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Finessing for the Queen of Trumps

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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Ann Burrus entitled Finessing for the Queen of Trumps has been approved by her committee as satisfactory completion of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

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FINESSING FOR THE QUEEN OF TRUMPS

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This collection is dedicated to my mother.

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WILLIAMS THE GREAT

Jack and I are about halfway up the long, steep staircase to the lobby of the Jefferson Hotel when a tall blind man begins to feel his way down. He holds carefully onto a white cane with his left hand and with his right clutches the thick brass handrail that bisects the red plush-carpeted steps. From the way he sticks his chin out ahead of him like a divining rod I recognize Al Weaver even though it's been nearly forty years since I last saw him. There's a bald place on his forehead now, but he has on the same kind of dark round granny glasses he wore back then. And his socks match. Watching him I feel my age.

"Do you think I ought to give that guy a hand?" Jack says. "He looks a little unsteady."

"No," I say.

As we pass by him I toy with the idea of patting him on the arm without saying anything to make him wonder who might be touching him so familiarly. I decide at the last minute that this is a childish idea.

Jack looks handsome in his tuxedo for a man nearing sixty. He has held up a lot better than I have. He still draws admiring glances from both old and young women. We

go into the ballroom for the symphony's fundraising dinner and stand around with drinks talking with friends. But I keep wondering what Al's doing in Richmond, so I excuse myself before the appetizer is served and wander around the lobby until I spot a sign about a convention of the visually handicapped. I slip downstairs and peep inside the hall where they are meeting. Al, not as shy as he was when I knew him, is giving a speech welcoming everyone, making his audience laugh. The room is filled with smiling blind people, only a few of them wearing dark glasses. I listen for a little while, then rejoin Jack and our friends, but I'm not listening to whatever they're saying. I sit there the whole evening thinking about Al and everything that happened my senior year in college back in 1951-52.

I'd been sure my money worries were over when I got a full scholarship to transfer to Carolina my junior year, where the men were. Wrong. Everything besides tuition was up to me because nobody in my family was going to take up the slack. My mother was barely able to support herself, but she had always insisted that a college education was "the only way out" for a woman. Since my parents' divorce, I had had no idea where my father was, and the rest of the family all thought I was weird, highminded at best, for even wanting to go to college. My cousins made fun of me. They predicted it wouldn't be long before I got knocked up by some slick fraternity boy.

The first year I took on several jobs in different places. It drove me crazy running back and forth between Durham and Chapel Hill. What I needed was one job in one place that would cover all those extras my scholarship didn't include, necessities like food, toothpaste, clothes.

Right before classes started my senior year I wandered into the student employment office and saw Al's sign advertising for a reader. It was printed in large, crooked letters and had inky fingerprints all around the edges.

I called him at his dorm, which was directly across the quad from mine, and arranged an interview. Apprehensive he wouldn't like my husky voice, I sat out in the little grassy circle in front of the Playmakers Theater and watched him feel his way across the grass. He was tall and thin, and his clothes hung on him. The khaki slacks he wore were too big in the waist, and his short-sleeved blue plaid shirt ballooned out over his belt. When he got closer I saw that he was wearing unmatching socks, one red and one white. He scratched at a patch of scaly dry skin on one arm.

"Are you here yet?" he said in a soft voice, smiling toward the sky.

"Over here," I said. He walked directly toward me. From behind the edge of his dark glasses his eyes looked blistered. They oozed viscous tears that he wiped at constantly with a white handkerchief. I found out later that

only two years before Drano had exploded in his face.

He smiled again uncertainly and stuck his hand out in front of him. After we had talked a few minutes he said I would do fine as a reader, and I started that day.

It wasn't long before Al recommended me for jobs reading to some of the other blind students. One of them, Pickett, was a graduate student in education, gradually losing his eyesight but still, at that time, able to tell light from dark and, in bright sunlight at least, able to identify particularly vivid colors. Pickett was the one who told me about the conversations the blind boys had about colors. He and Al were the only ones who had actually ever seen colors or had any conception of the thousand different shades one hue could take.

Pickett also told me how the sighted boys in their dormitory watched girls out of their bedroom windows and described their bodies to the blind boys. One of them was an older fellow named Barrett, a newly returned Korean War veteran who had spent the last two years in the submarine service. He teased the blind boys about me by describing my red hair and forest green coat. He said I had an hourglass figure, a waist he could circle with his two hands, and boy, were they missing the boat. This kind of talk made them frantic. I had wondered why they pestered me with peculiar questions about the difference between the red of an apple and the red of my hair, the green of the

grass or a pine tree and of the coat I wore every day now that the leaves were starting to turn. I tried to imagine what it must be like never to have seen colors.

Since Al needed more reading than the others, being not as quick yet as he would later become at deciphering his Braille texts, he and I went everywhere together. He was half a foot taller than I and would place his hand lightly on one of my shoulders, the only place he ever touched me, and follow along as I made my way, warning him of pitfalls when I remembered to do it.

Al boasted that in the two short years he'd been blind he had developed a special sixth sense about barriers, some kind of bat-like radar about dangers in his path that many people blind from birth never develop. I decided to test him on this, led him straight toward a high brick wall as we crossed the campus, just to see if it was true. I would never have let him be hurt, would have pulled him back before he hurt himself. But he stopped dead about three feet away from the wall, cocked his head that funny way he had when he was listening intently, and asked, "What are you trying to pull here, Williams? What's going on?" I was satisfied after that that he really did have some kind of weird sixth sense. But he was upset at me for trying to trick him.

Al didn't pay me for these extra hours, time I spent leading him along the pebbled pathways to the dining hall

or the library or sitting with him on the grass outside my dorm on warm days, reading to him pages from literature I thought was great, books I felt he might never hear about if I didn't tell him about them. Al's mother was, by Al's description of her, one of those overly protective parents who censored his reading until he escaped to college. The day I read Noon Wine to him he sat with one fist clutched against his heart as if he couldn't breathe, and when I finished Molly Bloom's ramblings, he didn't say a word, just got up and stumbled his way through the brittle orange and yellow leaves littering the quadrangle and up the dorm steps, his hands tense in his pockets.

It was Al who introduced me to Barrett, who had described me to the blind students. I already knew who he was because as a fiction editor on the Quarterly I had recommended a story of his for acceptance. It was a love story, and the passion in the words made me fall half in love before I ever met him. When he walked up to us one day as we were reading out in the circle of grass, well, in those days we called it getting the hots.

Barrett and I had dinner together that evening. We sat and stared at each other, gobbling our food so we could rush to the dark Arboretum to neck.

"I'm a stomach man," Barrett said, running his hands across my belly. Almost absentmindedly he added, "Yours sticks out too far."

"That's not a stomach. I'm sway-backed," I said. "But I notice you've got something sticking out too far down there yourself."

"Yeh, well, we can fix that," he said, guiding my hand.

In January I signed up for a basic zoology course with the blind freshmen I read to. I had postponed all science because I had no aptitude for it. In high school I had broken every beaker and pipette I touched and spilled acid on my shoes when I couldn't afford to buy new ones. I had bad memories of science--it made me feel stupid.

I not only read the text to my students but also was their hands and eyes in the dissection labs. Our frog was a female and her body cavity was filled with tiny, white round eggs about the size of the fish roe my mother scrambled with eggs for breakfast. Before we could dissect her, every single egg had to be scraped out. I guided each of their hands, in turn, in and out of the slimy mucous membranes. Their faces reflected their uncertainty as they rolled the sticky little clumps of eggs between their fingers.

"Most of these things would be little tadpoles by now if we hadn't murdered their mother," I told them.

"Poor little girl froggies," one of them, a fat kid named Padge, joked. "Gave their all in the name of science." He snorted when he laughed, his blank eyes

staring down at the floor.

"This feels disgusting," Al said, his face twisted into a horror-mask.

"Well, sometimes life is disgusting," Padge said. "If anybody knows that, we do."

A month into the course, when the lecturer started talking about reproduction, all of them leaned forward in their seats and cocked their heads so as not to miss a word. He'd finally hit on a subject they were interested in. I had no trouble getting them to study for the quiz we had coming up on that part of the course.

I'd been doing most of the reading for this class onto a spool they passed around among themselves, so I was actually losing money on the course since the state paid me by the hour. I was always looking for a chance to make a little extra, so I was glad when Al asked me to read to him alone one evening so he could "get a few things straight." We sat in a classroom in one of the tin Quonset huts left over from supposedly temporary housing erected after the soldiers came home in 1946 and flooded the campus. A few of these small rooms were left unlocked at night for the use of readers or tutors and their pupils.

At Al's request I went over the entire chapter on reproduction, beginning with the worms and ending with humans. When I finished, I asked if I needed to cover any parts again. He sat with his glasses off, his burned eyes

sticky with the yellowish-white liquid that always seeped out of them, apparently thinking over what he had heard, digesting the knowledge, as he usually did. He always called me by my last name only. I never found out why. "Williams," he said, "I'm still not really clear on the human reproduction part. Can I ask a few questions without you getting embarrassed?" His face flushed bright pink.

I wasn't surprised. Al had a kind of innocence about him that sighted boys his age didn't have. He had been brought up in a backwoods region of the mountains twenty miles up the Blue Ridge Parkway from Asheville, and I got the impression from some of the things he had said that his mother had made sure he led a sheltered existence. Still, he was so intelligent, so naturally quick-minded, that I was surprised that the oblique wording of the text confused him. My own mother had educated me early about sex with an anatomically detailed series of lessons illustrated with clinical drawings of reproductive organs. She had briefly been pre-med at Duke before she quit to marry my father, all because of sex, she told me.

"I was trapped at age twenty by tradition and taboo," she'd say in a bitter voice. "If I'd had any sense at all, I'd have just gone to bed with your father and gotten him out of my system, taken a chance rather than ruin my life dropping out of school and marrying a drunken gambler. But nice girls didn't do that in my day. Only sluts did things

like that." She smiled at me. "Of course, I wouldn't have you, honey, if I'd done that. But we always pay a price, one way or another, for giving in to our desires."

It was strange to find out how much more I knew than Al when I'd always felt I knew less than most other girls, not much at all, actually, except for this clinical knowledge of process my mother had passed on to me.

"I don't really understand exactly how the man gets the sperm to the woman's egg," Al said, wiping his running eyes, his face turning the rosy shade of a ripe peach. "Exactly what do they do?"

"Al, didn't your daddy tell you anything about sex?" I knew enough about his mother to assume she hadn't.

"Well," he hesitated, drawing out his voice as he weighed carefully how much to reveal, "when I turned sixteen, Mother gave me this stupid little booklet called Growing Up. That was all. For a long time after I read it, I was panicked. The week before she gave it to me I'd held hands with a girl I walked home from fellowship meeting. But the book was so vague about what was supposed to touch what when you had sex that I was sure I'd gotten her pregnant."

At first I was stunned at the depth of his ignorance. Then I started laughing. I couldn't help it. Al began to titter nervously along with me, then began to whoop. The sound of our laughter bounced off the bare walls of the

empty classroom.

When we finally stopped, breathless, he said, "Of course, nothing happened, except the girl didn't understand why I kept avoiding her. The book had talked about men getting women pregnant by touching them, but it didn't say how they touched them. Until we started taking this course, Williams, I never realized it had to be a specific kind of touching, that they had to touch sex organs." He hesitated again. "Maybe I should be able to figure it out, but I still don't know exactly how sex organs touch or what makes the sperm move out in search of the egg." He hesitated. "I mean, I do know about hard-ons. The guys in the dorm talk about them all the time. But the first time I woke up with a big one I thought I had contracted some terrible disease." He smiled uncertainly, bracing himself for ridicule. Al had no way of knowing I was still a virgin, at least technically. In my mind those days I was thinking of nothing else but going to Raleigh with Barrett. He never let up on me, so I couldn't have forgotten it if I'd wanted to.

But I had no intention of discussing my personal morality with Al. He was too young, like my cousin Jerry who had guarded me against a premature fall from virtue during my high school years by telling me boys were shits, that they would do whatever you'd let them do, then drop you and brag about it to other boys, all of which had

turned out to be gospel, as I had learned from listening to the complaints and tears of less careful girls.

I studied Al's blind eyes, the dead edges a light, clear blue. He was always turning them up toward the ceiling as if searching for lost light. Destroyed forever, they touched my heart.

"Al, your mother didn't do you any favors by trying to pretend sex doesn't exist."

"I know that now," he said. "She was just scared I might try it, I guess. But can you tell me in plain language how people do it? Describe it to me? I can't bring myself to ask the guys. I don't want them to know how dumb I am. They'd laugh at me, even Padge. They make enough fun of me as it is for wearing socks that don't match and for losing my pencils. I need to know. I'm eighteen years old, for God's sake." His face twisted at the memory of these humiliations.

The campus outside the windows was dark. I had to be back inside the dorm by eleven o'clock, while Al, two years younger, blind and a lot more innocent, could wander around outside all night if he wanted to.

"Hey, Al, cheer up," I said. "I, Williams the Great, will solve your problems. I'll at least tell you everything I've ever heard about how it's done, even though I'm suspicious you've got some cute girl waiting outside the door holding her breath."

"I assumed you were this experienced older woman," he said, smiling at the wall. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have asked."

"No, sir," I said. "I'm book-smart, but so far I ain't had a speck of real experience."

"Tell me what you do know," he said, his voice so soft I could barely hear it.

"O. K.," I whispered back, as if someone might be listening to us outside the door. "And tomorrow I'll take care of your sock problems, too."

The smile on his face was strained. He leaned forward. I was nervous. I wanted to choose my words carefully. If I used gutter words for body parts, it could alienate this frightened, naive young boy forever. I took my older-woman role very seriously.

"You said you've had an erection," I began.

"Of course," he said, squirming in the uncomfortable seat.

"Well, you have to have one before you can have sex."

"I figured that much," he said.

"There's a reason for that," I said. "It has to be that way so the penis can be inserted into the woman's vagina." I hesitated. I was so up tight I couldn't remember how much, if anything, the book had said about vaginas. "Do you have some idea what a vagina's like?"

"No," he said. "I know it's down there where the male

equipment is. I also think I can assume it's the opposite of a penis, sort of a tunnel. Is that right?"

"Not exactly, but close enough," I said. This was worse than I thought. It was like talking to a child, a child destined for monkhood, trained for celibacy from birth.

"Al, didn't your friends ever talk about girls?"

"No," he said, blushing again. "Mother always discouraged me from friendships with the neighborhood boys. She always said they weren't the kind of people she wanted me to be friendly with. She always made me a little afraid of being too friendly with anyone other than her and Daddy. Until I came to Chapel Hill, I didn't have any friends."

"Didn't you ever ask your parents where babies come from, for God's sake?"

"No," he said. "Mother brought me up the old-fashioned way, being seen and not heard. And if you think even you'd be able to look my mother in the eye and ask a question about sex, I'd sure like to see it. She's formidable."

There was a touch of pride in his voice. I wondered why.

"Let's get down to basics," I said. I tried to explain how male and female sex organs fit together, how lovers move together to reach climax, how the body juices help, how a man's orgasm produces millions of sperm that

swim upward in search of the single egg lying there like Madam Queen waiting to be fertilized by the lucky winner, assuming the egg was even fertile--all the stuff we take for granted today, even hear jokes about on national television.

It all seemed very clinical to me. Al asked a question now and then, but mostly he just sat there and listened the way he had listened the day I read Joyce to him--fascinated but very tense. We talked in the room for two hours or so, until I had to be back in the dorm. Disregarding curfew was a crime punishable by expulsion. I was not the only entity guarding the loss of my virtue. The whole world seemed to have made this its personal business, filled as it was with Betty Grable and Doris Day movies and books and teachers and relatives that never let an opportunity pass to extol the moral that bad girls, i.e, those who let boys go too far, were not only social outcasts, but they were also destined to roast like pigs on a spit in the molten flames of hell.

"That's enough," I said finally. "You've at least got enough words to talk to the guys in the dorm. I'm sure they can tell you more than I can anyhow."

He sat back in his chair and stretched his thin arms above his head. "Thanks, Williams," he said. "This means a great deal to me." He sat silently while I gathered together my books and purse and put on my jacket.

"Something smells good," he said. "Are you wearing perfume?"

"No," I said. "I've got to run now or I'll be late. Can you find your way back without me?"

"Sure," he said. I left him sitting there, his trousers stirring slightly, his face still flushed. I hoped he had absorbed enough to make him at least as much of an expert as I was. I was as fond of Al as if he were my younger brother. I was sure he'd be eternally grateful.

