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DRIGGERS, JAMES ARCHIE, JR. SOUTHERN STORIES. (1976) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 49.

It is the purpose of this study to examine the ways in which a particular region can influence the values and beliefs of the people who live there. Though the three stories included in this thesis are not necessarily linked by a common theme, they all deal with men and women rooted in the South, especially the rural South. There is no one thing that can be described as a Southern mind, yet all the characters depicted here share a great many similarities: chiefly their religious attitude.

In the first story, "Raymond and the Rapture," Raymond has chosen to live outside the fundamentalist Christian dogma which permeates the South, but even so, he cannot escape the consequences imposed on him by it. "Raymond and the Rapture" appeared in the Winter, 1975-76 issue of the Greensboro Review.

"The Pattern" expresses many of the ideals shared by Southerners, who find not only a moral framework in their religion, but also hope and comfort.

The final story, "The Little Woman," is a comedy, and though I hesitate to label it an allegory, it symbolizes much of what is characteristically "Bible-Belt Christianity."

APPROVAL PAGE
SOUTHERN STORIES

This thesis has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of
North Carolina at Greensboro.

by

James Archie Driggers, Jr.

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1

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RAYMOND AND THE RAPTURE

A cold gray light bored into Raymond's head. The sky, the color of unpolished steel, thudded through his eyelids, pounding his brain. God, his head hurt.

"Teeny! Teeny! Florentine!" he bellowed. Christ, where was she? Raymond swung his legs over the edge of the lavender print bedspread. Purple. God, even the color made him sick.

"Teeny!" She wouldn't be out. Not in the morning. She worked B-shift, running the bobber -- they were on evenings this week, or was it nights now? She had switched. He couldn't remember. His head ached, like he had caught it in an adjustable wrench. What time was it? He looked at his watch. It had stopped. 3:16. Great!

"Teeny!"

Raymond stood up, but the floor buckled beneath him. How long had he been out? He tried to remember. Thursday. Thursday was a good day -- he could remember Thursday. He had gone to work, yes, he had gone to work and Blackie Bradburn -- the sonofabitch -- Blackie had told him they were going to cut the crew in half. In half! And Raymond was going to be in the half they cut. No matter that he had been on the crew for two years. No matter that he was the best sheet metal worker they had, even if he was prone to take a drink now and then, but that was only on special occasions

or when Teeny vexed him.

"Teeny! Teeny!" God, was he going to let her have it. She shouldn't be out when she knew he was going to be waking up and needing a Bromo. He just couldn't fix them the way she could.

Raymond walked towards the door, but missed. Lying on the floor, he cussed God, Teeny, and the door. Raymond picked himself up, cussing the makers of Red Crow bourbon, too -- Goddamn them all. Raymond walked into the living room with his hands pressed against the sides of his head so he could feel his heart beating in his temples. The windows were open, and a small breeze twirled the pink curtains like strands of angel hair. Directly in front of him, the couch sat in the middle of the floor with the rug bunched up underneath it like a gopher's tunnel while Raymond's deluxe home entertainment center lay turned over on its front like a wooden foot rest. Behind the couch, jutting through the wall and wearing the window jam like a frame was the front end of Raymond's Buick.

"Jesus Christ," said Raymond, sucking in on the right side of his mouth and biting down on it. "What in the hell have I done?" He thought of trying to back the car down the front steps, but decided instead to sit and rest a minute first. Something is not right, he said to himself. Something is definitely not right.

Raymond tried to think of Thursday. Thursday was a

good day -- he could remember Thursday. He had told Blackie Bradburn -- the sonofabitch -- he had told Blackie he wanted his pay envelope right then, plus the two weeks he had coming for vacation he never got. Blackie had taken him to the office trailer and paid him in cash. Raymond remembered Teeny crying, the tears swelling her eyes so much that it was nearly impossible for them to run out. But was that on Thursday? She cried so often. She cried at weddings, and funerals, and every week for "The Waltons," but Teeny could cry at the drop of a hat. You could say, "Boo, Teeny," and she would answer, "Boo-hoo." Impossible! Impossible, crazy woman. None the less, it was Thursday she had cried. Raymond had come in with his pay envelope (minus the two bottles of Red Crow).

"Boo-hoo. Oh, boo-hoo-hoo. You've lost your job. That's what comes of drinking, and I'm the wife of a drunkard. My Mama told me...."

Raymond had picked up the pay envelope from the table where he had thrown it. "Go tell your Mama she makes my ass want a glass of buttermilk," he said, tossing her a dime. "Go down to Jones' and call her, and tell her I said that." With that, he had tucked the envelope into the left pocket of his gray flannel work shirt, walked outside, and sped off in the Buick, leaving Teeny and her swollen eyes veiled in a cloud of dust.

That was Thursday. He had driven off. But he had come back. Obviously. Because now he was here and the front half of his car was parked on top of the couch. Teeny was

going to raise hell -- Godalmighty hell when she saw the car. Or maybe she had seen it already. Maybe she had seen it and gone to her Mama's to tell her about it. If that was so, Raymond was sure he didn't want to be there when they got back. Teeny would come in quiet as death itself, and her Mama would prance around the room, the swish-swish-swish of her stockings rubbing together like knives being sharpened. Sorry, no-good drunkard. Dirty, low-down scum. No, he didn't want to be there for that.

Raymond thought of lying out in the field behind the house, but Teeny knew all of his hiding places and would come looking for him with that pitiful, squeaky voice of hers. Besides, he wasn't in the mood to wage a war on the chiggers.

Suddenly, it occurred to Raymond that if Teeny had gone to her Mama's, the best thing he could do would be to meet them on their own ground. He would get fixed up; then, when Teeny's Mama pranced around the room, he would prance right after her. Raymond walked into the bathroom. His hair, usually combed straight back was at odd angles to his face. What you need, buddyroe is a bath...and a shave, Raymond said to himself. Then, when Teeny's Mama stared screaming at him, he would sit there smelling of Old Spice, smiling like a banker. Raymond sat down on the toilet to take his shoes and socks off; leaning over, the blood rushed to his head so he thought it would pop. A shower, a cold shower would definitely help his head.

Raymond stood up, taking off his pants. He pulled

out the belt, his pants bunching up like a head of celery, then reached down into the pockets for his change. Teeny raised hell when she found anything left in his pockets. She insisted he use the plastic Tupperware bathroom valet she had bought from one of the women at the plant. Into the container Raymond emptied a handful of change and several bills minus the pay envelope. Deep in the pocket, he found a folded piece of paper.

Pulling the paper out, Raymond held it in the palm of his hand, flat, like a blade of grass that he could blow away with a single breath. ARE YOU READY? I WILL RETURN! it read on the front. Inside: "for the Lord Himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first, then we which are alive shall be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air...." Raymond didn't understand. The scripture blurred in his mind. Turning the pamphlet over, he read on the bottom of the last page printed in large type: if this booklet has helped you in any way, pass it along to another soul in need. For additional copies write

Reverend Custis Bledsoe
Church of Eternal Light
Any contributions appreciated

Custis Bledsoe. A face appeared as Raymond read the name, almost as if he had summoned an apparition. It was Thursday. Thursday, sometime in the night. Raymond had finished off the Red Crow, left his car parked at Little Lu's Bar & Grill and was riding the bus looking for a package

store that was open when the face appeared on the seat next to him in the way a picture flashes onto an empty movie screen. The face was long with a pointed chin that looked like it had been drawn on as an afterthought.

