

"What's going on?" He smiled down at them.

Mary Frances jumped up and gripped his arm. "Let's go," she said.

Stephen's eyes became round, serious. He pried her hand from his arm and held her around the waist.

Mrs. Mallison scooped up ice cubes and rubbed at the carpet with her hand. She held her pear-shaped face up to them. "There's plenty more lemonade," she said. Tiny lines moved above her nose.

They walked outside and got into the car. Stephen looked at her; Mary Frances looked at her knees. "He had the tree cut down," she said. She glanced at Stephen: he was frowning slightly, trying to understand. She made a little gesture of hopelessness with her hands and shifted in the seat, bringing her legs up under her, turning to Stephen. "I just can't explain how I feel about it. It

just seems... Oh, I don't know, unfair..."

Her voice broke and Stephen pulled her to him.

"Where shall we go?"

"Anywhere." She looked at Stephen's house: his mother squinted out the hall window.

They drove through the easy, somnolent streets; the houses, with their shades and shutters closed against the heat, looked forlorn and sterile to Mary Frances. They rode through the small business district, past the textile mill where her father worked, into the country. Mary Frances held her head out the window: the air was hot and dusty. The pastures were burnt, the flat acres of corn were shriveled and rust colored. A white-faced cow rested her head on a fence rail and blinked at them. Stephen swerved to miss an old colored woman walking barefoot in the road; she turned, gathering two boys and a curly-tailed dog to her, and glared after them through the dust. They passed a barn, leaning and brown shingled, and white farmhouses with raked dirt yards and tin roofs which glittered in the sun. The sun was high: Mary Frances thought it must be twelve. "Not a bit hungry though," she said outloud, wanting to hear how her voice would sound. Stephen turned the car; it was a dirt road, deeply rutted, but it ran straight to the river. They could see it ahead, brown and flat like an army blanket. Goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace grew in the ditches beside the road; to the right stretched long rows of tobacco. They drove almost to the river and

parked in the grass. They walked down a sloping hill and took off their shoes.

"Butterfly in your hair," he said, leaning over her. In his smile (his teeth were bluish in the sun!) she forgot; something new seemed to pass between them. He caught the butterfly, golden and brown, between his fingers and threw it upwards: it flew out over the water. Touching hands, they walked along the river bank. The river was narrow and low; mud showed two feet above the slow-moving water. There were no boats, no fishermen; heat glazed the river and the dusty grass and trees with stillness.

Mary Frances stooped. "Look, what a pretty rock." She held it up, blue in the sun, wanting to linger over everything. "Let's make the world slow," she said.

But he, by merely walking straight ahead, that long neck not even turning an inch, pulled her on.

"It's up here somewhere," he said.

"What?"

Then they found it: a group of low, close-growing trees leaning together in a circle.

"Oh," she said, wonder in her voice as she stepped inside, "like a house." And looking up: "A skylight too." There was a circular pool of sunlight on the ground.

Stephen kicked away beercans and sat down, pulling her with him. Of course, she thought, of course. This is the right thing. But she ground her teeth as Stephen eased her down. The sun shone in her eyes; dry grass plagued her

legs. She looked for love in Stephen's eyes, turning his face to hers, holding his head like a smooth brown egg between her palms as he moved above her. He smiled but his face seemed dulled, his eyes abstracted. She turned away and imagined him as he should be, a face shimmering with tenderness and strength. She opened her eyes again when he moved from her sighing; she looked up and saw that a slight breeze moved the broad leaves above her; they patterned and repatterned the blue, cutting it into odd faces. She thought: all that will have been nothing extraordinary unless he helps now. She turned for him, her eyes wide and pleading.

"What are you doing?" she said, sitting up.

Stephen was bent over, writing on a piece of paper, his back to her. He turned to look at her; his eyes were wild. "I've got a poem," he said, "I knew it would come. Terza rima."

"Did you know I was here?" She did not know if she spoke aloud: he did not answer.

That evening, after supper alone, Mary Frances sat in the porch swing: maybe Stephen would come. The sun hung behind the pines; the air was a peculiar lavender color and it was almost chilly. A child careened past on a bicycle; she could hear the lonely bell even after he turned the corner.

Mary Frances closed her eyes and waited, listening for footsteps. The afternoon, she thought, could have been

all blue pottery and pewter, if only the river had been silvery. But she had pouted, slouched against the car door and they had fought. She remembered his nose: it quivered at the very tip. "It's hard to feel for two people," he had said, "especially when one of them is you. What do you want from me?"

What did she want from him, she wondered, what did she? The smell of honeysuckle made it easy not to think. She rose and slipped down the front steps, her fingers over her mouth; she escaped smoothly, like a log loose from a raft, gliding down a swift river past brush and hills and houses.

She surprised herself: she was in the side yard crying. She almost fell over the stump; she knelt there in the wet grass, her cheek against the rough sweet smelling wood and cried until she was tired. "Suumertilime": her father sang. She saw him, a dim outline, sitting at the kitchen table; he sang and lifted the bottle, holding it straight up.

It was almost dark now. The stump glowed palely; she could still see the wavy thin circles in the freshly cut wood. "And the cotton is hiiigh." His voice rasped and burbled. "Hush little baaaby..." Mary Frances smiled a small smile and sighed, for her father's sake and her own. She rubbed her hand over the wide, sawed off trunk, following the circles; how very old it was, she thought, how much its pattern knew.



O, Roger

There was a trailer in the back yard: just a wooden trailer with two wheels and a long stick in the front made for pulling behind a car. Spelled out on the side in ragged blue letters was the name Martin.

But every time the phone rang and someone asked for Mr. Martin and I went upstairs to inquire, would you believe it? No one ever came to the door.

As if I hadn't seen them! As if I hadn't ever seen them go down the back steps from the top part of the house, that man and that woman carrying a child. As if I hadn't heard that baby squawl in the late afternoons, try as they would to drown out the sound with the television. As if I couldn't hear them laughing and clattering things around (perhaps disturbing Papa and Salmagundi!) when I walked up the stairs and stood on the landing before the door, just fixing to call Mr. Martin to the telephone. I heard them and I knew in my bones they were there, even if they did get quiet when I knocked. I knew: with my ear to the keyhole I could hear them breathing, alive. The minute I turned and walked back down the stairs slowly (I limp: I am old) they talked again, the man saying things like "You cook spinach with a flair, darling, my chickadee." But this was queer: I would run back up (as fast as my old woman's limp would allow, you understand) and they would turn off, even if in

the middle of a word. Like this: "Give baby his bot-."

Then I would turn, go back down the steps, and hear "-tle."

(O Roger, it was a trial!)

It wasn't as if I had time and energy to throw away.

For one thing, there was Salmagundi. When the Martins came, Salmagundi was an almost two year old Easter present from Papa. For a sweet blue parakeet he took so much time! Food and watering time of course. Plus this: Salmagundi was highly gifted and it was therefore my bounden duty to instruct him, to build his vocabulary. Salmagundi sat in his gilded cage which hung in the kitchen window above the African violets; I wish you could have seen his little bird eyes light up when we went through the dictionary together. I spent my spare moments (of which there were very few) with him, and by the time of the Martin onslaught we had worked through Webster's one and a half times.

Then, more important, there was Papa. Even way back then Papa was about a thousand years old and lived in the back room. You should have seen him: genteel, silky. He wouldn't allow just anyone to take care of him, to look after his special needs. Papa was delicate, you understand, not like other men. For instance, food. It was bad for Papa's constitution to mix colors of food; usually he had all white meals and sometimes (in the summer months) greens which were not too loud or rich: endive would not do. And as for mixing carrots and beets, eggplant, meat! It wouldn't

have been right, it just wouldn't, to have gaudy colors mix in his stomach. Rest assured that his meals required very very special preparation and know-how; you couldn't have done it. And the tonics, the warm blankets, the paint brushes to be kept just so. Papa's organs had to be in perfect balance: he had his work.

If only you could have seen him at his work, so painstaking and meticulous, your heart would have gone out to him too. His room was rather small (Papa despised ostentation) and there was one window at the back. The drapes were drawn open in the afternoons so Papa might observe and learn. The walls were covered not with ordinary wallpaper, but with smooth black velvet. But it was oh so gay: Papa's work hung on the walls. There were two tables--one by the window, where Papa sat in the afternoons with his chess, and a round one, of shining mahogany, in the center of the room, where Papa worked.

As far back as I can remember, Papa always sat at that table in the mornings. He looked so devoted, as he sat there, his fingers moving so slowly, his head bent. He wore wine-colored dressing gowns then, which, you would have agreed, were just the thing with his lovely white hair. At juice time in the mornings I would pad in very soft, set the tray beside him and watch. He didn't look up--not just yet--he was always in the middle of something. Oh, his profile, so white and patrician, the long white hands moving so carefully! And the work, dear, was sheer magic: the golds, the

reds and oranges, straight bold bars, curling lines and big silver feathers like clouds, the green of the serpents' eyes, blue stars on a white line.

The art of heraldry is tres distingue, you know. Papa was a real artist and did only the best of family lines. This was the trick: there were big books, bound in yellow morocco, that Papa traced the coats of arms from. He would open a book and find a family line of the best order. Then he smoothed silky-fine paper over the crest and traced it--ever so lightly and delicately, with a very sharp no. 2 pencil. I was allowed to close the book and carry it away. This is where the art was: elaboration and color. The better the family, the more extra plumes, boas, curlicues, labyrinthine lines and ornaments of black, silver, gold.

Our line was very very fine. Old Sir Hugh Middleton founded the London waterworks way back when. Just imagine! And to this day they have the same one! Long ago when Papa was young he went to England to find out about our fine line from scratch. Of course I didn't know then--I was not yet born--but Papa told me all about it one day, the day after Mama ran off with that Utley cad and the day I began to look after Papa.

That day (O Roger, I remember it well) I bound my hair with a soft green ribbon and carried in Papa's lunch: spoonbread so light it seemed it might fly. Papa sat at his round table reading from one of the yellow morocco bound books, following the words with his middle finger,



right hand. Oh, he was a man for shapely fingernails, perfectly gorgeous half-moons! He looked up and smiled sweetly; Papa's hair was glossy brown then, with just a touch of white.

"Leila Ann," he said to me, "Leila Ann, my own dearest daughter. So kind of you, I'm sure, to bring spoonbread to your loving father. Why it looks so light it seems it might fly!" Papa bowed from the waist.

