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LAMBETH, CANDACE ELAINE. The Waiting Room and Other Stories.  
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In very basic terms, the aim of a thesis comprised of short fiction is to put together words in such a way that clear, visual, believable, and interesting stories emerge. This is what I have attempted to do in "The Waiting Room," "The Creak," and "The Tie that Binds," three short stories of widely varying themes. My further purpose is to show people not at their best nor at their worst but at their most honest.

Candace Elaine Lambeth

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

Greensboro  
1974

Approved by

*Fred Chappell*  
Thesis Advisor

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THE WAITING ROOM  
" "  
AND OTHER STORIES

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

by

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Thesis Adviser

5

APPROVAL PAGE

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

My husband, Chuck  
Flight, whose continuing interest made much of this possible. Also, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Lloyd Kropp and Tom Kirby-Smith.

Thesis Adviser

Fred Chappell

Committee Members

Lloyd Kropp

W. J. Kirby-Smith

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	iii
THE WAITING ROOM . . . . .	1

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to my teacher, Fred Chappell, whose guidance and encouragement I could not have done without, and to my husband, Chuck Flynt, whose continuing interest made much of this possible. Also, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Lloyd Kropp and Tom Kirby-Smith.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	iii
THE WAITING ROOM. . . . .	1
THE CREAK . . . . .	20
THE TIE THAT BINDS. . . . .	39

over the receptionist's head. It was the laugh that caught her attention. "Thrill and brassy, without any sentiment at all. Not a laugh, really. At first Mrs. Crowder thought it might be directed at her. She yanked her mother-of-pearl glasses frames down to the end of her nose and stared over them, her black eyes squinting. There they sat, two young girls with a boy maybe two or three years older than they, each spread-eagle with a section of the newspaper. By the time Mrs. Crowder looked them in the crowded room, the laugh had become a sneer on each of their lips. They had not seen her.

Mrs. Crowder picked through her huge black leather purse until she drew out a small white card. She shoved her glasses halfway back up the bridge of her nose and held the card close to her eyes to compare it with the clock behind the receptionist. The clock now said 10:32, but she knew when she had come in. She dropped the card back in the large opening and walked to the desk.

## THE WAITING ROOM

Three of them were sitting in Dr. Maness's waiting room reading the newspaper like they kept up with things. Mrs. Crowder noticed them the instant she breezed through the plate-glass door at 10:31 a.m., according to the clock over the receptionist's head. It was the laugh that caught her attention. Shrill and brassy, without any merriment at all. Not a laugh, really. At first Mrs. Crowder thought it might be directed at her. She yanked her mother-of-pearl glasses frames down to the end of her nose and stared over them, her black eyes squinting. There they sat: two young girls with a boy maybe two or three years older than they, each spread-eagle with a section of the newspaper. By the time Mrs. Crowder located them in the crowded room, the laugh had become a sneer on each of their lips. They had not seen her.

Mrs. Crowder picked through her huge black leatherette purse until she drew out a small white card. She shoved her glasses halfway back up the bridge of her nose and held the card close to her eyes to compare it with the clock behind the receptionist. The clock now said 10:32, but she knew when she had come in. She dropped the card back in the large opening and walked to the desk.

"Mrs. Crowder," she announced solemnly to the receptionist, emphasizing the "Mrs." in case one of those young girls was pregnant and not married.

The receptionist, also a young girl, had been watching her as she approached the desk, but turned back to her work before Mrs. Crowder told her name. Without looking up, she said, "Would you please have a seat?"

Mrs. Crowder turned away, then back again, her thin painted-on eyebrows jumping high into her forehead. "You get my name, young lady?" She noticed that the girl's features were sharp and cold like those two in the waiting room, but the harshness was softened by her shimmering blond hair. One class higher, she supposed.

"Yes, ma'am," the receptionist said coolly. She still didn't look up.

"Miss?" Mrs. Crowder said and waited. The girl raised her eyes. "I think your clock's a minute fast. I was here at 10:30 and the clock said 10:31."

The girl turned around, her long hair swaying, looked at the timepiece on the wall, then checked her own watch. "Says the same thing mine does." She resumed her work.

Besides the three sitting in front of the blue net draperies to Mrs. Crowder's left, the waiting room held only gentle-looking young women, most of whom were pregnant. They were all placidly thumbing through magazines. Those who no longer had laps held the magazines high over their



humps, looking nearsighted. The rest, newly pregnant or, like Mrs. Crowder, coming to see if they were, kept their magazines flat on their laps.

Across the room a woman stood up to replace her magazine and find a new one. The orangeness of the empty chair seemed to dart out towards Mrs. Crowder. The room had changed substantially, she quickly noticed, presumably because of that young partner Dr. Maness had taken in. All the chairs were a nervous orange garish against the new royal blue of the walls and pile carpet. Mrs. Crowder searched her memory for how the room had been before. With four children discovered and prepared for in this building, she had come to know this waiting room quite well. But that was years ago....Oh, yes, the seascapes. She had often not even taken a magazine when she could find a seat that looked directly into one of those calm blue seas. They kept her from worrying about the painful probing to come. Now in the place of the seascapes were monstrous shiny glass cases with some kind of dolls inside. She walked over to one of them. A brass plate read "Primitive Mexican Art." The dolls were all naked women, top-heavy and bald. She'd like her husband to see these. He had told her a million times that the naked female body is the greatest existing work of art. It was on the millionth time--last spring, the day after their final daughter had gotten married--that she agreed to let him keep some of his dirty magazines in the basement. There was

certainly nothing beautiful about these women. Just dried mud. Blobs of dried mud stuck together, probably with more dried mud. George would call them exceptions if she pointed them out to him. Mrs. Crowder thought she would gently ask Dr. Maness what happened to the seascapes. She bent over slightly to see the second shelf of figures, then tensed and straightened. A pregnant naked woman. That was too much, even for a doctor's office. It would be much too much for George's workroom. She walked directly to the only vacant seats in the room--three together just opposite the young people--and chose the middle one. She was afraid that if she looked on the next row she might see a clay baby being delivered. She was definitely going to ask about the seascapes.

Mrs. Crowder sat at attention, back straight, eyes focused down her nose to the soft blue floor. The turning of the slick heavy magazine pages soothed her as the seascapes once had. There was a rhythm created by the women who turned the pages steadily and accented by those who stopped to read something. Gradually, her mind turned to what she and George could do next year if she were not pregnant. A sudden rattling of a newspaper interrupted her reverie. Mrs. Crowder glared at the three teen-agers: two of them were thumbing loudly through their sections. She doubted they really kept up with what was going on in the world. Just pretending. They were like George who kept

a Readers' Digest Condensed on the coffee table with a bookmark at the halfway point for show.

Mrs. Crowder still sat with her coat on, hands resting on top of the purse in her lap. Both her feet rested flat on the floor. As she had become heavier over the years, it was increasingly uncomfortable to cross her legs. She was still conscious, however, of keeping her thighs pressed tight together. So many women forgot that.

There was obviously going to be a wait, perhaps a long one. Nine other women were there ahead of her, not counting those two girls. And her with a 10:30 a.m. appointment. Why were there such things as appointments anyway? They probably didn't even have one. Just showed up. Which one was it? she wondered. Well, not the boy.

She sneezed. It came unexpectedly and she didn't have time to pull out a kleenex. Holding her hand broadly over her nose, she quickly shook a handkerchief from her purse to press against her nostrils. She blew quietly into it, then looked around. Everyone had politely kept their heads down, she believed. She was growing too warm; that was why she had sneezed. She decided to take her coat off. First, she set her large purse down on the floor, leaning it against her chair. It flopped to a straight-up position. She reached down and propped it again at a greater angle.

A coarse voice suddenly cried, "Woo-wee, listen to this."

Mrs. Crowder jumped. It had sounded like a man, but it was the girl in the middle of the trio. She continued in a loud whisper. "This mother and father in New Mexico sold their baby to be a slave. And that isn't all. The people that bought it were niggers and the parents were white."

Mrs. Crowder looked around quickly to see if there were any Negroes in the waiting room. She hadn't thought so when she came in, but she checked again to make sure. She saw a few of the women start to look up, then decide against it. The woman in the pillbox hat sitting beside the teen-agers changed the side her legs were crossed on in order to face the other direction.