"I can tell you one thing, brother," the face said. "I can tell you that if the Lord ain't grieved by the sad shape of things in this here country of ours...if He ain't grieved, if He ain't weeping, if He ain't about ready to rain fire down on every single one of us, then I reckon He's going to have to apologize to all them folks in Sodom and Gomorrah." The light of the bus gave the face a greenish glow, and the man tapped his finger along the end of his nose for emphasis.

Raymond didn't speak. He had learned the best way to deal with these folks was just to say nothing. When Doyce MacElwain had gotten saved at a Billy Graham meeting on TV, Raymond had spent the better part of a week arguing with him that he didn't want to be converted. Teeny preached to him enough at home as it was. Finally, Doyce had become so persistent, Raymond was forced to backhand him in the mouth with his wrench, knocking out three of his front teeth, in order to end the discussion. So, Raymond turned his back on the face, hoping that would be enough to persuade it to find someone else to talk to. Instead, the face said, "My name is Custis Bledsoe. I'm a preacher by calling, a sinner by nature, and an evangelist by grace. I can see by your

condition that you are in need of some help, and I feel the Lord has directed me to you. Tell me, are you born again? Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

Raymond blew his nose on his hand, and shook it out the window.

"This world is in a stinking mess, and the smell has wafted its way up to the nose of the very God Almighty, and I'm here to tell you that He ain't going to stand for it much longer. I, myself, keep one eye always looking up, cause it could come at any minute, and blessed is the slave who is not found wanting when his master returns." Custis smacked his lips, drawing them back over a set of loose fitting, yellowed dentures. Turning one eye even closer to the man, Raymond noticed a group of hairs descended from each of his nostrils as if he were beginning to grow a moustache inside his nose.

"Just how familiar are you with the book of Daniel?" A thought ran across Custis' eyes making him jerk his head so hard that his neck popped. "I don't believe I caught your name, son."

Raymond turned full-faced to the man. "My name is Raymond," he said, "and I ain't your son. And, I don't want to talk to you. As far as I care, you can take the book of Daniel and cram it up your ass."

Custis looked concerned, but not annoyed. He stuck his forefinger into his ear and began jiggling it back and forth as if trying to dislodge some memory stuck deep inside

his head. "'Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.' James 5:12. I know a man who once made a regular habit of breaking the third commandment. He had his tongue run over by a truck. Of course the rest of him got smushed pretty good. They had to scrape him up in a bucket. I know because I preached the funeral. His mama was a prayer warrior who wore a hole in the rug next to her bed she spent so many nights on her knees for that boy. I preached his funeral as a favor to that sister, and I am here to tell you that that coffin wasn't three feet long -- a baby's casket. 'Take not the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.'"

Raymond wondered if he should close Custis' head in the window, but decided against it, looking around the bus for someone else the preacher could talk to. The bus was empty except for a strawberry haired lady who was sharing a can of tuna fish with a cat stuffed into her handbag. "Why don't you go and drum up business with somebody else?" Raymond asked.

"I feel the Lord has given me a special burden for you," Custis replied matter-of-factly. "Besides, that kind sister is deaf as a post, and I figure the Lord takes care of His children who aren't all together."

Raymond breathed deeply, and turned his head back to the window, hoping to see a bar soon so he could pull the cord for the bus to stop and escape.

"In the book of Daniel," Custis began again, dragging out the name so it was Danny-el, "we are given a timetable for this old world. You see, there are seventy weeks...."

"Sounds like the Lord has a pretty fucked-up sense of time."

"'With the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day.' Second Peter 3:8. The seventy weeks are a symbol...." On the curb Raymond caught a flash of a woman letting her dog stop to pee. "Christ Almighty, did you see the tits on that broad?" he said in a half whisper. Teeny had good tits -- until she let her weight go, so now they were nothing more than fatty extensions of her belly. "That first set of weeks was for the kingdom of Babylon. It was the kingdom of gold in old King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. And then there was Rome -- it was the kingdom of iron." Raymond slumped down in the seat like he was going to sleep, so Custis paused for a different approach. "Anyway, them weeks has just about run out. It could be at any time."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Why, the return of Jesus. The Rapture! There will be a day when the Lord returns and catches up all the bretheren in his arms to take them to live with Him in heaven, and all those who have wasted their time falderahing around will be left to pay for their iniquities. It will be a world of outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And then all those poor sinners will be thrown into

a giant lake of fire." Custis shook his head at the thought. "How much do you know about the book of Revelation? That will be the day of the anti-Christ, the time when he puts the mark of the Beast on all the people left in the world. Unless you are a 'post-tribulation rapturite' -- I happen to be a 'pre-trib' man myself. Did you know the Pope already has a special suit made to order with the mark of the Beast all over it. And all them poor Catholics listen to everything he says just like it was gospel." Custis took a tan pamphlet out of the inside of his coat, and began to pick his teeth with one of the corners. "Woe to them that are left behind in that time of utter desolation. Woe to those unbelieving souls who choose not to hear the call of the trump. Woe to them who ignore this gospel of salvation that I am preaching to you."

A neon sign flashed on the street ahead. Raymond pulled the cord, signalling the driver, and stepped over Custis, making for the door almost before the bell rang telling the driver to stop.

"And a woe-de-woe-woe to you, Reverend," he said. As the door of the bus opened, Custis caught hold of Raymond, pushing the pamphlet down into his pocket. "Believe," he said, tapping his nose again. "Believe and be saved!"

"Crazy as hell," Raymond said, turning on the shower and stepping in. The cool water rushed over his head, down his back and arms. It was a minute before Raymond realized he was still in his underwear.

* * * * *

Sitting on the couch, Raymond put his feet up on the back of the stereo. He had thought about moving it against the wall, back to its spot, but decided not to touch a thing. "Not a Goddamn thing." Thataway, Teeny and her Mama couldn't blame him for the mess. Raymond pulled at the collar of his shirt. How he hated for anything tight to be next to his neck! But it would be worth it to see the look on Teeny's Mama's face. Teeny had always kept him a stiffly starched white shirt so he could go to church with her and her Mama. She used to cry when he said no. Now, she just went alone, leaving his suit and tie hanging on the door knob of the closet to shame him.

Raymond picked up a gold and white plastic plaque Teeny's Mama had given them when they had gotten married. God Is My Source. He thought of Custis preaching to him on the bus. He wondered if he had found anyone else, or if he had peddled his story to the deaf lady. Raymond decided he would tell Doyce MacElwain about the bus ride when Blackie Bradburn -- that sonofabitch -- called him back to work. Raymond scooted down on the couch so the back craddled his head like a pillow. His head was feeling better, and he wished Teeny would come home to fix him something to eat. An egg sandwich or maybe some stewed tomatoes with bread and sugar....

In a dream, Raymond was being chased through the streets by Teeny and her Mama, each of them holding in their

hands sets of clacking teeth, clicking and clacking them together like castanets. When he woke up, Raymond's shirt was sticky with sweat beneath his suit coat, and it took a moment for his eyes to focus. How late was it? 3:16. Teeny should be home by now; it was getting late. She wouldn't be out this long.

