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FUQUA, NANCY. Pausing under a Glass Dome. (1972)
Directed by: Lloyd Kropp. Pp. 121.

This novella illustrates the paradox between motive and appearance--the protagonist's inner life merges again and again into the texture of life in her observed world. Finally, what happens to her happens because she is the way she is.

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
1972

Directed by

Lloyd Kropp
THESIS ADVISOR

PAUSING UNDER A GLASS DOME
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

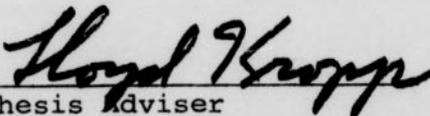
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Pausing Under A Glass Dome

She sat back on her haunches, and reaching between her spread knees, pushed aside the mulch of last year's leaves from the roots of a tough-stemmed rose. Fingers only a little less pale and thin as the bones that cored them dug through a winter's mold and mildew, white-stripping the gray dirt, and released the smell of cold rot that mixed in her nostrils with the scents of new rose leaves and loosening buds. The rose grew in a corner of the yard where a fence of chicken wire met and clung to a fence of weathered pine boards. This corner was screened from the back of the house by a careless row of white lilacs, their pointed flowers steaming in the late morning sun. Her hair hung over her face in lank strings as she concentrated on shaping a precise rectangle in the soft, cold earth. Beside her lay a yellow box which she picked up once, placing it in the hole and laying it aside again. She excavated another handful, neatly tamped the sides and bottom of the depression, and after smoothing away the ridges her fingers made, she dropped her hands and was satisfied. Again, she took the yellow box, miniature leftover from a toy kitchen, and

lifting the lid stroked her crusty fingernail the length of a crisp golden crescent, adorned at one end with staring pop eyes. She fitted the box in the hole, mounded the soil over it, yanked a bud off the bush spreading overhead, and stripped its petals arranging them across the grave between her feet. She whistled the kyrie eleison between her teeth. Under the rose, the high white light transmuted to stained-glass green. The corner was bare except for the rose that bloomed each year in seclusion, and when the lilacs put forth their heartshaped leaves and the grasses around their roots revived, it was hidden. There was detachment here from the busy summer yard and the house. It was her summer house, a place to carry out the private acts of childhood. She adjusted her position to sit cross-legged on the cool spongy ground. Reaching her arms toward the center of the bush, she saw the green light deepen on her skin, staining it, transforming her freckles to frog warts. A gigantic stone frog, toppled in and forgotten by mischievous children who had grown up and gone away, she crouched in the bottom mud of an old pond. Goldfish in exotic shapes wove through spears of sunlight and hairy strings of vegetation. Nothing approached. The sun did not penetrate to the floor; the fish played their games at a distance. She waited in thick, green quiet.

"Callie!" A voice bounced on the slimy, speckled terrain of her back and rippled off, sonar-like. "Callie! Callie! You better answer me!"

Damn! Callie jerked away from the bush, dragging her arm on the fibrous point of a thorn that had been tender when she was a baby. "God damn it," she said, bearing down on the words and sucking the slice in her skin.

"Calliee!" Her mother's voice tore the morning air, stained it, like the heat and smoke rising from the kitchen chimney.

Callie crawled, pushing through the lilacs, and stood, using her skirt like a rag to clean her fingers and scrub her knees.

"Hurry up here. There's something I want you to do." Willa spoke from the blackness behind the screen door, her hand and knee a blur against it.

The back of the house drooped, pegged like a tent by two chimneys running up the back wall. It was open underneath, supported by scattered brick columns. As Callie came across the yard, her mother turned, giving the door a kick that slammed it. Callie's long legs took her up the steps and through the door in a single step. She was an Olympic broad jumper, flying monkey-agile on her own energy. The

screen cracked twice, once against the outside wall and again after Callie's foot passed like a whirling moon, from bright into dark. Head down, fighting gravity, she slogged through an infrared swamp. Could this be the fourth dimension, at last? The sunporch with sloping, worn, red floor was lined with windows, blinds close-drawn against the heat. It contained only a faded green sofa bed, arms marked with cigarette burns, a wicker chair, cushions spread with black and green flowers, a sawed-off round table that belonged outside, and a Dixie Heater, a cylindrical coal-burning stove that heated the sunporch and dried their clothes during the short winter. At one end of the sunporch were a yellow table and bench where they took most of their meals. Callie spun around the table and dived at the kitchen door; arms outstretched, she caught herself in the doorway and hung there like the thief on the cross. She was fourteen, but under the skimpy dress her body had no more shape than a twelve-year-old boy's. Flat of breast, sharp of rib and knee, she stretched the verge of womanhood to a thin, taut edge.

"Why can't you come when I call?" Willa leaned over the laundry heater to stick a form in apples baking in the stovepipe oven. "If you had to be in a hot kitchen like Alice and me, you wouldn't want to waste time. Look at you, tall as I am, and out playing in the yard."

Alice, black and solid as a fresh eggplant, stood at a porcelain-topped table pressing biscuits into a pan. A gas stove gleamed from its place of state in a corner between two windows. It was virginal in that kitchen with the smoky ten-foot ceiling and walls of horizontal tongue-in-groove, and naked cantilever sink.

"You and Alice won't let me in here," said Callie, still hanging. "And anyway I've decided not to learn cooking."

"One of these days you'll wish you had."

"No, I won't."

"You can't back talk me when your father's not around." Willa turned, testing the hot, sweet air with her long fork. "I won't have it." Her pores were large and color burned from deep beneath her skin. Tears began to trickle through the puffy wasteland under each eye.

Oh Lord, thought Callie, drunk again, or getting there fast. A new hiding place for her bottle. About the time Monroe gets home she'll be staggering, and we're supposed to think she's having a fit of malaria, or epilepsy. "Don't touch me." Callie stood, glaring but with an eye on the door. Alice pushed out her lips, shook a clean dish towel over the pan of biscuits and waddled on short, curved legs to stir the pot of corn stewing on the pristine range.

"That's over, Callie. Your father can't do a goddam thing anymore." Willa threw down the fork and dropped, legs spread, into a kitchen chair.

Give us this day, our daily bread, thought Callie. She makes the words, gobbles them, belches them back to gobble again. A sick cow, nourished by vomit, with bad breath and poison milk. Uncomfortable, Callie endured the litany, wishing she were somewhere else, someone else, a girl whose mother did not steep herself in what had become almost a good quart of bourbon everyday.

"How," intoned Willa, "could I've missed marrying one of the handsome young men who was so crazy about me?" Not waiting for response she slipped willingly into the rhythm. "Didn't I tell Monroe he was too old? And now he's sick, what'll happen?" She went on while Callie thought how a maudlin Willa, her body swelling on drink, her movements spilling across a room, would pull out souvenir albums of twenty-five years before. She was displayed there among dance programs, invitations to navy balls, ribbons won in charleston contests at Hibernium Hall, the young, slender-bodied dream of a Willa, her dark hair bobbed and frizzed as the time decreed. She stood on a graveled, tamped railroad bed, squarely between two rails, shining in the sepia

haze, stretching behind to disappear in a clump of dusty trees. "Good Gracious!!" read the caption, and Monroe's bearlike shadow was anchored above it by the point of one of her laced high-heeled shoes. She often appeared alone, posed on railroad tracks or in front of gaunt, two-story clapboard houses, once leaning against a tree wrapped in a silk Spanish shawl with six-inch fringe floating around her like the hair that framed her thin, classic nose and all but concealed deep eyes above a mouth drawn in brown. Like the tints in the snapshots, Willa's lipstick, smearing on her hands as she wiped her face, was brownish, as though she held on to the time when Monroe's shadow was content to trail her.

"Come on, Mama. Come on and wash your face. Don't fall down on us yet."

Alice, peeling tomatoes, giggled.

"Up, Mama." Callie placed a stern hand on her sleeve, then both hands in the wet armpits to help her from the chair. The gorgeous knees so like those that had blazed on thousands of NE-HI orange posters churned uncertainly, straightened, and the two women grunted toward the hall. Callie hitched her mother firmly around the waist with one arm and used the other to open doors.

There were six mirrors in the bathroom for Willa to verify the crepey tucks in her aging skin. Callie hauled her to the largest hung over a chest, its top cluttered with cosmetics. Willa leaned on her fingers, staring over her head into a reflection of her back, thrown from a mirror on the opposite wall.

"Here." Callie stuck a cold washcloth into her face.

Willa plastered it on, peeled it off, and peered at herself. "It doesn't do any good. Just look at me. I'm getting ugly and old." Her mirrored self looked doubtfully back. Willa stretched her neck, running a hand down her throat and turning her head for a position that minimized her double chin. She arched her back, shifting her weight to one leg. With a deep breath she lifted her breasts in both hands. She slid her hands down, following the shape of her hips. Callie looked away. Jesus, don't ever let me look that way. Don't ever let me look at myself that way. Her pale eyes glimmered in the glass over her mother's shoulder. Willa was forty-three. Whiskey had blurred her face and body. Her breasts stretched the orange flowers on her blouse; the full pleated shorts stood wide away from her bloated stomach.

"When are you going to start to grow up, Callie? Stand beside me and let me look at you." Callie bore her sweaty touch and stood obedient, her head twisted from the sight of their combined images.

"I sure don't see any signs of it, do you? Don't you ever have a little stomach ache, right down there?" She patted Callie where the stomach ache should be. "Hold up your head. You want to have a honeymoon someday. Stand yourself up and put some shape on those bones." Her attention drifted. She forgot Callie and swayed close to the mirror, examining her face.

Callie gazed at the two of them. Her eyes were Monroe's and so was her wide mouth. We're alike where our hurts show first, thought Callie. I'll never learn to control my look any more than he did. Seeing Monroe's likeness next to Willa again reminded Callie of the album. In the pictures of Willa and Monroe together, Willa's gaze was for the camera, or with her head back-angled on her stem of a neck, into Monroe's eyes as though she found her pleasing reflection there also. And he focused, cameraless on these occasions, on her, looking as if he had found the end of his search for freshness and beauty after thirty-five years as dry as the sepia dust of a Piedmont North Carolina country road.

Willa stroked her face and throat with an astringent-soaked wad of cotton. Callie sighed. "What'd you want me for, Mama?"

"Oh yeah. Well, we've gotta have some more milk with that Phillip coming and all. Mr. Perry didn't leave any extra."

"He would if you'd tell him."

"And (pencilling in the plucked line of her brows) somebody's got to meet the bus. And it won't be me. If I've got to put up with Rhoda for who knows how long, I'm going to steady my nerves for one last time. Sure thing, after today nothing's going to be right again." A sob rattled in her throat, became a hiccup. "Oh, look at that!" She threw the pencil at the mirror and dabbed at her eyebrow with the wet cloth.

"Mama, if you care so much about how you look, why do you drink? It's the booze makes you fat and turns your face red." Holding her breath, Callie picked up a lipstick and rubbed it across her lips. Mata Hari, chin up, inscrutable as ever, met her interrogators.

"Take that off." Willa jerked her around, and with fencing movements ground the wet cotton into Callie's mouth.

"Don't. Let go of me." Callie poked, sharp elbow met jiggling breast. "Don't put that nasty cotton on me. You've been using it."

Willa stepped back, fresh rouge flickering. "Give it to me. Are you trying to look like that fourteen-year-ole whore, Dorothy Byrd? Made up, dressed up like a woman with her front sticking out."

It was said that Dorothy Byrd, after other girls her age had gone to bed, was heard talking in the shadows of her yard and was later seen riding in an automobile, with a man or men.

Callie looked down at her checked, gathered skirt, white collar and cuffs, and rick-rack trim.

"You look like a nice young girl. Time enough for growing."

They looked over the heap of lotions, powders, paints between them, assessing as women do each other's good points, totting up the other's armory, stockpile of ammunition. And Callie knew that the important weapons belonged to Dorothy Byrd with her smooth, moist, red-lipped face, rounded twitch of ass, and pointy, arrogant breasts. What were clean-limbed verve and Bette Davis-like sophistication compared to that? What were distorted, half-dreamed conquests, gone but for a pile of faded snapshots, compared to that?

Callie wiped her mouth on the underside of her hem.

"Gaa, Mama. You make me sick."

The two women turned, Callie toward the front door, Willa to her bottle's safe place. The oven door slammed. Willa stopped, revolved slowly in the dim hall, sliding her feet carefully on the pale waxed boards, a charwoman at a ball. "Callie, tell him, tell Carl I said to put the milk on my bill."

The town of MacRae and the people who lived there served the MacRae Cotton Mills. The square clapboard houses, the gravel-on-tar streets, the one-block string of stores, the thirty-bed hospital, the white and colored schools, all were built, owned, and maintained by the mill. The MacRaes had given the brick Episcopal church in the name of their God's first martyr. Stained glass windows dimmed it, and pipe organ music clung like the velvet lining of an elegant jewel box to its cool, stuccoed walls. The Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and members of the Holiness Church of God were plainer, louder, decidedly Protestant. There were

no actual Catholics nearer than the next town, four miles away. The one Jewish family who ran MacRae's clothing store traveled twenty-five miles to a synagogue. A spur line, ending at the mill, cut the main street into two streets, dividing the town--unpaved roads from paved, colored school from white school, the hog pens and company barn from the teacherage, union from management. Once and sometimes twice a day a coal-fired engine ground slowly in, then backed out to clank sixty-five miles to the parent mill. There were no stoplights in the eight-block length and breadth of MacRae. There were a movie theater, a telephone in the drugstore, an Esso station of the same brick as the Episcopal church, and a policeman who, like the town's doctor, was on call day and night. The volunteer fire department, the one-room library with its complete works of Agatha Christie, and a ping pong table were under one roof in a corner of the park next to the dye house. Here, too, were a swimming pool and a few clay tennis courts, deserted most of the time, a crumbling covered bandstand, and a cage shared by a bear and two monkeys. A traveling salesman, if he were detained in MacRae, could always find a room in the guest house nestled by the main gate overlooking the shaded park on one side and on the other, the red brick, saw-tooth corners and exposed iron braces of the various buildings of the mill.

Callie Morrin, ignoring the steps, left her head-high porch and landed flatfooted in bright daylight. Arms close to her sides, knees breaking just enough to cushion her fall. James Cagney could not have done it better, she thought. Not as well. Cagney was caught and tortured. Without mercy. Dangerous to parachute in behind enemy lines under a full moon. The sun was cresting in a high bleached sky as Callie jumped the low hedge marking her front yard and started for the stores in the next block. Her uneven, shoulder-length hair whipped redly in the unequivocal light that also fired the freckles rashed over her face and arms. The sidewalk of crushed quartz and warm packed sand wandered like a cow-path across the row of front yards. As she followed it, she drew, here and there, from thick trunked maples and oaks, patches of shade like a cooling film over her hair and skin. Hardly pausing, she transferred a sharp pebble from toes to fingers and pinged it against the steel rail that divided her street in half.

Callie giant-stepped away from the last of the shade, her feet imprinting the tar risen to the surface of the graveled street, to the concrete sidewalk flowing the length of the block of stores--from the Premiere at one end to the Bank of MacRae at the other. Jimmie, the town derelict, was

posted before the screen doors of Peel's Cafe where he had made himself inviolate within a circle of tobacco-stained saliva.