"Papa," said I, "the pleasure is mine."

"Do sit here, Leila Ann."

I sat and Papa began. Oh, the pain in his limpid grey eyes! It broke my heart as he said, "Dearest daughter, now that your mother has run off with that Utley cad, I must clarify." Then Papa smiled sunlight and tender clouds. "Our line is very very fine, but, Leila Ann, it is tainted."

Tainted? Why, what was tainted, I wanted to know.

Papa put it to me straight: "Political trouble my dear, political. Involved with getting Mary Queen of Scots on the throne." Papa pulled at his earlobe and was quiet a moment. The drapes were open. There was a rectangle of winter sunlight on the smooth floor. "However," Papa said, "However, my dear Leila Ann," smiling at me, "I gave the men in London \$15.35 to mark tainted from the books, all for you. Was because of Sir Hugh's waterworks that they consented, praised be." I touched my green hair ribbon and was glad Papa was so wise.

That was the day Papa's real routine and hard work



began. "I will concentrate on crests," he said, "more faithfully than ever." Pause. "Sir Hugh be willing."

At the door, leaving, I turned back to smile.

"One more thing, Leila Ann, my darling. Do not marry that common boy, nor receive him ever again."

(O, Roger, forgive an old woman, for what could I do? Papa sat in the winter sunlight, long fingers on the book. His eyes were greysad and his hair turned whiter and whiter as I watched him.)

Then were twenty peaceful, productive years: the yellow morocco grew yellower, the gold lines and curves of Papa's work became more ornate, his fair became whiter, his voice silkier. My limp began and my back trouble. But the pile of crests grew and in the kitchen window my African violets flourished, Salmagundi sang.

Good years, mind.

And perhaps this was the nicest thing: Papa became a chess wizard. He sat at the table by the window, where the board and chessmen were always set, from after lunch each day until early evening when the light failed. Papa bought this special set only a few days after Mama ran off with the Utley cad--sent straight to Hong Kong for it, if you please! The board was smooth and shining, with brown and cream squares. The chess pieces were cream white and pearl grey, tall oriental figures in flowing robes; the kings had sad walrus mustaches and the queens pierced ears with long earrings which shimmered when touched.

Ah, it was a sight for sore eyes, the way the sunlight poured in the window, the golden light playing on pearl grey and white chesspieces and on Papa's long soft hands folded patiently. Papa usually made no more than two moves in an afternoon. He would just sit and watch the pieces. (I'm sure, just positive, that's how he got the lines in his forehead and about the mouth, concentrating the way he did.) Sometimes he would reach out very slowly and stroke the figures with the tip of his index finger ever so gently. Then he would lift his hand and hold it over the board, his fingers moving slightly, his whole face frowning. Then, when least expected--boom!--Papa made a move, deftly, swiftly. After he moved, he sank back into his chair, his face peaceful and tired: you can see that it took quite a lot out of him, the poor dear.

After eight or ten years Papa tired of playing against himself. One afternoon I put on fresh rouge and my sweetest smile and carried tea and scones in to Papa.

"Come over here quickly, dearest," Papa said, shining by the window. "How fresh your color is!"

I set the tray beside Papa. (Oh, it was a beautifully laid tray; white Spode and Irish linen napery with an M embroidered.) I looked down at the chessboard.

"Why Papa," I cried, "a brand new game."

"Yes, rosy cheeks. I've made one move." Papa's index finger touched a white pawn. He leaned back, pressed folded hands against his chest. "Your move, Leila Ann."

Papa smiled slowly and closed his eyes.

I moved impulsively: in one afternoon I lost two pawns, a knight.

From that day forward Papa and I were chess opponents. Papa's moves were long thought out and deliberate: one time, back in October of '45, Papa thought a week before touching a piece. I grew better, but was still impulsive: not much match for Papa, you see, but then the work in the kitchen and about the house was on my mind.

(O, Roger, Roger. I castled, I moved my knights in L's in the sun, my bishops in diagonals, I protected my queen, but.)

Lord love a duck, dear, how I've run on! Back to the Martins with their trailer, their child, their outrages.

Like I told you, the years were twenty and peaceful before the Martins. Papa traced and painted his crests in the morning, feathery clouds and lines of rich gold, and there was chess in the afternoon and early evenings. And I had my kitchen, the light in the window, violets in the light, Salmagundi in the light, the back yard beyond. We had our hands full. Then: boom, boom, boom! These three strangers.

Just moved in, like they knew what they were doing. Moved in the upstairs that had always been empty. Don't ask me when they came exactly: I just looked out one day, out the kitchen window when I was preparing a white meal for Papa and there was a trailer: Martin on the side in

ragged blue letters. Don't ask me how they knew the telephone number either, or why, stranger still, why they wouldn't accept the calls they got on my phone; it was a puzzle. It wasn't long before I saw them. My eyes were sharp enough.

That Martin man must have left for work in the mornings very early indeed; I, who rise with Salmagundi and other birds never saw him. But in the afternoons, about 3:30 or so, here he would come, chipper as you please, mounting the steps. He was a young, strong man and wore blue shirts open at the collar (wintertime and all!); when I thought to look I could see black hair on his throat. He'd be upstairs for an hour and a half or so: Lord, the noise they'd make! You'd not hear a peep out of that woman or that child until he came. But for that time, hour and a half to two hours, the sounds: sounds of cooking dinner (they ate unfashionably early), of laughing, of that baby squawling like it was stuck, of the television. And sometimes they'd turn up the victrola loud and dance, dance till the house shook and I'd run into Papa's room expecting to find the chess pieces scattered on the floor. After they'd racketed around for an hour and a half to two hours, there they'd go, the whole tribe, down the steps: I'd watch them through the kitchen window. That man, hair on his throat and laughing, tickling the woman. She was a big thing! Blond and a bland, broad face. Wore a cotton dress of white with red stripes going vertical across her ample



breast and hips. Thick ankles and wore sandals! She'd carry that child, all wrapped in terrycloth, down the steps, just waving her fingers in its face and laughing while that man tickled her. Then they'd pile in that old black Ford coupe and rattle away. Lord knows where to or when they came back: Papa and I believed in retiring early.

Now I've told you my duties: I was a busy, busy and tired old woman, with the cooking, cleaning, chess and what-not. And you know Papa could not bear any disturbance. All the noise, laughter, tramping up and down those back steps might have been enough to drive me to action, but it was those phone calls that finally did it.

Now, I put up with those calls for a month: you'll have to give me that. All that ring-a-ling, yes, just a moment sir, limp, limp up the steps, hearing laughter, knock, knock, pound on the door, silence and down again!

Let me tell you about that day I decided. It was really like all the others.

There I was in the kitchen standing over a hot stove and listening to that racket upstairs. The rice had just begun to boil, steaming up my glasses, when the telephone rang. Right on schedule. I rushed out to the phone (pink princess, lights up in the dark) which was on a mahogany stand right outside Papa's door.

"Hello," I said, refined as possible. "Middleton residence. This is Miss Leila Ann Middleton here."

"Hello." The voice was always the same, an old old



man's rusty voice. "Would you be so kind, Miss Middleton as to call Mr. Martin to the telephone. I'd be deeply obliged."

"One moment, please," I said, and went straight up the steps. (The inside steps, you know, right by the kitchen.)

I stood right there on the landing outside their door. I listened carefully: it was for certain they were there, scraping their chairs as they sat down to eat.

"Buckle baby in his chair, sweetest," the woman said, "Buckle baby tight." Then some more scraping, and, (would you believe it?) a loud smacking noise, like someone was being kissed. "My little lovie," the man said, "my sweet little woman with the wasp waist."

That did it: I knew I couldn't have made that up. I knocked, genteel, but loud enough to be heard. "Oh, Mr. Martin," I hallooed, "telephone call for you." Silence. "Sounds urgent." Absolute silence. With my ear to the keyhole, I heard that baby burp. "Oh, Martins," I said, getting piqued, "I know you're there. I am Leila Ann Middleton out here, and of a very fine line, mind." Silence again.

I turned away, went down a step, and heard forks click against plates. Oh! I hope to tell you I made a beeline for that telephone. I picked up the receiver, ready to give that old man what for and ask a question or two. But the line was dead: put that in your pipe and smoke it.

I jerked open Papa's door and rushed in. "Oh, Papa," I said, speaking before spoken to, "those Martins are driving me plain crazy and I know you can't concentrate."

Papa sat quiet by the window in the dimming light. Leaning forward, he watched the chessboard closely. Then his hand shuddered a second over the figures, and--wham--he moved. He settled back in his chair, smiling, his eyes closed. I rushed to him. "Papa," I said, "have you seen them, heard them--that man, that woman, that--"

Papa's lips moved.

"What?" bending to listen.

Papa opened his eyes: serious grey. "Your move, daughter.

That afternoon I lost a bishop.

I went back to the kitchen and found the rice boiled over: that put me in a real pet. I just stood right there by the stove and watched the dinner go to pot. I made Decisions.

Number One: I would never again carry messages (telephone, cablegram, anything) up to that landing. Number Two: I, Leila Ann Middleton, was a person to be reckoned with, and I, Leila Ann Middleton, was worthy of notice. Therefore, I would make those Martins acknowledge my presence.

How? With presents: the surest way.

(O, Roger, always look a gifthorse in the heart.)

First, something old. After I took in Papa's break-

fast the next morning (hardboiled eggwhites on batter-whipped bread lightly toasted) I spent some few minutes looking for my hopechest: I knew it was in that room somewhere. I found it in a corner near the door: it was under piles of Papa's crests and draped with velvet. There it was, dainty as the day it was born, white porcelain with a line of perky blue daisies enameled around the sides.

While Papa sat at the big round table in the center of the room eating his eggwhites and checking Dow-Jones, I rummaged through the chest. Oh, my dear, I had forgotten the treasures it held: flowersprigged dimity dresses, a white lace parasol still not yellowed, my very first book of common prayer with my name stenciled on the front in gold, damask tablecloths, antimicassars, a gold heart-shaped picture frame with a faded familiar face inside. I held the picture in the light, then looked at Papa: he pushed his plate aside and set to work with paper and a sharp pencil. Again I dug: muslin sheets that smelled of lavender, a dance program (tasselled), the long golden braids, my hair, shorn when I became a woman. Then, beneath lace, silk organza, a tiara of pearls, newspaper clippings, there it was: a rattle, sterling silver. My very own, way back yonder, and a really grand rattle: L.A.M. engraved on the handle.

