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THREE STORIES:

THE AFTERNOON IN NOVEMBER

A SNAKE AROUND YOUR FEET

HOUSEPARTY

By

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THE AFTERNOON IN NOVEMBER

The afternnon was cold. The sun lay flat and white on the ground; the few cars against the curbs, the low buildings, and the day-blank streetlamps made long shadows on the street. The November sun, low in the afternoon sky, looked warm, but it was cold.

Laurie looked down the street at the long shadows. She thought how cold it was in the shadows--colder even than it had been riding her bicycle up the hill from school. She had ridden fast in the wind, and her breath had come in white puffs. She remembered telling herself that it was not necessary to hold the bars so hard in her hands. Laurie stretched her fingers out in front of her now, but they kept going back in a tight ball, as they had been on the bars. She was standing in the half-shelter of the newspaper office doorway; and she could hear a low humming sound, of things going on, in the office. She took the cold brass knob of the door in her hands, but she did not turn it. Miss Ruth would be there, inside the office. Laurie had come today because of that, because Miss Ruth was the only one left now. She had been the only one, of all those who had worked there before, to stay after the Record sold out in September to its rival, the Weekly News. It had seemed to Laurie, then, that everything had ended.... Laurie stared down the white paved street, edged by the low buildings, at the cold sunlight. It was wrong, she thought to herself; the sun should not look warm and

bright, and be cold. She felt that there was something sinister and false about it, something dead.

The summer before, while she was working for the Record as a cub-reporter, she had laughed about it. She had leaned over Bunny's desk in the office and said, "I wish we could have a murder. Why can't we have a murder?" And Bunny, who was city editor, and Marsh, the news editor, teased her about it. "Well, I just want to know how it feels, how it makes a town like this feel," Laurie said. She thought, then, that it would feel exciting. And she remembered the afternoon when she was a child, and she and her best friend, a fat little girl from down the street, had decided that there were murders, there was excitement, all around them--hidden from them by a kind of veil. It was a grown-up secret to keep children from being afraid to go to school. Laurie and her friend had locked themselves in the playroom then, pulling down the shades, and not daring to turn on the lights. They had a box of crackers for food and planned to stay in the playroom, safe, all their lives. They had come out, of course, at suppertime. But Laurie remembered. The ordinariness of things had ceased to exist that day. The brass courthouse spittoons--that Laurie and her best friend had seen, one time--the men in the sheriff's office, leaning back in their chairs and lazily thumbing their suspenders in the heat--all things seemed that they would take on an excitement and be new. And so it seemed to Laurie, then, as she leaned over Bunny's desk in the office and said, "Why can't we have a murder?" It would be a cloudy, rainy day and there would be the sense of something hushed and unknown while she rode in the sheriff's

Plymouth between Marsh and Bunny for the investigation. She had gone with Bunny once to the jail to talk to a "juvenile delinquent." And afterwards, Bunny had written the story--"Have we a Juvenile Delinquency Problem in Our Town?" The sheriff had not said anything much except that it was all foolish. "Go ahead and write your story," he said to Bunny, "but the boy's just bad." You could tell, he said. Bunny said the sheriff just didn't have faith in humanity, and the sheriff laughed. But it was not long after that that the boy broke out of reform school and stole another car.

It had been early summer then, Laurie remembered--long before the Record was sold out in September--but it was already hot. She had sat on a stool pulled up to Miss Ruth's, the society editor's, desk. Laurie was calling the funeral home for the obituaries. She hung up and looked down at the sheet of information she had copied--name, survivors, service, pastor, interment, age, died of. "None of them," she said disappointedly, "are murders."

"God, what a morbid child!" Marsh laughed. She was standing over by the teletype that was clacking away in the corner and rolling out sheets of yellow typed paper. Laurie could see her wiry, grey-black hair that was thin in places, her pin-point eyes, and the pencil stuck over her ear. There was ink on the long blue shirt she wore out over her skirt.

"Laurie's not morbid," Bunny said. She was sitting at her desk across the bannister railing from Marsh's. "She just likes the sound of exciting words in her mouth." She turned and looked toward Laurie. "Don't you, kid?"

Laurie nodded. "I just want to know how it feels." She looked over at Marsh and then at Bunny. The heat had made Bunny's thick black hair

hang in damp waves against her freckled face. It outlined her face and made her round, very-black eyes look rounder and bigger. She was wearing a rayon-silk dress with navy spots on it, and it hung close to her body. There was none of the shapelessness about her that there was in Marsh, who was nearly forty.

Bunny laughed, "It's the newspaperwoman in her."

Marsh, over by the teletype, did not turn toward them, but her voice was definite. "Laurie knows what I mean," she said. "Don't you, Younger Generation?" That was what she had named Laurie, Younger Generation. "She will be all right when she grows up." Then she said something in a lower voice about "Brenda Starr--Star Reporter" in the comics and some people having that attitude about all newspapers. "Glamour," Marsh said sarcastically.

Laurie did not look up at Bunny, but she heard her jerk a drawer open and then light a cigarette with a rough, hard sound. Bunny had been a reporter on the Star, the paper in the City, thirty miles away, before coming to the Record.

Miss Ruth looked up and was about to say something, but then the bells on the teletype started ringing--it rang three bells for very important and five for a "national catastrophe."

"Goddamn the bells!" Marsh screamed at the teletype. "There goes my front page!" She pulled at her short hair and set off running with the folds of yellow paper, marking them as she ran, to the Shop.

Laurie left her obituaries on the table and got up to follow Marsh--to see what was happening. In the Shop, Marsh was going around pulling out galleys, throwing things, and screaming. A man in overalls--he was

head man in the Shop except for the two linotype operators, who belonged to a union--followed Marsh around. He kept gesturing with his hands, but Marsh did not pay any attention to him. After awhile things quieted down a bit, and Laurie stood watching Marsh read type "upside down and backwards," setting aside parts of it. The new boy in the Shop sidled up to them, then, pretending to help Marsh and joking. "Aw, you people in the front office," he said, winking, "don't do nothing. You have an easy time in there." Marsh looked at him and waved an ink-stained hand. The new boy laughed. "Well, the others," he said, "what do you do out there all the time?"

Marsh began explaining that Bunny was city editor and Miss Ruth was society editor and took care of the bookkeeping.

The boy interrupted. "And what does she do?" He pointed to Laurie.

"Oh, Laurie? Laurie does Bunny's work," Marsh said. They all laughed.

Laurie thought it was a good joke; and when they went back into the front office, she told Bunny about it. Bunny did not laugh. She stood up, kicked in the drawers of her desk, slung her shoulder-bag on, and walked out of the office. She did not say where she was going.

Laurie heard Marsh, over in her corner. "The truth always hurts," she said; and, "What's the matter, Laurie? Are you our Younger Generation or Bunny's?" She emphasized the our and Bunny's.

Miss Ruth was shaking her head at Marsh. "Oh, I think Laurie can belong to all of us," she said quietly. "Something you'll have to learn, Laurie"--she smiled--"there are only 'certain things' you can say to a woman."

Laurie did not know what to answer. "I guess I'll do the obituaries," she said.

"Even if the people did just die naturally," Marsh said, shaking her head.

Laurie turned to go to the cleared-off table that was her desk. But then she stopped. Before her, in the middle of the office, stood a little, blond-haired girl in an organdy-ruffled dress. The little girl stood very still, her hands clasped in front of her. Her big, grey eyes looked around, taking in the office. She seemed completely alone, standing there. Her eyes caught Laurie's then, and she ducked her head down, sidling toward the bannister railing. She leaned her head against the railing and ran one finger along it, rubbing the wood.

Laurie stood watching her a moment. She leaned toward her and said, "Hello."

The little girl, rubbing the wood with her finger, stopped a moment. Then she moved the finger and continued rubbing the wood.

Laurie watched her. "Are you," she said, bending down beside the little girl, "maybe a fairy princess come to call?"

The little girl shook her head and looked up at Laurie. Then she ducked her head again and moved her foot in a circle. "I am six years old," she said.

Laurie heard Marsh behind her, then. She left her desk and, laughing, knelt down beside the little girl and hugged her in her arms. "My niece," she explained to Laurie. She addressed the little girl. "What do you mean telling Younger Generation here you weren't a fairy princess when you know perfectly well you are?"

The little girl laughed.

"Okay," Marsh said, "now that we've got that settled--. Princess, is your mother outside?"

The little girl nodded.

"Come," Marsh said, extending her hand to Laurie. "I want you to meet my sister... You can leave your 'murders' a moment, can't you?"

Laurie took the little girl's hand, and they walked together out to the waiting car to meet the little girl's mother.... Laurie, trying to remember now, could not remember the mother's face. All she could see in her mind was a grey darkness and a long, thin white blur that might be a hand, and might not be a hand. She stared out at the cold November sunlight and thought that it was here--just here--the woman had sat in that car--. But she could not remember . . . .

It was not until after lunch that day that Laurie saw Bunny coming down the hill, back to the office. Bunny called, and Laurie ran to meet her. "Bunny," she said. "Bunny, I just meant it as a joke. I thought it was a joke. You know it isn't true."

Bunny's face was still hard-set as she answered. "It's all right," she said. "I shouldn't have gotten mad. I know you meant it that way."

They went into the office together then, and Bunny started laughing at once--though nothing funny had been said. She went over to her desk, slung her shoulder-bag down on it, and sat down, still laughing. She did not say anything to Marsh or Miss Ruth. Laurie saw Miss Ruth watching Bunny, but Marsh kept her head definitely bowed over her work.

Bunny had begun to type when the Boss came in. He was a tall, thin man with wide shoulders and narrow hips, and a hollow face that made you think of Lincoln. He did not come into the front office much, but worked in a littered and paper-stacked inner office. His editorials won prizes for "fearlessness" at the State Press Convention. When he did come into

the front office, Laurie felt awed by him, and she bent over her work. He had not come from his inner office today, but from the Shop. He went over and stood behind Bunny, watching her type. Bunny seemed to feel him there, for she looked up.

"You can do better than this with two fingers, can't you?" she said.

The Boss laughed. "I see you get the Gansauer story. I'd like to talk to you about it."

"Yes," Bunny said. "Now?"

He nodded. Bunny got up and went with him into the inner office.

When they had gone, Laurie heard Marsh say, "God bless our happy home." She called Laurie over to her and said, "Younger Generation, cigarettes please." She held out a bill. "Chesterfields--Camels are a lady's cigarette." (Bunny smoked Camels.) Laurie took the money and went across the street to the grocery store to get Marsh's cigarettes.

Bunny took Laurie with her to Judge Roder's office sometimes. It was on the second floor up over the bank and the men's hat store, facing the Square. Bunny used to go there a lot and just sit, for they never talked much. She said that Judge Roder was a very wise man. Bunny told Judge Roder about "Laurie's murder," and he smiled over at Laurie, leaning his chair back till it seemed he would fall over. Judge Roder was an old man, white-haired and little. But his eyes were a hard clear-blue, and he did look very wise, as Bunny said. He told them a story about a Negro murderer who had been caught late one winter night. "It was out in the country," Judge Roder said. "We'd had a big snow that year, and the sheriff's car got stuck in it. So they had to get out and walk. Well,

the old Negro trudged between the deputies through the snow for about two miles, and then he sat down. He would not move. 'I don't care what you law-men does with me,' he said to the deputies. 'You can hang me or shoot me or 'lectrocute me, but I ain't walkin' another step tonight.' I had that put in the record," Judge Roder said, smiling. "I thought there should be some humor in those dull books." He thought then awhile, and then he thumped his chair down and said to Laurie, "We have murders here all right. You'll get your murder--in time enough. When it gets really hot, that's the time. People get hot under the skin then. Long about July--you'll get your murder."

Laurie thought he was laughing at her, the way he said it. In July Laurie was at the youth camp in Virginia--"on leave" from the Record; and down in milltown a man took a sawed-off shotgun and blew off his wife's head. Bunny sent Laurie the clipping and wrote on it, "Satisfied?" But Laurie was not. "That wasn't a real murder."

And now, here in the November cold, was the murder and the suicide. Laurie felt it. She thought of the word "murder" and all the excitement it had meant before. This was different. There was the white paved street before her, the low buildings, the day-blank streetlamps. And the November sunshine, with its long shadows, lay there on the street, cold. As if a nightmare lay naked in the cold... No, not a nightmare...a little dog, run over by a car, but not quite dead, lying there, screaming, and then dying, finally. Laurie drew back, feeling a sticky hotness inside her, and then the cold.

It was Monday afternoon now. The murder had been Saturday afternoon. Laurie knew now that her mother had known, then. But Laurie had only

the feeling, that something terrible had happened, as she rode in the car with her mother and the cousins who had come to visit them for the day. Her mother was driving, showing the cousins around town. And Laurie watched her pointing out things and laughing with the cousins. She did not look at Laurie. They had gone out to the Lyrelands' country estate to see the grounds. It was beautiful there, and Laurie always liked to walk down by the lake and watch the ducks parade out of the water and up the great lawn. The Lyrelands were not at home, and Mother was turning the car to go down the drive when the colored maid in a blue apron came up to them. The maid stood there, folding the apron over and over in her hands. She had been weeping. "Have you heard...?" That was all she said, for Mother stopped her with "Yes." And Mother's voice sounded like the maid's, not laughing as it had been.

"It's awful, ma'm. Oh Lord, it's awful. Why, I known her since she was a child. I used to work for Mrs. Marshalle, you know." She stopped, knotting the apron, and then went on. "That's where Mrs. Lyreland is now--she's gone over there."

But Mother did not let the maid say anymore. She started the car and drove off. Laurie caught on the name, "Mrs. Marshalle"--that was Marsh's mother. She remembered that she had said, as they were starting out to drive, "Mother, let's take them out to Marsh's house--."

"No." Her mother cut her off. "They probably saw that coming in. It's on the main road." Her mother's voice was quick and nervous.

"Mrs. Marshalle".... Laurie did not understand, and she kept saying over to herself, "Have you heard...?"--the way the maid had said it, as if it were knotted inside her. It made her afraid, and she knew that

something wrong and terrible had happened. Laurie learned about it slowly, first the full, queer feeling, and then knowing. It was murder and suicide. It was Marsh's sister--the woman whose face she could not remember--who had killed the little girl, who rubbed the wood of the bannister railing with her finger, and then had killed herself.

. . . Laurie leaned back against the door frame. It was a kind of slow-circle movement, with her hand still stretched before her, holding the knob. It had warmed slowly in her hand, though the hand was still cold. She thought, then, of the way it had been that late afternoon in January, a long time before November, when she had first come to the newspaper office. She had waited in front of the door that afternoon, too, but then she had been excited, not quite believing she was really going to work there. She had gone into the office, finally; and it had seemed full of noise, a din of noises that had gradually settled down, as she came to know them, into the jangling noise of the paper folding-and-cutting machine, the chop of the job-press, the tinkling heavy noise of the linotypes, and the roaring, complex noise of the press itself (like train wheels jarring). These noises were a steady roar from the Shop. In the office there was the clacking noise of the teletype and the typewriters.