The drugstore was a thin rectangle between Carl's grocery and the bank. As Callie entered the propped-open doors she saw a pale shadow moving in the back among the paraphernalia of the pharmacy. Mr. Searcy. Charlie, his son, was washing glasses and spoons behind the soda fountain, his back to the door. Callie tiptoed to the counter and, reading the labels on the shiny syrup pumps, waited for Charlie to turn around. Like Callie, Charlie Searcy had been born in MacRae, and he had lived all his life two houses down from the Morrins. He left the state university to join the Army Air Corps just before the end of the war. When he came home, it was not to finish at the university, but to give rides over MacRae from Bob Norris's airport by the Cape Fear River for five dollars. Then, because the cost of living was up and peacetime production of denim was down, and the union forced the mill into long periods of idleness, the grass grew high in the meadow runway, the windsock on the tiny hangar blew into tatters, and Charlie spent more and more time behind his father's soda fountain. She drew in her breath and held it. Charlie turned the instant before

her head exploded and his dead-man's face tensed into life when he saw Callie, her puffed cheeks and chest collapsing in a vacuum.

He unwound his apron and dried his hands on it before throwing it under the counter. "What game are you playing today, Miss Callie?" he said, tucking his shirt down.

She watched him adjust his belt before she looked up past his ear. "I don't play anymore." It was not what she wanted to say, not what other girls would have said with Charlie Searcy smiling at them with his look that went right under their clothes. The truth was she did not know what to say to Charlie anymore; she thought she sounded like a pompous child.

"O.K., Miss Callie, if you don't want to let me in on your game, then what can I do for you?"

"Orange coke, please." And to herself, don't keep calling me 'Miss Callie'. She turned, shaking her hair around her face to flip through magazines on a rack in the middle of the oiled floor, rejecting all except a "Classic Comics," Les Miserables. Pushing one side of her hair behind her ear and allowing the other side to half blind her, Callie turned to Charlie with what she hoped was an enigmatic smile only to find Dorothy Byrd between her and Charlie and the orange coke.

"Here's old Dot." Charlie leaned across the syrup pumps toward Dorothy Byrd as though he were about to vault the counter. "I haven't seen you since . . . ?"

Dorothy Byrd laughed and shook her head with a finger to her lips. "The name is Dor-o-thy," she said. "Who do you think you are?"

"Excuse me," said Callie, reaching past Dorothy Byrd's tan shoulders to pick up her drink.

"Don't I know?" Charlie said, wrinkling his face and scratching his head.

"You sure haven't shown me," said Dorothy Byrd, pressing against her side of the counter.

They laughed, heads close, her short blonde feather cut sticking in his mustache.

You'd think somebody said something funny, thought Callie. "Charge it," she said, holding up the coke and comic book.

"Why, Callie, I didn't think you read anything but Shakespeare," said Dorothy Byrd, giggling.

Callie took her coke and comic book to a booth next to the pharmacy. "Hlo, Mr. Searcy."

"Well now, whose little girl are you?" Mr. Searcy had asked this question of Callie every time he saw her in the store for as long as she could remember. When she was

little she had thought he really did not recognize her, and it worried her that she could change so, and she had tried to make her face look the same everytime she met him.

She smiled, and Mr. Searcy's false teeth peeped at her in response. "I'm waiting for the twelve o'clock bus. My Aunt Rhoda's coming."

"Late again," said Mr. Searcy, glancing at the large clock like a milk of magnesia tablet over his head. "How's your father?"

"The hospital's sending him home today. Aunt Rhoda's coming to help out. She sent Mama a telegram saying she was dropping everything to be here by today." Callie grinned at Mr. Searcy.

"That's Rhoda," he nodded, pursing his lips. "You need anything, you let us know."

Callie watched for the bus, turned the pages of the book, and ignored Charlie making a fool of himself with a girl her age. He and Dorothy Byrd were silhouettes against the eye-blistering glare beyond the wide doorway. Their long shadows, their murmuring and teasing laughter, reached her seat at the back of the drugstore. Wouldn't catch me falling all over the drugstore in a pair of shorts and a halter, she thought. She pulled a rubber band out of her pocket to skin her hair to the nape of her neck and scratched

a mosquito bite on one knee. Callie reflected on her long knowledge of Charlie Searcy and the constraint she had felt in his presence since the day of the plane ride.

Charlie loved airplanes and had spent his childhood and adolescence constructing models. When Callie was small, she tried to share his interest with crossed balsa sticks or a hard, green june bug tethered to a long piece of twine and sounding to her like the tiny motors Charlie fastened to his planes. When he returned from the war, an Air Corps pilot, full grown, it seemed natural that she should fly with him. Monroe drove her to the airport, and she, in her everyday plaid dress, climbed into the rear cockpit of an obsolete trainer. Charlie had fastened her seat belt, grinned at her beneath his mustache as he closed her canopy, then climbed in the seat ahead. Bumping down the flat meadow, roaring past the windsock and over the trees, Callie had felt the exultation of a happy ending. Like snapping the last piece in a puzzle--one with big round shapes in clear bright colors. Their being there was fitting in a way hardly anything ever was. Not just that Charlie was in the seat ahead manipulating the tandem controls, but that his parents, hers, the mill below like a broken lollipop on the stick of railroad, the clustered trees that were MacRae, the surrounding

cotton fields, the boiling river--all were absorbed, silenced, concentrated in her and Charlie and the humming, rushing world they made. Everything they knew, all they could be was squeezed into the twin cockpits, and the tips of the thin pewter-colored wings were as fragile, yet as strong and alive as her own fingers.

Forward she saw Charlie's face framed in his mirror looking gravely at her. He banked the plane to clear his downward vision. They were running parallel to the river, heading back toward the hangar and the filling station-store that edged the field. He looked at her again, his eyebrows curving in a question. Don't go back, she mouthed, and thought she saw the panic flash behind his eyes the way it felt in her at the ocean when she turned from pursuing an especially beautiful shell to find a breaker ready to grind her into the sand. Then his mustache lifted and there was nothing shining in his eyes but laughter. She did not smile back, for in that moment she felt her buttocks clinch as when she found herself in the path of Willa's runaway direction. Something behind Willa's ridicule and Charlie's watchful sharing was the same. Maybe they could name it; maybe they could not. But Callie knew she surely could not. They settled on the meadow like a sprawling bird. Jumping from the plane's wing and driving back to town with Monroe

in the black Ford, Callie hoped that Willa and Charlie did not know what it was either.

Callie shivered on the unpadded bench.

"Thar she blows." Mr. Searcy recreated his idea of a whaling man. One hand shading his eyes, porcelain teeth snapping to.

Wilmington, proclaimed the Trailways swinging in and shooting splinters of light all around the store and into Callie's eyes from its steel-mirror skin. The passengers confined to its dusty inside began poking their heads out the open windows or standing and stirring around, hoping perhaps to escape for a moment.

Callie took a mouthful of orange coke ice and tucked the book into the belt of her dress. The bus door opened. The driver descended rapidly, for crashing on his heels were Caroline Rhoda Morrin Smith in a billowing cape, a Pekinese on a red leash, and nine-year-old Phillip Morrin Smith wearing thick knickers.

"If you please," said Rhoda, thrusting a needlepoint knitting bag at the bus driver who grabbed it to protect himself from puncture. Rhoda bent to pick up the Pekinese, her cape making a tent over the sidewalk. Lodging the dog in the crook of her arm, she snatched her bag from the driver with a rich-throated "Thank you," and without looking

in the boy's direction, sang out "Phillip." Rhoda and the obedient Phillip were in the drugstore door before Callie could get to them.

"Callie. My dear. You have come to meet us. How sweet. How thoughtful. Isn't she sweet, Phillip. Come. Give your Cousin Callie a kiss."

At fifty, Rhoda was an unbowed six feet, not counting her thick hair coiled and fastened to the exact top of her head. She was large-boned with hair and skin the color of dirty sand. She shimmered in the doorway, her sharp edges and angles blurred in the spotlight glare and looking in a long black cape and black gloves like a giant bird come to shadow the sun.

"How is your poor dear Mother?"

"Mama's O.K. You know." Callie shrugged.

"Of course. And my brother. How is Monroe?"

"You have to be fifteen to visit in the Veterans' Hospital, so I haven't seen him. Mama says he can't walk or talk." Callie clamped her face to squeeze back the hot scratchy feeling behind her eyes.

"Ahh, I can't wait to see him," Rhoda declared.

Dorothy Byrd let out a giggle and her hand covered her mouth as though to push it back. She had been transfixed by the sight of Rhoda. Without lowering her chin,

Rhoda's gaze swept Dorothy Byrd against the counter, passed over Charlie, and traveled to the back of the store drawing Mr. Searcy out of his pharmacy.

"Is that you, Roland? You're quite indistinct back there. Why don't you turn on some lights?"

Mr. Searcy came forward, his blue cord suit wrinkling. "Yes, Rhoda, and what else do you want to change in your first minute in my store in five years? Why don't you let me buy you a coke? You'd like some ice cream wouldn't you, son?" he said to Phillip.

"Thank you, no," Rhoda answered. "We don't have time for that. We must get to my sister-in-law's and do what we can."

"Then promise me you'll come back. How long will you be in town?"

"There's no telling, Roland. Just as long as I'm needed. If you can imagine, I dropped everything, just threw all my obligations aside to be here today. For Monroe's homecoming."

"I can well imagine, well imagine," said Mr. Searcy. He cleared his throat and he and Callie fastened their attention on the Pekinese.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Rhoda's question was a surprise attack.

Mr. Searcy reached out to pet the dog. "Ah yes, yes. Quite lovely."

"No, no, Roland. Don't be a fool. I'm not talking about Harvey. I mean my neice. My beautiful namesake, Callie."

"Callie, by all means. Yes. We enjoy the sight of Callie everyday," said Mr. Searcy, groping for his gallantry. "As usual, Rhoda, you have me at your feet, doing my best to win your approval."

"Caroline Rhoda Morrin. Have you ever seen such hair?" Rhoda said, releasing Callie's hair from the rubber band. "How thick. How it catches the light. And the beautiful, sensitive skin that goes with this kind of hair. You're so sensible, my dear, to keep yourself covered." Rhoda twitched Callie's skirt with her own large-knuckled hand.

Callie felt the heat from five pairs of eyes pour across her face and flood her body. She took Phillip by the hand and in an awkward step toward the door lost the comic book from her belt. Phillip picked it up and handed it back to her. She said, "Dinner's ready." Please shut up, Aunt Rhoda, she thought. Please, please shut your face and get out of here. "Mama wants you to come straight home." She led Phillip out the door.

Rhoda started to follow, then stopped when she saw her luggage on the sidewalk where the Trailways had abandoned it. "Our baggage. We must see to our baggage," she said, lifting her free arm and flapping her cape.

"Never mind, Rhoda," said Mr. Searcy, joining her outside. "I'll see to it. Charlie will take it to the house in a while."

"Roland, you're so helpful. A dear man. The only gentleman in this godforsaken town." Rhoda bent close to Mr. Searcy and squeezed his arm. Harvey, pushed into close quarters with a stranger, snapped in Mr. Searcy's face. He jumped back, false teeth clicking, but Rhoda was already gliding past Carl's grocery.

"Aunt Rhoda, you and Phillip go on home. I have to stop here for some milk."

"We know the way, darling." Rhoda lengthened her stride and Phillip ran to keep up. Callie saw them sidestep Jimmie and heard Rhoda croon, "What a charming little village."

Callie ran home with two bottles of milk held to her chest. Except for Jimmy, the street was deserted. At three o'clock when the shift changed, workers could be seen cutting through the park on their way to and from their jobs and crossing the tracks to the stores. To Callie, running down the scorched sidewalk, the stores seemed empty. Anyone in them would be well away from the display windows, to the back where it was cooler. The houses she passed were, like hers, functional--gaunt as the faces of the men who had built them in 1900 when the mill was brought to the cotton. White, yellow, or gray, the houses squatted, wrapped in the bannistered porches that were their only vanity, under tall hickory and oak trees in early summer growth like a pack of mongrel dogs dug in under a clump of sweetsmelling bushes.

From the end of the hallway at the center of her house, Callie listened. Willa and Rhoda, shadows beyond the curtain-fogged French doors, crossed from the kitchen, and Callie heard them settling on the sunporch. Her stomach growled. The wide shadow that was Alice loomed to spread a cloth on the dining table. She bobbed about it, thumping plates and silver, and sounding an occasional bell-like note.

"Rhoda," Willa's voice was rougher than when Callie had left to meet the bus, but Callie judged she would get

through dinner. "Rhoda, Rhoda. You can't know what it's been like. I can just feel myself falling to pieces."

"Poor, poor dear," came deep from Rhoda's throat.

"You must be very glad I could come to be with you."

"Mother." Phillip. Standing right by his mother, I'll bet, said Callie to herself.

"I had a brief, but pleasant chat with Roland Searcy. What a delightful sense of humor. Never changes. His teeth though," Rhoda added, "do look a little more wooden."

"Mother!"

"Don't interrupt, Phillip, dear. It's not polite. At what time will my brother arrive?"

"Mother. When can I change clothes?"

"You may change your clothes after our luncheon. Were you about to say something, Willa?"

"Mother, look how I'm sweating."

"You, my son, are forgetting your manners. Should we be so unfortunate as to sweat, we never refer to it, nor do we allow it to show." Rhoda sighed. "Your father may have been a Yankee, but he had the good grace to disappear in time for me to bring you South."

There was a silence in which Willa coughed and Callie opened the hall door.

"Is dinner ready?" Callie set the milk bottles on the fruit-bordered tablecloth.

"Phillip. I'm waiting," said Rhoda.

Phillip buttoned his coat and sat beside her.

"Phillip."

"Huhnh?" Phillip stared at the floor.

"Only Harvey is allowed to growl. 'Yes, Mother,' is a proper reply to use."

"Yes, Mother." His eyes were small behind his thick glasses.

"Dear, get Harvey's chain from my bag and find a nice spot for him outside. He loves to commune with raw nature. Don't you Harvey, pet? He is a pet," she said looking at Willa and Callie. "Mustn't forget that. Just a dumb animal."

Phillip took Harvey from his mother's arms, and, with chain and red leash dragging, left by the back door.

Rhoda stood, dusting her hands, and the light slatted through the blinds stuck like streaks of dust to her black cape. "Now, where were we?" She turned to Willa who sat, legs crossed, her arms extended along the arms of the wicker chair. "This is such a tragic time for you," she began again.

"Rhoda, for God's sake," Willa drawled, uncrossing her legs and rubbing her hands on her thighs, "take off that cape and gloves."

"When one is accustomed to being dressed--"

"Oh sure."

"--one merely accepts occasional discomfort," Rhoda continued. But she removed the clothes.

"I'll take them, Aunt Rhoda.

"Thank you, Callie, darling."

Rhoda sat again on the sofa and rustled her voile dress over her large, stockinged knees. And as Callie left the back of the house, she heard Willa say, "I'd go naked if Callie and her father weren't such prudes."

Returning down the hall after hanging the cape in Willa's closet and smoothing out the gloves on the bed, Callie saw her mother enter the dining room, the large one they hardly ever used. It was papered in dark blue and a tall china cupboard stood in each corner.

"What're you doing, Mama?"

Willa jerked around. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

Callie went in and sat on a chair.

"It's none of your business, but Rhoda and I are planning on having a glass of your father's blackberry wine before dinner."

"Dinner's ready," said Callie.

"Then it can wait. We're an hour late already with Rhoda coming in. What'd you think Alice is mad about? She won't get any madder. Why don't you be helpful for a change and go help Alice?"

Callie shrugged. Deliberately stalling she glanced around the room before closing the door behind her.