When they had gone back to their reading, Mrs. Crowder stood up and took off her raggy black tweed coat. She picked a loose thread from her red and white striped dress, then twirled the coat around in front of her. An empty ash tray on the magazine table between her and the teen-agers fell to the carpet. "Oops," she said distinctly. She smiled apologetically around the room. Several of the ladies raised their eyes and looked regretful. The three holding the newspapers high in front of their faces dropped them so only their eyes showed. Mrs. Crowder couldn't tell whether they were smiling or not. She grimaced at them, pretending the look was meant for the poorly-placed ash tray, and they jerked the pages up again. Mrs. Crowder saw

the newspapers crowd together and heard the three whispering. She reached for the ash tray and replaced it quietly, straining for their words. Then she folded her coat and laid it on the chair beside her.

By the time Mrs. Crowder sat down again, two of the young people had creased their newspapers in half, revealing their faces. Not over eighteen, the boy. The girl looked fifteen or sixteen. Worthless. The boy was thin and undernourished. Those kind always were. She remembered George before she got her cooking into him. Skinny as a dogwood tree. But he'd only been too lazy to cook for himself. This boy was poor white trash. The boy had a long face that seemed oversized for his body. His eyes bulged queerly and his lips were fat. Maybe it was those cigarettes. One dangled in his fingers beside his folded newspaper now. She wondered if he knew cigarettes stunted people's growth. The smoke made her positively ill.

"Look here," the girl in the middle said, as Mrs. Crowder continued her scrutiny. She was the talker. The other two leaned over to read something out of the section she had laid flat in her lap. Mrs. Crowder looked carefully at the girl's stomach to see if it bulged. It did, a little. The girl was pointing out the article with her extended middle finger. The nail was dotted with flecks of red polish she had not scratched off yet. Mrs. Crowder looked at her own nails. Nurse-style: long enough to be attractive, but



short enough to stay out of the way. And no polish, ever. She thought about asking the receptionist to make those three be a little quieter. She started to rise, then paused. The receptionist hadn't been too friendly. Perhaps she would mention about all of them to Dr. Maness.

The two friends of the girl in the middle were still reading her newspaper. "Hurry up," she said. "I wouldn'a showed it to you if I knew it'd take you so"--she put her hand over her mouth and whispered something--"long." Mrs. Crowder refused to wonder what she said.

The girl had whitish-blond hair with red roots and visible tangles. Her large puffy mouth hung open even when she wasn't talking. The faded corduroy skirt she wore was hiked more than halfway up her thighs. If either of them played around, it was her, Mrs. Crowder was certain. The other girl had short thin brown hair that had been whacked off at the juncture of her head and long bony neck. It hung straight except at the sides where she had curled it around her ears. Her front teeth were gapped and at one time she had had a bad case of acne. Mrs. Crowder leaned forward slightly to try to catch a glimpse of her stomach which was partially hidden behind the newspaper.

Suddenly, the ugly one stopped reading and turned her face straight into Mrs. Crowder's line of vision. "Is there something you want to get a good look at?" she asked.

Mrs. Crowder had glanced down at the magazine table quickly, but not in time. Without looking at them, she said, "Oh, no, thank you." The girl who had spoken to her uttered a quick, one-syllable noise, akin to a laugh. Then, the three started whispering again.

Mrs. Crowder found herself acutely embarrassed before the other ladies in the room. She squeezed her thin lips together until they almost disappeared and kept her eyes on the carpet so only her pink eyelids showed. She sat perfectly still, hoping no one was looking at her and if they were, would soon turn away out of boredom. The blush that had not had time to appear now crept slowly over her face and she felt her pulse beating in her ears. She reached down for her purse, opened it, then fumbled through the contents. Sighing hopelessly, she closed the bag and set it again beside her chair. Finally, her heart stopped pounding enough that she could hear the waiting room noises again. It sounded like all the magazine pages were still turning. She wondered if they had stopped. Pinning her eyes on the carpet again, she decided not to move until her time came.

There was a general pause in the page-turning when someone came out of the examining room, but Mrs. Crowder would not look up. She heard the person walking towards her and crunched back in her seat to allow plenty of room. Two thin young legs stopped in front of her chair.

"Ruth?" a voice said. Mrs. Crowder lifted her eyes hesitantly.

"Why, Estelle, how are you?" she said, forcing a weak smile. Estelle was her older sister's daughter. Mrs. Crowder rose and extended her hand.

"The doctor says I may have twins," she said gleefully, patting her swollen tummy with one hand and grasping her aunt's arm with the other. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, nothing special," Mrs. Crowder said. "Just my regular checkup." She felt sick that those three knew her name.

"I thought Dr. Maness only saw obstetrics patients," Estelle said.

"That's the way it is now since he narrowed his practice. But he let me stay on after Barbara because I'd been with him so long. He still sees several of us who aren't pregnant." With her last two words Mrs. Crowder glared at the three young people behind Estelle. They were listening intently. Estelle started to turn around but Mrs. Crowder shook her head warningly.

"Mother says you never come to see her anymore," the niece said, half-turning in her position so she could see what her aunt was looking at. "I'll tell her I saw you and maybe you two can get together soon. She's still quite lonely, you know."

"I'm sure," Mrs. Crowder clucked, distantly. "Please have her call me."



"Will do," Estelle said with finality. She leaned over and whispered loudly, "Hope you don't find out you're p.g. the way I did."

Mrs. Crowder laughed nervously. "Bye now," she said.

Estelle twiddled her little finger at her.

She sat back down, irritated. Now they knew her name and that she might be pregnant. Here she was forty-five years old and in a doctor's office maybe p.g., as Estelle said. What a talker, that Estelle. Wonder how she ever got pregnant, the time she spends talking. Well, I guess you can get pregnant as easy talking as not. It was probably better; take your mind off it, anyway. She'd see if George would try that some time, in case they ever had another time. They hadn't since that night. She had told him it was the wrong time. He'd kept reminding her she was forty-five. Lord, what he didn't know. He was suffering now.

Mrs. Crowder felt injured. George. And then Estelle, telling her name like that. Acting as if she might be pregnant. With those three hobgoblins right over there. And what about them? Embarrassing her the way they did. She could look where she wanted. If it happened to be at them, so what?

A nurse came through the fluted swinging door that led to the examining rooms. "Mrs. Pegram," she said.

A mousy lady four seats down from her rose with some difficulty. She appeared to be in about her eighth month.

She walked slowly until she reached Mrs. Crowder, then stopped and said, "Excuse me, please."

Mrs. Crowder drew her legs farther under the chair.

"Excuse me, please," Mrs. Pegram said again. Mrs. Crowder looked up at Mrs. Pegram and saw her pointing at the floor. She followed the direction of the woman's finger and saw that her purse had fallen over into the aisle. Bending quickly to move it, she nearly brushed Mrs. Pegram's stomach with her head. The pregnant lady jumped back a step, nearly losing her balance. The nurse holding the swinging door let it go and dashed to grab the woman's arm.

"Careful now," she said.

The remark was addressed more to her than to Mrs. Pegram, Mrs. Crowder thought. The door flip-flopped loudly.

"Please excuse me," Mrs. Crowder said to both of them. Her black eyes stared remorsefully at their necks.

"Of course," Mrs. Pegram said coldly. There were red splotches on her arms from excitement.

Mrs. Crowder slid far back in the thin vinyl seat and tucked her legs under the chair. She checked her purse. It lay against the wall. When she finally looked up again, three pairs of eyes were staring at her. Those devils. They were imitating her. All three had tucked their legs carefully under their chairs, just as she had. Their hands were folded prayerfully in their laps. Mrs. Crowder shifted her weight, looked at the clock which said 11:15 and then at

a funny nose on a woman's face at the right end of the room. She drew her legs deliberately into an uncomfortable crossed position. Then she unfolded her hands and grabbed the two chrome arm rests. They were cold, but she held on until they grew warmer. The three across from her remained still. Perhaps she had only imagined they were mocking her. She decided to get a magazine. Dr. Maness was certainly working slowly this morning. Only one patient had been called in. Craning her neck, she studied the magazine table on the far side of the room. The table between her and the teen-agers had only those news magazines on it. On the other table were some ladies' magazines. As she stood up to choose one, she glanced nonchalantly at the threesome and saw three pairs of crossed legs and three pairs of arms resting on the chrome arm rests.

"Hmph," she said loudly enough for just them to hear. A nauseated feeling swelled in her. She clutched her stomach, sucked air in deep, and said a prayer that she wasn't pregnant. It was her routine procedure in front of George, meant to make him feel bad. She had acted it out so many times in the past two months it had become spontaneous. She tried to hide it from the teen-agers by moving the clutching hand quickly to her chest and coughing shortly three times. When the coughing spell was over, she walked to the magazine table. There was a Ladies' Home Journal on top of the stack. It was last year's Christmas issue. She grabbed it up and began reading on the way back to her seat.