The next day, despite university rules to the contrary, I walked into Al's dorm, made my way up to his room, having warned him I was on the way, and spent a half hour pinning his socks together by colors. I told him to repin each pair the moment he took it off, before he threw them into his dirty clothes bag. That way he would get them back from the laundry still harmoniously joined together, red with red, black with black, green with green.

"Now, don't tell anyone about this," I said. "Let the guys wonder. It'll run 'em crazy."

"O.K.," he said, "but I've got one more request, Williams. Please don't ever tell anyone about last night. I meant it when I said I'm ashamed not to have known all this stuff before. Even Padge, who was born blind, knew it all years ago."

"Padge is a city street kid, Al. You live in the boonies. That makes a big difference." I felt a sudden

rush of mortification for him.

"Not much of one," he said. He looked sad. "I feel so dumb."

"You were forced into the mold," I said. "But now you haven't got to worry. You know everything. And Williams the Great will never tell where you learned it." I crossed my heart even though he couldn't see me do it.

He never asked me about sex again. I guess if he had any other questions, the information I had given him equipped him at least to talk with other guys in a way that would conceal his practical ignorance.

All of this was going on in the middle of my own sex problems. I sure didn't need Al's questions to remind me about sex. Barrett was pressuring me hard. He insisted that if I really loved him I would show it. I'd heard this stale argument a hundred times, but Barrett was older and more insistent than other men I had known. Very sure of himself, he made it clear that he had had a lot of women before me, but had never met one so intent on staying a virgin. He said if nothing else I was a challenge.

"You're so damned innocent looking," he said, "but I know there's a sexball buried inside there, screaming to get out."

That kind of talk scared me. I was scared of being a slut, scared of losing my reputation, whatever that was, scared of getting pregnant, scared of disappointment. As

long as there were several layers of clothes between any man's flesh and mine, I felt safe.

In spring, when the campus sprouted pink and yellow buds everywhere and there was a smell of love in the air itself, I stopped struggling and met Barrett in a hotel in Raleigh. We traveled separately (my idea--the farther away, the less likelihood of discovery by my family or the girls in the dorm). After meeting in the lobby Barrett signed us in as "Mr. and Mrs. E. Hemingway." My bare left hand was clenched deep in my jacket pocket. The clerk didn't blink or smirk, but I was sure he knew what we were up to. Barrett tipped the bellboy who carried our overnight bags up to the beige, colorless room, then closed the door. He grinned at me, picked me up and threw me down roughly on the nubby chenille bedspread. I could feel every knot in the fabric.

"Finally!" he said, unbuttoning his shirt. He lowered himself on top of me and began unbuttoning my blouse.

Nothing was what I expected. It hurt like hell, and Barrett made loud grunting animal noises. It was more like rape than making love. When he was through, he said, "God, what a workout," leaned back on the pillows, and went to sleep almost immediately.

When he woke up he started picking at the sheets. "Move over," he said, shoving at me. "Where's the blood?" he asked, turning over on his back, lighting a cigarette

and blowing smoke at the ceiling.

"What blood?"

"You know what blood. Virgin's blood."

I was confused. I didn't know where the blood was. The pain indicated there ought to be some somewhere, but the sheets were unspotted.

"You've been lying," he said. "You've been around."

"No, I haven't."

"Then where's the blood?" he repeated. "You said you were a virgin."

"Not any more," I said airily, beginning to feel the difference.

"Agh-h, you've just been putting me on. You've been around a little." He turned over to look at me. "Damned little. You don't know much, that's for sure. You could use a few lessons in what to do with your hands and mouth."

"Make up your mind," I said, hurt, starting to snifle. Until that day Barrett had been tender and flirtatious, careful of my feelings. I rolled off the bed, went into the bathroom and cried sitting on the john while he snored. When I crawled back into the bed, I curled myself into a knot as far away from him as I could get.

He awoke in the middle of the night and reached for me. Still embarrassed, I tried to be funny to cover my fumbling.

"I might not know much about sex," I said, "but unfor-

tunately I've passed on the little I do know to poor Al."

"What are you talking about?" Pulling back, he peered down at me with interest and listened, rubbing my back, as I told him about Al's mountain-boy innocence and my verbal lessons.

"Poor guy," said Barrett, licking my ear and rubbing his beard against my raw cheeks. The second time was worse than the first. It hurt more and I still didn't bleed.

A week later he started trailing behind one of the campus beauty queens. He telephoned once to break things off, to tell me he had a real woman now, one who knew how to have a good time in bed, a woman with a flat stomach.

I dragged from task to task slowly, as if I had rheumatism, trying only to finish out the year without flunking anything. I'd already gotten an "F" in sex, after all.

I snapped peevishly at everyone, including my puzzled students. I'd always ended my recordings for them by saying things like, "Sweet dreams, sweethearts." Now I snarled things like, "The end, thank God." They stopped making jokes about my hair, were silent around me. Whenever I asked them if they'd seen Barrett in the dorm lately, they mumbled and shook their heads.

I jumped every time I heard the hall telephone ring, hoping it might be Barrett. I couldn't sleep. I would lie in the dark with my eyes open imagining he would realize his mistake and come tell me he still loved me. I made up

fairy stories as silly as the one I had imagined about the first time I'd have sex. I awoke every morning with a headache and hurried through the days, rushing through my readings and dragging Al and the other blind boys along the walkways too fast as I peered around for Barrett.

The last week before exams Al called and asked me to meet him in front of our dorms in the grassy circle where we read when the weather permitted. He wanted his big wire recorder back since I had finished reading to him for the year. The sun was shining on his upturned face. He was sitting on the low rock wall that surrounded the little park and stood up as I approached, as he always did, politely, when he heard my steps.

"God, this thing weighs a ton, Al," I groused, panting and irritable from hauling the heavy machine down three flights of stairs.

I sat down on the wall and rested my forehead on my palms. "This has been a long, awful year," I said.

"Yes."

"What is it?" I asked. "Is there something I forgot to do?"

His face was blank. It gave not the least hint of what he was about to say. But his long thin fingers trembled nervously and his voice shook.

"Williams, I have to fire you."

"What?" I thought at first I hadn't heard what he

said.

"I don't want you to read for me any more," he said. "I'm going to get someone else."

I couldn't think of a thing to say except, "Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. "I just want to do it and get it over with." He groped along the wall for the recorder.

I sat on the wall, watching him struggle with the recorder. He began to walk away rapidly and unevenly, leaning to one side where the heavy machine weighed him down.

I called after him. "Al, after all this time don't you think you owe me the courtesy of telling me why?"

He kept on walking. "No," he said, his voice floating back to me over the sound of his shoes on the graveled path.

I watched him cross the quadrangle. Someone helped him lift the recorder up the dorm steps, and then he was gone. No one was standing on the steps. There were no faces at the windows of the dorm. I sat alone, waiting.

I felt like crying. It was partly cumulative, of course. I needed to cry about Barrett. I needed to shake myself out of all the sadness and grief puddled in my chest. Instead I sat with my face turned toward the sun until my cheeks were wet instead with sweat trickling down from my forehead.

Some days later, I asked Padge and the others if they knew why Al had fired me. They were as mystified as I.

"I never thought I'd see this day," said Pickett, shaking his head. "I can hardly believe it. Al thinks the world of you. Did anything happen that I don't know about?"

"Not that I know of," I said, but I wasn't really sure. I kept hearing myself snarl into the recorder, saw myself jerk too hard at Al's arm, rush him across the treacherous paths.

Padge whispered that Al had a crush on me and couldn't handle it. I tried to believe it. It was better than thinking I'd been fired for being a mean-tempered bitch.

I wondered if Al was just unable to bear my knowing about his sexual naiveté, but that hardly seemed likely either. I was afraid Barrett had told Al about Raleigh, boasted about his conquest the way my cousin told me boys do. Or maybe he'd even told Al I was terrible in bed, or scoffed at my claim to virginity. As cruel as he'd been to me, he might even have teased Al about his own ignorance.

I never found out if Barrett had anything to do with it. He'd already left for a job on a newspaper in Florida. I was sure of only one thing: however I had failed Al, not being able to stare me down, he had simply walked around me like one of those barriers he avoided with his special radar.

My last days in Chapel Hill I often sat alone in the little circle of grass, not studying, just watching people rush across campus. Occasionally I would see Al feel his way alone down the dorm steps or along the paths, clumsily, carefully, the way he always did, but I never spoke or let him know I was nearby.

Every time for forty years that I've thought about Al and wondered why he fired me, I've had to resist the urge to call him up and ask why. If I go downstairs and speak to him, I wonder if he'll even remember who I am. But if I get the chance, I intend to identify myself. If he doesn't remember me, I'll remind him. It's time for old secrets to be unveiled.

Jack and I leave the party and descend the ruby staircase. He's doing little dance steps and whistling the theme from "Gone with the Wind," thinking he's funny. He <u>is</u> funny.

I laugh and say, "I hope you don't think you could haul <u>me</u> up these steep stairs, Rhett Butler."

A voice says, "Williams? Is that you?"

I turn and see Al standing just beyond the curve of the railing. The people with him, a pretty gray-haired woman and another tall blind man, turn toward me with interest.

"Al," I say, "how are you?" I walk over to him and take his hands in mine. They feel warm. He squeezes my

fingers.

"I can't believe it," he says, smiling toward the chandelier. "What're you doing here?"

I explain I have lived in Richmond since graduate school. I introduce Jack to him.

"Al," I say, "can I drag you over here in this corner for a minute so we don't bore everybody? Y'all don't mind, I'm sure." I smile at the other people. Jack couldn't care less. He turns his back on us and begins telling Jefferson renovation stories to the couple.

"I know what you want," Al says. His eyes still leak the way they used to.

"Tell me why," I say. "Before I die I have to know why."

"You're not anywhere near dying," he says.

"You never know," I say, "and how did you recognize my voice after all these years?"

"You've got one of those voices that you never forget," he says. "Like Tallulah's, or Garbo's. That was why I hired you, Williams. I wanted to hear more of that beautiful deep voice."

"You mean Padge was right? You just had a crush on me?"

Al smiles. He seems to think this is amusing.

"Well, not a crush exactly," he says. "If it had been just a crush, I could've handled it."

"What do you mean?"

"You remember that little lesson you gave me on sex, don't you?"

"Of course. Who'd ever forget a thing like that?"

He smiles. "Well, you also helped me adjust to Carolina and the frightening changes in my life. You fixed my socks, you seemed to understand most of my needs. I don't know what I would have done without you those first few months. You saw how alienated I was, and you helped me get used to being on my own."

"So you fired me," I say.

"I know," he says. "I know. But it was better that way."

"Tell me," I say again.

"You haven't ever figured it out?"

"Was it my bad temper?" I still have no idea what he's talking about.

Al shakes his head. "The imagination of a young man is powerful. In my blind, even more vivid, imagination you were the sexiest thing that had ever happened to me. Just when I'd think I could stop imagining you, somebody like that blabbermouth Barrett would start describing you in the most lurid way. . . . I couldn't handle it. Then I got the dumb idea that asking you to tell me, in some clinical, objective way, about sex would cure me, or at least relieve the tension, but after that night it got so much worse I

became physically ill. All I did when you read to me was sit there thinking about what I wanted to do. It was terrible not to put my hands out and touch you."

He turns his face toward me. "Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Not exactly," I say. How could an old lady fathom the passion of an 18-year-old boy when she'd been blind to it at 20?

"What are you like now?" he asks.

I decide to tell the truth. "I'm a fat old broad with a big mouth and a lot of opinions," I say. "Jack's always worried about what I'll say next."

"I don't believe you," he says, smiling. He reaches for my hand and I take his hand between my two and squeeze it very hard. Myths are difficult to dispel.

"We'd better get back to the others," I say.

Jack and I stand around and talk a few minutes with the other couple and Al. Al and I make inside jokes about how the blind lead the blind. We promise to keep in touch, but I'm sure we won't for the same reason we've never gotten in touch before. Besides, the story's all rounded out now, no more jagged edges left.

On the way home Jack asks what Al and I were talking about and I say we remember the old days very differently. Jack says he understands that since I can't remember what I served for dinner last night.

MILESTONE, MILLSTONE, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Carl is sure to be furious. He will assume she's faking illness just to get out of flying down to Jacksonville on that tiny company jet. He knows she will go to any lengths to avoid stepping foot on any plane. The fact that the weather has turned nasty will only confirm his suspicions.

Trouble is, he's wrong this time. Helen is throwing up, running a fever, trotting to the john every twenty minutes. Aspirin has just made her stomach queasier. She even calls Dr. Goldbloom, who tells her to crawl in bed and relax, reconcile herself to being sick at least a week with this new flu virus that's making the rounds. Dr. Goldbloom laughs when she says she has to get well quick so she can fly down to Florida. He says the pill ain't been invented yet that'll cure this flu.

"Take the legendary two aspirin and call me in the morning," he jokes.

She's not much in the mood for joking. She wonders if they give flu shots for people barely forty years old. Next year she intends to get a flu shot so this won't happen again.

For hours Helen has huddled in a flannel gown under a doubled-up comforter on her side of the king-sized bed, dozing between seizures of the chills. Her temperature is 102° even after the two aspirin. She thinks maybe she threw them up before they dissolved enough to enter her bloodstream and do some good.

She has been dreaming murky, disturbing nightmares of airplanes tossed about the skies by giant tornadoes or dashed to the earth from thirty thousand feet, unleashing the shrill metallic whine she remembers from dive bombers in old war movies. The sensation of dying in a plane crash is familiar, one she has had nightmares about for years and has now memorized. The pain on impact is swift and crushing, intense, excruciating, as all her bones crack and small pieces of her flesh fly through the air. From some overhead perch she watches a medical crew collect body parts while her nerves, still not entirely dead, respond with queer, diminishing spasms to each touch of the rakes they are using. The separate pains that she and all the other passengers feel run together like small mountain streams into a huge river of communal agony. Helen experiences these same sensations every time she dreams about being in a plane crash.

The television has been running for hours, the sound low and muted. Flashes of scenes from the Winter Olympics invade Helen's consciousness. She sees a man on skis shoot

a rifle in mid-jump and wonders if it's just another dream until an announcer compares this strange new sport to a high diver having to clean scales off a fish on his way down to the water. She hears that in 1946 the Italian hockey team were defeated by the Americans, or the Russians, 31-1. Who cares. She hates the way sports announcers are always reeling off irrelevant statistics as if they mattered. She drifts off to sleep.

At four in the morning she plays with the remote, trying to find something to watch besides home shopping. On the Washington station they are showing "The Scarlet Claw" with Basil Rathbone, a Sherlock Holmes movie she had never heard of until yesterday when she read in the paper that Rex Reed ranks it as one of the ten best mystery movies of all time. Throwing back the comforter, she pads barefoot to the kitchen for an icy can of Pepsi and a bowl of saltines. Through a haze she carries them to the bedroom, fluffs up her pillows, wet with perspiration, and settles down to see if old Rex is right.

Halfway through the movie she begins to nod again. Later she wakes up to see a hawk change into a rocket on the screen. She lifts her cold hand to her burning forehead and wonders if she hallucinated it or if it really was on TV. Earlier she had thought she saw a cat walking across the ceiling and down the wall.

Alan Alda does an IBM commercial. She wishes he would

smile at her like that, so sweet and soft and sexy. She wonders if he's really like that or if it's just an act he puts on for his audience. She knows from her own life that everybody has little pretend faces to present to the public, masks that metamorphose to suit any occasion. Like Carl with his customers, always smiling and bowing like a Japanese wind-up toy. Say money and Carl goes into his act. She wonders what it must be like to be married to Alan Alda.

The next time she wakes up light is streaming in through the windows. A squirrel on the bird feeder outside loses his balance and slides down the slick sides of the plastic canopy, his small claws clutching futilely at air. Helen hears him hit the ground chattering angrily. She feels her forehead and decides she can't tell whether she's still running a fever or not. Pulling a pair of thick socks over her cold feet, she stands and wobbles for a second before groping her way into the bathroom. Her face in the mirror is grayish-green, and a dried white crust where she has drooled in her sleep is caked on her lips and chin. Good God, she thinks, I look like I'm dying.