From the kitchen she heard her mother rejoin Rhoda and heard the decanter clink against the glasses. Taking a platter of sliced roast beef to the table Callie saw the two women raise their glasses as though in a toast, while on the low round table between them a slat of sunlight burned through the bottle of wine.

Helping Alice with the overdone meal, Callie thought back to a day the fall before when Willa had bought a pail of late blackberries at the back door from two large Negro boys.

"Is there a nigger school?" Willa had asked. Callie concentrated on the berries as Willa rinsed roadside dust from a double handful at the kitchen faucet. Light poured in the window through the prisms splasing into the sink and through Willa's fingers as she dribbled berries into a white bowl. Black pearls, still wet from the oysters, Callie

thought, or a glinting mound of caviar, or the jostling nappy heads of a group of black boys. Animal fruit.

"Well, is there?"

"Yes," answered Callie.

"Well. Long as I've lived in MacRae I never knew there was a nigger school. Never even thought about it before." She chewed some of the fruit. "Ummm. Warm. Tastes like those days I used to go blackberrying along the South Carolina coast. You know, down near Charleston, before your Daddy and I were married. These berries'll make good wine. Want some?" She offered fruit to Callie on her palm.

"No." Callie turned a page in "Classic Comics," A Tale of Two Cities. Keeping her face in the book, she cut her eyes up and saw Willa turn back to the berries in the sink.

"Where is it?"

Callie dropped her eyes and turned another page.

"Where's what?"

"You know, the nigger school." Willa's voice was a prod, blunt but painful.

"Find it for yourself." Callie twisted the comic book into a tight roll and left the kitchen like a marionette, her leg muscles jumping to Willa's laughter. Goddam her to hell! Who goes by that nigger school on her way to Raleigh to buy

her clothes and her liquor and when she goes hunting for another nigger woman the times Alice quits her. Callie had cracked the book against her hip and kicked open the back door, escaping to the yard.

"Dinner's ready." Again. Callie said under her breath as she set down the biscuits, warmed over and wrapped in a thick napkin.

"Have some more wine," said Willa pouring into Rhoda's glass.

"Mama."

"We'll take our glasses to the table."

"No one can make blackberry wine like Monroe," Rhoda pronounced. "He uses my mother's recipe. Did I ever tell you about that? His mother was no good in the kitchen, you know."

"Yes, I think you have told me, a few times. Hasn't she, Callie? Yes a few times. His mother was the weak sister. Your mother was the strong sister. And lucky for you and Monroe, it was the strong sister Mr. Morrin married last, since he died soon after you were born. Did I get that right?" Breathing hard, Willa was on her feet, but without straightening her body so that her face was close to Rhoda's. Her breasts hung over Rhoda's lap. Her flared shorts exposed flesh like mounds of tapioca.

Rhoda's smile was a curved steel band. "Exactly, exactly right, dear Willa," she said not flinching. "And it is not difficult for me to observe that you have more on your breath than this superb blackberry wine."

"Oof!" Willa made a sound like she had been kicked in the stomach and fell back in the chair. "So what, lady," the last word rang like a sustained note. "You can go back to the pickle factory up North, for all I care."

"Mama!"

Alice, standing behind Callie with a pitcher of iced tea, set it on the table, untied her apron and threw it on the floor. "I'm goin' out to my room. Dinner's ready. I'll be back when y'all finish with it one way or another." Alice slammed the back door to retire to her room like a tiny house off to one side in the back yard.

"Oh, go on." Willa drained her glass and refilled it. She took it to the table. "Well, come on, everybody. Let's eat. We've got to eat."

Rhoda poured more wine for herself before confronting Willa who was trying to slide onto the high-backed bench that ran the length of the table. From her full six feet, hands clasped at her waist around the wine glass, her white perforated shoes, one slightly before the other, Rhoda looked as though she were about to nod to an accompanist. Her best

contralto soared over Willa's head. "You are well aware sister-in-law, that I have never worked except as voice tutor to a few carefully selected and very gifted students."

Willa flopped on the bench, splashing wine in her plate.

"Also," said Rhoda, "Mr. Smith did very well for us in the pickle factory. He was a professional man, a chemist."

"Unhunh," Willa said, pushing her finger around in the puddle of wine. "But not quite well enough. If Monroe dies from this or can't work anymore, you're going to have a problem too. Where will all those temporary loans come from, and how is Phillip going to go to those expensive camps? Monroe's done all he's going to do for you. If you run a little short, you can thank that strong, smart Mama of yours who got fooled out of everything by a man. She should've known better." Willa clicked her tongue and smiled her belle's smile at Rhoda. "At her age."

Sweet Jesus, thought Callie. She's got no sense of timing. We'll never make it through this day.

Rhoda emptied her glass during Willa's speech, and she returned to the decanter, jarring the silvered coal heater as she came back to the table. "My dear Willa. It is sweet of you to be so concerned. But Phillip and I have enough. Truly." She pulled out a chair and sat across from Willa. Callie slid in by her mother at the other end of the

bench. "Now. I have rearranged my modest life to be here for as long as you need me."

Rhoda helped herself to roast beef and passed it to Willa. Then she placed a portion of each vegetable on her plate. Callie watched the women pile their plates. With her fork Willa picked the skin forming on a puddle of gravy in a heap of mashed potatoes. Rhoda was absorbed in her food until, her mouth full of beef, her eyes on Callie's empty plate, "Darling, you're not eating." She swallowed, her eyes widening, and cut another piece of the meat. "You must strengthen those delicate bones."

"Phillip's not here," Callie said.

"So he isn't," said Rhoda, looking around, and brushing her hand across her forehead, "I'm not accustomed to alcohol. Bad for the throat." Rhoda gathered herself to rise, changed her mind. "Callie, would you please call Phillip?"

Willa's drawl was milicious, "He's been out of your sight for a whole half hour."

Callie called from the terrace. Phillip answered from behind the lilacs, his voice muffled, distant.

"He's coming." Callie shut the door on the heat, sat, broke open a biscuit. Rhoda began to fill Phillip's plate. Willa, eyes closed, rested her head against the back of the

bench. Phillip entered, breathing hard, his steps heavy and stiff as though his knickers and brown oxfords were weighted.

"Here you are, darling."

Phillip reached for the plate, and Rhoda, turning, saw first his bloody dirt-ground hands and arms. Callie watched Rhoda's horror and incredulity grow as she took in Phillip's knickers, his shoes, his blank face. "Ahhhh, dirty, dirty, dirty!" Rhoda screamed as though a rat had run out of the roast beef. His coat and the shirt beneath were shredded to the elbow. His hands and arms were covered with fine streaks of blood. Stiff patches of black dirt stuck to his palms and knees. Dirt sifted from his hair to his shoulders. It swirled around him. It filled his knicker socks and pulled them down. Callie imagined his shoes filled with cold black granules, slipping under his soles and between his toes.

With gentle precision, Phillip set down the plate his mother had prepared, and dropped in the chair next to hers. Clutching the seat with both hands, he stared into the full plate and blinked his glassless eyes. His face, thought Callie is molelike. He cringes in front of Rhoda as before a hard, strange light.

Rhoda's loose, buff-colored features were taut, carved in porous rock. Working the syllables through stiff lips,

she said, "You nasty, disobedient boy. What have you done to me? Wrecked your best clothes. And Harvey!"

Phillip sat rigid and spoke very softly, "On his chain. He's O.K."

"Aunt Rhoda, Phillip fell in the old rose bush."

"Why, he could have put out his eyes," Willa taunted, again alert.

"I know the dangers of unsupervised activity, Willa," Rhoda ground out, not taking her eyes from Phillip. "You've destroyed your glasses too."

Phillip did not move or speak.

"Where are they?"

"In the rose bush."

"You played. Played. Without my permission. Without proper clothes. What do you say?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You know what we must do." Her voice was as cold, dry, and destructive as jagged glass.

"Yes, Mother." Phillip continued to cling to the chair.

"You're keeping your Mother waiting," said Rhoda, standing.

"Not here, Mother."

"Here. Here and now."

Phillip released himself from the chair. Scattering dirt, moving as though he were on the ocean floor or in a dream, he took off his shoes and socks, his ruined coat and tie, his shirt. He hesitated, added his knickers to the pile, then stopped, facing his mother.

"All, Phillip." Rhoda's voice ended Phillip's name in an almost cheerful lilt. She sounded as though for her the worst was over. He turned his head from Callie and Willa and removed his undershorts. Callie felt the blush that splotted his chest and upper arms and spread to burn his face. Below his round abdomen, his penis dangled as shrunken and characterless as his naked eyes.

"Your father's belt is in my bag." Rhoda was a teacher giving helpful instructions to a slow pupil.

Callie glanced at Willa and her look traveled on her mother's back to Rhoda where it slid down the belt Rhoda let fall from her waist to the floor. Callie felt herself encased in a fat nine-year-old boy's tender body, flinching before the first blow fell from his huge, deserting, Yankee, pickle-chemist father's worn leather belt.

"Let me out of here." Willa clawed her way off the bench, dragging at the tablecloth.

Callie's movement to follow was an ineffectual twitch. For a panic instant she was fastened to the bench, rooted

there by a kind of petit mal. And in that instant she saw the design on the tablecloth that Willa had disarranged come to life. The border of fruit jumped into sharp three-dimensional focus. Apples, oranges, grapes, and bananas glowed and danced like a Carmen Miranda hat gone mad. The next instant they retreated and there was only the familiar faded cloth with the hole in the edge at Callie's place and a tea stain in the center. And Callie was moving off the bench to follow Willa.

They passed through the hall, closing the doors at either end. Willa shut herself in her bedroom. Callie threw a record on the Silvertone console, but before the volume came up, the crack of leather welting flesh poured like a disgusting odor into the living room through keyholes and around doors. There was no sound between cracks. Don't cry, Phillip, cheered Callie, twisting the volume knob as far as it would go. In seconds, Rubenstein's authority, his mathematical precision were astringent to Chopin's Ballade #1 in G Minor, reclaiming the room. Callie waited for the first half to finish. Then she flipped the record for the end of the piece.

She went out on the front porch and lay in the swing, pulling her knees up to make herself fit. She flopped a cushion across her stomach and watched a spider begin weaving

a nest along the edge of the porch ceiling. The spider never wavered, never stopped what he had begun with great care, but the music finished first. All was quiet, and Callie lay in the swing and watched the quiet busy spider.

When Callie woke, she heard the three o'clock whistle. The spider had finished his work and was waiting for prey.

"Afternoon, Callie. Your Mother in?" Wayne Parker. Callie knew without looking. He ran the Esso station and lived down the street toward the stores on the other side of Charlie Searcy. Callie swung her legs around. There was an edge to Wayne Parker's voice that made her want to lie.

"I'll have to see." She went in, leaving him on the steps, and as an afterthought, closed the door that had been open for the music. She tiptoed to Willa's room. Rhoda and Phillip were asleep on one of the double beds; Rhoda in a slip, Phillip in undershorts. His plump arms had been washed and painted with mercurochrome. Callie went through Monroe's room, her room, before she found Willa in the blue dining room, seated at the octagonal table. Her body was curved around an open bottle of bourbon.

"Mr. Parker's here, Mama."

Willa didn't answer, but Callie knew by the tension in her back that she was not too drunk to hear.

"Parker's here. He wants to see you."

"We don't owe him a dime."

"I'll tell him you're not here."

"Tell him to go away."

Callie went back to Parker on the porch. "Mr. Parker, she doesn't seem to be around.

"Where is she?"

"I really don't know."

Parker shifted his feet, took off his hat and fanned himself. He teetered on the top step, looking out over the yard at the tracks.

"I guess she's getting things ready for my father to come home. He's coming today." Parker showed no sign of leaving. "They're bringing him home from the Veteran's Hospital. Around five o'clock."

"Well, Callie, that's what I want to talk to her about. Margaret--Mrs. Parker--and me thought it would be nice if Willa could ride back in the ambulance with Monroe."

"You do, do you." Willa said against the screen. Parker took a step across the porch. Callie went around him to sit on the top step. "I don't think it would be a bit

nice," Willa mocked. Callie picked a stem from a piece of shrubbery pushing against the steps and rubbed it between her toes, one crack at a time, across both feet and back, again and again.

"Simmer down, Willa. After all you haven't given Monroe much company since he was moved to the VA Hospital. Everybody knows that. We know too that it ain't easy to pick up and go twenty-five miles to visit the sick everyday."

"Everyday!"

"Take it easy, I said. I've come to drive you down there so's you can ride back in the ambulance."

"Too hot." Willa shook her head.

"If you would do that it would look real good to the people in this town and all his friends would take it kindly. So come on." He took another step toward the door. "If we leave now, we'll have plenty of time." Parker opened the screen and took Willa's arm.

"Take your hand off me, you bastard, and get the hell off my porch."

Parker tightened his grip. "Willa, you're goin' to regret this. You owe something to Monroe and the people in this town."

"You self-righteous jackass. Send Margaret to ride in the ambulance."

Parker let her go, and from the yard, said, "This ain't right. What am I goin' to tell folks?"

"Tell Margaret and anybody else you see what you'll tell 'em anyway--what you're dying to tell 'em--what you came here for so you'd be able to tell 'em--that I'm too drunk to go."

The door slammed. Parker stuck his hands in his coveralls and strode down the sidewalk. In front of the house next door, he turned and called to Callie, "You or your daddy need anything, you come to me and Margaret."

Callie threw down the stick and, turning away from Parker, walked with slow steps into the house.

"Eh one, eh two, eh--" Mrs. Wadley droned on the piano bench beside Callie.

Callie lifted her fingers from the keys and dropped them in her lap. "It's four-fifteen."

"--three, eh four--"

"Mrs. Wadley." Wake up you deaf old bat.

"--eh?" Mrs. Wadley jumped, her firm piano teacher's buttocks slapping the bench. "Callie, you've stopped. It's

only four-fifteen." Mrs. Wadley reached for the clock on the black upright and shook it close to her ear.

"That's what I just said," Callie raised her voice to a subdued yell. "It's four-fifteen, and I've had enough."

Mrs. Wadley rolled her eyes and dabbed at her nose with a damp ball of Kleenex.

"I can't stay here today for extra practice." Callie was patient, as though instructing a troop of Brownie Scouts. "Today I can't. My father's coming home at five."

"But you still have fifteen minutes of your lesson." Although Mrs. Wadley was no longer young, older than Rhoda and Monroe, there was black in her hair, and she sat with a straight back, her hands clasped neatly in her lap. Her debutante training, Willa had said.

"I'm not going to waste any more time on exercises," Callie said into Mrs. Wadley's face less than a foot away.

"Oh!" Mrs. Wadley rose, expelling her bad breath that was too much for pep-o-mint lifesavers, and fiddling with her hearing aid.

Probably turning it off, thought Callie.

"Callie, what's come over you? I've never seen you like this. There're those times you don't show up for your lessons. When nobody seems to know where you are." Mrs. Wadley's voice with its hint of microphone feedback trailed

off. Then, as though abruptly turning the volume up, she said, "But you're the most talented pupil I've ever had."

"Lucky you," said Callie, trying Edgar Bergen-like not to move her lips. She began the ballade she had put on the record player earlier that afternoon. It rolled from her fingers like an expert shuffling of cards or a whirling line of dominoes in graceful collapse. She listened for the precise dryness that could be felt the way a tooth can when the dentist sprays it with his air gun and then touches it with a metal probe. Where was Rubinstein? Not here, anyway, she thought. Not by a long shot.