Two women came out of the examining office. Mrs. Crowder waited a few seconds until she was certain the threesome had had time to focus their attention on the women. Then she swept her eyes up and over them quickly. All three were staring straight at her. They were now sitting with their legs crossed and magazines in their hands. She wanted to jeer, "Wrong kind of magazines, you silly children." They were looking at two Newsweek's and a Time. Without pausing, she kept her eyes moving until she reached the two women whom she didn't know. Then she began reading an article on Christmas decorating.

She had nearly become absorbed in the section on various uses of mistletoe when the nurse announced her name. She paused. As soon as she stood up they would know her last name as well as her first name. The nurse repeated "Mrs. Crowder" again, more distinctly. Quickly leaning over for her purse, she stood up and gathered her bulky coat in her arms. Without looking at them, she walked toward the nurse, head held high. She was thankful her examination had come before theirs. At the swinging door she turned and stared haughtily at the girl--whichever one it was--who had not yet been admitted. Then, she turned flashily on her toes, smiled at the nurse who was eyeing her quizzically, and walked on through.

Mrs. Crowder was in the examining room pulling her panties back on. She had one leg through and the other poised above the leg hole when she lost her balance. She stomped her foot down to keep from falling and ripped through the crotch piece. She was nervous in her relief: Dr. Maness had reported she was not pregnant, only going through the change of life. That meant she could still have her garden next spring and she and George could take that trip to Honolulu they'd been saving for. The panties were torn clear across and useless. She pulled them up anyway. They flapped loosely.

She finished dressing. First, her yellowing, well-stretched girdle which held the panties generally in place. Then, her red tinted stockings that matched the red stripe in her dress. Next was the large dingy bra, a new yellow slip, and the dress itself. She gathered her things, then walked down the hall towards the swinging door and the waiting room beyond. Halfway there, she remembered the two pregnant girls and the boy who had disturbed her such a short time ago. She stopped in the hallway to think and to tug through the dress and the girdle at the panties which had already begun hiking up. She wished they had given up waiting and gone home. Doubtful. Knowing them, they would probably stand up and wave goodbye to her. All she had to do was pretend they weren't there. She would stop at the receptionist's desk, make her next appointment, and walk out



the door without even looking at them. Now that she wasn't pregnant, she felt certain she would never see them again. No weekly visits to see Dr. Maness. Come to think of it, she hadn't told the doctor a thing about them. She was certain he wouldn't want such trash bothering his respectable patients. She had also forgotten to mention the seascapes. Too late, he was in with another patient now. Perhaps she could telephone him. All at once, Mrs. Crowder laughed. It was a squeaky, one-syllable hacking sound. She had acted as if she were afraid of them. They were probably afraid of her. After all, they were just children. Children in a situation over their heads. Pregnant and unmarried. They were upset. That's why they had been so rude. She wondered where their mothers were. Sometimes, it was bad enough to be pregnant when you were married. She knew. Her future could have almost been as bad as theirs. Maybe worse. Of course, it was worse. They had their whole lives ahead. Mistakes wore out. Her life was more than half over, but finally beginning again. No kids, just her and George.

Mrs. Crowder decided she would smile at the boy and two girls. Everyone had trouble. Two friends, pregnant at the same time. Maybe that boy was the father of both those babies. If that were true, they certainly all got along well. She wondered if she should speak to them. She could say she was sorry for looking at them, but was just wondering if they were in trouble and could she help. They would

have to think highly of that. Then she could....No, a smile would be enough. They would know she didn't hold any grudges.

Only the boy was there when Mrs. Crowder pushed open the swinging door. The bright orange of the two empty seats the girls had sat in jumped out at her from the blue background of the curtains. He glanced up at her from his newspaper then turned around and jiggled the curtain behind him. She thought she had caught his eye and smiled at him generously. But he had turned too soon and hadn't seen her. She wondered why he needed more light. The girls were probably being examined. She was surprised Dr. Maness would see them both at the same time. Perhaps that new doctor had one of them. Getting them in and out as fast as possible. Mrs. Crowder stood with her smile at the swinging door waiting for him, but he did not look up again.

She walked to the receptionist's desk and set up an appointment for the same time next year. The blonde with the sharp face made a date on the calendar for 10:30 a.m. September 22. Mrs. Crowder dropped the new card in her purse, pulled out the old one, and asked the girl to throw it away.

As she turned to leave, she stared hard at the boy one more time hoping he would sense her looking at him, but he was studying the newspaper intently. Shrugging her broad shoulders, Mrs. Crowder reached to shove the door open. It

swung out before she could touch it and the two pregnant girls walked in. She glanced quickly at their stomachs, then broke into a broad smile. Neither acknowledged her although she had stopped moving. They were sipping cokes through straws. She pivoted, eyes following them, as they walked to their seats. The boy welcomed them by handing each a section of the paper.

Mrs. Crowder stood at the door smiling until she began to feel wobbly on her legs. She turned from the open room and saw the receptionist staring at her again. She stared back, rude girl, then walked out the door. As it swung shut behind her, she heard the same humorless laugh that had greeted her when she arrived. It was cut short by the closing of the heavy glass door.

Mrs. Crowder squinted in sunlight across the small parking lot to her 1955 mossy green Cadillac. Perhaps she should have walked directly over to them. Told them what she was thinking, how she felt. They should have realized she wanted to talk to them. People sense things like that. Where had they been anyway? She'd never heard of anyone taking a stroll when they were waiting to see the doctor. What if they had been in her car? That boy...he had given them a signal with the draperies. They had done something to her car.

Mrs. Crowder slowed her steps before she was halfway across the lot. Cautiously, she approached the car. She



looked in the window on the driver's side. There was a piece of paper on the front seat. It was turned over but she could see where the writing showed through. They had left her a dirty note. She opened the door, then flipped forward the driver's seat. They weren't going to throw her off-guard with that note. Hands behind her back, she searched the floor and seat with her eyes for any strange objects. None. She pulled the seat into its original position and scanned the front floors and seat. Only the note. With two fingers, she gingerly picked it up and turned it over. It was a note from George asking her to stop by the liquor store. He must have come by Dr. Maness's office and recognized the car. She wondered if the two girls had read the note and decided she was an alcoholic. Mrs. Crowder leaned over for her purse which she had set on the ground during the search. As she turned to get in the car, she heard a knock on glass which seemed to come from the direction of the waiting room. She refused to look.

## THE CREAK

His grandson had wanted to fix the creak by pouring oil down into it, but he had said no.

"Why not?" the grandson had asked. "It's maddening enough to send you to an early grave and sure as heck make me not come back."

"Don't," the grandfather had said, shifting his weight in the rocking chair to make the creaking sound even more grating.

When the grandson came back three months later, he brought a can of oil with him. For a moment, fear tore away the stolidness in the grandfather's eyes. He looked at the can and at the grandson and then blurted out, "It's company," before the same emotionless look rose in his eyes again. And he didn't say anything else, only looked out the window at his pine trees.

The grandson sat a minute and talked of other things with his grandfather who was creaking back and forth in the rocking chair, his hands tight on its arms. But the young man had seen the fear, and he laughed to himself; but then he fled.

The rising September sun hesitated just at the top of Mr. Jolly's grove of pine trees as if the finger-like needles were teasing the old man and holding the warm rays back. Always suddenly, it seemed, the trees would let go and the ball of fire would leap upward, clearing the tops in one swift move. Then Mr. Jolly, who was always sitting in the kitchen in his rocking chair at that precise moment, would smile: the day had come to his farm.

When the sun climbed over the trees, making the outside shadows retreat and the inside glow of Mr. Jolly's cigarette grow dimmer, the old man began rocking. He used to rock the whole hour he was awake before the sun came up, but he had stopped doing that a couple of years ago. That was when the creak started getting worse; that sound, which was so friendly in the daytime, seemed eerie in the dark. Mr. Jolly thought about what would happen if he ever went blind and had to listen to the creak in the dark all the time, but he decided that worry could wait.

The creak was strange to him and at times he felt it wasn't something that just happened. Nina, his wife, had rocked in the chair steadily for eight years, and occasionally during the additional years she was an invalid, and it had never creaked. Then, right after her death five years ago, it had started whining a little. Over the months, the creak grew louder and more rasping, but Mr. Jolly hardly noticed until he came back to it one time after a week's vacation to

Florida to see his son. Suddenly, the creak was no longer the slight, whining sound he had first noticed, but a full-sized groan with what Mr. Jolly sensed were some scattered whimpers. By the time of the grandson's visit a few months ago, the old man had grown used to the creaking again.

The rocking chair had been Nina's. She had bought it twenty years ago at the auction after Widow Harvey's death. Folks said the widow was found stiff in that very chair the morning she died, but Nina had had to have it anyway. She had stepped up to it at the auction, run her hands along the smooth pine, and told Mr. Jolly this was what she wanted. No one else even tried for the rocker, it being the death chair and all, so the Jollys took it home.