Peering at her watch, she sees that it's still very early, about six something, it looks like. She gargles, brushes her teeth and wipes her cheeks and forehead with a damp washcloth. As she feels for the thermometer where she left it last night in the cabinet, lying on the shelf, she

wonders if she ought to keep it as proof of how ill she's been. She could show it to Carl, but she doubts it will prove anything to him. He'll just accuse her of holding it under the hot water faucet to prove she has reason to skip the weekend in Jacksonville with the Raineys. She knows there's no way on God's green earth she'll be able to convince him that she's not faking. Maybe if she can get him to call Dr. Goldbloom. . .no, that won't help. Dr. Goldbloom can only say he talked with her over the telephone. He didn't actually put his hand on her dry, burning forehead last night or peer into her red, rheumy eyes. He was so sure of what kind of flu she had that he just diagnosed her without seeing her. He assured her that she had classic symptoms, incurable except by time and endurance, unrelievable by anything fancier than aspirin. But Carl's not about to take her word for it, mainly because he'll know how relieved she is not to have climbed on board the shining little white jet with John Rainey the previous afternoon. She had seen on the weather channel the threatening red and yellow blobs, dangerous storms all around Jacksonville and several places between Richmond and there. Even though common sense tells her that no pilot will take off in weather that might endanger the life of an important man like John Rainey, her emotions and fears get the best of her, drooping over her like evil demons whispering that even the best pilots can't stop a plane from shaking in

those big, rolling thunderheads, and they can't stop her teeth from chattering or her stomach from flip-flopping either. In her mind she sees the plane swaying down to embrace the uprushing ground she knows is always there, waiting for her, invisible through the mass of dark clouds bumping her around the sky.

She remembers the last time Carl forced her to ride with one of his customers on one of those damned little jets. She spent the whole flight to Norfolk, no longer than twenty minutes at most, her head pushing against the ceiling as she stared fearfully at the radar reflection of a storm ahead along the coast. After the rocky landing, the small plane nearly tipping over sideways in the heavy winds, one of the pilots had grinned at her and said, "Now you know what wind shear feels like." That was the week after the crash in Dallas-Fort Worth that killed a bunch of her friends on their way to a bridge tournament in Las Vegas. She had known ten of them, met them when they flew up from Miami to a tournament in Washington. Nice old people. People just trying to enjoy their retirement and have a good time, and dear old Mother Nature had snatched the plane and smacked it down as it landed during a violent storm, robbing half the passengers of their lives. It can happen to any airplane, any time. Carl simply has no fear when it comes to airplanes. He just doesn't worry about them. He has ridden on planes ever since his teens and now

can't understand anyone like Helen with a full-fledged phobia about flying, a phobia based in reality and experience. Once he made her go to one of those phobia clinics to learn to handle her fear, take control of it. But she panicked halfway through the course, well before they reached the part where she would have to actually board a plane. And the dreams didn't stop.

The worst fight they ever had was when the Governor invited Carl and Helen to fly to Japan with him and a bunch of other people to rustle up foreign trade for the state. Helen had wept and begged Carl for weeks not to make her go, and he had finally cancelled out rather than have to explain to such important people.

"I can't afford to have a weirdo wife who takes the train or bus when the rest of us are on a plane," he had said to her then. "It's damned embarrassing. You've got to <u>do</u> something about yourself. I mean, once in a goddamned while, you've got to do something for <u>me</u>."

But no matter what she tries, self-hypnosis, getting dead drunk, even the phobia clinic, she always chickens out at the last minute, stalls at actually getting on the plane and letting it take off. Once she even got as far as strapping herself into the seat before the panic hit her, closing her throat, strangling her. Leaving her purse and her overnight bag in the aisle she pushed her way out against the crowd of incoming passengers, shaken and white-

faced, choking on her own fear.

Carl is becoming more and more outraged. She wonders if his anger is anything like her own when he traipses through the house like a great animal run amok, leaving a trail of open closet doors, never bothering to switch off lights or the television, throwing magazines and books on the floor open, their spines ready to break, pitching his clothes at the nearest furniture, his smelly socks in wads by the bed, his soiled undershorts piled in untidy heaps in a corner until she picks them up and puts them in the hamper. He can drift off to sleep with the bed piled a foot thick with Wall Street Journals and Golf Digests and last week's Sunday Times. The rattling of the paper as they turn over in the night never wakes him up, but let her try to sneak to the john and up pops his head as he mumbles angrily she's trying to kill him by keeping him from getting any sleep.

The telephone rings. She knows before she answers that it's Carl, checking to see if she has left with John, wanting to make sure she's already down in Florida. She picks up the receiver and tries to cast her voice down low, make it sound scratchier, hoarser.

"I wonder why I had this feeling you'd still be there," Carl says, his tone heavily sarcastic, his breath loud in her ear. She can see him pressing his lips against the mouthpiece the way he does when he doesn't want anyone

to hear what he's saying.

"I've got some kind of awful virus." She coughs in a sudden spasm.

"Sure you have, sweetheart." His Bogart voice drips with sarcasm.

"I have. Call Dr. Goldbloom if you don't believe me."

"No thanks. I don't need to be embarrassed in front of Dr. Goldbloom as well as the Raineys."

"Carl, I can't help being sick. Carrie Rainey said she doesn't want me down there around her and the children and the rest of the guests with what I have. Dr. Goldbloom said it'll last at least a week."

"Goddamnit, Helen, don't you realize that you never get sick unless there's a goddamned airplane ride looming in your future? Don't you know it's all in your goddamned feeble mind?"

"It's not, Carl. Not this time. But what if it were? Aren't phobias illnesses? Don't they have to be treated like any other sickness?"

"Oh, what do you know about it? You can't even decide when to pull trumps. You refused to pay any attention to those people at the phobia clinic. You just totally ignored everything they tried to teach you." There is a silence on the telephone wire. "Besides, we both know you don't have any phobia, not a real one. You just like to get under my skin. You're jealous of my work. You like to

show people you can't be ordered around, you don't have to go anywhere you don't want to. You like to show people that nobody can control you." His voice rises on the last word, cracking in her ear like lightning on the line.

"I really am ill, Carl, you've got to believe that."

"I don't believe anything you say any more. I'm supposed to fly out of Denver in half an hour. Do I have to change in Charlotte and come home and look after you in your final illness, or can I go on down to Jacksonville and have some fun for a change? Have you got any objection to that?"

"Carrie and John are expecting you. Carrie and I talked about what to do, and she said you ought to come on down by yourself. I told her you needed a little vacation."

"God knows that's true, as hard as I work. I just hate to go down there with everybody thinking I left you at home at death's door. What do you think that makes me look like?"

"No one's going to think anything, Carl. Everyone but you thinks I am real unlucky to be sick. They're all expecting to have a wonderful time."

"Well, they just don't know you. They don't know that the only way you can have a wonderful time is to keep both feet on the ground. They don't know I'm married to a weirdo freako scaredy cat."

Helen laughs. Scaredy cat. The childish expression catches her by surprise. No one has called her that for years, not since she was in third grade and burst into tears in fear of a dark, threatening cluster of wasps buzzing outside in the playground, afraid they would sting her. The teacher had called her a scaredy cat in front of the whole room. Dragging her feet in the dirt and sniveling, Helen had joined the other children near the swings and slides, keeping her eyes peeled for stray wasps. She had not been stung, but another little girl was and had screamed for what seemed like hours down the hall in the infirmary. Helen remembers being glad somebody besides her had been stung. It was because she had taken care of herself, looked out for herself.

"If you can laugh," Carl says loudly, "you can haul your ass onto a commercial jet and come on down to Jacksonville later today and join us."

"I can't. I'm too sick. I've got 102° fever and I'm dizzy and throwing up and have the trots. You don't want me around your friends right now. I look awful."

"Who cares how you look? I've got to get off this damned phone. I'm going to miss my plane. And wouldn't you love that? You know what? You've gotten to be just a milestone around my neck."

"Millstone," she says. She knows how he hates to be corrected.

"Millstone, milestone, it's a hell of a heavy load either way you look at it," he said.

"Goodbye, Carl," she says, throwing the telephone into its cradle.

She has been lying on her back in bed. As she sits up she sees a large wet ring on the pillow where her head has lain. The back of her hair is sticky and dripping with sweat. She pulls her gown over her head and throws it in a heap on the floor. A shower will feel good if she can stand up long enough to take one. Her body trembles with the fever as she feels her way to the bathroom. She grips the edge of the sink tightly as she leans over to open the stall door and turn on the shower massager.

As she waits for the water to warm, she examines her face in the mirror. She wonders if she ought to get down the Polaroid and take a shot of the sagging bluish bags bulging underneath her puffy eyes. With her gray-green skin she looks like a Hallowe'en witch mask. A picture like that would prove even in court how sick she has been.

Narrowing her eyes, she chants, "Eye of newt and dragon skin, stir the fickle western wind." Not too shabby. Too bad she's just a mere mortal. She'd like to give old Carl a little jolt.

"Boo," she says, to nobody in particular, soaping her aching arms and legs. She washes her hair and blow-dries it just enough so it won't soak the pillow. Padding down

the hall naked, she pulls a clean pillow case from the linen closet. Replacing the smelly wet case tires her so badly she falls onto the bed and goes immediately to sleep.

The telephone shrills in her ears, but she can't seem to wake up. Her eyes are so heavy she pushes them open with her fingers.

"Hello?" she rasps into the phone.

"Helen? How do you feel?" Carrie's voice sounds far away, farther than Florida. "You sound awful. Has the fever stopped?"

"Not yet," Helen says, sitting up on the side of the bed. She rubs her forehead, wipes at her running eyes. "Did Carl get there all right?"

"Well, that's what I was calling about. I wasn't sure he'd come on down after he talked to you and heard how terrible you sound."

Right, Helen thinks. Fat chance. I could be on my deathbed and he'd still insist I come dance and smile for the precious customers. "Oh, I talked him into it. He was in Denver when he called and barely had time to make the connection to Charlotte."

Something is wrong. He must have missed his connecting flight if he hasn't already landed in Jacksonville. She looks at her watch. She's been asleep eight hours.

"Well, Helen, I hate to worry you, but John and I thought you ought to know he hasn't gotten here yet. We

checked with the airport and his connecting flight landed two hours ago. And we haven't heard from him."

Helen leans back on the pillows, damp again where she has perspired in her deep sleep. She tries to think. Carl would never disappoint a customer or fail to check in if he was going to be late. Especially John Rainey, whose expectations of all underlings was formed during his military service. He's still a general and everyone else is a private. No, Carl would've called them if he had missed his flight.

"Carrie, I'm sorry," she says. "I can't seem to get oriented. I've been asleep for hours and I'm still feverish. I can't figure out where Carl could be if he hasn't called you. You know how dependable he is about touching base."

"That's why John made me call you. We heard something on the television that worried us and we thought we'd better check to see if he changed his mind and decided to come home."

"He didn't tell me about it if he did. And he's not here. What was on TV?"

"One of those commuter planes out of Charlotte to Richmond, you know the ones John and Carl take when they have business in Charlotte, crashed this afternoon. Everybody on board was killed. It went down right after takeoff, but it took a while before the newspeople put it on

the air. We were worried Carl might have been on that plane if he'd changed his mind and decided to go home."

"No, Carrie, he would've called me if he had changed his mind about going down to join you. Carl's nothing if not dependable in his habits. He always calls to tell me what he's doing."

Carrie sighs on the other end of the telephone. "Well, if you're not worried, I guess we won't be either. He'll show up eventually, I reckon. Go on back to sleep. We'll call you when we hear anything, one way or the other."

Helen's head is beginning to clear. She thinks she should be feeling some sort of fear or dread but all she's aware of is a piercing curiosity. It's closer to the kind of exhilaration that comes with waiting for something for a long time. She finds it downright strange to be all of a sudden so alert and tense, just as she was when poised for finally taking the great, brave leap of her girlhood off the high diving board, with everyone watching, staring up at her from below as she gathered her nerve. It also resembles the feeling she had just before she won the chemistry medal in high school: excited and very flustered, not really knowing what was going to happen but sure down deep in her soul that she would win. Poor Carl. She had better concentrate on thinking about him. But instead she focuses again on her dream and feels how strange it will be

if it is Carl's pain she has been dreaming, Carl's agony and bones and not hers. She deliberately reruns the dream in her mind and decides that the pain is too personal, too intense, to be anyone's but her own. It's her dream, her fate in the dream, not Carl's.

She reaches for the remote and turns on the television. With the sound off she watches the end of a Cosby rerun for a while, then switches the channel to CNN. In silence she watches scenes of the little plane's wreckage. The face of the announcer is serious, his professional mask for revealing bad news. Helen tries to read his lips, but her eyes keep closing, swollen with the heat of the fever. Finally she turns up the sound and hears the grave-faced announcer say that the names of the dead have not yet been released. The airline is trying to contact the families first. She turns off the television.

Her stomach is rumbling. She must be hungry, but she feels no hunger, only a painful tension that makes her nauseous. She makes her way to the kitchen barefoot, leaning against the walls to steady herself. Propping her elbows on the counter, she opens a can of Pepsi and chews on a saltine. She stands in front of the open refrigerator a few minutes to review the contents. Nothing catches her fancy. It all looks inedible, disgusting.

She closes the door, takes another saltine out of the box, then heads back to the bedroom. She has just popped

the last bite of cracker in her mouth when the telephone rings. She hears it but can't make her hand pick up the receiver. She doesn't feel like talking to anybody, not Carrie or John, certainly not Carl, and especially not some airline official. There's no way of knowing which of them is calling her and, for some reason, she's really not especially interested. Whoever it is will certainly call back, she's sure of that. Good news or bad, it can wait.

The phone stops for a few minutes, then starts up again. She picks up the receiver and listens.

"Helen? Is that you? Did I get the right number?" Carrie Rainey's excited voice continues to ask questions until Helen says something.

"I'm here, Carrie. I'm just so weak I couldn't get to the phone very fast."

"Carl's here now, Helen, so you don't have to worry any more. He just walked in the door. Here, Carl, you tell her about it." Helen can hear Carl protesting, telling Carrie she can tell Helen all about it, he's tired, he needs a good, stiff drink more than anything else.

Carrie's excited voice comes back on the phone. "It was something nobody down here even thought about. His taxi driver had an accident on the way to our house and the cop told Carl he had to stay there until he finished filling out all the papers, which took forever, naturally. You know how they are. Are you still there, Helen?"

"I'm here." Her shoulders feel heavier, her body hollow. She feels like one of those helium balloons beginning to deflate, limp and sort of wrinkled.

"Well, anyhow, I knew you'd be worried so I wanted to let you know the second we found out Carl was safe. Those scenes on television are awful, aren't they? So scary."

"Just terrible," Helen says.

"O.K. then, you take care of yourself and we'll see you next time."

"Thanks, Carrie. I appreciate the call. Tell Carl to relax and have a good time."

"Oh, he will, dear. Bye-bye. Take care of yourself."

Helen drops the telephone onto her chest. Rivulets of tears run down her cheeks, catching her by surprise. She's not a weeper; she's always had good control of her tear ducts. The last time she cried this much was when her father died. Nobody's dead now, so why is she crying? It's just that she'd built up her expectations, she'd been worried to death, all for nothing. Everything's such a letdown. Nothing's different, not one single thing. The son of a bitch. He can always be counted on to ruin things, one way or another. He's almost as good at that as he is at bowing and scraping to anybody with a buck.

She lies on her back, her chest heaving. She listens as the dial tone comes on, then the mechanical voice of the operator says if she'd like to make a call she should hang

up and try again, or if she needs help she should dial the operator.

THE REVEREND'S CHILD

I watched through the curtains as the Reverend and his wife made their way slowly up the brick walkway. Seeing them made me uneasy, and I began to regret my impulsive decision. They did not look anything like I had pictured them after my phone conversation with the woman, like a young couple expecting their first child and in desperate need of a temporary place to live. A tall, skinny man in his fifties, the Reverend walked with a slight forward list, bobbing his head appreciatively as he looked around our front yard. His wife, well into her thirties, smiled up into the rustling silver maple leaves, revealing a nearly toothless mouth. Her bulging blue gingham maternity jumper gaped open at one side where it had ripped.

"Reverend Chappell?" I asked as I opened the door.

"Yessum, I am he," he said, "except that in honor of the One I serve I have now changed my name to the Reverend Jesus Lord."

He smiled broadly, reptilian eyes closing as he bared large, yellow teeth.

"And this is my precious wife Wanda, who, as you can see, is happily burdened with our first child, the Lor'

bless." He nodded slightly, his eyes again closing. He looked exactly like a snake rearing and feinting to strike. I stepped back.