From the corner of her eye, Callie saw Mrs. Wadley wander to the casement window and look out across the rectory roof. Nodding to the music, shaded by a giant walnut tree, she fanned herself with a paper fan decorated with a picture of the last supper.

Mrs. Wadley was from a neighboring town four miles away. It was not a milltown and therefore belonged to a larger, more sophisticated world. Mrs. Wadley's town had two movie theaters, a tourist court, and recently, a laundrette. "Mrs. Wadley is our cultural import," Willa had jeered. "If not for her, why we'uns would never have known about the Community Culture Series." Callie rode to Raleigh for the concerts on sparkling winter nights with Mrs. Wadley

and her husband, Jerome. They heard artists such as Pinza, Peerce, Thebom, and Cappell. When Jerome was not drinking, he was a very good driver, but the Wadley's former social position prevented his taking a job as a chauffeur or a bus driver. Because Mrs. Wadley did not drive at all, and because Jerome was usually drunk, she came to MacRae every Tuesday morning on the bus, took her place at the big-voiced Steiff upright in the upstairs meeting room of St. Stephen's parish house, and by nine o'clock was ready for her first pupil. Callie was her last. When she didn't appear, Mrs. Wadley left early.

Callie played the piano in a way that astounded Willa and Monroe, and Mrs. Wadley. In far less time than the six years of lessons, she had outgrown her teacher who knew it as well as Callie. But no one told Willa and Monroe, and Mrs. Wadley continued to receive her check every month, even for the lessons Callie missed. It was just as well; for Mrs. Wadley, for all her upbringing, supported herself and Jerome.

About a year after Callie began taking piano lessons, and it was apparent that she could play well, Willa and Monroe discussed buying a piano so that she would not have to practice at the church. Before Callie could have a piano, Willa insisted, Monroe would have to arrange for a larger

house. But the mill owned all the houses in MacRae and anyone wanting to move, got in line when a tenant died.

"No room in this house for talent," Willa had declared to Monroe at the dinner table.

Unhuh! Callie said to herself, propping a Nancy Drew mystery behind her plate to keep from seeing Monroe's shoulders slope. Darling, blue-eyed, blonde Nancy was driving away in her smart blue roadster (gift from her adoring rich indulgent father) with her best friend (straight man) Georgette (Nancy calls her George) to another daring exploit. In complete freedom (her mother is dead) she outdoes the police in brilliance every time. The only thing I don't admire about Nancy Drew, thought Callie, is that her jokes are clean.

Callie did not really mind practicing in the parish house, and almost every day at irregular times the piano could be heard from the corner where the church stood. The parish house was quiet and familiar, and she could be alone there in a way she could not be at home. She liked the emptiness of the large upstairs room with its low stage at one end and its rows of yellow mule-eared chairs with woven seats. She liked the big Steiff with its deep bass. Sometimes Callie let herself into the church to play the pipe organ, but she had never learned to like its syrupy tones.

Callie stopped, her hands above the keyboard; started again. Mrs. Wadley, at the window, was leaning out, peering down. At, Callie knew, a bank of tiger lilies like ladies' graceful hands, clasping and unclasping above the first floor window sills, or like tropical moths hovering. Callie imagined herself a giant orange moth, with sun-tipped wings. She flickered past Mrs. Wadley's shoulder and out the wide window, passing through a bar of sunlight that crept beneath the walnut tree. The bar of sunlight made an abrupt disappearance and Callie sensed more than saw, as she worked back through the composition with its touch of dissonance, the dark wet cloud seeping across the sun. And she flew, on wings that did not need sunlight for brightness, until, with the row of red-brick stores at her left, she banked to pass the houses like her own. The approaching storm stirred a breeze to bend her sail-like winds. Looking down the Parker's driveway, Callie saw Margaret Parker, with an eye on the storm cloud, run to her clothesline and try to subdue a flapping wall of sheets. Lifting her wings on a moist gust, she landed in Margaret's hair. Margaret squealed and let go of the sheets with one hand to knock her away. Callie dodged. Flick, went Callie. Flick, flick at Margaret's eyes. Margaret screamed. "Wayne! Eeeee! Get away! Wayne!

Wayne! Wayne came running from the house, his face red, his paunch riding his belt buckle. "What--? Where'd that come from?" Margaret stepped on the sheets, tearing them from her hand. Faster and faster whirled Callie around their heads. Parker spun, flailing, his feet winding in the sheets, until he fell against Margaret knocking them both to the ground. The wind whipped yards and yards of material over their heads, wrapping them, shrouding them. Callie, pleased, fiery, circled once more before leaving the Parkers kicking and fighting each other, wallowing in Margaret's clean wash. On she sailed. Charlie came down his front steps, smiling to himself, hands in pockets, whistling between his teeth, the way he had taught her. Callie, tawny, exotic alien, spread her wings in their most provocative pose. But Charlie only looked at the cloud. She tried to cling to his shoulder, but he broke into a run, crossed the tracks, and disappeared through a yard on the other side. Against the ceiling of her own porch, she investigated the spider and his empty web. Then she hung in a link of the chain that suspended the swing. The sky grew darker.

Callie gave up on the G minor ballade and began a nocturne. She listened. More like it, she thought. So much for poetry. Thunder pushed cool air through the open casements, across Callie seated at the piano, the gaze of two

hundred empty chairs at her back, and she thought of the times she and Monroe had sat in the porch swing during a summer storm. Late in the hot afternoons when Monroe came in from the mill, he liked to sit in the porch swing and watch the spectacle of the storms as they made up low and dark in the West, finally clearing with violence the atmosphere for the setting sun. Callie, all bony corners in a sashed dress, liked to join him, and they would watch together. When she was very young she would sit warm under his arm, pressed to his side in the sudden coolness of the air as they took the spray on their faces, rocking in the gentle action of the swing. As their heads turned and they looked out over the banisters it seemed to them that they were suspended in a kind of ship. During the worst of the storms, Willa would come to the front door which she closed against the noise and danger. Careful not to touch the metal screen, she would call to Callie and Monroe to come in. They would smile at each other and say, "Soon." When storms came early on the hot, charged afternoons before Monroe came home from the mill, Willa would push Callie under the dining room table. Then she would draw the shades behind the white curtains and close the door. From under the table Callie would see her mother's paintings stacked against the fireplace. They were

of landscapes and pots of flowers, like pictures in "The Ladies Home Journal." Willa would sit on the edge of a dining chair with an imitation cut velvet seat, her face strained and listening, her body jolted by the sounds bearing down on the house. She's worse when Monroe's not here, Callie had thought. Is it fear? Or something passed on from an ancestor? How long can Monroe carry her burdens before his own storm bursts?

Callie's fingers gripped the piano's music rack. Mrs. Wadley's clock ticked above her head. Nearly five o'clock. Callie turned. The rows of chairs were complacent, non-committal. Mrs. Wadley would be on the bus for home.

The thunder had become a senile mumble. The bar of light again slashed the floor. It was longer, cutting to the opposite wall. Dividing the room, and coming between Callie and her exit. The storm had passed without breaking, and had left the air that for a time was somewhat relieved in anticipation, close, crackling with threat. Callie walked the cutting edge of sunlight to the casement where Mrs. Wadley had stood and leaned out to see the bed of tiger lilies touched by the low red sun. A red sunset. Sure sign of a big storm tomorrow. Heat lightening and thunder all around us tonight, thought Callie. The cloud had retreated to the northwest and was arranging itself along the horizon.

Callie reached out both hands to draw the window closed. She went, her bare feet scuffing the polished floor to the opposite window, and closed it. Then the piano. She gathered her music, stacking it on top. She ran the length of the center aisle. As she turned the corner, heading for the stairs, she grabbed the last chair and flung it behind her. She heard it crack and slide to crash against others, tumbling them. She plunged through a smell of damp plaster and old wood--the musty, closed-up smell of a building little used except by people bathed and cleanly dressed. Outside, the afternoon was filled with the smell of the hovering storm.

Callie decided not to take her usual path home. She went through the block--under the McCaskell's grape arbor, past the Hall's chicken lot, down the alley and through her back gate. She crossed the yard to stop with one foot on the back steps, still as a bird dog on a point. She could see no one moving about inside the house. There were no sounds except from the kitchen. Callie crept, in exaggerated skulking motions, close to the walls. She lifted her legs high and drew her long shadow behind her around the corner of the house and stood beneath the kitchen window. Alice's fat elbow poked the screen. She was washing dishes. Callie heard the muffled splash of sudsy water and the chink

of pieces of china falling against one another in the metal drainer. The dishes from dinner, she thought. Alice cursed. "White bitch. Bitches. God knows this is a crazy house." Glass splintered. "Serve 'em right if I broke every dish on the fuckin' place."

Callie grinned to keep from laughing and tiptoed away. Again at the back door, she changed her mind and veered off to the lilac-sheltered corner. Dodging a branch of the rose that reached toward her entrance, Callie crawled under the lilacs. A piece of Harvey's fur stuck on a thorn. The soft earth held impressions of Phillip's clumsy oxfords, of Harvey's footpads, the points of his nails, and his fat wiggly body. The odor of a barely covered pile of fresh dog manure mixed with odors of rose, lilac, and rich soil. Harvey's manicured paws had violated the grave Callie had made. He had torn open the yellow box and left gnawed pieces of goldfish scattered among withering rose petals. Harvey had smelled something freshly dead, probably for the first time in his well-fed and perfumed life, and had dug for it.

"Oh no." It was a plea, but the damage was done. Callie bit down. "Oh!" For a few seconds she saw only the dark red of pain. It cleared and she felt the ragged place inside her cheek. "I'll kill him," she said, cupping her

hands to rake the mess in a pile. "So help me God, Aunt Rhoda, I'll kill your dog."

She gathered the fish parts into what was left of the box and tamped earth over them again. When the mound was in place, she retreated as far as she could, to where the fences came together. She vomited the little that was in her stomach. She vomited until she no longer had strength for it. Then she lay on the ground, with her face pressed to the cool dirt until her breathing was regular again. Callie sat up, wiped her face on her skirt, pulled her hair back with the rubber band in her pocket. She pushed through the lilacs and went to sit on the front steps to watch for the ambulance bringing Monroe.

At five-thirty, an ambulance rolled into Callie's street. It was sleek and white with Veterans Administration Hospital lettered in black on the doors. Two men in starched white jackets sat in the front seat. The ambulance stopped a little beyond the Morrin house. From her place on the top step Callie heard the gears grind and saw the driver throw

the shift in a gesture of impatience. He frowned, stuck his head out the window, and looking behind, backed across the flattened-out ditch and into the yard, crushing a path through the hedge. He stopped the ambulance with a jerk, its back door almost touching the step on which her feet rested.

As Callie waited for the ambulance, she watched a man who lived across the double street washing in a tin pan on his front steps. He did that often, except in cold weather. She did not know his name, but she knew he worked in the weave room, because his overalls and shoes and the feet and legs beneath were covered in the fine, clinging lint of freshly dyed yarn. He removed his shoes and socks, rolled up his overalls, and crubbed to the knees. He was careful to get between his toes and the backs of his ankles, and he held first one foot then the other up for inspection. Sometimes Callie saw him remove his work shirt to cleanse his pale, pale arms and upper chest. And when he was finished he would dump the pan of blue water under the steps and stride into his house on bare wet feet. Callie had imagined him sitting down to supper under a bulb strung from the ceiling; he would plant his feet under the kitchen table where they would stick to the linoleum rug as they dried.

The ambulance distracted the blue-legged man from his bath. He stood with one foot in the pan, water running down

his legs and dripping from the washcloth in his hand. Watching him watch, with his open stare, Callie felt his detached curiosity about what was inside the ambulance.

She jumped off the steps and peered in one of the long side windows. The man lying within had a face like cold clay, not rigid, not soft. Fixed. An irregular face, lopsided at best, perhaps, molded into big rounded features. But carelessly. The right side dragged downwards, stretching the eye, the cheek, the mouth. The mishandled face was bordered by neat, combed brown hair, waving back off the forehead. The head lay on a flat narrow pillow. The chin rested on a starched sheet folded over a white blanket. A body shape filled out the blanket. The eyes were closed. Monroe Morrin was alive, Callie knew. She and Willa must make certain that the man in the ambulance was Monroe before the men left him in Monroe's bed and pulled back across the hedge and out of MacRae.

The two men slammed the ambulance doors. They looked alike--medium height and stocky with muscular arms. Their white trousers matched their jackets. The first one, the driver, wiped sweat from his face with a black bandana.

"Hey," he said to Callie, "this Morrin's?"

"Yes." Callie was more than ever aware of the blue-legged man's stare. Half pleased by the attention the ambulance had brought, she restrained a smile.

"Any body here sides you?" The driver heaved up the steps and punched the brass, nipple-like bell. Callie didn't answer.

"Your mother home, girl?" the second man asked hiking his foot onto the back bumper of the vehicle, and resting his arms across his upraised knee. He grinned at Callie. As comfortable, she thought, as if he had run over his own hedge. Willa came to the door.

"Miz Morrin?" the driver said.

Willa looked past him to the ambulance parked at the bottom of the steps. She pushed the screen door open and came out onto the porch. "Is it him? Have you brought him?"

"Monroe Morrin?" Willa and the driver nodded simultaneously. "Yes mam. We had a devil of a time finding the place. The town, I mean."

Willa walked to the edge of the porch and squatted to look through the back window of the ambulance. Her hair was flat on one side and her face was puffed from sleep. She was wearing the same wide-legged orange shorts. Both Callie and the second man from where they stood at the base of the steps could see that she wore nothing underneath. The man's grin

licked across his face like a snake's seeking red tongue and his eyes flashed over Callie. He winked. Callie blushed. She felt sweat forming under her arms and around her waist. She felt that it was she, not Willa, exposing herself at the top of the steps. Goddam her. Doesn't care or think. Or she likes it. Knows and likes it. Willa teetered and grabbed the porch roof support. "Yep," she said, getting to her feet, "that's him all right. Rhoda!" she called over her shoulder into the black cavern of the house.

"Mam, if you'll just show us where to put him and sign this."

Just like a package from the post office, thought Callie.

"We've gotta get back with this ambulance. It's due back right now."

Rhoda came running in a clean red and white house dress with a swooping skirt and looking with upraised eyebrows and a frozen eager face like a raggedy Ann doll.

"Is it Monroe? Is it poor dear Monroe?" she said.

She and Willa joined Callie at the ambulance's side window, to gaze at the silent strange life on the other side of the glass.

"Ah Brother, I never thought to see you this way. He was always so straight, so strong," she explained to the attendants.

"Looks like hell doesn't he?" Willa's voice was awed.

"Willa, you and I must be strong for him now. He needs us. We must let him lean on us." Rhoda tossed her arm like an extrusion of igneous rock around Willa's shoulders.

She moved from under Rhoda's weighty rush of sisterly feeling to Callie's other side, and said shuddering, "I can't bear sickness. Look at that." She pointed to goosebumps on her slack arm.

"Willa, this is no time for squeamishness--"

"Mam." The sweat was back on the driver's face. The second man had sat sat on the steps, looking resigned to a wait.

"O.K. O.K. Let me get used to this, will you?" Willa said to Rhoda and the driver. "Where do I sign?"

He pulled a pencil out of his breast pocket and handed her a paper on a clipboard.

"Well now, that does it for you. But it sure raises problems for us. Bring him on in." Willa led the way into the house, through the living room, and into the first door leading off the hall. She stood at the foot of the bed.

"Right here. This is his room."

