

Mrs. Jones

by Carol Emshwiller

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CORA IS A MORNING PERSON. Her sister, Janice, hardly feels conscious till late afternoon. Janice nibbles fruit and berries and complains of her stomach. Cora eats potatoes with butter and sour cream. She likes being fat. It makes her feel powerful and hides her wrinkles. Janice thinks being thin and willowy makes her look young, though she would admit that--and even though Cora spends more time outside doing the yard and farm work--Cora's skin does look smoother. Janice has a slight stutter. Normally she speaks rapidly and in a kind of shorthand so as not to take up anyone's precious time, but with her stutter, she can hold people's attention for a moment longer than she would otherwise dare. Cora, on the other hand, speaks slowly and if she had ever stuttered would have seen to it that she learned not to.

Cora bought a genuine kilim rug to offset, she said, the bad taste of the flowery chintz covers Janice got for the couch and chairs. The rug and chairs look terrible in the same room, but Cora insists that her rug be there. Janice retaliated by pawning Mother's silver candelabras. Cora had never liked them, but she made a fuss anyway, and she left Janice's favorite silver spoon in the mayonnaise jar until, polish as she would, Janice could never get rid of the blackish look. Janice punched a hole in each of Father's rubber boots. Cora wears them anyway. She hasn't said a single word about it, but she hangs her wet socks up conspicuously in the kitchen.

They wish they'd gotten married and moved away from their parent's old farm house. They wish . . . desperately that they'd had children, though they know nothing of children--or husbands for that matter. As girls they worked hard at domestic things: canning, baking bread and pies, sewing . . . waiting to be good wives to almost anybody, but nobody came to claim them.

Janice is the one who worries. She's worried right now because she saw a light out in the far corner of the orchard--a tiny, flickering light. She can just barely make it out through the misty rain. Cora says, "Nonsense." (She's angry because it's just the sort of thing Janice would notice first.) Cora laughs as Janice goes around checking and re-checking all the windows and doors to see that they're securely locked. When Janice has finished, and stands staring out at the rain, she has a change of heart. "Whoever's out there must be cold and wet. Maybe hungry."

"Nonsense," Cora says again. "Besides, whoever's out there probably deserves it."

Later, as Cora watches the light from her bedroom window, she thinks whoever it is who's camping out down there is probably eating her apples and making a mess. Cora likes to sleep with the windows open a crack even in weather like this, and she prides herself on her courage, but, quietly, so that Janice, in the next room, won't hear, she eases her windows shut and locks them.

In the morning the rain has stopped though it's foggy. Cora goes out (with Father's walking stick, and wearing Father's boots and battered canvas hat) to the far end of the orchard. Something has certainly been there. It had pulled down perfectly good, live, apple branches to make the nests. Cora doesn't like the way it ate apples, either, one or two bites out of lots of them, and then it looks as if it had made itself sick and threw up not far from the fire. Cora cleans everything so it looks like no one has been there. She doesn't want Janice to have the satisfaction of knowing anything about it.

That afternoon, when Cora has gone off to have their pickup truck greased, Janice goes out to take a look. She, also, takes Father's walking stick, but she wears Mother's floppy, pink hat. She can see where the fire's been by the black smudge, and she can tell somebody's been up in the tree. She notices things Cora hadn't: little claw marks on a branch, a couple of apples that had been bitten into still hanging on the tree near the nesting place. There's a tiny piece of leathery stuff stuck to one sharp twig. It's incredibly soft and downy and has a wet-dog smell. Janice takes it, thinking it might be an important clue. Also she wants to have something to show that she's been down there and seen more than Cora has.

Cora comes back while Janice is upstairs taking her nap. She sits down in the front room and reads an article in the Reader's Digest about how to help your husband communicate. When she hears Janice come down the stairs, Cora goes up for her nap. While Cora naps, Janice sets out grapes and a tangerine, and scrambles one egg. As she eats her early supper, she reads the same article Cora has just read. She feels sorry for Cora who seems to have nothing more exciting than this sort of thing to read (along with her one hundred great books) whereas Janice has been reading: HOW FAMOUS COUPLES GET THE MOST OUT OF THEIR SEX LIVES. Just one of many such books that she keeps locked in her bedside cabinet. When she finishes eating, she cleans up the kitchen so it looks as if she hadn't been there.

