

# A Cupful of Space

## by Mildred Clingerman

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First published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*; 'Stickeney and the Critic', 'Stair Trick', 'Minister Without Portfolio', 'Birds Can't Count', 'The Word', 'The Last Prophet', 'Mr. Sakrison's Halt', 'The Wild Wood', 'A Day for Waving', 'The Day of the Green Velvet Cloak', and 'Letters From Laura'.

First published in *Collier's*; 'First Lesson' and 'Winning Recipe'.

First published in *Woman's Home Companion*; 'The Little Witch of Elm Street'.

The following stories are original in this book; 'Gay Deceiver' and 'Red Heart and Blue Roses'.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BALLANTINE BOOKS, INC. 101 Fifth Avenue, New York 3, N.Y.

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### *FIRST LESSON*

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THE HOUSE WAS VERY UGLY—ONE OF THOSE NARROW THREE-story Queen

Anne houses with scalloped siding and a turret. Back in the nineties some other woman, perhaps, had occupied the turret bedroom and considered it romantic. Sometimes in the late afternoons I'd lean my arms on the windowsill and stare down through the green leaves of the tulip tree, watching for Hugh to turn into this quiet street, and I'd remember that tower rooms were the traditional vintage points for wives of soldiering husbands. There were half a dozen other wives waiting in that house for their men, but I knew that none of them waited with my peculiar fear.

As a matter of fact, Hugh and I felt ourselves very fortunate to be in that house. Hugh was neither an officer nor an officer candidate, and the landladies in that town upheld army tradition by almost never mixing enlisted men with the officer caste. But our landlady had a streak of romance and rebellion. She also had a soft spot for the enlisted paratroopers, who seemed to represent for her the essence of the crazy wildness Southern women find so attractive in men. Moreover, I was able to fall into Southern speech at will. I had only to remember the tones of my grandmother's voice, and my tongue obligingly produced the sounds that made my landlady happy; my voice grew higher and drag-gingly sweet, and the rhythm of the words changed subtly. One used almost any weapon to acquire a room in those days. in that town. Mrs. Allen, our landlady, had grown wry fond of me almost immediately.

The officers' wives were not in the least fond of me. We smiled coolly at each other when we passed on the stairway. They were punctilious about allowing me my turn in the bathroom, but the only conversation I'd ever had with any of them was once when the tall dark one ran out of cigarettes and borrowed a pack from me. She was in a great hurry to get back to her room and only paused long enough to tell me that the turret room was charming, really charming. Her enthusiasm alarmed me. I was afraid she wanted it for friends and might influence Mrs. Allen to make us move. But then I recalled Tall Dark's New Jersey accent and knew how unlikely it was that Mrs. Allen would ever be swayed by crisp consonants.

I ought to have been very lonely, I suppose. I was homesick for mountains and desert and distance, and I was often sickened by that hate and fear, so palpable in the South it oppressed one's breathing at times, but I wasn't lonely. Unless there was a night jump scheduled, Hugh came swinging down the street every afternoon, having been deposited at the corner by the bus labelled *Jordan*, which one must always remember to pronounce *Jordan*. Later the two of us would sally forth for the evening meal, since the turret room had no cooking facilities. So, except for the recurring dream that tortured me most nights, the evenings were good. I never told Hugh about the dream, and when I cried out in my sleep, he woke me with sleepy little kisses, murmuring all our familiar love words till I slept again. I roused briefly when his alarm clock rang at four A.M. and lay blinking at the brightness of the overhead light while Hugh dressed, listening to the heavy sighing with which Hugh greeted another day of soldiering. Watching his meticulous lacing of the paratrooper boots had such a hypnotic effect on me that generally I fell asleep again and never even heard his departure.

Mrs. Allen gave me coffee in the late mornings. She kept her coffee pot full all day, and I was free to help myself. Several times a day she stood at the foot of the stairway and summoned me with her fluty, penetrating voice to come have a "dope" with her. Bottled cola drinks in the South were so strong they made me feel as if my scalp were floating, and I rarely managed to down more than one a day, while Mrs. Allen easily disposed of six or eight.

When Mrs. Allen wasn't drinking coffee or cola, which she drank always standing up, staring exhaustedly at the kitchen sink, she was following the colored maid around, exhorting and pleading in a sweetly despairing voice audible all over the house. Iris was a sullen-faeed young woman who never swept the corners of rooms, but plied her broom in aimless circles while she gazed inscrutably at the cobwebs hanging from the high ceilings. One often met Iris carrying a mop bucket full of cold, greasy black water and dragging a string mop that resembled a tumbled heap of dark worms, some of which detached themselves to Me coiled in waiting all along the hall. Sometimes there was an ominous silence between the two women that kept me confined to

my room, despite my longing for coffee. There were days, I knew, when the widowed Mrs. Allen woke up "suffering" and dosed herself liberally with bourbon. The kitchen wasn't a pleasant spot on such mornings. But after a few hours I'd hear Iris and Mrs. Allen laughing together—shrieking, rather—their laughter so much alike I couldn't distinguish one voice from the other. I'd go down then and have my coffee before I dressed to leave the house for a late luncheon.

I was one of an army of wives that invaded the streets at that hour. Most of them walked in pairs like schoolgirls, eating together, shopping together, sharing little private jokes, and occasionally quarreling with the bitter intensity of bored women. I came to recognize many of these couples, and we all smiled and nodded, but I had no desire to join them or to link myself with any of the other unattached women who made tentative efforts to form an alliance. My reluctance was, I suppose, a kind of snobbery, but it was also an effort to maintain some semblance of my normal, civilian life which had never depended on just that type of feminine companionship.

I explored the town on foot and by bus. I spent hours in the library, and once I rented a light airplane and flew myself high over the town for an hour and a half of blissful solitude, till the mist from the river cut down on the visibility. It looked like a very clean, orderly world from up there, but I knew better. The war was going badly for us at that time, and any day now Hugh's group would be shipped out. In the meantime they were practicing night jumping with full equipment, and with this step-up in the training program my nightmare dream became more insistent, more de-tailed.

I became less and less able each morning to shake off the horror of the dream. Mrs. Allen began to chide me for looking so poorly. Even Iris, who had ignored me for the most part, began to cluck a soft, wordless counterpoint to Mrs. Allen's mournful inventory of all that was wrong with my appearance. I was much too pale, they assured me; my eyes looked like two burnt holes in a blanket, and I'd better get myself to a doctor before my bones started poking out of my skin. Iris followed me back to my room one day carrying the mop bucket and the squirming mop, with the avowed intention of doing up my room for me. At her insistence I retreated to the bed while she smeared the middle of the worn linoleum with liquid that resembled swamp-water. Her eyes flashed with something like friendliness when I offered her a cigarette and asked her to sit down a minute and talk to me. She dropped into the straight chair, as far away from me as she could get in that small room. For a while we simply smoked, avoiding each other's eyes, both of us overcome by acute embarrassment.

Finally Iris said, "You 'bout worried sick?"

I shook my head. "I keep having the same dream," I said. "It's so real—I can't forget it in the daytime. It haunts me. I know it's silly to let it bother me so much..." My voice trailed off, and I tried to find something in the room to look at, because Iris' eyes were unreadable.

"Is it a real bad dream?"

"Horrible," I said. We stared earnestly at each other then for a long moment, and something stirred between the black woman and me—a tenuous thread of communication that seemed to dispel all the barriers we'd each put up. I forgot that I was not superstitious, and I realized I was asking for help. I can't be sure, but I think Iris forgot for an instant that I was white and too know-it-all to be deserving of help. In any case her response came almost automatically, as if she were unable to stop herself.

"Tell Iris..."

I drew a deep breath and told her. I told her about the inky night sky and the droning airplane and the tense men lined up in the aisle of the plane, waiting for the signal light that would tell them they were over their drop area. I told her about Hugh, standing in the open door, just behind the lieutenant who was to lead off the jump. I saw the first man whisked out the door with Hugh right behind him.—I saw their grimacing faces when the opening shock hit them—somewhat

comparable, I told Iris, to hitting a padded brick wall at 85 miles an hour. But this was all right, this was normal. It always happened when they hit the end of the static line and the chutes opened. I told her about the expanse of white silk that billowed over Hugh's head for a moment, before it partially collapsed; of how he shook the lines, his head strained back, his voice cursing in the sudden silence; of how, finally, the chute blossomed out again, but with two panels blown. Beside him and above him men called to each other—some laughing with the relief from tension. One man, far off in the windy darkness, was talking coaxingly to his parachute, "Come on, baby, baby... sweet baby."

Suddenly a voice warned, strident and angry, "Slip to the right! Hot damn, they've dropped us over the trees..." Hugh reacted instantly, tugging at his lines. He began to oscillate. He seemed to be dropping faster, swinging hi a great arc. Never mind. Get set for the landing fall, knees slightly bent and together, shoulders hunched for the rolling tumble, head down, chin in. Was that the ground? Don't tense... He never saw the jagged, heavy fence post. His back was turned to it, and he could not know that it was slanted toward him waiting like a giant fork. Only the watcher in the dream saw the fork spear the man through the back and emerge, glistening and sticky, through his torn chest. There wasn't any outcry from the man at all. It was the dreamer who cried out in horror and grief. The man hung there, impaled, while the uncollapsed chute danced angrily where it touched the meadow, tugging unmercifully at the dead man and the fence post...

Iris shuddered and opened her eyes. I found I'd been staring at one of the brass knobs at the foot of the bed, but I hadn't known I was looking at it. My eyes had been turned inward to the dreadful vision that was becoming more real than anything else in my life. It was queer how the dream gathered details to itself as time went by. At first I'd seen only the body on the fence post. I hadn't known it was Hugh. Little by little the dream had developed backward from that moment, till now it was as if I were accompanying Hugh in the airplane, jumping beside him, watching and listening, hovering near him in terrible anxiety and helplessness.

There was something else about the dream that frightened me. Hugh rarely spoke of his job to me. Was it possible for me to have gathered so much knowledge about his jumps from the little he'd said? Perhaps. After all, I'd done a little night-flying; I'd even worn a parachute when I practiced spins, but I'd never been inside a plane of the type the troopers rode in. I'd never jumped out of an airplane in my life and hoped I never should. Still . . . it was just barely possible that I might imagine how it was. I think it was this daytime reasoning that had kept me free, for a long while, of the suffocating panic I now experienced.

Iris brought me a cigarette and lighted it with shaky hands.

"What... what do you think, Iris?" I asked.

"It sound bad to me," Iris said. "You tried prayin'?"

I shook my head. "I... the truth is, Iris, I don't know how."

Iris looked at me in surprise. "Ain't you got faith?"

"I guess not..." I turned away from Iris' eyes. They had the look that said I was a strange breed of cat.

"Don't you believe in nothin'?" I could tell by her voice that Iris was not so much censuring me as indulging her curiosity.

"A few things... maybe. Bad things, mostly, I guess. Obviously I'm beginning to believe in this rotten dream."

"Yeah," Iris said, and it was comment enough.

"You got any ideas?" Iris asked, after a long silence.

"None," I said. "I can't very well go to Hugh's commanding officer and ask him please not to make Hugh jump any more, because I've had a bad dream."

"No," Iris acknowledged. "You reckon your man could play sick?"

"He wouldn't do it. Anyway, I've never told him—I won't tell him—about the dream."

"You did right there," Iris said. "It would only fret him... When he gonna jump again?"

"I don't know. In a few days, I guess. He'll tell me beforehand."

"Well, now, listen," Iris said. "They *is* something you can do." She looked at me measuringly.

"You got twenty dollars? That's what it costs—twenty dollars. And you gotta do just like I say. You just give me the money, heah? I'll fix it all up so's you don't need to worry. Now, listen..."

I listened with a kind of numbed distaste to the instructions Iris gave me. When she finished I protested that I could never, never believe in such foolishness—or magic, whatever she wanted to call it.

"You don't have to believe," Iris said. "They's others will do the believin'. You just pays the money. And anybody could do the rest of it—they two little bitty things *I* told you. Lordy! Ain't you willin' to spend any amount to save your man?"

I got up and found my purse and gave Iris a twenty-dollar bill. I didn't believe for a minute that she could help me. any more than she'd helped me already, simply by listening to me.

"I gotta go," Iris said. "Remember, tomorrow, you listen for the strawberry man." She stood in the open doorway with the mop and pail. Just before she closed the door, she spoke again, her voice sly and amused. "Don't be surprised none if you start believin' in it yourself. Most folks *does* believe in the power of a twenty-dollar bill."

The next morning I got up and dressed much earlier than usual. When I went down to the kitchen, it was empty, but I heard Iris and Mrs. Allen in the front part of the house. I didn't want to see Iris that day, so I drank my coffee hurriedly and sped back to my room to wait for the Negro peddlers whose distinctive calls would soon sound in the quiet street.

The first one to appear pushed a barrow filled with fresh black-eyed peas. "BACK! Ah, peace..." the man called, with a poignant, sorrowful cry. He got a good response from the housewives or their maids. I leaned on my window-sill to watch. After ten minutes or so of silence, the street was filled with the cry of the strawberry man. "Star bees? RIPE star bees..." It was a charming, plaintive question and answer. Often when I'd been lying half-awake listening to it. I'd tried to imagine just what a star bee looked like, tempted to empty my purse for a swarm of them. This morning, though, the call meant something else to me, something dark and alien and faintly disgusting. Whatever it was I was buying from the man, I was certain it wasn't anything so nice as star bees.

He had rested his barrow directly beneath my window, and stood there as if waiting for my appearance. I called down to him and gestured stiffly when he looked up at me. On my way down to him I was glad not to meet anyone on the stairs. The house seemed suddenly deserted.

The strawberry man, I saw, was very old. He pulled a long, wrinkled earlobe by way of greeting me. From an inside pocket of his torn old coat he produced a small gray envelope and handed it to me.

"Iris sent me," I said unnecessarily, since I already held the envelope.

He nodded and seemed to look far beyond me. "You f'm Arizony?"

"Yes," I said. "Have you been there?"

"Cowboys," the old man murmured. "And Indians..." He nodded positively at me as if to assure me that the world held endless riches. Then the old, yellowed eyes filled with tears and his pendulous lower lip trembled "Some *say* ..." He looked a thousand questions at me, as if doubt tormented him.

"Oh, it's *true*," I answered, and his face lighted with delight. I turned away then, because I didn't want the strawberry man to see in my eyes that the cowboys and Indians I knew were not in the least like the godlike creatures he dreamed of, that the mythical men he revered were exactly as numerous as star bees, and truth more elusive than either.

Back in my room I opened the small envelope and examined its contents—three pieces of

white rice paper, scrawled all over with red ink. I recognized the paper as leaves from a book of cigarette papers. I couldn't make anything of the scrawled writing. If there were words written on the papers, they were in no language I had ever seen. Some of the words seemed to flow into minute, scratched pictures, one of which may have been a rooster, another a goat. But, according to Iris' reiterated instructions, it wasn't a part of my task to decipher the markings. My task was much simpler; I had only to chew up the papers and swallow them.

"You've gone this far," I told myself. "Why balk now?" The papers went down more easily than I had expected. The next part was even simpler. I fished two pennies out of my change purse and slipped them into the envelope.

I left Mrs. Allen's house then and took a bus to town. From the bus terminal I walked eight blocks to the river. From the pedestrian's walk on the bridge I threw the envelope with its pennies into the muddy water. Afterwards I ate a good lunch and went to a movie, and I felt strangely quiet and peaceful.

I had scarcely returned to my turret room when Mrs. Allen called me to the telephone in the downstairs hallway.

"It's Hugh," Mrs. Allen told me. "I expect he's going to be delayed this evening."

"Sorry, darling," Hugh said. "I'll be late tonight. They've scheduled another jump. You'd better go have dinner without me. I'm not sure just what time I'll get back. They've got a whole mob of us stacked up here at Malfunction Junction."

Malfunction Junction was the paratroopers' wry name for the airport.

It was a long evening. I wasn't hungry enough to go out to eat. I drank coffee with Mrs. Allen and ate a candy bar I found in our room. I tried to read, but I was unable to bring to my reading the same quality of attention I usually devoted to it on the nights Hugh jumped. But that fact was, in a way, a relief. I hated ever to use reading as one uses a drug. I sat in my room and tried to decide if I was as fearful as I had been over past jumps. Yes, but with a difference. What was it? For one thing, I was able to sit still without the anchor of a book. For another, I had made some kind of contact with the future, with tomorrow, by my imitation of an act of faith. Unable to believe for myself, I was yet able to believe that somebody, somewhere (more primitive, more gullible) was believing in my stead. As I say, it was a very long evening, and I had plenty of time for thinking—thinking with a difference.

At ten o'clock when the tall, dark girl from New Jersey knocked on my door, I was able to answer without any show of fear. How many times I'd waited for Hugh, terrified that somebody would come knocking to tell me he was dead.

Seeing my light, she said, she'd come to borrow cigarettes again. She was appealingly shamefaced about it, remembering that she'd never paid back the first package. It took me a few moments to realize that she hadn't really come for that reason. After I'd shared my cigarettes with her and invited her to sit down, she admitted she'd met Mrs. Allen hovering in the hallway, and that Mrs. Allen had asked her to step in and keep me company for a little while.

"My husband's away this evening, too," the girl said. "Isn't this a dull hole to be stationed in?"

We talked for an hour and then parted with shy friendliness.

At midnight I was still sitting in the lumpy old wing chair, numbly waiting for the sound of Hugh's boots on the stairway. At two A.M. when he opened the door, I knew at once that something disastrous had happened. Hugh was very pale. I remember thinking that he looked exactly as if somebody had dusted his face with flour. He came to me at once and put his head against mine. His hands gripped my shoulders so hard I wanted to protest, but I didn't. I began to cry very quietly, and for long minutes neither of us said a word.

Finally Hugh said, "Three of them drifted into the river. All drowned. Lots of them landed in the trees, but none seriously injured. Two malfunctions... one man with a streamer hit the ground, still nipping at his lines. We yelled at him to pull the chest pack. It was as if he couldn't hear us..."

Was it windy here? Very windy over there across the river... I came down by a fence. You know those barbed wire fences they have out in the country here? Like military entanglements, almost. There was a jagged post... somebody yelled at me. My God, baby, it was close... What startled me—everybody, you know, was yelling tonight—it sounded like you. Whoever it was, some real young kid, I guess, he called me by my first name. He saved my life. It was a loused-up jump from the word go. The pilot must have seen what he thought was the ground signal—probably some farmer's lantern—and he thought he was over our drop area. It took hours to find everybody. Darling, darling, don't cry..."

Slowly Hugh relaxed enough to begin undressing for bed. He talked softly, monotonously, though, all the time he was unlacing his boots. "Look, here and here, at the riser burns on my neck... And my helmet fell down over my face—separated from the helmet liner. Took me forever, it seemed, to shove it back so I could see anything. The opening shock was bad tonight. I blew two panels. Shook one old boy right out of his boots..."

Hugh pulled off one of his own boots, and a penny rolled out. He stared at it in disbelief, then slowly pulled off the other boot and shook it. Another penny rolled across the floor.

"Now what stupid idiot did that?" Hugh was shaking with anger. "Anybody knows it's dangerous as hell to do silly, superstitious things like that—those damn pennies could have buried themselves in my feet if they'd got turned sideways."

That was the last jump Hugh made in the States. A week later he was shipped out for Europe. I should have been very happy if I'd known when I said goodbye to him that I'd see him again in two years, that he would be the same Hugh, a little quieter and older, but otherwise untouched.

I gave up the turret room to friends of the tall, dark girl from New Jersey. I told Mrs. Allen and Iris goodbye and went home to the desert to work and wait. Mrs. Allen sent me a Christmas card that year and enclosed a note from Iris. It read:

*They is a kindygarten for faith, too. You just swallows the good words and casts your bread on the waters. That was all I meant to teach you. All that fancy stuff was just plumb foolishness, like you said. The strawberry man is my daddy. It was me drawed the pictures with red ink. It was me and my daddy that prayed. Excuse me, but your letter don't make any sense to me. I never put no pennies in your mister's boots. How could I? I thought they went in the river? Please answer, because them pennies are fretting me. Best wishes from Iris.*

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## **STICKENEY AND THE CRITIC**

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I WISH I HAD THOUGHT TO THROW STICKENEY A LIVE chicken on Midsummer Eve. There's no sense in doing it now, but if I'm still alive next year, I'll be sure to remember, I've been tossing live chickens at StickeneY for over 50 years, once a year around Midsummer Eve, give or take a day. StickeneY is no stickler for the absolutely correct day. (Now is as good a time as any to tell you that I hate and despise puns, but I'm getting old, and as my joints stiffen I seem to grow lax in other ways.)

I've been sitting out on the east veranda, staring down the road that leads to town, smoking my pipe and waiting for the law to show up. I've been expecting the Town Marshal, but it could just as well be the F.B.I. because this affair has international complications. But the road is empty and dusk is drawing down, so here I am in the parlor writing out the whole thing while there's time. I wish I could believe the disappearance of the Englishman will go unnoted, but the truth is

Mr. Cecil Cholmondeley was very well known in some circles. But I go on hoping, knowing Ml well "man lives in hope and dies in despair." This is a direct quotation from my father, who settled here in Oklahoma when it was Indian Territory; who, in fact, already had Mother staked out here on this very land while he lined up with the others in the Land Rush and pretended he wasn't one of those "Sooners" who had sneaked in before the signal. My mother had orders to shoot anybody who came nosing around and did shoot Father in the leg before she recognized him.

The reason Father wanted this land so much has a lot to do with Stickeney, though nobody knew about Stickeney at the time. Indians had camped on this land before the soldiers moved them out, but somebody had been here before—long before. Certainly it wasn't the Indians who had built the ancient stone barn or dug the huge stone-lined well. Father, in his forays into the forbidden territory, spotted the barn, the well, and the cleared acres and was determined he'd have the place come hell or the U.S. Army. He got it, with Mother's help, and, moreover, steered his brothers and their wives onto nearby homesteads so that I grew up surrounded by kinfolk, thinking I was cousin to every mortal soul on earth. After a while I even had Indian relatives as the Indians drifted back among us, and it was one of these, a very wrinkled old squaw (relative by marriage), who named for us the thing in the well.

"Stickeney," she pointed at the well, backing away and twisting her face into horrible shapes. She chomped her toothless old gums together and repeated the word. "Stickeney... bad Stickeney."

Father found out soon enough that there was something strange about the well, stranger even than its size or its stonework or its location in what was supposed to be unsettled wilderness. At first he used the barn to stable the team, and the well for a watering trough for all the stock, since Mother refused to use the water from it, even for scrubbing. The well wasn't like any well she had ever seen, and she didn't like the look of the water. In the first place the water level came within inches of the ground surface and had an oily, black look. The stone coping around the well was just over a foot high, and you could see deep enough into the water to note the green-slimed stones that lined it. The whole thing had a diameter of fifteen feet, and when Father tried to sound it he had to give up. The well was as near bottomless as a hole could get in this world, he said. Before a week went by Father lost a mule to the well.

It happened just about twilight, as I've heard Father tell it. He heard this mule squealing and splashing and got there just in time to see the mule dragged under. *Dragged* under. The water in the well swirled for an hour before it finally quieted down. Father insisted the mule had fallen in and been dragged to the depths of the earth by a whirlpool. Just a plain, cussed whirlpool, he said, that happened to rise up in his well from subterranean rivers or something. That's what he told Mother. But that night he screamed in his sleep, and the next day he started fencing the well away from the barn. Eventually he tore the old barn down and our big house (this very one) has a foundation of its stones—stones with strange carvings. The well was fenced off in one corner of the acre used for the kitchen garden. My father's new barn was as far away from the old well as he could conveniently place it.

I am the fourth son of my father and was, I am told, a very ordinary bottle baby. I forgot to tell you that my family name is Bottle. My full and real name is Abstain Bottle, because my mother had a fiendish sense of humor. I have been called Ab all my life, and I forgave Mother long ago. An ordinary Bottle baby walks at eight and one-half months, talks fluently and clearly at no later than ten months, and teaches himself to read before the age of four years. This last is accomplished by the reading aloud of Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* by some adult, over and over until the child knows them by heart. Then comes the glad day when light is shed over the mystery of words, and the child comprehends instantly the relationship between letters and sounds, and is ever afterward capable of reading anything but modern criticism. (This method is no longer practised except by far-flung remnants of the Bottles, though I once divulged the entire procedure to the University of Oklahoma with no thanks received whatsoever.)



You have all heard of my cousin DeWitt Quintan Bottle.

That is, you have heard of him if you have heard of people like T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, or of poetry or poets. Just let somebody mention poets, poetry, or even the words *avant garde* and eventually my cousin's name will bob up. I am not claiming he is worthy of mention with the poets I have named, but other people have certainly named him in exactly the same tone and the same breath. DeWitt Quintan Bottle, for all that, was not up to the standard for Bottle babies. In the first place, he didn't walk until he was thirteen months old, and even at eighteen months of age still talked baby talk and his grammar was atrocious. I happened to be around to hear the first poem he ever composed, which turned into a family joke so well remembered that it helped to drive DeWitt away from his family and country to settle in England and write poetry just for spite.

DeWitt used to visit at our house as a child, and it was the duty of all the children around the place to keep the chickens out of the kitchen garden, and particularly out of the enclosure that held the old well and Stickeney. Chickens were known to disappear with loud squawks if they hopped upon the old well curbing, and it was no good covering the well, because Father tried that. The boards just got smashed, somehow.

DeWitt was terrified of Stickeney and loathed chasing chickens anyway. He was just eighteen months old, with long yellow curls, and his pants falling off when he stood in front of Mother defiantly refusing to help. He cried:

"Poor little baby,  
Tan't walk hard'y  
Won't drive tzickies  
Out of Auntie's gardy."

There you are. DeWitt's first poem. He never lived it down. Bottles everywhere knew all about it and at family reunions and dinner parties and funerals it is still repeated with laughter. When he was fifteen DeWitt couldn't stand it any longer. He ran away. Quit farming for good. We were near enough the same age that DeWitt sneaked over to our house to tell me goodbye. Said I was his only friend in the family. All the other Bottles, he said, were down on him because he was backward. He'd show them, he said. All the other Bottle cousins thought he was a coward because he was scared to death of Stickeney. What he said was true enough. All the other Bottle kids would stand around the old well and chant until the water started swirling—gently at first, then faster and faster. When the water was really whirling good we'd toss in a live chicken. It was a favorite Sunday afternoon sport while the grown people napped in the parlor. But not DeWitt. We told him over and over that Stickeney liked us kids, and if he'd just throw in one chicken Stickeney would like him, too. But DeWitt went chasing off to England and became a poet.

That was nearly 50 years ago. DeWitt's dead now, and famous as all get out. And poor old Stickeney just gets one live chicken a year. The new crops of Bottle kids don't even know about him. I've sort of kept him quiet, a personal pet. you might say. I never married, and kinfolk don't visit the way they used to. As a matter of fact, I've only had one visitor in the last few weeks... Cecil Cholmondeley was the fellow's name. Fussy little man who wrote modern criticism. Wanted to do a book, he said, all about DeWitt's early influences. Wanted to drink in DeWitt's background, walk in DeWitt's footsteps, so to speak. I welcomed him. Told him to look around. Recited DeWitt's first poem. Warned him away from the old well. He wanted to know why. Told him DeWitt was always scared to death of it. Just that. We had an early dinner, and I was feeling sleepy, but Cecil wanted to stroll around the place.

"It's all so unspoiled," he said. "So primitive, really. One forgets that America is not all glitter and dazzle. I shall walk about, quoting Bottle's "better bits and feel my way into the place. All

right, sir?"

"Sure," I said. "Help yourself. Just stay away from the old well, though. It's not a healthy spot—too damp and weedy. Might be snakes."

That was the second time I warned Cecil away from the well. Just for the record. Cecil left with me a copy of a new magazine he'd brought along called *New Articulations*, open at a page which featured one of DeWitt's poems, and underneath it a critical review by Cecil himself. I read DeWitt's poem first, before I went on to read Cecil's review. I was astonished. Not at the poem. DeWitt's poems are all much of a muchness to me, I confess. But Cecil's review... well, I wanted to tell him a thing or two when he came back. Here is the whole thing, poem and review, just so you'll know what I mean.

*Early Departure*

by DeWitt Quintan Bottle

In the well  
feathers?  
Floating (oily  
wretched  
The swirling swelling  
The voiceless YELLing  
All the down-yonder (ing)  
Infinitely pondering  
fear-blown the future  
wafts one away (clackety-trackety)  
Don't forget to tip the porter.

DeWitt Quintan Bottle in Perspective

A Review of *Early Departure* by Cecil Cholmondeley

The discovery of this Bottle poem, found in his papers after his death, should in the opinion of this reviewer, secure DeWitt Quintan Bottle's position as the most penetrating commentator on this age. Other poets have, it is true, commented (in a minor key) on the same theme—the inflated ground-swelling trauma of man face to face with himself—but none has shown so much stature, poise, and peculiar excellence of craftsmanship. The "well" symbol (obviously the Existentialist mirror image) combined with the shockingly distraught "feathers" impales with one word a vast social fallacy (man's flight-wish exposed for what it is). "Floating" and "oily" are magnificently playful examples of Bottle's expanding metaphor technique. The stark "wretched" uncoils like a naked snake to hiss at us before we invoke the sensuous beauty of "The swirling swelling"—alliteration being one of Bottle's most incremental effects, achieving great density in a manydoored room. "The voiceless YELLing" is a key passage. For sheer wantonness this is unsurpassed. There is good meat (and some lovely gristle) in the next two lines. Here we discover unity imposed upon experience, demonstrating a powerful sense of self-involvement. The last line is a poignant prayer. A great poet's last and most strenuous act towards self-discipline.

I read this review over once again and got so mad I couldn't wait for Cecil to come back, but started out looking for him. I wanted to tell him about Stickeney, and then chant at Stickeney until the water started whirling, and then ask smart-aleck Cecil if he hadn't read a whole hell of a lot into DeWitt's poem that DeWitt had no notion of. It was just a fancied-up poem about

Stickney, and about DeWitt's leaving home and riding a train for the first time. I went stomping along till I heard Cecil declaiming De-Witt's last poem in the kitchen garden. In spite of all I told him Cecil was out there beside the well. Dark was coming on and I tried to hurry, but my knees were stiff and I heard the splashing and YELLING before I could get there.