Nina liked to sit in the living room and look out the front windows at the lake across the road. She would sit in the rocking chair for hours, rocking and looking at the lake and the people who came to fish in it. Every once in a while after she was taken ill, Nina would ask Mr. Jolly to carry her into the living room--that was where the chair was then--and set her in that rocking chair. Oh, how she'd loved it. The day she died, which had been one of those special times, Mr. Jolly moved the chair out of the living room and into the kitchen where it had stayed every since. He took it over that day, too, sitting there while the friends and family came to say goodbye. He never moved it back into the living room, telling his daughter he preferred to look at

the pines, which might last forever, but not the lake, which could dry up for all he knew.

The two rocking pieces had been worn slightly flat by all the years of Nina's rocking. She had what Mr. Jolly called a short rock; he himself had a longer one. After Nina died, when Mr. Jolly was in the chair fulltime with his heftier movement, the rocker would bump over the places worn by Nina. But, with a few months of Mr. Jolly's rocking, the rockers leveled out. The rocking was smoother, but the old man missed the constant reminder.

Mr. Jolly's house sat on a large tract of land directly across from the town of Creedmoor's water supply. It was a four-room frame one built about fifty years ago by him and his two brothers. The work was plain but solid, a structure set on a sloping ridge that was part of a hundred acre tract owned by the three brothers at first, then by two as one died off, and, finally, by just the last Mr. Jolly. The four rooms were arranged in a square with Nina's bedroom and the living room on the front of the house and Mr. Jolly's bedroom and the kitchen on the back.

Mr. Jolly, who spent all his days in the kitchen, had not seen the inside of his own bedroom in years: he arose before sun up, dressed in the dark, and went to bed after the sun set. There was no cause to go in there in the daytime. As for Nina's room, the old man kept the door shut and had not been in there for the past five years. The front room,



Nina's living room, also went unfrequented. It held too many memories: the piano with massive scrollwork rising above, the two shelves of framed pictures, the fireplace cold for five years, and the worn place on the hardwood floor where Nina had rocked.

Outside, there was a large pine forest over to the right of the house and a combination of hardwood and cedar to the left. People had been after Mr. Jolly for years to sell his timber, but he always said no. "I don't need the money, so you don't need the trees," he told them. The old man had been a farmer all his life before he quit, twelve years ago, when his wife became an invalid, and he knew the value of land, especially unspoiled land. It soothed the soul. He had worked hard on his seven acres of tobacco, and even when it looked as if he ought to clear out some of those trees and use the land for more crops, he put it off and put it off until times got better. In the long run, he was glad that, after he had spent most of the day nursing Nina those seven years before she died, he could come sit and be replenished by looking at his pine grove. "You look at tobacco, you think of money; you look at pine trees, you think of everlasting life," he had always told Nina.

The old man took a long puff on a new cigarette and gazed out the kitchen window at his small side yard which the pine trees fronted. The day, his eighty-second birthday, looked as if it were going to be fine. He was a little

sorry. He'd like to have bad weather today; it was more interesting. Mr. Jolly's only regular visitors were the paperboy, who now appeared far away on his bicycle, and the rural mailman, whose curly-haired arm Mr. Jolly saw once daily sticking out of a dingy beige station wagon and into the mailbox. There were no near neighbors. The ridge where the old man's house sat had other houses only where Mr. Jolly's land ended, a half mile distant on each side.

The old man, peering at Billy, rocked more vigorously in his chair. He wore thick spectacles, the glass yellowed by age, which enlarged his blue eyes unnaturally. A surprising thickness of white hair, standing straight up from the forehead before it fell back softly, covered his head. His face, which he shaved each morning, had not yet assumed the baby-like texture that many old people's skin does. It was still hard and tight although the rough brownness that had once characterized it was gone. An intricate map of wrinkles seemed to draw the skin closer together than it once might have been, making his face seem shrunken in relation to his large body.

Mr. Jolly studied Billy as he pedaled up the gravel driveway. He saw the strain come over the child's face as he heaved the rubber-banded newspaper in an arc toward the porch steps. He watched Billy slant his bicycle wheel and make a couple of circles in the yard before he started hard-pedaling down the driveway. Finally, the boy disappeared.

The newspaper lay in about the same place it always landed, close to the side door within easy reach. Mr. Jolly decided to let it stay there awhile.

It was noon. A well-gone-through newspaper lay on the kitchen table beside the chair where the old man dozed quietly with head slung forward so that his chin met his chest. Around the kitchen, everything was orderly though in a state of neglect. Swirling green linoleum tiles were cracked, the white walls were streaked gray, and the kitchen cabinets had lost bits of their dull yellow paint. A layer of dust covered what Mr. Jolly did not use from day to day, which included most everything except the counter top where he opened his cans of food, the table where he ate, and the two chairs in the room, the rocker at the window and a straight-back chair at the table.

While he was sleeping, the old man's stomach began growling. Before long the hunger pangs would waken him and he would go to the cabinet for food to tide him over until supper, which would in turn tide him over till the next day. He never ate much unless his daughter was there. The meal generally consisted of vienna sausages or canned ham, some bread, and some coffee, all of which he kept in minimal supply. There had to be some reason for getting out of the house and Mr. Jolly had decided upon food. Each afternoon



about three o'clock, he would get into his old Chevrolet and drive the two miles to Jake's Handy Superette where he would spend an hour selecting the next day's meals. He always decided on viennas or canned ham for lunch and tuna or canned beef stew, which he ate cold, for supper. The old man always looked around for somebody he knew. One day he had seen Billy in the superette and had spoken, as he remembered, a little too excitedly. Billy had said hello but Mr. Jolly realized afterward that the boy hadn't known who he was.

Mr. Jolly's stomach growled loudly and the sound made him stir. He started suddenly and shook awake. "Nina?" he called. The old man arose slowly and brushed his brown pants from the waist down the hips. He stood slightly bent over, waiting to wake up the rest of the way. Sleep was holding on and Mr. Jolly shook his snowy white head slowly and deliberately. The rocker behind him slowed to quietness. It was hot. Sweat from the old man's midriff and underarms had wet his long-sleeve white shirt. He stood looking out the window at the midday sky which had grown overcast from several westward moving clouds during his nap. It looked as if there might be a storm. Around the window, several dragonflies with black stars on their wings whirred. They were strange creatures: they came up from the lake whenever the weather was going to be bad.

Mr. Jolly walked over to the kitchen cabinets. It was time for lunch. He opened one and reached in for the cans

of beans and vienna sausages he had bought yesterday. He jacked their lids with a can opener and turned the contents up on a paper plate. From the percolator he poured coffee that had been reheating all morning.

The telephone rang and Mr. Jolly answered it. He held the earpiece two inches from his ear and talked into the mouthpiece loudly as if he were growing deaf.

"Hello," the old man spoke.

Over the line came a faint, then stronger tune. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear dad, happy birthday to you." It was his daughter Jean.

Mr. Jolly's wrinkled mouth stretched smooth into a grin. He was pleased. He listened.

"Dad? Dad? It's me, Jean."

"Hello, oh, Jean. Thank you for the song."

"Dad, I called to let you know I can't come visit today." Her voice sounded hurried.

Mr. Jolly let several seconds pass before answering. "Well, how about coming tomorrow?" The disappointment had struck hard and was strong in his voice.

"Dad, I'm sorry, but I can't come then either. How about next weekend? I'll bring a cake and we can really celebrate."

Mr. Jolly had half expected this to happen. Although plans were always made, he and his daughter celebrated only a few special events together. This time, though, there was

something new in her voice.

"Everything all right, Jean?" he ventured.

The woman sounded relieved. "Oh, fine, dad. Dad, I've got to go now. There are some people waiting for me. See you next week. Goodbye." The phone clicked.

"Goodbye, Jean," Mr. Jolly said. He hung up the receiver carefully.

Mr. Jolly took his plate and sat down in the straight-back chair. On the opposite side of the table the rocker arched in front of him. For an instant he wished his grandson were there so he could explain to him that he had to sit in the squeaking rocker when someone came to visit; there was no place else to sit.