Cora comes down when Janice is in the front parlor (sliding doors shut) listening to music. She has it turned so low Cora can hardly make it out. Might be Vivaldi. It's as if Janice doesn't want Cora to hear it in case she might enjoy it. At least that's how Cora takes it. Cora opens a can of spaghetti. For desert she takes a couple of apples from the "special" tree. She eats on the closed-in porch, watching the clouds. It looks as if it'll rain again tonight.

About eight-thirty they each look out their different windows and see that the flickering light is there again. Cora says, "Damn it to hell," so loud that Janice hears from two rooms away. At that moment Janice begins to like the little light. Thinks it looks inviting. Homey. She forgets that she found that funny piece of leather and those claw marks. Thinks most likely there's a young couple in love out there. Their parents disapprove and they have no place else to go but her orchard. Or perhaps it's a young person. Teenager, maybe, cold and wet. She has a hard time sleeping, worrying and wondering about whoever it is, though she's still glad she locked the

house up tight.

The next day begins almost exactly like the one before, with Cora going out to the orchard first and cleaning up--or trying to--all the signs of anything having been there, and with Janice coming out later to pick up the clues that are left. Janice finds that the same branch is scratched up even more than it was before, and this time Cora had left the vomit (full of bits of apple peel) behind the tree. Perhaps she hadn't noticed it. Apples--or at least so many apples aren't agreeing with the lovers. (In spite of the clues, Janice prefers to think that it's lovers.) She feels sorry about the all-night rain. There's no sign that they had a tent or shelter of any kind, poor things.

By the third night, though, the weather finally clears. Stars are out and a tiny moon. Cora and Janice stand in the front room, each at a different window, looking out towards where the light had been. An old seventy-eight record is on, Fritz Kreisler playing a Bach Chaconne. Janice says, "You'd think, especially since it's not raining. . . ."

Cora says, "Good riddance," though she, too, feels a sense of regret. At least something unusual had been happening. "Don't forget," Cora says, "the state prison's only ninety miles away."

Little light or no little light, they both check the windows and doors and then recheck the ones the other had already checked, or, at least Cora rechecks all the ones Janice had seen to. Janice sees her do it and Cora sees her noticing, so Cora says, "With what they're doing in genetic engineering, it could be anything at all out there. They make mistakes and peculiar things escape. You don't hear about it because it's classified. People disapprove so they don't let the news get out." Ever since she was six years old, Cora has been trying to scare her younger sister, though, as usual, she ends up scaring herself.

But then, just as they are about to give up and go off to bed, there's the light again. "Ah." Janice breathes out as though she had been holding her breath. "There it is, finally."

"You've got a lot to learn," Cora says. She'd heard the relief in Janice's big sigh. "Anyway, I'm off to bed, and you'd better come soon, too, if you know what's good for you."

"I know what's good for me," Janice says. She would have stayed up too late just for spite, but now she has another, secret reason for doing it. She sits reading an article in *Cosmopolitan* about how to be more sexually attractive to your husband. Around midnight, even downstairs, she can hear Cora snoring. Janice goes out to the kitchen. Moves around it like a little mouse. She's good at that. Gets out Mother's teakwood tray, takes big slices of rye bread from Cora's stash, takes a can of Cora's tunafish. (Janice knows she'll notice. Cora has them all counted up.) Takes butter and mayonnaise from Cora's side of the refrigerator. Makes three tunafish

sandwiches. Places them on three of Mother's gold-rimmed plates along with some of her own celery, radishes and grapes. Then she sits down and eats one plateful herself. She hasn't let herself have a tunafish sandwich, especially not one with mayonnaise and butter and rye bread, in quite some time.