In the middle of the office Marsh was standing and batting a newspaper about in the air. She was angry about something. "By the three-pronged beard of Shakespeare and the New York Times," she screamed, "we don't have any 'special cases.' We print the news, by God!" She waved her arms and batted the newspaper. "And this"--she pointed--"infamous

document of the Ramsons'--the Weekly News! They have printed three of my stories verbatim without so much as an acknowledgment...." She went on, blasting forth. Miss Ruth was sitting at her desk and pretending to work on society news, moving the pencil with her delicate, flourishing handwriting. But she was really watching Marsh as if she thought Marsh might explode. Bunny was bending over her desk in the office. She was wearing the dress with the big navy-blue spots in it. Something about the rayon-silk dress looked cheap at first. But Laurie had decided she was wrong about that. Bunny was not cheap; she was different. She had lived in a lot of places, in big cities, and she did not understand a small town. Laurie edged up to her at the desk; and for awhile no one noticed her or heard her. "I'm Laurie Stanford," she said. "I'm Laurie..." she repeated.

That was the way it had been. Now she held her hand carefully on the knob so that it wouldn't rattle. Then it would not have mattered because of all the noise in the office. But now the office was quiet except for the low hum of voices. It was always quiet, that way, now, because the paper did not come out but once a week--on Friday. And this was Monday. "And Saturday--" Laurie thought. She looked down at her hand on the knob, and half-closed her eyes, letting the hand blur...a long, thin white blur... The death was on Saturday, the murder and the suicide. That was why she had come today, something she had to know, to understand about that. Miss Ruth would be there, inside the office; and Miss Ruth was the only one left now. Miss Ruth had to know. She had to be able to tell her. There was no one else now; for Miss Ruth had been the only one, of all those who worked there before, to stay when the Record sold out in September. It had seemed to Laurie, then, that

everything had ended.... The Ramsons, the owners of the Record's rival, the Weekly News, had bought it. They had kept it very clean. They had painted the old green walls a light cream color, varnished the desks, and cleared away the piles of littered paper, newspapers, wrappers, and smudged pieces of copy paper written on in blunt pencil. They had covered over the dark floor that looked like earth, and felt like earth under your feet, and laid down a checked linoleum covering. It was swept and clean. And it seemed to Laurie that the office had been crowded with gaudy advertisements, or that someone had clapped after a prayer.

In the summer when Laurie worked there regularly, she was paid five dollars a week to clean up the lavatory, sweep, run errands, and write fillers for the paper. She was paid extra for the stories she wrote. It came to about seven-fifty a week. She took the fillers from the fat County Chronicles: "In 1883 the Record was established as the first newspaper in Farriman county." "In 1910 the Palladium was built." "In 1913 a dog named Rumpelstiltskin died, and the whole town turned out for his funeral."

Marsh was standing by her desk. "A toast to Health," she said. She was taking the brown syrupy medicine from a bottle on her desk; she took it "straight," several times a day. She hoisted the spoon high over her head and threw the medicine at herself. Then she ran, spitting, to the lavatory that was covered all over with spilled paper towels, wet, but left hanging over the edge of the basin. When she leaned up from the basin, she pointed a finger at it and recited, in the manner of a filler, "In this Year of Our Lord the Record office lavatory

was sorely neglected." Laurie laughed and came over to the lavatory. It did not do much good to clean it up, she decided; but she bent down to get the cleanser.

Marsh had turned and was listening to an overalled, sweating man who had come in from the Shop to ask her something. Marsh, deciding that he had completely misunderstood all of her instructions, proceded to tell him so, loudly. And after he had gone, she quoted Shakespeare, "'God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man.'" She quoted with gestures. She faced the hound dog that wandered into the office, pointing--"Mange-ridden beast! "'Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed ronyon cries.'" The dog paused, seemed to stare at Marsh, then turned and ran from the office. "Shakespeare," Marsh said, "is equal to every occasion." She smiled with satisfaction as Laurie laughed. "Amen, Younger Generation," Marsh said, bowing formally before Laurie, who was powdering the stained lavatory with cleanser for the third time.

"Amen," Laurie said. She thought about her title of Younger Generation. Marsh often delivered her long speeches on that subject. Laurie did not understand these except that they stated she was "pure, innocent, undefiled, and artless--noble youth." "Artless," Marsh had said, "you would prefer that to naïve, wouldn't you?" The speeches made Laurie think of the first time she had really seen Marsh, before she came to work for the Record. It was at the school chapel exercises. Marsh stood up before the students--in a clean shirt, but she had forgotten a pencil over her ear--and announced, "As I look out into all your bright and smiling young faces"--and the students seemed almost to groan out loud--"I know just how the early Christian martyrs felt--when they were thrown to the lions." They had

all laughed, and Laurie had loved Marsh at that moment.

It was Marsh who had cleared off the old table behind the teletype for Laurie and hung the sign over it, "Feature Editor." Before that, Laurie had sat with a typewriter propped on the gas heater by Bunny's desk. Marsh called herself The Scholar, and she was constantly quoting Shakespeare, or calling on the "three-pronged beard of Shakespeare and the New York Times." But there were times, in the late afternoon, when Marsh seemed to give this up. Then she settled down at her desk, her head bowed in her hands, and was quiet. If Laurie came over to her then, she said, "Leave me alone, Younger Generation." Once she had added, "Don't every grow up, Laurie." And Laurie had stood looking down at Marsh then--but only for a moment. She turned quickly to go back to her desk in the corner. She passed Miss Ruth and saw that Miss Ruth was watching her.

"Younger Generation," Miss Ruth called, repeating Marsh's name for her. She held out some papers for Laurie. "I wonder if you'd type these 'personals' for me. The linotype man is beginning to complain about my handwriting." She was smiling.

Laurie took the papers from her. "Sure," she said. She started toward her desk with the papers, but then she turned and came back to Miss Ruth's desk. She looked down at Miss Ruth. Miss Ruth worked, not like Marsh who was rich and did not have to work, but because her children were in college. She and Marsh had known each other, though, and been friends, for years. "Miss Ruth--" Laurie said.

Miss Ruth looked up.

"But why doesn't Marsh want me to grow up?"

"People don't all grow up the same," Miss Ruth said in a low voice. "Sometimes it's harder for people like Marsh--or it seems that way. But Marsh is a fine person, Laurie." Miss Ruth looked straight into Laurie's eyes. "And you will be, too, Laurie," she said.

Laurie thought, then, of vague things she knew about Marsh's life. Her name was really Mary Barnes Marshalle, and she was almost forty now. Laurie had called her Marsh because it didn't seem right to call her "Miss Mary" or "Miss Marshalle." The Marshalles were a wealthy family with a beautiful country estate, like the Lyrelands'. It was the kind of family that might be called "landed aristocracy." Most of them did not work, as Marsh did. And Laurie remembered that she had heard them called, in whispers, "alcoholics." The husband of Marsh's sister, she knew, was a drunkard. They even said that Marsh was once. She thought of these things, but she did not talk about them with Miss Ruth.

It was late one Friday afternoon in early summer--Marsh, Miss Ruth, and all the Shop workers had gone home--and Bunny was cleaning up her desk in the office. Laurie was waiting for her and pecking idly at the typewriter, "inventing a new language," she said. The door of the Record office was pushed open then; and Mr. Hartwell, who was a tall, thin man with grey hair and a cropped grey mustache, came in, whistling. He was a businessman, the owner of an insurance company. At a distance, Laurie thought, he seemed like a young "dandy," but there were lines in his face to show that he was old. Laurie looked up and said, "Hello, Mr. Hartwell." And she started to add, "How's Peg?"--Mr. Hartwell was her friend Peg's grandfather, and he was a deacon in the church. He was always telling Peg

and Laurie jokes, though sometimes they were a little dirty. But Mr. Hartwell did not seem to hear Laurie, or to see her. He took Bunny with him over into a corner of the office. She did not seem to want to go with him, and kept pulling away while he talked to her in a low voice.

Laurie stopped pecking at the typewriter. She heard part of it, and something curled up inside her. He was saying that his wife had gone away for the weekend; and if Bunny would go to the City with him, they would do anything she liked.

Mr. Hartwell suddenly threw down the ledger he had been holding in his hand and left the office, slamming the door behind him. Bunny stood very still a moment after he had left. Then she turned and walked angrily over to her desk. At first it seemed that she was going to throw something. But then she just leaned her head down against the desk and cried. Laurie came over to her and tried to say something, but there wasn't anything. She felt sick in her stomach and dirty, and she felt very sorry for Bunny.

Bunny did not say anything about it. But she reached up and caught Laurie's hand. She held it for a long time, and Laurie waited. Finally Bunny let go her hand and leaned back in the chair. She wiped her eyes, and they were dark and serious, looking at Laurie. "I make a big fool, don't I?" she said.

"No." Laurie shook her head.

"Well," Bunny said. She stood up, pushing the drawers of the desk shut with her body. "Let's get going."

They walked home together in the summer night. They could hear the baseball game and the shouts from the field that was down at the end of

Drossing Street, where Bunny lived in a boarding-house. They walked slowly, and they could hear the sounds of the people sitting and rocking on their porches, their voices low, and the lights in the houses turned out to keep away the bugs. They did not say anything for a long time. Then Bunny said, her voice hard, "Rotten--stinking rotten. That's what this Goddamned town is." After awhile she went on. "You know why they don't like me--it's because I'm an 'outsider.' They don't like anybody who hasn't lived here since before the Civil War."

"But I haven't lived here all my life," Laurie said.

"It's different with you," Bunny said. "They know your family. But they don't think I'm good enough for them."

"No, Bunny--"

"Well, I don't care," Bunny broke in. "I don't care what they say except for one thing. I've got a brain, and I know it. It'll beat theirs, anyday.... God, but it's rotten--a stinking, dead Southern town, and they're so dead they don't know it."

The next morning, Saturday, Laurie bought a toy rubber animal and gave it to Bunny--"for a joke," she said. Bunny laughed and said she would name it "Laurie Junior." "He has the same expression on his face, you know," Bunny said.

Laurie said, in a mock-hurt tone, "I resent that."

"No." Bunny shook her head. "I think he's sweet. In fact, 'Laurie Junior' and I will treat you to a coke to celebrate."

They went to the drugstore, then, and Bunny set "Laurie Junior" in the middle of the table while they drank their cokes. Afterwards, while they were waiting for the change, a clerk came over to them and

picked the toy up. The clerk squeaked it and seemed about to say something. But then Bunny saw her. "That's mine!" she said and snatched the toy from the clerk.

The clerk stopped, letting her empty hand fall in the air. She stared at Bunny a moment and then turned to go back to her counter. She was talking to herself. "...I was just looking at it. Lord...."

Laurie watched the clerk go--she knew her. She told herself that it was because Bunny was from the City and didn't understand that the clerk was just interested. She wished almost that she could go back and explain that to the clerk.

It was several nights later, toward the end of June, that Laurie came home from the movies alone and found Bunny in the porch darkness, waiting for her. The porch was lighted only dimly by the streetlight, hanging high over the street in the trees. But Laurie did not turn on the porch light because of the bugs.

"I almost gave you up and left," Bunny said.

Laurie looked down and saw the ashtray beside Bunny. Three cigarettes, burned low, were stubbed out in it. Bunny was smoking now.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were coming," Laurie said.

Bunny did not answer directly. She looked over at Laurie. "Oh Lord, Laruie, you're the only person in this Goddamned town I can talk to...."

Laurie waited.

Bunny stubbed out her cigarette. She pulled another one from her shoulder-bag and fingered it. "Funny thing," she said finally, with a

little laugh as she said it. "You know, I was thinking, sitting here in the dark. I don't know why I thought of it just now...." She waited a moment and sucked on the cigarette, lighting it. "You wonder about those things--you have to wonder about them...." she said. "It was a display--at the Boston Museum--a little room set up, a fifteenth century nun's cell. I went into that cell, and I felt something strange as soon as I walked in. I seemed to know it already, every corner of it." She stopped and then went on slowly, her voice low and faraway sounding. "I sat down at the little wooden table, and that strange feeling got stronger--it was a funny feeling... And suddenly I knew. I knew there was a secret drawer in that table and how to open it. I felt up under the table to the place in the wood. I touched it, and it gave a little springing sound. And the drawer was there. None of the museum people knew about it--no one. I felt it, sitting there. I felt I'd lived a whole life in that cell...." She looked up at Laurie, and her eyes were serious and dark, almost excited. "I was a Catholic, then," she said.

Laurie was silent for a moment. "But you said in the office--I thought you said you were a Methodist," Laurie said.

"Isn't everybody here a Methodist?" Bunny said. "Marsh and Miss Ruth certainly are. I was born a Methodist," she said. "I guess I'm an atheist now." She looked steadily at Laurie, and Laurie looked back at her steadily. "I shouldn't have said that," Bunny said. "I'm a fool to treat you like this."

"No." Laurie shook her head.

Bunny looked away, seeming not to hear. "God, but it's a mess, an unholy mess, life is." She stood up and walked in a circle around the side-porch where they were sitting. Laurie heard her say to herself,

"And look where it's got me." She sat down again and laughed. "Well, and now I'm going to write the G.A.N.," she said.

"The G.A.N.?"

"Haven't you heard?" Bunny leaned toward Laurie, exaggerating astonishment. "The 'Great American Novel.' That's what everybody in the newspaper business says he's going to write someday. The Boss says so; he might do it, too--if he can ever get his wife and kids out of his hair."

Bunny leaned back on the divan, and it creaked with her movement. In the darkness her face could hardly be seen; even so, she covered it with her hand and seemed to be thinking to herself. The divan creaked as she pushed her foot against the floor. At last she looked up, her eyes on Laurie. Laurie felt them in the darkness.

"Tell me, Laurie," she said. "Do you think a man almost forty is too old for a girl twenty-seven?"

Laurie started a little, looking at Bunny; Bunny was twenty-seven. Laurie thought at first of the Boss, then. The Boss was "almost forty." She saw him in her mind--the tall, thin body swinging as he walked, and the hollow face that was like Lincoln. There was a "presence" about him, somehow, as if he carried a world with him, inside, while the world around--dirty, cluttered, and noisy--was only a convenience, a place for him to walk. But the Boss was married. "An ox" was what Bunny called his wife. And she was not pretty. She was a solid-looking woman who seemed always to be pregnant. She had had three children, and she was pregnant now, again. She had come, though, from one of the "old families"--it was, in fact, an older branch of Marsh's, though that branch no longer had money. The Boss had been an "outsider" before that, and sometimes

people still called him that. He and Bunny talked together, sometimes, alone in the inner office, for hours.

"I don't know," Laurie said, answering Bunny's question. "I guess it just depends on whether you're in love...and things."

"A man like the Boss," Bunny said. "Lord, but he's a wonderful person. You know that, don't you, Laurie?"

"Yes."

"He believes in newspaper," Bunny said. "It's his life and--soul. You know I came here because of him. It's worth it to work with someone like that." She waited and then said, "He's the kind of man I want to marry."

"I like him," Laurie said.

"Yes," Bunny said.

They sat quietly. Then Bunny got up, suddenly. "For God's sake, Laurie"--and her voice was almost like a scream--"don't every grow up. You think you want to, but you don't know what it's like. I'll tell you--it's hell. Don't even want to grow up!"

"What is it?" Laurie was standing up, beside her. "What is it, Bunny?"

"I'm sorry," Bunny said. She put her hand on Laurie's and looked down at her for a long time. "God help you, Laurie," she said quietly. "I think you're a lot like me, Laurie. But maybe it will work out--for you... You're more like me than you are Marsh and Miss Ruth, aren't you?"