A twirling leaf outside caught his eye and the old man looked through the upper panes of the tall kitchen windows to see the trees begin stirring. All over the sky clouds had gathered. Mr. Jolly stepped across the kitchen to the door of the living room and stood on tiptoe looking out the front windows down at the lake. Here and there whitecaps were forming on top of waves on the lake's surface. He started back to his meal so he could finish it quickly and devote his full attention to the storm ahead. Sitting down at the table again, Mr. Jolly began gobbling the remainder of the sausages and beans. When he was through, he wiped the sleeve of his shirt across his mouth and stood up quickly. For a moment, the old man grabbed the table to steady

himself: he had lost his balance. More slowly, he picked up the used paper plate, walked to the trash can and threw it in, then ran his fork under the kitchen tap and tossed it in a drawer. Mr. Jolly walked over to the window in front of his rocking chair and raised it to smell the storm. Then he sat down and rocked while the clouds, wind, rain, lightning, and thunder gathered.

The slight breeze that had sprung up moments before suddenly came in the old man's direction and tossed dust from the dirty window sill into the room. Mr. Jolly took off his glasses and wiped them clean again. The dragonflies had disappeared. Outside, the clouds were still gathering. They were just dirty-white at first, but as cloud piled on top of cloud, the color deepened into large patches of gray. The patches looked to Mr. Jolly as if they were going to be permanent instead of becoming smoothed over into one color. A consistent sky, the old man had learned, meant a consistent rain. It was when some of the clouds were heavy and some lighter, a motley in shades of gray, that there was a real storm. The morning air had been hot but weightless; now it was thick and heavy.

In the yard, the wind was whipping up pine needles and leaves. Little whirlwinds scooted along the ground carrying the debris for a few moments before rising up above the ground and dropping their loads. Although it was still summer and most of the leaves were green and tightly attached

to the trees, from time to time a red or yellow one would come floating down from the sky. Mr. Jolly fixed on one high up in the air and followed it with his eyes along a breezy path until it hit the ground. Always some things ahead of their time, he thought. Above, the clouds were heavy upon each other.

The quiet before the storm came now. In obeisance, Mr. Jolly stopped rocking. The breezes died down and the trees appeared to stand perfectly still. All the ground twigs and sticks that moments before had danced along the yard now lay stationary. The leaves that had fluttered down, coloring the sky, seemed to have lost their animation forever. A new stronger smell, heavier and wetter than the first, came to Mr. Jolly's nostrils drawing them out in insistent anticipation of the wild, exciting sights to come.

Mr. Jolly bent his head to the open window and listened. Even the insect noises were hushed. The quietness always reminded the old man of the time forty years ago when he, Nina, and the two children had visited a large forest up in the Great Smoky mountains. It had been the first time he had ever heard stillness. Only, unlike a storm, the climax had never come in the forest. Mr. Jolly had imagined that a great tree should have fallen to break the silence just as the storm ahead was to break the silence he was now hearing. The stillness wore on until Mr. Jolly gauged that enough time had passed for all the devil's forces, as Nina had



said, to gather behind those black clouds. Then, he began to watch the farthest tree tops he could see.

The old man saw the first big gust of wind coming from the east making the tops of the trees bow down as so many servants before a king. The storm grew quickly and intensely. Whirlwinds again began scooting along the yard, but this time the wind was stronger and the cones of air could jump higher without losing any of their leaves and sticks. High in the hearts of the trees, the storm's backbone, a great wind which ebbed and flowed through the trees as the ocean ebbs and flows at its shore, sometimes whistled, sometimes wailed, sometimes howled. The leaves of the trees, ranging from small, round pine needles to large, flat sycamore leaves, gave the wind its voices.

Suddenly, Mr. Jolly heard a crashing, falling sound which he at first thought was thunder. Then, an old dead limb fell to the ground, its decayed arms breaking into hundreds of pieces while the main section stayed intact. Mr. Jolly had been noticing the limb for several months now, wondering whether it would ever extricate itself from the tangled live branches overhead. The limb had broken loose from the tree spring before last and had hung by its bark for months until last August when another storm broke it away. It had landed among a cluster of living branches which had held it until now.

At the crash of the limb, Mr. Jolly had stopped rocking, but now as lightning and thunder seemed to descend around his little house, he slowly began the back and forth movement again. Mr. Jolly was not frightened of lightning, and thunder never scared him except when it boomed and he had not seen the lightning before it. Both excited him. At times, he would find himself rocking so hard in his chair that one more bit of energy might have turned him over backward. At those times the squeaking of the chair would itself seem to become a part of the storm. Mr. Jolly would then slow down to a normal pace until the storm again fully engaged his attention.

Streak lightning zigzagged its way down the sky over Mr. Jolly's pine grove; its accompanying thunder boomed loudly; and the rain started. Drops spattered on the sagging wooden porch outside the window. Mr. Jolly craned his neck; the round wet marks were the size of peaches. Then the clouds gathered their full force, throwing rain in sheets against the porch, the ground, the trees, and the house. The sultry heat seemed driven into the ground. Mr. Jolly rose to close the window except for a crack. At the window he looked around at what he couldn't see while sitting down. A tarpaper-covered shed at the top of the driveway poured out steam as the water hit it. Tiny gullies began forming in the yard outside washing soil down the hill. It would go across the road and into the lake.

Mr. Jolly sat down again. All the elements of the storm were in motion and he began rocking with them. Suddenly, lightning seemed to strike in Mr. Jolly's kitchen. There was a giant crack as if the house had broken in two. The whole room, indeed everything that the old man could see, was suddenly emblazoned in a pure, yet frighteningly clear white color. The flash was blinding as it was white and the old man's arms went up before his eyes in reflex. When the thunder roared over his head a second later, Mr. Jolly cowered in his chair, his head on his lap. By the next streak of lightning, the storm had passed from directly overhead, but the old man, his shoulders shaking with dry sobs, remained bent over in his rocker.

After a few minutes of hearing thunderclaps sound farther and farther away, the old man looked up. For a few seconds he blinked his eyes to get them used to the daylight again. In his mind, he could still see the blinding flash. Finally, his eyes focused again on the dying storm. Outside, an electrical power pole, charred black where it had been burned by the lightning, lay across the yard split in half. From one of the loose-hanging lines, broken when the pole fell, sparks jumped, making the line hop up and down. The old man sat still in his rocking chair. Lightning had hit in his yard. Before he saw the pole, he thought lightning had hit the house and had wondered why he wasn't dead.



Mr. Jolly stood up, stepping closer to the window. Wires from the pole to his house were still intact although half their length lay on the ground. It was the wires that went on to the group of houses down the road that had broken. Mr. Jolly thought the rain would keep any danger from the sparks under control. He felt safe.

The old man was tired. A storm always exhausted him just from the sheer watching, but added to it was his first close experience with lightning. And on his birthday. The old man grinned and lifted his hand to hide it. What a story he could tell. He sat back down in his chair and thought of calling someone, but decided to wait until he calmed down. His heart was still beating quickly and the inertia that follows thrilling moments was upon him. Slowly, the old man relaxed. He noticed his shirt was wet with sweat. As his body cooled off in the dank air left by the storm, the shirt became cold to his skin. The old man's eyes closed as he reconjured the clear white flash and began planning how he would describe it. He rocked in his chair for a few minutes, then all was silent.

The sound of a telephone ringing slowly pulled Mr. Jolly from his deep sleep. Before his mind could direct him clearly enough to get up and answer it the ringing had stopped. Something else was pulling at Mr. Jolly to wake

up, too. Deep in his mind, the old man knew something was wrong, but he could not focus on it. Twice his eyes closed and he dozed, but the thing was still there nagging him to awaken. Finally, he took a deep breath to clear his mind and knew what it was. The acrid, stinging smell of smoke. Mr. Jolly opened his eyes on his pine trees. Suddenly, he knew what was happening. The shaky legs, unrushed for years, sprung out of the chair. It creaked loudly then was silent after the momentum was gone. Behind him, smoke was pouring into the kitchen from the hall. The fuse box, Mr. Jolly thought, it must be on fire. The lightning must have come into the house. The old man hesitated a moment. Should he try to put out the fire or just get out of the house? He thought of Nina's picture in the living room. And the other pictures of the family. He didn't want them to be burned. He ought to have time to get them. Suddenly, Mr. Jolly heard the crackling of the fire, the fire that always swallowed everything in its path. The tongue of a flame shot out over the rug in the hall that led to the bedrooms. There was no time. Mr. Jolly rushed to the door.

The old man stood out in his side yard in the midst of the debris from the dead limb, looking through the window at his rocking chair. From outside, the house still looked intact. No smoke was pouring from the roof yet. No flames were eating away at the walls. For a moment, the old man wondered had he imagined the fire. A dream, a joke on him.

Then, thin, black smoke began pouring out of the chimney. There was no fire in the fireplace; he knew that. Then, through the window he saw flames running up the wallpaper on the far side of the kitchen.