One thing I'd like to know is just what angered Stickney. Was it DeWitt's poem, or the critic's English accent, or just that I'd forgotten to toss him a chicken for a long, long while? One thing I know, I'm not going to go ask Stickney. Not while the water's whirling like that. He's just too doggone excited. That water's been whirling a full week. Ever since Cecil was taken, so sudden-like. And the old chant we used to chant at Stickney keeps coming back to mind.

"Fee, fie, foe, fum  
I smell the blood of an Englishman.  
Be he alive, or be he dead,  
I'll grind his bones to make my bread."

I'm downright ashamed of Stickney. But it's my fault—I should have tossed him a chicken on Midsummer Eve. The thing is, now he's had a taste of English blood, I'm not sure he'll be content with chicken.

All the Bottles are of English descent.

I do hope, though, it's just a taste for modern criticism Stickney has acquired. God knows, he's quite capable of swallowing it.

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## **STAIR TRICK**

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DAY AFTER DAY THE BARTENDER DID HIS FOOL'S ROUTINE of a man going downstairs. The regular customers loved it. Of course there weren't any stairs, but sooner or later somebody would call down the long length of bar, "Dick, old boy, I'd like a bottle of that Chateau Margaux '29 to take home to the wife. How about it?"

After twenty years of it, Dick could recognize his cue. "Certainly, sir," he'd say gravely. "It won't take me a minute. You'll excuse me while I step down to the cellar?"

The regulars would grin and nudge the newcomers, the uninitiated. "Watch it," they'd say. "Just watch this." And the newcomers would set their faces in accommodating lines tinged with the resentment of those who aren't in on the joke, and watch Dick carefully. Dick, his bald head gleaming in the overhead light, would start his stately descent into the cellar, until, step by step, the bald head had disappeared from view.

"What's so hot about that?" Nine times out of ten some disgruntled stranger would challenge the regulars. "Hell, I can still walk down a few stairs."

"Just wait. Just wait and *listen*" Gleefully the regulars would shush the unimpressed stranger until reluctantly he subsided and listened. Nobody knew, or cared to inquire too closely, just what it was Dick had rigged under the bar for his sound effects, but they were good. One heard the rattle of a chain lock, the squeak of the heavy door at the foot of the steps, a clicking light switch, and then the stone-muffled tramp, tramp of Dick's feet to the wine racks. Some hesitation then followed while the customers imagined Dick selecting the wine asked for, then they heard him crossing the stone floor. They heard again the click of the light switch and the door closing behind him with a hollow booming sound, the rattle of the lock, and Dick (a heavy man) was

climbing the stairs, puffing a little. As he gradually came into view, one often saw a wisp of cobweb trailing across the bald head, and in his arms he cradled a dusty bottle. The bottle was always the same, but the puzzled stranger didn't know that.

"Now!" the regulars would shout. "Look! Look!" Everybody would raise himself from his bar stool to peer over the bar, pointing at Dick's feet and the floor he stood on, the stranger along with the rest. It was always a pleasure to watch the stranger's face as he took in the solid cement floor that showed through the slatted walkway running unbroken behind the bar. The grin breaking on the newcomer's face always started out a little sickly, but as light dawned and the illusion faded, the usual verdict was, "I'll be damned." And everybody was happy.

"Let's see what you got in the bottle" . . . but the regulars were quick to explain, low-voiced, that Dick was funny about the bottle. It was just an old empty bottle, but Dick didn't go handing it around. If you wanted to get snubbed, try making a grab for it.

Dick, as always after he'd finished the stair trick, just stood there for a while, holding the empty bottle, and anybody looking at him would have been surprised at the expression on his face. Nobody really looks at a bartender. The man behind the bar is either a smile or a mild grouch, and in any case, a pair of willing hands—reaching, setting down, polishing, ringing the cash register. Even the bar philosophers (the dreariest customers of all) prefer to study their own faces in the backbar mirror. And however they accept their reflected images, whether shudderingly or with secret love, it is to this aloof image that they impart their whiskey-wisdom, not to the bartender. Dick knew that. For twenty years he had watched his customers with growing bewilderment. His small, kind eyes assessed his world, and found it very lonely.

Occasionally Dick, too, took note of his own face in the backbar mirror, but most of all he used the mirror for watching *The Game*. *The Game* went on and on, year in and year out, but Dick never tired of watching it. Just as the customers smiled and narrowed their eyes at his stair trick, wanting to believe, so too did he take in all the nuances of *The Game*, and even after twenty years of it he kept on wanting to believe. Nightly he assured himself that people do fall in love in bars . . . well, anyway, that one couple . . . Maybe. He hoped so.

Dick was almost used to the loneliness of his room in the musty old hotel. Every night when he unlocked his door he found the steaming foot bath waiting. How many bellboys had he trained to that attention? Too many, perhaps . . . Oh, well, there was the evening paper on the arm of the shabby easy chair, and the slippers waiting for his feet to emerge from the good hot water. A wife now . . . might remember he liked hot tea waiting, too, but then again she might not relish such tasks around 1:00 A.M. And, anyway, what was the use of wondering about that? It certainly wasn't very likely at this point that Dick would ever marry. Marriage happened to other men. Well, didn't it? He would gladly have married if the chance had ever . . . happened. How else did you get married? Nobody sets forth with the thought: I'm going to find somebody, *today*, for instance, and get myself married. No, it wasn't that way at all.

First, somebody catches your eye. You look at each other, past the mask, beyond all the things life does to cover people up, hide them, and your eyes meet in a far place that's familiar to each of you. And that's a frightening thing. That's the beginning of *The Game*, and the fear is part of the fascination. *The Game* is really just hide and seek, until neither can bear to hide any longer/But you can't play *The Game* until you meet the right pair of eyes. Now, can you?

Dick had looked into a lot of eyes, but none had been right. He had watched hundreds of people experience that shock of recognition, though. That's how he knew so much about it. Well, admit it . . . He'd also seen it assumed, counterfeited. He'd watched the Hunters of both sexes mark their prey. Usually they avoided their own kind, but sometimes, like jungle beasts meeting on a narrow path, they challenged each other. Then it was a battle to the death. Whenever this happened in Dick's bar, he could almost feel the charged atmosphere. You could see that it affected the customers, too. The laughter grew louder, the drinks went down quicker, and quarrels sprang up in the room like little fires. A good time for the stair trick . . . it helped to clear

the air.

This night Dick had gone through the routine and was still puffing from his exertions, just standing there, holding the empty bottle with that strange look on his face, when somebody down at the end of the bar called to him in a high, clear voice:

"Tell me, bartender, what's it like in the cellar?"

Dick turned slowly towards the voice and his hands shook so much he was afraid he'd drop the bottle. Nobody else had ever asked that question. Laughter and head-shaking admiration were supposed to be the end of it. This woman, now... She only came around once or twice a month. How did she know the cellar was... very real to Dick? He hurried to set the empty bottle before her so that she could examine it—the emptiness of it, the carefully preserved dust and cobwebs.

"The cellar..." Dick said. "It's nice."

She lifted her look to his. "I know," she said.

Their eyes met in the far place, and yet Dick trembled with unbelief. She was a Hunter, and Hunters were clever enough to find your far place, or to pretend they had.

"You're a liar," Dick whispered. "You don't really know."

The woman tucked a dark lock of hair behind her ear and smiled at him. "Don't believe me," she said. "Forget it. I'm just tight. But... tell me, in your cellar... have you found the door to the other side?"

"I don't know what you mean." Dick moistened his dry lips and glanced up and down the bar and out to the crowded tables. The customers were engrossed in their own talk, their glasses almost full.

The woman sighed and shook her head at him gently. "You're afraid," she said. "You know what I am, and now—this minute—I'm drunk enough to admit it. Also drunk enough and crazy enough to try to find the way out... You know you can't go through the door alone? Even if you find it?"

Dick looked long at her before he nodded his head. Yes, he knew. And here, at last, was the woman, if only he could believe in her.

"Aren't you lonely, too?" the woman asked softly. "Don't you want me? I'd be different beyond the door... What do you think I've been hunting for, all these years?"

"Why didn't you speak sooner?" Dick whispered. "Years ago..."

"You wouldn't look at me," she said. "You'd never really look at me."

That was true. He was afraid of the Hunters, and most afraid of the few quiet, lovely women who did not look the part. Like this one.

"I can't believe it," he said. "You don't want me." He shook his head dazedly.

The woman tried to smile. "All right," she said. "I was crazy to think you'd listen, that you'd believe... I don't blame you. And now the hell with it, I don't believe in anything at all." She slid down from the high barstool and turned to walk away.

"Wait."

For a moment she hesitated, then turned again to face him. He looked at her soft red mouth and the cloud of dark hair, and at the slender, sweet body before he allowed himself to look again into her eyes. She faced him as if he were Judgment, and she standing up pleading for mankind. Her eyes admitted everything. The meanness, the drab cheating, all the niggling subterfuges, the hurt, the fear, and yes... the love, to balance them all—to write them all off.

"Come with me now," he said.

Quickly then she ducked under the hinged serving board and was beside him on the slatted walkway behind the bar. He took her hand and smiled at her and together they went down the stairs.

There was the old bottle standing on the bar—that was the first thing noticed. Then somebody heard the creaking of the door. Somebody else heard it chained and locked again from the other side, and as sounds died in the room, almost everybody in the bar heard the muffled steps of the two of them crossing the stone floor. But they didn't stop at the wine racks. The regulars will tell you that. They went beyond—far beyond—any point Dick had ever reached alone. Until at last the footsteps ceased—brought up short it seemed before the last barrier. And then there was time enough and silence enough for every man in the bar to remember blank closed doors and the sour taste of failure.

The sighing had already begun—the thin, stingy *ahhh* for this latest defeat—when they heard the sound that was new and triumphant. Not one of the customers will swear it was music he heard, but every last one of them swears he heard Dick open the door to the Other Side... and close it again behind him.

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## ***MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO***

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MRS. CHRISWELL'S LITTLE ROADSTER CAME TO A SHUDDERING halt. Here was the perfect spot. Only one sagging wire fence to step over and not a cow in sight. Mrs. Chriswell Was terrified of cows, and if the truth were told, only a little less afraid of her daughter-in-law, Clara. It was all Clara's idea that her mother-in-law should now be lurking in meadows peering at birds. Clara had been delighted with the birdwatching idea, but frankly, Mrs. Chriswell was bored with birds. They *flew* so much. And as for their colours, it was useless for her to speculate. Mrs. Chriswell was one of those rare women who are quite, quite colour-blind.

"But, Clara," Mrs. Chriswell had pleaded, "what's the point if I can't tell what colour they are?"

"Well, but, darling," Clara had said crisply, "how much cleverer if you get to know them just from the distinctive markings!"

Mrs. Chriswell, sighing a little as she recalled the firm look of Clara's chin manoeuvred herself and her burdens over the sagging wire fence. She successfully juggled the binoculars, the heavy bird book, and her purse, and thought how ghastly it was at sixty to be considered so useless that she must be provided with harmless occupations to keep her out of the way.

Since Mr. Chriswell's death she had moved in with her son and his wife to face a life of enforced idleness. The servants resented her presence in the kitchen, so cooking was out. Clara and the snooty nursemaid would brook no interference with the nursery routine, so Mrs. Chriswell had virtually nothing to do. Even her crocheted doilies disappeared magically soon after their presentation to Clara and the modern furniture.

Mrs. Chriswell shifted the heavy bird book and considered rebelling. The sun was hot and her load was heavy. As she toiled on across the field she thought she saw the glint of sun on water. She would sit and crochet in the shade nearby and remove the big straw cartwheel hat Clara termed "just the thing."

Arrived at the trees, Mrs. Chriswell dropped her burdens and flung the hat willy-nilly. Ugly, ridiculous thing. She glanced around for the water she thought she'd seen, but there was no sign of it. She leaned back against a tree trunk and sighed blissfully. A little breeze had sprung up and was cooling the damp tendrils on her forehead. She opened her big purse and scrambled through the muddle of contents for her crochet hook and the ball of thread attached to a half-finished doily. In her search she came across the snapshots of her granddaughters—in colour, they were, but unfortunately Mrs. Chriswell saw them only in various shades of grey. The breeze was getting

stronger now, very pleasant, but the dratted old cartwheel monstrosity was rolling merrily down the slight grade to the tangle of berry bushes a few yards away. Well, it would catch on the brambles. But it didn't. The wind flirted it right around the bushes, and the hat disappeared.

"Fiddle!" Mrs. Chriswell dared not face Clara without the hat. Still hanging on to the bulky purse, she got up to give chase. Rounding the tangle of bushes, she ran smack into a tall young man in uniform.

"Oh!" Mrs. Chriswell said. "Have you seen my hat?"

The young man smiled and pointed on down the hill, Mrs. Chriswell was surprised to see her hat being passed from hand to hand among three other tall young men in uniform. They were laughing at it, and she didn't much blame them. They were standing beside a low, silvery aircraft of some unusual design. Mrs. Chriswell studied it a moment, but, really, she knew nothing about such things... The sun glinted off it, and she realized this was what she had thought was water. The young man beside her touched her arm. She turned towards him and saw that he had put a rather lovely little metal hat on his head. He offered her one with grave courtesy. Mrs. Chriswell smiled up at him and nodded. The young man fitted the hat carefully, adjusting various little ornamental knobs on the top of it.

"Now we can talk," he said. "Do you hear well?"

"My dear boy," Mrs. Chriswell said, "of course I do. I'm not so old as all that." She found a smooth stone and sat down to chat. This was much nicer than birdwatching, or even crochet.

The tall young man grinned and signalled excitedly to his companions. They too put on little metal hats and came bounding up the hill. Still laughing, they deposited the cartwheel in Mrs. Chriswell's lap. She patted the stone by way of invitation, and the youngest looking one of the four dropped down beside her.

"What is your name, Mother?" he asked.

"Ida Chriswell," she said. "What's yours?"

"My name is Jord," the boy said.

Mrs. Chriswell patted his hand. "That's a nice, unusual name." The boy grabbed Mrs. Chriswell's hand and rubbed it against the smoothness of his cheek.

"You are like my Mother's Mother," the boy explained, "whom I have not seen in too long." The other young men laughed, and the boy looked abashed and stealthily wiped with his hands at a tear that slid down his nose.

Mrs. Chriswell frowned warningly at the laughter and handed him her clean pocket handkerchief, scented with lavender. Jord turned it over and over in his hands, and then tentatively sniffed at it.

"It's all right," Mrs. Chriswell said. "Use it. I have another." But Jord only breathed more deeply of the faint perfume in its folds.

"This is only the thinnest thread of melody," he said, "but, Mother Ida, it is very like one note from the Harmony Hills of home!" He passed the handkerchief all around the circle, and the young men sniffed at it and smiled.

Mrs. Chriswell tried to remember if she had ever read of the Harmony Hills, but Mr. Chriswell had always told her she was lamentably weak in geography, and she supposed that this was one of her blank spots, like where on earth was Timbuktu? Or the Hellandgone people-were always talking about? But it was rude not to make some comment. Wars shifted people about such a lot, and these boys must be homesick and weary of being strangers, longing to talk of home. She was proud of herself for realizing that they were strangers. But there was something... Hard to say, really. The way they had bounded up the hill? Mountain people, perhaps, to whom hills were mere springboards to heights beyond.

"Tell me about your hills," she said.

"Wait," Jord said. "I will show you." He glanced at his leader as if for approval. The young

man who had fitted her hat nodded. Jord drew a fingernail across the breast of his uniform. Mrs. Chriswell was surprised to see a pocket opening where no pocket had been before. Really, the Air Force did amazing things with its uniforms, though, frankly, Mrs. Chriswell thought the cut of these a bit extreme.

Carefully, Jord was lifting out a packet of gossamer material. He gently pressed the centre of the packet and it blossomed out into voluminous clouds of featherweight threads, held loosely together in a wave like a giant spider web. To Mrs. Chriswell's eyes the mesh of threads was the colour of fog, and almost as insubstantial.

"Do not be afraid," Jord said softly, stepping closer to her. "Bend your head, close your eyes, and you shall hear the lovely Harmony Hills of home."

There was one quick-drawn breath of almost-fear, but before she shut her eyes Mrs. Chriswell saw the love in Jord's, and in that moment she knew how rarely she had seen this look, anywhere... anytime. If Jord had asked it of her, it was all right. She closed her eyes and bowed her head, and in that attitude of prayer she felt a soft weightlessness descend upon her. It was as if twilight had come down to drape itself on her shoulders. And then the music began. Behind the darkness of her eyes it rose in majesty and power, in colours she had never seen, never guessed. It blossomed like flowers—giant forests of them. Their scents were intoxicating and filled her with joy. She could not tell if the blending perfumes made the music, or if the music itself created the flowers and the perfumes that poured forth from them. She did not care. She wanted only to go on forever listening to all this colour. It seemed odd to be listening to colour, perhaps, but after all, she told herself, it would seem just as odd to me to *see* it.

She sat blinking at the circle of young men. The music was finished. Jord was putting away the gossamer threads in the secret pocket, and laughing aloud at her astonishment

"Did you like it, Mother Ida?" He dropped down beside her again and patted her wrinkled face, still pink with excitement.

"Oh, Jord," she said, "how lovely... Tell me..."

But the leader was calling them all to order. "I'm sorry, Mother Ida, we must hurry about our business. Will you answer some questions? It is very important."

"Of course," Mrs. Chriswell said. She was still feeling a bit dazed.

"If I can... If it's like the quizzes on the TV, though, I'm not very good at it."

The young man shook his head. "We," he said, "have been instructed to investigate and report on the true conditions of this... of the world." He pointed at the aircraft glittering in the sunlight. "We have travelled all around in that slow machine, and our observations have been accurate..." He hesitated, drew a deep breath and continued. "... and perhaps we shall be forced to give an unfavourable report, but this depends a great deal on the outcome of our talk with you. We are glad you stumbled upon us. We were about to set out on a foray to secure some individual for questioning. It is our last task." He smiled. "And Jord, here, will not be sorry. He is sick for home and loved ones." He sighed, and all the other young men echoed the sigh.

"Every night," Mrs. Chriswell said, "I pray for peace on earth. I cannot bear to think of boys like you fighting and dying, and the folks at home waiting and waiting..." She glanced all around at their listening faces. "And I'll tell you something else," she said, "I find I can't really hate anybody, even the enemy." Around the circle the young men nodded at each other. "Now ask me your questions." She fumbled in her purse for her crochet work and found it.

Beside her Jord exclaimed with pleasure at the sight of the half-finished doily. Mrs. Chriswell warmed to him even more.

The tall young man began his grave questioning. They were very simple questions, and Mrs. Chriswell answered them without hesitation. Did she believe in God? Did she believe in the dignity of man? Did she truly abhor war? Did she believe that man was capable of love for his neighbour? The questions went on and on, and Mrs. Chriswell crocheted while she gave her



answers.

At last, when the young man had quite run out of questions, and Mrs. Chriswell had finished the doily, Jord broke the sun-lazy silence that had fallen upon them.

"May I have it, Mother?" He pointed to the doily. Mrs. Chriswell bestowed it upon him with great pleasure, and Jord, like a very small boy, stuffed it greedily into another secret pocket. He pointed at her stuffed purse.

"May I look, Mother?"

Mrs. Chriswell indulgently passed him her purse. He opened it and poured the litter of contents on the ground between them. The snapshots of Mrs. Chriswell's grandchildren stared up at him. Jord smiled at the pretty little-girl faces. He groped in the chest pocket and drew out snapshots of his own, "These," he told Mrs. Chriswell proudly, "are my little sisters. Are they not like these little girls of yours? Let us exchange, because soon I will be at home with them, and there will be no need for pictures. I would like to have yours."

Mrs. Chriswell would have given Jord the entire contents of the purse if he had asked for them. She took the snapshots he offered and looked with pleasure at the sweet-faced children. Jord still stirred at the pile of possessions from Mrs. Chriswell's purse. By the time she was ready to leave he had talked her out of three illustrated recipes torn from magazines, some swatches of material, and two pieces of peppermint candy.

The young man who was the leader helped her to remove the pretty little hat when Mrs. Chriswell indicated he should. She would have liked to keep it, but she didn't believe Clara would approve. She clapped the straw monstrosity on her head, kissed Jord's cheek, waved goodbye to the rest, and groped her way around the berry bushes. She had to grope because her eyes were tear-filled. They had saluted her so grandly as she left.

Clara's usually sedate household was in an uproar when Mrs. Chriswell returned. All the radios in the house were blaring. Even Clara sat huddled over the one in the library. Mrs. Chriswell heard a boy in the street crying "EXTRA! EXTRA!" and the upstairs maid almost knocked her down getting out the front door to buy one. Mrs. Chriswell, sleepy and somewhat sunburned, supposed it was something about the awful war.

She was just turning up the stairs to her room when the snooty nursemaid came rushing down to disappear kitchen-wards with another newspaper in her hand. Good, the children were alone. She'd stop in to see them. Suddenly she heard the raised voices from the back of the house. The cook was yelling at somebody. "I tell you, I saw it! I took out some garbage and there it was, right over me!" Mrs. Chriswell lingered at the foot of the stairway puzzled by all the confusion. The housemaid came rushing in with the extra edition. Mrs. Chriswell quietly reached out and took it. "Thank you, Nadine," she said. The nursemaid was still staring at her as she climbed the stairs.

Edna and Evelyn were sitting on the nursery floor, a candy box between them, and shrieking at each other when their grandmother opened the door. They were cramming chocolates into their mouths between shrieks. Their faces and pinafores were smeared with the candy. Edna suddenly yanked Evelyn's hair, hard. "Pig!" she shouted. "You got three more than I did!"

"Children! Children! Not fighting?" Mrs. Chriswell was delighted. Here was something she could cope with. She led them firmly to the bathroom and washed their faces. "Change your frocks," she said, "and I'll tell you my adventure."

There were only hissing accusals and whispered countercharges behind her as she turned her back on the children to scan the newspaper. The headlines leapt up at her.

*Mysterious broadcast interrupts programmes on all wavelengths Unknown woman saves world, say men from space. One sane human found on earth. Cooking, needlework, home, religious interests sway space judges.*

Every column of the paper was crowded with the same unintelligible nonsense. Mrs.

Chriswell folded it neatly, deposited it on the table, and turned to tie her granddaughters' sashes and tell her adventure.

"... And then he gave me some lovely photographs. In colour, he said... Good little girls, just like Edna and Evelyn. Would you like to see them?"

Edna made a rude noise with her mouth pursed. Evelyn's face grew saintlike in retaliation. "Yes, show us," she said.

Mrs. Chriswell passed them the snapshots, and the children drew close together for the moment before Evelyn dropped the pictures as if they were blazing. She stared hard at her grandmother while Edna made a gagging noise.

"Green!" Edna gurgled. "Gaaa... green skins!"

"Grandmother!" Evelyn was tearful. "Those children are frog-coloured!"

Mrs. Chriswell bent over to pick up the pictures. "Now, now, children," she murmured absently. "We don't worry about the colour of people's skins. Red... yellow... black... we're all God's children. Asia or Africa, makes no difference..." But before she could finish her thought, the nursemaid loomed disapprovingly in the doorway. Mrs. Chriswell hurried out to her own room, while some tiny worry nagged at her mind. "Red, yellow, black, white," she murmured over and over, "and brown... but green...?" Geography had always been her weak point. Green... Now where on earth...? .

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## ***BIRDS CAN'T COUNT***

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EVERYBODY HAS HIS OWN WAY OF WEATHERING A HANGOVER. Maggie's husband's way was to ignore the whole matter, stoutly denying, if pressed, that he suffered at all. Maggie never denied Mark the right to this brave pretense, but she had long ago noted that on such days the family car needed a great deal of tinkering with, which necessitated Mark's lying down under it or in it for several hours. Maggie refused any such face-saving measures. Right after break-fast on the day after the party she took to her bed, fortified with massive doses of B1, a dull book and, for quiet companionship, Gomez, the cat.

The window cooler hummed invitingly in the darkened bedroom; the curtains belled out in the breeze, and Maggie, shedding everything but her slip, climbed gratefully into bed. The book was called *Hunting Our Feathered Friends with a Camera*, and Maggie, who knew nothing of photography or birds, began to read it in the hope of being bored into sudden sleep.

Sleep had been very elusive lately. It was silly of her to become so disturbed over shadows... or, more often, the lack of shadows. But how to explain her uneasiness to Mark, or to anybody? Once, last night at the party, she'd come very close to asking her friends for help or, maybe, just sympathy—the talk had turned to ghosts and hauntings;—but luckily she'd called back the words before they'd formed. The whole thing was too nebulous to talk about. From the first, Mark had labeled it paranoiac, laughing at her wide-eyed account of *something* that looked at her in the bathroom, trundled after her to the bedroom, then watched her in the kitchen while she pared potatoes. When Mark had asked where for Pete's sake was there room in that small kitchen for a secret watcher, Maggie had shut up. Not for worlds would she leave herself open to Mark's delighted shouts (she could just hear him) by answering that question.

"If I'd said: 'on top of the refrigerator,' " Maggie thought drowsily, "I'd never have heard the last of it."

... *The hunting urge is deeply ingrained in man. It is no longer necessary to hunt for*

*food; take a camera in your hands and stalk your prey. The prime hunter, anyway, from the days of the caveman, has been the artist, tracking down and recording beauty... Allow your children and yourself the thrill of the chase; satisfy this primitive urge with a safe weapon, the camera. Patience... do not harm the nests... natural setting... build yourself a blind... patience... catch them feeding... mating ... battling ... patience... quick exposure ... patience...*

Maggie slept.

Minutes later she woke to find Gomez, the cat, sitting on her stomach. She and Gomez, good friends, regarded each other gravely. Gomez, aware that he had her full attention, tossed his head skittishly.

"You woke me," Maggie accused.

"*Mmm-ow-rannkk?*" He was giving her the three-syllable, get-up-and-feed-me treatment. Maggie was supposed to find this coaxing irresistible.

"Blast and damn," Maggie said gently, not moving. Gomez trod heavily towards her chin.

"All *right*," Maggie muttered.

"But stop flouncing. Whoever heard of a flouncing tomcat—"

Both Maggie and Gomez froze, staring at something close to the ceiling.

"Do you see it, too?" Maggie rolled her eyes at Gomez, which so terrified him he immediately began evasive action—bounding off the bed, stumbling over her shoes, caroming off her desk, falling into the lid of her portable typewriter, his favorite sleeping spot. Gomez cowered deep in the lid, one scalloped ear doing radar duty for whatever danger hovered.

"That's my brave, contained cat." Maggie crooned through her teeth. She raised herself up on her elbows to stare at one corner of the ceiling; her eyes moved slowly with the slow movement there. But was it movement? Strictly speaking, it was not. Only some subtle shifting of the light in the room, she thought. That was all. The ceiling was blank and bare. Gradually the tumult of her heart subsided. Maggie caught sight of her face in the dressing table mirror. She was interestingly pale.

"It's all done with mirrors, Gomez, and who's afraid of a mirror? Neither you nor I... a car went by, or a cloud. Take one cloud, a mirror, and a hangover; divide by... Wait a minute. I just thought of something."

Gomez waited, relaxing somewhat in his tight-fitting box. Maggie sat cross-legged in the middle of the double bed silently pursuing an elusive memory.

White face... tents... carnival... yes, the spider lady! It was one of the first dates I had with Mark, and how much I impressed him, because I saw through the illusion at once. There in the tent, behind a roped-off section, sat a huge, hairy spider with the head of a woman. The bead turned and talked and laughed with the crowd, but glared at me when I began to point out to Mark the arrangement of the mirrors. It was all simple enough and fairly obvious, but not to Mark. Not to most people. Later, over coffee and doughnuts, I explained rather proudly to him that magic shows, pickpocket shows, that kind of thing, were always dull for me, because I could see so clearly what was really happening—that the way to look, to watch, was not straight on, but in a funny kind of oblique way, head tilted. Mark squeezed my hand then and made one remark about a crazy female who goes through life with her head on one side, seeing too deeply into things...

It is nice to remember young love, Maggie thought, but I'm losing the track of that thought. Oh yes... and then during the war there was the general at Mark's training camp—he definitely lacked my peculiar ability—who came to check on the trainees' camouflaged foxholes. Mark wrote me about it. The old boy cursed them all for inept idiots who couldn't decently camouflage a flea, and then, right in front of the whole company and still cursing the obviousness of their efforts, stepped straight into one of the concealed holes and broke his leg. So...?

Maggie lay back on her bed, her usual abstracted look considerably deepened. Her mind wheeled around to the party last night. Something said or done then nagged at her now. What was it? It had been a good party. Nobody mad or sad or very bad. The summer bachelor had flitted about like an overweight hummingbird stealing sips of kisses... and almost drowned in the blonde, bless her. A mercurial young man had explained to Maggie what a bitch his first wife was, while staring rather gloomily at his second... The talk had ranged from ghosts to sex, from religion to sex, from flying saucers to sex, and everybody had come out strongly on the side of the angels and sex. The rocket engineer believed passionately in the flying saucers, but—*that was it!*

He'd said: "Maggie, it's silly and sweet of you to hope for a *deus ex machina*, come to save civilization, but have you considered we may mean nothing to them emotionally? Haven't you ever watched ants struggling with a load too big for them? How much did you care? Even if, like God, you marked the fall of every sparrow, you might simply be conducting a survey or expressing colossal boredom, like the people who delight in measuring things. You know what I mean—if so and so were laid end to end..." and right there the talk had turned back to sex.

"So," Maggie said aloud. "I'm being watched. Catalogued. Maybe photographed. Either that, or I'm nuts, loony, strictly for the birds." She grabbed the dull book and began to read again, not quite sure what she was looking for. She studied the photographs in the book, and for the first time it struck her how self-consciously posed some of the birds looked. "Hams," Maggie dismissed them. "Camera hogs." She glanced at herself in the mirror, hesitated, then got up and combed her hair and lipsticked her mouth. In the mirror she could see Gomez peering cautiously from the typewriter lid towards a spot over the window cooler. The shadowy coolness of the room lightened for a moment, and Gomez' eyes registered the change, but Maggie didn't mind. She was posing sultrily and liking the effect. Maggie had decided to cooperate for the time being and give the unseen watcher an eyeful.