Raymond could feel his ears prick up like an old hound. But there was no noise. Everything was too quiet -- that was it. There were no sounds any place. There were supposed to be planes flying overhead, or was that when they had lived in Sumter? Holy Christ, he couldn't even think straight his mind was so eat up.

Wiping his hand across his face, Raymond saw the pamphlet laying on the table. He thought he had left it in the bathroom. ARE YOU READY? I WILL RETURN! Like a swift kick to the crotch, Raymond understood. The seventy weeks blazed on the wall in front of him. Teeny wouldn't be out. Not when she knew he was going to be waking up and needing a Bromo. The seventy weeks. They had come and gone. The time was up!

Jesus had come back. Now he understood. It was the Rapture. The Beast had eaten the seventy weeks. No, the Beast was going to eat the Pope and all those who didn't get taken to heaven. Those who got left. Raymond stood up, the room spinning so fast he found it hard to find something to hold on to. Holy Christ! Jesus had come and he hadn't gotten taken. Raymond began to shake. Where could he go? Where?

He knew the Beast would search him out, would know the house, would find him for the mark.

In a flash, Raymond was out of the house, tearing through a field of snake grass, the dried weeds crackling with every stride. He wished he had been a better husband. He wished he had listened to the old man on the bus. He wished he had believed.

Raymond came to a road. Right led to Jones'; left into town. Old man Jones had told Raymond never to set foot in his store again after Raymond had picked up the Potato Chip display, throwing it through the window because there were no pork skins. If old man Jones had been left, too, Raymond would write him a letter and apologize. He was going to be a better man. The Beast wasn't going to get old Raymond. No sir, not him. Turning left towards town, Raymond noticed he was breathing heavily, and his tie was wrapped around his neck like a boa constrictor. "Goddam... gol-durned tie," he said, slowing his pace down to a steady walk.

The sky had deepened to the color of a pigeon's back, and it looked like rain. Fire and brimstone Raymond said to himself, putting his hand over his mouth and laughing nervously, like a child who has been told that he is going to be beat within an inch of his life when his father gets home.

After a mile or so, Raymond heard a car approaching from the rear. Putting his thumb out, Raymond smiled to see the car slowing to a stop. Inside, a squatty, bald-headed

man in a green suit, gold shirt, and white tie sat mopping his head with a handkerchief. Raymond opened the door, leaning in before he sat down.

"Tell me, sir," he said in a voice that reminded him of Teeny and her Mama. "Tell me, have you been born again? Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

Squinting his eyes at Raymond, the man started to pick his nose. "Sorry, son, but if you want a ride, you're going to have to leave that gospel stuff right there on the road. I've had a long day, and I ain't in no mood to hear it."

"But surely you know about the Rapture," Raymond twittered like an old woman.

"Sorry sonofabitch!" the man said, pressing down on the gas pedal. "I don't know nothing about no rupture, and I don't give rides to no half-assed preachers either." The car leaped forward, taking Raymond with it before he could let go or get out of the way. As the car sped up, Raymond fell into a ditch, the ground scraping through his suit into his skin. Raymond sat for a second, rubbing first his leg, then his face, leaving a large, red, dusty stain that ran from his forehead to his chin like a strange birthmark.

Straightening his tie, Raymond stood up, walked back out onto the road, and turned again towards the city. Soon, he prayed, soon an angel would come, give him news of the Rapture, and take him home to heaven. Till then, he would

just have to walk. Back to Custis Bledsoe. Back to the Church of Eternal Light.

THE PARTNER

The wedding was to be at eight o'clock, on the morning, June the third. Nineteen hundred and fifty.

"You only do it once, so when you do it, do it right," Ma had told her daughter. "It's all with grace, be it with style. It doesn't cost you one thing more to hold your head up as you go through this world, but if you do, nobody is ever going to be able to knock you out."

Marion had had to do most of the housework. Her mother had kept a clean watch over her. Just before the hospital in Durham two or three times a week she had sent mail, delicate, artistic signs. "How does your mother like the look of the wedding register to carry the price. It's so nice let Hattie do it. Her hand is too good for it." Or, "I have been thinking about flowers. White is the best in my mind. With white roses and gladioli in the center. While in pink you will have a rather ordinary effect. White and lots of candies."

Marion tucked the blue lace handkerchief into her pocket, making sure there was no hole. There was no hole, she thought she said. The early evening light had changed the color of the heavy lead into a room full of shadows and light. The air carried on it the sticky smell of a warm night. It was a hot night with little breeze, and though she had thought she would

THE PATTERN

The wedding was to be at eight o'clock. In the evening. June the third. Nineteen hundred and fifty.

"You only do it once, so when you do anything, do it right," Ula had told her daughter. "Do it with class. Do it with style. It doesn't cost you one thing extra to hold your head up as you go through this world, and if you do, nobody is ever going to be able to knock you for it."

Muriel had had to do most of the preparation, though Ula had kept a close watch over her. Letters came from the hospital in Durham two or three times a week in her Mama's small, delicate, erratic script. "Make sure you are using the back of the wedding register to enter the gifts. And do not let Ruthie do it. Her hand is too much like my scratch." Or, "I have been thinking about flowers. White is the best in my mind. With Ellen Marie and Gladys in turquoise and Ruthie in pink you will have a rainbow otherwise. White flowers -- and lots of candles."

Muriel tucked the blue lace handkerchief into her bra, making sure there was no bulge. "Have you got Kenneth's ring?" she asked. The early evening light had changed the maps of the Holy Land into a room full of dresses and slips, and the air carried on it the sticky scent of hair spray. It was a hot night with little breeze, and though she and Ruthie were alone

in the church and the guests had not started to arrive, Muriel had kept the door to the dressing room closed out of fear that someone might see her before it was time.

Ruthie was blotting her lipstick and did not speak, but held up her right hand to show the gold band.

"What time is it?"

"Six thirty," replied Ruthie.

"Where's Mama?"

"She and Daddy are coming with Gladys and Ellen Marie. They'll be here in a while."

Muriel looked down at her hands. The pale, frosty white polish on the nails almost matched the color of her skin. I should have gotten some sun. I look like a spook. Watching Ruthie fix her lipstick again, Muriel wished her Mama was there, with them at the church. The way things were going Muriel never would get dressed. Ruthie was as nervous as she, and together the two sisters were managing only to agitate each other. Ula would know what to do.

Muriel sat down, the metal Sunday school chair cold against her bare back. She needed a moment to relax. She wished Kenneth were there; then she could puff on his cigarette, as if doing so would help her to draw from his calm. She knew he would be ready, exactly on time, waiting for her at the altar.

Muriel had met Kenneth when he was stationed at Fort Bragg. At the time, she was working downtown, behind the soda

fountain at the Fayetteville Drug. Mama wasn't sick then, and Kenneth had hung around across from the store on the steps to the old slave market until it was time for Muriel to get off work. He had offered to ride with her on the bus, nothing more, and so she had let him even though Ula had warned her about service men. When he walked her down the dusty two-rut road that led to the house, he didn't ask her for a date like she had expected, but talked of the radar equipment he was learning to use, and how he hoped to go into electronics when he got out of the service. He was tall, well over six feet, and though Muriel only struck him about shoulder high, she thought his gangly body was more like that of a little boy's than a trained soldier. A long, thin nose curved down towards his mouth like a beak, and a few traces of acne mixed with the shadow of a beard. But Muriel thought his face carried with it the look of a man who is going places.