The old man stared through the window as if in a trance. Everything he had, everything in his whole life was to be consumed in the fire. His clothes, all his money in a box in the kitchen cabinet, Nina's picture, the rocking chair. The rocking chair. Mr. Jolly's eyes focused on the rocking chair again. It rocked once. For a moment, the old man was terrified. Then he knew it was the fire. The sucking fire that sucked in all the air and pulled the rocking chair to it. The sucking fire that lived on the air and made the rocking chair rock with no one in it. Mr. Jolly's large eyes grew larger and his nostrils flared. His breath came quick and shuddering. He looked around for help. There were only the pines and the lake and the live wire that crackled on the ground behind him.

The chair began rocking again, this time without stopping. It was a short rock like Nina's. Out of the barely open window came the creaking sound of the rocking chair. Nina's creak. Mr. Jolly stopped trembling and his body tightened. He gazed again at the slowly moving chair, sweat dripping down his wrinkled, tender face. Suddenly, the white-haired old man ran toward the house. He yanked open the door and smoke billowed out. Feeling his way across

the kitchen, he reached the chair and ran his hands over it once. Then he began dragging it toward the door. It was very heavy.

It was useless to unpack like this. Taking things out of boxes and not putting them up. Just setting them down on the floor. Later, to have to bend over again to pick them up. But Jesse had been patient for two hours. Towels went to the linen closet. The cream-colored statue of the milkmaid sat on top of the television set. The pink piggy bank stood alone inside the built-in bookcase in the living room. Finding places for her things in Jerome's apartment. Suddenly, she had realized she was tired of just waiting for the Bible to appear. Unpacking and putting up and waiting. She wanted to have it now. Three large pasteboard boxes sat empty on the maroon oval rug. She was certain the Bible had been in one of these. It hadn't. So she had started impatiently on the five smaller boxes: digging into them at first, then as her belongings fell back to cover her arms, pulling them out and laying them on the floor. A wasted motion. She would have to lean over again later to pick them up. The room cluttered quickly. Finally, in the fourth box, she found the Bible. It was stuffed tightly between an electric baby food warmer she had bought on sale last year and the stainless steel butter dish her maiden aunt Ruth had given her two years ago as her first hope chest present. She was seventeen then, and now at nineteen she was married.

## THE TIE THAT BINDS

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Just married and moving in. She tugged at the book to pull it out.

Her impatience for the Bible had started last Saturday, the day of her wedding to Jerome, when she realized she was married and her husband's name wasn't going to be properly entered into the book at the same time. Silly to think about unpacking all those boxes just to put a name in a book. That had been Jerome. If she hadn't loved him so much, she might have been angry. Not about not signing the book, but because of where the book was and where it could have been. How much easier to have moved her things across town gradually before they were married than to have to do it all today, the very day after they returned from their honeymoon. Then the Bible wouldn't have been packed up and they could have signed it before they left. Jerome was just too proper. Mom and Dad will be staying here the night before the wedding. What would they think if your things were scattered all around? Nothing, she told him on their wedding night after they had arrived at Myrtle Beach. Your mother asked me at the reception why I hadn't already moved. Still, men didn't come proper anymore. Most of them would have had her living with them months ago. That was what they did these days, wasn't it? And where would she have been then? It was lucky for her that Jerome had come along first.



Jesse sat down on the worn brown corduroy sofa, the family coffee table before her. Two weeks ago, her parents had decided to buy a new sofa and table and give the old ones to the newlyweds. Some friends of Jerome's had brought the two pieces over while they were gone. Jerome had told her he wanted the furniture waiting when they got back so she would feel at home. They had stopped by her parents' house on the way back from Myrtle Beach. It had seemed strange there with the old furniture gone, even though her parents had replaced the old brown corduroy sofa with a new brown corduroy one. The new coffee table was almost the same too. Then, when they had arrived at Jerome's apartment, she had felt more at home than she thought she should. He had sat down on the sofa to glance through the newspapers that had collected, while she went into the bedroom to put on her robe. In a moment he was in the room with her, moving with the haste of something suddenly remembered. He smiled at her knowingly, and she, wordless, had smiled back at him. Then he opened the closet door and stretched to reach far back on the shelf. Carefully, he brought down a pair of ceramic praying hands. He cradled them in his own hands, then walked in the living room to put them on the coffee table. Jesse stared at them now. Last night she had not followed Jerome out here until she had finished changing clothes. By then he was reading the newspaper again.

Jesse slipped off the new wedding ring and posed her left hand lightly on the Bible in her lap. Her palm was flat and white against the grainy, black surface of imitation leather; the fingers were spread slightly. The nails were medium length and rounded, the cuticles smooth, the fingers long, slim, unblemished. Clean and pure. The hand of a good Christian woman. Jesse drew up the back of her hand to form a small hill; the fingers were now in a slant to the Bible. Almost the same effect. She'd like to have her picture taken that way. She turned her hand over, so the back of it was against the grainy leather. The fingers trembled from the release of the pressure and curled slightly in their new pose. Nice, but not as effective. With her right hand, she covered the upward facing palm. Just a clasp, but almost a prayer. Nice, too. That might be the best pose yet. For a Christian woman anyway. There were certainly others that were more striking, only not religious. Jesse moved her hands away from the Bible, laying them at her sides on the brown couch cushion. The book looked stark without any hands around it. Even the gold lettering did not warm it up. She wished there were some curlicues. But "FAMILY BIBLE" was written in block-style capital letters: no curves, only corners.

Jesse waited until she could no longer envision the two hands folded reverently above the book. Blank, finally. She wondered where her red fingernail polish was. In a box

somewhere. She didn't remember seeing it, though, when she was at her house packing. She'd like to pose with the Bible with red fingernail polish on. Like that woman in the Song of Solomon would have done if they had had red fingernail polish back then. Her best friend in high school had found that section of the Bible and showed it to her. Jesse could hardly believe it was there. The woman with the thighs like jewels and the navel like a round goblet and the breasts like young roes. It had excited her to read it even though she never had found out what roes were. Probably some big exotic fruit. That kind of woman would have worn red fingernail polish to pose with her Bible.

Jesse was ready for her new set of poses. She shook her hands to relax them. Did models have to shake themselves before they were getting ready to stand still for a long time? Shake, like the dancing puppets at the park. Or, did they just go limp? She could be a model; she could stand still forever. And she was skinny. And she was good looking. Jesse studied her fingertips and imagined the ten bright spots of nail polish. Placing her right hand on the black cover of the Bible, she extended her thumb and first finger, curling the other three fingers under her palm. She covered the "LE" of "BIBLE" with her fingertip. "FAMILY BIB." Nothing interesting about that. Besides the hand isn't natural on the Bible. It should be either at the side or in the middle, no halfway. She slid her hand down into

the center of the book, just under the gentle arc of the lettering. Better. Attractive, even. Someone that wasn't named Jerome Honeycutt might say sexy. The best she could think of anyway. Rhythmically, Jesse twiddled her four fingers on the surface of the book. First the nails, then the fingertips themselves. She preferred the sound of the clicking nails to the duller galloping sound of the ends of her fingers, but she alternated the two sounds regularly. It seemed only fair. Some people hated that clicking.

The family Bible had been Jesse's for five years, ever since she was fourteen. She bought it from a door-to-door Bible salesman who came by one afternoon just as she arrived home from school. Her parents were still at work. She had not intended to buy a Bible, only to talk. There was one in the house already. It was on the top shelf of the bookcase at the end of her Dad's row of Tarzan books. Besides, the only money she had--eight dollars and some change in a piggy bank--was going for half a record player. Her father was going to buy the other half. The salesman's name was Perry Craven. He was tall and he acted as if he liked her. At the very moment he told her he was putting himself through school, she knew she'd do anything to help him make it. He was probably about nineteen. Her dad was seven years older than her mother. Later, Jesse wrote her telephone number after her name on the form she signed to buy the Bible. He had smiled so sweetly.

Mr. Craven had all sizes, including one so tiny that Jesse asked whether or not it really contained the whole Bible. He swore so strongly it did that Jesse did not believe anything he said until four Bibles later. He brought them out one at a time, from the smallest to the largest. Interrupting each presentation, Jesse would shake her head no, then lean to look into his large black bag. She had lost interest.

Finally, he brought out the family edition, a medium-sized black book with gold lettering embossed on the front and spine. It had a feature none of the other books had, he said. At the beginning of the book were lined pages with headings at the top, "Births," "Baptisms," "Marriages," and "Deaths." That was what made it a family Bible, he explained. There's a place to record the beginning, the middle, and the end of a family.