Rhoda lumbered past Willa to the other side of the bed. "Now just a minute. Let's get the bed turned down nice and tidy." Callie close behind Rhoda, leaned against the thick

bed post, smelling old varnish mixed with the sweat and dust of her hair. As Monroe was lifted to the bed his eyes opened.

"Mama look." Callie pointed.

"Oh, God," Willa covered her face. "Rhoda," she said through her hands, "he's looking at us."

"Brother!" Rhoda dropped the bedspread she was pulling over his chest and grabbed Monroe's shoulders. His eyes like summer-bleached sky switched to her face.

"Easy lady," the second attendant said.

"Yeah," said the driver. "He can see you and hear you. But he's been given something to keep him quiet. He's not supposed to be excited."

"Well, well. Is the patient at home?" Dr. Dodson stood in the door. He was Callie's height, tiny for a man. His gray suit was crisp; he held a white panama hat in one small clean pink-nailed hand, his gleaming ebony doctor's grip in the other. His eyes sparkled through rimless glasses. He looked like a child washed, brushed, and changed by an overattentive mother.

"Where've you been?" Willa slumped like a sack of bruised oranges in a small red wing chair, but her face showed a willingness to smile. One of her favorite stories was how on the day of Callie's birth she and Jim Dodson went out

drinking bootleg beer on their way to the hospital. Before the pain became unbearable, she always added.

"Good afternoon, Rhoda. You've been making yourself too scarce. Callie." He smiled all around as he settled his bag on the bedside table. To the attendants, he said, "If you've done all you've been hired to do you can go."

"Yes sir," the driver said, and the two men folded the stretcher.

"Everything all right with the patient on the way over?"

"Just fine. No trouble at all. He slept all the way. Goodbye mam," the driver said. The second man winked at Callie across Monroe's prone figure. When she heard the ambulance start, Callie went to the door to see it crunch back across the hedge, tires throwing up sand and pebbles as it bumped onto the street. She heard the second man laugh as the ambulance turned the corner and disappeared.

When Callie returned to the bedroom, Dr. Dodson was holding a stethoscope to Monroe's chest. Rhoda brought a hard-angled chair to the bedside, placing it behind the doctor's coat tail. When he finished listening he sat, and, stethoscope dangling, lifted Monroe's sick right hand into both of his.

"Well, boy. What we dreaded has happened. We hoped it wouldn't but it has. You've got to take it easy from here

on in. Rest. Eat. Make yourself strong and then we'll go to work on the paralysis and aphasia."

With his pale eyes, Monroe pleaded with Dr. Dodson for a word that promised health, a rich glowing paisleyed word. Callie saw Monroe begging for this, and she saw the answer that passed between the two men.

Gently as a drowning man is said to embrace death, Dr. Dodson said, "If you do as you're told, that heart has a chance of lasting." Monroe's chest swelled in a deep breath, testing, sampling.

"Y'all here what I'm saying? Willa? Rhoda? Callie?" Dr. Dodson turned his glittering cupie doll eyes on the women; his hard cheeks were shiny. "All right." He turned to the bed. "Monroe, soon when I look in on you I want you to try to talk. But for now and the next few days, don't say a word. With three women in the house--Willa, you still have that ill-tempered gel in the kitchen?"

"Alice? Unhuh."

"Good. One more to do your bidding, Monroe. Now ladies, pay attention. We're going to set up some signals." Dr. Dodson slid off the chair. Removing the stethoscope from his neck, he used it to strike the palm of his hand as he marched his short legs back and forth across the fireplace

hearth. "Now. You folks keep a close watch on Monroe, because when he wants something, he's going to wiggle his left hand. Show 'em, Monroe."

The stethoscope held the three pairs of eyes and with a brisk movement directed them at Monroe. From flat on his back, he grimaced in what might have been smile or exertion. His shorted brain pushed the message to the fingers. The fingers moved, a slow-motion drumming.

"That's enough, boy. Just so they get the idea. If Monroe wants to answer any of your questions, he'll answer with a yes or no, by blinking his eyes. One blink for yes. Two blinks for no. Say yes, Monroe."

Yellow lids with veins deeper in color than the eyes they masked. Once.

"Good, good. Now. Tell these women no."

Twice.

"That's settled then. I commit my patient to your hands, and I'll see y'all tomorrow. Goodbye boy. Take it easy." Monroe's eyes followed him; his mouth worked.

"Oh God!" Willa crossed her arms over her stomach and turned away. Rhoda licked her lips; her eyes shone like flat buttons. Callie thought, Don't let him, and saw in her mind the torn nerves and capillaries twitching a dance macabre.

"Ggggoddammit, goddammit, goddammit, goddammit," Monroe said, and his eyes revealed the shock of hearing his words, not those his brain had formed. His lips rolled, snagging on his short even yellow teeth, and he tried in another burst of agony, "Goddammit!"

"There, there, boy. You have orders not to talk. I know what you want to say. I know. I'll look in tomorrow."

Callie looked at Monroe and he was like a ghost the moment before it is forgotten by the living. Callie could see him disappearing in that strange new body, in every word that twisted and changed in the utterance. She saw that there was nothing left of him already in Willa, and only a little in Rhoda. She followed Dr. Dodson and Willa out of the room.

At the door of his stubby, dark green Plymouth, the doctor called, "Goodbye, Callie. Take care of my patient."

Willa kneading her stomach with both hands turned toward the kitchen. "I'm going to see to supper."

Rhoda sat by Monroe's bed. Her big body was a frame supporting her drooping head.

"Don't stare at him like that, Aunt Rhoda. Go and do something. Take Harvey and Phillip for a walk."

"Oh child. You don't know how this makes me feel-- seeing him like this. Her big face wound itself up so tight

that a tear fell on the bedspread. "I can't bear to be away from his side."

"He can hear you if he's awake."

"But if you'll be here, I will take some air." Rhoda's words began to tumble like apples from a loaded tree in a windstorm. Thunk. Thunk. "Callie, dear, you're his treasure. He loves you more than anyone or anything. Your mother-- Well, you just keep that in mind." She paused on her way from the room. "Ah, we'll be back for supper." Her laugh was bright. "Don't start without us."

Aunt Rhoda, said Callie to herself, you won't miss any meals here.

Callie looked around the familiar square room that was Monroe's. It was the only room in the house that belonged to him and that under protest. Here he had taken a last stand. The bed's headboard and footboard he found in a farmer's barn under a pile of tow sacks and broken harness. The tall thick posts had been whittled by the farmer's grandfather a hundred years before. "Crude" was Willa's word for it when Monroe brought it home. He cleaned the pale wood and rubbed it with linseed oil. He'd had extra long side pieces and a mattress special made. He had spread the bed with a blue and white quilt, a wedding present from his favorite spinster

aunt. The chest of drawers had been his as a boy. Of solid mahogany it was as plain and serviceable as his life. It contained no secrets or surprises. A rummage through its deep drawers yielded only clean handkerchiefs, crisp collared and cuffed shirts, boxer undershorts, sleeveless knit undershirts--all white--and dark socks and garters. On the smooth top surface of Monroe's chest sat a carved teak box brought from the Orient by an older brother who had been a merchant seaman. When the brother was killed, run down by an automobile in Norfolk twenty years before, Monroe took only the teak box from his meager effects. In the box he kept two pairs of silver cufflinks, his father's watch, and a silver belt buckle with the M worn almost smooth. There was no clock in the room. Monroe had no need for clocks. His days were calibrated by the mill whistle and he woke every morning at five-thirty. At the mill by six, he was home again for Alice's seven-thirty breakfast which he ate alone before returning to the mill for the day's work. His routine was begun on the Alamance farm where as a boy he had got up early to do chores before school, or in the summertime, to hunt, an excuse for rambling through the woods. He began working summers in a cotton mill when he was eleven.

Callie yawned back at the narrow mouth of the fireplace with its coal grate like a blackened lower plate, its short hood the protruding uppers. The wallpaper was the color and texture of overdone oatmeal. Monroe had chosen it, calling it his favorite color. "For a man who earns his living making colors, he has no taste at all," Willa explained to the mill-hired paper hanger who applied the long curling strips to the wooden lathe walls. The wallpaper reminded Callie of the exposed land of the Piedmont county where Monroe had grown up. It was like the fields and the roads that threaded the county after a dry season. The orange clay baked and bleached to a yellowy brown, the grains of the soil pricking the surface, roughening it to the texture of mortar. It was also, thought Callie, like the color and texture of Monroe's skin, and Rhoda's, and all their people. The soil of Monroe's home was nothing like the soil on which MacCrae was built--dark and loamy where the Piedmont melted into the Coastal Plain. The tough, viscous Piedmont clay had attracted the people who were equal to the hardships it imposed, a people who believed in the virtue of work and that nothing worth having was had easy. Tall, they were, the women tall as the men, and broad. In Morrin family photographs they stood with feet apart, arms hanging,

fingers curved under, ready to give as much as they got, the mark of Scotland upon them even after six generations. They feared nothing but God and him only on Sundays in a Presbyterian church. Except for Monroe and Rhoda, the Morrins were all dead. Monroe, his brothers, and Rhoda grew up in a household dominated by the tall, raw-boned country women in the photographs. The children feared their discipline and their sadistic tricks more than they feared the distant personage of their father. Edward Morrin was too far above them to be real.

So long ago, thought Callie from the small red wing chair in Monroe's room. Lives so long ago settled, like a corn field in October. Here Monroe lies in his matter-of-fact room, his everyday worries about the mill, Willa's drinking, my education, staying alive--erased in sleep. His sleeping worries erased by the medicine. No one ever showed him how to live away from work, what to do about women who live on the guts and blood of their men. Who grow fat and lazy and mean on it. They'll take it all and think they more. Will get more. Even if the getting kills.

"Hey! You asleep?"

Alice's voice jarred Callie. She sat up in the chair. The pine outside the window was black, and the room was darkening.

"Where d'you want this?" Alice held a tray of food. "You going to feed him, ain't you?" she said jerking her head toward the man lying in the bed.

"I hate to wake him."

"Miz Morrin sayed you was going to feed him now. This ain't going to stay hot forever."

"Shut up Alice. He's sick. You'll do whatever I tell you, when I tell you, to look after him. He's going to have all the things Dr. Dodson says he needs."

"Hawh. He sho look sick all right. You better hire another girl just to take care of him."

"We don't need anybody else."

"Your Mama, she's done given up. Miss Rhoda, won't be no help. She don't dirty her hands for nobody but that sissy dog." Alice snickered.

"Get out!"

Alice hid a smile behind her hand and left the room, rolls of flesh slapping against one another under her green print dress and white bib apron.

Callie sat on the side of the bed. With her chin on her thumbs she rubbed her eyes with the ends of her fingers. After a few seconds, she dropped her hands, inhaled and exhaled a long breath. Along with the mashed potatoes-roast beef leftovers from lunch, Alice had brought a covered bowl of chicken broth, freshly made. Callie breathed the fragrance of the hot soup and thought, She's not all bad, that stinking Alice. Turning to Monroe, she touched his cheek. "Wake up, Papa. It's time to eat."

"Tell us, Cal." The tow-headed boy straddled the half wall, one foot propped on the broken slope of coal, black as the night that rimmed the east in bloated, thick-skinned clouds. His other foot rested on the dirt floor of the alley.

"Yehhh," said another tow-head exactly like the first. He spun like a Russian dancer before the slant-roofed coal shack that joined Callie's back fence. "Tell us!" He came

to a stop on quivering legs with both bare feet sunk in the cool alley dust, fine as pumice.

The six-foot fence butted the back corners of the shack, just under the low end of the roof. This lower wall was hinged half-way up to make a horizontal door for coal to be shoveled in from the alley. By dropping the door on its long strap hinges, an exit more exciting than the back gate was made from the yard. The way through the coal shack, over the coal, and into the alley was circuitous and dark; there was the danger of avalanche and of encountering a rat grown fat on the dung-like heaps of poison put out by the mill. In contrast, the alley, bordered by tall summer grass and weeds, was Shangri-la gained and regained.

"You've already heard it," Callie said, standing with her feet together, toes curled under. Her face was turned up so that her hair caught behind her shoulders and brushed her back, and her green and white checked dress had gone black and white in the dusk. She drew on a half-smoked cigarette. It flared, and smoke rolled from her mouth and nostrils.

"Yehh," sighed the first boy, "but we want to hear it again."

"You've heard it and you've heard it." Callie took another drag at the cigarette. The smoke melted up into the

pattern of black leaves stenciled against the white bowl of the summer evening sky, and the fragrance of Lucky Strike hung in the air.

"J. T. ain't," the second boy called from twenty feet away twirling as quietly and easily as if he were on Callie's living room carpet. "J. T. ain't never heard you say about the morphodite." He danced back again, arms swinging, feet kicking up small gray clouds that faded on their own like the smoke.

Callie heard the coal pile shift. A shadow moved and became a thin older boy. With one hand on the wall, he leaped it, and sauntered up to Callie, his hand out for the cigarette. Looking through him at the level of his neck, she passed it to him.

"Just what do you think you are, Ernie? Some sissy, goddamned stage dancer, like they have up in New Yawk City?" J. T. drew deep and held it so that when he did let go, there was hardly any smoke. He sat in the dirt, leaning his sharp, bare spine crossed by overall straps against the shack. The fire leaped close to his lips as he sucked again, and he threw the cigarette into the rough circle the four of them made where it glowed like a downed lightning bug. His bare arms rested on his raised knees, and he stared between them at the dot of fire. In the twilight he looked old.

It's a phophecy, Callie thought. If he could only see it. When he's an old man ready to die, he'll have again this tight gray face and these lightless eyes, and the bones of his shoulders and back will poke holes in his death bed.

He raised his face to Callie. "What's this morphodite business?"

Callie looked at the twins. "Don't you have to go home?"

"Nawh. Our daddy's gone to the union meeting," said Ernie.

"And our Ma's gone with him," the first boy said.

"Me and Brother here are loose 'til eleven o'clock at least." They laughed.

"Yeah," the boy called Brother said, "Now that Daddy's got to be so big in the union, he can't hardly get away from the meetings."

"Just like your daddy at the E-pis-co-pal-yun church," J. T. said to Callie. They all laughed.

"Monroe says that Cosie's been the leader and the biggest nuisance they have to put up with since the long strike Christmas before last."

"Unhuh," J. T. said. "Uncle Cosie, he don't have no education, can't read or write much--"

"But X is just as good with the law as fancy writing."

"--Shut up, Brother."

"Well, it is. Daddy told me so."

"It is; it is. Now Brother, shut up. Uncle Cosie ain't never gonna be anything in the mill but a doffer, and if they could, they'd take him off changing bobbins to send him down a peg to sweeper. They'd sure like to give him the nigger job. But Cosie's smart when it come to getting along with union folks that come in to organize. Them fancy Dans in the front office don't like it, but they got themselves a union."

Callie said, "How do you know so much? You haven't been here since the strike."

J. T. pushed his hair back with both hands; he locked his fingers between his knees and twisted his hands, setting them against each other. His brown hair was shaved over his ears and on his neck from a recent haircut. With the longer hair pushed back from his forehead, his face and head were palely edged. "I ain't going back to reform school. I'm sixteen now and I've got a job. They ain't getting me again. No more school. I'm making money now. I'll stay and help Uncle Cosie with the union."

"You going to be in charge of the dynamite again?"

J. T.'s mouth worked, but then he locked his jaw as tight as his hands.

Ernie caught Brother's neck in the crook of his elbow. Brother grabbed him the same way and they tried to trip each other.