I stood beside Papa's table and rattled.

"Dear daughter," he said, pencilling a curve, "this crest will be quite special."

How selfish I had been, engrossed with my Martins, my gift! Not until that moment had I realized that Papa was drawing, not tracing. And on a sheet of paper twice as large as usual.

"Yes," he said, silver head bending over, "from memory. Our coat of arms: Long live Sir Hugh."

That and the rattle--all at once! I went out just trilling and marched straight to the kitchen. I took that rattle and polished it till it sang and shone in the morning sunlight. When I rattled, so pleased, Salmagundi swung on his perch and said "Margarine, margerine." (That was one brilliant bird, I want you to know.)

Then I thought about those Martins, those calls and giving the rattle: I fumed and stewed until the time came.

Finally, long about three-thirty, here came Mr. Martin in his blue shirt, just whistling up a storm as he climbed the steps: I saw him out the kitchen window. Minute that door closed upstairs the hullaballo began, just like always. Now you'll have to give me credit for at least a peafowl's worth of brains: I knew they wouldn't come to the door if I limped up to the landing and knocked. So I darted outside, spry as I could manage, and left that rattle shining on the steps.

I waited.

Two hours later, short about a minute and a hair, I was in Papa's room delivering tea, standing by the chess-board, and saw them coming down.

They just came swinging down those steps, singing, laughing, tickling each other for all they were worth. That woman! My dear, the way she waved her fingers in that child's face it's a wonder the poor thing didn't go crosseyed. And she had a rubber band from a fruit jar on her wrist to keep off the rheumatism! Well, there they were just carrying on to beat the band and then, they saw it!

I nearly flattened my face against the windowglass. (Had to lean over the chessboard, but Papa didn't mind: he was watching his queen like he thought it might take off.)

They saw it and, dear, you couldn't imagine anyone more surprised. Why, they were turned to pure stone! Just stood and looked down at the rattle, so still they seemed not to breathe, for at least a full minute. Then: full speed ahead. They moved so fast and shouted so it gives me a headache even to think of it. Laughing!: you never heard the like. That man swooped up my rattle and without even one glance towards our window he leaped to the ground and danced like an Indian, just laughing and shaking that rattle up and down, side and back. Naturally that woman joined in; she stood next to him, kept time with a sandalled foot and threw the baby up in the air again and again, in rhythm with the dance. Such carryings-on you've never seen! Then they all swirled around together, until they seemed butter, like Sambo's tigers, just howling and laughing. Mr. Martin hit that rattle on the ground, on his knee, on



that woman's head: flung it around, and it sterling and engraved, remember!

Then--Oh Lord I was afraid of it--it broke, splintered every which way in the sunlight. Silver covered candy kisses rained out of it, fell to the ground in a shower.

Would you believe those Martins? First no gratitude, then no remorse. None whatsoever. That woman unwrapped a few of those kisses, stuffed them in her big mouth and they piled in the car. Naturally they didn't forget the very valuable rattle handle: probably went straight to the pawnshop.

I was so distressed that I'm afraid I let out a little cry. Papa looked up: he must have moved, for he was sunk back in his chair. He gave me the sweetest of smiles.

"What's the trouble, dear?"

"Oh, Papa, Papa," I said, "did you see that Martin man who just drove off--the one in the blue shirt--"

Papa just sighed. "Blue-collar worker. It's your move, Annie."

Heaven's above! I was so distraught, and upset that I lost three pawns, a rook, and put a knight in serious danger.

(O, Roger, Roger.)

Now, just picture the situation. Naturally I was mad as a wet hen, but I bided my time for a few days so I could calm down, for one thing. Never make a move in the heat of

passion: a lesson from Papa. I just went about my routine: gave Salmagundi fresh water and seed, plus a carrot to peck at, prepared white meals and tasty teas for Papa, and did my cleaning with vigor. I lost my other knight and two pawns. I watched Papa work in the mornings: the coat of arms progressed beautifully, the most ornate ever. One thing I did not do: carry messages to the landing. That old man called every day right on schedule and each day I subtly questioned him and each day the line went dead.

Every afternoon the Martins made more racket, every day they seemed more oblivious.

March came in like a lion. The afternoon it came, blustery and raw, I was in the kitchen preparing porridge for Papa. I had put the Martins out of mind when lo and behold up the stairs that man went, as uncovered and as happy as if it were the fourth of July. That did it: I struck again.

First, something old. Now something new. I looked at my African violets in the window, in the March light: new blooms. I mean to tell you I snatched up a pot of those violets, the very best variety, deep purple, and planted that pot outside on the steps.

Ha! I knew it! Come teatime, come Martins. Papa was wiping shortbread crumbs from his mouth and studying the chessboard when down they came, whooping it up like they never heard of judgment day.

Then--bam--just like before. They turned to pure

stone. I could swear that baby craned his neck out of the terrycloth and stared down at the violets. I just felt sure this would get to them.

"Look, Papa," I whispered, "there they are, like statues on account of my hybrids."

But Papa was hypnotized by his king and said "Ssh, ssh."

Then: Crack went that pot on the steps. Like lightning that man cracked it open. That man, that woman, carried on like they had been bit: laughing and howling and screeching they uncovered those delicate roots, threw dirt straight up in the air and danced around in it like it was rain. Thick rich brown fell on that man's blue shirt, on his hand, on that woman's blond head, her bland broad cheek and onto that terrycloth bundle. And they just screamed, happy as if it had been holy water! Then that woman collected those poor naked limp violets (she squatted in a most unladylike manner) and pinned them to her bosom. There they went: not a word, mind, not a word.

"Your move, daughter."

I lost a pawn, put my queen in trouble.

(O, Roger, my queen in trouble and thick rich brown on a terrycloth bundle.)

You probably think I gave up then. No sir. One more chance, I'd give them one more chance.

I didn't give them breathing time. The very next day I charged again. When that man mounted the stairs at

precisely three-thirty his shirt reminded me: time for Something Blue.

Dear Salmagundi. There he was in his gilded cage, just shining in the light, blue as the sky. He pecked at his carrot, happy as any fieldlark, and said margerine, margerine, oh, oleo--margerine. (Bird I.Q. of 152).

Oh please don't blame me: you can see I had no choice whatsoever. I must admit I dragged my feet getting that cage out to the steps and shed a few hot, hot tears onto dear Salmagundi as he sat there blinking in the outdoor light.

You surely know the routine by now: tea, Martins.

Papa was excited, breathing heavy over the game, but I couldn't pay him any mind just then. Like always, the same act: those Martins laughed and laughed on the way down then turned to stone. They stared down at Salmagundi in his gilded cage. Then--a new twist-- that man and woman looked at each other and cried, just bawled, their eyes screwed up tight, tears running over cheeks and chins like rivers. That woman sobbed and sobbed, rocked the terrycloth bundle side to side while the man bent over dear Salmadungi. Ah ha, I thought, they're going to call me out any minute.

But no! Next thing I knew there was a flash of blue and Salmagundi spiraled up into the air. Those Martins! That's when they smiled and laughed. Shading their eyes against the sun they waved goodbye happily as Salmagundi spiraled higher and higher, crying margerine, margerine,

until he was just a speck and then blended with the sky. Gilded cage in hand, those Martins got in their black noisy coupe and drove off without so much as a howdedo or kissmyfoot.

"Your move," Papa said. (Roger, I lost my queen.)

My poor dear Salmagundi bird: that was the straw that broke my back. I cried, I tell you, I tore my hair. Then: Revenge. I was ready, mad enough to chew nails. I'd just tell them to go right out in the garden and eat worms.

Next day was Good Friday. At midmorning I was in Papa's room watching the work. The crest was almost finished and so lovely, lovely it was, canaries beak to beak, a quill, a scribe, a lion, stars, a sunburst: all in soft muted colors and silver. I looked up from the crest and saw the snow begin in large lazy flakes.

By afternoon it was like a blizzard. (Just think of poor dear Salmagundi out in that cold.) Not that it bothered that Martin man. Didn't ruffle his equilibrium one bit because at three-thirty, along he came and fairly skipped up those steps, blue shirt open at the throat like it was early May and the dogwood in flower. I tapped on the kitchen window and beckoned with my finger. I hadn't really thought he would glance my way: of course he didn't.

I was fairly on pins and needles until that telephone rang. But it did, right on schedule, just after those Martins turned up the music and began to dance like a herd



of elephants in darkest Africa. It rang: I rushed to answer.

"Hello," I said, sweet as pie.

The connection was bad: static from the storm. The old man's "hello" sounded very far off indeed.

"Certainly I'll call Mr. Martin to the phone," I said. "I'd be positively delighted, just tickled pink."

As you can see, margarine would not have melted in my mouth. But, oh, I was seething inside. This was it, this was my chance. I meant it: I was perfectly delighted to limp up to the landing.

This is what I heard: those two dancing around flat-footed, baby keeping time with spoon against plate. "Dance with me, sweet strawberry blond," the man said, "let the world play on."

I didn't want to hear any more; I knocked, pounded. Absolute and total silence. The dancing stopped, spoon against plate stopped, the record stopped right there in the middle of Tuxedo Junction.

"Telephone call, dear Mr. Martin," I said. I wasn't going to be unduly nasty.

Martin made no response.

"Oh, Martin," I tried again, "this pathetic old man has been trying to get you for nigh unto two months."

Nary a syllable.

"Allright then," I screamed, "allright you Martins you. This is Leila Ann Middleton here and I am about to

deliver the Middleton ultimatum. Either speak and thank me for those lovely gifts which you so willfully abused or get out, just hightail it right out of this house and this county. Go straight to Omaha or Sioux City--we Middletons don't care where--but clear out!"

I went down those stairs just snickering. That would scare the stuffings out of them, those Martins.

And then, Lord help us to get right, there I was in the kitchen just a few minutes later, watching the kettle boil. I chanced to look out the window and here came Martin--alone! I untied my apron, expecting company, but oh no, he just hitched that trailer to the back of the car like he did it every day in the driven snow and in his shirtsleeves. Then, up he went again and here came that woman back down with him, the two of them lugging chairs and lamps. I stood rooted to the spot, my mouth hanging open like the hinges were broken, and watched in utter disbelief while they went up and down, down and up, carrying out sofas, beds, knick-nacks, television, combination washer dryer, bedside table of cherry, card tables, billiard table, rockers, baby crib, bassinet, sideboard, ashtrays, landscape watercolors. It rocked me for a minute, I tell you it did.