It's only when Janice is halfway out in the orchard that she remembers what Cora said about the prison and thinks maybe there's some sort of escaped criminal out there--a rapist or a murderer, and here she is, wearing only her bathrobe and nightgown, in her slippers, and without even Father's walking stick. (Though the walking stick would probably just have been a handy thing for the criminal to attack her with.) She stops, puts the tray down, then moves forward. She's had a lot of practice creeping--creeping up on Cora ever since they were little. Used to yell, "Boo," but now shouts out anything to make her jump. Or not even shouting. Creeping up and standing very close and suddenly whispering right by her ear can make Cora jump as much as a loud noise. Janice sneaks along slowly. Has to step over where whoever it is has already thrown up. Something is huddling in front of the fire wrapped in what at first seems to be an army blanket. Why it is a child. Poor thing. She'd known it all the time. But then the creature moves, stretches, makes a squeaky sound, and she sees it's either the largest bat, or the smallest little old man she's ever seen. She's wondering if this is what Cora meant by genetic engineering.

Then the creature stands up and Janice is shocked. He has such a large penis that Janice thinks back to the horses and bulls they used to have. It's a Pan-type penis, more or less permanently erect and hooked up tight against his stomach, though Janice doesn't know this about a Pan's penis, and, anyway, this is definitely not some sort of Pan.

The article in *Cosmopolitan* comes instantly to her mind, plus the other, sexier books that she has locked in her bedside cabinet. Isn't there, in all this, some way to permanently outdo Cora? Whether she ever finds out about it or not? Slowly Janice backs up, turns, goes right past her tray (the gleam of silverware helps her know where it is), goes to the house and down into the basement.

They'd always had dogs. Big ones. For safety. But Mr. Jones (called Jonesy) had only died a few months ago and Cora is still grieving, or so she keeps saying. Since the dog had become blind, diabetic, and incontinent in his last years, Janice is relieved that he's gone. Besides, she has her heart set on something small and more tractable, some sort of terrier, but now she's glad Jonesy was large and difficult to manage. His metal choke collar and chain leash are still in the cellar. She wraps them in a cloth bag to keep them from making any clanking noises and heads back out, picking up the tray of food on the way.

As she comes close to the fire, she begins to hum. This time she wants him to know she's coming. The creature sits in the tree now and watches her with red glinting eyes. She puts the tray down and begins to talk softly as though she were trying to calm old Jonesy. She even calls the thing Mr. Jones. At first by mistake and then on purpose. He watches. Moves nothing but his eyes and big ears. His wings,

folded up along his arms and dangling, are army-olive drab like that piece she found, but his body is a little lighter. She can tell that even in this moonlight.

Now that she's closer and less startled than before, she can see that there's something terribly wrong. One leathery wing is torn and twisted. He's helpless. Or almost. Probably in pain. Janice feels a rush of joy.

She breaks off a bit of tunafish sandwich and slowly, talking softly all the time, she holds it towards his little, clawed hand. Equally slowly, he reaches out to take it. She keeps this up until almost all of one plateful is eaten. But suddenly the creature jumps out of the tree, turns around and throws up.

Janice knows a vulnerable moment when she sees one. As he leans back on his heels between spasms, she fastens the choke collar around his neck, and twists the other end of the chain leash around her wrist.

He only makes two attempts to escape: tries to flap himself into the air, but it's obviously painful for him; then he tries to run. His legs are bowed, his gait rocking and clumsy. After these two attempts at getting away, he seems to realize it's hopeless. Janice can see in his eyes that he's given up--too sick and tired to care. Probably happy to be captured and looked after at last.

She leads him back to the house and down into the basement. Her own quiet creeping makes him quiet, too. He seems to sense that he's to be a secret and that perhaps his life depends on it. It was hard for him to walk all the way across the orchard. He doesn't seem to be built for anything but flying.

There is an old coal room, not used since they got oil heat. Janice makes a nest for him there, first chaining him to one of the pipes. She gets him blankets, water, an empty pail with lid. She makes him put on a pair of her underpants. She has to use a cord around his waist to make them stay up. She wonders what she should leave him to eat that would stay down? Then brings him chamomile tea, dry toast, one very small potato. That's all. She doesn't want to be cleaning up a lot of vomit.