Brother said, struggling to move Ernie's arm from his windpipe, "Hey, Cal, J. T. just wanted to meet you, and, God dern you, Ernie, let go a me!"

"Let go a me!" They wrestled to the ground. "We wanted," Ernie said, "Ow!" He freed himself with a kick at Brother. "You bastard. We wanted you to tell J. T. about the morphodite."

"J. T. knew me before tonight."

"Two years ago; you weren't no more than a kid, like them. Now you think you're tough, but maybe you're still a kid."

Callie looked down the alley walled in by tall black grass, rough boards, and the billowing barely visible wire of chicken yards. She looked up to the roof of heavy high-flung branches, down to the black hole of the coal shack, and to J. T.'s taut, bony face blurring in its pale rim.

"I don't want to have to explain everything again about the morphodite."

"Oh, you won't have to," said Brother, crawling to lean against the shack beside J. T.

Ernie said, "No. He's not like us. He already knows what a morphodite is."

It was growing dark in the alley. A few stars could be seen through the leaves, and Callie was conscious that beyond their pocket of dark were lighted houses, that the Premiere would be starting the second show, that the drug-store wouldn't close until the nine-forty bus came through on its way to Ft. Bragg. The twins and J. T. were gray shapes resting against the gray background of the shack. Except for their heads. Their heads stuck up over the half wall, and the boys' fair hair and J. T.'s pale hairline floated against the absolute blackness of the coal hole. J. T. lit another cigarette, frowning in the light, and handed it to Callie. She took it, not smoking, while she drew a line with her heel between her and the three boys. She handed the un-smoked cigarette back to J. T.

"Well," she said, "it was like this." One of the twins giggled. "It was a cold day last fall. Early, you know, but getting dark. I had just got my bike fixed, and the carnival was in town. Or not in town, really, it was out by Moss Creek last year, because, well. I found out why."

"You sure did, Cal." "Whoowee."

"Shut up. I can't tell in the dark who's saying what, but shut up, or I'll stop right here. I don't want to tell this anyway." J. T.'s cigarette flared and she saw his eyes like coal chips.

Nobody said anything. Nobody moved.

"All right. I wasn't supposed to go to the carnival last year. But every year before that I went. Every year before that it was on the baseball field behind the school, and I would go over after school and watch them putting up the rides, and the booths, the freak show, and the fortune teller's tent. I like to go and eat the stuff they sell. Their ice cream tastes different from Mr. Searcy's Sealtest. More like what we make at home sometimes, but even better than that. Candy apples and cotton candy you just can't get except at the carnival. Then the rides. There's nothing beats the ferris wheel, the tilt-a-whirl, the skyrocket, the swings. Even the little carnivals we get have all those. After the rides while the gypsies would be telling Willa that she'd get a letter on the sixteenth of next month, I'd be throwing up behind the freak show; then I'd go in. I've seen the fat lady, the alligator man, the snake woman, all the usual ones. I saw a two-headed baby in a bottle at the state fair in Raleigh. Before I would go home I'd walk around the

to see what I could win, and I'd usually pick up something at the shooting gallery. Nothing much, but once I brought home a plaster statue of the Lone Ranger.

"Now, last year, I was pedaling out to Moss Creek to the carnival. I had supper in the kitchen, early, and told Alice to tell Monroe and Willa that I'd be back around dark. They had to play bridge with Dr. Dodson and his new girl friend, so there was no way they'd know what time I got back. Because," Callie took a deep breath and let it out, "Alice doesn't give a shit what I do, except in front of Willa when she's sober, and then it's such a 'thin pretense,' as Aunt Rhoda would say, that she makes me laugh."

"You pore child," J. T. snorted.

"J. T. can't interrupt either, can he, Cal?" one of the twins said.

"No, but I interrupted myself that time. Anyway, like I said I was pedaling out to Moss Creek to this mysterious carnival. It was late October and cold. The pedaling was making me sweat and the cold air was drying it at the same time. So I was hot and cold together. It was one of those blue twilights when somebody has been burning off his fields and there's the smell of smoke in the air and a blue haze is laying in the rows between the bare cotton stalks. I finally

came to the carnival and left my bike outside the gate. That part was different. A gate, and I had to pay fifty cents to get in the gate. They had all the good stuff to eat and all the rides. I got to the part where I'm throwing up behind the freak show when I noticed that the freak show was different. It was a triple freak show. On one side some women were up on a rickety stage. They were dressed in Scheherazade outfits, the kind that Maria Montez wears in all her movies. They were jerking around a little, trying to smile. They were jerking around a little, trying to smile. They weren't really part of the freak show, but they looked like freaks to me. A few men stood on that side, looking up, laughing, nudging each other. A few went in; to see the show, I guess. On the other side was the regular freak show with a laughing fat lady doubling for the tattoos. They had a fire eater and a strong man, too. A few people were staring at them, but in the center was the real, all-time freak show. 'Half man--Half woman. George Ann!'" Callie wrote the letters with her hand in capitals in the night air. J. T.'s cigarette butt arced over her head and landed behind her.

"Get it?" one of the twins said to J. T. "George! Ann!"

"I get it," J. T. said.

"Up behind the barker was one of those big color pictures like they have to advertise what's inside."

"It ain't never near what they say it is, is it, Cal?"

"Do you want to tell about the morphodite?" No answer. "On the advertisement there was a picture of half a man facing half a woman. Just like any profile picture of a person only the back half was chopped off. You could tell which was a man and which was a woman because of the way the hair was and the clothes. The hair was painted black; the clothes were red, yellow, and purple, and the skin was yellowish, shadowed with brown. The pictures were interesting all right. Well, the barker said that George Ann's show was about to start, but that you had to be sixteen to get in. They always say that at freak shows. They have to, I think. But they always let me in."

"Why not, if you've got a quarter like anybody else," J. T. said.

"I know I don't look like somebody's mother, for Christ sake."

"You don't look sixteen either, and you've been going to these things for years, ain't you?"

"Not like this. Listen. The most people were lined up for George Ann. Men and women. A lot of couples. When

we got inside the tent the men were herded to one side of a partition, the women to the other. We couldn't see the men and they couldn't see us, but we could hear. The partition ran up to a stage that was draped with a gauzy blue curtain. Light from a big transparent bulb shone down on the front of the curtain so even if somebody was behind it you couldn't see him. This light was the only one in the tent, but it was bright enough to see the other women real good. There weren't chairs or benches, so we stood around in the sawdust, looking up at the stage, wondering when George Ann would come out. Some of the men and women said things to each other back and forth through the partition. Like 'Are you there, honey?' and 'I'm here!', then both sides would laugh. You could hear the men shuffling and jostling more than the women. The women stood pretty still.

"Well, the jostling, and the calling out, and the giggling kept up until George Ann appeared. She opened the curtain for herself. Just pushed it back on one side and then on the other. She turned her back to us, to do something with some switches, I guess, because some yellowish lights came on up on the stage and the big front light went out. We were in the shadows then, looking up at George Ann who stood there all washed in the yellow light with her skin the same color as the poster out front.

"She looked just like the poster, didn't she, Cal?"

"Just like. She had black hair that stuck out under a turban of gold."

"Lamé" a twin said, whispering. "She left that out. It means it looked like real gold."

"Her clothes were gauzy like the curtain. Red, yellow, and purple. Everything was very quiet. I was scared, but I never once thought of leaving. Wish I had. George Ann spoke. She said, 'My name is George Ann. It may seem a strange name to you, but I was born a hermaphrodite. And this has affected my life in ways you cannot imagine.' Her voice was low and quiet like I just did it, and clear. I heard every word. She sounded like my Aunt Rhoda would sound if Aunt Rhoda didn't have so much expression. The tone of George Ann's voice was all the same. If she asked a question or said she hated you, you couldn't tell. She went on to say how her parents didn't know what to make of her being born like that. How they didn't know any better than we did what a hermaphrodite was. But that she would tell us and would show us. And we would never forget.

"The look on her face never changed and during the speech, she stared in front of her at the edge of the partition.

"First, she pushed the layers of colored gauze apart and exposed her top to us. She sort of looked like a woman there, but more like an old woman, and George Ann's face didn't look old. Her breasts hung down flat, like they'd been dried, yet the skin seemed smooth and thicker than a woman's is there, more nearly what covers a man's chest. She lifted one of them, just held it out to us in her hand like I'd hand you a sandwich. I noticed then that George Ann's fingers were dirty and there were streaks across her stomach that wouldn't likely be shadows. She kept on in her monotone about how she'd been to a lot of doctors when she was growing up. And how they'd look at her and shake their heads before calling in others to look. Her parents had soon got the idea of showing her for money. It was all they could think of for their child. So they joined the carnival.

"Well, I was so interested in what she said and in what I was seeing--so was everybody else, I guess--that we never even thought about what might be next. Because when George Ann suddenly opened her clothes all the way, the crowd drew a deep breath. Some of the women cried out, but I heard some men giggle. George Ann didn't pay any attention. She went right on talking to the partition. She said, 'This is the way I looked when I came into the world. Nothing can change

that.' She put her hand on herself and lifted up her man's thing." Remembering Phillip that afternoon, Callie said, "It looked like a little boy's, and under it was like a woman."

A twin said, "No hair."

"Not a hair on her body. She was barefooted too. Her feet were real dirty. Well, some of the women were saying 'Ugh!' and some of them were pretending not to look. I couldn't help looking. I took in everything there was of George Ann--her strange color under the lights mixed with her dirt, all the parts of her that didn't fit on one person, her limp stage clothes, her face and voice with all the life gone. I couldn't tell what she was; she really was half-man, half-woman. I'll never forget her."

J. T. spoke. "How come you don't call George Ann It? How come you call it a she?"

"I felt for it like it was a woman."

"Shit! What does that mean?"

"George Ann stopped talking, but she didn't move. She stayed with her hand down there for us to get a last good look. I'd begun to think she had forgotten about us being there. Then she pulled her clothes together and walked off the stage. Her clothes swirling reminded me of the harem dancers out front. We all turned and left, too. Nobody was

saying much or looking at anybody else. When we got to where the men were coming out, a man said, 'Won't that somepen!' then we were out in the main part of the carnival, in all the lights with people everywhere. I felt real weird, and worried that someone would see me in front of the freak show and think I'd been in. I went off behind it into the shadows. All of a sudden, I felt like throwing up again.

"When I got through--it was harder that time because the ice cream and other stuff was already gone from the time before--I noticed that it had got good dark. The moon, what Willa calls a harvest moon, was set with a lot of stars. I tried to make myself think about the three-mile bike ride home. It was then I noticed a big, red house trailer, setting way over in the weeds beyond the freak show where I was standing. I could just make out what was painted on the side: George Ann, Half-Man, Half-Woman, Eighth Wonder of the World."

After a pause, Callie said, "That's it. The end."

"Whoowee!" "Shoot fire!" said the twins. "Won't that sompen, J. T.?" "What'd I tell you?"

"Don't you boys ask me to tell that anymore. I'm tired of thinking about the morphodite." Callie stepped to their side of the line she had drawn and sat in the dirt, knees under her chin, her skirt wrapped around her, facing Ernie, Brother, and J. T., close enough to see them.

"What can we do now?" Brother said. "It ain't time to go home."

Ernie said, "Let's play run and hide."

"Run and hide?" said Callie. "That's for children. I haven't played run and hide in over a year."

"What can we play then?" Ernie stuck his lips out.

"We'll play run and hide," said J. T. "If I ain't too old for it, Callie ain't."

"Will you, Callie?"

J. T. said, "You boys run on and hide. We'll come looking."

"We know some great places on this side of town, don't we Brother. If you don't find us soon, you better look out, because we'll come hunting for you." Brother and Ernie ran up the alley and were lost in the dark.

After a few minutes, Callie said, "Let's go. You wanted to play." She stood, brushing her skirt.

"I don't want to go chasing after them. Let's hide and let them find us."

"Come on. I know a place. They've never found me there."

J. T. undid the knots of his wiry body and followed Callie in the direction the boys had taken. They crossed

into the next block under a street light on a creosoted pole and pushed through a stiff, clipped hedge, taller than they were. They were next to a garage. Callie swung back a garage door and climbed it, using the braces and crosspieces as handholds and footholds. At the top she pulled herself onto the roof which slanted to a point in the center of the building. She lay face down on the rough shingles while J. T. climbed the door. He dropped beside her.

"Look here," she said, whispering, propping on her elbows and inching to the high point of the roof. J. T. wiggled close and stuck his head up beside hers. They looked down on the street they had crossed and into the mouth of the alley. Darker than it was for being just outside the small circle cast by the street light. "When they come back we can watch what they do from here. Be quiet now."

"Yeah. This looks like a pretty good hiding place." J. T. whispered back. He lit another cigarette and passed it to her. They turned on their backs, pushing against the shingles to offset the pitch of the roof and watched the stars. The heat lightning flickered around the edges of their vision. "I'm sort of glad to be back in McCrae," he said.

"Why? Oh, I know. You want them to have another strike this winter."

"We will have another one."

"Uhuh. Through Christmas and January. The worst part of the winter. Practically everybody in this town was on union charity for food and coal the last time. You were hungry, weren't you?"

"What's it to you. You weren't."

"You make me sick." Callie half turned to throw the cigarette over the roof out into the circle of light.

J. T. grabbed her arm, but he was too late. "What'd you do that for? It wasn't more than half gone." He grabbed her other arm and pinned her to the roof.

"What are you going to do about it? Beat me up? Union boy."

"I'll show you what I can do." He held her with his body.

"Let me go. I'll scream if you don't."

"Not you. You wouldn't want nobody to know you was up here in the dark with me. You're tough, ain't you?"

"Get off. Your bones are cutting me." She tried to sit and they slid. The movement pushed her dress to her waist. She felt the erection growing under his overalls, and

she was afraid of him. "I can roll us off this roof." She twisted her head and struggled to move.

"No you don't," he said, pulling her head around by the hair. He moved aside enough to shove his knee between her legs and fell back upon her.

She closed her eyes against the weight of his rushing breath. "If you do this to me I'll kill you. I don't want your nastiness."

"Girls always want it. They just have to say they don't." He steadied himself with one arm and groped her chest with the other. "You ain't got much a nothing." She felt the leg elastic break when he pushed into her under-pants. His hand was as dry and rough as the shingles scraping the backs of her legs. "Why, George Ann. You sure you're fourteen?"

He reached to unfasten his overalls at the shoulders and his hold loosened. She turned on her side while bringing both knees up, ramming them between his legs.

"Ahhh," he said. "Ahhh." Curled around his crotch, he slid to the edge of the roof.

"Oww!" Callie heard from the street. She crawled to the point of the roof. Ernie danced on one foot in the circle of light. "God derved cigarette butt," he said to

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Brother. "Well," said Brother, "J. T. must be around here somewheres. J. T. J. T. Callie. We give up. Come out. Me and Ernie's got to go home."

Callie looked back at J. T. and slid down to give him a push with her foot. "You bastard," she whispered. He tumbled the ten feet to the ground. She climbed to the peak again. "Over here!" she called to the boys, just loud enough for them to hear. Brother came running across the road with Ernie limping behind.

Brother said, "What a great hiding place, Cal. I ain't never looked over here. Where's J. T.?"

"Shh! He's coming. He slipped and fell, but he's not hurt much. Wait there." She went back to take another look at J. T. He was on his feet, leaning against the garage door. "Go on home with Brother and Ernie. Don't bother me again."

"You got nothing I want. Or that anybody else would want. George Ann." He disappeared through the hedge.