But it wasn't too late: I could give them one final chance. A gift: time for Something Borrowed.

I rushed into Papa's room like a house a fire. "Papa," I said, "Papa Papa I'm taking this crest." I snatched the lovely Middleton crest from the round table where it lay,

finished. Papa paid no attention: he quivered like a spaniel over the chessboard. Having no time for lengthy explanations, I hotfooted it right out of that room, right through the kitchen and out the back door.

Mr. Martin was settling things in the trailer, that woman looking on and crooning to the terrycloth bundle.

The snow was thick and cold but there they were, practically naked as jaybirds, her in that striped sleeveless dress and sandals, him in that shirt. I'd wager that baby was bare as the day he was born beneath the terrycloth.

"Don't despair," I said, "don't," and rushed right up to them. "Here," holding out the crest, "a reprieve--our fine line's coat of arms and your last chance.

That man and woman didn't speak a word but snatched the crest right out of my hands. They examined it together, then looked at each other and began to laugh. Yes, you heard me right, laugh! Together they tore that crest into shreds, and with me just standing there shivering.

I heard a little scratchy noise: Papa. His window was frosted, because it was warm inside, but he had rubbed a circle and I could see him plain as anything tapping on the glass. His face was white but his eyes shone like coals! His lips moved: "Checkmate."

"Checkmate," I said, "checkmate."

That man and that woman just laughed and laughed and I believe I heard them say checkmate, checkmate as they piled in the car. They drove away fast. Pieces of the

Middleton crest were still falling, blending with the cold cold snow after they were gone. Didn't even say ta ta.

And there I was in the snow, with Papa inside clawing at the window.

(O, Roger, Roger, checkmate.)

## A Month of Sundays

One quarter of the way through Deuteronomy and mostly at peace with the world, Caroline Inman sat alone in her back yard. The morning was warm and golden: late summer with a taste of coming September. In the distance, church bells rang silver.

Just home from church, Caroline Inman had changed from her navy silk and tight high heels to a flowered cotton dress and wedge shoes with wide white straps interlacing. Though ungirdled now, she still had her special Sunday feeling: she was freshly rouged and scented, silver hair curled tightly against her neck, and her mind was in order, re-arranged by a vociferous sermon. She read slowly, following the words with a fat blade of grass, and sucked in her cheeks at the end of each line. Some lines she repeated outloud, in martial rhythm, keeping time with her foot. Occasionally she shifted her loose, heavy body in the lawn chair and sighed, looking over her glasses at the pristine, sunbathed lawn; the sight of it made her feel all the more comfortable and secure.

She sat beneath maples. The grass at her feet was splashed with sunlight and the dark patterns of leaves. Several feet beyond were Caroline's late August zinnias; red and neatly spaced, they circled the yard. Behind the narrow ribbon of red were uniformly clipped bushes, so



dense and tall that they covered all but the pickets of the iron fence. So protected, Carolina could see only roofs and chimneytops; she was spared having to witness the childrens' eternal badminton games and the hamburger cookouts over smoky grills. Now, as she sat beneath the maples reading, waiting for Chessie to take the biscuits from the oven and ring the bell, she could only hear the neighbors: there was someone playing a piano, a halting version of some classical piece, almost familiar; there was laughter far away and the clatter of roller skates on a sidewalk, and a high-pitched woman's voice calling "Mandy, Mandy, come to lunch."

Caroline felt that these outside noises were just right, a part of the soothing summer morning. Distant, pleasant voices and the church bells ringing were a part of sitting under the maples and looking at the circle of zinnias, feeling the brick house rising solid behind her, and realizing that Chessie stood at the stove, and Arlin, in the den, shuffled through bonds and stocks certificates.

Caroline smoothed a page of Deuteronomy and thought of dying; her mother and father had gone from strokes and she hoped she might also. An easy, graceful way, perhaps ten years hence, perhaps while leaning to cut fresh zinnias or asters or those anemones brought back from the Holy Land. She thought of it often -- how she would be found smiling among her flowers -- but it troubled her not at all; she often talked to her friends at bridge luncheons

about her forthcoming stroke, saying, "I've been a good Christian woman and I'm not afraid to go; we all have to, you realize." Sometimes she would repeat those words to her grandchildren, holding their soft hands and smiling so they would not be afraid. "Heaven is nice," she told them, "milk and honey and some day we'll all meet there -- most all of the Inman family since time began. Maybe Chessie will be there too"(are colored people allowed? she wondered) "and she can cook those perfectly marvelous biscuits."

Caroline Inman was not a morbid woman, only sensible of her future happiness. Dying was not all pleasant, she realized that; quite aside from missing the red zinnias and the jay flashing blue in the birdbath there might be a poor turnout at the funeral or like Robert E. Lee's mother, one might be buried alive. But she could concentrate on the golden side; being healthy, she would not go for several years, and, while enjoying them, it was best to be resigned and ready. She would be There and happy; after all, she had read the Bible through many times.

She would be There deservedly. Just like her house, her back yard, which were, although only earthly pleasures, justly reaped. Long ago when they had lived at 1411 Spring Garden street and Arlin only had one drugstore and the children were young she had dreamed of this house. One night she had dreamed of walking up a long long hill and at the top shone this very same perfectly gorgeous brick house, red

camelias at the front steps. This very one: it was uncanny. She meant to write Dr. Rhine someday -- it would make a nice example for his theories. She could explain that she knew it was recompense held forth for years of raising children (and one turned out a heathen!) in the cramped house on Spring Garden street without a proper sideboard for the dining room.

There it was, Mrs. Inman thought, watching the sunlight and shade on her dress, her white legs, the whole pattern: Spring Garden street, here with the zinnias, and There. Something nagged: what? She struggled, then: Aunt Mapes.

Aunt Mapes. She turned to look. At the window upstairs the white face, bloated, pressed against the screen, lips moving.

"What?" Caroline said. "Have you packed yet? Speak up, Mapes."

"The bread is burning. I know the bread is burning." Aunt Mapes pressed hands against the screen. "Smells like good biscuits."

"Calm yourself, dear," Caroline said, turning back, "you'll be all right."

"It's not me," Mapes said, "the bread, Caroline, the bread."

Caroline Inman ruffled through the pages of her Bible; the gold edges were brilliant in the sun. Poor dear Mapes, she thought, poor dear Mapes had no conception of the

sacrifices she and Arlin were making for her comfort. She would most likely have to give up her trip to New Orleans to visit her daughter Joanne and her trip to Europe (ah' Rome, beautiful Rome!). And Mapes: she evinced no humility at all and she'd probably live forever. Caroline knew she was doing her duty to the fullest, but it was hard that it not be appreciated. Here was this sister of Arlin's who'd been living all alone in some tacky house way out in the western part of the state who suddenly decided to have a cancer operation so she could sponge off her relatives. Caroline was open-minded about this; perhaps she might have been almost the same if she had lived alone.

Almost, but not quite; she could never have said out-loud the things Mapes had many years ago at 1411 Spring Garden even if she had felt them. Mapes had sat right at her table enjoying her fried chicken, her biscuits, and had the gall to tell her heathen child that it was perfectly acceptable, in fact commendable, not to go to Sunday school. And then to disappear for all these years without even a Christmas card and then demand that Arlin pay her hospital bills and then just move right into her gorgeous brick house, taking the best room. Ah, Caroline could never have had such gall! And for her to actually complain and whine about being sent to Green Pines, the best and most expensive place in the state, a mental hospital that took normal patients in special cases. Swimming pool with artificial waves, ping pong tables, everything. And on her very own



go-to-Europe-and-New Orleans money. Poor dear Mapes; Caroline had said two silent prayers for her in church. Yesterday she had even had the preacher over for coffee and a talk with Mapes, but that misled woman would not unlock her door for a minute. And here Arlin was going to drive her to the place this afternoon in his airconditioned cadillac, such a ride as she'd probably never had before: not one syllable of appreciation, not to her own brother, not to Caroline, who had gone to so much trouble to arrange it in spite of those unChristian words spoken at 1411 Spring Garden.

And if the situation had been reversed! No, she could not imagine Mapes allowing a distant sister-in-law to move in for a month, just move right into a gorgeous brick house (assuming of course, that she had one) and bring her ugly Spitz dog and insist on walking it every night. (What the neighbors must think! A straggle-haired woman coming out of her house late at night walking that dog!) Much less giving up any kind of trip; why, she doubted that Mapes would give up a trip to the drugstore for her.

Chessie rang the bell. Caroline stretched and stood slowly. She left the Bible on the lawn chair and hurried to the house, brushing at wrinkles in her skirt as she walked.

"I hope it's not burnt black! Such a smell!" Mapes had taken the screen from her window; she leaned out, her faded copper hair falling straight down, shining in the



sunlight.

"You get back in that room!" Caroline shouted to her. Then in a hoarse whisper to Chessie, who stood smiling, hands on hips, on the back porch: "What if she'd jump!"

Chessie snorted. "Jump! Law, Miz Inman, you know she ain't gone jump. You just worries about others too much, Miz Inman."

"Well," Caroline said, "well..." and climbed the steps.

"Biscuits a little overdone." Chessie turned and followed Caroline into the kitchen. "I'se down in the basement seeing bout some waterpipes and they got right hard."

"What?" Caroline turned to look at Chessie, efficient looking in a starched blue uniform. "Mr. Inman will not be pleased." She stared at Chessie's broad face, her wide white smile: had she been at the bottle? So many of her friends' servants...

"Caroline!"

She hurried to join her husband.

Arlin, frowning and petulant, sat at the head of the table worrying holes in the tablecloth with his fork. Caroline realized at once the need of wifely soothing; she patted his hand and took her place beside him.

"Such a lovely lunch, isn't it, dear?" She dished peas and corn onto his plate. "What would we do without our Miss Chess?"

Arlin bowed his head and said a muffled grace into his

shirtfront, followed by Caroline's resonant Amen.

Arlin mashed black eyed peas with his fork. Caroline leaned toward him to whisper. "Not that our Miss Chess hasn't been up to something. Arlin, I suspect drinking."