It was after that, just a few days after, that Laurie went away to be a junior counselor at the youth camp in Virgainia. It was July. "Four

months ago," Laurie thought, leaning back against the door frame of the newspaper office, in the November cold. She had not wanted to leave the Record and go to the camp, but she had promised a long time before. She could not get out of it then. And she liked it there, though she thought about it strictly as being "on leave from the Record." When she came back in August, it was all different. She felt at once the difference in the Record office, the strangeness. It was queer. It seemed that there was something dark and unseen, something heavy hanging over everything. Laurie was afraid, feeling this Thing, and not being able to see it. It was the way she had felt Saturday afternoon, when she did not know about the death of Marsh's sister, but she had somehow felt the death and been afraid. The Record was dying. Marsh and Miss Ruth knew it. At first, they would not tell Laurie, and all she had was the feeling of the heavy Thing around her.

Bunny was not at the Record when Laurie came back in August. Her vacation was over and she had said she would be, but she had not come back. The Boss was not there, either. He had gone off somewhere alone. Laurie heard it in low whispers, what they said, that Bunny and the Boss had "gone off together." She heard, but she did not believe this. Bunny had left on her desk an envelope full of instructions and assignemtns for Laurie. One of these was to write Bunny's column, "Around the Town." This was not hard, or entirely new; for Laurie had always collected incidents for Bunny to put in her column. But it felt wrong that she should write it at all. And it seemed wrong that Marsh and Miss Ruth told her that it was better when she wrote it than when Bunny did. "An outsider couldn't know about those things," they said.

The Boss came back a week later, but Bunny did not. No one seemed to know anything about Bunny, what had happened to her, or to care. She could not ask Marsh or Miss Ruth very well because she knew they were glad Bunny was gone. And all Marsh volunteered was, "Your Bunny won't be back." And sometimes she would lean back in her chair and say, smiling, "You're ours now, Younger Generation."

The assignments that Bunny had left Laurie ran out after awhile, and she had to work on her own, thinking up new ones. She took her stories to Marsh, instead of Bunny, to be edited. Marsh was not so hard on them as Bunny had been, who would lecture her on "color in news-writing," or the importance of seeming to know thoroughly what she wrote about--even scientific experiments. "Of course, you can't know it all," she would say. "That's the 'Great Newspaper Secret.' You have to make people think you do." It was Marsh who had taught Laurie proof-reading and how to run galleys. Miss Ruth had taught her about advertisements and the adding machine.

The postcard from Bunny came not long after that. It said only that she was sorry she had not been there when Laurie came back from Virginia, and that she was coming to pick up her things on Monday. When Laurie came in from lunch that Monday afternoon, Bunny was at her desk, going through the drawers and piling things on top, looking down into the drawers. Marsh and Miss Ruth were at their desks opposite, looking down at their work and not saying anything. It was quiet in the office with just the sound of shuffling papers and pencils being laid down on the desk tops. It was always quiet on Mondays because the paper was not printed then--it was printed Tuesday through Saturday. The quietness always seemed strange

to Laurie on Mondays; it made talking in the office sound like shouting. But that afternoon there was not even any talking; and, as she came in, Laurie thought her feet sounded like clomping. Marsh and Miss Ruth said "hello" to her, but that was all. And then Bunny looked up, her eyes level on Laurie. Laurie looked back at her steadily. She smiled.

After awhile Miss Ruth called on the phone and talked about a wedding she was writing up for society news. "Yes," she said. "It was one of the loveliest weddings I've ever seen." She asked about the lace on the bride's dress and the flowers in her bouquet. When she hung up, she leaned over and asked Bunny how she had been lately.

Bunny said, "Fine."

Marsh scraped her chair against the floor, and nothing else was said.

Laurie went over to her table behind the silent teletype and got the story she had been working on before lunch. She took it over to Bunny to edit, as Bunny had always done before she went away. Bunny laughed when Laurie gave it to her and marked it with her blunt pencil. "Okay now?" she said.

Laurie nodded. Then Bunny got up and started toward the inner office. As she left, Marsh looked up and said to Laurie, "In the future will you please have your stories edited only by a member of the staff."

After almost half an hour, Bunny came back into the front office. She gathered up her things and motioned to Laurie to come with her. Laurie got up and followed, not looking at Marsh and Miss Ruth, as she passed. They went around the corner to the cafe where Bunny used to eat because she didn't like the boarding-house food. The cafe owner, a big, fat man whose strands of hair always looked sweaty lying across the bald places, welcomed

Bunny back and came over to wait on them himself.

They sat in a booth toward the rear of the cafe, and Bunny leaned back in her seat. After awhile Bunny said, "Well--?" and waited. She sat forward. "So the Boss and I went off together.... So what?"

Laurie looked at Bunny steadily. She did not say anything.

"That doesn't shock you?" Bunny said.

Laurie continued to look steadily at Bunny.

Bunny's eyes fell from Laurie's then. She looked down at her hands, spread out flat and white on the table-top. "I love him," she said. "I love him, you see..." She looked up. "Oh God, Laurie...." Bunny lighted and smoked one, after the other, three cigarettes, slowly, and they did not say anything all that time.

They drank their coffee. It was too strong, and it tasted burnt. Laurie wanted to ask a lot of things, but she waited. Bunny seemed to sense the questions, though. She pushed the coffee cup aside and lighted another cigarette. "It's a Goddamned mess, isn't it?" Bunny said.

Laurie waited while Bunny smoked the cigarette. Bunny's eyes were closed. Then Laurie leaned forward. "Bunny," she said, "what's happened? What's happening to the Record...and everybody?"

Bunny looked at her, shaking her head. She lit a match and watched the flame. "Death," she said. "The Record is dying, Laurie." It had lost money, lost advertisers, lost everything over the last months. It was going to be sold. "To the Ramsons!" Bunny said. "By God, the Ramsons!... They don't know anything about a newspaper. All they know is how to make money!..." Her voice got lower, and she did not look at Laurie. "It's killing the Boss.... It's his life--that paper. There's not another

editor in the world--" She broke off. "God, Laurie, it's killing him...."

Laurie listened until she knew it was really true. The Record was going to be sold--it was ending, all of it. Bunny said she did not know what she would do now--probably try for a job on the City paper again, the Star. "But you mustn't give it up, Laurie," she said. "You belong in the newspaper business. Remember that."

They said goodbye then. Bunny took Laurie's hand. "Goodbye," she said. She looked down. " I think I had a speech--something about climbing mountains, forever climbing mountains... But we'll skip that. Just--Goodbye, Laurie." She looked into Laurie's eyes.

"Goodbye," Laurie said. And then Bunny left.

Laurie went back to the office. It was still quiet, with Marsh and Miss Ruth sitting at their desks. Laurie did not feel like saying anything. She knew now what the Thing was--the paper was going to be sold. But still the Thing seemed heavy and unseen all around her; and it seemed all not possible, and that being sold was not all. It was wrong, very wrong. And it seemed impossible that this could end--the times like the day she had gone "out" on her first story, pedalling her bicycle in the March wind, as if she were covering something really important (like Marsh's five bells on the teletype). And she had come back, grinning and happy, with the story. They had all hugged her, as if she were a hero; and Marsh had said, "You'll never feel this way again, Younger Generation." And yet it seemed that it all had ended. She did not know how to feel--for she felt the Record was already dead--and yet the Thing was still there.

The Boss drank a lot after that. His eyes were red and he worked all night. He would come out of his office in the day--and he had not

shaved, and his shirt was loose and dirty--and he would work the linotype where one of the men had quit. Laurie heard Miss Ruth say he was "on the verge of a nervous breakdown."

It was early in September, about two weeks later, that Marsh took Laurie aside and told her that this was the last paper the Record would put out. Marsh was crying as she told her, but Laurie did not cry. She just held tight to the desk and shook her head. She could see in her mind Marsh standing in the middle of the office floor, waving her arms and calling on Shakespeare for aid "in the present crisis" because the Weekly News, the Ramsons' paper, had stolen her stories and printed them without any acknowledgment. She had said, "Damn the Ramsons!" then. But Laurie could not cry.

The paper came out in headlines that afternoon--"RECORD SOLD TO NEWS, WILL REVERT TO WEEKLY." The Boss wrote an editorial about the spirit of the Record. He said that it was more than the people who worked on it, or the paper itself, the years it had been printed as the town's oldest paper, since 1883. He had worked as editor of the Record for twelve years. "It's meant a lot of living to me to be a part of it. Perhaps someday someone will write a book about it; perhaps I will."

So the Ramsons had come, installed their own modern press and linotype machines, cleaned and painted, and covered over the earth-like floor with bright, checked linoleum. They called it the Weekly News-Record now, and they said it was a "preposterous and reckless idea, sheer foolishness"

that the Record had every tried to print a daily paper in a town that size, only thirty miles from the City. That was no way to make money; you had to realize that. Laurie felt that to walk into the office now--out of the November cold--would be like walking into a tomb, where there had been a death.

She did not work there regularly anymore, and she did not like to think of herself working at all for the Ramsons. The Ramsons had their advertising books, spread out on the office tables, open. In the paper they ran big, full-page advertisements that said--"FREE! To EVERY NEW SUBSCRIBER, a GENUINE BALL-POINT FOUNTAIN PEN! FREE!" The pens were cheap, and they were bought wholesale and piled in boxes on the desks. And of all the people who had worked on the Record before, Miss Ruth had been the only one to stay; and Miss Ruth had said that she really did not want to.

Still, Laurie had come today. It was the death, the murder and suicide, that had made her come...because Miss Ruth was there, inside the office. Miss Ruth had to know. She had to be able to tell her. There was no one else now.

Miss Ruth had been at Marsh's house last night when Laurie went with her parents to sit in the deep-sofa'd parlor with all the people who sat there stiffly, saying nothing. The faces of the people were serious; but once, one of the women laughed. Laurie sat there, looking for Miss Ruth. She knew she would be there. But she did not find her until they were leaving. She saw her, then, in the hallway. She looked as if she had been crying, but she smiled when she saw Laurie. Laurie went up to her a moment--her parents were holding the door for her. She

looked up at Miss Ruth. "Marsh--is she all right?"

"She'll be all right, Laurie," Miss Ruth said. "I'll tell her you came. She'll be glad to know you came, Laurie."

Laurie had thought then, looking up at Miss Ruth--she wondered if Miss Ruth remembered--"I wish we could have a murder. Why can't we have a murder?... I just want to know how it feels." She wished she did not remember, herself.

The November cold seemed to come all around and through Laurie. And her back felt ridged from leaning back against the door frame for so long. She leaned forward now and took the brass knob in both her hands. She turned it and went into the office. The humming-thudding sound of the office was before her in the group of four people gathered around the telephone on Miss Ruth's desk. Mrs. Ramson, a round, heavy woman with fat fingers and a short nose, was standing on the edge of the group near Marsh's old desk; and spread out on the desk were an unstopped bottle of polish remover, fingernail polish, and a file. She leaned toward the group around the telephone. Mr. Ramson-Senior, a stocky business-looking man with puffy white hair, was saying things. His voice made a quacking sound in the office. His son, beside him, Mr. Ramson-Junior (Mrs. Ramson's husband), was a copy of his father except that his hair was so black it looked the navy-blue color of his suit. The group were concentrated intensely; and they did not look up at Laurie. She passed behind them and took off her heavy coat, laying it on the table that used to be her desk. It was covered over and piled with unopened exchange papers and stationery boxes now. She sat at the desk and waited.

The group sounded only like humming at first, and she could not tell what they were saying. Miss Ruth held the telephone. It was long-distance, and she was trying to get someone.

"All right. All right. Tell them we'll speak to the managing editor then. Get him on the line," Mr. Ramson-Junior said.

There was a clicking sound. "They say he's gone out, but is expected back in twenty minutes. Should they call?" Miss Ruth asked.

"Tell them to call us as soon as he comes in, and we'll keep calling from this end, too," Mr. Ramson-Junior said.

"Damn, yes," Mr. Ramson-Senior broke in. "And tell them they damn well better not print that story--editor or no editor... That's something. Editor gone off, and they can't find the managing editor. I'll bet!"

"He says they go to press in ten minutes, and the story is set up to go in."

"Let me speak to the man," Mr. Ramson-Junior took the phone. "Listen, Kramer--that's your name, isn't it?--listen, you don't go to press with that story. I mean that. If your editor were here-- I know your editor personally, and he wouldn't do that kind of thing. Just remember this--that story doesn't go in." He handed the phone back to Miss Ruth.

"He says the story was written as they'd do any story of that kind, and it doesn't get any special treatment. He says it will take an order from the managing editor to keep it out."

"Tell him to go to hell--Excuse me, Miss Ruth. Damn the Star anyway!" Mr. Ramson-Senior shouted.

"He says he's holding the press," Miss Ruth said. She hung up the phone, her hands holding it awhile as she did.

"Special treatment! They don't understand the meaning of the word," Mr. Ramson-Junior said. He paced in a circle. "This is a special case. We can't treat one of our finest and most respected families like common trash. Why, the businessmen of this town would rise up in arms if they heard of such a thing in our paper. They'd stop our advertising, and we'd deserve it, too. Everyone knows and respects the Marshalles. Sensationalism--that's what the Star's after. They don't know how to respect a tragic loss in one of our best families."

Laurie watched Mr. Ramson-Junior pacing. So...the Ramsons and Miss Ruth were trying to keep the story of Marsh's sister--the murder and suicide--out of the papers as a special case. She thought of Marsh, standing in the middle of the Record office floor that very first day, when she had come to the Record in January. Marsh was yelling then, "By the three-pronged beard of Shakespeare and the New York Times...we don't have any 'special cases.' We print the news, by God!" But they were making Marsh a special case now--because she was from "one of the finest and most respected families," a family with money and influence. Laurie wondered--What would Marsh think if she knew she was a special case? Would it be right now? And maybe Marsh knew, and maybe she thought it was all right now, because Miss Ruth thought it was right. Laurie looked over at Miss Ruth. Miss Ruth seemed tired and sunken, somehow, sitting there at the desk and holding the phone cradle with her hand. She could not see Miss Ruth's eyes.

"What I don't understand," Mr. Ramson-Junior was saying, "is how the Star got the story in the first place. We certainly didn't give it to them. The Transit said they heard it from the Star, but that's a

different case. Talked to their editor. They understand this sort of thing. There'll be no mention of it in their paper." He flapped a copy of the Transit, the Star's rival paper in the City, in his hand.

Laurie listened. Saturday night, when she had come home from the ride and had known, finally, about the murder and suicide, it had seemed that she could not stand it, alone. She had written Bunny in the City. She had asked, "Why, why, why?" like a child. "What is it, Bunny? How can you kill your child and kill yourself and know there will never be another time? There'll never be another day, and you won't know tomorrow, and you won't feel anymore, and you won't be alive anymore. And you know that you'll be dead, right then. What is it?" ...Bunny worked on the Star. Laurie told herself that Bunny hadn't gotten the letter yet, but she knew that was not true. Bunny had gotten the letter. Maybe she hadn't been the one to turn the story in, and maybe she had--because it was news, not because she didn't like Marsh... And Laurie saw in her mind Bunny standing beside the man in the Star's news room and telling him not to listen to Miss Ruth and the Ramsons--the story sould go in.

Miss Ruth was answering Mr. Ramson-Junior, in a low voice. "I don't know how they got it. But it mustn't come out. It would kill Marsh... and Mrs. Marshalle. Mrs. Marshalle asked, as a special favor. It's just got to be kept out."