*Mind you, she was thinking furiously, if this is camouflage, it's out of my class... maybe out of this world. Then how am I to prove it? It might be easier just to go quietly nuts... But I've got too much to do this week to go crazy. Next week, perhaps. What am I saying! Fie on this character, whoever it may be. With my tilted, eagle eye I will ferret him out!*

Cbeered, she began to do sitting-up exercises. Next, she stood on her head. Unfortunately she couldn't see anything, since her only garment fell down around her ears.

Mark opened her bedroom door and peered in.

"Good God, Maggie!" he said. "What's up?"

Maggie's head emerged from the folds of the slip, and she lay full length on the rug. "Just a game," she said. "Wanta play?"

"Please, Maggie," he said plaintively. "Not just now. I've got to go polish the car."

"Idiot," Maggie said. "I'm studying photography... I think. Go away, you're apt to ruin the exposure."

"I am not," Mark said doggedly. "It's a lovely exposure, it's just that I have to—"

"—polish the car!" Maggie threatened him with a shoe. Mark sighed and withdrew, closing the door gently behind him.

Maggie got up and dressed in shirt and shorts and tried the headstand again. Gomez watched her with wide, startled eyes. Next she bent down and peered back between her legs while turning slowly to survey all four sides of the room. Nothing. Warily she sat a moment on the rug, rubbing her aching brow. Her eyes felt sandy, and she rubbed them, too. She glanced at Gomez and saw that he looked like two cats, one barely offsetting the other, like a color overlay on a magazine page that wasn't quite right. She rubbed her eyes harder to dispel the illusion, and just then she saw the watcher.

She and the watcher stared at each other across the intervening space and across the little

black box the watcher held. Even now his image was not clear to Maggie. One moment he was there, the next he was a something-nothing, then he was gone.

Maggie rubbed furiously at her eyes again and brought him back to her vision. This time she was able to hold him there, though the image danced and swam and her eyes watered a little with the effort. It was just like any illusion, she thought; once you know the trick of looking at it, you feel stupid not to have seen it at once.

"Peek-a-boo," she said. "I see you. But stop wiggling."

The watcher's expression did not change. He continued to gaze at her raptly. But all the rest of him changed. He reminded Maggie of mirages she'd seen, Unking and flattening mountain tops. Was he human? A moment ago, he might have been. But now he was a great whirl of gray petals with the black box and the staring eyes remaining still and cool in the center. The eyes were large, dark and unblinking. The gray petals now drooped like melted wax and flowed into stiffening horizontal lines like a stylized Christmas tree, and the liquid eyes became twin stars decorating its apex, with the black box dangling below like a gift tied to a branch. The tree dissolved and turned into a vase-shape, with delicate etchings of light on the gray that reminded Maggie of fine lace.

Maggie got up purposefully and walked towards the fluidly shifting image. The watcher shrank into a small square shape that was like a window open onto cold, slanting lines of rain. Maggie reached out a hand and touched the solid plaster wall.

"Nuts," Maggie said. "I know you're there. Come out, come out, and we'll all take tea."

The watcher's gaze now turned toward her feet, and his form lengthened and narrowed so drastically that he reminded Maggie of nothing so much as a barber pole with gray and white stripes. The barber pole grew an appendage that pointed downward. It seemed to be pointing at Gomez, who had seated himself just where Maggie might most conveniently step on him, and was yawning as unconcernedly as if the watcher did not exist, or as if he were quite used to him. The watcher grew another appendage, raised the black box, and just then a tiny shaft of light touched Gomez on the nose.

Maggie watched carefully, but Gomez did not seem to be hurt. He began to wash his face. "Is it a camera, then?" Maggie asked. No answer. She looked wildly around the room, grabbed up the framed photograph of her mother-in-law and showed it to the watcher. The staring eyes looked dubious. But by dint of using her eyebrows and all her facial muscles Maggie finally made her question clear to him. One appendage disappeared into the black box and drew out a tiny replica of Gomez yawning. It was a perfect little three-dimensional figurine, and Maggie coveted it with all her heart. She reached for it, but the wavering barber pole drew itself up stiffly, the eyes admired the figurine a few moments, glared haughtily at Maggie, and the figurine disappeared. Maggie's face expressed her disappointment

"What about me?" Maggie pointed to herself, pantomimed the way he held the box, then touched her own nose lightly. The eyes at the top of the barber pole gazed at her blandly. The barber pole shuddered. Then the watcher pantomimed that Maggie should pick up Gomez and hold him. Maggie did, and again the little shaft of light hit Gomez on the nose.

"Hey!" Maggie said. "Did you get me, too? Let me see." No response from the watcher. "Oh well," Maggie said, "maybe that one wasn't so good. How about this pose?" She smiled and pirouetted gracefully for the watcher, but the watcher only looked bored. There's nothing so disconcerting, Maggie thought, as a bored barber pole. She subsided into deep thought. Come to think of it, Gomez had been with her each time she'd sensed the presence of the thing.

"Blast and damn," she said. "I will not play a supporting role for any cat, even Gomez." She made fierce go-away motions to the image-maker. She shoved Gomez outside the bedroom. She created a host of nasty faces and tried them on for the watcher. She made shooing motions as if he were a chicken. Finally, in a burst of inspiration she printed the address of the Animal Shelter

on a card and drew pictures of cats all around it. She held it up for the barber pole to read. The eyes looked puzzled, but willing. The little black box was being folded into itself until now it was no larger than an ice cube. The barber pole swelled into a caricature of a woman, a woman with enormous brandy-snifter-size breasts and huge flopping buttocks. The eyes were now set in a round, doughy, simpering face that somehow (horribly, incomprehensibly) reminded Maggie of her own. The watcher then, gazing straight at Maggie, mimicked all the nasty faces she'd made, stood on his (her?) head, peered between his legs, smiled and pirouetted, pretended to leer at himself in a mirror, and then, very deliberately, indicated with one spiraling finger atop his head that Maggie was nuts. He gave her one look of pure male amusement and disappeared.

"Come back and fight," Maggie said. "I dare you to say that again." She rubbed her eyes without much hope, and she was right. The watcher was gone.

Rather forlornly, Maggie took to her bed again. "It's the worst hangover I've ever had," Maggie moaned. "So maybe I wasn't looking my best, but it's a bitter blow..."

The worst of it was, she could never tell anybody, even Mark. What woman could ever admit she had less charm than a beat-up old tomcat? "But I've found out one thing," Maggie thought. "I know now what dogs and cats stare at when people can't see anything there..." But she almost wept when she remembered her old day-dream—of watchers lovingly studying and guiding mankind, or at least holding themselves ready to step in and help when the going got too rough. Suppose, though, the watchers considered mankind no more than servants to the other animals? Feeding and bathing them, providing warm houses and soft, safe beds...

It was a sickening thought. Maggie harbored it for two minutes, and then resolutely dismissed it from mind.

"Fiddlesticks! He wasn't that stupid. In fact, he was a damn smart-aleck. So he liked Gomez. So what? Maybe he's a woman-hater."

She settled back against her pillow and opened the bird book:

*Remember, birds can't count. When you build your blind, let two people enter it. Let one person go away, and the birds will return without fear, thinking they are safe. In this way, you will get good, natural pictures of our friends eating, fighting, and mating...*

Mark opened the bedroom door and walked in. "Maggie?"

"Hmm?" Maggie went on reading.

"I couldn't polish the car..." Mark grinned at her.

"Why not?" Maggie dropped the dull book with alacrity. She knew that grin.

"I kept thinking about that new game you were playing... Some type of photography, did you say? Then I know the perfect name for it."

"What?"

"It's called see-the-birdie, and it isn't a new game at all—it's just part of an old one."

Maggie stretched luxuriously and made an apparently irrelevant remark: "So long, hangover."

## ***THE WORD***

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I CAN TELL YOU WE WERE FRIGHTENED WHEN THAT WOMAN opened the door. Goddess-tall, she was, like all those people. It is only when they are children their size does not frighten one... much. Even hunger, I think, could not have driven us forth from our hiding place to mingle with those giants in their crowded streets, but on that night Lodi had slipped back to report that the streets were thronged only with the little ones. We decided to

chance it. Dorion would be yet three days repairing the ship, he said, and his fingers had slowed and grown clumsy because of his hunger.

Lodi blamed himself bitterly for the hunger that gnawed at the four of us. Lodi is a good leader, and I, for one, would follow him anywhere, but Mun and I sometimes have to sit on Lodi. Literally, I mean. For instance, while Dorion grumbled over his repairs and paid no attention at all to anything else, Mun and I had been forced to listen to Lodi explaining over and over just how it happened that he forgot to fill the emergency food bins. At last Mun nodded wearily at me. So Mun sat on Lodi's head and I sat on his feet and we took turns feeding back his own sad story, with variations.

"Old Yaud called you in to explain an entry in our ship's log. How could you explain it when you couldn't even read it?" said Mun.

There we were," I took up the refrain, "just ready to take off from Big Ship with a million details to attend to, and you off in old Yaud's office buttering up the old idiot instead of checking the loading!"

But we couldn't keep Lodi down.

That's why I'd rather be on his observer ship than any of the twenty-three others attached to Big Ship. What if his crew is always being called to scuff the green carpet in the council chamber? With Lodi as our leader (and he tromping all over rules and regulations) we bring back the clearest, closest viewings of all. Tiu, who never leaves the Big Ship, but sits before the view screens day after day, blesses Lodi for his daring and pleads for us in the council chamber.

Now Lodi squirmed out from under us and got to his feet. "Shut up a minute," he said, and looked at Dorion who was driving himself at the repairs despite his slowing fingers. Then Lodi beckoned for Mun and me. We left the comparative safety of the ship and stumbled after him. I almost envied Dorion left groaning over his work. It was very dark outside the ship, but Lodi knew the way. Every night since the forced landing Lodi had sneaked into the nearby town with the small, portable viewtaker he'd persuaded Dorion to make for him. Tiu, we knew, would be delighted with these views. While we walked we imagined among ourselves how his round belly would shake with his whoops of joy, and of how he would speak up in the council chamber, slowly and powerfully in our defense. It was comforting to remember Tiu at this moment. Because we were breaking the strictest rule of all. Lodi was ignoring it, and my empty belly and I saw no reason to remind him of the fact that crews are supposed under all circumstances to *stay inside the ship*.

It was a long walk. But at last Lodi halted us and made us lie down in some deep shadows while he crawled ahead to assess our position. Mun and I communicated our nervousness silently and lifted our heads to peer at the lights ahead. I remembered the giants who lived there, and I shuddered. I had never seen one any closer than ship's length away, staring goggle-eyed at us through the window of his aircraft.

Suddenly, I felt something rubbing against my hand. My heart almost stopped before I saw it was a small, mewling animal that meant no harm. I scratched its neck as I would have scratched the neck of a *pprrr* at home. It liked it.

Lodi sounded the clear-ahead whistle. Mun and I stood up and walked forward into the lights. I saw, from afar, Lodi standing calmly on a walk jostled by a crowd of children. All along the street the light standards showed dozens of strolling children, but none of the frightening big ones. Not one of the children paid much attention to Lodi, I saw, other than to point at him and stare a moment, smiling, before they moved on.

"It's all right, Cleel," Lodi reassured me, though he did not speak aloud. Lodi, too, was nervous. "They all have food. All of them. Smell it?" He waved his arm encompassingly. "Do you see they are all carrying sacks full of food? Watch them. They go up to a house, knock, say a certain word, and more food is put in their sacks. It's a curious procedure, and I am even now

recording it with the view-taker." As he talked silently, coaxingly, we edged nearer to him. Lodi grabbed Mun impatiently and pulled him along by the hand. I was shaking with fright all the way to my toenails, but I plodded beside them.

"And are we, God forbid, to rob these children of their full sacks?" I have followed Lodi into many a trouble-making, council-shaking act, but I would not rob even a giant's child.

"No, no!" Lodi glared at me. "Have I yet led you into the unlawful?"

Mun and I clutched each other and snickered. Lodi dropped Mun's hand and stalked ahead. Another kind of animal, much larger than the mewling one (or we), came running up to Lodi, wagging its tail and licking Lodi on the chin. Lodi kept pushing it away and patting it timidly all at the same time. The animal then ran around and around Lodi keeping him prisoner and almost knocking him off his feet. Ahead of us a child turned and whistled. The animal went bounding away.

"Thank God," Lodi muttered. "I thought I had been chosen for Only-Love. Think how Dorion would have cursed if I'd been forced to return to the ship with that great beast. Now watch and extend your hearing." We all paused before a lighted house, and sheltered by the hedge, watched a group of children who waited before the open door. The light poured out on their upturned faces, and I gasped at the sight. One of the children bore the face of a man aged in wickedness. Another that of a polished skull. One child straddled a broom and wore a high, peaked hat and had the face of a toothless crone. "Oh, pity their parents!" I cried out. Lodi hushed me so that we might hear the secret word. A man giant came to the open door. The children all screeched together, so that it was difficult to sort out the syllables.

"How sad that they have the voices of children with such faces!"

Lodi shushed me again while we watched. The man put a piece of food into each sack. The children pushed and shoved each other in their eagerness. One child spilled all the contents of his sack and, wailing, stooped to retrieve them. And, oh then! His face fell off. I myself wailed at the horror of it. Lodi stuffed his hand against my mouth, and then I saw that underneath the face-that-fell dwelt another gentler face, like any child's.

"Did you hear the word?" Lodi hissed.

"No, did you?" Mun reached out and dragged Lodi into the shadow.

"Clang-heads!" Lodi whispered heatedly. "I will give you the word, but where oh where are *your* ears? Cleel must needs make the night ghastly with howling. Oh, yes, your lungs are ever-present, your mouth is ever-moving, your belly ever-calling, but who, *who* is it that does the head work, always and forever? *Who*, I say, makes it possible for you two honk-heads to stay in Observation? *Who*?"

"Tiu," I answered him. Lodi stopped raving and started giggling. We all sat down in the midst of the hedge and giggled. When we could stop, we got up and walked to the last house with a light. Lodi whispered the word to us, but we pushed him into the leading position, so that it was he who knocked on the door.

A light came on over our heads. The door opened. Goddess-tall was that woman standing in the doorway. Mun grabbed my hand, and my heart almost stopped again. But she was beautiful, that giant woman. She smiled down at us, and Lodi, who is susceptible to all the nuances of love, flapped his antennae in shy acknowledgment.

"Triggertree?" His thin, sweet voice gave him away. Lodi was in love again and, as usual, it was mutual. He lifted his eyes to the woman and she knelt before him. Just like that. That's Lodi for you. I poked Mun in the ribs. Mun started to giggle again.

"Oh, you darlings!" the woman's mind said. And I'd swear it was the same kind of thing she said aloud. She kept murmuring at us, and we caught the no-sack concept, and you should have seen Lodi pulling his face into a mournful no-sack-poor-little-thing to match her mind-talk. She loved it, that one. And Lodi wasn't half trying. Just then in the middle of all that exclamatory



murmuring of hers I caught a concept that froze me to the marrow. Translated into words it was enough to set us all trembling again. Do you know what that woman's mind was saying to us, not about us, but right to us?

"Oh, the darling little men from Mars! See their cunning little costumes... Your mother must have worked hours... And did you come in a little space ship all that way just to say 'trick or treat' at my house? And did you think I wouldn't give you anything just because you forgot your sacks? Wait, just wait. I've got just the things little Martians like!"

She stood up suddenly. Mun and I fell back in fright. But she didn't seem to notice. She went darting deeper into the house, while we stood there frantically communicating, all mind-talking at once, with Lodi louder and stronger than Mun or I, trying to keep us from bolting and running like hell shipwards. We stayed, but you can't always trust Lodi's judgment when he's newly in love. He was stamping his foot and silently cursing us when the woman came back. She had three enormous sacks stuffed with food. We staggered as she placed them in our arms. I could smell the food, and some of my panic stilled. Food does that, you know.

"Now go home, darlings," the woman said in effect. "It's getting late, and your mother will worry." I thought of Dorion sweating back in the ship with never a thought for us. But I was too scared to giggle. I ran with the heavy sack. Out on the street I stopped to look back. Mun was right behind me, but that Lodi! He had his arms around the woman's neck. She was kneeling before him and kissing him right between the antennae! I heard her call as he broke away from her at last. "Be sure to come back next year. Don't forget!"

And do you know, we may do that, if Tiu ever gets us out of disciplinary confinement. He's working at it. We had some of the food left when we got back to Big Ship. Tiu says any civilization that can cook like that can't be all bad... or mad. Lodi, who was too full of love to be afraid, kept his ears open, and he says the woman mind-named the things as she placed them in the sacks. Every day now while he plucks glucklings for Morden he names them over like a love song. "Popcorn, peanuts, apples, candy, doughnuts, cookies, cupcakes, *dandy!*" I don't know which was which. Neither does Lodi. But I'm going to remember that word Triggertree. Nobody has ever kissed me right between the antennae. Lodi says it's wonderful.

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## ***THE DAY OF THE GREEN VELVET CLOAK***

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EXACTLY ONE WEEK BEFORE SHE WAS TO BE MARRIED TO Mr. Hubert Lotzenhiser, owner of the Fast and Friendly Loan Company, Mavis O'Hanlon went shopping and, among other things, bought a very expensive mistake. She knew it was a mistake the moment the saleslady counted out the meager change from two fifty-dollar bills—almost the last of Mavis' savings. Still, the green velvet cloak was quite the loveliest mistake Mavis had ever made. For instance, it in no way resembled Hubert, her biggest mistake to date. Mavis, weaving her way through the crowded department store aisles, glanced briefly in the direction of the exchange desk, then down at the smart box that held the green velvet cloak. No, it was impossible. As usual, the very thought of approaching the exchange desk turned her knees to jelly and set ten thousand butterflies to panic flight in her stomach. Mavis knew very well what Hubert would say of such timid behavior, if he were to find out about it. (She certainly had no intention of telling him.) In the six years of their engagement Hubert had devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to what he called "fiber-ing-up" Mavis' character. She had been subjected to many long, dull lectures on the advantages of self-discipline, which, so far as Mavis could see, consisted chiefly in forcing herself to do all the things she most disliked so that she could turn out

to be exactly like Hubert.

Under Hubert's tutelage Mavis had shudderingly tried pot-gardening, dog-patting, and automobile-driving. She was miserable. She balked the night Hubert came to dinner in her apartment and insisted she pursue and kill the two cockroaches the grocer had sacked with the potatoes. She grew so heady with her rebellion that night that she almost broke the engagement. In fact, she was triumphantly convinced she had, till Hubert showed up the next night and overwhelmed her with his bland assumption that all was well. It was all so difficult. She could not clearly recall how she had come to be engaged to Hubert in the first place. Fortunately, Hubert's excessively cautious nature had demanded a long engagement. Unfortunately, the long engagement period was now drawing to a close, and Mavis found it more and more difficult to tell Hubert what a big mistake he was.

After the night of the cockroaches, Mavis had given up her role of the grim quarry slave scourged to her dungeon and gone happily back to being her old chicken-hearted, unfibered self. Now she wished she hadn't. If Hubert's character-building had succeeded, how simple it would be now to tell him (in effect) that she was turning him in at the exchange desk! (But for whom could she exchange him?)

That was a fruitless line of thought. Especially since she couldn't even bring herself to exchange a perfectly useless (but perfectly beautiful) green velvet cloak—which no power on earth could induce her to wear in public, even supposing she should ever have occasion for wearing it. It was impossible to picture herself garbed in the long Victorian garment, sailing into some nightclub on Hubert's arm. Mavis hadn't the courage to bring it off, for one thing. For another, it demanded an escort as unlike Hubert as was humanly possible.

When she left the department store, Mavis headed straight for the Book Nook. After mentally wrestling with two enormous mistakes she felt she deserved a small reward. In Mavis' opinion chicken-hearted people were frequently in need of small rewards—for the things they did and the things they did not do, for success and failure, for joy and despair, and for all in-betweenness.

When she could find it the Book Nook was her favorite second-hand bookstore, and second-hand books were her favorite small rewards. The place was a narrow, dark cave sandwiched between a real-estate office and a surgical-supply shop. She was never quite certain of the address. Sometimes, when it had been months since her last visit, she would return to find that the real-estate office had unaccountably changed into a cubby-hole that sold sneeze powder and exploding cigars; and when she turned into what ought to have been the Book Nook, she ended in a nightmare of trusses, bedpans, and menacing garments with a lot of dangling harness attached.

But on the day of the green cloak the real-estate office displayed its usual ugly photographs of property nobody wanted, while the surgical supply shop offered a choice of legs or crutches, and she found the Book Nook huddled between them.

There was a new proprietor in charge. But then, there often was. At first glance she found him a vast improvement over his predecessors, though this one was badly in need of a shave. Still, the new man was young and he didn't have a cold. Till then it had been Mavis' experience that all second-hand booksellers suffered from heavy colds and a startling resemblance to stone images squatting on ancient tombs. This one, however, went so far as to raise his head, blink his eyes, and glance pleasantly (if vaguely) in her direction.

Proceeding carefully in the half-gloom, Mavis eased her way into the old-books section, which in places like the Book Nook mostly meant nineteenth-century trash. After a grubby half hour she emerged with a prize: a chatty description of a European tour made by a wealthy American girl in the year 1877. Mavis had once known a man who collected cigarette lighters that looked like guns or miniature bottles or outdoor privies—he didn't care, just so they in no way resembled cigarette lighters. *Live and let live*, Mavis thought. Cigarette lighters held no

charms for her, but Victorian travel journals did. Like most collectors she began with sheer greed, trying to cover too much territory, and ended with despair and not enough money. For some time now, she had limited herself to feminine journals that spanned (roughly) the years between 1850 and 1900. As for why she ever began collecting them at all... Hubert had asked her that. She had tried answering him with the truth: that people do not live by reason alone—that they only make up reasons to stop other people asking silly questions.

Hubert wasn't pleased with her answer at all, at all. In the end she was forced to retreat behind the conversation-killing remark that history was fascinating. Even Hubert respected history.

When she brought the book to the new proprietor's desk, he blew the dust from it and leafed through it while Mavis waited with money in one hand and tried to steady her small mountain of packages with the other.

"It's marked seventy-five cents," she said. "Right there, on the flyleaf." She laid the money on the desk, but the young man ignored it. He was reading a page in the middle of the book. He closed the book, his finger still marking his place, and looked back to check the author's name.

"Sara..." he said. "Only think of Sara's keeping a journal so faithfully. It's exactly what I've been looking for. Thank you... thank you." He glanced up at Mavis and smiled very sweetly and went back to his reading. She stared down at the top of his head which resembled a medium grade of sheared beaver. Her feet began to hurt. Impatience always settled in Mavis' feet.

"You want to keep it?" she asked, leaning perilously forward to glare at him over her packages.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary or even desirable..." He chewed nervously at his lower lip. "But I really ought to *read* it—or anyway, part of. Now, *here's* a nice question of ethics: If one is a time traveler and discovers in the future that one's sister's best friend has been keeping a journal that one is certain to find oneself in, how far is one allowed to read ahead? I mean, of what is to happen, but has not yet happened?" He pondered a moment while Mavis stared at him in bewilderment.

"I rather think," he continued, "that it is perfectly fair for me to read up to the point of my departure, don't you?"

"Oh, by all means," Mavis said, but her sarcasm was lost on the young man.

"Yes, here we are, steaming up the Rhine, a whole party of us." He began to read aloud from the book: "*We broke our journey at Konigswinter long enough to climb up to Godesburg Castle. While strolling back T. G. kept us merry with fantastic predictions for the future. J. gaily accused him of having drunk too deeply of the wine at luncheon or of having consulted the raggletaggle gypsies who waylaid us near the castle. T. G. only laughed and shook his head. J. asked mock-scornfuttly if he had traveled much into the future. T. G. answered her that he wished he could, more than anything. Mrs. Simmons then exercised her authority as chaperone and begged us to cease our wild talk.* Yes," he looked up from the book and nodded at Mavis, who was standing before him with her mouth open. "That's exactly the way it was. And then we climbed the Drachenfels and afterwards floated past thirty-three crumbling castles. It must have been two days later when we reached Heidelberg. That's where I excused myself from sightseeing and succumbed to a bookshop." He suddenly stopped talking and fell to reading again the way a hungry man attacks his dinner.

Mavis began unloading all her packages onto the desk. He might well be crazy, but she wanted that book. Short of grappling for it, she saw no way of getting it but to wait for it. She moved around behind the desk, drew up a chair and sat down beside him; she took off her shoes and wiggled her toes. The Book Nook was very quiet, dark, and cool. There were no other customers. She could wait till closing time—still two hours away. Surely it would not take him that long to finish Sara's journal.

The young man paid no attention to her, other than to move his chair a few inches to allow her to squeeze in beside him. He read silently and swiftly for ten minutes, then began groping around on the desk top without lifting his eyes from the page. The hand paused as if it were surprised when it came in contact with Mavis' packages.

"I could stack them here on the floor," she said, "if they're in your way."

"Not at all. The thing is, I believe my cigar case is under them."

Together they lifted the stack. No cigars. The young man ran his hands through the medium grade of sheared beaver and looked desperate.

"Here, have a cigarette." Mavis opened her purse and handed him the package, first taking one for herself. She waited for him to light it, but when she saw that no light was forthcoming she fished out a book of matches. Only then did she glance up at his face. His eyebrows had climbed almost as high as the sheared beaver.

"Oh, I say! You... Well, I call it brave of you. There *are* ladies, I know, who... who smoke, but to do it in public and carry tobacco about with you... I call it brave!"

Nobody else had ever called Mavis brave. She warmed to him. But honesty was strong in her. "Millions of women smoke. Hubert hates it. But, of course you're teasing me... Forgive me, but I do think you're the strangest owner the Book Nook has ever had. If you've finished with it, I'll take the book and go. The money is on the desk."

The young man lighted both cigarettes before he answered. "My dear young lady, I am not the owner of the Book Nook. There was nobody at all here when I arrived in that little alcove back there. It was pitch dark, and I slept on the floor till daylight. That was three days ago. This morning I broke the lock on the front door—the back door is boarded up and nailed solid. I took a short but nerve-racking walk and then crept back into this safe but cheerless hole. It was then I noticed a sign on the street side of the door. It said 'Closed till further notice.' It's still there, I believe. When you came in, I was considering, rather desperately, what I should do next. I do think it was clever of you to find exactly the book I needed! I'd been looking, but there are so many books, and all so higgledy-piggledy..."

Mavis stared and stared at him, while belief in him grew and grew. For the first time she noticed that his crumpled clothes were *very* Ivy League. "Are you really out of Sara's journal? I... I mean, how did it happen?"

"I really am, Miss—please, what is your name?" Mavis told him. "Mine is Titus Graham, and I ought this minute to be in Heidelberg, and it ought to be the year eighteen seventy-seven. I don't quite know *how* it happened, except that I went into a bookshop and I found a new book of short stories by a young German whose work I admire. He writes fantastic stories about the future, and I quite lose myself in them, you see. Only this time I lost myself indeed.

"I had settled myself in a little reading alcove they have there and had begun reading the book. You see, I'd fully intended to buy it and take it back to the hotel with me, till I discovered I'd left all my money in my room. Very embarrassing, but the proprietor insisted I look it over, anyway. I did, and suddenly, here I was."

"But, Mr. Graham, how will you get back?"

"Presumably by reading in *this* time something that closely relates to the *other* time."

"But will it work?"

"I... I hope so." The young man closed his eyes and swayed a little, as if he were suddenly dizzy. He clutched at the edge of the desk, and his teeth began to chatter. His pallor was alarming.

Mavis was on her feet at once, scrambling to put on her shoes. "What is it, Mr. Graham? Are you ill?"

"Not at all. It's just the cold in here. Don't you feel it?"

"Cold nothing!" Mavis was furious with herself. "You're starving, of course. What a witless

idiot I am! No money—here three days in this dreadful honking, hooting, cruel city. Frightened, too, I'll bet! But not showing it. Oh, Mr. Graham, you are so *brave*! Here..." She dragged the green velvet cloak from its box. "Let me wrap you in this, and then I'll go get some food. I'll be right back." She was halfway out the door when he called to her.

"You are so kind. So very kind. When you come back, don't be alarmed if you don't find me here. I'll try reading the book in the little alcove back there. Perhaps that will help."

"Oh, Mr. Graham, dear, take the book and *try*! Try hard, and I'll hurry."

But again his voice stopped her.

"I say... I know this is rather presumptuous of me, but I wonder... That is, I've never met a woman like you before. You didn't turn a hair when I told you about me—when I was from. I've daydreamed a great deal about the New Woman of the future, so free, so untrammelled and brave. I mean, would you—if you could—go back with me? If we tried reading the book together? I'm saying this badly, but I could take you to my sister... And after awhile, if you wanted to... Miss O'Hanlon, will you marry me in eighteen seventy-seven?"

Mavis stood in the doorway, her heart pounding. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to go back with him—back to a time she'd fit into? Back to the long sunlit days when an hour was a whole hour long, not like these modern ten minute hours. She knew very well from her persistent reading of Victorian journals that something queer had happened to time even before she was born. And to people. There used to be room enough in the world for all kinds of people—the inefficient, and the chicken-hearted... Maybe, with time enough, she could fiber-up her character in her own way. Mightn't she even, in Titus Graham's world, appear to be not only strong-fibered, but perhaps a trifle *fast*? There, she could wear the velvet cloak... and no more problems about Hubert. *Hubert*. He fell into her dream the way a boulder might crash into delicate glass castles. She drew herself up as tall as she could, and for the first time in her life felt little tendrils of strength lacing across her spine.

"I thank you, Mr. Graham, dear, from the bottom of my heart. I am honored, but I cannot go. You see, I have not been in this world all that you think I am. I'm a timid rabbit of a girl—not the New Woman you've imagined me to be. A poet once said, 'There grows no herb of help to heal a coward heart,' so there's no sense in my chasing through time to look for it. What I'd better do is stay here and heal myself. Anyway, I mean to try. But right now I must go get you some food."

"In spite of what you say, I should like you to know, Miss O'Hanlon, that my faith in your courage remains unshaken."