"Wouldn't blame her." Arlin looked over Caroline's head out the window. He chewed vigorously and adjusted his glasses.

Caroline Inman let matters rest; another time, perhaps. They ate in silence.

Caroline admired her dining room: understated elegance. She was particularly fond of the wall next to the kitchen, toward which she faced. It was a lovely mural dominated by a huge blue lake and snowcapped mountains. In the foreground a Swiss boy with a feather in his hat sat before willows playing a lute, and a pigtailed girl stood stiff beside him, her mouth a red oblong O, singing. Birds angled in the sky, black against feathery clouds. The other walls were papered in a middling green, light enough to be cheerful, dark enough to be dignified. The carpet was thick, light green with darker green snake-like lines curling on it. Sunlight poured in through the windows, brought out the deep rich colors in the chairs, the sideboard, and shone on the china in the glassfront cabinet. Sunlight touched the fresh red zinnias arranged in a crystal bowl on the table, the snowy tablecloth, and her hand holding an ornately patterned fork.

She looked at her husband; he, too, looked nicely

taken care of, in a navy suit, light blue shirt, and the striped tie Joanne had sent for his birthday. His white hair, abundant and soft looking, was neatly brushed.

Caroline watched, disgusted, while he folded a whole slice of ham and pushed it into his mouth. He mashed more peas and raked them into a little heap noisily.

"Really, Arlin!"

He looked up briefly from his plate. "More bread?"

Caroline rang the bell next to her plate. Chessie opened the kitchen door a crack. "Yas'm?"

"Bread please, Chessie."

Chessie appeared, rustling, with the bread box and offered it to Arlin. "Wind it, Miss Chess," Caroline said.

The bread box played Dixie. Chessie shifted from one foot to the other. "That all, Miz Inman?" She edged toward the door holding the tinkling bread box in both hands.

Arlin chewed a biscuit.

"Yes." Caroline nodded. "That will be all."

Chessie opened the door, then turned back. "Oh, Miss Mapes says she don't want no more soup. Says can she have some ham."

"Mapes is sick," Caroline said, "sick people need soup."

"Yas'm." Chessie closed the door softly behind her.

Arlin looked up. "Not a damn thing wrong with her stomach."

Caroline patted his hand. "Well, dear, it's good for poor Mapes' nerves."

"Not a damn thing wrong with her nerves."

"Don't say damn so much, Arlin." Caroline folded her napkin and pulled it through the ring. "Anyone who would walk a Spitz dog at twelve midnight and who would refuse, flatly refuse, to enjoy Sunday lunch here in the dining room is nervous."

"I say that Mapes is not sick or nervous." Arlin's face grew red. "You know she just needs to rest and get back strength. Besides," he said slowly, "I've been meaning to talk to you about this -- she maybe needs her own people around." He pulled a ballpoint pen from his coat pocket and flicked the point in and out.

Caroline leaned back in her chair and cocked her head to one side; she heard water running upstairs. Would Mapes -- right here in her house? It would be just like her, the poor dear, distracted as she was -- it would certainly look bad. Perhaps she should have tried harder to persuade her to see the preacher.

"I mean, Caroline," Arlin said, "Caroline -- are you listening? It would be different maybe if we could have found a place in a nursing home or something, but, Good Lord, a mental hos--"

"She doesn't have to know, Arlin."

Arlin stared.

"Dear," Caroline said, smiling, trying to help him

understand, "she'll be treated just like in a nursing home -- not like she was -- well, you know. Besides, if she should get more nervous or try something they'd know what to do. I'm sure we wouldn't."

"Try something?"

"Well, jump or anything. Now, dear." Caroline held his arm against the table. "She has very good qualities like all you Inmans but she never went to church or anything like you and I'm sure I'll never forget that time at 1411 Spring Garden..."

Caroline stopped, disturbed by her husband's expression. The poor dear Arlin, she thought, this is too upsetting; he's not been right in his mind recently. She said a silent prayer for him. And his face was too red ... why he might have a stroke because of her tactless choice of words. She looked at the zinnias in the bowl; she didn't want Arlin to go before her, it would too too lonesome and she would just rattle around in this big house. Why, Caroline, she told herself, being unduly morbid: this is not like you!

Arlin touched her hand. "Caroline," he said, "you seem on edge lately. Have you been taking your naps and..."

Caroline laughed and threw her hands straight up. "Why, I'm calm as can be, Arlin Inman. Although, some wouldn't be, giving up their trip money. And I heard a grand sermon this morning that proved the flood and that's more than I can safely say for some people around here that I won't mention." She nodded toward the hall: Mapes passed,



walking quickly, headed for the back of the house. Caroline smiled at Arlin. "Better have some of Miss Chess' pie. It's a long ride." Then she called to Mapes, "How was the lunch, dear?"

"Caroline, be reasonable." Arlin sighed. "We have room for her here."

There was a flurry in the back of the house; Caroline strained to listen. The garage door slid open and banged, the dog yapped in delight, his cries blending with Mapes' exclamations. Caroline shuddered; she knew that Spitz longed to escape, to scratch around in her circle of zinnias. She could just see the scattered crushed flowers and upturned roots, helpless on loose soil! And Mapes: she'd whistle (helpful too late is not helpful at all) that horrible way, two fingers in her mouth, whistling in vain for that curly-tailed beast as he frisked about the green lawn with red petals on his jaws. She'd put on a sad face when she scolded: outrageous hypocrisy.

"It's a darn shame, anyway, the waste of three good bedrooms," Arlin was saying, "just a crying shame."

"Arlin, we must do what is best. Surely you want only the best for your only living sister even if she..." Caroline rose and pushed her chair back to the table.

Mapes passed again in the hall, leading her white dog. "Just going for a stroll," she said, smiling. The front door banged behind her.

"Well, I never!" Caroline pressed her face against

the window. "Proof of the pudding. Arlin," she turned to face him, eyes round, "she has on those high topped tennis shoes."

"Great Lord in heaven." Arlin stared at her. "Caroline, you..." He stood, straightened his jacket. "Yes, perhaps it would be better, taking her away." He stood looking at Caroline a moment, then walked from the room and out the front door.

Caroline smiled. Dear Arlin: how wise he was! She watched him jog across the front yard to Mapes. He took her arm and they walked down the street together. Such a good Christian man. Not that he wasn't human, of course -- he did have to be reminded of his duty occasionally. But then, Caroline realized, so did she; Dr. Eichhorn's sermons helped to show her the right path.

She ran her fingers across the window: positively black! That Chesapeake McIntyre must not have dusted for a month of Sundays. She rang the bell on the table angrily, and, getting no response, stalked across the room to the kitchen, taking a look at her dignified composure as she passed the mirror.

She closed the kitchen door behind her and saw Chessie, seated at the table next to the refrigerator, click off the radio and look up guiltily. "Yas'm?"

"You might dust occasionally, Chesapeake."

"Yas'm." Chessie sopped a biscuit in her plate. "I's figuring on it. Soon's I get to it." She bent over her

plate. "Today's Sunday."

Caroline sighed; it was so hard to get through to some people. "Well, clear off the table anyway."

"Yas'm."

Caroline walked through the kitchen, across the back porch and out into the yard. When she closed the screen door she heard the radio again, blaring rock and roll music.

She pulled the lawn chair further away from the house to escape the noise. Such dreadful stuff! Arlin called it bucket kicking music. Caroline settled in her chair under the maples and placed the Bible on her lap. She read a few lines, following with a blade of grass, and tried hard to concentrate.

But visions of horror invaded her mind, forced themselves onto the smooth thin page. What if Chessie were to get drunk in the kitchen? She could see her Wedgwood splintered on the linoleum floor and Chessie swaying, pushing at the blue shards with a broom. What if that Mapes, out on a walk, were to jump in front of a car, cause a scene, and Arlin would be right there, have to be put through such... why, everybody on the street would run out to look. What if that ugly Spitz were to take advantage of the situation and bite someone?

Caroline looked up from her reading. The circle of red zinnias, product of her own hard work and loving care, was reassuring. She was being such a silly! Nature was a wonder: it was miraculous, really, the way things took care

of each other, ants and squirrels and grass and flowers. So orderly and perfect. Like she had told that heathen child of hers only a few years ago, no one could help but be a believer if he really looked at the perfection of a flower or a simple maple leaf with all its tiny veins. And just the sky: oh, so blue. She raised her face, feeling the sun warm against her cheeks, and smiled.

She returned to her reading, almost comforted, determined to get through Deuteronomy.

Then, several minutes later, just as she had begun to flow along with the words, here came Arlin down the back steps, and with him, Mapes, dog and baggage. Mapes carried a round hatbox and a pot of geraniums, Arlin lugged a bag much too heavy for him, and Chessie followed with two more suitcases and a wooden hatrack.

Mapes waved gaily. She still wore her hightopped tennis shoes, and her hair was done up in a little knot at the back of her head. "Nice afternoon for reading, that's sure!" she said.

Arlin guided her toward the car. "Be back in a few hours, Caroline."

Caroline stood. "We hope you enjoyed your stay, dear Mapes," she said, "but where are you going with my solid oak hatrack?"

"It was mine -- I left it at 1411 Spring Garden," Mapes said.

Arlin turned, agreeing, nodding his head. "Yes she did,

Caroline, I remember -- Mother gave it to her." But Mapes whispered to Arlin, he shrugged, and when they drove off, waving, with that Spitz dog up in the front seat between them, the hatrack remained in the driveway. That Chessie! She just went right back inside to her music, not even bothering to carry it in.

Caroline settled back in her chair, relieved, when she heard the car turn the corner. What about that Mapes! It was a lucky stroke they were sending her to Green Pines, for she seemed to be getting worse and worse. Her hatrack shining there in the driveway had such a narrow escape; just to imagine what must have been packed away in those suitcases made Caroline squirm in her chair.

Then, as Caroline Inman sat under the maples and stared at the hatrack, she felt a certain terrifying dizziness. What was she thinking of Mapes, or doing, or was any of that important? She tried to hold Mapes and the wrongs committed at 1411 Spring Garden in her mind along with doing her duty and nothing seemed real at all. For one horrible moment, Caroline could not be sure what was true or what had really happened. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to concentrate on the hatrack: it wavered and shimmied, then curled double, pretzel-like.