"Won't y'all come on in and have a seat?" I said. "My husband can't be here. He had to meet with a client, but he left the keys." I watched as Wanda lumbered awkwardly toward the couch, rubbing her lower back and sighing. The Reverend followed, cradling her elbow in one enormous hand and holding his hat in the other. She leaned on him, welcoming his support. It had been a long time, but I remembered the feeling of being watermelon-ripe and gawky. All those months for nothing.

Dressed in an old Marine jacket, a stiffly starched white shirt and a shiny gold tie, the Reverend appeared more military than ministerial. His hair was clipped shorter than an inch, as if he had just finished basic training, except that he was about thirty years too old. His leathery face bore criss-cross scars that made him look like the survivor of fierce hand-to-hand combat.

Wanda's lank blonde hair hung down her back and over her shoulders. She mopped her glistening pink face with a wadded Kleenex and said, "Lord bless, this is really one of his hot ones, ain't it?"

"Sure is," I said. "You'll be cooler in a minute. I've turned the air conditioning on."

"I can feel it," said the Reverend. "Praise God for

givin' you folks this good cool air on a day like this and for lettin' us share it with you." He nodded rapidly, still smiling.

"Can I get you all something to drink?" I asked. "We've got some Diet Coke and some Pepsi and maybe a little bit of iced tea left over from last night."

"No'm," he said. "We don't usually drink drinks with all them additives, you know, because of the baby and all. It's not s'posed to be good for the little blessin's. It can cause 'em to git something wrong with 'em."

I could remember walking around the house trying to find something to do that wouldn't make my back hurt, hoping for Jack to come home early for a change and give me a rubdown. He had always worked hard, and after the baby was born dead, he had kept himself so busy I only saw him at breakfast or on weekends. His mother had said I lost the baby because I had bullheadedly insisted on painting the nursery when I was about four months along, and anybody with good sense knew paint fumes would make you miscarry. I knew this was a lot of hooey, but I still felt like Jack blamed me even though the doctor said it wasn't really anybody's fault that the fetus was defective and that we were lucky Mother Nature had taken care of the problem. He never said exactly what was wrong with the baby, just that we ought to be glad it didn't live. He didn't even say whether it was a boy or a girl, just that this didn't

really matter and was best forgotten.

I had never gotten pregnant again, although we had tried, and now, watching Wanda, all these worrisome memories loomed up for the first time in ages. My fingers found their way to the gold cross my mother had brought to me in the hospital then, that I still wore around my neck as if I could ever forget.

"I know you'll be glad when it's born," I said. "Waiting is hard, isn't it?"

The Reverend laughed loudly, slapping his hat against his thigh, and said, "Well, I ain't so sure about that! It's a mighty quiet little blessin' right now, but I bet after it comes it'll make sure we know it's here. We'll wish we was still waitin'. I ain't sure I can cope with all that noise at my age." He put his arm around his wife and gave her a light kiss on her damp hair. What a creep, I thought, but at least he's attentive to his wife.

"Miz Hamilton," Wanda began, leaning forward, "we surely do feel the Lord has once again moved in mysterious ways His wonders to perform by leadin' us to you and that wonderful house of yours up there all by itself, not bein' used. And He has sure taken care of you, too, by givin' you two wonderful homes, this beautiful one here in Richmond and the one up on 522 goin' to waste." She shook her head in wonder.

Doggone you, Jack Hamilton, I thought, for leaving me

to deal with this by myself. Even though I was the one who had told the Chappells, sight unseen, they could use our farmhouse, because of Wanda's condition, he had made the final decision. He had said, oh, well, it might be a good way to get the grass cut and the basement stairs rebuilt. And it had been his uncle up in Orange County who had told the Chappells to call us in the first place when they couldn't find a temporary place to live. Everybody else was asking for a year's lease. The lease on the house they had been renting was up, and the man had rented the place right out from under them, not showing one ounce of sympathy about the baby coming soon.

I couldn't understand people like that. But I had a funny feeling after getting a look at them that, pregnancy or not, if Jack were here he would just bluntly tell them he had changed his mind, something I was simply not capable of doing. I had never been very good at confrontation, but Jack was real good at it. I guess that's what made him a good lawyer. When people called us at home trying to sell aluminum siding or dance lessons, Jack would just slam the phone down in their faces and roar for five minutes about the cheek of some people, while I would always sit there for ten minutes listening and then apologize for not buying anything. But I had only promised the Chappells they could use the place for a few weeks, just until the county ran electrical and water service to the lot where their new

mobile home was parked. That seemed the right thing to do.

I thought Wanda showed a lot of spunk for calling complete strangers for help, even desperate as she was. I couldn't have done that. I also had to admire the way she had backed me into a corner with the Lord, telling me over the telephone that good, charitable Christians like Jack and me would surely get our reward in Heaven. Jack made fun of me, said I had let myself be manipulated as usual, which he said was just plain dumb.

"I believe I will take a little water if you've got it," said Wanda. She was fanning herself with a magazine and puffing air up from her lips onto her sweaty face.

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry. I'm not being a very good hostess, I'm afraid. Days as hot as this just make you forget good manners." I smiled and headed toward the kitchen for the water and the keys to the farm buildings and machinery. I could hear the two of them tiptoeing around the living room, so I jangled the keys when I returned to give them time to get back on the couch.

Handing the glass of water to Wanda, I said, "Jack and I've decided that we don't mind y'all staying at the farm for a little while, and we're not going to charge you any rent if you'll do a little painting and repair work for us." This arrangement had been suggested by Wanda during her telephone call. She had boasted her husband could fix anything.

"Praise be and glory hallelujah!" exclaimed the Reverend. "The Lord and all His mysterious might be praised!" He rose to his feet and danced a small jig, twirling his hat expertly from one hand to the other. I wondered what kind of minister he was.

"Sit down, Bud!" said Wanda. "Shame on you for acting so outrageous in Miz Hamilton's house." She smiled at me proudly.

"That's quite all right, Reverend Chappell," I said.

"Miz Hamilton, I do prefer my taken name, Jesus Lord, to my given name of Bud Chappell, if you don't mind. Here. Take one of my cards." He leaned forward and handed me a business card inscribed in raised blue lettering "New Covenant Ministries" and underneath that "Jesus, King of Kings, Lord of Lords." The residence number had been scratched through several times with new numbers penciled in, but I didn't see a church number. Down in the right corner was "Bud Chappell, P. O. Box 469, Culpeper, VA 22701." No title, just Bud Chappell.

"Reverend Chappell," I said, "I think I'll just call you by your given name, if you don't mind." The very idea of anybody wanting to be called Jesus Lord. I handed the set of keys to him, not without misgivings.

"You can call me anything you want to, ma'am," he said. "You have purely saved our lives this day." He rose to his feet, nodded briskly, then took Wanda's arm and

guided her rapidly toward the front door.

"Miz Hamilton," said Wanda, turning back to me, "you'll surely be blessed by the Lord for your charity this day. If the little blessin' is a girl, we'll name her after you and the Virgin Mary. Mary whatever. What's your first name?"

"Lynn," I said.

"Oh, that's so pretty! Mary Lynn. And if it's a boy, we'll name it after your husband." She smiled back over her shoulder.

Turning at the door the Reverend reached out and enclosed my hand in both of his. He said, "Miz Hamilton, I bet when you opened that door to us you could see on my face that I've been a real rounder in my day, couldn't you?" He cocked his head to one side and gave me another snaky smile. "Now, admit it, you did, didn't you?"

I tried to hold my face straight.

"Well, you're exactly right," he continued. "I did live the life of a rounder in my earlier days, but now I've been saved by this little lady young enough to be my daughter and by the Lord God and his Divine Son Jesus, even though they left the marks of my sins on my face as reminders." He raised his right hand and sang, "Glory be to God and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, Amen, Ah-men!" He had put his hat back on his head on his

way to the door, and he now smartly saluted first me, then his wife, clicking his heels together.

Wanda laughed and took the Reverend by the arm. "Sometimes you are the silliest thing, Bud Chappell. Thank you, one million times, Miz Hamilton, and your husband, too, for helping us in our time of need. We'll take good care of your lovely second home."

"You just worry about taking care of yourself and the baby," I said to Wanda. "Be sure to get a lot of rest and fluids."

"Oh, I will," she promised over her shoulder. They held hands and whispered as they made their way down the walkway.

Watching them I remembered when our baby had been born dead after a seven-month fight for its life. I had spent the last month in bed flat on my back. The summer had been hot like this one, and I had been ill most of the time, unable to do much besides stay at home alone with short visits from neighbors or friends. The sound of Wanda's labored breathing conjured up visions of my own misery and made me fear for the health of her child. Like me, she was a little past the prime age of childbearing.

We heard nothing from the Chappells for over two weeks. Jack kept asking me to call and remind them that this was just a temporary arrangement, just to make sure there would be no misunderstandings later. After hearing

my description of them, he had convinced himself that we had fallen into the hands of a couple of con artists who would be difficult to pry out of the house once they took possession, but I told him looks could be very deceiving. Jack liked to get away from the city for long, quiet weekends as a lull in his fastpaced city lawyer's life, and while the Chappells were there, he would be unable to do this. He was not happy with me and let me know it in a hundred little ways, mostly by starting each morning with a frown and throwing one last disappointed look my way before we switched off the lights at night.

One day there was a message on my answering machine from the Reverend. He sounded weary and said that a lot had been happening. He asked if we would please call him any time of the day or night, praise the Lord. I called immediately and he said Wanda had gone into labor two months early, on the day they had moved into our house. My breath caught in my throat, but he went on to tell me they had a premature baby daughter, whom they had named Ruth Jessica. Because she was born weighing just over three pounds, she would have to stay in the hospital a little while. Wanda was doing just fine, he said. I wondered briefly what had happened to their idea to name the baby after me and the Virgin.

"Miz Hamilton, you ought to see her, she's a jewel, a real beauty, and a true blessin' from the Lord. So tiny,

but she's got those long fingers and feet like her daddy, the Lord help her tiny soul. I b'lieve she'll be tall like me, too."

I asked him how it felt to be a father for the first time.

"Well, to tell God's truth, Miz Hamilton, it ain't what you can call the first time. I've got a son thirty-two years old." He hesitated a moment and continued, "Didn't I say I was married before?"

"No," I said, "but it wasn't necessary for you to tell me that. I just didn't know. Well, how does it feel to have a girl after all this time?" I bit my lip, embarrassed at my clumsy choice of words.

"Why, it feels wonderful to serve as the vessel that carried the Lord God's seed. It's the Lord who done it. Wanda and I've been married over eight years, and we didn't believe the Lord was goin' to bless us even though we never stopped tryin'. But He finally smiled upon us, and He continues to smile down upon us, givin' us this beautiful, big house to bring little Ruth Jessica home to. The Lord has given us many gifts, but this house is one of the greatest."

When I told Jack about my conversation with the Reverend, he said, "The next time you talk to that man, please tell him the Lord doesn't make the payments to the Federal Land Bank." He added, "I think I'd better drive up there

as soon as I can and make it clear exactly whose house that is. When the time comes, I expect we'll have trouble getting those people out of there. I've never trusted these religious types who hide behind the Lord and then do whatever they damned well please."

The fact that Bud Chappell called himself a minister won no brownie points with Jack. He said the Devil could cite Scripture for his purpose. He said there were all different kinds of lawyers, too, good ones like him and, at the low end of the scale, shysters and jacklegs that gave the profession a bad name. His law practice brought him into contact with what he called the scum of the earth. He knew 'em when he saw 'em, he said, and could smell 'em a mile off. It worried me that the Reverend had already managed to irritate him even before Jack met him in person.

When we finally found the time to make the two hour trip to the farm, we spent the first half hour checking on the land Jack sharecropped out to his cousin George. The soybeans and field corn were up and seemed to be coming along fine. Then Jack remembered that he wanted to drive past the barn to see the new floor he had ordered from a local carpenter. I sat in the Jeep while he waded around several mudholes to the main door.

"Good God A'mighty!" he yelled. "Get out and come over here. This is the damnedest thing I've ever seen!" Shading his eyes with one hand, he was peering inside the

barn door.

I slid down off the high seat of the Jeep and picked my way around the puddles of water. As I approached the barn I could see that screen wire had been tacked over every opening in the building. In one window sat a large black cat, licking its paws. As soon as I was close enough, I saw that the barn was filled with cats, at least fifty of them, every size, shape and color that cats come in. They were perched up in the rafters and in the screened windows and along the two-by-fours that bolstered the structure. Cat litter had been strewn thickly all over Jack's new floor, and the smell was incredible. I gagged and leaned against a large stack of what looked like church pews piled against the wall.

"What the hell," Jack said, "do you suppose Chappell is doing with all of these goddamned cats? Did you tell them they could put these cats in my barn? On my new floor?" He glared at me. "And what the hell are these pews for? Is he holding services out here in my damned barn?"

"Now Jack, just wait a minute," I said. "Wanda did tell me they had a few cats and asked if we had any objection to them bringing them along. I told her it would be all right as long as they didn't let them inside the house, but I didn't say a word about the barn. I just said I was allergic to cats." I took another look inside the dark

recesses of the barn. I decided there might even be a hundred cats sitting quietly inside, licking their paws and irritably twitching their tails. Cat hair was flying up against the screens. I started sneezing.

"Well, Jesus Christ, let's get on up to the house and tell those nuts they have to get rid of these stinking cats. And these pews or whatever they are. They've also got to shovel out all that cat shit and litter and hose down my new floor. I can't believe what I'm seeing." He glared at me. "This is all your doing."

We got back into the Jeep and drove through the gate and up the short drive to the house.

Jack had bought the farm from his father when his parents retired to the Virginia Baptist Home at Culpeper, fifteen miles away, and he had spent the next two years and a great deal of money making the two-hundred-year-old house comfortable. He relaxed only when he was at the farm, because it was, after all, where he had spent his childhood, and because there he could work outside in the earth like he used to when he was a boy. That way he could be a farmer <u>and</u> a lawyer. He really loved the place, and I was not a bit surprised that the sight of so many cats in his newly renovated barn enraged him.

"Maybe you ought to toot your horn, so they'll know we're here," I said.

"Maybe we ought to try to sneak up and surprise them.

God only knows what they've done to the house, or what they've got living in there with them." His face looked like an approaching thundercloud. "I don't like the feeling of having to knock at the door of my own house. I'm also mad as hell. I'll bet that son of a bitch has been holding his holy roller services over by the barn. I can't believe somebody around here hasn't seen it and called us." His face turned bright red and his eyes bulged out. "Since you got us into all this, I think you'd better go on in by yourself. I need a while to simmer down."

"It was your decision, too," I reminded him, but he stomped his foot against the floorboards and shook his head. In a way I was relieved to have a chance to get to the Chappells first. "You stay in the car until I find out if they're here or not."

"I'm not about to. I'm going out to the shed to check out the tractor. I see he's cut the grass, so it must be working. Maybe he even fixed it." He got out of the Jeep and started toward the outbuildings, once used as chicken houses and a smokehouse, now shelter for a small John Deere, a tiller, and other tools we used in our vegetable garden. Looking back at me, he said, "I'd better not find any more damned cats out here."

"Jack!" I hissed, pointing at the woodpile stacked against the smokehouse. The logs were stacked so neatly that they formed a precise rectangle. Each had been recut

so that they all fit perfectly together, like a finished jigsaw puzzle. I had never seen a woodpile like it before.

"What in God's name. . . ?" His voice trailed off as he walked on toward the shed, shaking his head. I stared at the logs for a moment, then continued walking toward the door.

When we had renovated the old house, Jack had had the architect install twenty feet of sliding glass doors so we could look out over acres of lovely green hillocks stretching to a far wood and the small stream that wound through them. The view was east, and I had watched many sunrises, seen shooting stars and taught myself about the galaxies through the expanse of glass in the three wide doors. Jack was right. The thought of knocking seemed weird.

But before I could knock, through the glass I saw the Reverend walk out of our bedroom in his undershirt, scratching at his crewcut. When he saw me, he ran to open the door.

"Miz Hamilton!" he said. "I'm so glad to see you here. Come on in! Is Mr. Hamilton with you? I been lookin' forward to meetin' him in person." He stuck his head out the open door to look for Jack.

"He'll be here in a little while," I said. "He's checking out the tractor."

"I fixed y'all's tractor, Miz Hamilton," he said. "Them people down at the small engine place don't know what

they're doin'. I fixed it so it works right." He stuck his thumbs under his armpits and swaggered.