Jesse looked carefully at the four pages. A curlicue design in black bordered each one. The first letters of the titles had doves flying around them. A place where she could record the most important events of her life. Her name, whom she married, their children, their children's children. Then she could pass it on, with all their names etched into eternity. The book might even be in a museum someday, Mr. Craven said. For a moment, Jesse thought she would choke from the dryness in her throat. Her name and a man's name in holy wedlock. Permanently. Recorded in a



family Bible, her family Bible. It was a sign of forever, an everlasting union, the tie that binds. What has been carefully recorded in God's book, man cannot put asunder. Tie that binds. Then together, later, with love in their hearts, signing the names of their children, first the two boys, then the two girls. The boys would come first, Jesse thought. Girls should have older brothers.

She stared hard at the first empty line of the "Marriages" page, hoping for a vision of whose name would be written beside hers. In the midst of her concentration, Mr. Craven took the book from her. The movement startled Jesse: she had nearly forgotten he was there. He wanted to show her the color pictures, or what he called color pictures. They were all different tones of yellow. Daniel in the Lion's Den, Moses and the Ten Commandments, The Baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph. Yellow was a color. Jesse stole a glance away from the book to look at Mr. Craven. Perhaps he was the one. Some sweet twist of fate.

"How much is this book?" she asked thickly.

"Twelve dollars," he answered, then paused to examine Jesse's face. "But for you I'll make it ten." His eyes had been full of meaning. In the end, he sold her the book for the eight dollars and seventy-five cents in her piggy bank and another dollar's worth of change she found in the kitchen drawer under the telephone. She would have to find some way to replace that before the paperboy came again. It was



funny that she had just thought of Billy Hawkins as the paperboy. She had always thought of him as Billy before. He was cute, too, but only fourteen years old.

That night, Jesse excused herself early from the television set. A little extra work, she said, careful not to say "homework." Getting into the big time, Dad had kidded. She smiled and nodded: she wouldn't lie outloud. Besides, "work" could mean anything. So could "big time." She walked back to her bedroom, then sneaked across the hall to Mom and Dad's room where the old family desk stood. Opening the middle drawer slowly so that the long squeak made lots of short quieter squeaks instead, she found her father's fountain pen. Then she went to her room. For an hour, she practiced writing her name again and again. Just before she was ready for the real thing, the pen ran out of ink. She tiptoed back into the dark bedroom and felt around the top of the desk for the ink bottle. Back in her own room, she decided to practice once again. She was jittery; the delay had made her lose her touch. The writing looked like a child's. Jesse wrote her full name ten more times before she was satisfied with it again.

When the writing was smooth and flowing and sat squarely on the line, Jesse walked ceremoniously to the closet shelf and stood on tiptoe to pull down the thick book. Hugging it to her heart, she walked to the pink skirted dressing table, which was also her desk. She placed the Bible

in the very center of the glass surface and sat down, looking gravely into the mirror. She wondered whether Mr. Craven had thought she were pretty or not. Perhaps he would bring her the box for the Bible tomorrow. He had been out of boxes but had promised she would have one soon. Jesse decided to wear her blue dress with the white hem ruffle to school. Opening the cover of the book slowly, she turned one page at a time until she reached the one with "Marriages" at the top. Five pages if you count front and back as one; ten otherwise. Uncapping the pen, she wrote "Jesse Margaret Johnston" slowly and steadily in the finest script she could muster. Toward the end, her hand trembled slightly from the strain. Finished. She sat back to study her work. The "Johnston" headed up above the gold line. She went over the last three letters carefully to bring them back to earth. There, that was fine. The ink a little darker at one end, but it didn't matter. She took up the pen again, smiling this time, and wrote in slightly smaller letters the word "and." Jesse stared at the blank space for several minutes hoping God or someone might inscribe the name of her husband-to-be on the page. There was nothing. Perhaps a vision needed the right moment in time. When the ink dried, she closed the book and took it back to the closet shelf.

Jesse had her first date a year to the very day after she bought the Bible. She thought it was a sure sign that

the boy, Johnny Morgan, was the one. After he brought her home that Friday evening, she hurried to the closet and took the book down. Normally, she looked through it once a week on Sunday nights concentrating on the pages she would eventually fill. Sunday made it seem more reverent. Sometimes she read the section in the Song of Solomon about the beautiful woman with breasts like twin roes that Christ loved. She had decided she would wait for a man who talked to her like that. Johnny Morgan might talk that way eventually. On their date he had said she had a nice smile. Jesse sat cuddling the book on her lap for a while, then put it up on the table surface. She could have turned the pages blindfolded and landed directly on the "Marriages" page. Only she wanted to watch. Opening the cover, she turned slowly to her name. She had asked John his middle name, and now, sitting there, she thought John Hunter Morgan would look perfect beside her own. Jesse Margaret Johnston and John Hunter Morgan. She'd have to put the date on the line underneath, since they both had such long names. A June wedding would be nice. Maybe in two years. She would be seventeen; her parents would have to sign. They would, she was sure.

Jesse stared at the book and tried to envision John's name. The name would be black, but not ink, on the creamy white of the page. Instead of ink, smoke would pour from the lines of the name as if it had been engraved by some

amazing force. The page stayed blank. Jesse could see the two names only when she squeezed her eyes shut tightly and concentrated with all her might. And then, they were written only on a deep black emptiness and not on the thin white page. She went to sleep that night with the Bible in bed beside her.

John hadn't been the one. Nor were any of the other young men she went out with for the next three years. For awhile, Jesse considered every boy she dated as a potential husband. That lasted for two years and eleven boys. She even considered Barry Clinard who lived, breathed, and worshipped fast cars. That would have been all right if he had just once talked about something else on one of their dates. Like about her. But he hadn't. Barry Clinard ended up being the first boy Jesse ever dumped. After him, forgetting a boy before he forgot her wasn't so hard anymore. If she didn't like someone on the first date, she just didn't go out with him again. At first, she was nervous about the rule, afraid that someone she might discard was a winner. One bad apple doesn't have to spoil a bushel; one bad date doesn't have to make a loser. Not everybody was always at their best on a first date. Still, she followed the rule the whole year she was seventeen.

At eighteen when she became more mature, Jesse stopped considering anyone a potential husband until she had dated that person at least twice. After two dates, she began

looking for special signs, like lucky numbers and meaningful initials. She had always kept a close count of the persons she dated, knowing that one day she'd discover what her lucky number was. By the time she met Jerome, she had gone out with nineteen young men. After he asked her to marry him, Jesse realized the number was twenty. There was something else about Jerome. Two of his names began with "j's" and so did two of hers.

The day she met Jerome at a downtown curb market where she was buying lunch, Jesse broke her own rule and decided he was a potential candidate. At that particular moment, it was more what he wasn't than what he was--not loud and not a braggart. The two boys she had dated most recently were both those things and she was tired of it. Then, when Jerome was ringing up her purchases on the cash register, he said what a pretty color her dress was. Jesse bought her lunch there the rest of the week. The next Wednesday night, after he brought her home from their first date, she pulled the Bible down in his honor. It hadn't been out for two weeks except for the regular Sunday night perusal. Jesse had found out his middle name and sat there with the book wondering how Jerome Jackson Honeycutt would look beside her own name. She decided to wait before trying to conjure a vision until after their second date.

Jesse told Jerome about the Bible that Friday night. Not the "Marriages" page, but the rest. What a kid she'd



been when she bought it. How much it meant to her. He was a religious man, she knew, since their first date had been to a church supper. She thought her having a Bible might impress him. She was waiting when he arrived, sitting on her parents' brown corduroy sofa in the white dress she'd worn at graduation. The book lay open on her lap and her hands were folded across its pages. She had brushed her light brown hair until it shone. Jesse, you look just as pretty as a picture. They'd all said it, and so did Jerome.

"What's that book?"

"It's my Bible. I've had it since I was fourteen. Would you like to look at it?" She opened it carefully to the illustration of The Baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph. "Isn't that a pretty sight?"

"About the way you'd look."

Jesse hugged the book close and looked up at him for a long time.

The Bible was out on the coffee table every time Jerome visited from then on. It wasn't left there, although it appeared to be. Jesse's parents didn't think it was quite proper to display Bibles. No making a show of religion around this house, her father said every time they came home from a visit to his brother's house. Uncle John had a picture of Jesus on the wall and an open Bible on top of the television set. Jesse thought showing a Bible was bragging, too, but she could see Jerome liked it. He picked up the



book each time he came to get her. She usually brought it out about ten minutes before he was due to arrive. Once he told her that his parents had always acted funny about displaying Bibles and he couldn't understand why. Jesse hadn't said anything.