But when she opened her eyes, there it was: her solid oak hatrack, standing straight and invulnerable, shining in the driveway. And her yard, her own yard: graceful, soothing.



Caroline breathed deeply, shaken, and laughed to herself. It was just a rabbit running over her grave. She was not superstitious.

She picked up her Bible and began to read. By skimming over the less interesting parts, Caroline was able to finish Deuteronomy and all of Joshua before the light failed, before the circle of zinnias became indistinguishable in the late twilight.

## House of Gifts

Alice went willy nilly all over, Sister said, and sang too much in the shop. Looked strange, Sister said, for a mature saleslady to sing off key. A little humming--for-given--but just this noon Alice broke into "Stardust" and scared a honeymoon couple right out of the shop...those Yankees who kept asking about Queen Anne birdcage tables.

Under her breath Alice said Sister's got a big mouth. Alice straight out said Sister can't add her way out of a wet paper bag and pointed out evidence to Sister. That young gentleman from Virginia in here just last week--to name only one--cheated the shop of forty cents, thanks to Sister's addition. Forty centses add up, Alice said.

Earl (the youngest) said it was all a bunch of fooforah and drank a beer off limits.

Sister said that nobody, not even her own baby brother, would be tolerated in her house in an intoxicated condition. And as for smelling up the very shop with beer!: why, that was unthinkable.

Alice said that what big Sister needed was a beer or two her own self.

Earl's face lit up; friend! it said, where have you been?

"Wash out your mouth, child!" That was Sister. If Alice didn't hulk over her half a foot and more, Sister's

eyes said, she might have gotten a whipping.

I remember those days, said Alice's eyes, flashing in the dusk.

"B'lieve your hair color wants a pick up," Alice said out loud, and fluffed out her own sidecurls, ten years less grey than Sister's.

"I'm no Jezebel, thank you," Sister answered.

"Puff puff, all in a huff," Alice muttered, loud enough for Sister to hear, and here came Lucy into the shop.

"Law. Dahk in heah. What y'all doing in this heah dahk shop? Whoo!" Lucy shook her apron at the dark, as if at a flock of chickens. Earl grinned at the young chocolate knees. "Y'all come on in to suppah."

Earl winked at her twice (the left eye, then the right) before she left the room.

"I didn't see that," Sister said. She clasped her arms to her flat chest. "Lord, help me not to see."

Alice lumbered into the dining room behind Sister. "It's snowing down south," she said, pointing at the white scalloped edge below Sister's skirt. "I just this second noticed...and with all the gentlemen customers today! One might think it" (and Alice giggled cruelly behind the back of her hand) "not unintentional."

They sat down.

Alice shifted and refitted her ample body in her chair almost as if she were plumping up a pillow.

"Heavenly Father make us truly thankful," Sister said

through her nose and glared at Alice the while.

"Amen," from Earl who whistled as he reached for the watermelon pickle and got away with it.

"You're a fine one to talk," Sister said, before she let the fried chicken loose. "You're a fine one to utter such words, Miss, Miss..." Alice puffed up and reddened a little and Lucy was quiet in the kitchen. "Miss...Henny Penny."

Alice leaned back, making a little noise with her mouth that sounded like a balloon untied and helped herself to beans with corn. "Weak, sister," her smile said, "pretty weak."

Sister took in the smile, all right. "Miss Pot Calling The Kettle Soiled," she spat out.

Alice had to snort at Sister's lack of inspiration. She readjusted her glasses on her nose and turned up the corners of her mouth and regarded Sister. Her voice was evilly honied: "Why so flustrated, sweet pea?"

The only light in the room, a black-shaded ceiling lamp, hung just above their heads. The two sisters, sitting straight with their shoulders braced against the room's dark corners, hugged opposite sides of the table. Earl, between them, leaned sideways, hooking one elbow over the back of his chair; he churned his beans with an idle fork. His bald head shone pinkly.

Earl hummed a little made-up tune and looked at Sister, at Alice, at Sister. Sister, square and tiny, barely cleared the table. Her hair was yellow-grey and wildly curly; her grey eyes (dadblamed shotgun eyes, Earl called

them) fixed Alice over a drumstick.

Alice pruned her mouth between bites. Whenever she thought of her last remark her huge body shook and she reddened all over.

Sister clearly failed to see the humor in the situation: her taut face said so. She watched Alice shovel in rice and beans and chicken; she shuttled dishes to Earl without once shifting her gaze from Alice. Only when Lucy burst through the kitchen door and clicked across the floor with hot biscuits and clicked back, swinging her round limber arms, did she turn away. Sister screwed up her eyes at Lucy's retreating back. "Something right peculiar about her, too." she said, "Yes, sir. Ri--ight peculiar."

Earl also watched Lucy, his head cocked. "Wish I had a swing like that on my back porch." he said, low, on Sister's deaf side.

Alice heard and spewed rice all over.

Sister (out in the cold) looked at Earl, grinning and scratching his side, and at Alice, who laughed and snorted like a wild thing until big tears wobbled down her nose.

Sister leaned across the table and pecked hard on Alice's plate with her knife. "Mannerless Heathen! Shameless Hussy!"

Alice ironed out her face. "Well, I never!" she said, "Well, I never!" but her voice cracked on the last word and she was off again, whooping but continuing to stuff beans into her red cheeks.



Finally Earl had to slap her on the back. "What has bit you?" he said, but grinning.

"I would not be surprised to hear she'd been tippling," Sister said from across the table, and her face showed she meant it. "I wouldn't be surprised at any--thing!" Here Sister gathered her arms at her waist and leaned forward. "She is shameless, shameless!" Her voice was low and scrapey. "Made eyes! Made eyes, just as wanton as could be, at that big in-surance gentleman with the solid gold pocket watch this morning. Like to backed him right out of the door! And him on the verge of giving us Lord knows how much of a sale!" Sister's eyes were very dry and hard. She stood up, trembling. "My own selfsame sister whom I raised and nursed through the chicken pox and saved from a beehive and put iodine on cuts..."

"And whipped!" Alice broke in. "And told lies to Papa! Misrepresented my case! Said I ate all them fried pies!" Tears still wet Alice's face but her eyes had turned serious and her nose quivered at the very tip.

Earl looked from one sister to the other and cleared his throat. "How about some dessert, girls? How about..."

"You did too eat them," Sister said, "Twelve pies in one Monday. My conscience is clear."

"He made eyes at me, not me at him!" Alice rose and upset her water goblet. "Said I had a quote right nice voice unquote!" Alice shouted and pulled at a fleshy earlobe. She looked at Sister, who had her nostrils distended in a way she thought was genteel as could be. "Ah ha," Alice said

softly, her broad face alight. "Jealous, I believe. I do declare: jealous!"

Earl rushed to Sister, who was holding up her fork in a most unusual way. "Dessert, Sister? Here comes Lucy with apple pie."

And sure enough, in came Lucy, her eyes rolling.

"I forego apple pie, thank you." Nose in the air, Sister walked to the door. There she turned to Alice. "Have not seen you so happy since our poor longsuffering Papa died," she said, and slammed the door.

Alice gasped. "You'll say anything," she screamed at the door. "Who was happy, really happy, at that rainy graveyard? Who pulled the wool over Papa's eyes? Who pulled a long face at his bedside and squeeze his hand and inherited? Who? Who? Not that I mind! A certain gentleman is coming back tomorrow -- a certain person who said I have a right nice..."

Sister's head reappeared -- "Heathen! Hussy!" -- and disappeared behind the door, slammed so hard that the table shimmied and the overhead lamp swung, throwing the circle of light to a smooth pine wall and back.

Alice looked at Earl and Lucy, who stood before her open-mouthed. "Venus fly traps," she said crossly. She sat down and tore into the apple pie.

## II

The next afternoon it showered. The rain looked cold but it turned the grass a dark, warm, mint color.

Alice peered out a shop window. "Going out like a lion, girls," she boomed. "Bless its heart!"

Sister was holding a silver creamer just out of a befurred lady's reach. "Colonel Tarleton gave this to my maternal grandmother -- presented it to her in this very room," she said, and lowered her eyebrows at Alice, who said:

"March, that is," and the customer turned round and smiled, but it was too late: Alice had been in high disgrace since the morning.

Sister showed Alice her back. "I wouldn't let it go to just anybody, of course." She held the creamer up a little and the woman reached out an arm. Gloved fingers fluttered, opened and closed on space.

Alice looked at a wet sparrow on the feeder and she smiled and sighed and smiled, beside herself. Sister wrapped the creamer and put the lady's money in a pink shoebox. (The real cash register was in Sister's locked bedroom.) The lady went out with a newspaper over her head. The sign (it read "House of Gifts" in heavy gothic letters) thumped against the brick face of the house. The Cedars creaked and wind blew down the chimney.

Sister bent over an account book. Alice blew a mist on the window: she twirled a yellow flower between her fingers. "I always did favor an olive complexion," she said tentatively. "Papa had one too."

"Hmmm. Five hundred sixty dollars, plus thirteen twenty for a creamer," Sister said, sighing all the while:

her put-upon sigh.

"Oh, well," Alice said to herself, and hummed valiantly atop her stool. Because it was raining she wore elastic bandages wrapped tight around her legs. Because it was a special day she wore a leopard skin hat, high and square.

There were tall narrow windows on three sides of the shop; it was dark out, making the shop dim and dusty-looking. Alice clambered down from the stool and wandered between the heavy round tables, touching and straightening the merchandise. (Sister called it her Jew bait; as her better non-yankee customers were aware, she kept all the good buys and real antiques under the tables.) Alice was in charge of table-top inventory; she moved from table to table, singing, counting things on her fingers and forgetting them. There were Aladdin-shaped lamps, scented candles, ashtrays printed with the state motto, Esse quam videri, Confederate play money, plastic salt shakers shaped like colored Mammys and pepper shakers like dignified retainers, bags of lilac sachet, antique brooches and necklaces made of large pieces of colored glass, a stack of faded photographs (identities unknown) under cracked glass, in gilt frames, music boxes which looked like swiss chalets, some old 78 speed recordings of songs which never had been popular, and two heaps of identical looking small black chunks, one group of which Sister said were minnie balls from the Revolution, dug from their yard--the other she claimed were Confederate buttons from the uniform of her

paternal grandfather. (Both piles were always on special at two dollars and a half each piece or two pieces for four dollars.)