"Mr. Chappell, I have to ask you about the barn before my husband gets here. He's really upset about all those cats. Not to mention the church pews."

The Reverend ducked his head and smiled. "Well, Miz Hamilton, the one thing I have always been, even before I became God's true disciple, is pro life." He paused. "All life," he continued. "That includes the least creature God ever created. And cats have a real bad time on this earth. All them cats you seen out there in the barn, well, them cats have had their lives saved by me and Wanda. They've all been abandoned or thrown out by mean people who don't care about animals, and we've made it our business to save 'em."

"Where did you get so many?" I asked.

"Oh, here and there, along the highway," he said. "You'd be surprised how cruel folks is to their animals. The church helps us pay for their food."

There was little I could say. I decided to let Jack discuss the cats with the pro-life Reverend.

"And the pews?"

"We been collecting them for the day when our congregation can build its own church. We been using the Elks hall over in Unionville and the Boy Scout cabin out in the woods, but we're mighty tired of beggin' off of people. We

been savin' our money, too, so it won't be too much longer before we break ground somewhere." He clasped his hands together over his head like a boxer.

"As for the dogs, I know you're wondering about them," he went on, "why, we've made a place for them back in them pretty woods yonder." He pointed across the rolling fields. "O' course, we ain't got but about twenty. Folks takes better care of their dogs."

I choked. I wondered how I was going to break the news about the dogs to Jack. He was going to kill me.

"Where's Wanda? Is the baby home yet?" I asked, looking around the room. It was difficult to keep my face from revealing my astonishment. The Chappells had put their personal stamp on the room.

Since they had planned to live in our house only two months, I had asked them to store their furniture in the smokehouse and live out of their suitcases. They had agreed reluctantly, saying it wouldn't be much like home without <u>their</u> things, but they seemed to understand my wish not to have our furniture moved into outbuildings and our closets disturbed. The long room we had made into a combination kitchen, dining room and family room was strewn with open boxes of clothes. Stray towels hung on the backs of chairs, and bras and briefs straggled out of green plastic bags onto the floor. Wads of paper from baby gifts were strewn here and there, and I couldn't walk without stepping

on wrinkled clothes. A crib filled with pink and green baby blankets, rattles and stuffed animals crowded one corner. Several brightly colored mobiles dangled down into the mass of baby things.

"Why, Wanda's in yonder asleep. Ruth Jessica, bless her little face, we only brought her home yesterday. She's finally gone to sleep there in the crib after hollerin' all night long. Do you want to see her?"

He made his way toward the crib. I noticed that the large, beaded African mask we had hung on the wall was gone. In its place was an enormous painting, on black velvet, of Christ's face alongside a smaller rendition, on wood, of the Last Supper. They had also rearranged the other prints and paintings in this room. As I approached the crib, I noticed that the Reverend had tacked a couple of his business cards onto a piece of the woodwork.

"Here she is!" he said. "Here's the Lord's gift! Ain't she beautiful? Ain't she the most beauteous of God's blessin's?" He held up what appeared to be a huge wad of blankets and swung it down so that I could see the baby. She was beautiful, extremely tiny with long fingers and hands like her father. I started to reach out for her, but thought better of it because she was still asleep and I didn't want to wake her up. I could wait a while.

Wanda, in shorts and a T-shirt, her massive breasts swinging loose underneath, walked in, yawning, and said,

"Ain't she the trues' blessin' you ever saw? Give her to me, Bud, I need to nurse 'er." Almost as an aside, she said to me, "How you, Miz Hamilton."

"She ain't awake yet, Big Baby," said the Reverend. "Uh-oh, I called you Big Baby in front of people." He snickered. "Since the baby came, I have tooken to calling Wanda Big Baby and Ruth Jessica Little Baby. But I ain't s'posed to call 'em that in front of folks." He simpered at Wanda.

"Give her to me anyhow," she said. "It won't be long before she's awake and howlin' for her milk." Turning to me, she said, "The Lord has also blessed me with an over-abundance of milk. I have to drain these things since she's too little to drink it all up. Ain't it a miracle?" I agreed. The baby, the milk--both miracles I wouldn't have minded having myself.

She took the baby from the Reverend and lowered herself into the closest chair, pulled up her shirt and began poking her nipple into the sleeping infant's mouth. The baby did not move. She continued to try to force the nipple in, but the infant made no response.

"Maybe she's too sleepy to eat right now," I said, worried that Jack might walk in and, unwarned, make some foolish or inappropriate comment to cover his embarrassment. He had never overcome his feeling that nakedness was for the dark.

"Bud, how much of that stuff did you give Ruth Jessica?" Wanda asked in a strident tone.

He twisted his face up and laid his finger on his lips. "Just one little swallow is all I give her," he said. "She was wearing' her little self out hollerin'." I looked at the baby. She was very pale and still.

Wanda stood up and yelled, "How much of that damned stuff did you give her, Bud Chappell? You said it would just make her rest and sleep easy, and she's actin' like she's dead."

My God, I thought, the poor little baby does look dead. I ran to the middle door, slid it open and called Jack. He was sidling slowly toward the house, studying the woodpile.

"Jack," I said, becoming really alarmed, "there seems to be something wrong with their baby. Reverend Chappell gave her something to make her sleep and now she won't wake up." Jack peered through the door. I clutched at his sleeve, slightly faint.

"What's wrong with the baby?" he asked in a confused tone. His eyes roved the room, surveying the clutter and searching, I knew, for his prized African tribal headdress.

"Mr. Hamilton?" said the Reverend amiably. "Now this is a real pleasure." He walked across the room and held out his hand. Smiling expansively and bobbing his head, he said, "I'm Reverend Bud Chappell and this here is my wife

Wanda and my baby daughter Ruth Jessica. We are all three pleased to meet you and want to welcome you to our little home on Route 522." I felt paralyzed. I wondered what he thought he was doing. Jack's mouth hung open as he stared at the Reverend. His eyes continued to sweep the scene before him like a searchlight, back and forth.

"Please come inside and make yourself comfortable," continued the Reverend. Wanda was still sitting in the

chair, poking her exposed breast at the infant's open mouth. Her head bobbed as she tried to smile at Jack and frown down at the baby at the same time.

"There's definitely something wrong with this here baby," she said. She stood and walked toward the crib where she propped the bundle of blankets containing the baby against a lacy pink, heart-shaped pillow embroidered with the slogan "GOD IS LOVE." She turned and walked toward Jack, extending her right hand and pulling down her t-shirt with her left. "Welcome, Mr. Hamilton," she said. "Come on inside and set a spell while I figure out what's wrong with Ruth Jessica. Bud's done dosed her up with paregoric and I think he gave her too much."

Jack stepped inside the door carefully, as if he might be moving into an unexplored jungle swarming with dangerous creatures. He continued to stare around the room as he walked past Wanda's outstretched hand.

"What's wrong with the baby?" he whispered urgently in my ear. "What the hell's going on?"

"She won't wake up," I said. "Something's really wrong. They just brought her home yesterday."

The Reverend smiled and walked over to the crib. He picked up the baby and began to swing her motionless body to and fro in a broad arc.

"Wake up, Daddy's little girl," he crooned. "Open your baby blues and smile for the nice people." He turned his eyes to me and Jack and said, "There ain't a thing wrong with Ruth Jessica 'cept she sleeps too hard like her daddy, ain't it so, Big Baby?" He gave the small bundle a hard shake and began rocking it next to his chest.

"Give her to me, Bud Chappell," Wanda said in a bossy tone. "Let me look at her and see'f she's breathing or not."

The Reverend handed the baby to Wanda, who walked quickly into the bedroom, emerging with a small purse mirror in one hand.

"This is the way to check if anybody's breathing or not," she said. "I saw it on TV." Lowering her bulk into the nearest chair, she laid the baby prone across her knees and stuck the mirror in front of her mouth. I bent to see if any mist appeared on the surface of the mirror but I didn't see anything.

After a few seconds, Wanda began to emit a series of

high-pitched, rhythmic squeals like a burglar alarm suddenly tripped. She dropped the mirror and started rocking back and forth rapidly, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"Jesus Christ save us all!" she screamed. "God love us, my little baby is dead! Jesus, come down! Come down! Come down now! Save this innocent baby, please, I beseech Thee!" She clutched the child to her rolling breasts and rocked faster.

"What in bloody blue hell is going on?" Jack said. He grabbed the Reverend by the undershirt and, setting his face close up to the Reverend's, he yelled, "What have you done to that baby?"

The Reverend stared back into Jack's eyes, his jaw slack, his body bending back limply. "Nuthin'," he said. "I ain't done nuthin' to that baby. Just gave her a little bit of medicine to help her rest easy."

Jack loosened his grip on the Reverend's t-shirt and walked over to Wanda to lift the baby from her. He sat down in another chair, pinched the infant's nose carefully between two fingers and began giving her mouth-to-mouth with soft, shallow breaths. She remained limp, her tiny, fuzzy head lolling back against his arm. Jack's face appeared frozen in an expression of pure panic.

As his eyes roamed the room for something that might help, a large blue-green horsefly buzzed into the room through the open door and landed on the baby's pale cheek

for just a second. Before any of us had time to react, the fly took off and sailed back out through the open door. As it darted away, Ruth Jessica sucked in her breath with a noisy whoosh, surprising for her size, and began to wail in a light and piteously weak voice.

Wanda vaulted like a great white frog across the space between her and Jack and jerked the baby from his arms. The baby continued to whimper until Wanda finally managed to insert one of her nipples into her small mouth. Ruth Jessica began to suck sleepily.

Jack turned to the Reverend and spoke with what only I recognized as great control. "Chappell," he said, "I don't know what paregoric might do to a baby this small, but I'm guessing that the least amount of most anything could kill her. Did it occur to you that you can go to jail for doing a thing like this?"

The Reverend was not listening. He smiled at his wife who smiled radiantly back at him.

"Dear Jesus," he began, "dear Lord in Heaven above, what a miracle Thou hast wrought here today." He raised his eyes and arms toward the ceiling.

"Amen, Lord," Wanda whispered.

"What are you talking about?" said Jack. "What miracle?"

"For we have all witnessed this day the miraculous love of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who continueth to

perform daily miracles for us all, not the least of which is the saving of little Ruth Jessica, His tiny servant." The Reverend's eyes were shining with simple reverence and adoration. Making a sweeping sign of the cross, he clasped his hands together and fell to the floor on his knees.

"Get up, you crackpot son of a bitch," Jack said in a loud, angry voice. "Jesus didn't do a damned thing. I saved that baby and neither God nor His Son had anything to do with it." He pointed his finger into Bud Chappell's face.

"Forgive him, Lord," said the Reverend with a nod, "for he knoweth not what he saith or doeth."

"What I saith and doeth just this particular minute," said Jack loudly, "is that you had better pray to Jesus that I don't put your ignorant, hypocritical ass in jail." He was getting really angry.

"Jack, stop that," I said. I pushed against the two fists he was holding balled up together against his chest, his fighting position.

"Reverend Chappell," I said, trying to keep my voice quiet and calm, even though I was about to explode, "please don't pray any more right now. Jack's just upset about the poor baby." I was afraid that Jack really would hit the man if he continued, moonfaced and oblivious, to praise divine interference for breathing life back into Ruth Jessica. I didn't know what had happened, but I really

didn't care. I was so relieved that I was ready to believe anything if it would keep her breathing. No more dead babies. Please.

The Reverend rose slowly and in a subdued voice said, "Mr. Hamilton, if it was you who breathed life back into little Ruth Jessica, then you were God's instrument, actin' for Him, when you did it. It was God instructin' you to do the right thing. I know that as sure as the sun rises in the mornin' and sets in the evenin' for He sent us His sign, that great big beautiful fly, His creature, like He sent the rainbow to Noah, to let us know His guiding hand was in this room." His eyes seemed to glitter as he spoke, and his earnest manner quietened Jack for the moment. I could also tell by my husband's face that he had startled and frightened himself with his brief show of rage.

"Jack," I said, "let's go." I tugged at his shirt.

"In a minute," he said. "I need to get straight with these people about when they're moving out of here."

Wanda, who had watched and listened almost placidly as Jack yelled at her husband, looked up serenely from her nursing and said, "Oh, Mr. Hamilton, you ain't got to worry yourself none about that. Our place is close to bein' finished. We're gonna be movin' out soon, don't you worry." She smiled her toothless smile and nodded her head as she rocked.

"And what about all those cats?" Jack asked.

"And the dogs?" I added.

Jack turned and looked at me. "What dogs?"

"Oh, nothing for you to worry about," said Wanda. "We got a few ol' hounds we rescued from the persecutions of the wicked tied back yonder in the woods. They ain't doin' a thing but waitin' to go to their new home up on Lake Anna. The church bought us a big double lot so we'd have enough room for the animals, too." She smiled proudly. "Bud's already put up two sets of fences, one for cats with a top on it, y'know, so they can't get out and get run over, and a regular one for the dogs." She nodded faster and faster as Ruth Jessica pulled more strongly on her nipple. She scratched at a widening spot on her t-shirt where her other breast was leaking milk.

"Well, I'm sure you'll leave the place in the same condition you found it in, like you promised," I said, pulling on Jack's arm. I was trying to steer him toward the door before he started up again. Flies and wasps were buzzing in busy circles from the deck into the house through the open door. My head ached.

The Reverend, rubbing at his crewcut, reassured us as we moved toward the door, "Now y'all know you ain't got a thing to worry about. Didn't I fix your tractor and cut the grass? Didn't I fix your basement steps for you and straighten up your woodpile and paint the smokehouse? You know that when we move out we can be counted on to clean

out this beautiful house you was both good enough to lend us in our hour of need." He winked at me and added, "Even if one o' y'all don't realize that it was really the Lord, movin' in His mysterious ways His wonders to perform, who done the miracle here today."

"Well, I'm just relieved that the little baby is all right," I said quickly. We had reached the back porch. Jack's lips were pressed together in a hard, thin line. "That's what really counts in the end, isn't it?" I added.

"Yes'm, praise the Lord, Sister Hamilton," he said, smiling and aiming a discreet, collusive wink in the direction of a clear turquoise sky.

On the way home I drove, barely listening as Jack ranted on about Jesus freaks, how they were taking over the goddamned world, and how he for one did not intend to stand by and watch. He said we needed to start with Oral Roberts and Jerry Falwell and work on down through Jim Bakker and that Swaggart joker and all the other bloodsuckers on TV. He wasn't sure that Chappell creep wasn't using those cats for some kind of devil worship. He was going to get a court order and throw them and their dogs and their cats off his property the minute he got home, by damn.

"And Ruth Jessica?" I said.

"I was the one who saved her," he said.

"Then you don't want her camping out in the woods somewhere and maybe getting pneumonia, do you?"

He was silent the rest of the way back.

We'd had our differences of opinion for years, and I'd always been the one to give in. This time was going to be different, and he could tell it. I felt the Reverend and Wanda, no matter how long they squatted in our farmhouse, could not be included in his litany of religious charlatans. That they saw ordinary events of their daily lives as a series of personal miracles was a step past anything I had witnessed as a child, but it was no basis for assuming ulterior motives. Jack Hamilton might think he was going to throw the Chappells out before their mobile home was ready, but it would be over my dead body. Jack wasn't used to me standing up to him, but as far as I was concerned he could either go along with me on this or else. I felt new power in my fingers as I gripped the steering wheel, taking the curves perhaps just a little too fast.

But it didn't last long. Six months later I had to call Wanda and tell her to move out before Jack called the sheriff to do it. They didn't move to any mobile home on Lake Anna, either. They found a place up near Charlottesville and left without all the furniture they had stored at our farm. Every time we go up for the weekend, up come the Chappells and Ruth Jessica to talk with us about moving back into our house. A few of the cats got loose when they moved, and they say they are driving all that way every day to feed them and try to catch them. They ask me if I'll

keep a lookout for them and call them if I catch one. I enjoy holding little Ruth Jessica during their visits, but she's still so puny it makes me nervous. Jack always disappears when they show up. In fact, Jack disappears a lot these days.

Some weekends I go up there alone and occasionally, when I'm walking around outside, I see them, those wild-looking cats wandering the far field.

YOU'VE NEVER DONE THAT

"Why do you have to leave this afternoon?" I ask.

"Because I want to get back early to do some things." He picks a tuneless series of notes on his Fender Jazz, nodding his head to the rhythm, his front teeth biting over his bottom lip. I peer out his window to see if the warmth of the afternoon sun has persuaded any of the azalea buds to open early.