He's so tractable through all this that she loses all fear of him. Pats his head as if he were old Jonesy. Strokes the wonderful softness of his wings. Thinks: If those were cut off, he'd look like a small old man with long, hard fingernails. Misshapen, but not much more so than other people. And clothes can hide things. Without the dark wings, he'd look lighter. His body is that color that's always described as *café au lait*. She would have preferred it if he'd been clearly a white person, but, who knows, maybe a little while in the cellar will make him paler.

After a last rubbing of his head behind his too-large ears, Janice padlocks the coal room and goes up to her bedroom, but she's too excited to sleep. She reads a chapter in *ARE YOU HAPPY WITH YOUR SEX LIFE?*, the one on "How to Turn Your Man into a Lusting Animal." ("The feet of both sexes are exquisitely sensitive," and, "Let your eyes speak, but first make sure he's looking at you." "Surrender.

When he thinks he's leading, your man feels strong in every way.") Janice thinks she will have to be the one to take the initiative, though she'll try to make him feel that he's the boss--even though he'll be wearing the choke collar.

For a change, Janice wakes up just as early as Cora does. Earlier, in fact, and she lies in bed making plans until it is late enough to get up. She gets a lot of good ideas. She comes downstairs whistling Vivaldi--off key, as usual, but she's not doing it to make Cora angry this time. She really can't whistle on key. Cora knows that Janice knows Cora hates the way she whistles. Cora thinks that if Janice really tried, she could be just as in tune as Cora always is. Cora thinks Janice got up early just so she could spoil Cora's breakfast by sitting across from her and looking just like Mother used to look when she disapproved of Father's table manners. And Cora notices, even before she makes her omelet, that one can of tunafish is missing, and that her loaf of rye bread has gone down by several slices. She takes a quart of strawberries from Janice's side of the refrigerator and eats them all, not even bothering to wash them.

Janice doesn't say a word, or even do anything. She doesn't care, except that Jonesy might have wanted some. Janice is feeling magnanimous and powerful. She feels so good she even offers Cora some of her herb tea. Cora takes the offer as ironic, especially since she knows that Janice knows she never drinks herb tea. She retaliates by saying that, since they're both up so early, they should take advantage of it and go out to the beach to get more lakeweed for the garden.

Janice knows that Cora decided this just to make her pay for the tunafish and mayonnaise and such, but she still feels magnanimous--kindly to the whole world. She doesn't even say that they'd already done that twice in the spring, and that what they needed now ere hay bales to put around the foundations of the house for the winter. All she says is, "No."

It's never been their way to shirk their duties no matter how angry they might be with each other. When it comes to work, they've always made a good team. But now Janice is adamant. She says she has something important to do. She's not ever said this before, nor has she ever had something important to do. Cora has always been the one who did important things. This time Cora can't persuade Janice to change her mind, nor can she persuade her that there's nothing important to be done--or nothing more important than lakeweed.

Finally Cora gives up and goes off alone. She hadn't meant to go. She's never gone off to get lakeweed by herself, but she goes anyway, hoping to make Janice feel guilty. Except Cora knows something is going on. She's not sure what, but she's going to be on her guard.

As soon as Janice hears the old pickup crunch away on the gravel drive, she goes down in the basement, bringing along Father's old straight razor (freshly sharpened), rubbing alcohol and bandages. Also, to make it easier on him, a bottle of sherry.

Cora comes back, tired and sandy, around six-thirty. Her face is red and she has big, dried, sweat marks on her blue farmer's shirt, across the back and under the arms. She smells fishy. She's so tired she staggers as she climbs the porch steps. Even before she gets inside, she knows odd things are still going on. There's the smells ... of beef stew or some such, onions, maybe a mince pie, and there, on the hall table, a glass of sherry is set out for her. Or seems to be for her. Or looks like sherry. Though the day was hot, these fall evenings are cool, and Janice has laid a fire in the fireplace, and not badly done. Cora always knew Janice could do it properly if she really tried. Cora takes the sherry and sits on the footstool of Father's big chair. It's one of the ones Janice had covered in a flowery pattern--looks like pinkish-blue hydrangea. Cora turns away from it and looks at the fire. Thinks: All this has got to be because of something else. Or maybe it's going to be a practical joke. If she lets down her guard she'll be in for big trouble. But even if it's a joke, might as well take advantage of it for as long as she can. The sherry relaxes her. She'll go up and shower--if, that is, Janice has left her any hot water.