"Mind you keep those things separated good!" Sister said shrilly from her corner, making Alice jump. "Else Yankees can swootch things into them big handbags. And hush up that singing, please! How can I count with all that racket!"

Alice held up a hand mirror with a pink-flowered backing and smiled at herself, not daunted a bit. "I hear tell that Teaneck, New Jersey has a right nice climate," she said.

"Seven hundred fifty dollars and twenty cents intake for February, minus a light bill of twelve dollars, eighty-two cents..."

Finally Earl came. He drove his truck on the grass right up to the front door. "Well, drat his eyes!" Sister said.

"He planted it!" Alice said, singsong; she almost clapped her hands, so glad was she to see him.

Sister licked her forefinger and turned a page.

Earl came in smelling of fresh air. His whole face and head glowed pinkly.

"Well, I'm all in a swivet," Alice said, and held up the limp jonquil for him to see.

"Oh me," Sister said, looking up from a column of figures, "the floor!"

Earl held a burlap feed bag under his arm; peat moss dribbled from it. "Hmm," Earl said, looking at the floor.



He shifted from one foot to the other, worsening matters, for his boots were covered with mud and wet grass.

"Go ring up no sale on the cash register, Alice," Sister said, pointing at her with a yellow pencil, "and recount the quarters. Earl," shifting the pencil, "get busy with a broom." She fanned her pencil in the general direction of the peat moss on the floor.

Alice looked at Earl; at the sight of him cradling the bag of peat as if it were a child, she burst into tears. Her square leopard skin hat slipped to her eyebrows as she cried, her face in her hands. "It's just all so thrilling," she said, peeping through her fingers at Earl.

Earl shifted the bag and patted her awkwardly on the shoulder (he didn't reach much above her shoulder) with his free hand. "What is it, dolly?" When she made no answer he said, "Give you a real pretty 'zalea."

"Alice Carlson is a crybaby at fifty-two," Sister said, rising triumphantly, "because her sins have been punished."

Alice choked. "Unfair!" she wailed. "And inaccurate! I'm happy! And," she whispered, "no more than fifty."

Sister, her arms akimbo, stood in front of Alice, but she watched Earl. "She flirted, hussy that she is, but come to discover that the New Jersey gentleman wanted to sell her a whole slew of insurance! Wanted nothing more, except (naturally) to e-lope with the Carlson fortune. Oh, yes," Sister went on, "he came back, all right, just swinging that

watch chain and switchin' round to beat the band--but he knows who to ingraytiate with--he knows who's the weak sister here! He knows!"

Alice, crying and laughing, fluttered her arms up and down. "No, no. I'm just so tickled!" She waved the jonquil like a flag. "He gave me this!" Alice executed a series of little heavy jumps; the whole room trembled.

"You pulled that flar of your own accord!" Sister shouted. "I saw you! Besides," she added coolly, "he's got a sissy voice."

"Doesn't!" Alice said, stamping her foot so hard that a whole set of goblets shivered and cracked.

"Then why are you carrying on?" Earl asked, putting the bag on the floor. "If he gave you that, huh, dolly?" Earl ran both hands over his head; it was oval and smooth except for a vein which cut the top of his head like a stocking seam.

Alice gave Earl a little squeeze and forced the daffodil through her buttonhole. "Because I am so overcome," she said, "at an almost outright declaration of affection! He ain't sold no insurance just yet, mind! Keeps putting it off! So there!" she said to Sister, who was glaring at her again. "That settles a few accounts!" She pranced to the door. "Going for a walk."

"And how," Sister demanded, advancing, "how have you settled any accounts, is what I'd like to know. And what--how darst you?--to what accounts might you be referring?"

"Answer to question number one is this," Alice said, her eyes half closed, pointing her toe, "It's what he said. He said I was a pretty--little--filly! Plus this of course," she said, opening her eyes, pointing to the daffodil.

"When did he say you were that, in his squeaky little voice?" Sister wanted to know. "I never noticed."

"I read it between the lines," Alice said gleefully, just as if she'd been waiting for that. Then her bland, jolly face turned ugly for one instant. "And as for the other--what accounts, indeed! -- Sister, you been knowing that a looong time. My, My, Sister," she said, "your face is green green green." Out the door flew Alice, sniggering.

Outside, Alice stood before the door in the drizzle.

"What was all that?" she heard Earl ask, "what in the world?"

"He took the full course at the Sourbun in Paris, France," Alice shouted through the door. "There's your final come-uppance!"

"Earl, if you'll not sweep I will," Sister said, "and me with such a crippled shoulder!"

Neither Alice nor Sister heard what Earl said.

Alice sailed across the lawn, her skirts blowing, her hat riding low. Puffing, all parts of her working against each other, she sped down the hill in her long blue tennis shoes. She leaned her elbows on the vine-covered gate.

"Oh, my," she said, looking at the willow, faintly yellow-

green, next to the road, "Papa's willow!" Alice took a deep breath of mint and wet grass. "Everything new!" she whispered and smiled at the sight of the daffodil in her buttonhole. The rain was gentler now, but Alice had come without a wrap; her shoulders and arms were soaked, making her cotton sleeves look blistered. "I'm a crazy old fool," Alice thought, but she continued her tour around the yard anyway. She knew where to look for buds: many of the trees and plants Papa had set out years and years ago, others Earl had planted. She sped from one point to another -- a forsythia, fully blossomed, to a flowering quince, its tan branches covered with pale green folds, ready to burst alive. "Takes me back! Takes me back!" Alice cried, at each familiar spot, and rushed on in the rain. "The nicest surprise!" Alice whispered, spying a white cloud behind the pine grove in the side yard; the goatsbeard had opened, the blossoms lush and fragrant, heavy with water.

Alice was in the side yard when the shower ended and the sky cleared. Her shoes slushed and squeaked when she walked; she looked at the smoke curling up from the chimney and started toward the house, for she felt cold and heavy and her dress clung to her legs. "Oh, if Mr. McAdoo should see me now!" Alice said aloud. She straightened her hat and looked around: what if he did come back now? she thought, her heart wild. "Oh, I'm a fright," she practised on a young dogwood, "You must excuse my appearance." She was scurrying for the back door, looking this way and that, when

she saw someone in the bamboo forest behind the house.

Moving closer, she saw that it was Lucy. Lucy, her back turned, stood swinging her bare dark arms, catching her hands in front, then behind. Beyond her was a sloping hill and below a pasture, a green pond. The sky was steel grey. "Lucy," Alice whispered; the bamboo moved around Lucy, clattered in the wind.

It was on the edge of Alice's mind:

Once, several summers past, after church, an elfin-like child in a pink bonnet had sung right at Alice: "Why would a fellow want a girl like you, a girl like you, oh, a girl like you, oh, why would a fellow want.." Alice had not thought about that on purpose for some twenty years; she had been suddenly and terribly aware of the thin-heeled shoes supporting her flaccid legs, of the church steps spinning beneath her, of her cologne lying heavy on the morning, of the pink simulated pearls at her throat, of the eyes behind who stared at the crooked seams of her stockings and her wide hips covered by flowered print, tent size. Oh Lord, she had prayed, cover me up! Oh Lord, lift me to the belfry. In front, a young man had turned round, and, looking straight into her small pale eyes, had exploded. Next to her, Earl, looking suspiciously untroubled, had inspected a spot on his tie. The mother had propelled the child before her. "Oh!" she had said to one, then another, "this precious child has seen the Cinderella movie and remembers all those cute songs. Fred says she has a



photographic memory, for sure!"

Once home, Alice had squatted in the bamboo forest and wept. Sister had seen her through the reeds, had seen a big heaving splotch of electric blue flowers with a white patent leather pocket book beside it. "Look!" Sister had called to Earl, who was tending his azaleas, "The dam is bust!" Alice had fallen forward on her hands and cried with her mouth wide open. Then she had screamed at Sister; it had been on her mind all those years -- but something about her brown speckled hands before her in the dry earth, in the sunlight, striped with bamboo shade, and something about the pond below her and a boy fishing there made her say it now, finally. "You were jealous, Sister! I could have married him -- had dear Papa been alive I would, I would! You witch! Convinced me (bribed! threatened!) to work in the shop instead of spending a honeymoon at Sea Island. You Godless creature," Alice had said, shaking her fist, rising with an effort, "May you be damned forever, you terrible old maid!"

"Oh, what you said!" Sister had shouted through a rolled-up newspaper. "Oh, what you said!"

Alice strained her eyes at the bamboo thicket and at the place where Lucy stood -- for it seemed there were two now. Someone stood beside her, his arm about her, someone in a yellow oilslick coat and hat -- why it must be Earl! He looked down at Lucy and smiled and drew her closer. Why,

ain't that nice, Alice thought, after the first shock. She looked at them, quiet, motionless, like statues, the bamboo moving all around them. "Ain't that just grand!" she said aloud. She felt small, ticklish tears at the inside corners of her eyes. The sky darkened; the bare tree limbs rubbed against each other in the wind. Alice let out a tiny sigh as her legs gave way beneath her and she floated to the grass.

### III

Alice was in bed for over two weeks. The doctor said it was part pleurisy and largely <sup>e</sup>temperament. Sister said she guessed it served her right for running loose in the rain, but she let Alice watch her color TV during shop hours. Lucy smuggled in eclairs and dishes of ice cream: "Law, Miss Alice, don't want you to melt away!" Earl flooded her room with camellias and jonquils. In the mornings sunlight filled her room, fell in a large warm square on her quilt. Then Alice was content; she felt supple and light, snuggling beneath the covers and drowsing. Mr. McAdoo returned and left his card: Ernest McAdoo III, Liberty Mutual Insurance, Teaneck, New Jersey printed nicely in light blue. Across it was written in square, pencilled letters: "Here's to the speediest of recoveries! Yrs. trly., E. Mac." Alice kept it on her bedside table.

"What did he 'low?" Alice had wanted to know.

"Precious little about you!" Sister had said. "Tried his bag of tricks on me (naturally) and didn't happen to

think of you until the last possible minute, and then only to change the subject -- it was right when I had my mouth set to give him what for. Outrageous flattery! Then he popped out, headed for that New Jersey turnpike."

"Humph," Alice had said, and buried her nose in the pillow. "You are merely puffed up with envy." But then she had dreamed Sister was a bowl of dough and she kneaded her and pounded her and ground her out with a rolling pin, and Alice woke up sweating.