"Can't you leave in the morning and still get back in time to do those things?" I lay a pile of folded jeans on his bed.

"I won't be able to sleep if I stay here tonight, then I'll have to get up at four to miss the Washington traffic and I'll be sleepy all the way up." He turns and bends, moving his long, slender fingers rapidly up and down the neck of the bass.

"Well," I say, "whatever you think is best, although I think you'd be better off getting a decent night's sleep here in your own bed first. Is that girl, you know, the one that rode down with you, is she riding back with you?"

"Nope," he says. "She has a ride back. I don't need company going back. I needed her on the way down to talk

to because I was tired from all those exams and papers. But I'd really rather drive alone."

"Are you sure that car is OK? Is it still working all right?" The '74 Volvo we bought for him as an around-town car during high school was never intended for driving back and forth the five hundred miles between Virginia and Ohio. The first year he was in college we chauffeured him up and back whenever he wanted, except for fall break, when he flew home. Like me, he is not crazy about flying; he only flies when he has no choice. I worry that he may have gotten that fear from listening to me talk about how scared I am of airplanes.

"Mom," he says, suddenly irritable, "will you stop bugging me about the Volvo? It works fine, and God knows it's heavy enough if I do have an accident. It would take a head-on with an eighteen-wheeler to smash it enough to hurt me." He lays the bass on his bed and begins to change his shirt. "Or so they say."

"What time do you plan to leave?" I ask. I have always dreaded Michael leaving, even to go to the movies with his brothers or out on a date. I get jittery, uneasy, feelings I try to hide since the absence of either of my other two sons arouses no such emotions. I guess it's because he was the last child and the others are older and were always more independent than Michael. When Michael returns home, no matter what time it is, I am always wide

awake and waiting, unable to sleep until I hear his tires in the driveway. The brakes on the Volvo squeal as he parks, a signal in the night that it is safe for me to go to sleep. I am usually snoring before his key clicks in the door.

Michael is the only one of our boys without the curly red hair from my side of the family. When he was small, he decided that he was adopted, that there had been a mixup at the hospital. Whenever he would stare doubtfully in the mirror at his own straight, dark brown hair and dark eyelashes, I would remind him that his father had dark brown hair when we were first married, even dug out old photographs to prove it, but Michael has always seemed able only to think in terms of now. Since his father's hair turned prematurely white before Michael's birth, it has been white forever in Michael's mind. The truth is that Michael's features are an amalgam of characteristics from both families. He faintly resembles one of his cousins, but Michael actually looks only like Michael.

"I hope to be on the road no later than one-thirty. That way I'll get back to school almost in time for that decent night's sleep you're so concerned about." He is rolling shirts and jeans and socks into balls and stuffing them into his duffel bag. "You really didn't have to wash these things for me," he says. "You just can't accept the fact that I can do this stuff for myself now, can you?" He

grins crookedly at me and does a little dance. "I even like doing it for myself."

I pat him on the shoulder and say, "Ma's big old son, all growed up."

"You betchum, Red Ryder, and now you're all alone with nothing to do," he says, grinning widely, teasing me the way he used to when he was small. "Nothing else to do, your life's work all finished, just wasting away." He zips the duffel bag and throws it down near the door.

Picking up the Fender, he arranges the strap carefully and places it inside the open case lying on the bed. Michael is a musician like the other two boys, but he doesn't play just rock music. On string bass and tenor sax as well as guitar and amplified bass, he plays mostly jazz. The sounds I hear from his room are Monk and Parker, Charlie Mingus and Jaco Pastorius. He also sings in a group at college, everything from Thirties' pops to Mahler's Second. Once he mailed me a tape of their latest concert. I keep it in my car and hum along with it when I am driving alone. He refuses to sing for me any more. He swears that since his voice changed he only stands up there on the stage and mouths the words. "I just get in these groups to meet girls," he says. "And I ain't gonna do no more private performances of 'Ave Maria' for the home audience."

"Don't rely on your mental image of Old Mom too heavily," I say now. "Just because I'm getting a little gray

doesn't mean I'm totally over the hill." I smile at him from the door. "I'm going down to the kitchen and start getting things together for lunch. Is there anything special you would like? One last home-cooked meal before returning to college pap?"

"Who says your stuff ain't pap?" he says. "Of course, it is the finest pap available, I'm sure. Pap all the same." He cocks his head to one side and asks, "What exactly is pap, anyhow? Something like gruel? In Oliver?" For a moment he looks just as he did at five, asking what makes the cat's fur striped and where do the colors in the prism come from.

"Baby food, technically, I think, but it has other meanings now also. It's what politicians feed to the masses. It's what you hear in commercials. Pacifiers of the most wicked sort."

He stares at me and says, "I used to think you knew everything." He has a dreamy look on his face.

"And now you know better?" I ask.

"And now I know better," he says, still staring at nothing.

"Well, you're right, because I've forgotten half of what I used to know and can't remember the rest. Wages of old age." I start out the door.

"Mom," he says. "Do you remember your fiftieth birthday?"

I turn and look back at him. He is lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

"Sure," I say. "Sort of. You don't forget traumatic things like your fiftieth birthday. Where were we?"

"Up at the farm," he says. "Dad and Ben and I had gotten up early and gone out to weed the garden before the sun got too hot. You were feeling sorry for yourself because nobody had said anything about it being your birthday. You were in the kitchen cleaning up behind us when Mark came downstairs and said, 'Happy Birthday, Mom!'" He turns over and looks up at me. "Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember," I say.

He continues, watching my face, "And you said, 'Oh, Mark, you remembered. Thank you, son.'" He pauses. "And then Mark asked you how it felt to be one fourth as old as the country. And you cried and laughed all at the same time?"

I smile at him. "Yes, I remember. That was funny, wasn't it? Your brother's very funny. I thought about sending that in to the Reader's Digest to one of those columns, see if I could get $100 for it, but I forgot to."

Michael sits up and says, "Mom, have I ever said any thing like that to you? I mean, thought about it, planned it and then said it? On purpose, not mad or upset or any thing?"

I walk back into the room and sit on the edge of the

bed. "No, Michael," I say, finally. "You've never done that."

We sit there for a minute. The light from the sun is beginning to reach his window through the new spring foliage. A few rays strike the slender prisms suspended on strings from the shade. They spin in the light wind blowing through the open window and throw erratic sparkles on our hands and arms and faces. The room is filled with whirling, shimmering light and color.

Michael jumps up, slapping his thighs. "Well! I've got to finish packing so I can hit the road." He seems excited, almost hyper, as he always is when he is getting ready to leave to go back to school, or off anywhere by himself. "Have you seen that old black turtleneck sweater of mine anywhere?" he asks, jumping around the room, opening drawers, falling on his knees and squinting underneath the bed. "You know, the one I used to wear in high school?"

"No," I say. "I think you threw it out."

"Oh, God, I hope not. It was perfect."

"For what?" I am puzzled a little, watching him cavort around the room. "Michael, have you been taking dancing lessons?"

"That'll be the day. No, I've got a part in a Pinter play and I need that sweater for my costume." He continues to search in all the bureau and dresser drawers for the

sweater, his forehead wrinkled in a frown. "I wish you wouldn't mess around in my stuff," he says, throwing a sweatshirt back into a drawer.

"I have told you over and over that I never mess around in your stuff," I say. "I told you that Grandma used to sneak and read my diary and that I swore I'd never do that to any of my own kids."

"Yeh, I know what you told me, but monkey see, monkey do."

"What does that mean?" We have been through this identical conversation three or four times, every time he comes home from school. "You're getting paranoid, you know that, don't you?"

"Mom!" He whirls and narrows his eyes at me. "Somebody comes in my room and messes around in my drawers and disturbs things. If it's not you, it must be Dad or God or somebody because I can tell my stuff's been rearranged. And Mark doesn't live here any more, so it's not him. That leaves you and Ben, whenever he's at home, and I don't think Ben is interested in anything I've left here."

I have not touched any of Michael's things, so I am upset and perplexed at his loud accusation. All I have ever done is pull his dirty clothes out of the hamper, wash them, fold or hang them and leave them in the utility room where he eventually picks them up. Since he left for college, I usually don't even do that. He came home for

Christmas his freshman year insisting that from now on he was going to do his own laundry. He said the women at his school had really opened his eyes about how men expect women to do this kind of job for them and he intended to do his personal things himself from now on. I still tried to help, because he never irons anything, just wears his shirts wrinkled the way they come out of the dryer, says he kind of likes them better that way.

"Well, it just might be your father," I say. "He could be the one. He always mourns for several days every time you leave, wanders around the house looking at things sort of half lost."

"Oh, for God's sake, Mom." He is exasperated with me and does not like being reminded that his father loves him, too. "I don't believe Dad has the time to snoop around."

"And I do."

"We-e-ll. . . ."

I try not to change expression. I get up and walk through the door and, with one foot on the stairs, call back, "Lunch'll be ready in a few minutes."

He doesn't say anything. I busy myself in the kitchen with plain old tuna salad and try to blink away the sting of sudden tears before he comes in and sees that I am hurt. He hates it when I cry, especially if it has any connection with him.

I squeeze a lemon into the tuna and chop a stalk of

celery. Looking out the window at the dogwood trees I think about the day Jeremy, Michael's cat, jumped out of one of them into the path of the mailman's Jeep as it turned into the driveway. Michael was ten and when he came home from school I asked him to sit down beside me on the bed because I had something to tell him. His eyes widened and he asked, "Is Grandma dead?" because my mother was in the hospital with a stroke.

"No," I said. "It's Jeremy. He got run over and killed."

He threw himself down on the bed, sobbing furiously and loudly. I pulled his long, skinny little body into my lap and rocked him back and forth for half an hour until his shock and grief were exhausted and there were no more tears. He had never mentioned Jeremy's name again and by dinnertime he seemed to be recovered, although I knew better. Michael always used to keep his feelings hidden from everybody but me. When he got to be about fifteen and discovered girls, he stopped talking to me, too, which is only natural. I saw the other two do that when they started growing up. It must be a necessary step on the way to becoming a grown-up man, turning their backs on Mommy, but Michael seems to need to widen the gap even more.

"O.K.," he says now, sliding across the kitchen floor in his sock feet. "Where's the big gourmet lunch? What're we having?"

He sees the bowl with the tuna in it. "Oh, boy," he says. "Some of your blue-ribbon tuna pap. Let me fix it so it'll be good." He opens the refrigerator door, takes out a green bottle of lemon juice and starts pouring it over the tuna salad.

"Michael, stop that," I say. "I have already squeezed half a real lemon in there. It doesn't need that frozen stuff."

"That's what you think. I like a little tuna with my lemon juice," he says. "And I don't like real lemon juice. I like this frozen stuff. It tastes better." He stirs the soupy mixture with a fork and tastes it, making a face.

"Just right," he says, carrying the bowl over to the table. "How 'bout some bread? I think I'll make a sandwich."

"That stuff's too wet for a sandwich now," I say. He gets up and pulls a couple of slices of white bread from the bread box. He gulps his food in silence while I stand at the sink washing the breakfast dishes. I still have my arms in the hot, soapy water when he pitches his bowl and glass into the sink.

"'Bye," he says. "I'm leaving in about two minutes."

"Have a safe trip, Michael," I say. "Call me as soon as you get there so I won't be sitting down here worrying." I say this every time he leaves, like a recording of a silly message people hang up on. But he never calls. I

always have to call him.

"I will," he says.

"Hug goodbye," I say.

"Next time, if you're a good little girl," he says in a cheery voice as he leaps the stairs two and three at a time. He passes through the kitchen two or three times carrying his gear out to the car. I watch him out the kitchen window as he loads his bags and boxes into the back seat, whistling. He glances up briefly and sees me looking out at him. He darts back into the kitchen and pecks me briefly on the cheek, then goes out to the car. He drives away fast, making the tires shriek, a sound he knows I hate.

I feel tired, but I can see the ivy invading the azaleas along the driveway, so I go out and pull the worst vines from around the base of the bushes. The rest can wait until I feel more like weeding. I go back in the house and lie down on the couch and watch a Cosby rerun.

In about an hour the phone rings. It's Michael. He's in Fredericksburg buying gas.

"Mom, I'm sorry," he says. "I'm a real jerk."

"No, you aren't, Michael," I say. "It's O. K."

"I can't help it sometimes," he says.

"I know that," I say. "Your brothers had the same problem at your age."

"True," he agrees. "They were even bigger jerks. But

that doesn't make it right for me to. . . ."

"Just call me when you get there," I say. "You know how I worry."

"O. K., I will. I promise."

He hangs up. Somehow I feel as if this time he might actually remember to call me when he gets back to school, but I don't intend to sit around waiting. I'll give him the usual nine hours, counting stops for gas and burgers, and then I'll call him, like always.

KISS YOUR ASS GOODBYE

"Everybody will get there before we do," Jan said. Staring at the immobile line of cars nosed into the tunnel under the sparkling green bay was making her sleepy. The Jaguar had not budged for over half an hour. Far ahead, just beyond the tunnel exit on the other side of the water, police cars and ambulances and tow trucks rushed, their blue and red and yellow lights flashing, to clear the highway of wreckage from an accident. Already, at only three in the afternoon, weekend beach traffic was blocked for miles, accumulating in a snaky line four cars thick behind them and narrowing to two at the tunnel mouth.

"They're all fighting the same traffic we are. And what do you care anyhow?" Sam said. "Dinner won't be served until at least eight and I bet we'll get the Snake Room again even if we do arrive first."

"I'd like to think it's because we're the youngest couple," she said, "but I know that's not the reason." She was tired of coming on these weekends with Sam's clients, the Rich and the Powerful, she called them. After three or four days her jaw began aching from forcing a smile.

"What reason do you think it is?" He said "you" as if

addressing a sulky child, his lip in a patronizing curl.

"I don't think anything. I know. The reason we always get that damned room is that from the Justins' point of view we're on the A-number-one bottom rung on any social or fiscal ladder. We've been going down there for over ten years for Memorial Day weekend and the only time we didn't get that room was the year they invited those weirdos down from New York. And then they put us up in the Holiday Inn. Even they got better treatment than we did." She thrust her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. She still felt snarly about the insult.

"Oh, come on, Jan, get off it!" Sam seemed to be exasperated both with Jan and with the traffic. He opened his window to a sharp breeze that was stirring up whitecaps out on the water. There were two Japanese freighters and an aircraft carrier heading out to sea. Small sailboats with colorful striped sails dotted the water closer to shore.

"I didn't imagine any of that," she said.

"You know perfectly well that what you call 'weirdos' were all these famous New York artists. Warhol, for God's sake! Lichtenstein! Besides, they made all the regulars sleep at the motel that time, even the Judge. It wasn't like we were being singled out. They just wanted to impress those people. Can't you understand that?" He lit a cigarette. "Besides, I kind of like the old Snake Room and

so do you." He flicked his tongue at her.

The Snake Room was one of five bedrooms in the beach house the Justins had built twenty years earlier. One of the artists whose work they collected had created one of his "ambiences" in the house: a faux jungle with a stuffed boa constrictor that wound sinuously around a tree limb just above the bed. The enormous snake was in fact tied to a poorly camouflaged pipe that ran diagonally across the room, its cotton guts now leaking out in spots as its skin stiffened with age. The walls were hung with canvas sheets painted dark green, and canvas curtains flecked with abstract blobs of paint covered the single window and the closet door. Paddles hung loosely suspended from the ceiling on wires, handles down and painted with comically fierce native faces, and outsized brown paper bags, tacked to the walls, were crayoned with rolling blue eyes set in grinning cannibal visages. In one corner stood a patently fake palm tree with orange and aqua fronds through which wound another smaller reptile, slender and bedecked with strings of colored beads.

At first it had been great fun to sleep in the Snake Room, except for the door into the room, which the artist had cut for the ingress and egress of pygmies, and except for the bed, a wide mattress thrown on the floor. Although it was comfortable, they had to get down on their knees to get into bed. A yellow neon sign erratically flashed the

word CELEBES into the dark and disturbed their sleep. While the Justins awakened to the morning sun rising over the Atlantic, no curtains or blinds on the curved glass wall around their bed to shield them from the light, whoever occupied the Snake Room might sleep fitfully on until noon in the sweaty confines of a tropical atmosphere with the heavy canvas blocking all but the merest whisper of cool from the air conditioning vents it covered.