"She didn't need to ask. By God, we understand these things," Mr. Ramson-Senior said. " It would never come out in the Weekly News-Record."

"Mrs. Marshalle is a fine woman," Mr. Ramson-Junior said, "one of the finest we have. You may be sure that anything we can do, anything at all... We want to extend our deepest sympathy." He had lowered his

voice as he spoke.

"Yes, anything we can do, anything at all...." Mrs. Ramson echoed, and she moved closer to Miss Ruth as she said it.

Laurie's eyes held on Miss Ruth. She knew that Miss Ruth was tired, sitting there and holding the phone-cradle in her hands, waiting. Miss Ruth looked up then and saw Laurie. She smiled half-way, seeing her; and she motioned. But Laurie did not know whether the motion meant "come" or "wait." And then the telephone rang.

"It's Kramer," Miss Ruth said, answering. She turned toward the group. "He says he can't hold the presses any longer."

"Tell him he damn well better hold the presses. Where the hell is the managing editor, anyway?" Mr. Ramson-Senior was screaming so that it must have been heard on the phone.

"He says it's the Star's policy to show no discrimination," Miss Ruth said quietly.

Mr. Ramson-Junior took the phone from Miss Ruth. "Listen, Kramer," he said, "this isn't a question of discrimination. This is a question of decency." He cleared his throat. "I don't care what you say, Kramer. I'm telling you now, final. If you print that story, it's the end. Your paper can expect no more co-operation from the Weekly News-Record in any form--as long as the Ramsons are in charge of this paper. I think you understand the friendship that has existed between this paper and yours in the past. We have co-operated with you in every way possible. But if your paper prints this story--this is final--you can expect nothing more from us. Ever."

There were garbled noises from the other end of the phone. Mr. Ramson-Junior, with a set smile on his face, laid down the phone. "He's

found the managing editor now, says he just came into the office," he said. He rubbed his hands together. "I'll take it in my office, Miss Ruth."

"It's about time," Mr. Ramson-Senior said. He followed his son into the inner office. Mrs. Ramson went back to her desk. She mumbled something about it's being terrible and stared down at her fingernails. But she did not polish them. She only picked at the nails, as if listening all the time for the voices in the inner office.

Miss Ruth half stood up, as if to follow the Ramsons, then sat down and hung up her receiver, her hands staying on the phone-cradle. She leaned down against the desk and let her head rest on her hands.

Laurie watched Miss Ruth. She got up then and went over to Miss Ruth's desk. She stood there, beside it, and looked down at Miss Ruth. Miss Ruth did not look up, but she took Laurie's hand and held it in hers. Laurie fixed her eyes on the coil of grey hair around Miss Ruth's head, and waited. After awhile Miss Ruth spoke in a low voice. "It was January, wasn't it?" she said. Laurie did not understand at first. "It was January when you first came here, wasn't it, Laurie?... And now it's November...."

Laurie nodded, but she could not say anything. She felt Miss Ruth's hand tighten on hers, but Miss Ruth did not look at her. And Laurie kept her eyes fixed on the coil of grey hair aournd Miss Ruth's head, waiting. Miss Ruth was looking down, and her voice sounded far away. "I don't know," she said. "There's a little verse that keeps going through my head. You know it, Laurie. 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.'" She looked up at Laurie. "That's

all I know," she said. And Laurie saw Miss Ruth's eyes then--they seemed full and warm, but they were empty. They were empty eyes....

The telephone conversation in the inner office ended, and Mr. Ramson-Senior and Mr. Ramson-Junior came out... Laurie dropped her hand from Miss Ruth's, then, and it felt as if something were broken as the hand let go... The Ramsons were cursing. "Damn the managing editor!" Mr. Ramson-Senior said. "He's upheld Kramer--upheld him!"

"The story is going to be printed," Mr. Ramson-Junior said. "We told them it was the end. They'll get nothing more from us."

Laurie left the office. The afternoon was late, and it was getting colder. The low Record building looked cold and dark to her in the dusk. It was as if the Thing came down to her and was all around her and over her, and then it crawled inside her, and lay there.... Laurie pushed her bicycle down the hill, away from the Record office, walking slowly beside the bicycle, her hands holding the bars.

A SNAKE AROUND YOUR FEET

I

Four-twelve was a transient room in the Greenwich-Chelsea Y. W. C. A. That is, it was a room that was rented for two dollars a night to transients, people who came and went, staying only a night or a few days. It was through a mistake in the downstairs office that the room was rented for the summer. The downstairs office often made mistakes as it was staffed regularly only by two old ladies who always said, "Pardon me. Beg pardon?" when they were spoken to and asked the person to please repeat. Besides the two old ladies, another woman with a long nose and rimless glasses worked there half-days; and the desk was staffed at odd hours, busy times, by resident girls who were out of work, just then.... The mistake having been made, the downstairs office did not bother about it, but left it as it was.

The room, four-twelve, near the end of the hall on the fourth floor, was assigned to Patsy Howell from Decatur, Georgia, for the summer. Pat Howell, who had never been in New York alone before, was a girl with dark, red-blond hair, brown eyes, and freckles on her nose. She was nineteen years old and a college student.

It was seven-thirty in the morning; and the scrub-women were mopping the fourth floor hall. They leaned up and stood aside while the girls, still dressing hurriedly, passed them in the hall. Tall Negro William, the day elevator operator, unlocked Pat's door and gave her the key.

The room was small, a narrow sliver of a room, with just space enough to pass between the dresser and the cot-bed to the window. There was a desk and straight chair by the window; and a curved-back chair was pushed against the door. It seemed bare except for the color. The walls were painted wash-room green, and the furniture was shell-pink.

After breakfast Pat left the 'Y' and started down 12th Street toward Fifth Avenue. It was Friday morning, and she folded a copy of the New York Times to the Classifieds and walked slowly. The street was narrow, and the buildings seemed to lean over it from the sides. "Lovers' Nest--Sweet Candy," said the red sign spread over the second floor of an antique shop and cat store. It seemed odd that West 11th Street crossed 12th. An old woman in a lavender-lace dress bent over a garbage can, her body sunk half-way into it. Silent, she then leaned up, a humped old woman with untidy grey hair, and lifted a greenish gin bottle to the light. She squinted her eyes and shook the bottle against her ear. Her powdered face smiled like a grandmother-picture. She looked around cautiously, then placed the bottle in an old sack she had laid on the sidewalk-edge beside her. The morning was clear and had not yet become hot.

It was night. Pat sat on her cot-bed in the narrow sliver of room in the 'Y'. The stand-lamp by her bed made a round, yellow light, like the base of the shade, on the floor and wall; and the rest was dark. The mimeographed sign on the back of the door read--"Notice to Transients: Check-out time is... Closing hours are 1 a.m. week nights, 2 a.m. Saturday and Sunday...." The door was pushed again the curved-back chair, not quite closed so that the night breeze could blow through the room.

But the faded, wildly flowered curtains at the window hung flat and still. It was hot. The yellow lamp was like candlelight in the wash-room green and shell-pink room. It yellowed the no-color rug piece on the floor, but it was only a patch of light. The window was black beyond the curtains. In the half-light the room seemed closed in and small, and it seemed to get smaller so that it was like the blankets hanging warm and dark over the dining-room table on a rainy day. Patsy and the other children were playing Arab. They crept under the tent and breathed heavily, pushing up to the others the golden treasures they had stolen from the caravan. They were dressed in blankets and flowered kimonos with towels around their heads, and except for that, naked. They were hot gathered under the tent. There was a feeling of rain-dampness all around.

There were no lights from the black window, and the street was quiet. "Arabia," Pat said; "Not New York--Arabia."

There was a knock at the door, and then a girl pushed half-way in the room. "May I borrow a cigarette? Just one, I--" She stopped, seeing Pat. "Oh, I'm sorry; I'm so sorry. I thought you were some-one else. Really, I did. I wouldn't--" She was backing from the room.

"Sure," Pat said. She held out the cigarettes. "Come on in."

"Really, I thought you were someone else. I couldn't. No, really. The other girl that was here-- But I guess she left. Yes, she said she was leaving. I'm so sorry, really...." She edged in slightly. "You're sure you don't mind? Really? I'll pay you back."

Pat was shaking her head and holding out the cigarettes. The girl edged closer. She twisted her tall, thin body nervously. Her face

was hard, though the skin under her eyes sagged; and she seemed old, dried up like a prune, though she could not have been over twenty-eight. At last the girl reached out her hand toward the cigarettes.

"You're sure you don't mind? Heavens! what you must think of me! But I'm not that kind--I'll pay you back. We borrowed--the other girl and I--but we kept count. Not like some of the girls around here; some of them would steal everything of yours if you didn't watch. I had five dollars stolen. Five dollars!" She leaned forward, pointing with her finger. She had sat down, hesitatingly, in the curved-back chair by the door. She sat on the edge. Her striped housecoat hung limp and loose on her bony shoulders.

"Really, I wouldn't have--a perfect stranger! What you must think... barging in on you and asking for a cigarette!" She made a gesture as if she would put out the cigarette at once. "I should have got dressed and gone out. But you understand. Noise! Noise! Did you hear that radio blaring? That's Magga. She's not right, not right"--she pointed to her forehead. "And she's mean. She's an animal. I say--why keep someone hear like that? Because she's an old friend of the director! Ought to be locked up or dead. Plays her radio, screams, drives everybody crazy."

"I haven't met Magga," Pat said.

The girl stopped and seemed to pounce on the realization. "You're new here!" Then she started again the rapid circle of words with questions. She asked them, hardly waiting for answers. She said her name was Helen.

"What must you think of me? Really, I'm so sorry!" Helen stood up to leave then. She extended her hand. "I believe I'll borrow just

one more cigarette. I'll pay you back. Really, you're sure you don't mind? I'm so sorry." She left then, edging out of the door and leaning back several times to say she was sorry and would certainly pay Pat back.

Sunday morning Pat stood, half-dressed, over the lavatory in the community bathroom. She bent over, holding the automatic turn-off faucets to fill up the basin. The enamel was scarred and stained. She watched the other girls. There were two girls in slips talking loudly about a trip to the beach down at the other end of the row of basins; and other girls were coming and going, flapping the green john doors with a loud sound after them. The showers were running; and a girl, sloshing in the bathtub, yelled as someone walked into her unlocked compartment by mistake. The girls came and went. Pat saw, finally, a tall, jerking girl near her. It was Helen. She was cursing another girl who was using her lavatory. Pat spoke, but Helen did not hear. She moved closer and touched her shoulder. Helen sprang around.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't see you. So sorry."

Pat broke into the flow of words. "Are you--do you know anyone who's going to church this morning?"

"Church, lord! I only got up because there's so damn much noise on this hall"--she looked over at the girl using her wash-basin--"I couldn't sleep." She turned back to Pat. "Oh, not you, not you--I don't mean you making noise.... Rosalie Callahan--she's always going to church. She's Catholic. But, no, she's gone home this weekend.... This is the noisiest floor in the place. I'm going to speak to Miss Hedford about it tomorrow." She looked back at the girl by the wash-basin. The girl

mumbled to herself. "I pay good money to stay here," Helen said. The girl at the wash-basin laughed. "Listen, you--" Helen started.

The girl at the wash-basin emptied it. "Why don't you go to church, Helen?" she said, leaving.

Helen stopped. "Church--oh, yes--why don't you try 411? I think Reena's going.... Say, remember, I'll pay you back for those cigarettes. You understand?"

The sun was hot and high in the sky. It felt hot, like walking into a furnace from the dark church. There was no shade, and the sidewalk was a white glare. Pat walked beside the two girls--Reena O'Reair and a friend. Reena O'Reair was a large-boned, plump girl with Germanic blond hair and blue eyes. She was German, she had said--all of the family was, though her great-grandmother had married an Irishman. Reena and the friend were studying their church bulletins, pinching up their eyes in the sunlight.

"I don't like that church," Reena said. She had turned the bulletin over and read all the sides. "No social activities."

"Well, another one down," the friend said; "First Presbyterian church--no go."

"What do you mean?" Pat said.

"Oh, we just go," the friend said, " to see if they have any social activites. This is the fifth we've tried around here."

"We want to meet men," Reena explained. "It's hard to meet any nice ones in the city--"

"--So we go to the churches to see if they have any social activities," the friend finished.

"God, I feel the need of male companionship," Reena said. She hugged her arms around herself.

"You're new here, too, then?" Pat said.

"Oh, no, I've lived here--let's see--three years," Reena said.

"And I've been in New York seven," the friend said. "We just started this--going to the churches."

"It's the only place to meet any decent men," Reena said. "But none of them seem to have social activities in the summer."

"We can keep trying, but I'm getting discouraged," the friend said.

"How old are you?" Reena turned to Pat. Her face was fattish and loose, making her eyes into faded blue points.

"Nineteen."

"Well, I'm twenty-five, and it's not funny," Reena said. "And you're in college; you can meet men."

"I didn't go to college," the friend said.

"I graduated from college. I even taught school a year," Reena said to Pat. She said it almost angrily.

II

The roof of the 'Y' was dark. It was on the eighth floor. The elevator went as far as the seventh, and you walked up a flight. There were only a few rooms on the eighth floor, and a hall led out to the roof. The roof was floored with brick tile and enclosed by a low wall. The fire escape and a slatted platform led off the low wall. A cool night breeze came from the Hudson and blew over the roof. The Palisades

on the New Jersey side were large and dark on the skyline. Farther up a light-bulbed sign flashed "Palisades Amusement Park," and there were colored lights. An advertising dirigible moved across the blackness, lighted up in red colors, "R&H Beer." This flashed off, and there appeared a glass and a beer bottle. The bottle lifted and poured sparkling yellow light into the glass. Flash, and it read, "Drink cool, refreshing R&H Beer." Again there was darkness, and then the series began over. There was the low sound of motors as the dirigible passed overhead, and then the wind blew the sound away. It was quiet.

The five girls--Pat, Reena O'Reair, Rosalie Callahan, Hamp Lorch, and a girl called Farrie--were sitting in the white lawn-chairs on the roof. Their faces were dark except when one of them struck a match, making a red glow about her face while she lighted a cigarette.

"Well, that was nice."

"What?"

"The beer sign. I always like them when they move," Rosalie Callahan said. She arranged herself in the chair so her dress would not wrinkle. "The other night they had Donald Duck."

"Just for you, Rosalie," Hamp Lorch said. "They know you go for those things." She turned to Pat. "Sing us another one of your songs, Patsy," Hamp said.

"What would you like? 'She was poor, but she was honest'--very appropriate to my state just now--or 'When I lived in yonder boarding-house'?"

"Oh, you'll get a job," Rosalie said.

"Sure, anybody who's had two years of college--" Hamp Lorch said.

"I would like some beer," Reena O'Reair said, "some good solid German beer."

"That's what I've been trying to tell her," Rosalie started. "Anybody with her qualifications--"

"I've been to college," Reena O'Reair stated. "And look where I am--the Broken-down and Drunk Sailors' Aid Society, officially known as the Merchant Seaman's Service and Rest Center."

"It's a soft job. You oughta' have to do what I do--and for thirty-five a week. I never went to college," Hamp Lorch said in her harsh, guttural voice. "Eight years I've been in New York--file clerk and typist for a dirty printer." She stood up and stamped out her cigarette; and, in the darkness, her eyes were black, hard balls. She pushed her hands down in the pockets of her jeans, her man's shirt tucked in over a flat chest, and paced the roof.