Ula had come out onto the front porch to greet them, clasping Kenneth's hand in her firm, friendly grip. "Muriel's Daddy has gone down the Turkey Neck Road yonder to get me some needles. I forgot to ask Muriel to bring me some home from work. Sit down -- he'll be right back, if he don't get to talking." Ula was wearing a faded print house frock, but she sat with authority, sizing up the young uniform. "I hope you aren't going to be having to go overseas," she said. "Muriel's got a cousin. It's my husband's sister's boy. Well, Donald is in Korea, and his Mama just worries about him all the time.

I tell her she's just being an old Jessie, but it don't do no good. I think she just likes to worry, myself."

"No, mam," said Kenneth. "I don't think I'll be going. I mean it doesn't look that way. I'm hoping when I finish here they will transfer me up near my home."

"Where's that?"

"Detroit."

"Your family there?"

"Just my brother and his wife. My parents are dead." To Muriel, the remark sounded casual, almost off-hand.

"Well, Kenneth," said Ula rising. "I'm going to go tend to some supper around in the kitchen. I hope you'll come to see us again too, now that you know the way. We go to church most every time they open the doors, and it would be nice for you to join us some Sunday. Of course you would have to stay for dinner. We don't have anything fancy, just plain food, but there's always plenty." Turning in the doorway to the kitchen, Ula looked back at the couple. "I'll be honest with you soldier," she said. "I would hate to see the man who kisses one of my girls when he has just met her. But I would hate to see the man who wouldn't try."

After that, Kenneth had come around regularly, joking with Ula, flirting with Ruthie, talking politics with Muriel's Daddy and her brother Alvin till he was one of them. Then, the month before his transfer came through to Detroit, Kenneth asked Muriel to marry him. She said yes, of course, without needing time to think.

Now the thoughts stuck in her like sandspurs. Married. What was she doing? She was only nineteen. Yet she was ready to get married; glad to get married. Most of her friends had gotten married, and had begun to raise families. But did that make it right, just because everyone did it? They all seemed happy enough to her, but what did they know? They were all just as dumb as she was. It had taken Florence McKenna, now Florence Treetle, only the two years since high school to gain thirty pounds and begin to sag in her bosom. And Florence was the queen of the Halloween Carnival their senior year. What could Muriel look forward to?

She had outgrown the Youth Fellowship, and was no longer a member, but Muriel had avoided joining a Ladies' Circle. Ula did not press her. "In time," she said. "In time," which weighed as heavily in Muriel's thoughts as the rapping of a judge's gavel.

Yet she did love Kenneth. Or so she told herself. Kenneth, whom she hadn't seen in six months. Smiling Kenneth in a photograph, her fiance, covered in glass and bordered by a drugstore frame. If only she could keep him that way. Far enough not to threaten, close enough not to fade the image completely.

Ruthie was fussing with the long row of eyehooks on the back of Muriel's gown.

"Are you almost through?"

"Gimme a second. This isn't a zipper, you know."

"I hope this isn't going to be too much of a strain

on Mama. She's not been getting her rest, and I can tell she's having trouble. She should be in bed."

Muriel had tried to corner Ula during the day, but the house was full of relatives, and Ula spent most of the time receiving in her bedroom, propped up on pillows, or standing at the head of the dining room table to show gifts, her peacock blue robe flowing down around her ankles like a waterfall. "The jelly spreader is from Frank and Connie, and those linen placemats are from Miss Annsette Smith. She did the embroidery work herself. She made Muriel's wedding dress, you know. Wait'll you see it -- it is so very nice. And she did the ones for the other girls, too. That box of grits is Alvin's idea of a joke. He said it was bad enough his sister was going to live up North, but he'd be durned if she was going to eat like a Yankee."

Ula picked up one of the dinner plates, which was arranged in a place setting before her. "Of course the china is from most every one. Don't you just love the pattern? It's simple, but she can use it for fancy or everyday if she wants, don't you think? I hate to imagine anything this pretty sitting around in the cupboard, gathering dust, never seeing the light of day."

Ula had helped Muriel pick the pattern. Muriel visited the stores, gathering booklets on china and silver and crystal. She would then take them to Durham to show to her Mama, and they would discuss the merits of each individual pattern. Finally, Ula had preferred a simple bone-colored plate outlined with

a gold rim. In the center of the dish, painted on with glaze, was a small cluster of fruit.

But Mama would never eat off the china, never see the gifts out of their boxes.

Muriel was home from work the day Mama had begun to get sick. Muriel's period was starting which always gave her trouble, and so she was resting on her bed, putting the hem in a dress when Ula had called from the back porch, her voice quiet, tense. "Muriel. Sister. Come here. I need some help." Ula was holding to the curved handle of the pump with the scared look of a child who is unwilling to come into the house because of mud on her Sunday shoes. "Mama, what is it?" But beneath Ula was a puddle: dripping, growing, a tiny pool of blood at her feet.

After a short examination, Dr. Fischer had packed Ula to keep her from hemorrhaging further, and announced that Ula needed to be taken to Duke for tests as soon as arrangements could be made. He emphasized with a doctor's deadly edge of calm that she needed help immediately. Muriel wondered later, if the sickness was so prevalent, why hadn't they seen signs of it earlier; how had it managed to remain hidden until it had her Mama in its stranglehold?

Kenneth left for Detroit the day after Ula was taken to the hospital. Muriel had worn the dress she had altered especially for the event, but she didn't care. As she watched him go, she felt an emptiness inside her which ran through her

body like a cold stream. She didn't cry, but she wished Kenneth would call to her, ask her to come with him, not so much because she wanted to be with him, but because of Ula lying in wait for her in a hospital bed in Durham.

That night, Muriel had taken the first of many bus rides to Duke, to sit with her Daddy until her Mama returned from the other world of the operating room. Her Daddy had been nervous, fretfully lighting cigarette after cigarette, making small talk about the Giants and the Yankees. "Why don't they put a radio in a place where you got nothing better to do but sit and stare at the walls?" Muriel insisted on taking the night watch, sending her Daddy to the house where they were staying so he could rest. After he left, Muriel sat in the hall, away from the starkly lit waiting area, twisting herself into an old school desk that had been left there. The walls and floor shimmered green in the glow from the overhead lamps, and Muriel watched a black boy buff the hallway, tracing his path of shining rings and half-circles. Nurses padded in crepe-soled shoes behind the station to her left, and every so often there would be a quiet bell like a piano string gone loose and out of tune.

Muriel had brought a magazine from work to help her pass the time, so she occupied her mind with wedding plans as she read "Your Wedding Day -- Your Way." The magazine brides organized perfect weddings; they worried only about recipes for punch, and about where to put the orchestra at the reception,

and which color engraving to use on the thank-you cards. Muriel began to doodle on the edge of the pages. Muriel Olivia Bracken. How nice it would be to be rid of the old initials M.O.B. But M.B.M., Muriel Bracken Martin was little better. That sounded too much like a movie studio. Muriel Olivia Martin. Muriel didn't bother to sketch the initials, yet they seemed to burn on the page in front of her.