They were the last words Mavis ever heard from Titus Graham. Spoken words, that is. When she returned with the sandwiches and coffee, he was gone. In the small alcove in back she found Sara's journal, and after a short but sharp battle with her conscience, she gathered the book up with her packages. After all, she comforted herself, she had left the money for it on the desk. She put the sandwiches and coffee inside the box that had held the green velvet cloak and set them outside on the curb for the trash collector. Resolutely then she left the Book Nook and walked several blocks to find a telephone. Though her voice and hands were shaking, she finally managed to phone the police to tell them that someone should see to relocking the Book Nook's front door. When they asked for her name, she hung up.

Once safely at home again, Mavis gave in to fatigue and dull discontent. Something strange and wonderful had happened to her, and yet everything was discouragingly the same. She felt there ought to be some glow left, some magic light that would alter her forever. But what was different? There was still Hubert to contend with. There was still the fact that she'd spent almost all her money on the green velvet cloak. What, she wondered, had happened to it? And, oh, if she could only *know* that Mr. Graham was safely home again and no longer hungry. Her eyes fell on Sara's journal... Of *course*!

She found the entry almost immediately. Sara had written in Heidelberg in June, 1877:

*After a frantic three days' search by our whole party and various Heidelberg officials, T. G. reappeared yesterday and set our fears at rest. He was quite unharmed, but tired and hungry and looking very seedy. None of us endeavored to question him till he had enjoyed some food and rest. Today the physician tells us that he evidently contracted a fever and in his delirium wandered about the city, in a state bordering on loss of memory. It is pitiful to think of poor T. unable to find his way back to his friends and family. The fugue, as the doctor called it, has now passed, and we are assured he will recover fully. T. G. remembers nothing, he says, except that somewhere he met a young woman who was kind to him, giving him her cloak because he was shivering. He had it with him when he returned and will not yet permit it to be removed from his sight. He has got it firmly in his head that she was an extraordinarily beautiful and fearless creature, quite unlike any other young lady of his acquaintance. It is most provoking.*

*He has always admired strong-minded females. Fortunately, I feel myself growing daily more strong-minded... The cloak is of green velvet and of a quality that proves its owner (whatever her other attributes) to have been a lady of excellent taste.*

For a moment, Mavis had read enough. Without at all intending to, Sara had given her enough glow to go on with. Bravely or not, Mavis could at least live her life with good taste. And it was never good taste to marry a man you didn't love. So much for Hubert. Mavis reached for the telephone and summoned him to their last meeting. While she waited for his arrival she made further plans for the future. She would continue her collection of journals. It would be delightful if now and then she ran across references to Sara and Titus. Of course, they'd marry. Or had married. Mavis hoped so; certainly she didn't mind. In fact, Mavis had no regrets at all, except when she thought of the beautiful green cloak. Never mind, Sara could have it. Mavis would save her money and buy herself another, because it hadn't been a mistake at all.

Then why, Mavis wondered, with everything so neatly ordered, did she feel like a leftover pancake in an otherwise empty refrigerator?

She was crying a little and telling herself that she would not cry when her doorbell rang. Mavis was surprised that Hubert had arrived so quickly; he wasn't due for another hour yet. The young man standing before her had hair that resembled a superior grade of sheared beaver, and in his hands he carried a package heavy with red wax seals.

"Miss Mavis O'Hanlon? May I come in? I come on a very strange errand, and it will take time to explain. Forgive me, my name is Titus Graham, the Fourth, if it matters to you." He ran his hands distractedly through the sheared beaver. Mavis remembered to close her mouth—gone suddenly dry—smiled, and invited him in. When he was seated he began again. "You aren't going to believe this, but my great-grandfather—by the way, he was Titus the First. Look, I know I'm not making sense yet, but—that is, when my great-grandfather died in nineteen thirty-five, among his effects was this sealed package with a letter of instructions concerning it. The letter insisted that the package not be opened, but that in a certain year—on this very day—it should be delivered to a Miss Mavis O'Hanlon in this city. Preferably by his unmarried great-grandson, Titus Four. That's me—oh, I told you. Yes... well, as a matter of fact, part of my inheritance from him was to be withheld till these conditions were fulfilled. I was pretty young when he died, but I do remember him, and I liked him very much. So, you see, aside from the rest of the inheritance, I'm pleased to do as he asked—am I going too fast for you?"

Mavis cleared her throat and shook her head and brought out a quavery no. Titus IV was looking at her with the quality of sympathy that leads to soothing and murmuring and makes people forget they are strangers. Mavis tried to make her smile repressive but encouraging, cool but warming, hello-but-not-yet. It emerged, she was sure, as a positive leer, which she wiped off at once.

"Well, then," Titus was saying, "it was fairly easy to find you. Luckily, you are the only person of that name in the city. But now comes the hard part. In order to keep the contents of this

package you must, before opening it, correctly identify what's inside. Miss O'Hanlon, I know this is silly and impossible, but can you tell me what's inside this package?"

"I can," Mavis said. (Stone-faced and unflinching before a firing squad, an investigating committee, a quizmaster, six detectives, and the income tax bureau... brave, cool, alert, snapping her fingers under Hubert's nose... waving him into Limbo: Guards! Take him away...)

"Miss O'Hanlon?"

"What? Oh! The package, yes. It contains a perfectly beautiful green velvet cloak."

Titus stared at her with deepening interest. "Yes, but how did you know? Not that you wouldn't look lovely in a green velvet cloak. It's the kind of thing that would suit you very well. Oh, I don't mean you need clothes like that, or anything—that is, with or without clothes—that's not what I mean at all!" He grinned wickedly at her. "Put on the cloak, please? And get me out of this hole I've dug for myself."

Mavis broke the seals and opened the package. Somebody had done a miracle of packing, folding the cloak around soft old rolls of the finest lawn to keep the aging velvet from cracking. When she shook out the cloak the room was filled with the scent of roses and lavender, of far-off sunlit days in gardens she'd never know. Mavis smoothed the velvet with trembling fingers, then carefully drew the cloak over her shoulders. "It needs another dress," she said, "and I could lift my hair, like this."

"Do," Titus said. "And we could have dinner at that German place with paintings and red plush."

"It's hardly faded at all," Mavis murmured. "And I've got that cream-colored portrait dress I was going to be—what time is it?"

"Oh, it's early yet. Plenty of time. I want to hear everything. How you knew what was in the package, and how—"

"No," Mavis said. "Not now. There's just time to dress and get away before—I don't believe in Last Meetings, do you?"

"Never," Titus said. "First Meetings, yes. Last Meetings, outlawed. I almost forgot; there's a message that goes with the cloak. Titus the First said to tell Mavis O'Hanlon: *What's past is prologue*. Does that mean anything special to you?"

"I fervently hope so." Mavis grinned back at him while sprinting for her bedroom. "Ten minutes," she called back...

Time paused, as if for a deep breath, before they were caught up in it again and whirled away, so that all the hours of their life together seemed thereafter foreshortened, nostalgic, and as perfectly beautiful as the green velvet cloak.

## WINNING RECIPE

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MISS MERSEY CAME DOWNSTAIRS ONE MORNING TO FIND the wastebasket maliciously sucking away yesterday's mail before she was ready to discard it. The calendar clock announced the hour in a surprising falsetto, and Miss Mersey recognized the insolence the house machines reserved for her alone.

I ought to be *firm*, she thought. But her chin trembled as it always did when she felt timid. And Miss Mersey so often felt timid. She had no business feeling that way in the enlightened and peaceful year 2002. Her brother kept telling her so, but the more he stamped and yelled; the worse she got.

Miss Mersey shut off the wastebasket and stood quietly before the smugfaced clock, thinking of bullies in general and of the house machines in particular. She hated and feared every one of them. The house was full of mechanical things that sucked, chewed, or blew. Half her days were spent warily punching buttons, moving levers, and reading the tapes the machines stuck out at her like tongues to list their complaints and needs. And lately they seemed to sense her fear of them, spitting and hissing at her with a bully's contempt for weakness. Her brother John was a well-meaning man, she thought, but he couldn't resist gadgets.

"Show some gumption, Clare!" John bellowed when she complained wistfully that she would rather do the housework herself. "Forward! That's the watchword. Fancy not having house machines nowadays. Brace up, show some spunk, some spice!" And often as not, John would stamp right out and buy another machine, even more complicated and frightening—to help, he said, spice up her character.

Her brother came bounding in now, loudly demanding breakfast. The clock announced the hour with precise, baritone dignity.

"You're late again, Glare," John Mersey grumbled. "Can you rush things a bit? Now, none of your falderals, please. You spend too much time in the kitchen. I've been thinking—we ought to streamline that department, too. As a matter of fact, I know just the thing." He carefully avoided the stricken look Miss Mersey threw at him.

Until now, John had never interfered with the cooking arrangements. His sister was a superb cook, and John was a man who enjoyed his food. As for Miss Mersey, cooking was her life. Into it she poured all her imagination.

John ignored all her timid protests and finally admitted that the gadget was already ordered and paid for, and would be delivered at any moment. "The Kitchen Autocrat," John told her while he ate, "will cook anything. Now, Clare, stop sniveling. You'll get used to it. It doesn't require a skilled operator. It thinks for itself. You'll see."

With John fed and 'copted off to the city (where his sister suspected he bullied his employees), Miss Mersey sat in the living room and waited for her doom to arrive. She wept a little and thought a great deal, and after a while she was surprised to feel a stubborn resistance crowding out her usual timidity.

"This time," she whispered, "John's gone too far. I'll fight. I don't know just how. But no matter what kind of monster he's bought, I'll fight it to the finish."

Miss Mersey was belatedly discovering that sometimes courage is born of timidity pushed too far. Science, she thought, simply did not take into account people like herself. If science took a giant's stride one year, it took two strides the next. And who knew if science might not one day build mechanical sisters? John would like that. Miss Mersey's jaw hardened.

It was then that she became aware of pounding noises in the kitchen. Her hands fluttered with sudden fear. Had one of John's machines gone berserk? Her heart raced, and she was halfway through the door to the garden before she realized she was running away.

"No." Her face grew pink, and she raised her chin. It was probably only the delivery men with the *thing* John had ordered. She marched sturdily to the kitchen. "Remember, Clare," she told herself, "gumption, spunk, spice."

The two young men in the kitchen grinned at her while she stared at the massive metal contraption that covered three of the walls from floor to ceiling. The Autocrat resembled steel filing cabinets piled one on top of the other. Through the window, she could see her former kitchen appliances set haphazardly in the yard beside a long van.

"I hope we didn't startle you, Miss Mersey," one of the young men said. "Mr. Mersey said we should just walk in." And when she still stared, the young man shuffled his feet and looked at the ceiling. "This is a great little gadget. One of the few creative-thinking machines released for civilian use." He darted a quick look at the pamphlet in his hand. "It says here: *There is, of*



course, a limited creative area. While the Kitchen Autocrat is guaranteed by the manufacturer to give excellent service, even extraordinary service, the housewife is urged to refrain from demanding the impossible. Not too much, as yet, is known about machine psychology. The manufacturer cannot be held responsible for the results if the Autocrat is subjected to unusual frustration" He read a few more words to himself. "Oh, yeah, I'm supposed to give you the instruction book. I'll tell you what: You just go study this book while we finish up in here. Won't take long." He pushed Miss Mersey gently through the door and closed it. The pounding noises began again, but Miss Mersey didn't hear them. She was too busy going over the words of the man's speech. She had her weapon.

When the men were gone, Miss Mersey stood before the Autocrat, ready to measure her foe. In one hand she held some of the most difficult of all the recipes she possessed—long, tedious ones requiring hours of human labor. In the other hand she held the instruction book, rapidly rereading it.

*Speak clearly*, the book ordered, *into the microphone on panel G7*. Miss Mersey found panel G7 and suffered instant stage fright. The book in her hand shook slightly, and she squared her jaw again. *The Autocrat*, she read, *will skillfully substitute when any ingredient called for is not to be found in its storage space*. Miss Mersey decided to play fair. She loaded the maw of the machine with a vast quantity of food from her supplies. Then for an hour she read recipes into the microphone, daring the machine to equal her own artistry.

In exactly 37 minutes, the Autocrat disgorged such an array of food that Miss Mersey was forced to remove it or herself. The kitchen was not large enough for the banquets the Autocrat laid before her. And every dish was perfect. Moreover, the Autocrat surrendered the food all ready on serving dishes, and beautifully garnished. Miss Mersey called a 'copter to deliver it all to the Children's Hospital and wearily began again.

As she stood before the machine, watching the glow of the tiny red lights on the panels, listening to its chuckling purr, she imagined that the little red eyes were watching her with amusement.

"Just you wait," she told the panel. "I'm not licked yet. Take a pig," she ordered loudly, "from three to six weeks old..." Miss Mersey had no intention of thrusting a poor little pig into the Autocrat. The machine was supposed to be so wonderful at substitutions—let it worry over the impossibility of constructing a baby pig. This time the Autocrat grumbled a little (while Miss Mersey hummed sweetly to herself), but at the end of two hours out popped a very creditable imitation of roast piglet—and with an apple in its mouth. Now it was the Autocrat that hummed sweetly while Miss Mersey wept...

It was almost time for John to come home. Miss Mersey sat drearily in the middle of the kitchen floor, surrounded by pickled oysters, quenelles of grouse, boned turkey and squirrel potpie. All simulated, to be sure, but delicious. She could just hear John's crowing remarks. "Not jealous, are you, Clare? Come, come. Show some spice. Trouble with your character, my girl, is too much sugar, not enough spice."

Suddenly Miss Mersey felt she had been raised to a mountaintop and had there received a vision. Trembling, she stood again before panel G7.

"Recipe for little boys," she cried in triumph. "Snips and snails and puppy dogs' tails. That's what little *boys* are made of!"

The Autocrat's panels glowed a fiery red. The hum changed its pitch and became a siren wail. Miss Mersey fled to the safety of the garden. Above the terrible clashing and grinding sounds that followed her, there came a deafening roar. The explosion threw Miss Mersey to her knees, and then all was quiet.

Out of the silence, Miss Mersey haughtily addressed the empty garden. "I hope John's satisfied. It was spice he asked for, and from now on, it's spice he's going to get."

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## LETTERS FROM LAURA

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Monday

Dear Mom:

Stop *worrying*. There isn't a bit of danger. Nobody ever dies or gets hurt or anything like that while time traveling. The young man at the Agency explained it all to me in detail, but I've forgotten most of it. His eyebrows move in the most fascinating way. So I'm going this weekend. I've already bought my ticket. I haven't the faintest idea where I'm going, but that's part of the fun. Grab Bag Tours, they call them. It costs \$60 for one day and night, and the Agency supplies you with food concentrates and water capsules—a whole bag full of stuff they send right along with you. I certainly do *not* want Daddy to go with me. I'll tell him all about it when I get back, and then he can go himself, if he still wants to. The thing Daddy forgets is that all the history he reads is mostly just a pack of lies. Everybody says so nowadays, since time travel. He'd spoil everything arguing with the natives^ telling them how they were supposed to act. I have to stop now, because the young man from the Agency is going to take me out to dinner and explain about insurance for the trip.

Love, Laura

Tuesday

Dear Mom:

I can't *afford* to go first class. The Grab Bag Tours are not the leavings. They're perfectly all right. It's just that you sorta have to rough it. They've been thoroughly explored. I mean somebody has been there at least once before. I never heard of a native attacking a girl traveler. Just because I won't have a guide you start worrying about that. Believe me, some of those guides from what I hear wouldn't be very safe, either. Delbert explained it all to me. He's the boy from the Agency. Did you know that insurance is a very interesting subject?

Love, Laura

Friday

Dear Mom:

Everything is set for tomorrow. I'm so excited. I spent three hours on the couch at the Agency's office—taking the hypno-course, you know, so I'll be able to speak the language. Later Delbert broke a rule and told me my destination, so I rushed over to the public library and read bits here and there. It's ancient Crete! Dad will be so pleased. I'm going to visit the Minotaur in the Labyrinth. Delbert says he is really off the beaten track of the tourists. I like unspoiled things, don't you? The Agency has a regular little room all fixed up right inside the cave, but hidden, so as not to disturb the regular business of the place. The Agency is very particular that way. Time travelers, Delbert says, have to agree to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Delbert says that will be very difficult for me to do. Don't you think *subtle* compliments are the nicest? I've made myself a darling costume—I sat up late to finish it. I don't know that it's exactly right, historically, but it doesn't really matter, since I'm not supposed to leave the cave. I have to stay close to my point of arrival, you understand. Delbert says I'm well covered now with insurance, so don't worry. I'll write the minute I get back.

Love, Laura

Friday

Dear Prue:

Tomorrow I take my first time travel tour. I wish you could see my costume. Very fetching!

It's cut so that my breasts are displayed in the style of ancient Crete. A friend of mine doubts the authenticity of the dress but says the charms it shows off are *really* authentic! Next time I see you I'll lend you the pattern for the dress. But I honestly think, darling, you ought to get one of those Liff-Up operations first. I've been meaning to tell you. Of course, I don't need it myself. I'll tell you all about it (the trip I mean) when I get back.

Love, Laura  
Monday

Dear Prue:

I had the stinkiest time! I'll never know why I let that character at the travel agency talk me into it. The accommodations were lousy. If you want to know what I think, it's all a gyp. These Grab Bag Tours, third-class, are just the *leavings*, that they can't sell any other way. I hate salesmen. Whoever heard of ancient Crete anyway? And the Minotaur. You would certainly expect him to be a red-blooded he-man, wouldn't you? He looked like one. Not cute, you know, but built like a bull, practically. Prue, you just can't *tell* anymore. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You've heard about that funny dizziness you feel for the first few minutes on arrival? That part is true. Everything is supposed to look black at first, but things kept on looking black even after the dizziness wore off. Then I remembered it was a cave I was in, but I did expect it to be lighted. I was lying on one of those beastly little cots that wiggle everytime your heart beats, and mine was beating plenty fast. Then I remembered the bag the Agency packs for you, and I sat up and felt around till I found it. I got out a perma-light and attached it to the solid rock wall and looked around. The floor was just plain old dirty dirt. That Agency had me stuck off in a little alcove, furnished with that sagging cot and a few coat hangers. The air in the place was rather stale. Let's be honest—it smelled. To console myself I expanded my wrist mirror and put on some more makeup. I was wearing my costume, but I had forgotten to bring a coat. I was freezing. I draped the blanket from the cot around me and went exploring. What a place! One huge room just outside my cubbyhole and corridors taking off in all directions, winding away into the dark. I had a perma-light with me, and naturally I couldn't get lost with my earrings tuned to point of arrival, but it was *weird* wandering around all by myself. I discovered that the corridor I was in curved downward. Later I found there were dozens of levels in the Labyrinth, Very confusing.

I was just turning to go back when something reached out and grabbed for me, from one of those alcoves. I was *thrilled*. I flicked off the light, dropped my blanket, and ran.

From behind I heard a man's voice. "All right, sis, we'll play games."

Well, Prue, I hadn't played hide-and-seek in years (except once or twice at office parties), but I was still pretty good at it. That part was fun. After a time my eyes adjusted to the dark so that I could see well enough to keep from banging into the walls. Sometimes I'd deliberately make a lot of noise to keep things interesting. But do you know what? That character would blunder right by me, and way down at the end of the corridor he'd make noises like "Oho" or "Aha." Frankly, I got discouraged. Finally I heard him grumbling his way back in my direction. I knew the dope would never catch me, so I just stepped out in front of him and said "Welllll?" You know, in that drawly, sarcastic way I have.

He reached out and grabbed me, and then he staggered back—like you've seen actors do in those old, old movies. He kept pounding his forehead with his fist, and then he yelled, "Cheated! Cheated again!" I almost slapped him. Instead I snapped on my perma-light and let him look me over good.

"Well, Buster," I said very coldly, "what do you mean, cheated?"

He grinned at me and shaded his eyes from the light. "Darling," he said, "you look luscious, indeed, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm sight-seeing," I said. "Are you one of the sights?"

"Listen, baby, I *am* the sight. Meet the Minotaur." He stuck out this huge paw, and I shook it.

"Who did you think I was?" I asked him.

"No *who*, but *what*," he said. "Baby, you ain't no virgin."

Well, Prue, really. How can you argue a thing like that? He was completely *wrong*, of course, but I simply refused to discuss it.

"I only gobble virgins," he said.

Then he led me down into his rooms, which were really quite comfortable. I couldn't forgive the Agency for that cot, so when I spied his lovely, soft couch draped in pale blue satin, I said, "I'll borrow that if you don't mind."

"It's all yours, kid," the Minotaur said. He meant it, too. You remember how pale blue is one of my best colors? There I was lolling on the couch, looking like the Queen of the Nile, flapping my eyelashes, and what does this churl want to do?

"I'm simply starved for talk," he says. And about what? Prue, when a working girl spends her hard-earned savings on time travel, she has a right to expect something besides *politics*. I've heard there are men, a few shy ones, who will talk very fast to you about science and all that highbrow stuff, hoping maybe you won't notice some of the things they're doing in the *meantime*. But not the Minotaur. Who cares about the government a room's length apart? Lying there, twiddling my fingers and yawning, I tried to remember if Daddy had ever mentioned anything about the Minotaur's being so persnickety. That's the trouble with books. They leave out all the important details.

For instance, did you know that at midnight every night the Minotaur makes a grand tour of the Labyrinth? He wouldn't let me go along. That's another thing. He just says "no" and grins and means it. Now isn't that a typical male trait? I thought so, and when he locked me in his rooms the evening looked like turning into fun. I waited for him to come back with bated breath. But you can't bate your breath forever, and he was gone hours. When he did come back I'd fallen asleep and he woke me up *belching*.

"Please," I said. "Do you have to do that?"

"Sorry, kid," he said. "It's these gaunt old maids. Awful souring to the stomach." It seems this windy diet was one of the things wrong with the government. He was very bitter about it all. Tender virgins, he said, had always been in short supply and now he was out of favor with the new regime. I rummaged around in my wrist bag and found an anti-acid pill. He was delighted. Can you imagine going into a transport over pills?

"Any cute males ever find their way into this place?" I asked him. I got up and walked around. You can loll on a couch just so long, you know.

"No boys!" The Minotaur jumped up and shook his fist at me. I cowered behind some hangings, but I needn't have bothered. He didn't even jerk me out from behind them. Instead he paced up and down and raved about the lies told on him. He swore he'd never eaten boys—hadn't cared for them at all. That creep, Theseus, was trying to ruin him politically. "I've worn myself thin," he yelled, "in all these years of service—" At that point I walked over and poked him in his big, fat stomach. Then I gathered my things together and walked out.

He puffed along behind me wanting to know what was the matter. "Gee, kid," he kept saying, "don't go home mad." I didn't say goodbye to him at all. A spider fell on him and it threw him into a hissy. The last I saw of him he was cursing the government because they hadn't sent him an exterminator.

Well, Prue, so much for the bogey man. Time travel in the raw!

Love, Laura  
Monday

Dear Mom:

Ancient Crete was nothing but politics, not a bit exciting. You didn't have a single cause to worry. These people are just as particular about girls as you are.

Love, Laura  
Tuesday

Dear Mr. Delbert Barnes:

Stop calling me or I will complain to your boss. You cad. I see it all now. You and your fine talk about how your Agency "fully protects its clients." That's a very high-sounding name for it. Tell me, how many girls do you talk into going to ancient Crete? And do you provide all of them with the same kind of insurance? Mr. Barnes, I don't want any more insurance from you. But I'm going to send you a client for that trip—the baggiest old maid I know. She has buck teeth and whiskers. Insure *her*.

Laura

P. S. Just in case you're feeling smug about me, put this in your pipe and smoke it. The Minotaur *knew*, I can't imagine how, but *you*, Mr. Barnes, *are no Minotaur*.

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## ***THE LAST PROPHET***

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IT WAS SAID OF REGGIE PFISTER THAT HE HAD AN UNCANNY knack for appearing at the best and noisiest parties, wherever in the world they might be. To those scribes who reported the cavorting of international society, Reggie was as much a fixture as the fat ex-king, though not nearly so colorful. Reggie, too, was fat and rich; but nobody hung on his words, nobody scrambled to join his retinue. Reggie didn't have any retinue. Hostesses welcomed him for the reason that unattached, eligible males are always welcomed; but because of his well-known hobby and his penchant for droning on about it in a soft, flat monotone, people tended to avoid him whenever possible.

At very large parties, however, there were always a few who were unaware of his reputation as an amiable bore. Across the room from him somebody would be struck by his likeness to a jolly (but spiritual) monk; somebody else (usually female) would recall acres of oil wells all labeled *Pfister*; or occasionally somebody's attention would be caught by the significant way Reggie glanced at his watch, then wrote in a worn little notebook. These were the people who threaded their way to his table.

Reggie's face always glowed with delight when this happened. Hopping up excitedly, Reggie pushed chairs about, signaled waiters, shook hands, and bounced on his toes till his guests, dizzied by his swooping, flight-like gestures, collapsed in their chairs gratefully. For the first few minutes Reggie was content to let the others talk—not because Reggie had finally learned to approach potential listeners warily (he hadn't), but because he liked the feeling that at any moment now he'd have the opportunity to present these smart, sophisticated people with some *real news*!

When he decided the time had come, almost any casual remark was enough to set Reggie going. Somebody might say, "It's a dull party," or, "Weren't you in Rome last week?"

Then Reggie would say: "That's a very interesting question. I'm glad you brought that up..." And away he'd gallop on his hobbyhorse while his guests stared at him and nudged each other under the table. "... I'm sure you've noticed it," the flat voice would be hurrying now. "Everybody has noticed it at one time or another, but nobody does anything about it—like the weather, hmmm? But I have. Done something about it, I mean. For fifteen years I've kept records on it... right here in this little old notebook. I've gone to the noisiest parties—trying to play fair, you

know. Must be scientific about these things, or a project's worthless. Worthless. As of this moment, I've recorded 12,938 occasions it has happened, all personally witnessed. No doubtfuls included, you understand. If there's so much as a giggle, say, from the terrace, I'm utterly ruthless with myself. I don't record it, though I am often tempted... yes, yes, very tempted. My record is four in one twenty-four hour period. I should so much like to make it five..."

There was always one at the table who had failed to follow Reggie's tricky transition. In fact, in his eagerness to plunge into his subject, Reggie often forgot to lead into it at all. Asked what the hell he was talking about, Reggie would laugh and slap his thighs, and then take out his handkerchief and blow his nose. This seemed to have a sobering effect on everybody. Reggie, leaning carefully over his untouched drink, would tap the table with a pudgy forefinger, stare one by one into the glum faces around him, and ask a question,

"Haven't you ever noticed those dead-silent lulls that fall on groups of people? At a party like this one, for instance. Sooner or later this very night there'll come those few seconds when nobody is saying anything. When it happens, glance at your watch. You know what time it will be? *Twenty minutes after the hour.*" The pudgy finger lifted as if to halt protests. Nobody offered any. "Now mind you, some people will tell you that it also occurs at twenty minutes *to* the hour. I'll "be honest with you. Sometimes it dees. But out of 12,938 recorded instances, that has only happened, in my experience, 119 measly times. That clearly indicates to me just one thing: human fallibility. You discount human frailty, ordinary wear and tear, and the natural blurring after so long a time of the built-in blueprint for the human brain, and I'll guarantee that, *from the beginning*, we were supposed to be quiet at twenty minutes after every hour."

At this point, Reggie's listeners would be drooping listlessly over empty glasses and staring out at the gaiety around them with the sour faces of castaways watching a ship disappear over the horizon. But the waiters were heaving into view with drinks. Reggie saw to that. Almost anybody with a fresh drink before him will pause long enough to take a sip or two. Reggie counted on their doing so. Because now he was approaching the great heart of the matter. It was imperative that *this* time Reggie be allowed to finish what he had to say. But first he must fill them in, he thought, on some of the background.

"I've tracked this thing all over the world." (Reggie never varied his background-opener.) "I spent years hunting out the wisest men in every corner of the globe. To every one of them I put the same question: Why? *Why?* Most of them just laughed at me... Now, I'm *not* blaming them. I can see how, just at first, my question might sound pretty unimportant to a busy man—the world being in the shape it is, and all. Their mistake was, they didn't ponder it long enough. If they'd bothered to think about it a while, they'd have seen as clearly as I do that, given the answer to *what makes people fall silent at twenty minutes past the hour*, we'd have a lot of other answers to some pretty deep questions. Like, *who are we?* for instance, and *is there a God?* Well, To make a long story short, I finally ran across a couple of old magi, real wise men of the East, like in the Bible. They study the stars and charts and ancient old tablets and books, you know. So I asked them, and they didn't laugh. 'Come back,' they said, 'in seven years and we'll try to answer your question.' So back I went, seven years later—that was a couple of years ago—and I find just this one feeble old man still alive, but he had the answer for me!

"Now I don't insist that you believe it. The answer, I mean. You people can look on it as a theory, if you like. But I'll frankly admit that I regard it as a prophecy. That poor little old man...! After his partner died, he'd worked on alone. He had a lot of dignity. The day before he died he took my hand and told me how lucky I was—said I was chosen to publish the good news and alert mankind. That made me feel good. But you have no idea how difficult it is! People don't seem to be interested. Oh, they'll listen politely enough for a while, but they never wait to find out the answer..."

It was on the Riviera that Reggie's voice halted just at this point—one of those evenings when he was most hopeful of reaching his hearers. For a moment the whole room was quiet. Except

for the wind that could be heard in the oleanders outside, the hush was complete. But only for a few seconds. Even while Reggie was consulting his watch, noise flowed back, with a woman's laughter bobbing atop the wave.

"You see!" Reggie crowed. "Twenty minutes after twelve!" But his guests were gone.

That kind of thing was always happening to Reggie. In Cairo or New York, in Madrid or Washington, D.C.—especially in Washington, D.C. It was there that Reggie had the devastating experience of barely opening his mouth when several people said, "I'm glad you brought that up," and what with all of them talking politics very fast and loud, completely drowned out Reggie's soft drone.

In Hollywood Reggie got only as far as the two magi, when a pert starlet insisted there should be three magi, and where was Reggie from?

"Why, I'm from East Fairview, Pennsylvania," he admitted shyly.

Whereupon the starlet dragged him off to a bedroom and draped him in a bedspread, proclaiming him for the rest of the evening as the third wise man from the East. The other two, she said, were a helluva lot brighter. They'd already given up and gone home.