"Well, you're getting somewhere in that night photography course," Rosalie said.

"Sure," Hamp said. "Broke."

"That isn't what I mean," Rosalie said. "It's a first-rate school."

"And when I get through," Hamp said, "I can go back to Maine and take pictures of the whole family--if I can afford a camera." Hamp turned her back and walked off to a corner of the roof. Hamp had come from a large, poor family in Maine, which she did not talk about much. "What is there to talk about?" she would say. "They were glad to get rid of me, and I was glad to get out. Okay?" She was twenty-seven years old. She didn't go out much, and never with men--though in the night photography class, there were almost thirty men. The others had heard

that they asked Hamp for dates, but Hamp said, "They're swell fellows. But I don't go out. Okay?" "But, Hamp, you ought to. You never do anything," they would say. "No," Hamp would answer in the final, harsh guttural tone.

"Well, The Lorch is off again," Reena said, watching Hamp in the corner. "Lord, I need a beer."

"All Patsy's got to do is be tough," Rosalie continued; "and for God's sake, try to look a little older. She doesn't look over fifteen... Baby," she said to Pat, "you just look like a baby--that's all."

"I can't help it," Pat said. She looked at Rosalie, soft and plump with a pretty, almost cherub-like face. In spite of the face, she looked more than her age, twenty-one. But then she dressed very well, staying up late at night to iron her clothes. "And I just can't wear those heels," Pat said. "Yesterday my feet get red and swelled up so I couldn't get the shoes back on when I took them off. They still hurt."

"What does she want with a job?" Reena said. "She's been in New York a week, and she's already dating three men."

"They were just--"

"Incidental, I know," Reena said. "They like the new ones, and it's that Southern accent. You're always popular at first."

"You have a one-track mind," Hamp Lorch said. She had come back and was standing beside the group.

"Thank God I've still got it," Reena said.

"Hamp, we all want men," Rosalie said.

"Do you think I want to work for the Broken-down Sailors all my life? My God, I want to get married and have a family."

"Marry one of the Broken-down Sailors then," Hamp said. "You can have it. Have a dozen kids like my mother; and be sure you get an old man who's drunk all the time, so you can take in washing!" Hamp walked off. She climbed the fire-escape platform and began walking the low wall, side-step, weaving. The light from the street outlined her tall body with the rough, jutting bones and her thick, curling-black, almost Negroid hair that she wore short and man-like.

"Hamp, for God's sake!"

"Hamp, please get off," Pat yelled.

"It scares you?" Hamp said.

"Yes. I don't like high places. I feel like I'm going to jump off."

"I do, too," Hamp said. "But, for you, I will come down." She did it with a little flouish.

They did not hear the door to the hallway open then. A tall, jerking girl leaned out, and then started back.

"Oh, come on out, Helen," Rosalie called, seeing her.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. I'm sorry. I wouldn't want to break in on anything. This is a private group. I'll not bother you. I'm sorry."

"You're not breaking in on anything, Helen. Come on."

"No, I'm sorry to bother you. I'm sorry. I was just looking for Farrie."

Farrie started up from her chair, off to the corner, where she had sat silent. Farrie was a very pretty, delicate girl. She worked in a beauty parlor. "What is it?"

"Oh, that you, Farrie? They want you on the phone. I'll go now. Excuse me, I didn't want to break in on anything."

"Oh, Helen--"

"Maybe it's Bill, Farrie."

"I hope so." Farrie smiled. "He hasn't called in a week." She left quickly, Helen with her.

"She's crazy about that guy, but there's something peculiar about him."

"Slick," Hamp Lorch supplied.

"He's good-looking," Reena said.

"That was Helen," Rosalie said to Pat.

"I met her--the first night," Pat said.

"God, what a beginning," Hamp said.

"She's Pill Number One around here," Rosalie said.

"Pain Number One, you mean," Hamp said. "Didn't you know our floor was called 'Snake Pit Hall'?"

"Oh, I get along with her all right," Rosalie said. "She hasn't said anything to me since she found out I make as much as she does, and I've only been working two years. She always went around bragging about how much money she's making when she's only been working ten years--$50 a week. I shut her up. That's what you have to do. Haven't you heard her screaming in the middle of the night, Pat?"

"I heard a scream last night."

"That was Helen. She hears--or thinks she hears--Magga's radio; and she goes out and screams, 'Goddamnit-to-Hell! Shut up, you bi--' I won't say it. She makes twice as much noise as Magga's radio."

"Who's Magga?" Pat said.

Farrie came back then, to pick up her things. "The boss," she said to the group as they looked up.

"Lannie?"

"Yeah."

"What did he want?"

"He's coming to take me to ride in his new car."

"He's getting awfully friendly."

"Oh, he's just a friend. He knows about Bill."

"Yeah, but does he care?" Reena said softly.

"Would any of you like to go?" Farrie asked. "He told me to ask you."

"Not tonight, Farrie."

"Some other time. I'm tired."

"I wish you would," Farrie said, pleading. "Pat, what about you? I've told him about our Southern gal."

"Well," Pat said, "I don't think so. I've got to get up early and job-hunt. But thanks a lot, Farrie."

Farrie left.

"You'll get a job," Rosalie said. "Stop worrying."

"I asked my boss about you," Hamp said. She seemed embarrassed at the admission. "But he said this was the slow season."

"It's slow everywhere. I can't get a job. All I get is dates with the people who interview me for jobs."

"Lord, I need a beer," Reena said. "Praise God for tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Yes, the O'Reair clan has a christening--beer," she said. "The O'Reairs know how to drink beer. We do it by the keg--never pass out."

They went downstairs in the elevator. "Oh Lord," Rosalie whispered, pointing. "We'll never get off on the fourth floor. We should have

walked. Old Man Rofor's working this thing."

"You better hold on, Pat," Hamp said.

Old Man Rofor was deaf. He was a humped old man whose hands trembled as he held the levers. He forgot the fourth floor and went to the basement instead of the lobby. When he opened the door and discovered himself in the basement, he seemed puzzled. Then he closed the door and went up to the lobby. He let them out at the third floor, and they walked up.

"Twenty minutes I spent in that elevator with him once," Rosalie said. "I think he's pitiful."

"You should get stuck for half an hour between floors with him," Reena said.

In the hall, laughing, they passed a shapeless, middle-aged woman. She walked slowly, dragging her legs. She spoke to another girl, and her voice was not like language.

"Who was that?" Pat whispered to Rosalie.

"Oh, that's Magga."

"What's--what's wrong?"

"She was in an airplane crash six years ago."

"Knocked her cuckoo," Reena said.

"She's not crazy," Rosalie said. "She just learned to walk again two years ago, and to talk this year. She was a brilliant woman, they say. She had a top job with the airlines."

Pat looked back at the shapeless, animal-like woman.

"Sweet of the airlines. They gave her a pension, so she can live in this lovely rest home the rest of her life," Reena said. "You can't

be nice to her. She's a terror, always complaining."

"Better when she couldn't talk," Hamp said.

"I feel sorry for her," Rosalie said.

"Rosalie feels sorry for everybody," Hamp said. She laughed. "Even me."

III

Fourteenth Street was broad and open, but it was crowded with shoppers, peddlers, tinkling Good Humor men. The people coming from the stores stopped and gave a short gasp as they came out into the afternoon heat. It was damp heat. The peddlers screamed their bargains, paused and wiped their foreheads on their rolled-up sleeves. Their shirts were open at the neck, and their undervests were wet. They pushed nylon stockings before Pat--compacts, billfolds, and bargain sunglasses. A big, sweating man carrying packages turned to his companion angrily. "Well, you didn't have to pour it out all over me," he said. At Sixth Avenue the crowds were stopped for the traffic. A matronly, flowered-hat lady spoke. "Frances, I've been wondering about the world...."

Pat walked down toward 12th Street and the Village. Twelfth Street was narrow and crooked. After she crossed Greenwich Avenue, it was cobbled; and the trash lay in the street and piled in the gutters. It was smothering, wet-hot in the street. The fat, big-bodied women with long coils of hair leaned out of the windows in their slips. They stared, each at a point far distant, unmoving; and their eyes were empty.

On a corner stoop, a group of little girls were playing. Their smaller brothers and sisters sat and watched them, or made attempts to

follow. The little girls were arranged in a circle; and an older one, the leader, sat above them on the stoop. Their faces were serious, bent on their leader and on the little girl who knelt in their midst. She was a dirty, stained little girl with greasy blond hair. The sleeve of her dress had been torn loose, and her face was little and pinched. She had finished a dance and now knelt with her forehead in the dirt of the sidewalk. She bowed and kissed the sidewalk, then leaned up, her eyes fixed on the leader. The leader shook her head. "No. You have to have a snake around your feet and no shoes on." The little girl stared down at her dirty brown shoes, stared and made as if she would take them off. Then the thought come to her, and she looked again into the leader's face and then at the faces of those around her. They were laughing and jeering. She stared at them and at the leader. Then she ran off, crying. She had no snake.

In the night Pat sat in her window, pushed against the flowered curtains, in her housecoat; and except for that, naked and hot. She was smoking a cigarette alone because it was too hot to sleep. She stared down into the street at the stoop of the three-story house opposite. A young man, wearing a sweat shirt and some kind of tight leotards on his legs, sat there smoking in silence. He was one of the young men who sunned themselves on the roof of the three-story house--it was just level with the 'Y' fourth floor--on Saturday and Sunday mornings, walking about in swimming trunks or diaper-like shorts, flexing themselves and dancing in leaps. In the dim light of the street the young man sat. He threw down his cigarette in an arc-like motion. His arms

clasped his knees. And with them, in a slow continuous motion, he moved them inward together, touching lightly; and in the same sweep of motion, without pause for a beginning or end, moved them apart, wide. The movement was slow, rhythmic; all of him moved in the rhythm, like a liquid creature. The body flexed, contracted as a whole thing, slowly and continuously. He seemed to be an extraordinary cat, a cat man with a liquid body. And there seemed to be a meaning in his movements, a slowly intensifying meaning until it became unbearable while the liquid movement continued in slow rhythm--like the subtly suggestive call of a cat. The meaning was like a pressure in the air.

Pat left the window and went quickly from her room to Rosalie's door. "Rosalie, are you awake? Come here." Rosalie was awake. She came, and Pat led her to the window. "Isn't that--something?"

"Yes," Rosalie said. "I've seen him--lots. He's a dancer, you know, in one of the Broadway shows."

"He had to be."

"Did it scare you?"

Pat laughed. "No. It just looks so strange."

"Yes, it's queer."

"It gives you a funny feeling." Pat paused. She turned from the window, deliberately. "Rosalie," she said, "what's the matter with Reena?"

"Oh, Reena's got one idea, you know--men. She wants to get married, and she needs to. God! She's twenty-five, almost twenty-six, and she's beginning to get worried. It gets almost morbid at times."

"But what about Harold?"

"Oh, he's stodgey and set, a bald-headed old bachelor. He's in love with her. But he's dull as they come. I think she's afraid he's all she can get. He's the only one who comes back."

"The others never come back..." Pat wondered.

"Don't you know why?" Rosalie paused significantly. She waited.

"God."

Rosalie nodded. They didn't say anything for awhile. "I wish there was something we could do," Pat said.

"What can you do? She can't help it. I've talked to Reena lots. She's told me and told me into the long hours of the night. She's awfully mixed-up about a lot of things."

"I don't know. I guess there isn't anything you can do...." Pat's voice trailed. She turned. "But Hamp, Rosalie--"

"What about Hamp?"

"You can look at her and see, Rosalie. She's all tied up in knots. It's as if there were something closed up, like a little hard ball, inside her; and she keeps packing it down tighter and tighter. Someday it's going to explode."

"She likes you, you know," Rosalie said. "She likes you a lot."

"But she won't talk. She just laughs it off."

"That's Hamp, always. Nobody knows anything about Hamp."

IV

"I was not drunk," Hamp Lorch said. They were walking together--Hamp, Reena O'Reair, and Pat--toward 14th Street on their way to work.

At 14th Reena would take the subway to the Merchant Seamen's office. Hamp and Pat would go on walking.

"You recited 'The Night Before Christmas,'" Pat said, "with gestures."

"Well, what of it? I felt like reciting 'The Night Before Christmas.'"

"It happens to be the latter part of July," Pat said.

"Some people get gay, and others get sad," Reena said.

"And some people get like Rosalie," Pat said.

"Rosalie doesn't like beer," Hamp said.

"Yes, but you should have seen her the night after she went to the cocktail party," Pat said. "She was numb."

"That was the funniest thing, Hamp." Reena laughed. "You should have seen Pat in there, testing Rosalie's reflexes. She didn't have any."

"I wish I had," Hamp said. "Rosalie's always so self-controlled."

"She was then," Pat said. "She couldn't move at all."

They all laughed. "I think we should have another beer party," Reena said. "I must teach you kids to appreciate the German heritage."

There were at 14th Street then, and Reena left to get on the subway. Hamp Lorch and Pat turned down 14th. They walked along past the Salvation Army headquarters.

"Are you going this weekend, Hamp?"

"To visit that girl? I don't think so, Pat."

"Why not, Hamp? Honestly."

"I don't know. I guess I don't want to bother them, that's all. They'll have a good time without me."

"Hamp, she's asked you before--lots of times. They want you."

"I know--or I guess they do. But it's like this. When I was little, I used to go next door to play and all; and when I came home, my mother would bless me out and say, 'Stop going over to Julie's all the time. You know you're just bothering her and her mother, messing up the house.' I guess she just said it so many times--well, I've never felt right, going and bothering people. I don't know how to act. It's better to stay."

"Hamp, but that's not true. You can't let something like that cut you off all your life."

"That's the way it is," Hamp said. She held her lips in together and walked steadily.

"What is it, Hamp? What's wrong, anyway? Something is." Pat turned her eyes to Hamp.

"You, too!" Hamp said. "Listen, do you want to turn me around and cart me back to the Salvation Army headquarters? There's nothing wrong with me--why won't you kids believe that? If you don't like me the way I am, just skip it." She walked faster, angrily. Then she gave a little laugh.

"I like you, Hamp."

"Well, skip it, then," Hamp said.

They did not say anything more. They separated at 23rd Street.

Paul guided Pat on the dance floor. He moved her about expertly. They tangoed, rhumbaed, waltzed, even shagged. It didn't matter how well Pat knew to do these, for Paul was an excellent dancer. It was

only necessary to follow.

Pat had come to the Marble Collegiate Church with Reena and Rosalie. First there had been a lecture, and then the dancing had begun, and Paul had come over to Pat. Paul was an odd mixture. His mother was Irish, but his father was Mexican. He was short and stocky. His hair was black and his coloring olive, but his eyes were blue. He was evidently very popular at the church.

He was explaining this to Pat, about his blue eyes, when a taller man, who looked as if he had put bay rum on his hair for the occasion, cut in. He wore a green spotted bow-tie that was crooked. His name was Albert, and he was from Missouri. Albert danced badly, without rhythm.

"So you're new here, too," Albert said.

"I've been in New York almost two months."

"You don't have to tell me how you feel," Albert said, confiding. "I know. It's a terrible thing to be lonely in New York. It's terrible."

"But I'm not--I like it."