For several days, Mr. Jones is in pain. Janice is glad of it. She knows how a wild thing--or even a not so wild thing--appreciates being nursed back to health. She hopes Mr. Jones was too drunk to remember about the ... removal ... amputation ... whatever you'd call it. (Funny, he only has four fingers on each hand. She'd not noticed that at first.)

As soon as he's better, she hopes to bond him to her in a different way.

Cora is still suspicious, but doesn't know what to be suspicious about. The good food is going on and on. After supper Janice cleans up and doesn't ask Cora for help even though Janice has done all the cooking. And Janice disappears for hours at a time. Goes up to take her nap--or so she says, but Cora knows for a fact that she's not in her bedroom. After the dishes are cleaned up in the evenings, Janice sews or knits. It's not hard to see that she's knitting a child-sized sweater, sewing a child-sized pair of trousers. At the same time, she's working on a white dress, lacy and low necked. Cora thinks much too low necked for someone Janice's age. But perhaps it's not for Janice. Maybe Janice has some news she's keeping from Cora. That would be just like her. Someone is getting married or coming for a visit. Or maybe both: someone getting married and a child is coming to visit.

Mr. Jones is getting better, eating soups, nuts and seeds and keeping everything down, finally. Janice is happy to see that his skin has faded some. He might pass for a gnarled, little Mexican, or maybe a fairly light India Indian. And he's beginning to understand some words. She's been talking to him a lot, more or less as she used to talk to old Jonesy. He knows: good boy and bad boy, and sit, lie down, be quiet.... She thinks he even has the concept of, "I love you." She'd never said that to any other creature ever before, not even to the pony they'd had when they were little. She's been doing a lot of patting, back rubbing, scratching under the chin and behind the ears. Though he's always wearing a pair of her underpants tied up around his waist, every now and then she notices his penis swelling up even larger

than it already is, though she hasn't even tried the stroking of the exquisitely sensitive feet yet.

One night, after reading over again the chapter, "How to Turn Your Man into a Lusting Animal," she puts on her flowery summer nightgown (even though the nights are colder than ever and they haven't started up the furnace yet). She puts on lipstick, eyeshadow, perfume, combs her hair out and lets it hang over her shoulders.... (She's only graying a little bit at the temples. Thank God not like Cora; she's almost completely gray.) She goes down into the cellar with a glass of sherry for each of them. Not too much, though. She's read about alcohol and sex. She tells him she loves him several times, kisses him on the cheeks and then on the neck, just below the choke collar. Finally she kisses his lips. They are thin and closed tight. She can feel the teeth behind them. Then she rolls her nightgown up to her chin. She hopes he likes what he sees even though she's not young anymore. (If anything, he looks surprised.) But no sooner has she lain herself down beside him, than it's over. She's even wondering, Did it really happen? Except, yes, there's blood and it did hurt. But this isn't at all like the books said it would be or should be. She's read about premature ejaculation. This must be it. Maybe later, when he knows more words, they can go for sex therapy. But--oops--there he goes again, and just as fast as before. After that he falls asleep. She not only didn't get any real foreplay, but no afterplay either. She's wondering: Where's the romance in all this?

Well, at least she's a real woman now. She hasn't missed all of life. She may have missed a lot, but no one can say she's missed all, which is more than Cora can say about herself. Janice thinks she is, and probably permanently--at least she hopes so--one up on Cora. She has joined the human race in a way Cora probably never will, poor thing. Janice will be kind.

Janice hardly ever drives. She has always left that to Cora. She knows how, but she's out of practice. Now she has several errands to do. She wants a nice pin-striped suit, though she wonders if they come in boys' sizes--a suit like her father never would have worn. She wants a good suitcase. Not one from the five and ten. Shiny shoes big enough for rough claws, though she's cut those claws as short as she could, using old Jonesy's nail clippers. Since Mr. Jones looks sort of Mexican, she'll get him a south-of-the-border, Panama-type hat and dark glasses.