When Ula had been taken to intensive care to recover, Muriel paced the hall, waiting for some word from the doctors. At the end of the hallway, a sound like a dog barking caught her ear, and she followed it to a private room where an old woman sat straight up in her bed, held on either side by leather grips, yelping. Her white hair hung around her face in the way a sheer curtain borders a window, and she cocked her head to see Muriel standing in the doorway.

"Have you seen my Papa?"

Muriel did not answer. The woman didn't seem to notice, but turned her face to the ceiling and began to bark at the lighting fixture as if it were the moon. Muriel jumped to feel a nurse's soft, sure hand on her shoulder.

"Visiting hours were over at nine," she said.

"I'm just waiting on my Mama to come out of surgery. I heard a noise."

"Yes," the nurse said as she led Muriel back down the hall. "It's sad. She's got no family, and some people from the church brought her here until arrangements can be made to

take her someplace else. She's not sick, really -- she just can't put things together anymore. You can ask her about something that happened fifty years ago, and she can remember it clear as a bell. But ask her where she is, and she won't know. I guess it's fortunate she has some money. Otherwise, she would be put in a state hospital. They've just been running tests on her here to see if there is anything they can do, but I don't think there is."

Later, Muriel watched Ula being rolled into her own room, and her Mama smiled at her, even though Muriel was sure she was not fully aware of what was going on. Then Muriel had walked out of hospital, throwing the bridal magazine into a trash bin, and sat alone in the lobby of the boarding house until it was time to eat breakfast with her Daddy.

Ula had stayed in the hospital less than three weeks, after which she had taken a room near the hospital, where she stayed while receiving treatments as an out-patient.

Muriel had gone to see her Mama once more before she was released, taking with her the pattern for her wedding gown and a sample of the material her Daddy had gotten from the mill. Excited, Muriel sailed past the nurses' station straight into her Mama's room. The bed was surrounded by young interns, while next to her Mama's head, an older doctor stood explaining Ula's chart.

"Here we have a case of uterine cancer which has spread from an initial case of cancer of the cervix. The uterus has

been removed surgically along with the surrounding tissue." The doctor rubbed his index finger along the inside corner of his right eye, preoccupied with a sty.

"Is this a hysterectomy, then?"

"Basically, except non-reproductive tissue was also removed. Radium treatments are planned on an out-patient basis to combat the growth of further cancer cells. Any questions?" The group filed by Muriel without a sideways glance; Ula's head lay deep in the center of the pillow, cupped tenderly in the sterile hand. Without a word to her Mama, Muriel whirled on her heel and followed the doctor down the hall.

In a voice louder than she had expected, Muriel called after him: "Doctor, I need to have a word with you."

The doctor stopped, and Muriel walked to him, breaking the circle of white coats. "Yes, may I help you?" The doctor looked tired, as if he was just ending a day's work instead of beginning one. But Muriel did not care. Ignoring the group gathered around them, she slapped her hand across his face, hard, so she could feel the stubble of the beard scratch against her palm. "That woman," she said. "That woman in there. That woman is my Mama." For a second they faced each other, then Muriel turned away from him and ran into the bathroom and cried until she made herself sick.

When Ula was released permanently, Muriel quit her job so that she could be at home with her Mama. A nurse had come out from Fayetteville with a box of needles and a grapefruit

and taught Muriel the proper way to give an injection. Even so, Ula had not fully accustomed herself to the pain not relieved by the Demerol, and Muriel would spend hours with her, trying to distract her, to coax her into sleep, gently rubbing the backs of Ula's legs where they exploded in a riot of violet blue lines and arcs. "This will be a good time for you, Sister," Ula had said one afternoon as Muriel sat at the foot of the bed. "With you getting married, this will be a good time for you to learn -- for me to teach you." But Ula never said anything to her about the way she should cook or keep house.

The first weeks Ula was home brought an abundance of family and friends and comforters. Cousin Will Garner and his wife, Jean, brought news that Oral Roberts was to be in Raleigh in less than a month, but Ula would not agree to let them take her there. "The Lord knows where I am," she told them. "If He wants to heal me, I know that He will, and I will praise Him for it. But that is up to Him." The church sent food by way of the W.S.C.S., and flowers by way of the preacher, left over from the Sunday service and rearranged so Ula could enjoy them. Ula had talked to Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and one Church of Christ, but Muriel chased away the others, those who came around selling funeral plots. All this while Muriel contracted for flower arrangements, reluctantly agreed for her Cousin Roxy to sing "O Perfect Love" at the service, and attended two showers given in her honor.

Kenneth's leave gave him only two days to be in Fayetteville before the wedding, so he arrived from Detroit by train. His brother drove the car down, and Muriel and Kenneth were planning to drive back to Michigan for a honeymoon, stopping off along the way in West Virginia to visit Blackwater Falls. Muriel had waited for the train in the hot shade of the station platform, anxiously twisting her diamond on her finger. It was an old station, with wooden benches for colored and white, separated, but facing each other. The floor was done in tiny inlaid squares of colored tile, and Muriel was able to form a variety of patterned circles, squares, arcs, while the sun filtered down through the heat like a spotlight cutting lines across the design.

Muriel wondered what would happen when she saw Kenneth. She had missed him, yes, but she wondered if seeing him would make her realize that she didn't want to get married. What would happen then? Yet, when the train strained to a stop, Kenneth jumped off before the steps had even been set, and bounded over to her, squeezing her tight so that her white, starched blouse chafed against her skin.

"How's my girl?"

His voice was full of life and light and sweet as a song, and if Muriel had never loved him before, she knew at that moment that she could. Kenneth had asked about the family, especially about Ula, and Muriel was glad when, after they had joined hands at the supper table, her Daddy had asked Kenneth

to say the blessing.

"Father, thank You for this food, for this day, for these people. Help us to appreciate all that You have given us, so that we might serve You better. Amen."

Ula winked at Kenneth, passing him a plate of sliced roast beef. "Alvin, I hope you were paying attention to the blessing. It might benefit you to listen to what Kenneth was saying. I'm getting kind of tired of 'God is great, God is good,' and I'm sure the Lord is a trifle weary of it, too." Sitting there, flanked on either side by her parents, Kenneth seemed to Muriel to be part of the family, a brother or a cousin -- not the man who was to take her away to be his wife.

Yet, that night after supper, Muriel's anxiety returned. Sitting out away from the house in the arbor swing, Kenneth rocked them back and forth in a slow, steady motion with his leg, while Muriel let her feet dangle, skimming the ground like a child's. There was no moon, and the night was so black it was blinding. Across the expanse of yard, sounds drifted out from the house along with tiny blocks of light fading softly, quickly into the dark air around them. Kenneth kept his arm around Muriel, and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

"You know," he said, "it's just like I've never been away. Nothing's changed."

"Mama's looking terrible."

"You think so? I don't. She looks thinner, sure, but I don't think I've ever seen her looking happier. She must have

showed me the presents a dozen times."

"I just wish there was something I could do for her."

"What?"

"I don't know. I just feel like there is something I should do. Ruthie still has one more year at the high school, and Alvin -- sometimes I wonder how he had the sense to get born. And Daddy...I worry about them all...like I was deserting them."

Muriel could smell the sweet fluid of the lighter a moment before the flame appeared.