In San Francisco Reggie poured out his story to a fascinated audience, up to the moment when he was about to divulge the prophecy. But in San Francisco everybody insisted on the right to think (and prophesy) for himself, and it all ended in the hurling of some high-class vocabulary and fisticuffs.

Reggie boarded a fast plane home to East Fairview, having wired his housekeeper to uncover the furniture in the drawing room and prepare for a big party. He invited all his relatives and in-laws, his old school chums, and the girls he'd left behind him. It was a very nice party. For the first time in his life, Reggie was able to record five dead-silent lulls; but even this triumph was questionable, since he later discovered that none of his relatives ever spoke to each other anyway. And as for relating the prophecy, Reggie hadn't a chance. He had forgotten that a prophet is without honor under his own rooftop.

Back again in New York, Reggie faced the fact that time was running out. There's something about an unshared hotel room, he thought, that presents any fact in the dreariest possible light.

Silently he addressed his image in the bureau mirror: Here am I, a lonely man, with a story to tell. I have *news*, and nobody listens. I'm fat and funny-looking and my voice is all wrong. Until fifteen years ago I led a perfectly useless existence. I'm not very smart; somebody else had to give me all the answers. I've shared food with people, and drinks, and room-space, but I've never shared a great experience. I'd like to share this. I'm the only man alive who knows...

Suddenly Reggie Pfister remembered that he was a rich man. He remembered it in a spirit of humility. If nobody would listen freely, then perhaps he could pay to be heard.

The psychiatrist's office was cool and quiet, except for the murmuring of the two nurses in the receptionist's cubicle. Reggie was very early for his appointment; he had been anxious to escape the hotel room and the bureau mirror. There was another patient waiting too, a young woman with the blank, unwritten-on face of a child. Reggie tried not to stare at her. He had the feeling that it might be bad form to show undue interest in patients waiting in the outer rooms of psychiatrists. But the young woman troubled him. She was very pale, and she was trembling. She turned the pages of the magazine she held with the excessive quietness and caution of a child who has been scolded too often and too harshly. Reggie, stealing little peeps at her over his own magazine, saw that she was crying. He had never before seen anybody weep in just that way. Two little unbroken streams of tears poured smoothly down her face and dripped onto her soft collar. She was scarcely making a sound.

Impulsively Reggie went to sit beside her. He glanced at the receptionist's cubicle. He and the girl were out of the line of sight of the nurses. They would have had to lean out their little window to watch the two patients; besides, they were now discussing hats. No interference there, Reggie

thought, and he took the girl in his arms.

She fitted against him without resistance, pressing her head against his shoulder. After a while, when her trembling had subsided, Reggie wiped her eyes and her nose and smoothed back the fine, straight hair. He was rewarded with a small, tentative smile.

"I'm so frightened," the girl whispered, leaning very close to Reggie's ear, as if she were telling an important secret.

"Tell me why," Reggie whispered back.

"All the paths are dark," the girl said, "and I am afraid to turn comers."

"Yes," Reggie said. "And what else?"

"When I cry out in the night, nobody answers... and... and there are beasts in the forest who devour children, even very good children. Not a bit like in stories... Will you tell me a story?"

Reggie's eyes closed almost involuntarily, as if he wanted to contain for the moment his fierce joy. He shifted his arm then and drew her closer to him.

"Listen..." he said. "Once upon a time—a *very* long time ago, when the world was young, a father gathered his children around him and said, 'I must go away for a time. I have work to do far away—so far that, though I shall travel faster than your good thoughts, yet will I not have reached the realm when your children's children are old. I do not like to leave my children fatherless, but I am needed elsewhere. I leave with you my boundless love, and lest you grow weary with longing for counsel, I bid you be silent and listen at such times every day—'"

Reggie paused and smiled down at the girl's rapt face. "And then," he continued, "the father set a kind of little clock humming in every child's head, with the times for listening clearly marked, so none could forget. Then he said, 'When I have finished my work, I will come home.' He kissed every child goodby and asked them all to be good, and then he went away."

"Did the old witch get them?" the girl asked in alarm.

"The old witch?" Reggie asked.

"You know. It's part of the game... The father says, 'I'm going downtown to smoke my pipe, and I won't be back till the broad daylight. Don't let the old witch get you.' Then the children are supposed to say 'Tick-a-lock' so they'll be safe behind the locked door. But mostly they forget that part," the girl mused.

Reggie nodded. "Yes, I expect these children forgot it, too. By and by, they, or their descendants, forgot a number of things. They forgot the trick of listening in a certain, special way; so that, as the father traveled farther and farther, and his voice grew smaller and smaller, finally they couldn't hear him at all. But the little clocks still kept humming—every child ever after was born with one built-in—and every day people still fell silent at the right times though they no longer knew why."

The girl stirred in his arms. "And then what happened?"

Reggie sighed. "The next part hasn't happened yet. In the meantime the world grows darker and darker without counsel, and you and I are afraid of the beasts in the forest... But almost any day now," Reggie's face brightened, "something very nice will happen. You really mustn't be afraid, because—" Reggie struggled for the right words to phrase the prophecy, but found none. The girl waited quietly. In their cubicle, the two nurses were silent, too. Reggie stared at the clock on the wall. *Twenty minutes after Three.*

Suddenly, out of the silence, there was a great noise, as of the ripping of an enormous cloth, big enough to shroud the world. Then came a mighty rolling-back sound, as if the sky had parted and curled back on itself like two halves of a scroll. Light poured down into the waiting room, and the weight of it bowed the heads of all within. There was a sound like bells, and a sound like thunder. There was an immutable sound like power, and a joyous sound like glory. Reggie heard and noted the chill undertones of justice, but was most aware of the tender tones of love. Both the light and the sound grew and grew till they merged and became the Voice:



*My Dear Obedient Children, I am Coming Home...*

There was a cessation of sound, and only the light remained. Then one of the nurses screamed, and the scream died away into a long, sobbing wail. This very human ululation brought Reggie's head up sharply. The old distress call of the pack found an instant response in his quickened heartbeat, and in the prickling down his backbone. It brought Reggie's head around to stare downward through the window behind him, however briefly. Still holding the girl, Reggie's arms were now wooden and unaware. His mouth was dry and he swallowed spasmodically to rid it of the metallic taste of adrenalin.

Below him the pack squirmed and crawled like maggots seeking an opening into the dark, sweet body of the earth, Reggie saw enacted with terrible clarity all that was animal in humankind. Under a rising accompaniment of wordless babble the monstrous pantomime unrolled for him. Reggie was lost in it and part of it, tooth and claw, till suddenly he caught sight of a man with his back to a wall, his arms and head raised defiantly, not against the howling mob, but *against the sky*. The puny, clenched fists of the man were so sad and so wonderful that Reggie smiled... There was something in the gesture that returned all Reggie's humanity to him. The pack moved on, but Reggie turned and looked at the girl.

Bathed in the great light, her face showed no fear. When her serene eyes met his, Reggie was able for a moment to meet her gaze without faltering. Except that... His eyes closed in shame for the giggling little shred of vanity and disappointment he was wrestling with. *If only I could have had another minute...* he thought.

"You are troubled," she said.

"It's nothing really," Reggie said. "It's just that I wanted to tell you something, but time ran out."

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## **MR SAKRISON'S HALT**

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IN THOSE DAYS THE OLD KATY LOCAL WAS THE MAGIC CARPET that transported me from one world to another. Summertime only truly began the moment the conductor lifted me aboard and urged me to "set still and be a big girl." He was never impressed with the fact that I'd been traveling two days all alone and on much bigger trains than the Katy. When he had asked after my mother and told me how anxiously my grandparents were awaiting my arrival, he'd pass on down the aisle to mysterious regions forward, and I'd be left to spy all about the coach for Miss Mattie Compton.

As often as not, there was no sign of Miss Mattie, and the only other occupants would be somnolent old men in alpaca coats who roused now and then to use the spittoons. Usually her absence meant simply that the conductor had not yet found time to eject her bodily from the Jim Crow car, but sometimes I was forced to conclude that she was resting at home that day. At such times my disappointment would be intense. And while the Katy huffed and rattled past the cotton fields and muttered gloomily over the shady creeks, I had nothing to do but hold myself steady on the slick straw seat and stretch my eyes wide to keep awake.

But mostly I was fortunate enough to catch the Katy on one of Miss Mattie's days. I'd see just the tip of a pink ribbon bobbing over the top of the high seat, and I'd hurry down the car to slide in beside her. Or perhaps the door to the coach would open and Mr. McCall, the conductor, would appear with Miss Mattie in his arms. She would be hanging as limply as a bit of old mosquito netting, staring sweetly into Mr. McCall's annoyed red face. He'd plump her down beside me and then, accommodating himself to the Katy's swaggering roll, slam out of our car

again without a word.

Miss Mattie and I never bothered with formal greetings. The bond between us was so well-established that we always took up again just where we'd left off the year before. She might sometimes call me by my mother's name instead of my own, but I didn't mind. (It was such a pretty name.) Almost immediately, out of the confused, jackdaw clutter of her conversation, her recognition of our shared dedication would emerge, and once again we'd plunge deeply into talk of Mr. Sakrison. Interruptions were frequent, as frequent as the Katy's stops along the line. When the Katy squealed jerkily to a halt and sat there panting, we'd press our noses against the dirty window (with its heaped up piles of coal dust along the sill) and stare silently at the scene outside. Then, for a little while after each of the stops, I'd have to pat Miss Mattie's hands till she stopped whimpering.

Miss Mattie was pretty when she wasn't whimpering. Her face was soft and pink with fine little crumpled lines, and her blue eyes were younger than the rest of her. Sometimes when she was telling over and over again about Mr. Sakrison's strange disappearance in that young chirruping voice, I would forget that Miss Mattie was close to sixty years old.

She always wore little crocheted white gloves that somehow lent an air of dignity to the rest of her ill-assorted costume. "Outlandish," people termed Miss Mattie's get-ups. She mixed the styles of thirty years back with anything modish that took her fancy. In order to take Miss Mattie's fancy a piece of wearing apparel had only to be pink and fluffy. Chapel Grove's inhabitants never forgot the day Miss Mattie appeared with a pair of pink "teddies" pinned to her gray curls. The wispy bit of lingerie hung gracefully and shamelessly behind her poor addled head for all the louts in town to see, and they followed her to her door taunting her with ugly words.

In the main, Chapel Grove treated Miss Mattie kindly enough. She was even pointed out to visitors. But nobody ever bothered to hide the grinning and nudging that broke out wherever she appeared. There were humorists, too, who liked to josh her about Mr. Sakrison, saying rude, insulting things of him, till Miss Mattie collapsed into a damp, sobbing little heap at their feet. At such times I suffered a queer, ill-defined conviction that Chapel Grove would like to make me cry, also. Beneath the surface kindness I sensed their suspicion that I was, in some way, as different as Miss Mattie. Even my grandparents thought it was too bad that I must grow up elsewhere, and everybody smiled at my alien "accent." No matter how joyfully each summer I threw myself into the very heart of all the youthful activities there, I was aware of a subtle reserve that kept me circling just outside the true center. (Didn't they realize I belonged? Why, I'd been born there!... But so had Miss Mattie.)

Miss Mattie and I were both made to feel Chapel Grove's disapproval of those who do too much traveling around. Several times each year she went all the way to the State Capitol to ask the railroad officials there to help locate Mr. Sakrison. But most of her journeys were made up to the city where one transferred to the Katy for the last four hours of the trip to Chapel Grove. The Katy rattled up there mornings and returned in the late afternoon. At least twice each week Miss Mattie boarded her for the round trip. Once arrived, Miss Mattie usually just stayed on board, if the trainmen would let her. She had no interest in the city at all. It was the journey back and forth that was important.

On the last journey we shared, the conductor did not lift me aboard the Katy or tell me to be a big girl. I was a big girl. At least I thought I was. I certainly towered over tiny Miss Mattie, and I was very conscious of the hard little buds that were my breasts—half-ashamed and half-proud of the way they strained under the tight voile dress.

Miss Mattie was having one of her rare "clear" spells. She called me by my own name and traced for me, through mazy genealogical thickets, her fourth cousinship to my mother. This didn't startle me; one way or another I was related to everybody in the county. But I was startled and disappointed to hear her talking like all the other adults I knew. She seemed tired, too, and I was suddenly shaken by a dreadful fear that one day soon she'd give up her search and admit defeat.

"Oh, Miss Mattie, please," I said, "tell me about Mr. Sakrison."

She turned to look at me, and I almost cried out when I saw she was cringing as if I were one of the town bullies eager to strike the poisonous blow. I stared back at her till the tears spilled down my cheeks.

"You've grown so tall," she whispered. "I was afraid..."

Both of us wept openly then with a great flutter of white handkerchiefs, and afterwards I was glad to see that the weary, grown-up look had faded from her eyes. With our heads very close together and Miss Mattie's hand in mine, she told me the story again for the last time.

"You remember, my dear—I've told you so often—he had the loveliest instincts. I never knew a Yankee could be anything but a *beast*, but he was so kind, so gentle... I didn't mean to fall in love with him. They say such horrid things about traveling men, specially Yankee traveling men. He walked me home from church that night. Wouldn't come in, since I was—to Chapel Grove's way of thinking—living alone in that big house. But he kissed me... We stood under that old catalpa tree, you know the one. He hugged me so hard he crushed the roses I was wearing, and the smell of the bruised petals hung over us like a fog. We made our plans and I packed all night. Had every nigra in the house pressing and mending... The night went so quickly, and all of us were happy, calling back and forth and singing snatches of songs.

"Early in the morning I put on my pink organdy and Mr. Sakrison called for me and we caught the Katy to go up to the city for the wedding. It was a delirious kind of morning. I've never known the Katy to slide so smoothly along. There was something different, too, about the way the sunlight slanted across the fields. I remember thinking that if I could shift those long shadows just a fraction, the way you do a vase full of roses, I'd see a lovely new view. And there was a new, wonderful taste to the air and even to the coffee I'd put up for us!

"After a while we both felt quieter inside and Mr. Sakrison held my hand and talked of all his hopes for the future. Not just our future, either. He spoke his piece for the whole world. I was so proud of him. I'd never heard anybody speak so sadly about the nigras—their want and their fear. They were picking in the fields that day, I recall... He put words to the little sick feelings I'd had at times, and I began to catch his vision... some of it, but not all. Not then."

The Katy whistled long and mournfully. Miss Mattie interrupted herself with "Hush!" and pressed her nose against the window to see if this, at last, was the station she'd been hunting for all those years. But it wasn't.

"You see," she said, "I was too happy to know or care which halt it was. The Katy would stop, as it always does, at every cow pasture almost. Sometimes Mr. Sakrison would swing off to light his cigar, though I never minded the odor of cigars... Delicious, isn't it? But he said the scent caught in my hair, and he couldn't have that. He said my hair smelled of breezes in the springtime... And then the Katy stopped at the dearest little halt! We had been aboard about two hours, I think, so it would have been almost halfway to the city. I had never noticed the place before, but then I hadn't been to the city often.

"The first thing that caught my eye was a huge camellia bush in full bloom, a red one. The fallen petals had heaped up in a ring around it, you know the way they do. I asked Mr. Sakrison to step off and cut one of the blossoms for me with his pocket knife. I didn't think the station master would mind, and there wouldn't be time enough to ask politely. But the queerest thing! The Katy just sat and huffed and puffed for the longest spell, it seemed. And things outside moved slow as molasses. There was a park with a little blue lake, and swans dipping their heads... and children playing. Ever so many children, and all so nicely dressed, even the little darkies. There were adults strolling there, too, all mixed in together, all colors. I wasn't a bit surprised, somehow, but I wondered at the slow, graceful movement of the scene. It was like grasses waving under water.

"Then I noticed the station itself. It was a funny little brick, octagonal building. Over the door

to the waiting room it didn't say *white*, you know. It said: *waiting room, One and all*. And then, while Mr. Sakrison was still cutting the blossom, out of the station house came a colored gentleman. He walked up to Mr. Sakrison and pounded him on the back and they shook hands, and I thought to my soul they were going to embrace..." Miss Mattie paused and bit her lips and twisted her hand from mine.

"Do you know, that made me angry? I looked hard at Mr. Sakrison, and for a moment he looked like any other Yankee... a total stranger. It was the anger that kept me sitting there staring instead of joining him. I wouldn't feel angry now. Even then—I like to remember—I fought it down and called and waved to him. But he only looked around in a puzzled kind of way... and walked off into the park with the man. The Katy started up again with the terrible crashing sound and fairly flew away from there.

"I was looking back, you know, and trying to reach the emergency cord... and weeping. I saw just the first few letters on the station sign. It said 'B R O' something. In the city I waited and waited, but Mr. Sakrison didn't come. They told me the only halt between Chapel Grove and the city that had the letters B R O was Brokaw. I hired a buggy and drove back there, but it was only a tumble-down old halt without a station house—just one of those sheltered seats..."

Miss Mattie always stopped her story at this point, as she did now. Again we murmured over all the pleasant names we could think of that the halt might have possessed. As usual Miss Mattie argued strongly for her favorite. But I didn't think the word *Brotherhood* was pretty enough. While we talked I was recalling the rest of the story—the part of it I knew from a different viewpoint. Chapel Grove's version was that the Yankee traveling man had meant to fool her from the start. She had probably given him money, they said. Her folks had left her a great pile of it. And (here they pulled down their mouths) he never had any intention of marrying her and had escaped at the first opportunity. Miss Mattie had come home then and shut herself up for months. When she did show her face again it was the silly, addled face she wore now. Look at the crazy things she did—like riding the Katy up and down the line for thirty years almost every day, looking for the halt that swallowed Mr. Sakrison!

In the long gloaming that day the Katy made many halts, and I stared fiercely with Miss Mattie in utmost concentration at each one, hoping we'd recognize *something* to tell us this one was B R O.

Sure enough, we found it. It was I who spied the swans, so white in the dusk, but it was Miss Mattie who saw the camellia bush and the man who waited beside it. When the Katy stopped Miss Mattie was off as quick as a wink, but she needn't have hurried, because the Katy just stood breathing there for a long time. I saw a petal on the camellia bush fall and fall—forever it seemed—before it touched the ground. I saw Miss Mattie leaning on the man's arm, and they turned and he waved his straw hat at me, slow as slow. And, oh, Mr. Sakrison was lovely... but so was Miss Mattie. She was young and plumped out, especially in the bosom, and I was suddenly ashamed and crossed my arms over my chest. I was watching the swans arching their necks when the Katy started up again very quickly as if she were getting away under full steam. Only then did I remember to look for the station sign, but I was too late.

In Chapel Grove that summer it was a nine days' wonder the way poor old Mattie Compton had stepped off the Katy and disappeared without a trace. Since I was the last person who saw her, I was forced to tell again and again the dull facts of how the Katy stopped at a station whose name I neglected to notice, and of how Miss Mattie got off there and didn't get back on board. That was all I reported. Grandmother finally put a stop to the questions with her appeal to the ladies that I was "at that delicate age," and Miss Mattie's disappearance had upset me.

It hadn't, of course.

But there were things in Chapel Grove that year that did upset me. Most nights I saw the fiery cross burning on schoolhouse hill. Grandfather went about tight-lipped and angry, cursing "flap-mouthed fools." I lay awake sometimes and listened to the hounds baying down in the

bottom-lands, and I wished with all my heart for money enough to ride the Katy every day, up and back, till I found the halt called B R O. There, I'd run, run and be gathered to Mr. Sakrison's heart... and Miss Mattie's.

The Katy local was retired years ago. There's a fine high-way now to the city, and they say everybody in Chapel Grove drives there often since it's so near. I hear everything has changed. But I read in my newspaper last week how they've locked the doors to the schoolhouse and barred with guns and flaring anger the way to the hill, and I realize how terribly far Chapel Grove still is from Mr. Sakrison's halt.

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## **THE WILD WOOD**

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IT SEEMED TO MARGARET ABBOTT THAT HER CHILDREN, AS they grew older, clung more and more zealously to the family Christmas traditions. Her casual suggestion that, just this once, they try something new in the way of a Christmas tree met with such teen-age scorn and genuine alarm that Margaret hastily abandoned the idea. She found it wryly amusing that the body of ritual she herself had built painstakingly through the years should now have achieved sacrosanctity. Once again, then, she would have to endure the secret malaise of shopping for the tree at Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that one wretchedly disquieting hour every year was not too much to pay for her children's happiness. After all, the episode always came far enough in advance of Christmas so that it never *quite* spoiled the great day for her.

Buying the tree at Cravolini's began the year Bonnie was four. Bruce had been only a toddler, fat and wriggling, and so difficult for Margaret to carry that Don had finally loaded Margaret with the packages and perched his son on his shoulder. Margaret remembered that night clearly. All day the Abbotts had promised Bonnie that when evening came, when all the shop lights blazed inside the fairy-tale windows, the four of them would stroll the crowded streets, stopping or moving on at Bonnie's command. At some point along the way, the parents privately assured each other, Bonnie would grow tired and fretful but unwilling to relinquish the dazzling street and her moment of power. That would be the time to allow her to choose the all-important tree, which must then of course, be carried to their car in triumph with Bonnie as valiant, proud helper. Once she had been lured to the car it would be simple to hurry her homeward and to bed. The fragrant green mystery of the tree, sharing their long ride home, would insure her sleepiness and contentment.

As it turned out (why hadn't they foreseen it?), the child showed no sign of fatigue that evening other than her captious rejection of every Christmas tree pointed out to her. Margaret, whose feet and back ached with Bruce's weight, swallowed her impatience and shook out yet another small tree and twirled its dark bushiness before Bonnie's cool, measuring gaze.

"No," Bonnie said. "It's too little. Daddy, let's go that way." She pointed down one of the darker streets, leading to the area of pawn-shops and narrow little cubbyholes that displayed cheap jewelry. These, in turn, verged on the ugly blocks that held credit clothiers, shoe repair shops, and empty, boarded-up buildings where refuse gathered ankle-deep in the entrance ways.

"I won't," Margaret said. "This is silly. What's the matter with this tree, Bonnie? It isn't so small. We certainly aren't going to wander off down there. I assure you, they don't *have* Christmas trees on that street, do they, Don?"

Don Abbott shook his head, but he was smiling down at his daughter, allowing her to drag him to the street crossing.

*Like a damn, lumbering St. Bernard dog*, Margaret thought, *towed along by a simpering chee-ild*. She stared after her husband and child as if they were strangers. They were waiting for her at the corner, Don with the uneasy, sheepish look of a man who knows his wife is angry but unlikely to make a scene. Bonnie was still tugging at his hand, flashing sweet, smug little smiles at her mother. Margaret dropped the unfurled tree with a furious, open-fingered gesture, shifted Bruce so that he rode on one hip, and joined them.

The traffic light changed and they all crossed together. Don slowed and turned a propitiating face to his wife. "You all right, hon? Here, you carry the packages and I'll take Bruce. If you want to, you could go sit in the car. Bonnie and I, we'll just check down this street a little way to make sure... She says they've got some big trees someplace down here." He looked doubtfully down at his daughter then. "Are you sure, Bonnie? How do you know?"

"I saw them. Come on, Daddy."

"Probably she *did* see some," Don said. "Maybe last week when we drove through town. You know, kids see things we don't notice. Lord, with traffic the way it is, who's got time to see anything? And besides, Margaret, you said she could pick the tree. You said it was time to start building traditions, so the kids would have... uh... security and all that. Seems to me the tree won't mean much to her if we make her take the one we choose. Anyway, that's the way I figure it."

Margaret moved close to him and took his arm, squeezing it to show both her forgiveness and apology. Don smiled down at her and Margaret's whole body warmed. For a long moment she allowed her eyes to challenge his with the increased moisture and blood-heat that he called "smoky," and which denoted for both of them her frank desire. He stared back at her with alerted male tension, and then consciously relaxed.

"Well, not right here and now," he said. "See me later."

Margaret, reassured, skipped a few steps. This delighted the children. The four of them were laughing, then, when they found themselves in front of the derelict store that housed Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters.

Perhaps it was their gaiety, that first year, that made Cravolini's such a pleasant memory for Don and the children. For the first few minutes Margaret, too, had found the dim, barny place charming. It held a bewildering forest of upright trees, aisles and aisles of them, and the odor of fir and spruce and pine was a tingling pleasure to the senses. The floor was covered with damp sawdust, the stained old walls hung with holly wreaths and Della Robbia creations that showed real artistry. Bonnie had gone whooping off in the direction of the taller trees, disappearing from sight so quickly that Don had hurried after her, leaving Margaret standing just inside the door.

She found herself suddenly struggling with that queer and elusive conviction that "this has happened before." Not since her own childhood had she felt so strongly that she was capable of predicting in detail the events that would follow this moment. Already her flesh prickled with foreknowledge of the touch that would come... *now*.

She whirled to stare into the inky eyes of the man who stood beside her, his hand poised lightly on her bare forearm. Yes, he was part of the dream she'd returned to—the long, tormenting dream in which she cried out for wholeness, for decency, and love, only to have the trees close in on her, shutting away the light. "The trees, the trees..." Margaret murmured. The dream began to fade. She looked down across the packages she held at the dark hand that smoothed the golden hairs on her forearm. *I got those last summer when I swam so much*.

She straightened suddenly as the dream ended, trying to shake off the languor that held her while a strange, ugly man stroked her arm. She managed to jerk away from him, spilling the packages at her feet. He knelt with her to pick them up, his head so close to hers that she smelled his dirty, oily hair. The odor of it conjured up for her (again?) the small, cramped room and the bed with the thin mattress that never kept out the cold. Onions were browning in olive oil

there over the gas plate. The man standing at the window with his back turned... *He needed her; nobody else needed her in just that way. Besides, Mama had said to watch over Alberto. How could she leave him alone? But Mama was dead. ... And how could Mama know all the bad things Alberto had taught her?*

"Margaret." Don's voice called her rather sharply out of the dream that had again enveloped her. Margaret's sigh was like a half-sob. She laughed up at her husband, and he helped her to her feet, and gathered up the packages. The strange man was introducing himself to Don. He was Mr. Cravolini, the proprietor. He had seen that the lady was very pale, ready to faint, perhaps. He'd stepped up to assist her, unfortunately frightening her, since his step had not been heard—due, doubtless, to the great depth of the sawdust on the floor. Don, she saw, was listening to the overtones of the apology. If Mr. Cravolini's voice displayed the smallest hint of insolence and pride in the lies he was telling, then Don would grab him by the shirt front and shake him till he stopped lying and begged for mercy. Don did not believe in fighting. Often while he and Margaret lay warmly and happily in bed together Don spoke regretfully of his "wild-kid" days, glad that with maturity he need not prove on every street corner that he was not afraid to fight, glad to admit to Margaret that often he'd been scared, and always he'd been sick afterwards. Don approved of social lies, the kind that permitted people to live and work together without too much friction. So Mr. Cravolini had made a mistake. Finding Margaret alone, he'd made a pass. He knew better now. OK. Forget it. Thus Margaret read her husband's face and buried very deeply the sharp, small stab of disappointment. *A fight would have ended it, for good.* She frowned a little with the effort to understand her own chaotic thoughts, her vision of a door that had almost closed on a narrow, stifling room, but was now wedged open... waiting.

Don led her down one of the long aisles of trees to where Bonnie and Bruce were huddled beside their choice. Margaret scarcely glanced at the tree. Don was annoyed with her—half-convinced, as he always was, that Margaret had invited the pass. Not by any overt signal on her part, but simply because she forgot to look busy and preoccupied.

"Don't go dawdling along in that wide-eyed dreamy way," he'd said so often. "I don't know what it is, but you've got that look—as if you'd say yes to a square meal or to a panhandler or to somebody's bed."

Bonnie was preening herself on the tree she'd chosen, chanting a maddening little refrain that Bruce would comprehend at any moment: "And Bru-cie did-unt he-ulp..." Already Bruce recognized that the singsong words meant something scornful and destructive to his dignity. His face puckered, and he drew the three long breaths that preceded his best screaming.

Margaret hoisted him up into her arms, while Don and Bonnie hastily beat a retreat with the excuse that they must pay Mr. Cravolini for the tree. Bruce screamed his fury at a world that kept trying to confine him, limit him, or otherwise squeeze his outsize ego down to puny, civilized proportions. Margaret paced up and down the aisles with him, wondering why Don and Bonnie were taking so long.

Far back at the rear of the store building, where the lights were dimmest, Margaret caught sight of a display of handmade candles. Still joggling Bruce up and down as if she were churning butter, she paused to look them over. Four pale blue candles of varying lengths rose gracefully from a flat base moulded to resemble a sheaf of laurel leaves. Very nice, and probably very expensive. Margaret turned away to find Mr. Cravolini standing immediately in front of her,

"Do you like those candles?" he asked softly.

"Where is my husband?" Margaret kept her eyes on Bruce's fine, blonde hair. *Don't let the door open any more...*

"Your husband has gone to bring his car. He and your daughter. The tree is too large to carry so far. Why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid..." She glanced fleetingly into the man's eyes, troubled again that her

knowledge of his identity wavered just beyond reality. "Have we met before?" she asked.

"I almost saw you once," Cravolini said. "I was standing at a window. You were reflected in it, but when I turned around you were gone. There was nobody in the room but my sister... the stupid cow..." Cravolini spat into the sawdust. "That day I made a candle for you. Wait." He reached swiftly behind the stacked packing boxes that held the candles on display. He had placed it in her hand before she got a clear look at it. Sickeningly pink, loathsomely slick and hand-filling. It would have been cleaner, more honest, she thought, if it had been a frank reproduction of what it was intended to suggest. She dropped it and ran awkwardly with the baby towards the lights at the entrance way. Don was just parking the car. She wrenched the door open and half fell into the front seat. Bonnie had rushed off with Don to bring out the tree. Margaret buried her face in Bruce's warm, sweet-smelling neck and nuzzled him till he laughed aloud. She never quite remembered afterwards the ride home that night. She must have been very quiet—in one of her "lost" moods, as Don called them. The next morning she was surprised to see that Bonnie had picked one of Cravolini's largest, finest trees, and to discover the tissue-wrapped pale blue candles he had given Bonnie as a special Christmas gift.