Jan smiled at Sam, remembering their first night in the Snake Room, a hot, sleepless night of sweaty sex, stifled whispers and giggles as they played jungle games. Sam had tied her hands to the pole supporting the great snake and pretended to rescue her from certain death. They had smothered their laughter at their own jokes about the sexual suggestiveness of the room and how they had instantly fallen prey to it.

"Yes, that was fun. . .the first time." She paused. "But we aren't thirty years old any more and all it means now is a damned backache." It was funny how getting older had changed her perspective. And limited her patience. Sam had lost his ability to make it all seem so amusing.

The line of cars moved a few feet into the tunnel. Sam switched on the motor and crept along an inch every minute or so, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel in time to some unheard tune.

"Did you call anybody about Herb?" Jan asked.

"No, but I asked Mike, you know, his nephew who works in our office? He said old Herb hasn't got much longer. But he said Sarah's taking it well, whatever that means. How do you take cancer well?" Jan could not visualize Sarah, always cool and poised with the perfect words on her lips, distraught or sniveling even in deep grief. Herb and Sarah were in their sixties, owners of a chain of hardware stores across the state, worth hundreds of millions like the Justins.

"So you don't know whether or not they will be here?" asked Jan.

"No, but I hope they make it. I can't imagine what one of these weekends would be like without Herb and the Judge picking at each other, showing off for the rest of us. Those two old guys really love each other."

"Who's going to be the fifth couple this year?" For years Jan and Sam had been the fifth couple, often invited at the last minute to fill up the house whenever the Justins had no one special to entertain, but after the Justins had a falling out with one of the regular couples, a college president and his chain-smoking, screeching wife, Jan and Sam had gradually fallen heir to fourth place. Each year afterward a different twosome showed up as the fifth couple, but none of them were ever invited back. Somehow they all sensed that they were outsiders, were plainly bored by the amused references to past weekends, and sat

patiently with blank smiles on their faces as Herb or the Judge attempted to explain.

Last year two of the Justins' friends from the Board of Trustees of the Museum had tried their best to fit in, but they had had no chance of overcoming ten years of common history. The man had bathed them in his odorous breath and his wife had sat indoors alone all four days to protect her pale freckly skin from the dangerous rays of the sun, watching television and reading what the Judge sneeringly called "one of those women's best sellers."

"Are you enjoying your book?" he would ask solicitously as he walked through the room on his way to the hot, white sands of the crowded beach. Or "What's happening on 'Days of Our Lives' today, dear?" The woman would try to answer him and he would cut in with a contemptuous, "That's nice," before she got two words out, sliding the glass door shut in her face.

"Hey, Sandy," he had said to his host outside on the deck, "How much thinking did it take to come up with those two? Maybe Herb and I can help you with this problem next year? These people can't tell a spade from a club."

Sandy Justin had fallen back in his beach chair on the weathered gray deck and laughed heartily, as he always did at anything the Judge or Herb said. The three of them and Sam were excellent foils for each other. Jan knew it was the men who got together each year; the women were just

along for the ride, faithful pets, part of their adoring audience.

"I'll make book the Rollinses won't be back," Jan said. "I thought we treated them awful last year." She made a face like Sally Rollins', confused and polite, but baffled, so like the woman's real face Sam started to laugh.

"Nancy told me when she telephoned that the director of the Putney and his wife are coming. She said the wife is extremely wealthy, that it was her family that sold that huge farm near Charlottesville to the Breughels."

"Hey, look, things are beginning to move." Jan squinted through the blinding sunlight and saw a few cars creep into the dark tunnel. She reached behind her for the crank that would tilt her seat backward. Rubbing at her temples, she said, "I have got to get a short nap before we get there so I'll be able to keep a smile on my face. Wake me as soon as we get off the expressway," she said, closing her eyes and leaning back with a sigh. She was asleep almost instantly.

As Sam pulled into the parking area behind the Justins' house Jan's eyes opened instinctively. She saw Nancy Justin in one of her Memphis bathing suits pull herself out of the narrow pool they had added five years back. Nancy had developed severe back trouble from a fall and had to swim for an hour each day. At home she could use the pool

at the Club, but summers posed a problem. Sandy had merely waved his hand in the air, as he always did when he considered a problem not a problem at all, and said, "For God's sake, Nan, just call somebody and get a damned pool dug down at the damned beach, one wide enough just for you because I sure won't be using it. Needless to say." Sandy Justin was diabetic and wore high-topped, prosthetic shoes to accommodate a foot partially amputated.

Nancy waved a large red straw hat and yelled something Jan could not make out above the wind and the surf. She rubbed her eyes and inhaled the beach smells.

"We're here," Sam said. "Wake up."

"I'm already awake." Jan wiped her chin where she had drooled in her sleep and sat up. She looked in the mirror and said, "God, I look like hell. I haven't got any lipstick on and my hair's straight as a stick." She unscrewed her lipstick and began coating her lips in orange wax. Around these rich people she always felt unkempt, no matter what she did.

Sam opened the car door and was stretching when Nancy reached them, catching his waist in a hard, affectionate hug. "I'm so glad to see you both," she said. "We're supposed to have gorgeous weather so I hope you brought lots of sun block." She leaned over and peered into the interior of the Jaguar. "Jan, are you planning to join us?"

Jan was halfway out of the car, trying at once to put on her sunglasses and smile and pull her makeup case out of the back seat. She hurried around behind the car and hugged Nancy, all the while hearing herself babbling to the older woman how she had fallen asleep and was still not awake. Nancy was listening politely, showing interest where Jan knew she had none.

Sam reached into the car for the two larger suitcases and followed Jan and Nancy toward the house. Nancy said, "And I know how you two love the Snake Room, so we want you to have it again." Jan looked back over her shoulder at Sam, her raised eyebrows a semaphore for I-told-you-so. Sam grinned and carried the bags up the back stairs with Jan trailing along behind him.

As she stooped to enter the half-door the heat of the room hit her. She wondered if the air conditioning was working at all. She smelled delicious odors from Anton's dinner preparations. Anton had been the Justins' chef for years, almost a part of the family, babied and coddled by the Justins to keep him happy, treated by guests not like a servant but as someone on slightly higher a social level than themselves. He had worked for some of the richest people in the world, after all, rubbed elbows with the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers. Sam had told her they paid him $75,000 a year because of Sandy's special food requirements.

"It is ungodly in here," she said, fanning her face with a magazine lying by the bed.

Sam said, "If I can get a double Glenfiddich and one of Anton's great meals under my belt, I won't care how hot it is in here." She knew he was looking forward to four days with no clients (except Sandy, of course) and no dumb associates and no Lydia. Lydia was his new secretary. Despite his denials Jan was aware that Sam was interested, just probably not up to juggling both her and dear Martha just yet--she had a feeling he wasn't quite through with Martha Ross. She marveled briefly at herself for being able to think about these women and still remain calm. It hadn't been that long ago that she would become hysterical, screaming and yelling at Sam, telling him she wanted a divorce this minute. He had always talked her out of it, convincing her other women meant no more than taking a leak, persuading her that the unknown element "out there" had to be a lot worse than their marriage, the known quantity. But she knew it had a lot to do with maintaining Sam's image, the Sam he presented to his clients as solid citizen, dependable husband, doting father.

Sam unpacked his clothes and draped them quickly and sloppily on the wire hangers in the closet. Changing to a pair of shorts and a knit shirt, he hurried down the stairs to the living room, anxious that he might miss something. Jan followed behind him slowly, still in her travel

clothes, watching her step on the steep stairs.

"Oh, yes," she heard the Judge's voice say, "we're aware you guys think it's the neatest room in the house." There was a pause. Then he said, his voice in a leer, "And we all know why. You used to shake the damned house down, for Christ's sake!" Jan figured the Judge and Anita must have driven in right behind them.

"What it means now that you've gotten old, like us, is that you've been stuck again," said the Judge, still pumping Sam's outstretched hand. "Well, thank God it's not us. I hate that damned room. It's hot as hell, and all those goddamned snakes!" He made a face.

"Watch out!" said Sam. "Your Freudian insecurities are showing." He wagged his index finger in the Judge's face. Sandy Justin snickered.

"Well, hell, Sam, I guess you <u>are</u> the only one of us still young enough to have an identifiable libido, but you'd better start worrying, son. It disappears before you know it." The Judge did not wait for a reply but walked toward the kitchen yelling, "Hey Anton, bring me a drink. Let's get this weekend off to a good start."

Sam smiled in the Judge's wake and leaned over to give Anita a hug. Anita had once been a beauty, one of those tiny Greek women with glistening dark eyes and curving lips who drew men like Sam to them with little effort. Even though she was a good fifteen years older than Sam, Jan

could see he still felt pulled to her, still liked to touch her finely grained skin, ivory white and unwrinkled for her age. She always smelled of the same light perfume, a wonderfully clean, soapy aroma. Jan was sure she must dye her hair, still jet black and shining, hanging loose to her shoulders, with tiny dark red highlights glinting here and there when the sun struck it. She wore a lot of jewelry, too much for most women but somehow suitable for her, and affected long, flowing, silky caftans, even at the beach. Jan was sure the older woman hated the little roundness she had developed at her waist. She could remember how slim Anita had looked in her bathing suit years ago when she would still appear on the beach in the hot sun, unworried about sun spots and skin cancers. Sam had made it clear he wanted her then and he had not lost his desire over the years. Jan used to be nervous about it (with her heavy, fleshy thighs she was always nervous about slim women), but knowing Anita had reached her sixties, the simple fact of it, had somehow calmed her fears. As the youngest woman in the group she felt secure enough not to revive tedious arguments about how Sam looked at other women. Sam was free to ogle Anita all he wished. Why not? It made Anita feel good, and Jan didn't begrudge her that.

"Anita, sweetheart, as beautiful as ever," Sam said, nuzzling her neck.

"Such a teaser," she murmured, pulling back and smil-

ing up into his eyes. Despite her four-inch heels she had to throw her head all the way back to peer up at Sam, six three, towering above her head.

"Has anybody heard from Herb and Sarah?" Sandy Justin asked. The Judge emerged from the kitchen with a tall, amber-colored Scotch.

"This party has officially started, with or without Herb and Sarah, our token Republicans," he said, patting his stomach. "I've got my drink." Sandy grinned at him. The Judge was clearly his favorite. The Judge could say anything outrageous to Sandy and be certain of a laugh. Jan wished the world could know this side of the Judge, see him so different from the tough, serious, brilliant adjudicator who, dressed in black robes, threw fear into the hearts of all conservatives, whose house had been under attack from cross-burners and rock-throwers after his unpopular decision on busing years before. He and Anita and Anita's mother, in her nineties and bewildered with Alzheimer's, had fled to a different motel every night for months, outrunning a few rednecks intent upon personal revenge. Sam had said he was glad the Judge, in this company at least, among friends he could trust who had similar political leanings, could relax and tell his raunchy jokes, crack snide about colleagues and tease the rest of the group unmercifully about their various weaknesses. Such a funny old guy, Sam said. Jan thought maybe

he wasn't always very funny. She knew one of the reasons she and Sam fit in so well with these older, wealthier people was their capacity to play audience to them, to hear their jokes and not feel compelled to compete for laughter. Sam, at least, was comfortable in the role, having played it for many years; besides, he knew his talents lay in his expertise in corporate, tax and securities law, areas in which all of the others had found reason to seek his advice at one time or another. Sam believed there was something to be said for being a loyal spectator, and he required that Jan play this role along with him.

"Sam, I'm more than a little worried about Herb," said Sandy Justin, his vast forehead creased in a frown.

"Yeh, I'm a little worried about Herb, too," said the Judge. "Didn't you say he's claiming now that he's walked on red hot coals?" He took a quick swallow of his drink and waved his long, bushy black eyebrows at Sam.

"What are you talking about?" Sam asked. Jan had a mental image of Herb the Joker, leaping across a bed of hot coals, screeching wildly and rolling his eyes. Sandy pulled himself to his feet, stood unsteadily for a moment, then put his arm around Sam's shoulders, drawing him and the Judge toward the outside door, away from the three women on the couch.

The three men seated themselves in a row on the outside deck on on one of the weathered benches built parallel

to the railing overlooking the pool. Anton followed them through the door, carrying a glass of Evian for Sandy and Sam's Scotch and water. When the glass door slid into place, Anita said, in a near whisper, "Herb, like a lot of people who see the handwriting on the wall, has begun to resort to some offbeat techniques to stave off the inevitable. He's been trying a few experimental drugs, in Europe and Mexico, Sarah told me, ones that aren't legal here. Right now he's going mostly on chutzpah, according to her."

"God knows he cornered the market on that," said Jan.

"What about the hot coals?" asked Nancy.

"He ran into a bunch of those people who claim that dying's all in your mind," Anita said, "that you can use your will power to overcome illness if you train yourself in their methods. The way they get you hooked is to teach you a few tricks about concentration, then get you to walk across a bed of glowing hot coals, and you see other people doing it also, so eventually you get up and take off your shoes and walk across fire, or what they tell you is fire. I just don't understand how they work it to keep your feet from getting burned."

"Oh, God, poor Sarah must be upset as hell about that," Jan said.

Sarah was nothing if not a sensible woman, the one in this group that Jan liked most. She saw Sandy Justin through the glass doors shaking his head and running his

hand over the shaggy, coarse white hair that jutted out stiffly at awkward angles from his broad head. The wind caught the long, loose strands and blew them forward into his face. Jan saw him run his fingers over his dental plates as he tried to adjust them to ease the pain in his gums. Jan couldn't understand why, with all his money, he didn't have better prostheses. She was glad she and Sam still had all their own teeth. She dreaded this particular burden of age.

"Well, it's a trick, Nancy, you know it's just a shoddy trick," said Anita. "What I can't understand is why Herb is falling for it, a smart man like him, worth jillions of dollars. I can't see it, and neither can the Judge. He couldn't talk about anything else on the way down. Drove me crazy."

"Whatever works, works," said Jan. "If it makes him feel better, if it's keeping Herb alive, why the hell not?" She turned and looked out at the Judge. He was staring at the incoming tide, the waves tall and foamy from a storm approaching across the water. Jagged lightning streaked across the darkening skies a few miles out. Sunbathers on the beach below the sea wall were packing up their hampers and umbrellas, hauling their small sailboats and catamarans high up on what was left of the beach, calling their children out of the water. Jan could remember when the beach was a dozen or more feet broader than it was now.

"Why the hell not? Why the hell not?" The Judge's truculent voice, as if he had heard Jan's question, drifted into the house as Anton cracked the door with a tray of fresh drinks for the men. He seemed to be talking to Sam. Jan walked toward the door, straining to overhear them.

"I'll tell you why the hell not," the Judge continued. "Because Herb's an intelligent man, a sweetheart of a guy, even if he is a goddamned Republican, and this goes against everything he's ever believed. It's not right for him to have to grasp at straws like this in his last days on earth. It diminishes the man. That's why the hell not." He frowned out at the storm as he took another swallow. "Anton, my man, you're Johnny on the spot. Always here when I need you. What's for dinner? Let's get this show on the road." He stood up, gulped the rest of his drink and walked toward the house.

Sandy Justin's face creased with worry. He leaned over to Sam, the wind now beginning to wail a little, drowning out some of his words. Jan heard, ". . .hope the Judge lays off Herb. . .weekend. If Herb feels like. . . wants. . .walk. . .coals. . . O.K. by me."

"Whatever helps," yelled Sam in the rising wind. "Herb's entitled." Jan thought, I'm starting to talk like him. We all talk just like our husbands.

His arm resting on Sam's to steady him against the thrust of the wind, Sandy stood up. "Gonna get it, I be-

lieve. Looks like a pretty good-sized storm out there. We'd better get inside before the lightning gets close."

Jan helped by holding the heavy glass doors open for Sandy, who peered myopically toward the interior of the house. Jan turned and saw Sarah enter the living room with Herb grinning pale-faced over her shoulder, his eyes white-rimmed and puffy, his nose enormous in a face thinned down by months of chemotherapy and anxiety.

"Here they are!" Sandy's hearty voice betrayed his love for Herb and Sarah as he limped across the long room to gather the couple into his thin arms. "Now the Grand Old Party weekend can really begin, that is, if you think just two of you conservatives can stand up to all of us free-spending Democrats." He rubbed his palm across the sparse hair beginning to grow again on Herb's head and smiled down at him.

"Hey, you'll get no luck from doing that," Herb said in a hoarse voice. "I ain't quite dark enough since I got sick." Everyone had always envied Herb's year-round deep tan.