She had been wanting to put Jerome's name beside hers ever since he asked her to marry him. He said no, it could mean bad luck. She kept insisting, asking if he thought he was going to change his mind about her. She gave up on getting his approval the day he pointed out that he might die between now and the wedding and the book would be spoiled for the next husband-to-be. Now, finally, it was proper. She had asked Jerome to close the curb market for lunch and come home for a ceremony. She wanted the book signed before they spent one more night together. Then she could put it away, no anticipation for awhile, until it was time to add a baby's name. Well, she could enjoy it for that, too, she guessed. Take it down from the closet. She had never gotten a box, so it had to be dusted anyway. Take it down and imagine a baby's name. Sometimes she felt tired of the Bible.

Jesse piled the things on the floor back into the boxes. The living room was immediately neat despite the eight cartons in the middle of the floor. They had only a few pieces of furniture so far. The sofa, the coffee table, and

one slip-covered chair in this room. A dinette suit in the kitchen. A bed and chest of drawers in the bedroom. The living room also had a built-in bookcase. She would make it very homey. The praying hands would have to go. She looked at them on the table. Sometime perhaps she could put them away, or maybe she would accidentally break them.

Jesse decided to finish unpacking later that afternoon. It was time to prepare for the ceremony. She found Jerome's two emergency candles--a new red one and a stubby orange one --in a kitchen drawer. Melting wax on a plate, she stood each one up, then placed the makeshift holder on the coffee table. She moved the praying hands over to one end of the smooth mahogany surface then sat down on the middle cushion holding the Bible in her lap. Opening it, she turned to "Marriages." There was her signature. It had looked so smooth and mature when she was fourteen. Perhaps she should have waited till the time her husband's name was to be inscribed before signing her own. Oh, well, it was done. Not bad writing, only she wrote so much better now.

This was a big step. Something she had waited for a long time. Five years. Five years of looking at the Bible once a week, plus on about half the nights she dated. Wondering who would be there, who would be beside her. Jerome Jackson Honeycutt. Why hadn't Jerome wanted his name written down anyway? Perhaps he had not wanted to feel bound before the ceremony. It was funny. He had been much more nervous

at the wedding than she. In fact, she hadn't been jittery at all. She felt more nervous now than she had felt last Saturday. It hadn't been a week. Perhaps a delayed reaction. This certainly was a big step. Signing their names. It wasn't something you could easily go back on, names written in a Bible. Spoken words could be denied. Even with witnesses it was still easier to prove that you wrote something than you said something. But it was more than that. Names written in a Bible were holy. And binding. That was why she had wanted to sign last Saturday and why she had bought indelible ink.

Perhaps she would never sign the book. Something could happen to Jerome on the way home. What if they never got to sign the book? It would be as if she had never been married. She certainly couldn't sign his name if he were dead. It would be too sad. The book would be clean, as if she had never been married. She hated to say it, but that way the book wouldn't be ruined. If something happened to Jerome and she remarried, it just wouldn't be right to her next husband to put his name on the same page Jerome's name was on. She'd have to get a new Bible. That would be a waste. And she'd hate to give up something she'd had five years. It was the most important thing she had brought from her childhood. How silly. Jerome would be fine. He'd be home in about ten minutes. They'd get the signing done and everything would be set. He would be hers. The Bible might

even act as a lucky charm. Keep evil from Jerome so they would have a marriage that lasted long enough to make it worthwhile.

She'd really never want another Bible. This one was too precious to her. Five years. Almost a third of her life. A little less than a fourth. You don't wipe out a third of your life like that. She could never just throw the Bible away, with Jerome's name in it or not. She would have to keep it always. She wanted it signed now, but perhaps she should wait. After all, things could change between them besides something happening to Jerome. They could get a divorce. Perhaps she should wait and make sure they stayed together before his name went in. It would be a shame to spoil the Bible. Wait a year and make the celebration on their anniversary. They'd have a good idea by then if it were going to work. After all, she'd only known him four months. Anything could happen.

She had told Jerome there was going to be a ceremony. He knew it was about the Bible. Maybe she could plan another ceremony. What? Why not just pack the Bible back up? Sorry you had to come all the way home for nothing, but I haven't found it yet. You can have lunch anyway. Later, she could just put it off. He wouldn't persist. Jesse closed the book, stood up, and walked over to one of the small boxes. She stuck the Bible under a blanket.

The lock turned and Jerome walked in the door. Without saying a word, he stood there and smiled at her, his hands broadly on his hips. "There's my girl." She was sitting on the sofa, a magazine in her lap.

"I decided to take a break," she said, smiling back and closing the magazine. "I'm glad you got to come home. Were there many customers?"

"No, not many." He walked over and sat down beside her. "How's your unpacking been going?" He put his arm on the sofa behind her, not touching her pale pink sweater.

"Fine, but I have a disappointment for you. I haven't found the Bible yet."

"Let me help you. We can just take everything out and you can put it up later. You want to have that ceremony, don't you?"

"Oh, it can wait," Jesse said. "Let me start lunch." She stood up to go to the kitchen, and Jerome sat down, taking up her magazine.

"Jesse, is there anything wrong?"

"No, of course not, just tired of unpacking. Why?"

"You sound nervous."

"Oh, no, I'm fine," she said over her shoulder before disappearing into the kitchen.



Jesse concentrated hard on fixing the cheese toast so she wouldn't think of Jerome. When she was opening the can of tomato soup, though, his oversized face with the slimming sideburns came into her mind. What a sweet man. He came all the way home for my ceremony and his own wife doesn't even trust him. I do trust him. He even closed the store so he could be here for my ceremony. I must be crazy.

Jesse walked back into the living room. "I have a feeling I know where that Bible is," she said. "I just remembered, it's in the same box that the blanket's in. After all, the candles are ready and everything. You came home. It would be a shame not to have the ceremony."

"I thought you were upset about it. Why didn't you let me help you look?" Jerome stood up and encircled Jesse in his arms. "Can I do anything?"

"If you'll get the pen out of the bedroom....Bring a scratch pad too."

Jesse walked over to one of the small boxes and folded the blanket back. "I found it," she called to Jerome who was already halfway down the hall.

"Great."

She was sitting on the center couch cushion, the Bible in her lap, when he came back, pen and pad in hand. "Pretty as a picture," he said.

"I think you've said that before." She smiled and took the writing materials from him. He sat down beside her on



the crack between the cushions to be close. "First I've got to practice," she said. She began writing his full name, Jerome Jackson Honeycutt. She practiced it three times before she was satisfied. "Good enough?" she asked.

"Perfect."

"Let's hope I can write it so perfectly in the book."

Jesse had laid the Bible on the table in front of them. She picked it up with both hands, the pen between her fingers. The pen slipped through and fell to the floor. "I must be nervous. You know I've waited to do this a long time." She turned slowly to the "Marriages" page. The immature handwriting always surprised her. "Oh, I forgot, light the candles." She paused while Jerome obliged. The moment was finally here. Five years she had been waiting. "You know, when I put your name in here, it means forever, don't you?"

"It meant forever when we got married," Jerome said gently.

"I know." Jesse smiled. "But this is something a little different. Try to understand. You don't put your name in a Bible unless it's going to be that way permanently. It's hard for me to explain, but writing seems so much more solid than what you say. You know what I mean?"

"I guess this is like a second wedding," Jerome said. He hugged her, chuckling softly.

Jesse put the pen to the paper. Slowly she inscribed his name. The writing looked shaky on the page, but it had stuck closely to the gold line. "There," she said. There was a slight smeared place where the pen had caught a piece of fuzz when it crossed the two "t's."

"It looks just beautiful," Jerome said. He smiled at her. "You know, Jesse, you can leave that Bible out on the table permanently if you'd like. I was going to tell you last night when I got the praying hands down, but I figured you knew what I meant." Jerome reached over and pulled the white hands closer to the center of the table. "Of course, I think we ought to move the Bible and the hands too whenever my mom and dad come to visit. You remember, I told you they don't like those kind of things. But for just you and me and for your parents, we can leave them there and enjoy them. I always thought the Bible looked so great in your house."

Jesse was serenely silent. Her hands were folded on the Bible and now Jerome covered them with his. While he was talking, she had been looking hard at his name which filled the space that had lain blank for so many years. Staring, until the black ink seared into her eyes. Was this the vision? Of course, it was. Jesse and Jerome. Jesse Margaret Johnston and Jerome Jackson Honeycutt. She need never imagine again. Then the final test. She clenched her eyes tight. On a creamy white background, she could see

their two names joined by the small "and." Finally, the background was white and not black. Slowly, Jesse closed the book and placed it on the coffee table. She leaned over into Jerome's arms and hugged him around the waist, knowing that the first time she moved the Bible for his parents that she'd never bring it back out again.