Every year after that Margaret promised herself that this year she'd stay at home on the tree-buying night. But something always forced her to go—some errand, a last bit of shopping, or Don's stern injunctions not to be silly, that he could not handle Bonnie, Bruce, *and* the biggest tree in town. Once there, she never managed to escape Cravolini's unctuous welcome. If she sat in the car, then he came out to speak to her. Much better go inside and stick close by Don and the children. But that never quite worked, either. Somehow the three of them eluded her; she might hear their delighted shouts two aisles over, but when she hastened in their direction, she found only Cravolini waiting. She never eluded him. Sometimes on New Year's Day, when she heard so much about resolutions on radio and television, she thought that surely this year she'd tell Don at least some of the things Cravolini said to her—did to her—enough, anyway, to assure the Abbots never going back there again. But she never did. It would be difficult to explain to Don why she'd waited so long to speak out about it. Why hadn't she told him that first night?

She could only shake her head in puzzlement and distaste for motivations that were tangled in a long, bad dream. And how could a woman of almost-forty explain and deeply explore a woman in her twenties? Even if they were the same woman, it was impossible.

When Cravolini's "opening announcement" card arrived each year, Margaret was jolted out of the peacefulness that inevitably built in her between Christmases. It was as if a torn and raw portion of her brain healed in the interim. *But the door was still invitingly wedged open, and every Christmas something tried to force her inside*, Margaret's spirit fought the assailant that seemed to accompany Mr. Cravolini (hovering there beyond the lights, flitting behind the trees), but the fighting left her weak and tired and without any words to help her communicate her distress. *If only Don would see*, she thought. *If there were no need for words. It ought to be like that....* At such times she accused herself of indulging in Bruce's outgrown baby fury, crying out against things as they are.

Every time she saw Cravolini the dream gained in reality and continuity. He was very friendly with the Abbots now. They were among his "oldest customers," privileged to receive his heartiest greetings along with the beautiful candles and wreaths he gave the children. Margaret had hoped this year that she could convince Bonnie and Bruce to have a different kind of tree—something modern and a little startling, perhaps, like tumbleweeds sprayed pink and mounted on a tree-shaped form. Anything. But they laughed at her bad taste, and were as horrified as if she were trying to bypass Christmas itself.

I wonder if I'll see *her* this year, Margaret thought. Alberto's sister. She knew so much about her now—that she was dumb, but that she had acute, morbidly sensitive hear-ing—that once she'd heard Cravolini murmuring his lust to Margaret, because that was the time the animal-grunting, laughing sounds had come from the back of the store, there where extra trees lay



stacked against the wall. Her name was Angela, and she was very gross, very fat, very ugly. Unmarriageable, Alberto said. Part of what Margaret knew of Angela came from Alberto's whispered confidences (unwanted, oh unasked for!), and the rest grew out of the dream that lived and walked with Margaret there in the crumbling building, beginning the moment she entered the door, ending only with Don's voice, calling her back to sanity and to another life.

There were self-revelatory moments in her life with Don when Margaret was able to admit to herself that the dream had power to call her back. She would like to know the ending. It was like a too-short book that left one hungry and dissatisfied. So this year she gave way to the children, to tradition, and went once again to Cravolini's.

Margaret was aware that she looked her best in the dull red velveteen suit. The double golden hoops at her ears tinkled a little when she walked and made her feel like an arrogant gypsy. She and Don had stopped at their favorite small bar for several drinks while the children finished their shopping.

Maybe it's the drinks, Margaret thought, and maybe it's the feeling that tonight, at last, I'll settle Mr. Cravolini, that makes me walk so jut-bosomed and proud. Don, already on his way with her to Cravolini's, had dropped into a department store with the mumbled excuse that always preceded his gift-buying for Margaret. He had urged her to go on alone, reminding her that the children might be there waiting. For once, Margaret went fearlessly, almost eagerly.

The children were not waiting, but the woman was. *Angela*. Margaret knew her instantly, just as she'd known Alberto. Angela stared up and down at Margaret and did not bother to hide her amusement, or her knowledge of Margaret's many hot, protesting encounters with her brother. Margaret started to speak, but the woman only jerked her head meaningfully towards the back of the store. Margaret did not move. The dream was beginning. *Alberto is waiting, there beyond the stacked-high Christmas trees. See the soft, springy nest he has built for you with pine boughs*, Margaret stirred uneasily and began to move down the aisle, Angela beside her.

I must go to him. He needs me. Mama said to look after Alberto. That I would win for myself a crown in Heaven... Did she know how unnatural a brother Alberto is? Did she know how he learned the seven powers from the old forbidden books? And taught them to me? He shall have what he desires, and so shall I. Here, Alberto, comes the proud, silly spirit you've won... and listen, Don and the children are coming in the door.

Margaret found the soft, springy bed behind the stacked trees. Alberto was there, waiting. She heard Don call for her and struggled to answer, struggled desperately to rise to go to him. But she was so fat, so heavy, so ugly... She heard the other woman's light, warm voice answering, heard her happy, foolish joking with the children, her mock-protestations, as always, at the enormous tree they picked. Margaret fought wildly and caught a last glimpse of the Abbots, the four of them, and saw the dull, red suit the woman wore, heard the final, flirtatious tinkling of the golden earrings, and then they were gone.

*A whole year I must wait*, Margaret thought, *and maybe next year they won't come. She will see to that.*

"My sister, my love..." Alberto crooned at her ear.

## ***THE LITTLE WITCH OF ELM STREET***

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THE LITTLE WITCH OF ELM STREET

NINA HIT OUR NEIGHBORHOOD HARD. OF COURSE WE'D BEEN warned, but for

the first day or two we found it impossible to believe that such a beautiful child could be seven kinds of unmitigated hell. My first introduction to Nina came one day late in the spring. I was visiting Mrs. Pritchett who lives next door. I'd made the mistake of telling Mrs. Pritchett that I never seemed to get caught up on my housework. She insisted that I come right over to see just how she organized her day. I never could resist expert demonstrations. Every year at the county fair I buy little kitchen thingumbobs that look perfectly easy to operate. Under my hand, though, they turn into Awful Mysteries.

For two hours I'd been watching Mrs. Pritchett squaring corners and quieting ruffled surfaces and in every room obliterating evidence that Mr. Pritchett or any living thing had ever passed that way. Poor Mr. Pritchett, I thought. On Elm Street Mrs. Pritchett's living room was referred to as "the living reproach"—to the rest of us. Neither Mr. Pritchett nor the Pritchett infant was allowed to impede the smooth progress of her day. All of Mrs. Pritchett's days clicked and purred, turning out nice square little compartments labeled "cleaning." "baking." "baby." "marketing." In the nursery I watched her bend over the baby's pram and tuck in another half inch of blanket on the right hand side. This exactly centered the knot of blue-ribbon trimming under Master Pritchett's chins.

Master Pritchett, himself, remained inert, except for the slow blinking of his eyelids. After seven and one half months of perfect, ordered existence the Pritchett infant had taken on the exact look and deportment of a justice of a superior court. Mrs. Pritchett wheeled him out to the sunny porch and left him to his judicial contemplation of a world that might, or might not, show cause.

I recalled how my own children at that age had screamed for attention. Just the same, I thought, they didn't in the least resemble stuffed sausages. Back in the living room Mrs. Pritchett was lifting the taut sofa cushions and narrowly inspecting the crevices along the sofa arms. Once, two years ago, she told me, she'd found an orange seed buried there—damning proof, I gathered, that in her brief absences Mr. Pritchett's besetting sin still twitched in him. I was glad to hear it. He would eat oranges in the living room, she said, though he no longer piled the ashtrays high with orange peels. He couldn't. Mrs. Pritchett had made him stop smoking and removed the ashtrays. Poor Mr. Pritchett.

Even expert demonstrations pall, especially when accompanied by little lectures in miniature, calculated to imbue me with the Pritchett Housekeeping Doctrine, which I knew very well was as alien to me as Druidic rites, and about as likely to be put into practice. I was ready to go when the doorbell rang.

Two figures confronted us. One was a thin, spectacled girl of about twelve, whose hair straggled out of careless braids to hang curtain-like over her high forehead. She maintained a firm hold on a leather leash which was attached to a four-year-old beauty, a dimpled dumpling in a blue pinafore. The dumpling's smile was enchanting. Here, I thought, is perfection. One simply overlooked the fact that the tiny girl's elbows were bandaged (so were both knees) and that a yellow-and-green bruise lay like a slap along one round cheek.

The older girl blew at a bothersome strand of hair and wrapped another loop of the leash around her arm.

"This," she said, pointing to the Vision, "is Nina. We've just moved into that new house in the next block and I'm calling on all the neighbors to warn them—it's only fair. Especially those with children."

She peered curiously past the astonished Mrs. Pritchett into the Pritchett living room.

"Mind if I come in? It's quite safe, really. It's a new leash, you see, and in any case Nina has a thing about me. She always has had. Isn't it lucky? But of course," she said, "I can't be with her constantly. There's school and all... That's what I'd like to explain to you if I may? Thank you, we'd love to come in."

Mrs. Pritchett and I fell back before this determined advance. I sat down again. The morning began to look like fun.

"What a neat room!" the child said. "Is the whole house like this? You must have a compulsion or something. I know all about the beastly subconscious, you see. My brother, *her* father," she jerked the leash indicating Nina, "is a professor at the University. By the way, my name is Garnet Bayard." She stuck out a rather dirty little hand first to Mrs. Pritchett, then to me. The handshake was quick and down, as the French do it. She seated herself composedly in the best chair, with the radiant Nina leaning against her bony knees.

"It's this way," she said, bending confidentially toward us. "Nina expresses her aggressions very readily without any regard for painful consequences. For herself, I mean. Hence the bandages. Naturally she doesn't care how painful the consequences are for her victim. They—that is, her parents and the psychiatrist—believe that this is simply a phase and that it is up to them to try to provide her with 'inanimate objects' to vent her aggressions on. Personally, I've grown a little bored with this phase. I've been with my brother and his wife since Nina's birth and, frankly, she was ever thus. I loathe sounding reactionary but until psychiatry becomes more of a science"—Garnet lifted her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders—"one may as well resort to witchcraft. As a matter of fact, I find the study of witchcraft a fascinating one. My brother has a very nice collection of old books on the subject—"

But Mrs. Pritchett, whose mouth had been opening and closing without any sounds emerging, finally found her voice.

"I don't understand. What was it you came to... *warn* us of?"

Garnet looked at her in surprise. "Why, I came to warn you about Nina. She bites. She kicks. She pinches babies. She aims her tricycle at the behinds of nice old ladies and never misses the target. She's hell on wheels." Garnet turned to smile at me. "I am addicted to plays on words. I think even bad puns are delightful, don't you?"

Mrs. Pritchett was sputtering. "You... you mean she attacks people without any provocation? What are her parents thinking of? Have they no control over her at all?"

"They've got me," Garnet said, "and the leash. As to what they're thinking, does one ever know? About anybody, I mean. Pamela—Nina's mother—is lying down at this moment reading Proust. One would suppose reading Proust would set her to dithering around in half-forgotten, somewhat mucky old impressions. What it actually does to Pamela is put her to sleep. She's rather tired with the moving, and the sight of all those un-unpacked boxes and barrels simply drove her to Proust. It's that kind of day."

Mrs. Pritchett, I saw, had reached the hand-wringing stage. "But what do you expect us—the neighbors—to do about it?"

Garnet studied her for a moment and then spoke soothingly.

"About Nina? Nothing, except for keeping your gate closed and latched. And when you're out walking look behind you frequently. She's amazingly quiet when approaching her prey."

It was almost lunchtime. I had to run along, much as I hated to, but I went away cherishing the picture of Mrs. Pritchett's face as she listened to Garnet in horrified fascination. Mrs. Pritchett's eyes, I thought, looked as if she were suddenly confronted by far, disorderly vistas. I decided this was an even nicer spring than usual. Of course, our neighborhood wasn't exactly dull before Nina's and Garnet's arrival, but there wasn't much scope for righteous indignation. True, we women always reacted when the Pritchetts were mentioned. Some of us clucked our tongues and some of us grinned, but we all joined in the chorus to murmur, "Poor Mr. Pritchett..." Living next door to them, I saw a good deal more than most. Like Mrs. Pritchett sweeping the front walk right behind Mr. Pritchett every morning as he left the house, as if she were determined to erase his irresolute footsteps. I could hear her delivering firm lectures—not miniature ones, either—yet I had never once heard Mr. Pritchett answer back.

At parties I'd heard ribald speculations as to just how Master Pritchett happened. They had been childless for the six or seven years of their marriage, and when Mrs. P. began to appear in neat, dark maternity dresses some of the gayer couples insisted she was about to deliver herself of New Man—a robot-like creature somewhat resembling an efficiency expert, but minus vocal cords.

I'm afraid we were all disappointed that the baby hadn't upset the rigid routine of that household. Some of the women had begun to say, "Yes, but wait till he starts walking or trying to feed himself!" As for me, I had no such hopes. I was certain Mrs. Pritchett was more than a match for her son. I had watched the slow metamorphosis in Mr. Pritchett. He hadn't always been an object of half-scornful pity to his neighbors. Years ago he had exchanged books with me and sometimes a few words at twilight, standing on his neat patch of lawn, gazing wistfully at our toy-littered yard, tumbling children, cats and dogs. We talked then of beer and pigeons and amateur painting in oils. He was fond of all three but Mrs. Pritchett banned them as "messy." He said lovely, unexpected things sometimes, like the evening I told him about my struggles to measure our windows correctly for new curtains. I had tried it four times, I told him, and the inches came out exasperatingly different each time.

"Yes," he smiled at me warmly, "there's something queer about measuring tapes. I believe they hate us, and sometimes they can't resist making fools of us—for being so silly as to imagine we can tame even a small chunk of space or fence it in."

I went inside my house and looked at my measuring tape with new eyes. Mr. Pritchett's words only served to deepen my own conviction that the world was a fearful and wonderful place, and that in it anything could happen and the very best thing for me to do was to stay limber enough, to enjoy it.

I harbored the uncharitable wish that Nina's first attack would be on Mrs. P. but the initial assault, unhappily, was directed toward my own two children. While I bandaged and soothed, the story emerged between sobs. Nina had ridden them down on her trike while they were kneeling unaware, playing marbles. The severest injury, I saw, was to their pride. It was unthinkable that a four-year-old girl should dare assail boys of eight and ten. And, by George, she wouldn't catch them that way again. The sobbing stopped while they showed each other just how they'd show her. Here I stepped in to separate them before they forgot that this was a mere demonstration and to point out how extreme my scorn would be if they ever stooped to fighting a four-year-old girl.

"But what'll we do?" they wailed. "You want us just to lie down and let her ride that old trike all over us? Be smashed to smithereens?"

I remembered Garnet's words. "Keep looking behind you. If you see her coming, get out of the way. Run!"

I got nothing but rebellious looks for this advice but in two weeks it was standard operating procedure for every child in the neighborhood and for most of the adults. The adults who didn't use evasive tactics soon learned to. She bit the postman on the thumb, hanging on like a terrier. She butted fat Mr. Simpson in the belly. Twice. She broke up every knot of children she found by pedaling furiously into their midst. I became accustomed to the sound of terrified shrieks and pounding feet. I knew Nina had appeared on the block. And throughout all the commotion and blood, Nina kept smiling her entrancing smile. We mothers began to long for summer when school would be dismissed and Garnet could take full charge.

We all agreed that Nina suffered as many injuries as anybody. More, really. I rarely saw her when she wasn't swathed in bandages. She didn't talk much, even in Garnet's care, and of course nobody paused to converse with her otherwise. We hesitated to call on her parents, since some of the first callers had been a little put off by the Bayards' reception of them. Nina's mother, I heard, was a languid woman who lived in a welter of books and dust and who, at the mention of Nina's crimes, either bristled or laughed heartily. Professor Bayard's laughter at his daughter was

rather hollow and it was remarked that he had several bruises on his shins. That was one of the things that made the callers uncomfortable: the professor at home wore nothing but a pair of shorts and one or two of the older ladies disliked the sight of his peaked, naked little chest. And the talk, they said, was like nothing they'd ever heard before. Very erudite, but also full of very strong Anglo-Saxon words. I thought the Bayards sounded like fun, but I was too busy just then to seek them out.

And anyway Garnet sought me out often enough to keep me informed about the Bayards, though mostly, to my delight, her talk ranged farther afield. Nina was never a menace when Garnet brought her. She sat playing with the boys' outgrown toys and picture books, the perfect picture, herself. I was charmed. Garnet, however, pointed out that even bulldozers occasionally run out of gas.

Garnet's talk had much the same effect on me that Mr. Pritchett's once had. I recognized the fact that she was some kind of genius and might one day startle the world with her originality and fire. But at twelve she was content to startle me—her quick mind grasping, sorting, and discarding, her tongue curling around new words she'd just learned, framing her newest thoughts in mint conditon. I liked her because she was interested in almost everything: people, cats, pies, stars, or the way to scrub a floor. I just this minute realized that Garnet, all along, was meant to be a poet. There was a time, though, when I saw her as retributive justice or just plain witch.

It began—this period—the day Garnet came rushing in to tell me that she had finally, in her study of witchcraft, discovered a possible cure for Nina.

"I am convinced," she said, "that she is, in old-fashioned terminology, harboring a devil. Why not? Isn't that what the psychiatrist is trying to lure out of her with his little dolls and toy furniture? He gives them to her so she'll build a world in miniature and then react to it, while he watches. She reacts, all right. Smash. Crash. But why? He could have come over here and watched her in this one for all he's learned. Do you know what our bill for bandages alone amounts to? She'll kill herself if we don't do something quick." Garnet pushed excitedly at her hair; "Why, any day now she may begin attacking people in automobiles.

"I have to get back. I left Pamela at her eternal bandaging. No, Nina hasn't attacked anybody today. Not yet. Pam and I decided last week that Nina adores being bandaged... She'd just intercepted a man on a bicycle and afterwards she apparently felt she rated an extra big bandage, though all she needed was a small piece of tape. *How* she howled! So we're experimenting—wrapping her like a mummy several times a day. I haven't much faith in it, and Nina keeps protesting there isn't any'red.' Have you got a bottle of ketchup? We don't keep it on hand. Pamela thinks people who eat ketchup ought to be cast into outer darkness, but I like it..."

I found a bottle of ketchup and humbly passed it on to Garnet.

"I hope you're on the track of her trouble," I said. "This bandage idea sounds good to me. Maybe she hurts herself so her mother will fuss over her."

Garnet shook her head impatiently. "That's too simple," she said. "Besides it's too utterly dull. By the way, I need a few... uh... herbs. For the spell, you know—the exorcism. I've been collecting stuff for two days now, and what a pile of junk. Have you got any rosemary? Good. I'll take some of those poppy seeds, too. I haven't told Pam about this witchcraft thing. My brother wouldn't care, I know. He'd laugh. But Pam can be very primitive-mother about Nina at times. You'd be surprised. They're going to a faculty party tonight, so just as soon as I wave them on their way, I'm going to set the scene and do the deed."

I was alarmed. "Garnet! You're sure you won't hurt her? You aren't going to feed Nina any queer messes or potions?"

"Of course not. I'm simply going to seat her in the middle of a chalked pentacle and then work my abracadabra. Actually, I'm combining three different spells—just the best features of each." She turned to go, then hesitated. "The thing is, you aren't likely to be in the vicinity of our

house this evening, are you? It has occurred to me that Nina's devil might hunt for another host. The book doesn't say anything about that. Just to be on the safe side, why don't you keep your family in the house between seven and seven thirty P.M.?"

I promised and Garnet left.

As the witching half-hour approached that evening I felt a little nervous. I believe I half-expected the sound of a great explosion, followed by a mushroom-shaped cloud.

It wasn't till a little after eight o'clock that I received the first hint that Nina's devil had perhaps found a new host, though neither Garnet nor I can ever be certain.

Garnet phoned me immediately after her "ceremony."

"Of course it worked. Nina was sitting there calmly trying to mash her fingers with her rubber hammer, smiling like an angel. I was dashing around rather madly, you know, lighting incense, waving my hands and chanting, flinging little bags of herbs hither and yon, when suddenly the blinds on the big picture window fell with a dreadful clatter. Nina began to scream like crazy. I felt a little shaky, myself, but all the lights were on and I still had a few details to attend to. Nina kept screaming her piercing screams and drumming her heels on the floor—a perfect devil's tattoo. Just as I finished the spell, somebody rang the doorbell. When I answered it Mr. Pritchett dashed over and picked up Nina before I could explain anything. He was passing by, you see, and heard her screaming and was afraid she'd hurt herself again.

"He couldn't help seeing me through the window and I guess he thought I'd panicked or something. But, listen... the thing is, Nina stopped crying *immediately*, and she hugged him, instead of kicking him... and, well, Mr. Pritchett was breathing hard and looking rather pale, so I offered him a drink of Pam's gin and he took it! Not only that, when he left just now he was murmuring something about beer and pigeons and every man's right to express himself! Now, really, what do you think?"

When I hung up, I thought, poor Mr. Pritchett—one drink of gin bringing out all those stifled little loves. I felt so said I left the warm peacefulness of our lived-in living room and went out back to look at the stars. After a while I was sure I heard Mr. Pritchett singing a rollicking drinking song and was astonished to see him standing in his kitchen doorway, pitching empty beer cans out into the darkness. Behind him I could see Mrs. Pritchett clutching her chest, her mouth open, her voice silent.

Of course, Elm Street these days isn't exactly dull. But there's no longer much scope for righteous indignation. Some of us cluck our tongues over that mischievous Pritchett boy and some of us grin. And there are people, I hear, who object to Mr. Pritchett's pigeons as a messy nuisance, but I like to see them wheeling against the sky.

Yesterday when I ran over to see poor Mrs. Pritchett for a moment, I found the living room ashtrays (as usual) full of orange peels. There was an empty beer can on the floor, too, half hidden by the ruffle on the easy chair; But there was also a new look in Mrs. Pritchett's eyes, as if she was contemplating some long, exciting vista and finding she rather liked it.

"Mr. Pritchett," she told me proudly, "has just received an important promotion. I'm not a bit surprised—he's such a forceful man!"

The Bayards, I'm sorry to say, have moved away. The bandage idea must have worked its magic on Nina, or perhaps it was the psychiatrist. The people around here still miss her. There isn't, after all, so much beauty in the world that one grows resigned to parting with it, particularly when it's accompanied, as it was these last few years, by Nina's kind of sweetness.

But it's Garnet I miss most. So stout of heart, so original and altogether delightful. Though there was a time when I looked on her with a feeling akin to fear. For who wants retributive justice loose in his neighborhood, or even a witch?

## A DAY FOR WAVING

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EDEN SLEPT AS ALL CHILDREN SLEEP, WITH SODDEN ABANDON. She lay as if mired in some dark pond till the light and heat of the summer day dragged her to the surface. Once awake she made no effort to submerge again. There were frightening shadows in the pond, and sometimes it seemed to Eden that she'd spent the whole night battling them. The really frightening part of her dreams was the way vague, bewildering daytime feelings turned into *things* at night. How did it happen, for instance, that the hot, dissolved feeling of jealous love turned then into Eden's own hand, squeezing to death a little yellow chicken?

The disturbing thought of the baby chicken brought Eden out of bed to search for her mother and grandmother. The house had a late-morning quietness that Eden disliked. It meant the grownups had set the day going without her and now Eden would have to run hard all day to catch up and belong. From the back of the house she heard the complaining sound of the opening of the oven door, and she darted kitchenward. But it was only Lyle, looking fragile and dour in his Huck Finn bib overalls and no shirt. The two children looked at each other without intensity and with complete acceptance. With no word spoken Eden felt suddenly oriented. She whirled and ran for the east veranda.

Here she found her mother and grandmother sitting far apart in the stretched-out silence. The tension that had been building in the house for weeks lay between them, and Eden felt called upon to commit some small naughtiness to assert herself. She slammed the screen door behind her and danced across the warm stones right off the low porch into the four-o'clocks.

Her grandmother, she knew, was watching from her chair just out of the sun path. The palm leaf fan in her hand ceased its slow waving and made imperious, chopping motions.

"About time, young lady. Your mother and I have been up for hours. Get yourself out of my four-o'clocks. Where's Lyle?"

"He's got his head poked in the oven."

"Your breakfasts are on the table, covered. If you young'ns would get your lazy selves out of bed mornings you could eat a civilized meal in a civilized way."

Eden put on her pouring-water-off-a-duck's-back look. Mama Hawthorne regarded her grandchild with pretended distaste, pulling her mouth down and raising one eyebrow. "I could wipe that smirk off your face, if I was a mind to. Your mother may be able to let your upbringing slide, but *I* can't."

Eden ignored her and glanced at her mother, who sat on the steps examining her long, perfect legs bared to the sun. Reba smiled at her daughter and murmured as if by rote, "Go eat your breakfast. Mind your grandmother..." She seemed to rouse a little then, enough to add, "Wash and dress. And don't forget to brush your teeth. After you've eaten I'll take a comb to your hair."

"Teeth." Mama Hawthorne snorted. "*Which* reminds me, Reba," her voice rose to weighted meaning. "Is old snaggle-tooth still hanging around? 'Twas him I suppose you were out with last night till all hours. You're mighty quiet this morning, which is always a sure sign."

"Of what?" Eden planted herself between her mother and grandmother, still trying to edge her way into the current that flowed between them.

Mama Hawthorne fanned a little faster. Her face reddened with determined effort. "Ask your mother," she said stubbornly. "It would take the recording angel to keep up with her love life, and though nobody made *me* a gift of the details, I have eyes to see with, whatever your mother may think."

"Reba!" Eden thrilled. "Are we going to get married again?" She began to dance across the

porch, hoping to fall in the four-o'clocks, but Mama Hawthorne grabbed her by the gown tail and held her fast.

"Nonsense!" she bellowed. "Who on God's living earth would marry a snaggletooth dentist?"

"Reba will! Reba will! Won't you? *Please?*" Eden squirmed away from her grandmother. "Then we'll move to the city and have a house all our own, like when Daddy was alive." Eden searched for other words that would tell more clearly all the things it would mean, but she could not find them. They seemed part and parcel of the bewildering feelings that would never embody themselves in the daylight.

Reba only smiled her slow smile and stroked her legs.

Just outside the hedge two flowery hats bobbed up and down, going past. "Hush!" Mama Hawthorne hissed. "You needn't publish your mother's foolishness to all the neighbors. Reba, pull down that skirt. They may turn in. Eden, get yourself out of sight—you're practically naked. Marry again, indeed! Your father would turn over in his grave at the idea of your being bossed by a toothy stepfather... and bossed you'd be, Missy! No running around half-naked in the middle of the morning. No sleeping late for you! Hounded from pillar to post you'd be—and likely half your teeth snatched out just from spite..."

While she spoke Mama Hawthorne rose ponderously from the creaky chair. Eden watched her smooth out her face and prepare a smile for the flowered hats, in case they turned in. Mama Hawthorne seemed to be trying the smile for size, Eden thought. Suddenly she recognized the emotion in her grandmother's face. It was the same jealous love that Eden knew so well, and she wondered if Mama Hawthorne felt as if she were squeezing a fluffy chick to death. Eden wanted to comfort her grandmother, and she moved close and leaned against Mama Hawthorne's great bulk, hiding her face against the starchy cotton dress that smelled of sachet and a too-hot iron.

"They've gone on," Mama Hawthorne said. "That's a blessing." The smile went back into hiding. "I'll say this, Eden. Unless you get in there and eat your breakfast, there'll be no visiting the cemetery for you today."

Eden hugged her grandmother in a fierce excess of love, grateful for the warm permissiveness that lay just under the harshness of her words.

"Stop squeezing, Eden! Yes, we're going to the cemetery. We'll take a lunch, and I'll weed around my sister Lil—and Hawthorne, maybe, if the mood's on me."

"And my father, too?"

"Likely!" Mama Hawthorne snorted. "After the way he used to whack me on the bottom and then yell 'gelatine' at the top of his lungs. Weed him yourself."

Eden joined Lyle in the dining room, where ivy clustered so thickly outside the windows the room was shadowed with undersea color. She made happy, swimming motions through the green gloom to reach the round oak table. Lyle sat with his back to the windows. Eden wouldn't have turned her back to those windows for sacks of nickels and dimes. Once, long ago, she had seen a green dragon peeking in at her. It didn't make any difference how many times they told her she had probably seen a mountain boomer, if anything. She could never forget the horrid, flat head and the nasty "Aha, little girl" look in his beady eyes. He had come straight out of the worst of her dreams to confront her when she felt safest. Since that time she had never been completely sure that the two states of being might not at any moment mingle. The possibility both fascinated and terrified her.

But now the dining room was not frightening. The table was, as usual, covered over with a white linen cloth, bumpy with the bottles and big bowls under it. Lyle had laid back one little edge of the cloth to get to his plate. He was eating steadily and with his eyes riveted to the king of hearts he had taken to carrying around with him.

Lyle was usually a very silent little boy, but when he did talk, good for explaining things—particularly the kinds of things Eden found most bewildering. He was brief and assured



(Eden did not like explanations to be long-drawn-out) and he was only six weeks older than she was. Very young to be her uncle, but just the right age for understandable explanations.

Eden laid back the cloth to find her own plate. She ate cold biscuits buttered and honeyed hours ago, cold sausage, apple sauce, some bread-and-butter pickles, and when Lyle still did not look up, tilted the coffeepot and drank from the spout.

"I'll tell," Lyle growled. He turned the card around and looked at the king of hearts who still stubbornly faced to the-left.

"Reba and I are going to get married again," Eden challenged.

Lyle glared at Eden darkly and went back to staring at the card. "You won't," he said. "I've told you, you won't."

"Why? Has the king winked yet?" Eden asked.

"Three times," Lyle said. "If this end of him winks your father will come swooshing up out of his grave at four fifteen in the morning."

"Phoo—why?"

"You know why." Lyle gritted his teeth, at Eden and crossed his eyes. "He hates dentists."

"What will he do to the dentist?"

"He'll wring him out like a dishrag." Lyle turned horribly limp and wobbled his head with his tongue hanging out.

Eden chewed thoughtfully at another cold biscuit. "Phoo..." She tried to draw her mouth down at Lyle, as Mama Hawthorne did, to prove her disbelief, but her month began to tremble uncertainly. Could it be? Lyle knew all about ghosts, certainly... Lyle's ghosts often bobbed up in her dreams. Mightn't even a ghost know the squeeze-a-chicken feeling? Probably. And Lyle, imitating the dentist, looked dreadfully squeezed. Did something slither through the twisted ivy over the windows? A hand fell heavily on Eden's shoulder. She screamed and dived under the table.