It only takes a couple of days for Janice to get her errands done and then a couple more to get the guest room ready: aired out, curtains washed, bed made. (Good it's a double bed.) She whistles all the time and doesn't even remember that it always bothers Cora.

Cora watches the preparation of the guest room, but refuses to give Janice the satisfaction of asking her any questions. It's easy to see that Janice wonders why Cora isn't asking. Once Janice started to tell her something, but then turned red to her collar bone and shut up fast.

Janice has continued making good suppers of Cora's favorite foods. Cora is

still waiting for the practical joke to come to its finale, but even-or especially if it doesn't end, she knows something's up. She hasn't let down her guard and she's snooped around--even in the basement, but not in the coal room. She didn't notice the padlock on the door. But in the attic she did find a large--very large piece of stiff leather, dried blood along its edges. So brittle she couldn't unfold it to see what it was. It gave her the shivers. Pained her to see it, though she couldn't say why. Perhaps it was the two toenails or claws that were attached to each corner. She'd thought of throwing the dead-looking thing out in the garbage, but after she saw those claws that were part of it, she couldn't bring herself to touch it again.

Everything is ready, but Janice knows Jonesy needs a little more experience and training. She wants to pretend to go down and pick him up at the airport in Detroit. Cora, if she hears about it, will never let Janice go there by herself. But Cora mustn't be there. For lots of reasons, not the least of which that Janice wants the trip to be like a honeymoon. They could sneak out in the middle of the night and they could take two or three or even more days getting down there, and two or three or more days coming back. Maybe a couple of days enjoying Detroit. Jonesy could learn a lot.

Janice has never dared to even think of going on a trip like this before, but with Jones she wouldn't be alone. She sees herself, dressed in her best, sitting across from him (he'll be wearing his pin-striped suit) in restaurants, going to motels--movies, even. . . . She'd look right doing these things. Like all the other couples. They'd hold hands in the movies. They'd stroll in the evenings after their long drive. Can he stroll? She'll get him a walking stick in Detroit. Better than Father's. Silver handled. He may be a cripple, but he'll look like a gentleman. And the better he looks the more jealous Cora will be.

And it started out to be a wonderful honeymoon. Janice kept the choke collar on under Jones's necktie and shirt, running the chain down inside his left sleeve so that when she held his hand she could also hold the chain just to make sure. She also found a way to hold the back of his shirt so she could give a little pull on it, but she seldom had to use any of these techniques. And how could he try to escape, hobbling as he does? Unless he learns to drive the pickup? But Janice wouldn't be a bit surprised if he could learn to drive it. Even before they get to Detroit, Jonesy is dressing himself, uses the right fork in fancy restaurants, can eat a lobster just as neatly as anyone can.

Janice keeps a running conversation going, just as if they were communicating. She keeps saying, "Don't you think so, dear?" hoping nobody will notice that he doesn't nod. Except she's sure that lots of husbands are like that. Even Father often didn't answer Mother, lost in his own thoughts all the time. But Mr. Jones doesn't look lost in his thoughts. And he doesn't look as if he feels hopeless anymore. He looks out at everything with such intelligence that Janice is considering calling him Doctor Jones.

In Detroit (they are staying at the Renaissance Center) Janice gets the good

idea that they should get married right there at City Hall. Before she even tries to do it, she calls up Cora. "I got married," she says, even though it hasn't happened yet, but, anyway, whether it does or not, Cora will never know the difference. "And isn't it funny, I'm Mrs. Jones, and I call him Jones, just like Old Jonesy."