"You O. K., J. T.?" she heard one of the boys ask.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" he replied.

"We got to get home in a hurry." "Let's go!"

Callie waited on the dark side of the garage roof until the boys and J. T. had time to walk home. Crossing the street, through the alley, she wondered what it would have

been like. She thought about the places his body touched hers so hard she could feel him still and feel his breath sucking hers. In the blackness of the coal shack his transparent image floated up and clung to her. Through him at a distance she saw George Ann, yellow, naked.

The house was dark and it seemed to breathe. Callie knew, though, that what hung around its foundations and caught the intermittant lightening flash was no more than the slight steaming of night-wet grass. And that the respiration-like sound was the mill; the third shift would soon be drawing to a close. The mammoth oak where her swing had hung long ago spread its blackness over her head. Beyond the oak to Callie's right, the shade drawn over Alice's window glowed. A shadow bulked across the light. P. K., Callie guessed. P. K.'s back. It was two years this time.

P. K. was Alice's sometime man. Her only man as far as anyone knew. And when P. K. was around, Alice was meaner than ever. Alice had grown up in the country, on Henry Grady's big farm on the other side of the river where it

gathered in a slow deep pool to begin its run into the next county. But P. K. was born and raised in MacRae, in the small permanent community of women, children, and a few old men, who supplied MacRae with servants: cooks, laundresses, cleaning women, floor waxers, window washers, yard boys. MacRae's niggertown, a cluster of pine shacks and privies, euphemistically called Under-the-Hill, nestled next to the Raleigh road, across from the nigger school, at the bottom of a hollow in a ragged pine grove. Since the war, young men had been absent from Under-the-Hill. MacRae offered no future for them and no present, other than sweeper in the mill or as parttime garbage collector, even the union had been unable to change that. So the young men left when they could and without education tried to find jobs elsewhere. Those who wanted to stay in MacRae soon became discouraged and eventually left their women and children to do better on their own than their men could provide for them. Some of the men came back from fighting the segregated war, saw nothing had changed while they were away, got drunk with their mothers and sweethearts and wives, and left again for good, as soon as they sobered up. In Under-the-Hill the houses sat in a crazy-quilt pattern connected by hard dirt paths compacted by the bare feet of the children. There was no electricity, no

plumbing. The women who took in washing scrubbed white people's dirty clothes in galvanized tubs and ironed them with flatirons heated on wood stoves that burned continuously even through the long hot and humid summer. The white women who went there in search of domestic help or to pick up their clean ironed clothes drove the few blocks from their homes to the edge of the community, then walked the paths to the cabins they sought. Callie had made trips to Under-the-Hill with Willa. She had gasped in the close heated air of the cabins, nearly suffocating in the thick blend, like a rich batter, of the smell and taste of lye, wood ashes, sweat, washed cotton, scorch, hair grease, and the skins of bodies foreign to her own. Back home in her room amid the rosebud and lattice wallpaper and the dotted swiss curtains, she got whiffs of the cabins when she shook out a clean dress or slid into bed or rolled her head on her pillow. P. K. had exchanged under the hill for the war. After the war he came home and Alice had a baby by him. A baby he hadn't seen because he was gone again before the baby was born.

"He a restless 'un," Alice had said when Callie asked why she and P. K. didn't get married.

"Where does he go, Alice?"

"Up Nawth. All around. He been everywhere," Alice said, bearing down on the starched collars of Monroe's white shirts.

"The plain fact is, you don't know where he goes."

"I shore does. He tells me."

"When he gets back maybe. But he never writes."

"Callie, you can't say that. He wrote me a picture post card onct from Baltimore. It showed a picture of the kind of houses they have up there--one squinched right up next to the other to where you can't tell where one starts and the next one begins."

"I don't believe it. I didn't know about it."

"Girl, you think you know everything. It was general delivery and Mr. Jackson done give it to your mama to give to me. I ain't showed it to you."

Alice had P. K.'s baby in the basement of the company hospital where beds were set up for the colored. She had wanted to have the baby in the country at her grandmother's house on Mr. Henry's farm. But the baby came too soon, and Willa got out the car to rush Alice the two blocks to the hospital. Willa was playing bridge in the living room when Alice screamed from the kitchen. Willa was dummy and had just finished laying down her cards. By the time she dropped

Alice at the hospital and returned, her partner was dealing the next hand. They had made the game and rubber. Dr. Dodson told Willa that he thought the baby, named Patty, would be retarded and would probably have bad eyesight. Any kind of baby, though, and especially a sickly one would have been a problem living in the back yard in Alice's one room, so Willa, Callie, and Alice took the baby to the country.

The grandmother's cabin on Mr. Henry's place was set in a peanut field. Willa said, as they drove through it, that Mr. Henry was trying peanuts on the recommendation of the agriculture school in Raleigh because there was supposed to be money in peanuts, and heaven knew Mr. Henry needed to figure some way of making money to keep up with the way he had spent it on horses and parties when he was young and would spend it on booze, if he had it. Mr. Henry's parties were famous in the state before Callie was born.

It was Sunday. The cabin and the spavined porch overflowed with lounging adults and running children. Alice's grandmother had a wrinkled brown face and a head of fluffed white hair that looked like cotton in the boll. One of the women was Alice's mother. All the men, women, and children were Alice's kin, but Callie couldn't tell who belonged to who. One of the young women was nursing a baby. She took

Patty and nursed her. When Patty fell asleep, Alice left her clothes, then Willa, Callie, and Alice climbed back in the Ford and drove down the rutted track out of the peanut field. The road was graded dirt. After about two miles, it led across a wooden bridge onto the hardtop that ran through MacRae, five miles away. Rounding the curve at the bridge, they saw Mr. Henry on one of his roans. He laughed, blocking the bridge with his horse.

"Ladies, afternoon!" Mr. Henry bowed from the back of the giant roan. He took off his cap and his head bent toward them was the color and texture of the horse's coat. But there were strands of gray in Mr. Henry's hair.

"Willa, you're as beautiful as ever."

Willa smiled, but Callie could tell she was not pleased. Callie leaned over to wave to Mr. Henry through Willa's open window.

"Callie, honey, I swear, I want to take you home with me, you're so pretty. I need a pretty redhead around my place."

Willa said, "Get back Callie." And, "Henry, aren't you afraid I'll run this car over you and your horse?" She raced the motor.

Mr. Henry didn't answer. He swung himself off the horse and came to the car. He crossed his shirtsleeved arms

on the dusty window ledge and his big red face took up most of the window. When he smiled, his bloodshot eyes almost disappeared. Willa put the car in gear.

"Hold it, Willa." A smell of sweat and whiskey filled the car. "Honey," he said to Callie, "I'm very partial to redheads."

Willa let the car roll toward the bridge. "Henry." The hard edge of her voice pushed Callie against the opposite door.

Mr. Henry's face twisted in a way that made Callie think he was about to cry. He dropped his arms, backed away from the car, and turned to his horse on the bridge. Callie saw that the backs of his boots were skinned, his jodpurs and shirt stained and caked with dirt. Mr. Henry mounted the roan in the middle of the road, whirled, and galloped past. Willa blasted the horn with her fist. Through the rear window Callie saw the white dust Mr. Henry and his horse kicked up rounding the curve.

"Mr. Henry's been thrown," Callie said.

"He sho is some man," Alice giggled.

Willa stomped the accelerator. The car clacked across the bridge and onto the black top. She drove to MacRae in second gear, and without speaking, closed herself in her room until the next morning.

Watching the shadows twist and merge across Alice's glowing window, Callie thought, P. K. is back. And she remembered the conversation between Willa and Alice the day after they took Patty to the country. Callie had heard Willa tell Alice if she got that way again, for God's sake to find somebody who could get rid of it for her. Alice had said that yes'm, her grandmother couldn't take no more.

Callie moved from the sheltering arms of the oak to cross the yard under the uneasy night sky. She glanced at the kitchen gable and thought of the bats that lived there and how they squeezed out on summer evenings to swoop and swirl in the last light. Callie eased the back door shut. Willa and Rhoda laughed on the front porch. In the kitchen, by the cold light of the Crosley Shelvador, Callie ate a slice of roast beef and a biscuit, washing the food down with a glass of tap water. She moved through the unlighted house with the familiarity of one whose physical surroundings are never altered. Opening a drawer in her nighttable, she took out a flashlight and went to the closet. At the back, behind the hanging clothes she switched on the light. Squatting with the light clamped between her knees she opened a round, black, Dobbs hatbox. She dumped the contents on the closet floor, then replaced them, examining them one by one,

in the narrow beam: a pair of sling-back, high-heeled snakeskin shoes, size five and a half B; a pair of nylon stockings, size eight and a half; a brassiere, thirty-six C; and a blue-banded embroidered skirt. Except for the stockings which were new, the clothes were worn. The snakeskin shoes had come from the trash can behind the Smart Shoppe; the brassiere had been Willa's; the skirt had belonged to Willa's best friend and it was the most recent addition to the cache.

Callie had begun the collection that spring, on the day of her annual crocus hunt. She had never found a crocus, had never seen one outside of a drawing in Compton's Encyclopedia, but each spring since she learned to read she had searched for crocuses. In her textbooks, crocuses were exclaimed over by the children-characters and by their parents--even by their pets. Finding crocuses was for the textbook families a family activity, like going to church or to grandfather's farm. Crocuses made them as happy as a new baby or a litter of kittens. A flower both fragile and delicate, crocuses could push through the snow; more exotic than orchids, they gave fulfillment to those who found them. Although it hardly ever snowed in MacRae and Callie never found a crocus, the crocus hunt had become a rite of March.

Even after she realized that crocuses belonged naturally to a climate other than hers--the climate of the publishing world that produced textbooks. And so, each spring she brought home hyacinths from the wood that snaked along with the river a mile and a half from town.

Callie was crossing the vacant lot behind the stores and twirling a purple hyacinth between her thumb and index finger when she saw the shoes on a trash can lid behind the Smart Shoppe. They perched primly on the lid as though on a closet shelf. Sling-back, open-toed, with heels higher than anything in Willa's closet, Callie knew they belonged to Mrs. Silver who owned the Smart Shoppe. She kicked off her muddy socks and loafers and supporting herself against the can tried the snakeskin shoes. They were tight--her big toe stuck too far through the hole--and she felt herself swaying high above the ground. Callie thought, Mrs. Silver never felt this way; in her highest heels she's shorter than I am flatfooted. She never felt like a ripe sunflower in the wind.

Callie put the shoes away in the back of her closet. That night she moved her broken colored glass collection from the hat box and hid the shoes there. Callie wondered why she wanted to hide the shoes and why two weeks later she took a brassiere from Willa's room to put with them. She was

frightened the afternoon she walked home from the dime store with the stockings under her blue corduroy blazer. But placing them in the black box with the shoes and brassiere her fear disappeared. She smiled at the things, and felt, inexplicably, hope. The cache was better than garlands of crocuses. It was a month later that she stole the Guatemala skirt.

Willa's friend and bridge partner, Lovey Stephenson had been to Guatemala with a rich aunt. She brought a woven basket for Willa, and for herself, two embroidered skirts--one trimmed in broad bands of green, the other in blue. Every time Lovey wore her Guatemala skirts she told about her trip. She was prouder of the skirts than she was of the slightly used mink stole from the same aunt. Callie had seen Willa's envy of the stole, and that she was even more envious of the skirts which represented foreign travel. The mark of Willa's envy was her disparagement of Guatemala as a place to visit and also that the souvenir basket resided at the top back of the pantry shelf.

Willa sent Callie to Lovey Stephenson's house with a note about a change in the Altar Guild schedule and to pick up the clean linen for communion Sunday. Lovey gave Callie a rice krispy cookie and chocolate milk, while the colored woman who was ironing in the kitchen finished the minister's

surplice. Callie left the house with the church laundry wrapped in a clean sheet draped over her arm. On her way down Lovey's back steps she saw the skirt in a basket under the clothes line. She took it, sweet-smelling from hanging in the sun, and concealed it under the altar linen. Lovey told Willa that she had fired the cook for stealing her Guatalama skirt. For only a week, though, because good cooks were hard to find. Stealing the blue Guatalama skirt had been easy, and Callie hadn't known how much she needed it until she got it home and saw it folded in the box with the other treasures.

Callie tied the lid on the box, switched off the flashlight, crawled through the hanging clothes, and closed the closet door. Walking to a window, she rolled up the shade to let the lesser darkness from outside poke into the room. There, she thought looking at the walls, a labyrinth of rosebuds twining on a lattice like a gate to the limitless space beyond; there is where I'd like to be. She reached out to touch the wall as though she expected her hand to lead her into the surreal space. It was blue there, clear blue, although it looked gray in the night light. Silently, she went into the bathroom. The other bathroom doors, one to Monroe's room, the other to the hall, were closed. She

locked them both and closing the door to her room locked it. The window set high in the wall at the foot of the tub was open to the stars and the flickering light that rimmed the sky. Callie turned on the water in the boat-shaped tub. She removed her dress, slip, and pants; her naked reflection rushed at her from Willa's mirrors. Twisting and turning, she traced with faint highlights first one side of her body, then the other--nose, cheek, chin, collarbone, flowing arms. The reflections fell back. She was absorbed, caught. Callie in the dark mirrors, in the mirrors, in the mirrors. A tinier and tinier Callie, but there each time she looked. She saw herself, always there. She turned off the faucet and listened to night noises from the trees and grass, music, and raucous women's laughter, beyond locked doors.

With one foot in the cool water she examined her chest. They are growing, she thought, pinching the skin around her nipples. She pushed and pulled, and sighing drew in her other foot and slid into the water. She splashed her chest, trembling in the shock of cold. With a wet finger she traced the wrinkle over her navel where her body bent when she leaned forward. She placed her hand over the red fuzz as soft and sparse as a caterpillar's, just visible between her legs; then with a finger she traced a large triangle. In Willa's

books, she thought, the women have dark triangles. The men strip the women to see triangles and breasts bloated like balloons. After the men handled the women's parts, like a lesson in solid geometry, they lay on the women and did to them what J. T. tried to do to me on the garage roof. When it happened, she wondered, when the parts of men and women were forced together like a new puzzle, what is it like? Not J. T. What would it be like with Charlie? She pushed the fuzzy lips of her vagina together, hard. Then she spread them and the water rushed in. Knees up, she lay in the tub, soaking her shoulders, her neck, her hair. The water sealed her ears, mouth, nose, and eyes as it had sealed the opening between her legs.

Callie sat up, sluicing water around her hipbones and over her collarbone. It ran from points of shoulder blades and elbows and spikes of hair in streams of light. She turned the shower handle, and the plate-size shower head burst upon her to feed the dwindling streams. She arced her arms over her head and reached into the slow heavy spray that was like afternoon rain. She was water. Water was light. She thought, I will make him think of a cold bath in the pale summer night. She turned off the shower and pulled the plug. Wrapping her body with a towel, she recalled the hard,

unfamiliar parts of another body touching hers. She shuddered in the wet towel and threw it on the floor.

Her nightgown hung on the hall door. To get it she had to pass through the mirrors. I won't look, she thought. Don't catch me. But from the corners of her eyes as she ran from one end of the long bathroom to the door she saw that Willa's mirrors sucked at her. Callie felt the tug on her breasts, her secret places plumbed. She grabbed the gown and in one motion threw the lock and opened the door.

"Calliee!"

Callie drew the gown over her head. It was highnecked, sleeveless, and dotted with rosebuds very like those on her bedroom wall. The material became transparent where her hair wet it, plastering rosebuds to skin.