"The way I see it, you're only doing what they would have you do. I know you're scared. But Detroit isn't that bad a place."

"I don't know anybody."

"You know me -- that's a start. And you met Fred. I'm sure you're going to like his wife, too. You know, she's been going around with me trying to find us a place. We're going to be living only about six or seven blocks from them, and we'll have TV and everything. Of course it won't belong to us, but the lady downstairs said we could watch hers when we wanted. It'll be an adventure for us. You should be excited."

The words came out of the darkness towards her, but Muriel was not listening. Her thoughts lay inside a small, satin-lined box, with the ring she would give to Kenneth. It seemed strange to her suddenly that the ring could be put on just by sliding it; she thought it ought to be clamped or welded to the flesh.

Kenneth left early to make plans with his brother, and Muriel dressed for bed immediately, though she was not sleepy. The house was still, and Muriel stretched across her bed after lighting a small candle on her night table. Boxes and luggage were piled along the walls, and her gown hung in a plastic wrapper on the back of the closet door. Muriel enjoyed the way the candle did not flush out the darkness, but compromised with it, dancing shadows off the walls and ceiling. The house had been wired for electricity ever since Muriel graduated from high school, but she often burned a candle the way Ula had done for her when she was little and could not sleep.

In the other part of the house, the floor boards squeaked, and Muriel knew Ula was up. She wondered if she needed an injection. Muriel raised up off the mattress, but even as she did, she heard the door to her parents' room close, and the house was silent once more. How glad I will be when this is over, Muriel thought. How tired I am of Significant Days. She felt like a prisoner who had only to order her last meal.

Muriel puffed the candle instead of blowing it, so her breath enveloped the flame and squeezed it out. The sheets billowed up and away from her as she scooted down between them, settling in for a sleepless night, and the dark settled over her as softly as the cool linen.

Ruthie opened the closet door so Muriel could see herself in the full length mirror, and for a moment, Muriel was able only to see The Bride. The Bride who wore a gown of ivory

satin, scalloped to a full skirt which extended into a full-length train. The Bride who wore a double-tiered finger tip veil of French illusion attached to a tiara of seed pearls. The Bride who carried a white Bible marked with a white, purple-throated orchid and white satin streamers.

The door to the dressing room closed, and Muriel turned to face Ula. "Ruthie is giving Ellen Marie and Gladys their corsages, and I thought it would be good for us to talk." How frail her Mama looked. It had been necessary to have Ula's dress of midnight blue lace realtered within the last week, but it still bagged over the end of her shoulders. Ula's hair had thinned as a result of the radium treatments and turned white in wisps which she brushed back off her face.

Muriel could hear car doors slamming and people talking on the steps of the church as the guests arrived for the service. Outside, darkness had sprung up from shadowy patches of blue-eyed grass, spreading up and out and around the church. It slipped up the trees in the distance reaching for the sky, until all of night seemed to converge at a pinpoint in the west which became the first star. The janitor had raked the sandy yard and drive for the event, and out across from the church, the tombstones in the graveyard huddled together like the foundation for a building.

Ula walked over to the wall, resting her head against it so that Jesus praying in the garden in a picture seemed to lean over into her ear. She wore no flowers, except for a tiny

spray of baby's breath on her wrist. "You're a beautiful bride, Sister. A beautiful bride. But that is easy. I hope you will be a beautiful wife.

"I've noticed the past few days you've been acting nervous, but I figured it was just all the people in and out of the house, and the excitement. You've never been one to hog the attention. I just wish there was something I could say that would put you at ease, that would make you understand what's in my heart. You know how much your Daddy and I like Kenneth. I told your Aunt Francis this morning that if I lined up all the men there are, and had to choose for you, I don't think I could do any better."

Muriel could feel her eyes begin to sting, and she prayed that she would not cry. There was no time to re-do her make-up. "But, Mama, I worry about leaving you now when you need me."

"I know you do. But, honey, I'm going to be leaving soon, myself, and there's nothing I can do. Don't you think I hate to leave your Daddy, and Ruthie, and Alvin? But this is one of those things I just have to trust the Lord with. I know that He's going to take care of them. Good lands, Sister, when I got married, I had to move up from South Carolina. I didn't know when I'd ever see my folks again. But when I came here, I brought with me all those things that they had taught me, so I always had a part of them with me. I've always said I never wanted my children to settle down underneath me, and

that's the truth. You're grown. I've done what I could. Go out and make your new life."

"But Mama, what can I do for you?"

Ula smiled a sly, half smile. "Just gimme lots and lots of grandbabies."

Ruthie opened the door. "Mama, it's time."

"Where's your Daddy?"

"Out smoking a cigarette."

"Here I am." Muriel's Daddy threw a fiery red spark out into the black.

"Let me look at you all," said Ula, gathering her family into a circle around her. "God has blessed me. I've got no complaints." With that, Ula turned on Alvin's arm to start down the aisle. Looking back over her shoulder, she said, "Remember, Sister, walk down the aisle. Don't prance. You're a bride, not a movie star."

After Ula was seated, the ushers pulled out the white canvas runner, unpleating it down the left hand aisle toward Muriel. The wedding march started and Gladys stepped off, followed closely by Ellen Marie. Ruthie held up her hand again to show she still had the ring, and with eyes already wet, began to walk down the aisle.

Taking her place at the edge of the carpet, Muriel was pleased to see how beautiful the church was. Candles burned in every window and along the front, so the shadows were pushed back into the corners like cobwebs. Flowers banked the altar

and pulpit, and the church smelled sweet and clean. Stretched down the long aisle of the church, Muriel had only to follow the runner to the front, led by her Daddy, recite her vows, then circle back down the right side on the arm of her husband.

Her Daddy gave her arm a squeeze. As Muriel's foot touched the white canvas walkway, it seemed to take hold of her and move her along towards the altar, without effort, like a moving sidewalk. She moved ahead past friends first, then distant kin, then cousins and close family.

At the front of the sanctuary, Muriel could see Kenneth watching her, handsome in his dress uniform. She thought she saw him gulp for air, and it pleased her to know that he too was frightened. He smiled, and she could feel herself being drawn to him.

Muriel unclasped her bouquet, letting her free hand pass lightly over Ula's, which rested on the upper arm of the pew.

I love you, Mama. I love you so much.

Ula's eyes were bright with pride, but Muriel knew the look was one she could not fully understand; for though her Mama's look encompassed her, it went beyond Muriel, intended for, shared with her Daddy.

The organ melody carried her forward, and leaving Ula behind, Muriel looked ahead to Kenneth. Her husband. Her lover. Her helper. She returned the smile he offered to her, and she was happy, though deep inside her, held tighter than

her bouquet, was the knowledge that in a year, maybe sooner, she would be back in the church, packed in among bunches of white flowers, in her Mama's place, to watch the candles burn.

THE LITTLE WOMAN

Eva unwrapped the pin curl and rewound it around her finger. She should never roll her hair when she was aggravated with Roy. One night when she had been put out with him, she had pinned her rollers so tightly her eyebrows were left in an arch; the next day her head looked as if it had been covered with tiny balls of blue-gray Brillo.

She should know by now that it did no good for her to become upset with Roy, but he was becoming impossible to live with. Just today she had baked a Peter Paul Mounds cake for Mozelle Wasser after she found out that Mozelle's daughter had given up nursing school to become a Hare Krishna. Eva had asked Mozelle about Doris that day at the A & P just to be polite, and Mozelle began to heave and sob like a woman possessed.