"You say so, but I know. I felt lonely, that way, at first. It's hard to make friends, and it's a terrible thing to be lonely. You sit all alone, and you just have to hold yourself from jumping off the roof. I know."

Paul came back, and before Pat could say anything, said, "I'm sorry. I didn't want him to dance with you. He's queer--peculiar, I mean. What did he say to you?"

Pat repeated.

"He's a--neurotic," Paul said, hissing the term.

"That bad?" Pat laughed, mocking.

"They've helped him a lot here, but I still wouldn't want any girl I liked to be with him."

Pat saw Rosalie and Reena in the coat and powder room. They said they were going home together. Pat walked back to the 'Y' with Paul.

"I like to walk," Paul said. He swung Pat's hand up and said, "You know, I taught dancing once. You're good--I could make something of you."

Pat laughed. "Wrong there. I've got less rhythm than anyone I know."

Paul shook his head. "Let me tell you about you. You're a shy girl. You've had a hard life, but you've made something of yourself. And now you want to get married and have a family." He waited for the reaction. "No? How could I be wrong? What do you want then?"

"I've been considering saving humanity," Pat said.

"Good!" Paul clapped his hands. "I like a girl who's ambitious. I am ambitious. I may be just a waiter now, but I am a good waiter. Soon I will be a headwaiter, and then I'll run by own hotel dining room." He told her how he would, when he had his own, have three dining rooms--"one for the rugular customers (ordinary people), one for distinguished people, and one for my personal friends. I will seat them all at one table, my friends. I think they will like that, don't you? We can all be a big, happy family."

Paul wanted Pat to go with him to the beach on Sunday. "I know a good beach," he said, "not like Coney Island or Brighton--quiet, secluded...

No? I beg you, Patsy... No? Well, how about the Museum of Natural History?" Pat listened while he told her all about the Museum's new display, which she had already read about.

Across the street a woman with bedraggled, henna hair swung her arms high and wove drunkenly on the sidewalk, half a block ahead of her companion, who was drunk but silent and kept pressing his head with his hands. She sang, a chant. "Chop, chop, chop, chop." She shrieked the song, weaving and swinging her arms. Her companion caught up with her, pulled her arms. She screamed and ran from him singing. He again caught up with her, pulled her roughly. He dragged her with him, and they turned off the avenue. The woman was still singing.

They were on 12th Street now, nearing the 'Y'. Paul turned to Pat. "How do you feel, Patsy," he said, "about a goodnight kiss?" He did not wait for an answer. He pushed Pat under the canopy and kissed her. "I don't like," he said, "to kiss my girls out where it's light, and everybody can see. I don't like boys who do that. They do not understand a girl's feelings."

Pat pulled away from him. She stared silently at him, a short, stocky boy, a moment and then walked ahead into the 'Y'. Paul called after her, "I'll phone you, Patsy. You will be my girl, won't you?" Pat did not answer. She walked through the lobby and went up the elevator to her room. In the darkness of her room she had a sudden image of the cat man, sitting on the steps and moving his liquid body, slowly and rhythmically. She shook herself. The cat man was tall and lean; his call was silent and intense.

The Times Square crowds late at night pressed around Pat as she walked from the theatre toward the subway. A thin little man with a too-big hat pressed against her, turned to a friend behind. "So-uh-they lighted a candle." Against a glittering, glass-front drugstore, a little boy, about ten years old, leaned. His face was expressionless, mashed-in looking, and his eyes were glassy. His mother, a brown-dressed woman in a flat straw hat, leaned over him. "Well, Robert, have you had enough of New York?" The little boy did not answer.

V

It was raining out, a dark steady drizzle. Pat, Hamp Lorch, and Reena wore raincoats over their jeans in the delicatessen next to the 'Y'. The man behind the counter handed them over the case. "You girls are going to be wetter inside than out," he laughed.

They took the case, covered over with an extra raincoat, and marched through the 'Y' lobby to the elevator. The two old women at the desk smiled and handed over their room-keys.

"Do you realize, Patsy," Hamp Lorch said, "that was Miss Hedford, the director, we just passed?--and you and Reena carrying that beer."

"Miss Hedford," Pat said, "will not know unless you talk a little louder and tell her."

Reena said, "Just don't drop it."

They crowded then into Reena's room--Hamp, Rosalie, Pat, and Farrie. They were laughing and talking. Hamp demanded that Pat sing "When I

lived in yonder boarding-house," and they all joined in. Down the hall someone yelled, "Goddamnit-to-Hell! Get quiet!"

"Helen," someone said.

"Somebody go gag her."

"Oh, just ignore it," Rosalie said.

"Hey!" Hamp Lorch said, jumping up. "Rosalie's drinking beer!"

"Even the lowest of us," Rosalie laughed, "have to cultivate our taste." She screwed up her nose.

"By God," Hamp said.

"Armageddon," Pat said.

"Some people try to show off their knowledge," Reena said.

"Armageddon is a well-known term," Pat said. "I think it is appropriate. I am leaving New York next week."

"You're not allowed to drink in your school, are you?" Hamp said.

"No."

"Awful," Hamp said. "You know, we'll miss you."

"Don't talk about it," Rosalie said.

"How can you stand it?" Reena said, going back to drinking not being allowed.

Pat laughed, "Grin and bear it. It's possible."

The party went on. They sang "She was poor, but she was honest," and Helen screamed again from down the hall. They ignored Helen.

"Just the thing for a rainy night," Reena said, "or any night, for that matter."

"Hey, let's get Hamp to recite 'The Night Before Christmas'!" someone said. They looked around to press Hamp. Hamp was sitting in a

corner by the bed, sprawled out with her head down. She looked sick.

"By God."

"She's green."

"Well, Lord, don't just stand there," Rosalie said. "Help me." She began lifting Hamp, and Pat and Reena came to help. Half-dragging and half-holding they got Hamp down to the john. They turned on the shower and held her under it. Hamp was fighting against their arms.

"That's enough," Rosalie commanded. They lifted her out. Hamp doubled over and began vomiting all over the floor.

"Oh Lord!"

At last they got Hamp down to her room and on the bed. They covered her up, and Hamp began to weep in little choking sobs.

"I think someone better stay with her," Rosalie said. "Look, I'll stay awhile, and then I'll call you, Pat."

"Sure."

"I'll stay some, too," Reena said. "I better stay first. You and Pat are all wet."

"She was awfully quiet, but gosh--" Pat said. She went down the hall with Rosalie to change.

It was about four o'clock in the morning when Rosalie came down and woke Pat up. Pat woke at once, but she did not at first understand. Rosalie's face looked frightened, and she spoke with urgency. "Come, Pat--for God's sake!"

Pat got up, pulling on her housecoat over her heat-damp pajamas. "What, Rosalie?"

"Come," Rosalie said. She pulled Pat with her. "She's talking, Pat. She doesn't know it, but she's talking. It's all coming out."

Pat tried to fix the meaning of Rosalie's frightened face in the bright light of the hall.

"She's telling all about it and crying," Rosalie said. "The tight ball, Pat--remember what you said about the tight ball inside of Hamp?.."

Hamp's body was covered with perspiration. She tossed in the bed, weeping and screaming, fighting off Pat and Rosalie as they tried to calm her.

"God, God...oh, God, no...!" Hamp screamed. "No!" She half rose in the bed. The sweat stood out on her face as in a fever and wet her pajamas. She bunched the pajamas up in her fist and fought against Rosalie's and Pat's arms. "No!" she screamed again. She lay back in the bed then; and her big, rough hands moved down her body, pressing and holding. Their weight seemed to overwhelm her. A sudden shiver ran all through her, and she was quiet. She turned over on her side and began to weep. She wept bitterly and uncontrollably, pressing her hand against her forehead. She took the hand away and seemed to stare at it. "Dirty," she said. "God!" and began weeping again. "Let me go," she plead, "go home...Feel sick and dizzy...going to be sick...Not used to drinking...Home in Maine--didn't drink..." She clapped her hands over her forehead. "They hate me! All of them...No, no..." She shook her head. "Been here three months...hate me...That's why..came..." She seemed to look up. "Love you? Love you!" Her black eyes got blacker and frightened, and the words came fast. "No! No!" she screamed. "Let me go..home! Going to be sick..Please, home...I won't!...No!" Her voice

trailed in a long, terrible scream, and she began fighting fiercely, living over the struggle in the touseled bed of a cheap house.

"Eight years..." Pat said, "eight years..."

"Hamp?" Rosalie said. "Not Hamp..."

"It's been this all along." Pat turned to Roalie. "Why couldn't she tell us?"

"Hell, hell...God, hell!" Hamp screamed. Pat and Roalie talked to her. They tried to calm her. When it was almost morning, they left her sleeping. She slept all Saturday and did not wake until late in the afternoon.

Rosalie and Pat talked about whether they should tell Hamp. "Yes," Pat said, "Hamp should know... Hamp's got to know."

Rosalie looked at Pat. Pat shook her head.

"Well, who then?" Rosalie said. "Who's going to tell her?"

"You've known her a long time, two years, anyway," Pat said. "I think you should."

"No." Rosalie shook her head. "I'm just Rosalie Callahan--friend. You know Hamp's never talked to me about things. You've come closer to it than anybody."

"But you know how to explain things..." Pat said. Finally they agreed to talk to her together.

When Hamp woke up in the late afternoon, they went up on the roof--the three of them--to get away from the heat. "If there's a breeze anywhere in this hole," Rosalie said, "it'll be up there."

Rosalie told Hamp about it with Pat beside her. Hamp sat, listening, with a mocking look on her face. At first she said that they were at

their old games again and were making it all up to prove there was something wrong when there wasn't. "So I conked out," Hamp said. "You kids have been seeing too many movies about innocent little girls who come to New York and get led astray." Her voice was hard, and her face wore a set grin. She kicked her foot and leaned back in the lawn-chair with an air of indifference.

Pat stood up in front of her. "Damn you, Hamp Lorch! What kind of guts have you got, anyway?"

There was a shock of silence on the roof. Rosalie leaned forward, shaking her head at Pat.

Pat continued to look steadily at Hamp Lorch, sitting in her chair.

After awhile Hamp spoke. "Guts, Patsy?" She looked up. "Okay, Patsy."

"All right, then, listen," Pat said. Her tone had relaxed, though. She repeated the story that she and Rosalie had gotten in broken moans and sobs.

Hamp nodded.

Pat went on. "I know, Hamp," she said. "Look at me. I didn't have it like you, but I've been through it--and I was only fifteen."

Hamp looked at Pat seriously. Pat sat down then, and the three of them talked. Rosalie was smiling at Pat. Hamp told them again the story. And after awhile they started laughing about it.

"You know," Hamp said, laughing, "you really scared me, Patsy."

"She's a little terror when she wants to be," Rosalie laughed. She turned to Hamp. "You'll go with us, Hamp--won't you?--to the 'Y' dance Tuesday night. It's really lots of fun sometimes."

"Complete regeneration?" Hamp laughed at Rosalie. But they talked about it, and Hamp agreed to go.

"Celebration," Pat said. "Who's for a coke? I'll go down to the lobby and get them."

"Sure."

"Watch Old Man Rofor," Rosalie called. "We'd like to see you again soon, you know."

Pat laughed and left. It was only a short time before she came back to the roof. She opened the door and stopped there, staring.

Rosalie was talking softly to Hamp, pleading. Hamp had climbed up on the low wall of the roof. She was walking the wall, weaving and swaying as she walked. It was dream-like; she seemed to be walking in her sleep.

Pat could not speak at first. Then said, low, "Rosalie."

Rosalie shook her head for Pat to be quiet. "Hamp, please come down... Please, Hamp...."

It was a while before they got Hamp down. She came down slowly, in the same dream-like way. She sat in the chair, sunken and silent. After awhile she opened her eyes and laughed. "What's the matter? You kids look like you've seen a ghost." She did not remember at all.

VI

It was Pat Howell's last night in New York. It had turned suddenly cold, and she and Rosalie sat in the warmth of the Smoker on the Staten Island Ferry.

Pat crushed out her cigarette and stood up. "How's for the arctic regions?" she said, "a last look."

Rosalie nodded.

Two sailors followed Pat and Rosalie from the ferry Smoker, whistling and making conversational attempts. In the dark, Rosalie and Pat left them easily, winding around the ferry from the wind side--toward Staten Island, which seemed a crouching, box-like mass, unlighted, in the darkness--and coming around to the back of the ferry. They leaned against the steel deck-poles and looked down at the ferry's broad, white wake. The ferry's engines rumbled, sounded far-off and cold. They did not say anything.

Pat stared out over the lengthening space of water at Manhattan. The skyscrapers loomed blacker than the darkness, here and there a light in them--then a great, sparkling mass of lights. These were the lights of Broadway and Times Square and the Empire State building. And over it all, a kind of lighted haze spread in the darkness of the sky. It seemed clean, like new chromium, and wonderfully exciting. Then something seemed to force its way into the splendid night picture, and it seemed a kind of dusty picture of a little boy with an expressionless, mashed-in looking face, and glassy eyes--"Well, Robert, have you had enough of New York?" And there was a little girl kneeling in the dirt of the sidewalk, bowing and kissing the walk. The ferry docked at Staten Island. Pat, leaning back against the deck-pole, watched the cars start up and roll off the ferry. The people crowded down the ramps and moved through the exit turnstiles.

HOUSEPARTY

I

"God has nothing to do with it," Mickey said. "Or did you bring Him along with you tonight, Ross?" Mickey counted the group sitting around the campfire down on the Point of the peninsula. "Only eight here. Maybe Ross left Him in the rowboat?" she said to Martha, who was sitting beside her. Martha nodded.

"I just said, 'Goddamn you,'" the boy Ross said. He shifted himself and leaned back against his elbows, looking--not at Mickey--but across the campfire at Ellie.

"Strong language," Ellie said. But she was smiling at Ross.

"Oh, cut it, darlings--before you get dirty," Leah said to Mickey and Ross. She was sitting beside Ellie. The two of them were chaperones for the houseparty--Leah, Mickey's older sister, and Ellie, her sister-in-law. "You've been at each other's throats all night. It was just a game."

"A child's game--'rhythm,'" Ellie said, yawning.

"I didn't know how to play it," Lucy Ruth, who was only eleven and so younger than the fourteen-year-old girls on the houseparty, said.

"You are an <u>unusual</u> child," Leah said drily. She stretched her long legs lazily and blew a spray of smoke across the campfire at Ross. "Ellie, where'd you get these damn cigarettes, anyway? It's like smoking a wad

of snuff."

"It was all they had at the crossroads store," Ellie said. "We could teach these kids to smoke and get rid of them, if you like."

Leah shook her head. "Impractical--we'd have five sick children on our hands."

"Six," Ellie corrected. "You are forgetting our friend from the neighboring peninsula. Or would you get sick, Ross?" She looked toward him.

"Besides, we're supposed to be chaperoning, I think," Leah said. "Not leading them astray."

"How am I unusual?" Lucy Ruth said. She always stayed two jumps behind in the conversation. She looked up at Leah and then to Frances, who was her older sister. Frances was not looking at her, though, but talking to her "best friend," Caroline.

"I know it was just a game," Mickey said. "What I was talking about was your ganging up on me," she said to Leah. "You and Ross and Ellie. I'd still be king-leader if you hadn't."

"I was king for a long time," Frances said.

"Yes, Frances was king for a long time," Caroline said. She fluffed out her platinum blond hair and looked at Ross.