Mama Hawthorne's feet marched all around the table while her hands gathered dishes and silver. "Nerviest child I ever saw—Come out of there, Eden!—but eats like a field hand. Lyle, *move*."

An hour later the four of them walked Indian file down the lane. The bees in the long line of locust trees made it a humming, yellow road, dancing in the heat. Several times each summer they all made the pilgrimage to the family cemetery. Eden had always enjoyed going there, till recently. She liked playing with the ornaments on the children's graves, but today she was ill at ease, remembering her queer dreams and Lyle's threatening words.

Mama Hawthorne was in front calling back things to Reba. Lyle and Eden, both of whom had been combed and scrubbed to the point of rebellion, dawdled as far to the rear as they dared. Mama Hawthorne carried the lunch basket and a trowel. Reba carried a striped blanket to sit on. She was dressed up quite a lot, Eden saw. Eden carried her straw hat in her hands and tried to kick sand back into Lyle's shoes. Mama Hawthorne talked and grunted her way over a stile and cut across a field, with Reba following silently, careful of the sheer georgette dress. Eden clambered after Lyle, who was trying now to keep close to Reba. Lyle developed these sudden passions for Reba, sometimes in the middle of church, even. Then he'd walk on everybody's feet to get to where she was sitting. Eden hated him to look calf-eyed at her mother.

After these occasions she could hardly wait to shout at Lyle, "I love her the most!" Then she would, for a time, hate both her mother and Lyle because they were brother and sister. Lyle had explained they were more kin to each other than Eden was to either of them.

Now, trotting fast to keep up, Eden yelled at Lyle, taunting him. "Reba and I are going to get married! First thing you know we're going to move to the ci-ty!" Lyle hesitated, while Reba walked on, slowly, beautifully.

"It's a double ugly lie!" Lyle blocked the way. "Just a word, one more word," he yelled, "and

I'll make the king wink his eye!"

"Don't do it!" Eden blinked hard. She sought and found a diversion, offering it to Lyle like a bribe. "Don't do it, Lyle, and I'll tell you what. When we get to the cemetery I'll nibble a piece of Great-great-grandma Cole! I promise I will."

"You wont. Cowardy cat. You never do."

"I will, I will! This time I will. How does she taste?"

"Like a cedar chest smells." Lyle grinned wickedly. "And a little *something else*."

Eden gulped and kept her breakfast down. She followed the others through the little back gate of the cemetery. They climbed a low hill by way of a sunken brown path. It seemed cooler when they got to the top. Reba spread the blanket carefully between two mounded graves in the shade of a giant old cedar tree which grew exactly out of the middle of one of the mounds. Eden glanced fearfully at the cedar, and then read the inscription on the slanted tombstone. For certain sure this tree was Great-great-grandma Cole. Though Eden had known and accepted it all her life, today she hated the very thought of the tree. On the other side of the blanket was mysisterLil, whom Mama Hawthorne had come to weed. Eden was relieved to see that mysisterLil had not yet turned into any kind of tree. Just a few green weeds, she was, outlined with little red flowers.

Mama Hawthorne put on her gardening gloves and changed her hat to a pink sunbonnet she had brought along in the lunch basket. "How mysisterLil loved the color red! That's why I planted all this verbena here, almost a perfect match for the red ostrich-plumed hat we buried with her."

Eden scarcely bothered to listen. This was just the beginning of the litany Mama Hawthorne recited over mysisterLil. Presently it would turn into an account of how mysisterLil died of heart failure the night before her wedding, and of how all the lovely trousseau had been crammed into a special-size coffin with her. Eden waited only for her mother's inevitable three words before she ceased listening altogether:

"How disgustingly vulgar..."

Eden removed herself from Great-great-grandma Cole's shade and went to visit the children's section. Here the mounds were all patted out to the approximate length of the child who lay buried there. After measuring herself against a likely looking one, Eden discovered she had surprisingly outgrown "Margaret Clara Cole, aged seven years, four months, and five days" since her last visit. Margaret Clara's play-pretties consisted of a cunning marble rabbit, three large seashells, and a doll-size china pitcher. Eden polished the rabbit on the hem of her dress and rearranged the shells. If she had dared, she would have stolen the pitcher, but Lyle had painted only too clearly the fate of a little girl who once upon a time stole a play-pretty from a cemetery.

"What happened?" Eden had asked scornfully.

"Worms," he said.

"Worms?"

"Came in the night. From the grave. Up on the little girl's bed. Carried her off. In pieces. Down into the hole. In the coffin. Left her there."

Reba was leaning against the trunk of great-great-grandma Cole, waving at Eden. "Come and eat," she called.

But Lyle was sticking right beside her, Eden saw. She pretended not to hear her mother.

Reba came to get her, alone, taking her by the hand. She said, "After we eat, I may go for a little ride." She squeezed Eden's hand with the secret message.

"Dentist?" Eden whispered.

"Mmmhmm," Reba hummed.

"But what will Mama Hawthorne say?"

Reba lifted her chin to the sun.

"She just wants us all to live together... always. Partly because the money goes farther that

way. Partly because she wants you and Lyle together. And it's more fun to boss three people, instead of just one."

It was a long explanation, and Eden felt anyway that none of it was exactly the truth. "Tell me, Reba. Was Daddy ever jealous of you? You know, that hot, nasty feeling when you want to *kill* somebody?"

Reba laughed with her head back, her eyelids closed soft and thick. "Jealous, honey? Lord, yes. Crazy jealous. But never as bad as I was..." Eden scarcely heard the last part of Reba's answer. She was staring at Lyle, cramming whole boiled eggs in his mouth, leering at Eden with secret knowledge. Mama Hawthorne was still wielding the trowel.

"Well, Reba," she said, "you haven't so much as set foot near your man's grave. Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose. Lyle, eat your lunch and leave the eggs alone."

"I haven't noticed you weeding Papa." Reba sniffed at a sandwich and gently pulled off the crusts.

"Your Papa was that stingy he wouldn't even feed a weed. His grave's as clean as a whistle."

Lyle was pressing something into Eden's hand. She looked down at it and immediately stopped chewing. It was a little gray-green wad of foliage off Great-great-grandma

Cole. "Reba," she said slowly, "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Nonsense," Mama Hawthorne pounded her on the back, "You eat like a field hand."

Eden lay flat on the blanket, squealing. "I won't! I won't eat even a smidgin of her!"

Mama Hawthorne loomed over her as big as a mountain. "Lyle, do you have anything at all—the least little thing to do with this?"

"No'm." Lyle crossed his heart.

"Nerviest child I ever saw." She reached down and pried open Eden's fist. She extracted the gray-green wad and threw it away. "MybrotherTom used to do me the same way." She passed out some more sandwiches.

Eden heard the "ooga... ooga" of the car horn out on the road. Reba rose smiling and smoothing at her dress.

"Dentist!" Mama Hawthorne boomed the word like a curse. Reba moved away, waving at them. "Watch out for those long yellow fangs," Mama Hawthorne yelled after her. "If he ever bites you, you'll die of the frothing fits!"

When Reba was out of sight, Mama Hawthorne stopped yelling and spread a newspaper on the other side of great-great-grandma Cole. "I'll leave you young'ns the blanket. I'm going to close my eyes for an easy space of time, and I bid you do the same."

Eden molded herself against the earth and closed her eyes, but she could not sleep. Mama Hawthorne was snoring gently. Lyle pinched Eden's arm for attention.

"Ssst... listen, Eden," he whispered. "Do you hear it?"

"What?" Eden sat up and looked all around.

"That moaning sound." Lyle widened his eyes at her and clutched her arm. "That's your father. He's crying because Reba has gone off with the dentist. I expect he has a broken heart. She didn't even visit his grave. *You* haven't looked at it, either. It's all clawed up, that grave. He's got a little space open now, but it keeps getting bigger all the time. Tonight he'll heave and shove and open it all the way. Then you'll be sorry, you and Reba. But the dentist will be the sorriest. If you weren't such a coward, you'd go and tell him to hush that groaning. Mama's gonna be awful mad if he wakes her up."

Eden listened so hard her ears hurt. She heard Mama Hawthorne's soft snoring and the wind in the top of great-great-grandma Cole, and yes, a soft roaring that might or might not be inside her head. She lay down beside Lyle, huddling very close to him, trying to slow her heartbeats and the churning in her stomach. Lyle was murmuring "coward... coward..." in a monotone that

presently soothed him to sleep. Eden lay as if pierced with fright. Now that Lyle was asleep she was certain she could hear her father moaning.

"I expect he has a broken heart," Lyle had said. Eden could not bear the thought. Her throat and chest ached with it, momentarily crowding out the fear. She was up and away before she had time to think, running swiftly down a long avenue of tombstones toward the far corner of the cemetery which held her father's grave. There was scarcely room in her chest for both the pain and the harsh sobs she tried to contain. When she tripped and fell headlong she lay still a moment clutching at the long grass. She felt too heavily tired to get up and go on, but she must. It had all happened as she had known it would one day—the nightmare world had invaded the daylight. Love was not love, but ugly squeezing hands shutting out the sunlight. Lyle was not just old Lyle; he was her tormentor. Mama Hawthorne was not her warmly loving grandmother, but a fat, bossy old woman with hate in her heart. And death was not quietly beautiful sleep. It was bones and worms and turning oneself into a tree or clawing a grave from *inside*. Eden trembled with loathing for the earth she lay on.

The hands that lifted her up were gentle and strong. Eden, too exhausted to struggle, lay passively in the man's arms.

"Baby," the man said, "you mustn't. You've got it wrong. Whatever it is, it's wrong. It must be to put you down like that... looking like that. Spill it this instant Tell me, Eden, baby."

Eden told him all of it from the beginning, and while she talked the man eased himself down to lean lazily against a tombstone, with Eden lying across his lap, her head cradled against his arm.

When she had finished the man pointed at the deep sky and let his arm sweep all around the quiet stillness of the cemetery. "Look," he said, "how smooth and empty. Death is like that. Nothing better or worse. But you know that churning sensation you get when you're with Lyle and Mama Hawthorne? That's life, but only a small part of it. Your grandmother isn't always jealous and spiteful, is she? That's just love turned a little blinky, like milk not *quite* sour. She'll get over it; so will Lyle. He needs a good shaking though, for those horror stories. Still, I'll bet he's scared himself a lot worse than he has you, at one time or another. And your belief aided and abetted him. Hop up, I want you to go look at your father's grave."

Eden drew back a little, but the man smiled and firmly led her to the smooth, undisturbed grave.

"Can you remember your father?" he asked.

Eden tried. It was a little like sinking into the deep pond of sleep, but without the fearful shadows Lyle had introduced. A smile emerged and a feeling of hands lifting her high. Nothing else. After a time even those were gone, and Eden was distressed that she could remember only the face of the dentist, whose smile was not nearly as toothy as Mama Hawthorne said.

She looked up to find the man had been watching her face. He swung her up for a moment and held her close before he put her down. Eden wished he would do it again, though ordinarily she disliked being captured and held in this way. It happened so often to her—every time Reba took her into the town. This man must be another of the many kinfolk, all of whom felt privileged to grab at her when she passed them on the street. He had that privileged, family look, and quite certainly he knew all about her.

"I can't remember much," Eden said. "Was he *very* jealous, do you know?"

"Your father? Not unduly, I think. Truth to tell, he and Reba made a game of it. They had a lot of fun, it seems to me."

"Then you don't think he'd mind if Reba married the dentist?"

"Lord, no! I think he'd be very surprised to know she hasn't married long before this! Reba... unmarried? Incredible. Such a waste, you know. And it would be so unflattering to her dead husband, if she didn't remarry. One good marriage deserves another."

"But if he loved her very much, wouldn't he just hate the dentist?"

"Why should he? If he loved her very much—and he did, I can assure you of that—he'd only want her to be happy, with or without the dentist."

"I'm glad," Eden said, "I used to be jealous... But I'll change if we move to the city, won't I?"

"Of course. You'll go on changing. All through your life there'll be days when suddenly you'll know it's time to move on to something else. Days for waving goodbye to all the good and bad and then facing ahead for what comes next. Sounds exciting, doesn't it?"

Eden nodded and the man began to move slowly away. "Tell Reba," he called back, "that I'm tremendously pleased with our joint production." He waved goodbye to Eden and then gestured, drawing her attention to the road.

Eden turned and saw Reba approaching. She wanted to call for the man to wait and talk to her mother, but he disappeared over the brow of the hill just as Reba came to stand beside her, taking Eden's hand.

Reba was staring past Eden with a startled look. "*Who was that?*"

"I don't know," Eden said. "One of the cousins, I guess. A nice one. He told me how glad Daddy would be if we married again. Reba, *are* we going to marry the dentist?"

Reba looked distractedly down at Eden. "Yes, we are. But didn't he say anything else... that man?"

"He said to tell you he was pleased with the joint production. Something like that." Reba stood with an unbelieving look on her face that filled Eden with impatience. She pulled her mother along, hurrying her back toward Mama Hawthorne and Lyle. Eden could hardly wait to crow her triumph over Lyle.

But somehow she didn't want to when she saw him. By bedtime that night Lyle and Mama Hawthorne had achieved the goodbye look, with just a hint of new-found compensations mixed in with it.

"I'll never have to share the pony again," Lyle murmured sleepily to Eden by way of a goodnight.

Eden thought reluctantly that there would be no pony in the city. Never mind.

Everytime you left a place, you left *something*.

Lyle crept back into her room for a last, hissing threat, "Watch out, Eden, the ghosts are walking tonight..."

"I no longer believe in ghosts," Eden said primly. Just before she sank gratefully into the dark pond she remembered that all day long it had been a waving kind of day.

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## ***THE GAY DECEIVER***

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THE CROWD PRESSED TIGHTLY ALL ALONG THE PARADE route. Far away down the street Verna could hear the band music, but so faintly she knew the parade was still several blocks away. Skillfully she maneuvered her thin body through the crowd till at last she stood directly behind the small children who lined the curb. On both sides of the street the children made an animated edging for the empty parade route, bouncing small bottoms up and down on the curbs, twisting, nudging, calling, laughing. A few were already tired with the waiting and excitement, and were roaring their discomfort monotonously, but most of these, Verna noted, were not bothering to produce any real tears, as yet. Their mothers, she saw, were also well aware that the howls were not the all-out, serious kind that had to be dealt with strenuously. A small shaking sufficed, or an admonitory pat, perhaps, with a few shaming words.

*In a minute, any minute now, Papa Frolic will come*, Verna silently promised the bawling youngsters, *and then you'll hush your ugly racket*. As if on cue, she heard then the high, sweet trilling she'd been waiting for. She leaned far out over the children till she caught sight of him down at the end of the block, advancing along the parade route, the balloons dancing and straining over his head; and Papa Frolic dancing and prancing under them, as if it were the balloons themselves that propelled him. He was wearing his yellow and red outfit today. His hat was high and pointed in the crown and made of sewn-together diamond-shaped pieces of red and yellow leather, as was the jacket he wore. Besides the balloons, which were yellow, red, pink, blue, green, purple, and gold, he carried a fistful of slender red canes with little yellow pennants which waved in the spring breeze.

He was delightful to look at, but oh he was even more wonderful to hear. Now all the children had grown quiet to listen, their eyes round and shining, all turned upon him. Even knowing, as Verna did, all about the cheap little tin whistle that was hidden inside his mouth, she could still imagine that there were small, brilliant birds hidden under his cap, peeking out through his white curls, or else hidden inside the beautiful jacket, and perhaps singing their song through his buttonholes.

As he drew nearer though, one stopped wondering where the birds were hidden. It didn't matter *where* they were; it was what the birds were telling in their singing that charmed away one's curiosity. All along the street, Papa Frolic had paused, still whistling, selling his balloons and canes, leaving in small, reaching hands the bobbing and weaving pretties. Sometimes, if the grownups asked, he reached into a back pocket and sold one of the whistles, exactly like the one inside his mouth. Verna was scornful when this happened. Silly fools. Did they think they could ever make music like his? They'd find out. A few, wavering, sour-sounding bird noises was all they'd ever produce out of those whistles. Papa Frolic was the only person in the world who could make a whistle sound like sunlight slanting on a green meadow, with baby lambs leaping around and a million flowers bending to a soft wind. He could make it sound like puffy white clouds, too, with pink-winged baby angels sound asleep on top of them. But best of all, when he wanted to, or when Verna begged and nagged him into it, he could turn the whistling into a flowering lane with trees arching overhead, and the lane would beckon, with its leaf shadows and speckled sunlight, toward a dear, green-painted door set in a garden wall. Behind that wall lay, one knew, that long-ago place called home. Not, of course, the home (if you could call it that) that Verna had been born into, or the crowded, dirty places she'd grown up in. What a laugh, to think anybody would want to go back to that. No, the lane and the doorway at the end of it which Papa Frolic conjured up was the secret way that led to Verna's real home, the one she had been born remembering. When she tried to explain it to him, Papa Frolic always laughed and nodded and quoted some old puzzling poetry by a man named Wordsworth, trying to convince her that everybody was born with some miserable homesickness and longing for a place they'd never see.

*"The soul" he'd quote, "... cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come ..."*

It made Verna feel cheated and angry to think other people wanted to find her old home. They had no right there; it was hers alone. She distinctly remembered. . . well, not distinctly, maybe, but she could almost remember what it had been like, and she certainly did not recall sharing anything with anybody. Coming from a father-deserted, charity family of seven squalling kids she'd had enough of sharing to last her the rest of her life.

It was at a parade like this one that Verna had first seen and heard Papa Frolic. The only difference was, it had been held in a big old dingy, smoky city, and the skies then had been overcast, not bright and blue as they were today out here in the west. Verna, with three other

waitresses, had stood in front of the greasy-spoon restaurant where they all worked, to watch the parade go by. Big deal. The fat, slobby boss had generously waved them out to see the sights, since nobody obviously was going to eat in his sleazy joint when they could be watching a parade. Papa Frolic had moved into Verna's sight with all the color and impact of a steam calliope. Then when he stopped right in front of her and began to whistle up the vision of the lane and the door that led home... and handed her a free balloon, that was enough for Verna. She told him to wait—*begged* him to wait, and while he stood there whistling that calling, calling song, she'd run into the restaurant, dragging off her cap and apron, and flung them at the boss, right in his teeth, and left the place forever.

She'd been travelling with Papa Frolic now for three years. He had been very casual about accepting her. She could come along or she could stay, it didn't matter much to him, he'd said. She was useful, though. She kept his clothes clean and mended. She cooked—not very well—and cleaned the filthy light-housekeeping rooms they rented in every town. Nights she slept beside him in the sagging double beds that were the same in all the towns. Mostly, in his way, he was good to her. He taught her to drive the old station wagon they travelled in. He tried to teach her about food and music and poetry. Sometimes at night when he was restless and edgy he told her stories from history, though Verna privately didn't care much for history. So much of it was dark and bloody. He was good at telling stories, though. He made Verna see the little crooked medieval streets, with the timbered houses jutting out, the tall towers, and the stone bridges humped over the rivers.

She was lucky, she knew, and she ought to have been perfectly happy, but she wasn't. She didn't mind that he was so much older than she was, and knew so much she'd never know. It wasn't that at all, and really, he was exciting to be with. Moreover, Verna loved their life of travelling from town to town, year in and year out. They tried to hit all the major fairs, horseraces, parades, festivals, and town celebrations. In three years they'd been in almost every state in the union. They travelled light and easy, too, without any permanent possessions to speak of except the tin trunk that held Papa Frolic's collection of musical instruments—"pipes," he called them. The trunk was full of every kind of reed, wood, or metal pipes you could imagine. Some of them were very old, real antiques and "collector's items," Papa Frolic said. Sometimes on moonlit nights when the whole world felt hungry and yearning, he selected one and played far into the night, while Verna lay quietly on the bed and walked closer and closer to the door at the end of the lane.

She didn't want to leave him, ever, no matter what... Anyway, she didn't *know* anything, for sure. It could be coincidence—the horrible things that happened in the towns they'd passed through. She'd first noticed it about a year ago. She had tried to tell herself to forget it, to stop reading the newspapers, to comfort herself with the nice new dresses he was always buying her, to stop *thinking*. Lately, though, she hadn't been sleeping well. Twice Papa Frolic had waked to find her pacing the floor, silently wringing her hands. He didn't like it at all, and she was a little frightened of him when he got angry.

And right here he was, pausing right in front of her, studying her face, his clear blue eyes narrowed but smiling;. Now he was handing her a pink balloon over the heads of the children on the curb, who gazed up at him with awed, but loving, regard. Verna shivered as if the spring wind had turned suddenly cold. But, as always, she took the balloon from his hand, and managed a gay laugh and even bobbed a little thank-you curtsy to him. Then, without pausing, she presented the pink balloon to the youngest child near her. It was a crowd-pleasing gesture that sold almost the whole stock of balloons and a few more of the canes. When Papa Frolic moved on down the line, Verna slipped out of the crowd and hurried away just as the leading band in the parade appeared. She wasn't in the mood for a parade today.

She would walk back to their room, leaving the station-wagon in the car park for Papa Frolic, who would return to it from time to time to replenish his supply of balloons and canes. He

would not come back to their room till dusk. After the parade was over he would cover the town—certain sections of it—on foot. Sometimes he whistled his way through the nicer parts of the towns, selling his balloons to the kids who wore clean clothes and always had plenty to eat, but he preferred to walk through the slum areas, where the kids swarmed in the streets and alleys and followed him for blocks, dancing to his music. Maybe Papa Frolic really liked kids. In the slum sections he gave away more balloons than he sold.

On her way home Verna paused at a newsstand to buy all the newspapers of all the surrounding towns, including the towns they had just come from. Papa Frolic liked to read about things that had happened after he left a town, as well as the news of fairs and celebrations in the next towns they were going to. Verna, after circling the block twice, finally identified the drab house they had taken rooms in the night before. Sometimes, moving so often, she got confused as to just which house she belonged in. It was funny the way all towns looked alike when you always took rooms on the wrong side of the tracks. Just once, she thought, I wish we could stay in a decent place... someplace clean and shiny with starched curtains, a good bed, and no bugs to kill. But this was the kind of neighborhood Papa Frolic liked best. He preferred to stay, he'd said, right in the center of a melting pot where there were lots and lots of children of many different racial backgrounds, Wei, this was certainly it.

From the dirty kitchen window Verna surveyed several unsavory backyards while she washed a head of lettuce under the tap. They were all alike, and all dreadfully familiar. Gray, sagging washing on a line, old cardboard boxes stacked around full of junk, rusted bedsprings leaning against a tumble-down shed, old worn-out automobile tires, empty bottles, chairs with the stuffing hanging out, old refrigerators with burnt-out motors, rags, paper, weeds, and children everywhere. Only the children and weeds seemed alive, whole, and flourishing. Verna fixed herself a bologna sandwich with lettuce and drank a glass of milk. She put the remainder of the meat, milk, and lettuce back into the big old almost-empty refrigerator that took up most of the kitchen space. In the living-bedroom she shuffled through the newspapers she had laid on the tin trunk and selected two or three to read while she lay down to rest. Her eye was caught once again by the name painted on the tin trunk. *H. P. Froelich*. That's Papa Frolic's real name, she thought again in wonder. Wouldn't it be funny if people called me Mrs. Froelich instead of Mrs. Frolic? I can't even say it right—not to please him. That's why he changed his name, he said. So many people like Verna were too stupid to pronounce it right.

She kicked off her shoes and folded the limp, dank-smelling pillows into a backrest and idly scanned the top newspaper. After a moment she stiffened and threw it onto the floor. There it was again. Almost identical to the headlines she'd read less than a month ago, and had been reading far too frequently in the past year or two: TOTS DIE IN OLD REFRIGERATOR. She wouldn't read the details. They were always the same, more or less. No evidence of foul play. Some silly notion made the little kids crawl inside the old, junked boxes and pull the door to behind them. Verna lay a long while with her eyes closed and her teeth gritted, but it was no use. Finally she had to run to the bathroom to be very sick. When she crawled back onto the sagging bed she fell asleep at last from sheer exhaustion.

She woke as he opened the door. She had slept a long time; dusk now shadowed the room. He turned on the over-head light, and she heard the scratching and scuttling noises made by cockroaches as they scrambled back into hiding. She shuddered to think that some of them may have crawled onto the bed with her.

Papa Frolic came through the door with arms full of paper sacks from the supermarket. He was whistling softly between his teeth, and he kicked the door to behind him with a cheerful finality that told her his day had been a successful one.

"Up, up, Verna, my dear. I've brought rye bread and cheese, onions and liverwurst, pickles and beer. How's that? I remembered your favorite meal, and as soon as I get rid of these wretched cockroaches we'll eat."



He carried the sacks to the tiny kitchen, and Verna heard him unpacking them.

"Think this sack will be big enough?" He stood laugh-Ing in the kitchen doorway, while he spread open a large brown paper sack, and folded over the edges so it would stand firm on the floor. "Have we got a garbage can out back?"

"There's a can out by the back step," Verna said, still not moving from the bed.

Papa Frolic left the brown sack standing open in the middle of the kitchen floor. He moved over to the tin trunk, opened it, and selected a small, slender pipe. Back in the kitchen he began to play a thin, thread-like melody. Verna pressed her hands against her ears to keep out the sound of scuttling insect feet, but she didn't really try to shut out the sound of the flute. As always, she loved the way it called and promised and cajoled. To her mind it called up damp, warm forests with dripping green ferns, and just yonder a decaying doorway... But what it said to the cockroaches might not be that at all. In any case, she knew what was happening. All the cockroaches were emerging from the damp, greasy walls and marching up and over the lip of the sack. In a few moments Papa Frolic would twist the neck of the sack, put it in the garbage can outside and set it afire. He had done this in almost every place they'd ever stayed.

Verna joined him at the supper table (now guaranteed free of vermin, as he said), but found she was not at all hungry. While he ate heartily Papa Frolic talked of the parade, the crowds, and of his day's take, Verna remained silent and withdrawn.

"Anything in the papers?" he asked at last.

"There's a three-day square dance festival in Phoenix," Verna said.

"We'll make it," Papa Frolic said. "I like Phoenix. Now? where's the Albuquerque paper?"

"On the floor by the bed. I read something in it that made me sick... just... sick. Papa Frolic, what do you suppose makes kids crawl into old refrigerators to die?"

He stopped chewing for a moment, then laughed and swallowed and took a big draught of beer. "Why not?" he said. "My dear Verna, I've told you, children are born with a shadowy recollection of a sweet, warm home that's the essence of ease and delight. Show them any old door or opening that looks to their eyes as if it might lead them back there, and in they go, pleased and eager. Who knows what a child sees when he opens the door and crawls in? But I forget—you do know. If you found your lane, wouldn't you want to explore it?"

Verna nodded, her eyes wide and staring. "Yes," she said, "they see *something*... Papa Frolic, do you make them see it, with your piping?"

He raised his eyebrows and finished his beer. "It doesn't concern you, Verna."

"But why do you do it? In Albuquerque there was a little boy five, holding his three-year-old sister's hand... They found them three days later."

"Hush, Verna."

"What did they ever do to you?" Her voice was rising, and the muscles of her face were twisting uncontrollably. "What kind of monster are you, anyway?"

He had stopped eating and drinking and had pushed his chair away from the table.

"Verna, I'm not any kind of monster. I'm simply a man with a job to do. Long ago, I made a vow... a bargain, if you like, and I am fulfilling that vow. Did you ever hear of a town called Hamlin? Hamlin, Germany? The city fathers there owed me a debt, which they have never paid. Think. Use your head, you silly child. Yes, I took their children, all of them, but do you think they stopped having children after we went away? These few children you're worrying about are the strays, the descendants of those people. When I finish with them, I'll go back to Hamlin once more..."

"You'll get caught..." Verna was backing towards the door. "They'll kill you for it. The police... you'll die. You'll pay. I'll bet you a million, million dollars you'll never get away with it. I'll tell..."

"I'll take that bet," Papa Frolic said, and he moved closer to her, smiling.

Belatedly Verna remembered that he rarely lost a bet, and that he never forgot a debt or forgave a debtor.

Papa Frolic was opening the door of the big old empty refrigerator that took up too much space in the tiny kitchen, and now he was playing the pipe.

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## *A RED HEART AND BLUE ROSES*

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I'M AWAKE, I ARGUED WITH THE SPECTATOR WHO WATCHED all my dreams and commented on them with amusement or distaste. If I were asleep how should I know what time it was? And I did know, clearly. It was that reasonably quiet hour in the hospital after the visitors have all straggled out, when one's dinner is still only a rattling promise far away down the corridor. I was awake. But the Spectator only pointed silently into a deep chasm where a large Hospital still hunted Lewis Carroll's *Snark*.

"They sought it with thimbles," the Spectator urged, "They sought it with care..."

I obediently took up the refrain, "They pursued it with forks and hope; they threatened its life with a railway share—"

"My dear, are you very sick?" The warm, motherly Voice called across the dark blue void I was peering into.

"Oh no," I was cheerful about it. "They charmed it with smiles and soap." I opened my eyes, and after a moment or two I woke up. In the next bed a large pink woman had raised herself up to stare at me.

"You were asleep again," she accused me in a playful tone. "Off and on you've said some queer things today, but I haven't minded a bit. It's taken my mind off my troubles, Did you know your husband was here, and you slept right through the whole visiting hour?"

I considered this fact, turning it around and around to look at it. "He wore the wrong tie with that striped shirt." I was triumphant and positively awake.

"You were quite brutal about it," she agreed, "but he seemed awfully pleased."

I lay quietly for a while, as if I were resting smugly after immense effort.

"When did you come in?" I struggled to stay awake long enough to hear the answer, but her first words eluded me.

"—days ago," the woman was saying, "but they only moved me in here with you this morning. You were asleep. They had me in a private room, but they finally decided what I needed *least* was to be alone. I keep having nightmares, you see, about a tattooed—"

"—tapioca pudding, or you could have Jello, if you'd rather." The nurse was being firm about something. Her arms were faintly yellow and stringy with muscle. I sat up and ate the tapioca pudding.