"She's given up everything to pass out bananas on a street corner in Atlanta," Mozelle said, opening a roll of paper towels to dry her eyes. "She says for us not to worry about her or to try and come and get her. She says she is doing what she always wanted to do, and she has a peace of mind. Passing out bananas on a street corner." And Mozelle began to sob again, her face becoming red and blotched and swollen. "I think somebody has given her a drug that has made her lose her mind. That's what I think. But her Daddy

says that if that is what she wants to do, we should let her go -- good riddance and good-bye. I can't let her go though. She's all I've got. She's my baby."

Eva had baked the cake to take over because even if Mozelle should have half expected Doris to do something crazy, she was such a foolish girl -- nursing school, that was a laugh; she had been to secretarial school, stewardess training school, and tried to set herself up selling Avon door-to-door -- Mozelle was still a friend, and Eva stood by her friends. Before she and Roy had left for Mozelle and Warren's, Eva had told Roy the whole story, and warned him positively no to say anything on the subject of Doris because it was such a delicate situation, but no sooner had Mozelle cut the first piece of cake, Roy said to Warren, "I hear y'all got a fruit vendor now in the family. Think you could get me a good deal on some tangerines?"

Mozelle began to cry into the cake, her tears running down the sides like glaze, and Warren said he didn't appreciate jokes being made of what was a family matter. Eva had been too embarrassed to speak. She could only draw her mouth in a tight, angry line and glare at Roy, but when they left she told him she bet he would have a grand old time at a funeral. "Or a train wreck. I bet that would be a regular knee slapper! Ha! Ha!"

Eva reached on the dressing table for her cold cream. It wasn't there. "Daddy Roy, if you've taken my Ponds again

to clean those golf clubs of yours, I'm going to smack you good."

She thought he was in the bathroom, but when Roy didn't answer, Eva knew that meant he was downstairs -- nibbling. It would be best to catch him in the act; then she could let him have it with both barrels. The doctor had put him on a strict diet, one thousand calories a day, but Roy kept right on gaining. The doctor had said definitely no fried foods, no sweets, no liquor, but if Eva ever left anything more than a carrot stick in the refrigerator nine times out of ten she would find it gone.

"Just what am I supposed to do?" she had asked the doctor. "Cook twice? I don't think that I should have to suffer because Daddy Roy has let himself get to be as big as the side of a barn. I worked like hell to keep my figure, and now what good does it do me? I've got to diet just like some fat old sow."

In fact, Eva's weight had never been a problem for her, but there had been no need to tell the doctor that. At four feet eleven, she always referred to herself as a size petite, and was given to dressing in rows and rows of soft ruffles. Daddy Roy told people she was proof that the best things always did come in small packages, and when Eva was young, more than one person told her she bore a strong resemblance to the Gish sisters.

She had sold ladies shoes and handbags at Belk's for

twenty-five years, till she met Daddy Roy. He was an insurance salesman with a dead wife and a grown son, and fixed to retire in five years when they met. That was seven years ago. Eva had worn a pink suit (the color of Jackie Kennedy's) and carried a small, white leather Bible when they married. Roy weighed a little over two hundred pounds that summer when they honeymooned in Cypress Gardens, and was a handsome figure of a man with his silver-gray hair and gleaming white teeth. Now, he was pushing three hundred and fifty pounds and shopped from a special section in the Sears catalogue. Eva had also discovered that the teeth were false.

Eva pulled her champagne colored wrapper from behind the bathroom door where it was hanging, and knotted it tightly around her waist. She stooped down to get her matching pom-pom scuffies, in the process picking up a pair of Roy's drawers from the floor where he had stepped out of them. There is only so much one person can do, she thought, only so much, and I've just about reached the end of my rope.

Eva knew exactly where Roy would be. She had taken an apple-nut cake with caramel icing out of the freezer that night after getting home from the disaster at Mozelle's to take over to Demps Patterson since she was fresh out of the hospital with a kidney stone attack. If Roy was into that cake, she would smack him good.

A floor lamp threw a yellow circle of light around the living room as Eva crept down the stairs on tip-toe to

keep from giving herself away. Down the hall she could see the lights were off in the den, and Eva figured that she was probably going to catch the old coot with his head stuck in the icebox. On the coffee table, her cold cream sat unopened, but Roy's golf clubs were leaning up against the couch.

"Ah ha!" she said, marching for the kitchen. "I've got you now, Daddy Roy."

The swinging door to the kitchen opened with a whoosh to reveal Roy standing, wearing his starred and striped Bicentennial pajamas, framed against the inside of the refrigerator door like a flag. Hearing Eva, he jumped out, away from the refrigerator sounding as if the breath had been knocked out of him, and turned to face her.

"Good God, woman, what do you think you're doing?" Roy's red face suddenly drained to the color of bone china in moonlight, and he began to stagger across the kitchen towards Eva. "Eva," he said, tearing at the front of his pajama shirt. "Oh, God, Eva! My heart. I'm having a heart attack!"

Eva was struck dumb for a second as she watched her husband flail his arms as if he were trying to funnel air into his mouth -- unsure if he was faking. When she did move, she found her scuffies had become tangled in the hem of her wrapper and she could hardly walk. "I'm coming, Daddy," she said. "Just a sec. You hold on for just one second. I'm coming."

But it was too late. Roy was already upon her.

Putting her arms out to help him as best she could, Eva reached around Roy as far as she was able, and he began to dance her backwards through the kitchen door and into the living room, her feet digging deeper and deeper into her wrapper with each step.

"Daddy Roy, now you hush that wheezing. You sound like a locomotive," she said, looking over her shoulder for someplace to lead Roy. "Everything's going to be all right. We'll just let you lie down on the couch to rest, and I'll call the doctor."

Instead of answering, Roy gave a groan, his knees buckled, and they began to fall, Roy crashing down on top of her in the way a giant tidal wave breaks, crushing, devouring everything in sight. Eva could feel herself falling back, as her world turned over, the furniture rushing past her head, the walls and ceiling exchanging places.

She reached frantically up, behind Roy for something to hold on to, managing only to catch a piece from his pajama shirt. Letting go, her fingers stiffened and spread apart like a starfish. There was no time to scream, and no reason, for Eva was like one caught directly in the path of an avalanche. The room shook, the glass rattling in the windows as they hit, and Eva could feel her left leg twist up underneath her and give way with a sharp crack as if several extra joints had been placed in it.

And so Daddy Roy came to rest squarely on top of her. Eva's face was pressed sideways into the carpet by Roy's shoulder,

and she drew her breath in short, rabbit-like gasps. Roy was quiet, but Eva knew he was alive because his breath still wheezed into her ear. She tried to sniff if he smelled of apple-nut caramel cake, but couldn't tell.

"Daddy Roy, you've broken my leg. Daddy Roy. Daddy Roy, if you can hear me I want you to roll off of me so I can get us some help." There was no sound, however, other than Roy's shallow, troubled breathing.