"Calliee!"

"The screeching bitch," Callie said in a matter-of-fact conversational tone as she padded up the hall into Monroe's room. When she leaned over him to check his breathing, she saw that his eyes were open, staring at the ceiling.

"Papa? You awake?" She reached for his good left hand. "I can turn the light on for you." He blinked twice. "I could read to you, Papa." The man closed his eyes and tears crossed his cheeks and fell on his pillow. Callie

kissed him. "Good night, Papa. Please don't worry. I'll take care of you."

"Calliee! I know you hear me!"

The man moaned. "I'll make her stop," Callie said. He moaned again as she left the room.

Callie kicked the screen door, passed through, and caught it with her foot before it could slam.

"Well!" said Willa. "If it isn't Alice in Wonderland. Where have you been?"

"Taking a bath."

"I mean for the hours and hours before that."

"Out back. Talking to the boys."

"Talking to the boys!" Willa said in a singsong imitation. "Just listen to that, Rhoda. Can you believe that a daughter of mine, at the age of fourteen, is still playing with little boys--like a little boy?" Willa adjusted the swing cushions and recrossed her legs. "I can't believe this redheaded tomboy came out of me. Shoo!" She shook her head so hard that a curler flew over the banister into the shrubbery. "Callie, get that for me."

"I'll get it tomorrow."

"Yes, yes, Willa. Callie-dear will get it tomorrow."

Rhoda was sunk in a porch rocker, a glass supported on her stomach by the folds of her dotted dress.

"Shut up, Rhoda."

"How dare you talk to me that way," Rhoda said without conviction.

Light from the street sifted through the trees and stuck to the porch walls and floor and to the two women sitting there. Willa, in a quilted bathrobe, squirmed, rattling the swing, and a large flake of light stuck to her face. She drank from a coffee cup and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Rhoda, I'm going to talk to you and I'm going to tell you that from this day, you don't have a chance. I'm going to tell you that Monroe is not going to get well. He's going to lie in there with one side of him dead from his brain to his feet while he waits for the other side to die."

"That's not so!" Callie said. "He can get well. Dr. Dodson said he could work on it, could try and get well."

"But he won't. Those strong women. That houseful of nut crushers got him ready for his deathbed."

Callie felt the sweat beading in her armpits and her feet sticking to the porch.

"Now, Willa, I think you're getting in over your head--"

"You've been over your head--over your head in bull-shit--ever since I've known you. You'd have been better off

on the farm instead of in the city learning fancy ways. You'd better ask yourself if fancy ways can make a living."

"Phillip and I have means." Rhoda drank with dignity.

"Yeah. Well, I read in the paper that the cost of living's going up eighteen percent this year. And from where I sit, your means have just gone down ninety-nine and forty-four one-hundredths." Willa swigged from the cup. "Unless you don't think you're too old to whore."

Rhoda hiccupped. Callie turned to go into the house.

"Put that record back on, Callie."

"Which record?"

"Just raise the victrola lid and you'll see which one I mean."

In the living room Callie reset the gyrating needle.

"Come on back out here."

Callie saw that Willa, her legs in the air, was trying to reach the bottle of bourbon under the bouncing swing.

"That's a good way to wear out needles," Callie said.

"It's not the money for needles I'm worried about, Miss Callie. It's money for the food you put in your mouth that concerns me." She lunged at the bottle and snagged it by the neck with two fingers.

"Manana, manana. Manana is good enough for me. Oba! Oba!" sang Peggy Lee.

"But you and Rhoda are no more worried about that than the niggers, are you? They're still living on Roosevelt promises, and you all think you're going to live on Monroe promises. Well, I'm voting for Dewey. Again."

"Why, Willa! Are you trying to tell me that you voted Republican?"

"No you simpleton." Willa laughed. "But I did. I'll do it again too. Only one in this town."

Callie turned to the door.

"Um, Callie."

"Yes, Mama."

"Somebody's got to sleep with Monroe tonight. You heard Dr. Dodson say so. He has to have somebody with him all the time in case he needs anything."

Only the record spoke: "My mother's always working. She's working very hard."

"God knows I'd do it. But I can't bear sick things."

The night wind rose, rustling the trees and breaking up the pattern of light.

"Monroe'd have another heart attack for sure, if Rhoda got in bed with him."

"Mama."

"Willa!"

"So you see, Callie, I guess you'll just have to sleep with your Papa for awhile."

"Mama."

"Oh sure, I know he's a big man, but you're a big enough girl to call if he tries to get up or anything you can't handle. Get Rhoda. She's almost as big as he is."

Callie went into the house. Crossing the dark living room, she heard Willa call: "Callie, reset that needle!" Callie reset the needle and entered Monroe's room as though she were walking into it for the first time. She walked around the bed; the man's toes made a peak. She lifted the covers; he stirred slightly and his breathing became less audible, but his eyes remained closed. Callie lay beside him in the four poster double bed. Covered with his cover, she could feel his warmth, and she thought how he and Willa had lain like that--together, apart, their warmths blending. The man tensed, sensing another presence in his bed. Callie raised on her elbow, and his eyes opened and met hers.

"Gggod dammit," he said.

"Ssh, Papa. It's all right. Don't be frightened. It's just me."

Callie woke when the light changed. She threw off the covers and moved to the window without any notice of the man who lay beside her. The sky was salmon pink and purple--last night's sunset in pastels. She leaned on the sill until the rising glare rinsed the color from overhead. Turning, she glanced at the man as she walked past the bed. He watched her. But there was no recognition between them.

Phillip was asleep in Callie's bed. Harvey was stretched out on the cool brick hearth. He followed Callie around the room as she dressed, his toenails clicking on the bare floor. She pulled her nightgown over her head and threw it on the floor, and rummaging in a drawer, found underpants, blue shorts, and a halter.

The kitchen was quiet; night hung in its corners and across the ceiling, although it was time for Alice to be in, building a fire in the laundry heater so Willa could have her morning bath with enough left over for the breakfast dishes. Alice also liked to do some of the cooking toward dinner on summer mornings; by seven she would usually have a pot or two

steaming on the gas stove. But Alice was nowhere around. A piece of paper lay on the porcelain-topped table under a large ripe tomato. Callie lifted the tomato, still gritty from the field of the farmer who had sold it to Carl, and read: "Miss Morrin me and PK has left we taken Patty to Baltimore. good luck Alice"

Callie took the percolator from the stove, filled it with water from the sink, coffee from a can in the pantry, and put it back on the stove, turning a burner up so high that flames lapped the spout. She pulled a mule-eared chair up to the porcelain table and ate a bowl of corn flakes while the coffee boiled. Once she interrupted her reading of the cereal box to turn the gas down when the coffee boiled over. When she judged that the coffee was done, she turned off the gas and poured herself a cup. She drank it black and scalding, outlining with her tongue the blister that formed in the roof of her mouth.

Callie went into her room again where Phillip slept with the smooth expectant nine-year-old look on his face that he didn't have when he was awake. Harvey was on the hearth, stomach flat against the bricks. Callie pulled the black hat-box from the closet. Sitting beside it on the floor, she checked the contents: shoes, stockings, brassiere, skirt.

She added a white blouse, fastened the lid, and left the house. Outside, on the path that staggered toward the stores, she felt the sun on her feet and shoulders and curled her feet around the sharp-sided quartz pebbles. She stopped in front of Charlie Searcy's house, her eyes climbing the column of smoke coming from the kitchen chimney. On down the path, across the tar and gravel street, already warm, she leaped upon the strip of concrete that held the stores together. As she did so, she felt a lift as of the orange moth's wings. For an instant she was about to be that mysterious, beautiful, exotic, and frightening creature. Only for an instant, then forgotten. Callie switched the hatbox to her right hand. In front of Peel's Jimmy said, "Mornin'," tipping three hats over his brown grin. Callie followed the concrete strip past Carl's and the drugstore, around the corner entrance of the bank until it ran out at Dr. Dodson's office door. Her feet made prints in dirt again for about ten yards and she turned in a doorway that led up steep wooden stairs. A sign hanging over the doorway said in green letters, "Inez's Beauty Parlor." And painted on the stairway wall was another sign: "E. A. Steward, Dentist," with an arrow pointing up the steps. At the top of the steps Callie turned down a hall that got its faint light from the frosted panels in the doors at each end.

A ribbed green linoleum stretched across the floor; the horizontal tongue-in-groove walls were green. Callie twisted the rusty door knob. Locked. She sat on the cold linoleum, her hatbox between her feet, her legs draped protectively around it. Callie's feet were as cold as the floor and she felt the separate grains of dirt on her soles; her shoulder blades dug into the wall. She tried not to think. She began to try to catalog what she could see, to make a pattern of it, but there was nothing in the hall to count, group, or fit together like a puzzle. Even the design in the linoleum was random--yellow and red splashed across the cold green--Callie could build no world within it as she could in her bedroom wallpaper. She sat in the cold green hall with her head tipped against the wall and her eyes closed. Trying not to think.

Behind her eyes she was surrounded by the blue limitless space that lay behind the walls of her room. The space was hard and brilliant and never ending. In a universe of silence and freedom she was alone. Once Charlie had been there. He had brought a rushing wind to a place that was windless. But he took the wind with him when he left her there. She was alone with neither taste, touch, smell, nor another to tell her where she was and who she was.

As the giant moth, golden as an orange, common as the setting sun, she went anywhere, could be anything; she was of the earth, but not fastened to it as Miss Callie was. Looking down she saw that she stood on the edge of a cliff under an enormous sky. She raised her arms and stepped over the edge. Instead of the lift of two lush suntipped wings, she felt herself fall, twirling, twisting like the circus girls twirling over the sawdust rings. Then the falling was like standing still and turning slowly in a dance.

"Callie Morrin! What are you doing up here by yourself at eight o'clock in the morning?"

Callie turned in the direction of the voice.

"Are you dancing, or what?"

She lowered her arms and picked up the hat box.

"What's that you've got there?" Inez said, pulling a skeleton key from her pocket and unlocking the door to the beauty parlor. Her eyebrows were black and even. She stood facing Callie with her back against the half-opened door.

"A hat box."

"It sure is." Inez's eyebrows curved, wrinkling the thick skin of her forehead. "Do you want to come in?"

"Yes." Callie stumbled on the threshold. The beauty parlor consisted of three rooms. A small waiting room, a

facial and hair dryer room, and the room where the ladies were washed, rolled, and combed. Callie followed Inez into the last of these where there were a sink, two tables with mirrors, and the permanent machine, an electric octopus hanging over an old dentist's chair.

"Excuse me, Callie. I always come early so's I can put on the coffee and sit for awhile before old Mrs. Bell comes in for her comb-out. How's your Mama?" Inez filled a percolator and set it on a hot plate in a corner under the window. "She missed her appointment last Thursday." Callie stood in the middle of the room with her arms closed around the hatbox's girth. Inez sat in the dentist's chair, contemplating Callie with her brows drawn together like breaking waves. "What can I do for you?"

"I want a haircut. A feather cut. And a permanent."

"Well, you're old enough to want to spruce up a little. Can't be a kid forever. Your first permanent, right?"

Callie nodded.

"O. K. Let's get to work. Today you are a woman!" Inez laughed and got out of the dentist's chair. "For God's sake, put that thing down."

Callie looked around for a place to set the hatbox.

"Oh, give it to me." Inez tried to take the box from Callie, but Callie held on.

"No," she said.

Inez shrugged, her eyebrows leveling. "Suit yourself. Just put it on the floor there by the permanent machine. Now, come here. We have to start with a clean head."

Callie lay back in the chair. The edge of the sink was cold on her neck; the shampoo ran icy fingers across her scalp. She was soaped and rinsed and rinsed again, her head lolling in Inez's warm sturdy hands.

Inez drank three cups of coffee and combed Mrs. Bell while Callie sat with her hair whirling loose under the dryer.

In front of the mirror, Inez began cutting. "Callie, you got beautiful colored hair. It's just what Cora Lynn Jones wants, but I can't get it out of a bottle to save me. She's too hard to please, and the more she fusses, the more off I get. It's hard to work trying to please women. And not worth it for what I charge, even with the birthday and Christmas presents. Your hair's too thick; I'm going to have to thin it to make this new style work right. It sure is straight too. You should have come to me before. I can fix you up. The way you want to be." Inez bit her lip as she lifted hair to thin the underneath layers and her brows were like breakers again. "Now look at yourself. Better already,

isn't it?" Callie looked at the mass of roan-colored hair tangled around their feet. "Come on over here and let's get the curls going. Why, you won't know yourself, honey, when I get through. The old Callie Morrin will be gone."

In the dentist's chair Callie looked down on the roof of the Esso station, as Inez sectioned, applied the eye-stinging chemical, and clamped her hair in tight rolls against her scalp. Then Inez pulled down the dangling cords of the permanent machine and fastened them, one by one, to each roll of hair. She switched on the machine. "There you are. Let's hope we don't have a thunder storm for the next eight minutes." Bride of Frankenstein, thought Callie and she smiled. Inez saw it. "Oh, I'm some joker, I am." She laughed. "I've got to go down the hall--all that coffee, you know. I'll be right back, then we'll see what kind of result we've got. Don't move, you hear?" Inez laughed again.

Inez said, "I'll just put the finishing touches on and you can go out and show the world how pretty you are. It's a little bit curlier than I had in mind, but in a couple of weeks it'll be just right, and I think your mama will be real pleased to see what a grown up young lady you are. You look a lot different don't you? Pretty as a movie star. Take this mirror and look at the back. You like it, honey?"

Callie noticed that Inez's brows were breaking furiously across her white, powdered forehead, but her mouth was stretched in a big red smile. Callie took the hatbox and walked through the dryer room and the waiting room to the door with Inez following.

"I'll put it on your mama's bill. You come back in here next week and let me wash and fix that permanent for you."

Callie opened the door and started down the hall.

"Is your mama coming for her appointment Thursday?"

Callie shut the door. Past the stairs, almost to Dr. Steward's door, Callie entered a bathroom, large enough for only a toilet and sink. It too was green with a piece of cold splashed linoleum on the floor and tongue-in-groove walls. Standing between the toilet and sink, Callie switched on the overhead bulb, locked the door, and removed her shorts and halter, tossing them in the toilet. She pushed the spring

seat with her foot, but the flush was not strong enough to take the clothes away. Choosing Willa's brassiere from the box, she slipped it across her shoulders and fastened it behind. It hung on Callie's thin frame like a worn harness. Over the folds of the brassiere she pulled her low-necked peasant blouse. She opened the stockings, pulled them over her thighs and fastened them by twisting and rolling the tops. Then the shoes. Callie swayed against the door. She lifted the Guatamala skirt, shook it out, careful of her hair and brought it over her head. She fastened the skirt, turning the waistband twice.

There, she thought, there, and she looked down at herself: she caressed the bunched front of her blouse, twitched the blue-banded skirt over her knees, followed the smooth tanned length of her legs to Mrs. Silver's high-heeled snake-skin shoes. There.

Slowly, anticipation kinking her movements, Callie turned to face the narrow spotted mirror over the sink and the girl she saw there was already looking back. The young girl touched her crimped orangish hair with a freckled hand which she slid down her neck and brought to lie along her throat. "Hello," Callie and the girl said in unison. Then they laughed, a trilling, self-deprecating laugh. The girl

shook her head, bouncing a bright curl over her eyes. She smiled and leaned toward Callie, almost close enough to touch. "Hello," she said.