Cora can't answer. She just sputters. She's been lonelier without Janice there than she ever thought she would be. She had even wished the little light was still flickering in the orchard. She'd gone out there, hoping to find another nest. Partly she'd been just looking for company. She'd even left the doors unlocked, her window open. But then she'd put two and two together. She's had all these days to wonder and worry and wait, and she's been down in the basement where the coal-room door had been carelessly left open. She's seen the pallet on the floor, the bowl of dusty water, the remains of a last meal (Mother's china, wine glasses,) three pairs of Janice's underpants, badly soiled. And she remembered that piece of folded leather with the dried blood all over it that she'd found in the attic and she'd gotten the shivers all over again. Cora knows she's been out-manuevered by Janice, which she never thought could ever come about, but she suddenly realizes that she doesn't care about that anymore.

She sputters into the phone and then, for the first time--at least that Janice ever knew about--Cora bursts into tears. Janice can tell even though Cora is trying to hide it. All of a sudden Janice wants to say something that will make Cora happy, but she doesn't know what. "You'll like him," she says. "I know you will. You'll love him, and he'll love you, too. I know him well enough to know he will. He will."

Cora keeps on trying to hide that she's crying, but she doesn't hang up. She's glad, at last, to be connected to Janice however tenuously.

"I'll bring you something nice from Detroit," Janice says.

Cora still doesn't say anything, though Janice can hear her ragged breathing.

"I'll be back real soon." Janice, also, doesn't want to break the connection, but she can't think of anything else to say. "I'll see you in two days."

It takes four. Janice comes home alone by taxi, after a series of buses. (The pickup is going to be found two weeks later up in Canada, north of Thunder Bay. Men's clothes will be found in it, including Panama hat, dark glasses, and silver-handled cane. The radio will have been stolen. There will be maps, and a big dictionary that had never belonged either to Cora or Janice.)

As Janice staggers up the porch steps, Cora rushes down, her arms held out, but Janice flinches away. Janice is wearing a wedding ring and a large, phony diamond engagement ring. She has on a new dress. Even though it's wrinkled and is stained with sweat across the back, Cora can see it was expensive. Janice's hair is coming loose from its psyche knot and now she's the one who's crying and trying to pretend she's not.

Cora tries to help Janice up the steps. Even though Janice stumbles, she won't let her, but she does let Cora push her on into the living room. Janice collapses onto the couch, tells Cora, "Don't hover." Hovering is something Cora never did before. It's more like something Janice would do.

Even after Cora brings Janice a strong cup of coffee, Janice won't say a single word about anything. Cora says she'll feel better if she talks about it, but she won't. She looks tired and sullen. "You'd like to know everything, wouldn't you just," she says. (What other way to say one up than not to tell? . . . than to have secrets?)

Cora almost says, "Not really," but she doesn't want to be, anymore, what she used to be. Janice hasn't had the experience of being in the house all alone for several days. There's a different secret now that Janice doesn't know about yet. Maybe never will unless Cora goes off someplace. But why would she go anyplace? And where? Besides, being one up or being even doesn't matter to Cora anymore. She doesn't care if Janice understands or not. She just wants to take care of her and have her stay. Maybe, after a while, Janice will come to see that things have changed.

Cora goes to the kitchen to make a salad that she thinks Janice will like. She sets the dining room table the way she thinks Janice would approve of, with Mother's best dishes, and with the knives and forks in all the right places, and both water glasses and wine glasses, but Janice says she'll eat later in the kitchen and alone and on paper plates. Meanwhile she'll take a bath.

After Cora eats and is cleaning up the last of her dishes, Janice comes in, wearing her nightgown and Mother's bathrobe. As she leans to get a pan from a lower shelf, the bathrobe falls away. When she straightens up again, she sees Cora staring at her. "What are you ogling!" she says, holding the frying pan like a weapon.

"Nothing," Cora says, knowing better than to make a comment. She's seen more than she wants to see. There are big red choke collar marks all around Janice's neck.

But something must be done or said. Cora wonders what Father would have done? She usually knows exactly what he'd do and does it without even thinking about it. Now she can't imagine Father ever having to deal with something like this. She can't say anything. She can't move. finally she thinks: No secrets. She says, "Sister." And then . . . but it's too hard. (Father never would have said it.) She starts. She almost says it. "Sister, I love. . . ."

At first it looks as if Janice will hit her with the frying pan, but then she drops it and just stares.