"I know how to play it now," Lucy Ruth said. "All you do is sit in a circle and snap your fingers and call out numbers. Everybody has a number, and if you miss and 'break the rhythm,' you have to move to the end of the line."

"Which Ross did every time Ellie missed," Mickey said.

"The king is the best," Lucy Ruth went on. "You get to be king if you don't miss at all, and then you get to 'start the rhythm' and

call the numbers first. You have to be good to be king."

"Martha did a good job of teaching you," Leah said to Lucy Ruth. "You sound like Hoyle."

"Hoyle?" Lucy Ruth said.

"Oh, what difference does it make?" Ellie laughed, stretching herself. Ross laughed as an echo. He seemed to be echoing Ellie all the time now. "Games--children's games... Let's sing the kids some songs, Leah," Ellie said.

Leah said, "Okay," and they began to sing some dirty Army songs. The songs got dirtier; and in parts of them Leah and Ellie giggled and wouldn't sing the words, though Ross begged them.

"I'll bet it's just parts you don't know," Ross said.

"No." Ellie shook her head. "Parts for husbands and wives...yes, husbands... We learned them from our husbands before they left for Korea."

Leah stopped singing, looking at Ellie. "Damn Korea," she said, low to herself. Then she took up the songs again, and Ellie joined in. Ross got up and said the smoke from the fire was in his eyes and went over and snuggled up to Ellie. She didn't seem to mind. They went on singing.

The campfire glowed in the darkness, the flames middle-high. It lighted only dimly the cleared-out space down on the Point of the peninsula, where only low bushes and yellow grass frew. Ross had rowed over from his family's cabin on the neighboring peninsula. It was about a half-hour's walk on the road by land, but it was a space of water that could be rowed or swum in ten mintues. Ross was a year older than the

girls. He was fifteen.

"We should have waited to roast the weiners and marshmallows," Mickey said. "The flames were too high then."

"Scorching," Martha said.

"I didn't like that game," Lucy Ruth said. "Nobody ever called my number."

They didn't say anything for awhile then, listening to the songs. The fire died down, and only the coals smoked and glowed. It had turned suddenly cold after the very hot day.

"Why don't you get up and stir the fire, lover-boy?" Leah said.

"I'm too comfortable here," Ross said and snuggled further into Ellie's lap. He gave out a make-believe snore.

"I think he's immovable," Ellie laughed. She stroked his hair, twisting it into little knots.

"My dream girl," Ross opened his eyes. In the firelight they shone with yellow glints. They were his best feature, the brown eyes, though they were a little too small and were more like shining pin-points.

"he's too delicate for such work," Mickey said.

Ross rose up. "What do you mean? Don't I work all day at my pop's gas station in town? I'm tired."

"Oh, sure. Wiping off windshields and flirting with girls is hard work," Mickey said. "Child labor."

Martha got up from the group around the fire. They had started singing again. She said she was feeling a little sick and she thought she would go up to the cabin. "I guess I stayed out in the sun too much today," she said.

"It was hot as hell, all right," Leah said.

"You were taking sunbaths?" Ross looked up at Ellie and Leah. "Why didn't you tell me? I'd have been here sooner."

"I thought your services at the gas station were of the non-expendable type," Mickey said.

Ross ignored Mickey.

"She gets those words from books," Leah said, "my own little sister."

"And my sister-in-law," Ellie said.

"I guess I'll go," Martha said. She picked up a flashlight and started off up the path.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Frances called after her.

"Yes, do you want us to go with you?" Caroline called.

"No, I've just got a bad headache," Martha said. "That's all."

"Wait!" Mickey called. "I'm coming, too."

Martha waited. She flashed the light down and found the right path, where the yellow grass had been beaten down the widest. Mickey was near her, and there was a smaller form following after. It was Lucy Ruth, rubbing her eyes and turning her head back, a little unsure about leaving her older sister, Frances.

"We'll probably be up in a little while," Frances called.

"Yes, in a little while," Caroline said.

Martha turned to Mickey. "You shouldn't be leaving, should you?"

"It's my houseparty, isn't it?" Mickey said. "I can leave if I want to." She looked back toward the group. "But maybe you're thinking of <u>their</u> greater happiness?"

"Okay," Martha said. They walked ahead together in the darkness, looking down at the lighted space of path before them. They could

hear the lake water swishing against the land on both sides of them, hitting against the rocks. It sounded very near. Martha flashed the light over into the black on both sides of her. It was just the water. There were narrow, limbless trees standing in the shallows of the water on the right.

They were nearing the cabin; Martha knew by the widening of the path and the pine needles strewn over it. There was a rushing sound in the pine trees, and the cabin was all black, with no light at all. Martha stopped, and Mickey stopped with her, Lucy Ruth behind. They looked back toward the fire down on the Point. It looked warm and yellow, Martha thought. They could hear them singing. The wind batted the song in waves; so it came now loud, now a silence or a faraway sound, and then loud again.

"Why are we stopping?" Lucy Ruth said.

Martha turned to Mickey. "Honestly, boys get disgusting after awhile, don't they?"

Mickey nodded. "Especially some of them." She looked up. "You know, I've been considering a plan to eliminate them from the species."

"All of them?" Martha said.

"My sister and sister-in-law would probably be heartbroken," Mickey said.

"Maybe they would get over it," Martha said, copying Mickey's tone.

"Some of the most beautiful music that's been written, you know," Mickey said, "is for funerals."

"Aren't we going in?" Lucy Ruth said.

They went into the black cabin then, entering from the side steps. Mickey found the gas lamp on the mantel and turned it up high. Martha

watched it brighten with the bluish light and then went over to the portable radio and turned it on to a program where there was talking and laughing. She put down the flashlight.

"Have you got an aspirin, Mickey?"

Mickey said she thought so and looked around in her suitcase.

Martha took the aspirin she handed her and went out to the kitchen. In a few minutes she came back into the main room and returned the aspirin to Mickey. "No water," she said.

Mickey looked up. She had settled on the daybed, where she and Martha slept at night, and was reading one of the cabin's three novels. Across the room Lucy Ruth had gone to sleep on the couch.

"The well," Mickey said.

"Not worth it," Martha explained. "Dreary place down there this time of night. I guess I'll just read or something." She bent down under the radio table and examined the books. Besides the three novels, there was only a book of Kahlil Gibran poetry and some paperbound books that Mickey's brothers and their friends had brought out to the cabin, the same friends who had pasted up Varga girls on the walls. Martha decided she would write a letter. She got on the bed beside Mickey. Mickey moved over for her, and Martha propped her legs up in front to support the stationery box.

"Lucy Ruth is asleep," Martha said.

"Yes." Mickey looked up. "Spontaneous, I think. She just sat down on the couch, and then--bingo!"

"Pop, you mean," Martha said. "I never saw anybody but a fish go pop-pop like that with her mouth while she's sleeping."

"That's an interesting question," Mickey said. "Do fish sleep?"

Martha shook her head.

"I bet Ross snores," Mickey said. "Ellie does, you know." Mickey spoke seriously. "Do you suppose we should tell Ross?"

Martha looked at Mickey.

"No, I guess not," Mickey said. "It might break up a happy...friendship. Friendship is very important, you know."

"It is," Martha said.

"Marriage is, too, I think," Mickey said. "I don't believe I'll ever get married."

"Why?"

"Because it would involve a member of the opposite sex," Mickey said. "This book is stupid. Especially since I have already read the end." Mickey bent her head back down and started reading again, though. Martha began writing the letter. It was eleven-thirty. The others would be coming up from the Point soon, she supposed. This was like her, Martha's mother would have said, "always sitting around and dreaming" while the others down on the Point were having a good time and doing things. "Moping around, just moping around," her mother would have said. "You've certainly got no Martha in you. You're a Mary if I ever saw one. You should have been named Mary instead of Martha." Her mother thought "the world would not get very far if there were only Mary's in it," despite what it said in the Bible.

"Mickey," Martha said, "we both should have been named Mary."

Mickey looked up from the book. "Because we're likely to turn into nuns?" Mickey said. "Or do you just think 'it's a grand old name'?--as it says in the song."

"Nothing," Martha said. "I was just thinking of the Bible."

"Oh," Mickey said. "That way..." Then Mickey laughed.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Mickey said. "I was just picturing Lucy Ruth in swaddling clothes--"

"Going pop-pop," Martha laughed.

At about twelve-thirty the others came up from the Point, and they were all surprised at the time. Ross said he supposed he had better go home. His mother was having a spaghetti supper at midnight. "And you'll be going to bed," he said.

"Oh, no," Leah laughed. "Ellie and I've worked out a system--keeping the little darlings up late so they won't wake us up early in the morning--. Except for Lucy Ruth," she added, seeing her on the couch.

Lucy Ruth woke, hearing her name. She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"What?" she said.

"That's the way to treat them," Ross said in a superior tone.

"We stay up because we want to," Mickey said.

"Umm. But you should see your little eyelids drooping at two a.m., darling," Leah said to her sister. "It's a positively pitiful sight. Almost moves me to let you go on to bed." Leah stretched her legs out before her on the folded-up daybed by the radio and leaned over to switch it to music and get out her stationery box. She was a tall woman with a very good body, well-proportioned and almost muscular. She had a long, thick cascade of black, soft hair, deep brown eyes, and a slender, well-shaped nose. She was very beautiful and very much in contrast with her

little sister, Mickey. Mickey was pudgy and round with a pouting mouth and long braids. She did not wear glasses, but she had that look about her that seemed as if she wore glasses.

"Letters! Oh, my God, I almost forgot," Ellie said, looking at Leah. She scrambled over under the radio table and found her stationery. She lifted out of the box a packet of letters from her husband, smiled to herself and kissed them. "Oh, hubbie, I miss you!" She sat down on the daybed beside Leah and propped her bare legs up in front for support while she wrote.

"God, it seems they would have landed in Japan by now," she said to Leah. "They said they would cable...as soon as they landed. I hope--"

"Cut it," Leah said, her voice low.

"Yes, we have to be cheerful," Ellie said. "My dearest--" she began. Sitting on the daybed beside Leah, she looked very different. She was short and flat-chested. She admitted and lamented this fact, though she said she would not want to be any taller because of her husband. Her legs were thin, and her no-color hair hung in little hard twists of permanent. The way Ross was looking at her, though, she could have been twice as beautiful as Leah, instead of just impish or "cute," as much as you could say honestly.

Frances, Caroline, and Lucy Ruth were sitting in a huddle in the corner. Lucy Ruth leaned against her sister, Frances. Caroline, from time to time when she thought Ross was looking, flopped her platinum blond hair. But Ross was not looking at her. He stood around with his hands in his pockets. He would take them out and put them in again. He swelled out his chest. He had not yet reached his full height--he was only fifteen--

but he was taller than Ellie. He watched her closely. "Why are you writing letters tonight? There's no mail tomorrow, you know. It's Sunday.

"He's jealous," Mickey said, punching Martha, beside her. They both laughed.

"The hell with you," Ross turned to Mickey.

"Well, you are. Isn't he, Martha? For your information, Mister Ross Bryson, my sister-in-law Ellie is twenty-three years old."

"I've had about enough out of you," Ross said. He curled his lips, and his little eyes got smaller. He moved forward as if he would hit her.

Mickey leaned back, ducking. But the blow did not come.

"Oh, leave lover-boy alone, Mickey," Leah said. "We know you love each other."

Mickey blushed. It was true that she had had a secret crush on Ross for a long time. "On the contrary," Mickey said, "I find Mr. Bryson quite disgusting. And childish," she added.

"We always write our husbands every night," Ellie said. "And they write us, too, every night they can."

"Gosh, how do you find things to say?" Martha said, thinking of the letter she had started to write.

Ellie and Leah looked at each other. Their eyes met, and they grinned.

Ross said, "Well, I guess I'll be going." He started for the side door.

"You're not going by water--" Ellie said.

"Sure. It's quicker. Besides, my boat's over here."

"But it's so dark. You better walk and come pick up the boat tomorrow."

"No, I'll go by water. I'm not afraid of the dark. And I'll be back tomorrow, anyway."

"But I think--"

"Oh, let him go. Maybe he'll drown," Mickey said.

Ross ignored her. He looked straight at Ellie. "I'll see you tomorrow." He left.

"Puppy love is so sweet, don't you think?" Mickey said.

Martha gave a half-nod.

"Oh, I think he's cute, Mickey," Ellie said.

"Obviously, dear," Leah said. Ellie looked at her, and Leah looked back and then laughed. "Well, you are all charming people," Leah addressed the group. "And I'm sure we could talk all night--" She stretched herself, yawning. "But writing one's husband rather puts one in mind of--"

"Going to bed," Ellie supplied. She and Leah laughed.

Mickey got up and started undoing the daybed. "Get up," she said to Martha. "You may be a Mary who just sits around dreaming, but I am not a Lucy Ruth--and I do not go to sleep on an unmade bed spontaneously."

After they had gone to bed and the cabin was dark, Mickey and Martha could hear Leah and Ellie talking together upstairs in the unfinished attic where they slept. They would talk in low voices for awhile and then break out in giggles. Mickey turned to Martha in the darkness. "Martha," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Will you remind me, please, not to grow up?"

II

On Monday of the week before they had driven out to the cabin on the "Lake of the South"--they called it--in the loaded car. Leah was

driving and talking about her husband Van's family. She had just come back a few days earlier from spending two weeks with them. "Van's just like his father, you know. It was certainly right to name him junior, even if it is bad luck."

"Bad luck?" Lucy Ruth had said, catching on the words.

"Yes. Van had an older brother that died. He had been named junior."

"Why is that bad luck?" Lucy Ruth asked.

Leah was driving. She pulled the car to a jerking stop before the cabin.

"Oh, it's just an old superstition--nothing to it," Ellie said. "We're here, kids!"

"What old superstition?"

"That if you name a second boy junior after a brother who has died, he'll die, too--young," Leah said. She said it blankly.

"Oh," Lucy Ruth said. "But, golly then," she said happily, "you don't have to worry. Van's not dead--" Mickey and Martha caught her. Mickey clamped her hand over Lucy Ruth's mouth. Lucy Ruth looked toward Frances, puzzled. There was a silence in the car.

"Well, kids, is this a houseparty or a car-party?" Ellie laughed. They all piled out of the car.

"Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he...."

Mickey and Martha had sung together as they walked along the mile and a half of twisting road-path and then clay, country road to get the mail and milk Tuesday morning.

"He called for his pipe,
And he called for his bowl,
And he called for his privates three...."

The Negro man, who was a kind of community caretaker for the lake cabins, came out to them, nodding and smiling. He said, yes, they had mail, surely, pointing to the mail-box beside the road. He brought them the milk from where he had put it, on the shady side of the house, to keep cool for them. There were two, fat air mail letters for Leah and Ellie and a post card for Frances and Lucy Ruth from their mother. Mickey and Martha set off back down the road. "'Beer, beer, beer,' said the privates," they sang.

"'Merry men are we,
For there's none so fair
As can compare
With the U. S. Infantry!'"

It was the song they had learned the night before from Leah and Ellie. It had many verses. It went all the way up from the privates to the generals. But Mickey and Martha only knew as far as the privates. They were nearing the turn into the broad cabin yard. Mickey was carrying the air mail letters for Leah and Ellie and the post card for Frances and Lucy Ruth. She looked at the letters.

"Well, they were right," she said. "They said they'd have letters."