Eva tried to move her arms, but couldn't. Pinned, as she was to the floor, she reminded herself of a circus performer braced against a backboard ready for the knife thrower. The turquoise rug seemed to run up and away from her eyes like a soft, blue-green wall, and the furniture jutted out sideways like decorative push pins. Even in this position, Eva couldn't help but marvel at how clean the room was. She was an excellent housekeeper.

Standing off one of the end tables near her, Eva noticed a large photo of her and Daddy Roy. The angle of her head tilted the image so that it looked as if she were carrying Roy on her back like a gigantic papoose. She had never liked the picture. It had been taken for the church directory, and Eva thought the photographer had tinted her skin to the point she looked like a honkey-tonker. He had also caught in her eyes a look that made it seem as if she had been kept in a cage and beaten with a stick. But Daddy Roy liked the picture; the photographer had washed away Roy's wrinkles in the last rinse, and

he didn't look a day over forty. Daddy Roy had wanted it, so they had bought it. He had even resurrected a large, gilt-edged frame which Eva had hidden at the bottom of a box of junk she was planning to donate to Good Will. The frame had been used previously to house a picture of Daddy Roy's dead wife, and Eva wanted no reminders of her. Now, her presence seemed to surround them continually.

Eva shifted her position slightly, and she found she could move her arms. Roy was unconscious, with Eva pressed up next to him face-to-face so that his beard scratched against her cheek. His skin felt like a piece of hard rubber, and he looked like a baby doll that had been left out in the rain overnight. Eva tried to remember her Red Cross training. "If heart attack victims do not get help within the first thirty minutes, they have little chance of full recovery."

"Daddy Roy, please get off of me. If you don't, there is no way I can help you. Daddy Roy, if I don't get help you might die." Die. Dead. Gone. The words clanked through her thoughts like a penny being swept away up the metal snout of a vacuum. Roy dead. "Don't die, Daddy Roy. Don't go and die now. We don't want that. What would your Eva do without her Daddy Roy?"

What would she do? She was too old to sell shoes anymore. She had no children. There would be no one to take care of her. Yet Eva had always known this is the way it would be. She was past her time when she met Roy, and she was glad of it.

She had not wanted children. Mozelle had told her once, "Honey, you carry something around as a part of you for nearly a year, and when it's time to give it up, it feels like your insides are being burned out! They wanted to knock me out for Doris, but I wouldn't let them. I wanted to know exactly what it was like to give life." Eva tried to imagine her feet in the stirrups, breathing deeply, pushing, pushing out life, but the feeling escaped her. "I think the darkies have the right idea," Mozelle had said. "They just squat down and 'plop!' it's over with. A cup of coffee and they're ready to go back to work. All these fancy doctors, and it takes you a month to get back on your feet. If you ask me, I think they put you up on that table just so they can get a free look." Eva hated to hear talk like that. It embarrassed her. When Daddy Roy had begun to gain weight, sex had become increasingly difficult, and finally impossible. His stomach kept getting in the way. One night he had suggested to Eva that she get on top, and she had smacked him good. "Have you forgotten, Daddy Roy, or do I need to remind you of the natural order of things?" After that, Eva moved a small daybed into their room, and took to sleeping at the foot of Roy's bed, covering herself in a printed spread of fruit and ivy.

What would she do? Roy was going to die, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. If she screamed for help, she might not be able to draw another breath. She could only wait. Mozelle was due in the morning to go with her to see

Demps Patterson. She would find them; Roy dead, Eva trapped beneath him. There was no choice but to wait for Mozelle.

Eva began to make plans. The house could go to Roy, Jr. Eva didn't want it. She didn't like it, never had. It was Roy's house -- and his dead wife's. Not hers. She would be glad to get rid of it. Then what? The Albert Bros. would do the funeral, and Eva would request that there be no flowers. Donations could be made to the Heart Fund instead. It seemed only appropriate.

There would probably have to be a fight over the funeral with Roy, Jr. An insurance salesman (like his Daddy), he had gotten the notion that he had been called to convert traveling salesmen. As a result, he spent his weekends and vacations traveling the highways, painting Scripture verses on rocks by the side of the road. Undoubtedly, he would want to have a few words to say at Roy's funeral. Eva was glad Roy, Jr. was the ghost woman's baby and not hers. She would hate to have a nutty child. Eva had a vision of Roy, Jr. lying prostrated on the floor of the funeral parlor chapel in front of his father's casket screaming, "Get Right With God!" No, no, no. No thank you, sir. "I couldn't control Daddy Roy in life, but I'll damn well bury him the way I want." Roy, Jr. could have the house, but the funeral belonged to her.

Eva chided herself for even thinking that she would have to sell shoes again for a living. She would have plenty of money. Daddy Roy bought almost as much insurance as he

sold. She would have no worries in that department. Maybe she would take a trip. She and Mozelle could take a trip together. To Europe. Eva saw herself eating snails in the Eiffel Tower or ordering a real Italian pizza in Rome. She could do it. She would do it -- Mozelle or not. In fact, Eva decided it might be better to go without Mozelle after all. Mozelle would spend half the trip pining away for Doris and Warren, the other half buying souvenirs to take home to them. Mozelle would only tie her down.

Eva found herself becoming excited at the thought. People would respect her because she would be a widow, not a maiden lady to be pitied. The world rested at her fingertips like a control panel, and she had the power to turn it on. The aggravations, the vexations, they would have been worth it. She had been a good wife, better than Roy deserved, and now she would be rewarded. She would have his name, and she would have his money, and she would be free to do as she pleased.

Eva's hand touched a wet spot on the rug, and she wondered if Daddy Roy had urinated as a result of the attack. People did that sometimes, lost control of themselves, when they died. However, when Eva brought her hand to her face, she could see her fingers were tinted with red.

Blood. Eva knew her leg must be broken off entirely or fractured so bones severed blood vessels. Arteries even. Panic hit, and Eva realized if she didn't get Daddy Roy off

of her, she might not live until morning. Her life's blood could seep out painlessly and soundlessly as hair falling to the beauty shop floor and she would drift off.... The situation was too bizarre! The kind of story Eva read in the beauty parlor's magazines: Her Husband Loved Her To Death -- Bloody Bodies Found In Passionate Embrace. She wanted to see Roy in the ground, not lay down beside him while his idiot son preached over them.

Eva knew people were given extraordinary powers during times of stress. She had read more than once of women lifting a car or some such object off one of their children when it was necessary to save the life. Eva put her arms up under Roy's collar bone and pushed.

"Get off of me, Roy. I want you off of me now." Her arms locked into place, and Eva scooted down to try and free her legs. As Roy's body lifted away from hers, a sharp pain raced from her leg into her stomach, and deeper, like a hot knife ripping at her insides. Eva screamed, but the pain only wrapped itself around her more firmly, and began to dance on her heart. Her eyes crossed, and even though Eva kept her arms straight, Roy came down again, the folds of his flesh surrounding her head as if she were inside a deflating balloon.

There was no escape. Eva tried to breathe, but her mouth filled with cotton pajama top. "Let me up, Roy. Let me get my breath." But if Daddy Roy heard her cries, he did not respond. Massive, immovable, his veins seemed to run

full with lead he was so heavy. "Damn you, Roy. Damn you," she said, biting into the soft flab underneath his heart till she hit bone. "You have no right to do this to me." And she shook her head, clinching bone and skin tightly between her teeth as the stars above her face blazed and burned in the flannel sky.