One afternoon Alice heard a commotion in the shop. She could not hear what Sister said but she knew it was Sister from the way the voice sounded, high-pitched, like a small feisty dog's bark. Alice felt recovered anyway; she was wrapped in a pink quilted robe and, sitting on the edge of the bed, she rocked back and forth. It was as if she had been waiting for an interesting occurrence. "I love surprises," Alice said as she put on her slippers. She walked down the long dark hall and opened the door to the shop. She looked in and saw only Sister and Lucy glaring at each other.

Alice's huge, pink, room-filling presence forced Lucy and Sister apart. A little impatient, they both looked at her.

"Well?" Alice said, clasping her hands together. Her face was flushed and soft-looking. "Where is he?"

"Why, he's a good Christian man," Lucy said, looking unreasonably angry, "little thing like this won't cause him

to be runnin' off."

Sister cleared up matters. She pointed at Lucy: "Confessed that she does not have a tumor in her stomach as she previously swore on the Holy Book! Liar! Deceiver! Sarpint!" Sister paused. She let her arm and head fall slowly and she sighed. Alice's heart almost burst with hope. "She is pregnant," Sister said quietly.

"Glory be!" Alice cried, jumping upwards. Then, breathlessly: "Why, it was Earl."

Sister and Lucy stared.

"Ea-rl!" Sister said slowly, in two syllables, the first high, the second sliding lower.

Lucy chuckled. "Lor', Miss Alice, you can't be knowin' much."

"Why, Earl! Earl!" Sister said, "here I thought it was that black Lucy's been walking out with for months..."

"Why sho!" Lucy smiled. "Yes ma'am! We walks up in the back pasture me and him, up to his..."

"That will do," Sister said, rapping her fingers on the table.

"But," Alice shrieked, remembering, "I've seen them. I seen them together."

Lucy laughed and laughed, holding her sides.

"Earl! You, Earl! Lucy! Now, Alice!" Sister turned, whirling on her square heels, from Lucy to Alice to Lucy and craned her neck to look out the window for Earl.

"In the bamboo, in the rain. So beauteous, so

lovely!" Alice cavorted between the tables; she leapt and twirled, a stout ballerina, her pink robe flying. "Oh, Lucy," clutching her around the neck, "my sister-in-law!" At this, Alice shed a few tears, Sister emitted an oath, and Lucy, now looking confused, went out the front door with her apron pulled over her head.

Sister ran to the window, open at the top. "You're fired anyway. Get packing."

"Who's fired?" Earl said, sticking his head in the window.

Alice flew to the window and kissed Earl on the forehead.

"Jesus!" he said, drawing back, his eyes wide.

"What did he say?" Sister asked, trying to see around Alice.

"Oh, Earl," Alice cried, "Love is so glorious! We are sooo beautiful in love," she warbled, making up the tune, circling the tables, sometimes rising to tiptoe, "so tender and early morningish."

Earl shook his head and started away.

"Wait," Sister called, lifting a finger, "Lucy is pregnant."

"No news to me," Earl said. He beamed: even the top of his head shone brighter. "I'm the godfather. And," he whispered, "I'm presenting a vegetable garden...five rows of turnip greens to start with...Don't tell!" Finger to his lips, he went away, back to his flower bed. Soon Alice



heard the regular sound of his rake, in rhythm with the tune he half sang, half hummed. "Ohh, pre-tty wom-man..."

Sister had to sit down when she realized how shocked she was. "Oh! To think he knew and approved! Oh! I'll fix him!"

Alice stood dreaming in the middle of the room. "Our son. Everybody's."

"I'll fix him," Sister said. She drew a small tablet from her pocket and took the yellow pencil from above her ear and began to write quickly. A triangular bit of tongue showed at a corner of her mouth. "He'll not inherit from me! He'll not get my Chippendale, my spode, my demitasse spoons, my sideboards..."

"What?" Alice said, "what?" groggily, as if just awakened. "You already gave him those."

Sister glanced at Alice, pretended to look right through her. "Nor will he get a single very valuable china figurine, nor an old and rare snuffbox..." Her pencil sped down the page.

"Highboys even and the velvet loveseat?" Alice demanded, shocked.

"Highboys even and the velvet loveseat!" Sister said, writing.

"That's going too far: you're depriving a young family."

"I dare you to come say that in my good ear!" Sister rose, looking as distressed and ruffled as a bee-stung

collie dog.

But Alice was already at the window and trumpeting, with her hands cupped at her mouth: "Don't you fret, Earl. Consider my cherry bedroom suite yours! And my pewter! Silver candlesticks, two dozen pair and three odd ones!" She whirled round to face Sister with a wide, malevolent smile.

They held each other in silence.

"You know what he said about you?" Alice said in her most sugary voice.

"Who?" Sister said, straightening, knowing who.

"He said you were quote a hag and a terrible old maid unquote."

"Oh! You made that up. And after he never wanted to leave you a card and I told him to."

"Not likely. He peeked at me through the window, his nose just flat against the screen, and his eyes were very concerned when he didn't think I saw him!"

"Well," Sister said, spluttering, "there's no answering such lies as that..." Her mouth worked, wanting to say more. "No spinning wheels," she finally whispered.

"Aha," Sister shouted in triumphal rage. "Half of those are mine," she called out the window, "and therefore yours!"

Earl, standing in a wash of throbbing color, turned, scratching his head.

"Prove that!" Sister said.

Alice giggled as she looked at Sister, lost inside her baggy dress, her tiny fists hanging ineffectually at her thighs. Then her heart rose; warm afternoon sun filled the room, it was April and there were surprises to come, things she hadn't seen yet: violets for one. Alice felt lifted and simplified. "Well," she said, sighing and relaxing, "he's got what he most wants: the yard. But you'll die first. Then I'll give him everything else."

"Whoever said I'd leave you a blessed thing," Sister said, "you wild, wild hussy!"

Alice thought of how the violets would look against the dark mahogany earth: heart shaped flowers, almost black, and white ones touched with purple. Right around the corner, just out of sight. In the shadows she could bend and smell them, a faint, faint odor.

"Not a single teacup!" Sister was saying, flitting about Alice like an annoying little sweat bee. "Not a thing to entice and inveigle a man with."

Alice just reached down and lifted Sister from the floor. She was no heavier than a stem or a dried out branch. Alice held her up and shook her slightly. Sister, with her eyebrows drawn together, her mouth an open, noiseless oval, looked like a small petulant child. You're a right cute little trick, Alice thought, holding her higher still. Her voice was patient. "We have decided to marry. We have decided to marry in spite of all my money." She smiled sweetly. "You will excuse me...just around the side of the house... I must..." Alice flung herself out the door and ran, churn-

ing her legs and skirts, ran across the porch, ran on the brick walk which curved round the house, toward the side of the house where the afternoon shadows fell. Behind her... it seemed much later...as she ran, almost round the house, Alice thought she heard a noise, a muffled remembered noise, like a full laundry bag or a pillow dropped to the floor. The sunlight, hot thin, and golden, burned her. Alice flailed her arms and dove forward; she thought she would wind around the side of the house where he hovered, as if winged, his dark eyes golden-flecked and deep.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## EPILOGUE



## About the Stories

I like to write because I like surprises. I like the way details appear and blend, the way the half-forgotten is often inseparable from the made-up detail; the name of a character, a gesture, the shape of a nose, a color, someone's mispronunciation of a word -- where they come from, how they suddenly appear on the page interests me because of the mystery. I like the surprise in the arrangement of collected surprises, the texture or mood of the whole story, always at least slightly different than anticipated. I like the way the surprise works against the preconceived notion of order in a story, sometimes co-existing with it, at other times defeating or being defeated. I like to experiment in stories; I would even like to lie, this so I could later decide whether I was lying or telling myself some part of a truth. Unhappily, I rarely, if ever, had honest, serious "theme" in mind when writing any one of these stories, or if I did, I made it up much later, perhaps after it was finished. The largest surprise to me about these stories is that they do have some similarities in characterization, tone, attitude. I have wished for a missionary zeal about something; perhaps I could gradually develop one or several. At present I like to find out what I am keeping from myself, if anything.

But because I have experimented with different kinds of stories (the experiment usually governed by the

problem of point of view) I suppose I have imitated certain favorite writers. One I am quite sure I have imitated is Eudora Welty; I have read her stories for several years and I do not understand any of them very well, nor do I care to. I feel that if I had analyzed her stories from the beginning they would not have influenced me -- something which I do not feel about other stories and novels which affect and influence me. Her presence behind the stories entranced and still entrances me: I feel that she feels real joy in the writing, even when the stories are terribly sad or scary. She feels surprises when she writes, the most surprises and the best ones at moments in the stories which are the most inevitable and perfectly timed. (This illusion of surprise, of her almost naive-seeming discovery, is, I realize, mostly an illusion.) She is a poet as well as an instinctive storyteller; her poetry in describing movement interests me most. She often compresses important movement -- a slap, a turn, a run across a field -- into a beautiful small sentence, a breathless, timeless moment; the smallness and the subtlety of the description of the reality contrasts by implication with the reality, pointing up the enormity of the certain movement. She achieves the same feeling with dialogue; often the dialogue seems to have motion of its own, beauty and mystery for its own sake. For this and other equally inexplicable reasons I like Eudora Welty's stories and have consciously or unconsciously imitated certain things about them at times. My only regret about imitation is that I cannot imitate better, although I certainly

do not want to write like she does (even if I could); I hope that something I thus learn from her styles (combined with others) will help me to find my own best combinations in words and attitudes. Perhaps all I am saying is that I like writing because I first like reading.

Most of these stories are about people who are at least partially mad. I am not sure whether this interest is partly due to Eudora Welty's influence or whether I was first attracted to her stories because I was already interested in this sort of character. I think the latter. At any rate, I find half-mad people (especially half-mad elderly ladies) easiest to write about because they are exaggerated and startling and there is most room for surprise and contrast; when any effect is natural, real, or well-timed, it seems all the more so because everything else is (at least) a little off key. I never have been able to use madness the way I wanted to; I find it difficult to show the wonderful warm eccentric part in nice normal people -- part of their normality, of course, being their difficulty in dealing with their own realities. I suppose I use the exaggeration to discover the problems that I only feel and do not know.