The woman in the other bed was eating heartily from a loaded tray. She kept dipping her fork into something dark brown and succulent looking, and I suddenly felt quite pitifully betrayed and hungry. I drank a cup of tea, well sugared. "I'll have the Jello, too," I said, but the nurse and the tray were both gone.

"—son in the Navy." It was morning, and the woman was shrugging into a pink bedjacket.

"Why, my son's in the Navy, too!" I hauled myself up to lean woozily against the pillow, and stared at her as if the hairbrush she was flourishing were a fairy wand.

"I know, dear, that's just what I was saying. Your husband told me. *My* son isn't in the Navy. He's in the Army. They think that may be the source of half my trouble. The nightmares, you

know. You see, my father and all my uncles were Navy. I married outside the Service, but I'd always supposed our son would choose to be Navy when the time came. Well, he didn't, at all." She sighed and picked stray hairs out of the brush. "He's been rather a disappointment in some ways. His math wasn't good enough for Annapolis or West Point. Next year when he finishes his tour of duty he wants to apprentice to a mortician. Now, really, what kind of ambition would you call that?"

"An eminently respectable one?" I hazarded.

She shook the hairbrush at me admonishingly. "My, we *are* feeling better, aren't we?"

We were. After I'd wolfed a meager breakfast I was buoyed up enough to tell my roommate all (and more) than she wanted to know about my son in the Navy. "He's on one of the new Polaris submarines," I bragged. "Born and brought up on the desert, as he was, that boy lived and breathed Navy from babyhood, almost. And as for being underwater, we could never make him swim on the surface, and then in high school he joined a skin diving club, and they all sat around for hours on the bottom of a swimming pool."

"Does he get home very often?" She was frowning down at her fingernails.

"Not often," I said mournfully. "And he's dreadful about writing letters. But far too handy with the long distance telephone. Collect, of course."

"Of course. Clay's exactly the same." We nodded at each other solemnly, two middle-aged mothers with equally enormous phone bills.

"But tell me, does your boy ever bring any of his service buddies home? To stay, I mean, in your house."

"He hasn't so far," I said. "But I wouldn't mind if he did."

"That's what you think," she said darkly. "You'll need to be *very* careful. I daresay there's more than one orphan in the Navy. If that's what he was..."

"Who?"

"Surely I mentioned him yesterday? That boy—that man—that *thing* Clay brought home with him Christmas before last."

"I can remember Christmas before last," I said, "but yesterday..."

She looked at me in astonishment. "But you had your eyes open, and you even made one or two rather pungent comments. Do you mean to tell me you were asleep all day?"

"Oh, hardly asleep. What I was doing, I think, was concentrating on holding now, without allowing the last now and the next now to get away. It was very difficult. It took two hands to hold one now, and the other two kept falling away. I'm really very sorry. And the funny thing is I can actually juggle three oranges..." I hesitated and decided to be honest. "Sometimes."

She snorted, but I knew I was forgiven, "My dear, think nothing of it. It's entirely appropriate that only a six-handed woman could hear and understand the truth about Damon Lucas. I think he was some kind of fiend. My husband thinks he was a natural-born sponger. Rhoda—that's my daughter, she's nineteen and extremely pretty—thinks he's one of those weirdies who preys on older women. Clay says simply—and I quote—'the guy's kookie.' You see? Even the people he happened to can't agree on what he was. Maybe, in different ways, we're all biased." She paused to rub out the frown between her eyes. "I wouldn't care a bit if that could just be the end of it—a family mystery—with all of us sitting about now and then idly speculating about him. Why, he might even, in time, have turned into a family joke."

"Why hasn't he?" I was bitterly regretting all those hours yesterday devoted to that silly juggling game, when I might have been fitting together highly-colored bits of a jigsaw puzzle.

"How could we possibly turn him into a joke when he keeps turning up again? And each time getting younger and younger?"

I was getting desperate. "Will you be very kind," I said, "and start all over again at the very beginning and go along slowly, because I'm beginning to need six hands again."

"Of course I will. You poor darling, how thoughtless I've been." Her face smoothed out and she smiled at me as if I were three years old with all my buttons buttoned into the wrong holes. She looked so much like everybody's secret ideal of motherhood I suddenly wanted to lay my head on her full bosom and cry away a heartful of tears. Moreover, I was starving in this horrible hospital and nobody cared. I blew my nose and blinked my eyes clear and spoke coldly to the ceiling.

"You realize, I hope, that they have forgotten to give us any lunch."

"Well, dear, it's only nine o'clock." She got out of bed and fished in the drawer of her nightstand, then padded barefoot across the space between the beds. "Do have some of these chocolates. In fact, it would be a great favor to me if you'd eat all of them. I'm getting much too fat. But hide them from the nurse, won't you?" She leapt hurriedly back into bed, keeping a sharp watch on the door.

"I don't even know your name." I had eaten three chocolates before she'd stopped sighing and settling herself in bed.

"It's Pemberton. Katie Pemberton, age over forty and hips to match. You'd think, wouldn't you, that with a figure like mine I'd be perfectly safe from strange young men for the rest of my days? Well, I thought so, too, till Damon Lucas started following me around like a lap dog. At first sight we all thought he was handsome, in a blond and bland kind of way. Rhoda was prepared to be quite taken with him, I know, but after he'd been staying with us a few hours it became painfully clear that he wasn't taken with her. In fact, I don't believe he ever actually looked at her. Now, you can't call that normal, not for an unattached young man of twenty-six, and certainly not when the girl is as pretty as Rhoda. Philip thought—he's my husband—well, Philip got to worrying that maybe he was one of those you-know-whats, but after questioning Clay very closely and watching Damon when Clay was around, he soon saw that Damon was, if possible, even less taken with Clay than he was with Rhoda. It began to look as if he positively disliked Clay, and with every day that passed he seemed to dislike Clay more and more. By that time we were all uneasy about Damon, for one reason or another. Sometimes, for no discernible reason, at all."

Mrs. Pemberton sighed, and stared at the only picture in the room, a doe-eyed Christ blessing little children. "It was a queer kind of Christmas, I assure you."

"Why did Clay ever invite him? Had they been such good friends as all that?"

"Oh, no. Clay had never seen him before they met in the waiting room at the bus station. You see, it was this way: Clay hadn't seriously expected to get a Christmas furlough, but at the last minute it came through, just too late for him to get any plane reservations. Two airlines were tied up by strikes, and the others had waiting lists miles long, so Clay phoned home—collect, of course—to tell me he'd take a bus. He told me later the bus station was mobbed by servicemen of all branches, all trying to get home for Christmas. Here and there in the crowd were soldiers and sailors who owned cars and who were wandering about looking for riders going in their direction to help pay driving expenses.

"Clay thought he might get home faster that way and began to look around for a ride going west. Finally, a fellow in civilian clothes came up to Clay and said he was driving to Phoenix, which of course was perfect for Clay, who jumped at the offer. But for once Clay used enough common sense to look over the car—an almost new racing Corvette—to take down the license plate number, get the fellow's name, and phone home again to tell me his plans and relay the details. Even if I'd openly disapproved, I doubt if Clay *could* have turned down that ride. On the phone he was lyrical about his chance to drive such a car—they were to spell each other at the wheel. I didn't approve, really. Call it instinct or simply my conviction that they'd drive much too fast for safety. Anyway, I didn't like it. But it was Christmas time, and Clay's still such a child, in some ways. I just told him to be careful and then started praying the minute he hung up."

"Was there an accident?" I sincerely hoped not, but the fact remained that I was full of

chocolates and contentment. It was blissful to lie in bed while a large pink mother told me stories.

"Not a serious accident. In New Mexico it was snowing, and Clay, who was driving and has had no experience of icy roads, skidded them into a ditch. They were stuck there seven hours till the Highway Patrol came along and lent them a shovel to dig themselves out. Even with that delay they made the trip—over two thousand miles—in an incredibly short time. I gather they barely paused for food and gasoline, and the only sleep they had was what one could snatch while the other drove. When they arrived on Saturday afternoon they were both red-eyed, muddy, and exhausted. It would have been inhuman of us not to offer Damon, along with Clay, a hot bath, food, and some sleep.

"Philip hurried to set up a camp cot in Clay's room and got out Clay's old sleeping bag to make an extra bed in a hurry. Clay's room is small, you see, and is built like a sea captain's cabin, very compact and shipshape—when he isn't in it—but with just the one bed. We'd remodeled the room that way when Clay was only ten, and I still hoped he'd be Navy. Well, never mind that. . . . After they'd showered and shaved and demolished ham sandwiches and several quarts of milk they both went to bed, and we didn't see them any more till late that evening. I had given up hovering around their closed door when finally Clay emerged, blinking and grinning and starved to death. Damon was still asleep in Clay's bed. While I broiled Clay a steak he told me a bit about Damon—all Clay had learned about him during the long hours of driving.

"Damon, he told me, was just out of the Navy, twenty-six years old, single, and planning to settle in Arizona, preferably up in Phoenix, where he had a distant relative, a second cousin, I think it was, whom he'd never met. The only relative he had left since his parents had been killed in a highway accident a few months back—a Labor Day accident, in fact. Clay, I could see, was quite haunted, as I was, by Damon's lonely future and particularly by the bleakness of this first Christmas since his parents' death. Their estate had been settled quickly and their home sold almost immediately after the double funeral. Damon had purchased the car with part of the insurance money and had enough left to spend a few months looking around for the right job and the place where he wanted to live.

"While he was telling me all this Clay ate the steak, a large green salad, and half a pecan pie. Long before he got to the pie and coffee I knew I was going to ask Damon to spend Christmas with us. I also knew that Clay would have been horrified at any other conclusion, in spite of the fact that he admitted he was not in any way drawn to Damon personally. Damon had been in another service, was several years older, and in Clay's own words was 'kinda funny—peculiar.' Clay's unspoken attitude was simplicity itself: Homeless cats, dogs, and humans had to be fed, warmed, and comforted at any season of the year. At Christmas they were to be especially cherished, 'just because.' It is this 'just because' quality in Clay that keeps me wavering between parental despair and delight. . . . I wouldn't have let him down for worlds."

Mrs. Pemberton found a tissue and blew her nose. She glanced sharply at me to make sure, I think, that I was still awake. I nodded at her urgently and after a moment she continued.

"Most house guests are disturbing, in my opinion. Even when they're the considerate kind. There's a different feeling about the rooms. There's a. . . well. . . a different smell in the air, almost. One's possessions begin either to look dreadfully shabby or too shinily new. And all at once family habits and customs begin to seem slovenly or just plain silly. I'll admit that there are two or possibly three people I know who can stay in my house and not affect my life in any way except to increase my pleasure and excitement. But even that can be wearing. You know the old saying about fish and guests beginning to smell after the third day. In Damon's case I should say he began to smell three seconds after he finally woke up and joined us all in the living room.

"To begin with, after brief nods to Philip and Rhoda—he ignored Clay—he addressed himself solely to me. 'That's a pretty good bed,' he said. 'The room's okay, too, but that cot sorta crowds it up. I took it down. Junior, here, can sleep in that other bedroom I found at the end of the hall. The bed in there's loaded with Christmas junk, but I guess he's big enough to unload it.'

Then he rubbed his hands together briskly and gestured with his chin towards the kitchen. I suppose I was just sitting there staring at him with my mouth dropped open, because he walked over and chucked me under the chin. 'Well, *c'mon*, Mom,' says he. 'Feed me, your new boy's hungry!'"

"I hope you told him off *good*" I said. "I think I'd have stamped on his toes and ordered him out of the house."

"I wanted to," Mrs. Pemberton said grimly. "There was a long silence while each of us waited for somebody else to do or say something, but we were so appalled that finally all we did was giggle a little, and then pretend we hadn't. Then, hardly knowing what I meant to do, I got up and left the room, with Damon following close behind me. Philip got up and followed Damon. I went straight back to Clay's room, gathered up the folded camp cot, carried it into the spare bedroom, set it up—with Philip's help—and then unloaded all the wrapped Christmas gifts off the spare room bed onto the cot. Then with Philip and Damon still watching every move I made I carried Damon's suitcase into the spare room and plopped it down hard. 'You'll sleep here,' I said, 'That's the kind of stupid mistake people make when they're angry and off-balance.'"

"Why do you say that? I think it was a very natural thing to do."

"Don't you see? It gave Damon a foothold... implied he was staying. I suppose ever since I'd talked to Clay about asking him for Christmas I'd been idly thinking how I'd put Damon into the spare bedroom, and under the stress of the moment I just did the next thing I'd planned to do. It was automatic, like picking a stray thread off the living room rug when the house is on fire. I saw at once by the look on Philip's face that I'd done the wrong thing.

"'Tonight,' Philip told Damon. 'You can stay here tonight. In the morning no doubt you'll want to continue your trip.' There was no mistaking Philip's meaning. Damon straightened up and stopped grinning. He turned rather pale, and his eyes looked hurt and bewildered. 'I hope I haven't stepped out of line, sir,' he said. 'It was a joke—a funny—I planned it in the room when I woke up. My folks and I used to kid a lot that way. I guess it was being in a real home again that got me going like that.' He started to say something about 'Mom' and choked up and stopped talking.

"I could see Philip was softening. Philip comes of a very gentle breed with a tradition of hospitality that's all-embracing. It must have cost him a great deal of effort to speak out to Damon in the way he had. 'Very well, Damon,' he said. 'Come along now and we'll find you something to eat.' Philip left the room, and for just a second or two Damon and I were alone. We stared at each other and Damon shuffled his feet in a queer kind of little dance step, and started grinning again. 'Pop's a real nice little man,' he said softly, 'Real nice.' Then he winked at me and walked out. Later, when Philip and I were getting ready for bed, I tried to tell him about that wink and something of my dislike and distrust of the man, but none of it sounded very menacing to Philip. 'He's been badly brought up,' Philip said, 'but it's Christmas, and he's lonely and lost. You can see that. He isn't exactly our kind, as you say, though that does sound very snobbish, Katie. I think we ought to let him stay, so long as he behaves respectfully to you.' It was Damon's lack of respect for Philip that was bothering me, but I didn't say that. It isn't the kind of thing you like to point out to your husband.

"All this took place just five days before Christmas. Nobody ever actually asked Damon to stay. It just seemed to be taken for granted by all of us, including Damon. I was very busy cooking and cleaning. The children were out a great deal... Clay, tearing around in my car seeing his friends and Rhoda, doing research in the University library for a paper she had to hand in after vacation, or else shopping for me. Philip, of course, was at work all day. Damon scarcely left the house at all, though the children asked him along, often. He treated their invitations with such obvious contempt, I marvelled at their good manners towards him. But, then, all of us were strangely patient with him. I should certainly call it patience, in the beginning. Later, I thought it looked more like fear... He slouched around after me most of the day, wearing a tight, skimpy

T-shirt and an old pair of Clay's Levis. His own clothes were at the dry-cleaner's, and he seemed to have just the one set of civilian clothes. We never saw any sign that he still had his Navy uniforms. He never talked about the Navy, either. The only way you could tell which service he'd been in was by the repulsive tattoo on his left arm. It was a big, dripping red heart, enclosing a blue anchor, and underneath it the word, MOM, in red letters entwined with blue roses. He seemed very proud of it."

Mrs. Pemberton lay quietly for a while, as if stricken by the memory of the bleeding heart. Before she could rally herself to continue, our doctors arrived together, hearty and jocular, and both in a tearing hurry. With some prodding from the nurse who accompanied him, I managed to give my doctor a halting report of my behavior for the past twenty-four hours. He seemed to be as bored with it as I was, but as he left he gave me a paternal pat on the head, by way of forgiveness.

"Tomorrow we'll get *up*," he caroled, and left.

I scrupulously tried not to hear the conversation going on five feet away from me, but I couldn't help overhearing the parting remarks which Mrs. Pemberton's doctor was delivering in louder tones, as if reassurance for his patient lay mainly in drowning out her own faintly protesting voice.

"Fine, *fine*" he was roaring. "And if all goes well again tonight you can go home tomorrow. There's not a thing on earth wrong with you that time won't take care of, Haw, Haw. Time and a leetle self-discipline, Katie. Now, buck up and take your medicine like the big girl you are, and put that silly notion of yours right out of your mind. F'gawd's sake, girl, you're saner than I am and healthy as a horse. Control! That's all you need... Well, then, *stop* thinking!" He plunged out of the room, flashing a fine set of teeth in my direction.

For some minutes I refrained from looking at Mrs. Pemberton. From the sounds of tissues being pulled from the box and various little sniffings, I felt sure she was crying. After a while, though, she poured herself a glass of water with so much banging of the vacuum pitcher, and then plumped her pillow so viciously I knew she'd recovered from her tears and was in the process of passing through anger to resignation. It didn't take her very long.

"Oh, well..." she sighed. "Jim always was a tactless idiot, but he is a good doctor. And it's true—I'm feeling better. Last night is the first night in weeks I haven't screamed my lungs out, waking from that nightmare. You're lucky not to have heard me. They say I wail like a banshee, enough to lift the hair right off your head."

I was suddenly enlightened. "Has the nightmare anything to do with Damon?"

"It has everything to do with Damon," Mrs. Pemberton said. "When I finally told him to go I hoped and prayed that would be the last of him, but it hasn't been."

"You kicked him out?"

"On Christmas Eve," she nodded. "We had a ghastly scene... just Damon and I. The children were out, Philip was in bed asleep. Of course, that scene had been building up in me for days. It takes a lot to make me explode that way, and a lot is what I'd been taking..."

"Mealtimes, for instance. While I was preparing the meals, Damon would hang over me and watch every move I made. He was always sampling and meddling. If I wanted a certain butcher knife, Damon was sure to be fiddling with it, testing its sharpness or poking it into my chopping block. Sometimes he sang bloody ballads in a high voice—all about drowning somebody in a river after choking her to death, and most troubling of all, there were times when he'd giggle steadily for long, long minutes about nothing at all. At the table he talked very little, which was a blessing, but he ate so greedily and with so much noise that it was difficult to carry on a conversation. He *grabbed*, you see, and he took food right off Clay's plate, while Clay was talking. And suddenly, out of the silence, he'd laugh in that queer way, and always he kept his feet moving, as if he were dancing, even as he sat. Then, if somebody commented on the food..."

like, 'This pie is delicious,' Damon would swell visibly and say, 'My Mom made it. She likes to cook for her sailor boy.' What kind of answer do you make to a remark like that? One, I mean, that doesn't sound surly and ungracious. I'm not really old enough to be Damon's mother, and the way he kept calling me 'Mom' grated on me. More than anything else, it kept suspicion stirring in me. If your mother had been dead only four months, do you think you could call any other woman 'Mom' so easily?"

"Probably not," I said.

"Then there was the incident of the Christmas tree. The children have always decorated it so carefully. They take a great deal of pride in some of the old ornaments we have. Some are lovely. Some are rather awful... There's a celluloid doll, for one thing, that has to have a prominent place on the tree, simply because we've always had it. Damon stepped on it and mashed it flat. Not quite an accident... When Rhoda hung it, anyway, Damon got very loud and scornful. He kept sneering at their work and finally announced that next year we were going to have an aluminum tree with no ornaments at all, just lights. Before I could remind him that next year he wouldn't be with us, he slammed out of the room.

"There were dozens of little incidents of that kind. Little things, maybe, but all together, very disturbing. When Clay and I tried to talk he was always butting in, always there, trying to draw my attention away from Clay, growing louder and louder and more excited. Clay only had a ten-day furlough, and I began to despair of ever having a moment alone with him. Often Clay would give up trying to talk to me and go to his room to nap behind a locked door. Somehow, in that house of always-open doors, we'd all begun to shut ourselves in. In Clay's case I could see reason in it. Damon had begun to raid Clay's wardrobe of all his civilian clothes, even after Damon's own clothes had been cleaned. Clay would be trying to dress for a party and would discover his best white shirt stuffed away, soiled, in Damon's room. Knowing Damon would be there for Christmas, I did extra shopping, of course, so he'd have some gifts under the tree. I bought clothes for him, since he seemed to need them. One afternoon I locked myself in my bedroom so I could wrap them nicely. I also wrapped a lovely, bulky gold-colored sweater for Clay as an extra surprise—one he'd especially admired in a store window, one day when he was with Rhoda in town. When I finished I put all those gifts with the others under the tree.

"I had baking to do that day, and for once Damon, was somewhere else in the house, and I was thankful. Just before dinner he came swaggering in, wearing all the clothes I'd wrapped for his Christmas gifts, plus the gold sweater I'd bought for Clay. 'I don't like waiting, Mom,' he said. 'I saw my name on the packages.' I was so rattled I began to doubt myself. Maybe I *had* put Damon's name on Clay's sweater. Anyway, I wasn't sure, so I let it go. But the next morning I sent Rhoda to town to buy an identical sweater for Clay.

"By Christmas Eve I was strung up tight as the strings on a fiddle. The children left with a crowd of young people to go caroling and to a party later. Philip and I turned out all the lights but the tree lights, drew up our chairs to the fireplace, and listened to Christmas music on the hi-fi. Damon, to our surprise, had roared away in his Corvette almost immediately after dinner. The house was beautifully peaceful without him. My doubts and fears began to melt away. About ten o'clock Philip went on to bed, but I decided to sit up awhile to savor more of the Christmas peace. Around eleven o'clock Damon walked in. I admit what I was doing may have looked silly by some standards... The children have these old, beat-up, felt Christmas stockings they still hang up at the fireplace every year. I had already stuffed Rhoda's with cosmetics and hair-rollers and things like that. For Clay's I had shaving things, combs, pencils, and other odds and ends. I was standing there smiling at Clay's sock, which was stuck together inside the toe, where years ago he'd deposited some half-chewed candy he didn't like.

"Damon sidled over, wrenched the sock out of my hand and dropped it on the fire. Before I had time to feel shock or anger, I rescued the sock and saw that it wasn't scorched much, then I whirled on Damon as if I were a buzz saw. What did he mean by acting like that, I wanted to



know. And what in *hell* gave him the idea he could move into my house and ruin my Christmas? I wasn't very ladylike about it. I may have used even stronger language. . . . When I reached the point at last where I could hear again and see, Damon was trembling and mumbling, as pale as a ghost. He was trying, I think, to say something about Clay's being too old to hang up a stocking. That was enough to set me off again, and I can't remember all the things I said. When I ran, down a little, Damon was still mumbling and had shucked out of the gold sweater and was rolling up his shirt sleeve to show me his left arm. It took a while for me to focus my eyes and see what he was trying to show me. He'd spent the evening in some nasty little tattoo parlor, having an addition made to that horror on his arm. It now read: *Mom, I love you.*

"He was saying over and over, 'I did it for you, see? Your Christmas present. . . . I did it for you.' Well, I simply broke down and howled. I still don't know if I was laughing or crying. Damon danced around me sort of tentatively, talking so fast I could scarcely make out what he was saying. After my hysteria subsided a little I began to listen very carefully, and this is the kind of thing I heard." He had it all planned out; my children were almost grown up, ready to leave home for good. He would take their place. He would get a job and take care of me, always. Even if the 'old man' died I wouldn't have to be alone, ever. Nothing could make him leave me, ever, ever, ever. I was his Mom, He had chosen me. Out of the whole world, he had chosen me. I was his, and he was mine, for the rest of our lives.

"It was like a chant. He kept repeating himself, and the horror kept growing in me till I thought I'd scream. When I couldn't stand it any longer I ran out of the room, wildly, just to get away from his voice. I was terrified that he would follow, but he didn't. I could hear him in the living room, still chanting. I washed my face in cold water at the kitchen sink and dried it with a paper towel. Then I went to the spare room and packed his things. I let myself out the back door and piled all his stuff into the Corvette. Then—quietly—I came back into the house and woke Philip. Eventually the two of us were able to persuade Damon to leave, but there were some hideous minutes when I thought we'd have to call the police. . . . or an ambulance complete with strait-jacket. I couldn't sleep that night, I was so afraid he'd come back."

"Did he?"

"No. He never came back to the house. I don't know where he went that night. He must have left town. For weeks we kept watching in traffic for his red Corvette, but we never saw it again. And for weeks I kept remembering his words—like a threat—just before he drove away. 'You'll see me again, Mom. You ain't ever gonna be rid of me, one way or another.'"

"Have you seen him again?"

Mrs. Pemberton bit her lower lip and looked at me with troubled eyes. "Not exactly," she said at last. "I may as well tell you the rest of it, and if you decide I'm crazy you can ask for another room."

"I heard your doctor say you were saner than he is. I'll take the chance," I said.

"Very well then, dear. Six months later, when we'd just begun to forget Damon, or to get over him, at any rate, Philip got a long-distance phone call one night from the San Diego police. Our twelve-year old runaway son, they said, had been picked up hanging around outside a tattoo parlor, and would we please come and get him or send the fares for him and an accompanying social worker. The boy had told them his name was Damon Pemberton, and that he was our son. . . . our name and our address, everything. It took time to convince them we had no such son. We even had our local police department phone them to verify our statements. In the meantime, we learned, the boy had escaped from the detention home they'd put him in. We don't know to this day who or what the child was. . . . or who put him up to it.

"The San Diego episode happened in June. In August Philip and I spent a weekend at the Grand Canyon. We were staying at that lodge right on the rim of the canyon. It was after dinner, and Philip was reading his paper in the lobby. I went out to watch the sunset, and I was strolling down the path along the rim. Behind me I heard somebody running in my direction. Then I could

tell it was a child, gasping and crying, being chased by someone. I turned around just in time to brace myself as the little boy in front threw his arms around me, hiding his face in my skirt. He grabbed me with such force I almost lost my balance. A bigger boy had slowed down when he saw me and was hanging back. The little boy peered around at the big one who'd been chasing him. 'My Mom will fix you,' he said. 'You big old dumb nut.' The big boy turned and ran off, out of sight. The child gave me a big squeeze, then, and said, 'Mom, I love you.' While I was taking that in, he just sort of melted away into the dusk, but I could hear his running feet, and I could hear him laughing. He was wearing a sailor cap, and just as he twisted away I saw he had an enormous tattoo on his left arm."

"Oh, surely not!" I said. "Or it was probably one of those transfers little boys delight in plastering themselves with. They do look like tattoos."

"Maybe," Mrs. Pemberton said. "Then last September Philip and I went fishing in the White Mountains. Now that we're older we don't bother about camping out. We rent a motel room in Show Low and Philip drives out very early to the trout streams and lakes. On this day I stayed behind, because I wanted to write some letters and wash my hair. It was still very early in the morning, not many people about. I'd had coffee with Philip at an all-night place on the highway and walked back to our motel alone. I hadn't been back in our room long before I heard a kind of scrabbling noise outside the door. I thought it was a maid, perhaps, though it was far too early for them to be coming around or a yardman, raking the car park, I was sitting at the little desk, watching the door, when I saw a piece of paper come sliding under. Some kind of advertising, I thought. But when I picked it up I saw it was lined paper torn from a child's school tablet. On it was drawn, in red crayon, a dripping heart, and in staggering block letters, like those of a child in the second grade, it read *Mom, I love you*. I don't know how long I stood there staring at it. I remember how the paper shook in my hands. I opened the door and looked out. There wasn't a soul stirring in the courtyard of the motel. I left my door open and ran out to look up and down the main street. Almost a block away a very small boy in a sailor suit was just turning the corner, crying as if his heart would break. By the time I got to the corner, he was no longer in sight."

Mrs. Pemberton was sitting up in bed, half turned towards me, her eyes pleading with me for some answering word.

"Oh," I said reluctantly, and then hunted for something to add to it. "Coincidence?" I offered.

"I don't believe it," Mrs. Pemberton said sadly. "Oh, I *want* to. You don't know how much I'd like to think that I'm reading dark significance into unimportant little happenings. A few weeks ago I started having nightmares... brought on, I know, by far too many of these so-called coincidences, far too frequently occurring, and far too shattering in their impact on me. I haven't dared to, tell anybody, even Philip, all the things I've half-seen and half-heard."

"Do you feel...well...persecuted?" I asked.

"I did for a long time. I felt hunted, and I was angry. And at last I was afraid. Afraid to walk down a street, afraid to answer the telephone, even afraid to sleep after the nightmares began."

"What is it in the nightmare that frightens you so much you scream?"

Mrs. Pemberton glanced at me in surprise. "Why, it's the baby, of course. I find it, you see, on my doorstep, and it's so sweet, so warm and talcum-powdery, and I'm so delighted with it. Then, as I hold it and rearrange its clothing—such delicate, lovely clothing—the blanket falls away and reveals that hideous tattoo on the baby's arm..."

We didn't talk much more that day. Luncheon trays arrived and were carried away—mine, at least, very much lightened. Flowers were delivered and exclaimed over. Visitors sidled through our doorway, rested uneasily on the two chairs, or stood first on one foot and then the other, and finally, in great relief, hurried away. When the long day brought us once again to that fairly quiet hour before dinner, I asked Mrs. Pemberton the question that had been troubling me.

"If you no longer feel resentful or persecuted, how *do* you feel?"

"I've been puzzling about that," she said. "You know, the nightmare has changed. That's why you've never heard me scream. It isn't a real nightmare anymore. It's just a dream about a gift. Something fragile and of great value, which somebody has brought to me after great exertions and dangers. I accept it, but with immense reservations. My fingers refuse to close around it. I drop it, and it breaks, But it doesn't shatter like glass. It just lies there and bleeds... All that's left with me when the dream ends—the residue, you might say, for the daylight hours—is just sadness. Weary sadness, that's all."

After breakfast the next morning a pretty nurse's aide brought in the wheelchair for Mrs. Pemberton's departure. While the girl waited and watched, smiling at us, Mrs. Pemberton told me goodbye.

"I don't really need this," Mrs. Pemberton gestured to the wheelchair. "But this hospital is sinisterly determined that no discharged patient walk out of here on his own two feet."

"More Snark hunting," I said. She patted my hand warmly and was wheeled away.

"I'll be back in a moment," the nurse's aide called to me from the doorway. "To get you up in a chair, And I hear you're to go home tomorrow, too."

When she returned I asked anxiously, "Do you think Mrs. Pemberton will be all right?"

"Right as rain," the girl said. "She was only in here for some tests and observation. After all, she *is* a little old to be starting another baby."

"Oh... yes." I said.

"She's a little scared, I think. But, you'll see, she'll perk up more and more, and by the time that baby arrives, she'll be convinced there's not another baby like hers, anywhere in the world."

"Oh, dear Lord," I said. "I hope not."

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