"Yes," Martha said.

"They were so sure," Mickey said. She looked at Martha. "I bet they'd look funny if we told them they didn't."

"Mmm," Martha said.

"They would look funny, Ellie would."

"They'd get mad," Martha said, watching Mickey.

"They'd get over it," Mickey said. She stuffed the letter down her shirt and looked at Martha. Martha hesitated a moment, then stuffed the

other letter down, as Mickey had done. They called out together, "Mail's here. Mail's here."

The others met them in front of the cabin, Leah and Ellie leading.

Mickey and Martha, holding with one hand apiece, leaned over, bowed, and presented the post card to Frances and Lucy Ruth.

"That's not all?" Leah said.

Mickey and Martha shook their heads. "Guess Frances and Lucy Ruth are the only famous people around here," Mickey said.

"Our letters--" Ellie and Leah held out their hands."

"This is no joke, you stupid kids," Leah said. "For God's sake!" She was almost crying.

Mickey and Martha pulled out the letters and handed them over.

"By God, if you ever do this again--" Leah said.

In the afternoon after lunch they had "rest hour," lying about on the beds, sleeping or reading. Martha was going up the stairs, barefoot. She had not been conscious of walking quietly; but at the rise in the stairs, she saw the double-bed mattress and springs that Leah and Ellie slept on. They were lying across it, half-naked in the attic heat; and they were talking together in a kind of frankly vulgar way about their husbands. The heat in the attic was heavy. Martha felt perspiration drops coming on her forehead. She listened for only a moment; and then she turned and went back down the stairs, slowly and cautiously so she would not be heard. She thought of the time, then, when she and Mickey were eight years old. They had crawled across the living-room floor and leaned up under the table by the window to watch Leah and the Navy ensign

on the porch. It was not Van; Leah did not even know Van then. They were on the divan, and the ensign's head was in Leah's lap. It had seemed very exciting, and they had thought it would be wonderful to be eighteen years old, like Leah. Leah and the ensign were kissing and kissing; they seemed to kiss all over. Martha's back hurt her; she felt cramped and tired leaning under the table. But they were afraid to move because Leah might hear them. She would not like it at all, Mickey said.

Nothing exciting had happened on the houseparty, but they had all thought it was fun. It was too bad it would have to end on Monday, and they would all have to go back to town again--they had said. Then they had gotten the idea. Mickey had suggested it. They would go into town on Monday and ask their mothers. Then they would all chip in five dollars, and they would come out and stay another week. Leah and Ellie agreed that they would chaperone. They laughed, and Leah said, "Hell, if they can stand it, we can. I like the simple life, anyway." And then Leah and Ellie sang,

"We two are just simple girls
Caught up in the mad, mad world,
Caught up in the mad, mad world,
Mad world of the A-arm-ee!"

III

The old Negro caretaker woke them up Sunday, bringing the cables for Leah and Ellie. Their husbands, the cables said, had arrived in Japan, and they would be stationed in Japan, not sent to Korea, for at least six weeks. Leah and Ellie grabbed and hugged each other. Then they went

around and hugged all the girls--Mickey, Martha, Lucy Ruth, and Frances and Caroline. They did a dance, and Leah kept saying, "We'll have to celebrate. We'll have to celebrate."

"I'm going to write a letter right now, right now," Ellie said.

"Well, what about breakfast?" Mickey said.

"Oh, don't worry, kids. We'll agree to anything today!" Ellie said. "Anything!"

It was two-thirty in the afternoon, and they were having a pancake breakfast in the kitchen. Ross came strolling in. "Breakfast?" He seemed puzzled, then grinned. He had dressed himself in white slacks and a yellow T-shirt. It set off his tan very well, and his small brown eyes reflected the yellow in glints. It appeared that he had carefully wiped water-stains off his trousers.

Ellie and Leah fell on him, waving the cables, and hugged him. As Ellie hugged him, Ross looked up and said, "And she she can cook, too! Will you marry me, honey?"

"I'll do anything today!" Ellie laughed.

"That's a date," Ross said, looking up seriously-jokingly at Ellie.

After breakfast he announced to Ellie and Leah that his mother was having a party that afternoon, and they were invited. "Refreshments--" he said.

"To celebrate!" Leah said.

"You can trust the <u>kids</u> alone for awhile, can't you?" Ross said.

"I don't think <u>we</u> are the kids Leah and Ellie have to worry about," Mickey said. "Did you know that under the law people are 'infants' until they are eighteen years of age? It's an interesting fact."

"And there's talk of raising the age limit for boys," Martha said.

"Nobody asked you into this, Martha," Ross said.

"It's just your charming personality. I can't resist," Martha said.

"We're interested in your education," Mickey said. "We'll be sure to let you know when you reach the age of reason."

"Aw, go tie your pig-tails," Ross said.

"Cut it, darlings," Leah broke in. "This is no day for harsh words. Oh, it's a glorious day! We'd love to come, Ross. We have to dress."

"Kindly do not beat up our lover-boy while we're upstairs," Ellie laughed and followed Leah.

They came down after a short while, Leah dressed in a red-and-white T-shirt and white shorts with navy stripes. Her bronzed skin and soft black hair made her very beautiful. "Patriotism," she said. She gave a salute.

Ellie had taken her hair out of pin-curls, and today it curled softly about her face. She wore yellow and black and looked surprisingly good, even by Leah. "I must have felt it would be a big day," she said. "I rolled my hair up."

"Gosh, you look--swell," Ross said. They laughed and followed Ross outside and down the peninsula path to the boat. Ross was gesturing and waving his arms.

Mickey said, "He looks like he's trying to fly a kite."

The afternoon was rather long and empty. No one felt like swimming. Frances and Caroline would not play cards because it was Sunday.

"Oh, for gosh sakes," Mickey said.

"We could play double-sol, Mickey," Martha said.

"That's so dull," Mickey said. "Let's just go outside."

They went together down by the water's edge where the trees stood in the water and the gound was damp and thick with leaf-sod.

"Say, you remember--" Mickey said.

"Gosh, but we had a good time that day," Martha said. "Last spring--the nicest part was skipping school. And we caught four turtles."

"Tortoises, I think," Mickey said. "And there were really five because I had one at home already."

"And we named them all for each other. I had Mickey-the-Second and Mickey-the-Third. I wish they hadn't died."

"Oh, Mickey-the-Second and Martha-the-Third got away," Mickey said. "You know, Martha-the-Second's grave is right near here. Yes, right over there by that tree, the little mound." She led Martha to the mound in the leaf-sod. They jumped over the narrow inwash of the water.

"We could dig her up and see," Mickey said.

They began to dig with their hands, turning up the sods of earth. They dug for several minutes. "Maybe she wasn't really dead and crawled off somewhere after she was buried."

"She was dead," Mickey said. "She caught herself on the barbed wire and bled to death. She smelled."

"Well, maybe this isn't the place," Martha said.

"I'm sure it is," Mickey said. But they went over and dug in another place.

"She must have been immortal," Martha said.

"I guess we just haven't got the right place," Mickey said.

It was nine-thirty at night when Leah and Ellie came back, Ross following along with them. It was still very hot, and they were perspiring.

They had driven over in the Bryson's car. Ellie and Leah were giggling together. They waved their arms and flopped on the folded-up daybed.

"Oh, charming time, lovely," they giggled.

"Mixed, that's what does it," Leah said. "You should never, never mix your drinks."

"Ross didn't have any." Ellie leaned forward and pointed her finger. "He's too young, and his mother won't let him."

Ross blushed. Frances and Caroline moved uneasily in their corner. Lucy Ruth looked puzzled.

"Look! He's blushing! Lover-boy's blushing! Doesn't he look cute?" Ellie said. "Come here, lover-boy." She motioned. "Lean down. Yes." She kissed him on the forehead. "There!" she laughed.

"Party--let's have a party," Leah said. "We can't stop the celebration now. Look at them--" Leah indicated the group around. "So sad. We must have a celebration to cheer them up. I tell you what--let's dress Ross up like a girl!"

"And I'll dress up like a man!" Ellie said. She patted Leah's hand. "Excellent suggestion."

Ross protested, but only half-seriously. Laughing, Leah and Ellie got him down. They dressed him in a flowered, full skirt and halter. They tied a ribbon around his head and put on rouge and lipstick. Then they stood back and surveyed their work. "No." They shook their heads. "I know," Leah said. She found a pair of socks and stuffed the halter.

"There now. Doesn't he look lovely?" Leah said.

"He looks beautiful. Lover-boy, you're a beautiful girl," Ellie said.

"He does look nicer as a girl," Mickey said.

Leah and Ellie were moving unsteadily about Ross, putting touches of rouge here and there and giggling. Ellie dressed in Ross's clothes with an old spotted tie about her neck and a cigarette-ash mustache. Leah went up to the attic and brought down the camera to take "Glamour Gal Rosie's and Handsome Ellie's" picture.

"Smile pretty," Leah said and clicked the camera. She looked, then, at the one and the other. She seemed to think a moment. "I know, I know," she said. "Let's have a wedding--you and Rosie must get married."

"Yes!" Rosie said. "Come, Ellie."

"But we can't," Ellie said. She let her hands fall at her sides. "He hasn't proposed," she said.

"I proposed this morning," Rosie said. "I am now a woman, and you must propose."

"Propose, Ellie," Leah commanded.

"Oh, Lord, what next?" Mickey said. But she was laughing.

Ellie got down on her knees before Rosie. She made extravagant arm-gestures. "Wilt thou, Rosie...?"

Rosie agreed.

"Now, you must be married," Leah said.

"We must," Rosie said.

Ellie stood up, looking puzzled. "But we haven't got a Justice of the Peace," she said.

"Fox paws," Mickey said to Martha. "We forgot to invite one." Mickey's face was set with indifference.

Leah considered Ellie's statement. "But you're a notary public, Ellie. You can marry people, can't you?"

They talked about this for awhile. Finally they agreed that a notary public could most definitely marry people. "Well, you can deputize me, then," Leah said.

"Yes, deputize," Ellie repeated. "We have to have a Bible," she added. She looked about as if to find one in the pockets of her drooping trousers. "A Bible," she said.

Leah was looking around for one. She turned up some pillows. "There!" she said in discovery. "Frances has one." She bent over to get the Bible from the shelf. Frances handed it to her. They stood, then, in the middle of the gas-lighted room, and Ellie solemnly swore in Leah, whose hand was on the Bible Ross held for her. Then they lined up for the wedding.

"Witnesses," Leah demanded. "Mickey, you and Martha, come and stand as witnesses."

"Can't we sit?" Mickey yawned. But they rose and walked slowly to the middle of the room. They stood to the side of Ellie and Rosie while Leah pronounced the ceremony. She rolled the words and spoke solemnly. "Dearly beloved," she said. "We are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy matrimony..." She stumbled. "If any man can show... just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him speak now, or else...forever hold his peace..." Leah waited, looking over the group. "I now pronounce you," Leah said, "Man and Wife...."

"Amen," Mickey said quietly.

"Now the bride and groom must kiss," Leah said.

"Oh, yes!" Rosie said.

"Oh, no!" Ellie said. She giggled.

Ross grabbed her, held Ellie tight, and kissed her for a long time on the mouth. When they parted, he took one of the socks from the halter and wiped off Ellie's mustache. "I don't like husbands with mustaches," he said. "It should taste better now." He pulled her back to him, crushing her in, and kissed her longer and harder.

"Air!" Ellie pulled away, giggling.

"No, no," Ross said. "The honeymoon. You're not going to cheat me out of a honeymoon."

"Honeymoon?" Ellie repeated.

"Yes," Ross said. "We've got to celebrate our wedding."

"Celebrate--yes, celebrate," Ellie laughed.

"Come with me, Husband," Ross said. He dragged Ellie toward him. Then Husband Ellie and Wife Ross went out the back door of the cabin.

"Where are you going?" Leah called.

"Secret," Ross called back. "Never tell where you're going on a honeymoon. Have to be alone."

"Secret," Ellie echoed.

"Well, let's have music," Leah said. "Reception, you know--party."

Mickey did not say anything.

Husband Ellie and Wife Ross came back after about an hour. They were mussed looking; Ross's halter was looped around his neck. They came in giggling, holding to each other.

"Home," Ellie said. "We must take my wife home to his--her--mother now. Honeymoon's over."

"No," Ross said. "Let's go outside again."

"Say, what did you two do out there?" Leah asked.

"Secret," Ross said. He grinned and pulled himself up, man-like.

"Never, never tell," Ellie said, putting her finger to her lips. She wagged the finger at Ross. "Wife, never, never tell. Now, home. Wedding's over."

"No," Ross said. "Out again."

Ellie shook her head. Then she laughed. "We're taking Rosie home in her trousseau."

Ross looked down at himself. He protested against being pushed toward the door and the car. "My clothes!" he said.

"Mine." Ellie shook her head. "Now, home. All of you come." She motioned.

They piled into the car--all eight of them--and there was an argument about who would drive. Ross wanted to, but Leah insisted. "I will drive," she said. "I'm not even a little bit drunk. You are love-birds. Coo." They all laughed except Ross. Leah leaned over and studied him in the darkness. "Why doesn't he coo?" she said to Ellie.

"He is sulking," Ellie said. She put her arm around Ross and stroked his hair. "So cute," she said.

Leah started the car. "Oops!" she said as it bucked and ran against a tree root. "Try again," she said. "'If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.'" She backed the car, and they turned into the car-track road.

"The lights," someone said.

"Oh, yes, the lights," Leah said.

The lights flashed on in the darkness. The night was black. There was no moon, and the clouds were thick, hiding the stars. Each curve in

the road, with Leah jerking the car to miss the trees, seemed a new rush of the night. The car lights were dim and useless against the blackness. In the car, they started singing. Martha was not singing. She felt Mickey, pressed close to her in the car, and wondered what Mickey was thinking. Mickey had not said anything at all for a long time that night. Her face had been almost like a mask, though sometimes she laughed. Mickey was singing now, loud. Martha started to sing with her, but she kept forgetting the words and had to wait for the others.

They thumped into the Bryson yard and let Ross out. "Goodnight kiss?" Ellie said. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth.

"All kiss Rosie goodnight," Leah said. "Kiss the bride." She leaned over Ellie and kissed him. But the others did not.

"Bashful girls," Ellie said.

Ross slouched off in the darkness, and they left.

Back in the cabin, Ellie and Leah flopped on the daybed. "Long way upstairs," Leah said. "Long, long way."

"Everybody should get married," Ellie giggled. "Lovely, just lovely."

After Ellie and Leah had gone to bed upstairs and the cabin was dark, they could still hear the giggles from the attic. And over in the corner, Frances and Caroline were whispering together. Frances leaned over after awhile and called to Mickey.

"Mickey, we've been thinking about it, Caroline and I," Frances said. "We don't see how we can come back out next week after all. Caroline says they'll need her at the store, and I think my mother will need me around the house. You know how it is. We're sorry."

There was no sound from Mickey in the darkness.

"Mickey, did you hear?... You aren't mad, are you?"

Mickey did not answer. In the darkness, Martha could only see Mickey's pudgy form sitting up, and feel her beside her. After awhile, the whispering in the corner stopped. Frances and Caroline had gone to sleep. Martha felt suddenly a great heave go through Mickey. She fell down beside Martha. "Oh, God, God, God...God!" she cried. She wept for a long time. And Martha lay beside her.

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