"Herb's trying to pass this year," said the Judge. "But we all know better, don't we, Sandy? We know he's been skinny-dipping in Chlorox for years trying to pass. We know what's been lurking around his family woodpile."

"Here come de Judge! And the beautiful Anita! Good to see you. . . ." A fit of coughing shook Herb's body.

He turned away until he regained control. Anita stood up and put her arm around him, whispering softly into his ear.

"Jesus Christ!" said the Judge in a loud voice. "Look at that horny old guy. He's already trying to make out. I guess being sick has no effect on that part of your life, huh, Herb? Sandy and Nancy should've given you the Snake Room."

Herb lowered himself carefully into a large tan leather chair and reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. Jan searched Sarah's face, but she remained standing in the entrance-way, smiling serenely.

"I see you forgot to order perfect weather," she said, looking out the windows at the black, rolling clouds. "Nancy, didn't you and Sandy promise to take care of that?"

Nancy Justin, a white eyelet top covering her damp bathing suit, smiled and said, "We did, we did. The weather man announced not over two hours ago that all beachgoers would have completely sunny weather the entire weekend. I guess he means starting tomorrow."

Anita, standing behind Herb's chair, asked, "Sandy, who's the other couple? The ones coming down from New York? When will they get here?"

"Not until tomorrow," said Sandy. "He's working on a new show of Red Grooms's latest work that opens at the Putney in July. Don't let me forget to send Mr. Johnson to the airport, dear. They're supposed to land about 2:30."

"All right, Sandy," said Nancy. Jan knew that in his daydreams Sam had always longed for a father like Sandy Justin, rich and powerful, kind and just, and a mother like Nancy, lovely and fiercely intelligent, with a brilliant business mind. His own family were farmers from whom he had fled as far and as fast as his education would take him. He hardly ever even telephoned them nowadays, leaving to Jan the drudgery of remembering their birthdays and Christmas.

"It doesn't matter who they are, Anita." The Judge raised his voice, commanding everyone's attention. "They ain't nothing but some more of those artsy-fartsy New Yorkers, coming down South to see how the rubes live so they can go back up No'th and make fun of us. Ain't that so, Sandy?"

"I hardly think so," said Sandy. Turning to the rest of the room, he went on, "These are really nice people. You all will like them, I'm sure. Except for the Judge, who doesn't like too many people as we all know. We should be flattered that he honors us with his presence every Memorial Day. I keep telling Anita she's welcome to leave him at home, but he always manages to tag along. God forbid he should miss a free meal." He grinned broadly in the Judge's direction.

The Judge blushed briefly. "You're right about that, Sandy," he said. "In my position I don't get very many

freebies. They put people like me in jail for too many freebies. So it's nice to have rich but honest friends who're unlikely ever to appear before me in court." Turning toward Herb, who sat quietly smiling at the badinage between the two men, he announced, "Now, enough about me. Enough about the famous judge. There's something a lot more interesting going on in the life of our good friend Herb, I hear. Herbie, it's show and tell time, old buddy. Just wait 'til I get Anton to mix us all some fresh drinks. Anton!" He strode in the direction of the kitchen, waving his empty glass above his head. "Hey! We're all dry out here. And how about some hors d'oeuvres? We're starving!"

Lightning cracked loudly nearby and the lights flickered briefly. "I'm impressed," said Herb. "Even God reacts when he speaks."

Jan touched Sarah gently on her arm to draw her attention. Sarah was gazing abstractly at Herb, watching, Jan thought, for any sign she might be needed. "Let's get your things up to your bedroom before the Honorable Almighty starts in on Herb," Jan said. "And before the lights go out." She picked up a suitcase and started for the stairs, Sarah following with another. She saw Anton and the Judge whispering in the kitchen doorway.

The two still had their heads together when Jan and Sarah reappeared. Sarah passed her hand lightly over Herb's forehead. Herb had leaned his head back against the

soft leather and closed his eyes. Now he opened them and smiled up at his wife, his face already weary with effort.

"O.K., O.K.," said the Judge, returning to the group, rubbing his hands together. "Now we get to hear the true story of how Herb walked on red hot coals." He paused for effect, his eyes gleaming wickedly. "Or was it water?"

"Judge," said Herb, "the water trick's something you guys invented."

"Well, we at least expect you to take off your shoes and show us your magically unmarked soles or we won't believe a damned word you tell us."

"You're just going to have to take my word on this one, my friend. I know what a skeptic you are, a rank disbeliever, no religion to rely on except, what do you call it, some kind of Armenian Catholicism? And we Jews all know what that's worth, don't we, Sandy, a nouveau little religion like that?"

"Now before you drag us too far off the subject, Herb," said the Judge, "what I want to know is how an orthodox Jew like yourself"--everyone laughed dutifully at the old joke-- "got rooked into trying an essentially mystical experience, a miracle, if you will, such as walking on hot coals, something even we Catholics are suspicious of nowadays."

Herb looked around the circle of people, studying their faces the way he did the Times crossword puzzle on

Sundays, looking for clues he could decipher quickly. Jan saw that Herb's illness had changed the essential man, at least that part of him that she and Sam had come to know during Memorial Day weekends over the years. Herb had a statewide reputation as a raconteur, was called upon frequently to serve as master of ceremonies at political dinners and charity fund raisers. He had a bag of jokes and stories at his command to suit any occasion and told them all well. To test his sixth sense about what would succeed with a particular crowd and what would flop, he occasionally threw in an unsuitable story, just to make sure he was right about it, and then snickered when his audience withdrew briefly only to return, roaring with laughter, as he zigzagged swiftly back into his planned routine. He had that look on his face now, Sam saw, speculative and a bit diffident, tabling his performance until he read the crowd.

"All right, palsies, let's get serious for a minute. This isn't Herb the Entertainer speaking now. I have inadvertently, and quite fortuitously, I might add, discovered a power in myself that for 67 years I had no idea I possessed." He paused dramatically, his breathing harsh, his face serious and earnest. "And the only reason I am going to tell all of you about it is that I know that all of you also have this power secreted away inside yourselves somewhere, that you'll need it someday, too, need it badly.

It's important for me to let you in on this secret now, before it's too late."

"Oh, Jesus," sang the Judge, "he's gonna get serious on us." Anita touched the Judge's elbow lightly and leaned around to smile at him. Lightning struck again nearby, flooding the rainswept deck for a brief instant in a white glare.

"I want to hear what Herb has to say, honey. Why don't you let him finish, please?" Jan saw Sam smiling fondly at Anita as she handled the ferocious judge deftly and sweetly. Jan wished she could be more like Anita, a little softer instead of coming on like Rambo whenever she got upset at Sam and his women. She wondered if the Judge ever screwed around on Anita.

Herb stood up with difficulty, pain conspicuous on his face. "Sarah and I have some friends at home who introduced us to the Maharishi Yogi. He was right there in my own backyard while I was jetting wildly around the world looking for medical miracles. I'm here to tell you there ain't no medical miracles. Not for this stuff." He coughed. "Just the same old treatments they've been trying on cancer for years and years. They can't do anything for us. It's up to us to do it for ourselves. The cure is inside of us. It all depends on our inner strength and tenacity, our determination to resist."

Herb walked over to a small lamp table and picked up a

stack of papers. He began passing out pamphlets and photographs as he continued talking. The Judge grimaced at a color snapshot of Herb walking barefoot, in shorts, across what appeared to be a large bed of burning coals. There were other people in the photograph, most of them also barefoot, standing behind the bed of coals and applauding as Herb, a broad grin on his face, was preserved in mid-stride, in mid-miracle. One man had a long white beard and wore a toga and a white turban.

"While this constitutes proof that I actually did it, you need to hear that I sat there all afternoon while over twenty people did what I doubted could ever be done. I didn't believe. I spent my time watching them, seeing the metamorphosis they underwent as they made their decisions, watching them set their jaws as they vowed to have faith in their strength and ability to make their bodies do what their minds willed. It was the most incredible experience of my life, my friends." Herb scanned their faces.

"Just how many people did the guy cure that day anyhow?" asked the Judge. "And what did it cost you?"

"You don't understand, Judge," said Herb. "No one got cured of anything. Do I look cured to you? There were no promises that anyone was going to be cured. Half the people there weren't even sick. They just wanted to take control of their lives."

"Ain't that sort of thing more for fakirs and fakers?

You know the difference, don't you, buddy, between fakirs and fakers? With all your money you sure ought to." He smirked at the others.

Herb shifted his weight from one foot to another. "You forgot fuckers," he said levelly, looking directly at the Judge.

The Judge guffawed and slapped the air. "No, I didn't," he said. "I left them out on purpose. There're ladies present." Jan saw that the Judge was stunned, was trying to conceal his astonishment. Herb's anger was a reaction he had not expected.

"Tell us how walking on hot coals has put you in control of your destiny." Jan's voice was tender, like a caress. Sam sat up and looked at her, evidently surprised to hear her voice. He probably had forgotten she was even there.

"Jan, I'm afraid I learned the technique too late, but I'm going to give it my best shot anyhow." He stood up and cleared his throat. "I know that if I can walk across a bed of burning coals, and feel the heat rising from those hot coals, feel it and not get burned, if I can do that, then I can direct my inner strength to combat this invader in my body. I can will this goddamned cancer to leave me, recede like the waves out there attacking the shore and then falling back." He looked around at the circle of faces. "I think I can keep this up indefinitely. I've

stayed alive, using this technique, six months longer than all those know-so-much doctors gave me. You people are looking at a walking, talking dead man! Isn't that miracle enough? I'm willing to bet I'll be here next year this time with all of you, medical opinion to the contrary."

He raised his fist in a gesture of defiance. His breathing had become noticeably heavier during his prolonged speech, and he began to cough heavily. Sam and Sarah each took an arm and supported him until he reached the leather chair.

"Oh, wonderful, Herb," said Sarah in a shaky voice. "Now you're ruining your beautiful sales pitch. You'd better cut out that coughing."

"Use your new will power," said the Judge in a caustic voice.

"Don't be ugly," Anita whispered, her eyes wide as she watched Herb shake with the seizure of coughing.

"Hey, Anton!" the Judge yelled, beckoning toward the door of the kitchen where Anton had been leaning against the door, listening. "Come on in here. Let's show Herb your little miracle."

As he entered the room, Anton wiped his hands on his chef's apron, took out a cigarette and lit it. He took one deep drag as he crossed the room and, once in the center of the circle of people, he squatted and slowly crushed the burning end of the tobacco in the middle of his palm until

it was extinguished.

"Now watch this, you guys, watch this," said the Judge in an excited voice.

Anton wiped the blackened area of his hand on his apron until it was clean and walked around the circle showing everyone his unburned hand. He bared his large white teeth in a proud grin.

"See?" he said. "No burn. That's how they do it. It's just a trick."

"What trick, Anton?" Nancy asked. "Where's the trick? Do you know how to do this mind control thing like Herb?"

"I said it was a trick, Mrs. Justin, and that's what it was. While you were all talking in here, I deadened the skin of my palm by holding ice until I couldn't feel anything. Not only did I not feel any pain, but I also didn't get burned. No miracle, just a trick every stage magician knows."

Herb sat shaking his head back and forth stubbornly. "They didn't put any ice on my feet," he insisted. "I would've known if they'd done that."

"No," said the Judge. "The variation on the trick was making you think you walked across coals, making you think you felt heat instead of cold, creating an illusion. What you thought was hot, was icy. Dry icy, most likely."

Herb continued to shake his head. "You're wrong," he said. "I know you're wrong. I was there. It all happened

like I said."

"Of course it did, darling," said Sarah, stroking his shoulders. She gave him a little kiss on the neck.

The Judge, who had sat quietly during Anton's performance, stood and crossed his arms. Looking down at Herb, he said, "Come on, Herb, I can't stand to see you falling for an old trick like that. A smart man like you? Made a billion dollars or more? Come on. Snap out of it. You might as well try a little voodoo up in the Snake Room. You know, to get the old pecker working again." He paused, looked at Herb, and said, "If you're gonna rely on that shit, you may as well kiss your ass goodbye."

"Sarah," said Herb. "I think I'd better go rest a while before dinner. I'm a little tired from the drive."

They all watched Herb lift himself out of the chair again and begin making his way toward the stairs, leaning on Sarah. Anton retreated toward the kitchen, a worried look on his face. Jan was sure he realized what a mistake it had been to allow the Judge to drag him into this discussion among the Justins' guests.

Sandy and Nancy looked at each other with sad eyes. Nancy patted Sandy nervously on the arm. Sam took a gulp of his drink.

When they all heard the sound of the bedroom door upstairs closing, Jan stood and faced the Judge. She was aware of Sam turning toward her, very likely with alarm if

he could see her face. Sam could read her face real well. She didn't care. For once she was going to say exactly what she felt.

"I don't see why you couldn't leave Herb with his last hope, his last illusion," she said to the Judge. "What gave you the right to take that away from him on what will probably be our last Memorial Day weekend? Your damned jurisdiction is federal, not universal, you old son of a bitch." Tears slid down her face. She saw Sam looking at her, his face twisted in anxiety, not for her, but for his precious image.

"What the hell," said the Judge. "I still think I'm right. A smart, intelligent, genius of a guy like Herb, believing in a hokey thing like that. I couldn't stand it. You see what I mean, don't you, Sandy? Nancy?"

"Sure, sure," said Sandy. "I know you didn't mean to upset him." He waved his hand at Anton. "You meant well. Why don't you get the Judge another drink, Anton? I think Nancy and I will also go up and lie down for a while. Dinner will be about eight thirty. We'll meet you all back here then." He held Nancy's hand tightly as they left the room.

Sam moved over on the couch next to Anita and leaned against her shoulder. He was going to throw up one his smoke screens, draw people's minds away from what had just happened. She knew he didn't intend to deal with Jan and

her outburst until later, in the privacy of the Snake Room. Good luck, Sam, she thought. This time there'll be no deal.

"When're you gonna leave that jerk and run away with me?" he said, nudging Anita in the ribs.

"How about tomorrow?" she said. "But we have to take Jan with us." She winked at Jan.

"Oh, you're no fun at all," said Sam. He stood up and laid his arm across the Judge's shoulders. "I hope you're not going to hold what my big-mouthed wife just said against me."

"Oh, no, no, no, Sam," the Judge said. "She was right. I went too far. I guess I thought if I teased him, the way we always tease each other, it would make things seem. . . ." His voice trailed off. He wandered out on the deck in the dwindling rain with his fresh drink and his grief. Sam glared at Jan and followed him outside.

She could see in the dim light that the worst part of the storm was past. Across the pulsing water the skies looked as if they might clear even before the sun went down. She knew she was going to face heavier weather than that storm before she would be allowed to go to sleep that night, but in her mind she had already begun construction on a storm shelter, one that would be permanent.

Ginger told Ceci she would prefer to rent the top floor of her house to a man who could do all the little repair jobs the old house always needed. That is, if Ceci had no objections.

"I've never been any good with hammers and nails and screwdrivers," she said. "Ever since James moved out, this place has gotten darker and darker because every time I need to crawl up a ladder to replace one of those damned little chandelier bulbs, I get dizzy, so I just don't do it." She chewed her lower lip and studied Ceci through thick blond eyelashes.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Ceci said. She hesitated. "Well, maybe, if you can find just the right guy. Somebody we both feel comfortable with, somebody we can trust."

Ceci said she was going to specify a man with a child to raise since someone like that was likely to be more reliable, or at least would understand the kinds of problems the two women had both had with their young sons since their divorces.

"I'll put the ad in right away," she said. "That's

the way I found you, after all. If it worked once, it ought to work again."

If Ginger only knew how apprehensively Ceci had answered her quirky ad for someone to share the large house, she wouldn't be so convinced. As far as Ceci was concerned Ginger had lucked out finding someone as reasonable as she was, with a well-behaved little boy like Greg who got along with Ginger's son Jamie. The world was filled with weirdos of all kinds. Ginger could have gotten one of them.

Every one of the men who answered the ad had something about him that either unnerved Ceci or gave her the creeps. She vetoed all of them until Dave Ross showed up. An associate professor of English at a nearby college, he brought his shy daughter with him to the interview. The child buried her face in her father's sleeves and clutched with one hand at a small pink patent leather purse.

"So you're not divorced?" Ginger asked. "Where's your wife?"

"A few months ago she decided she was in love with Garrett Fletcher. She went to live with him in Mexico." He shrugged.

"Garrett Fletcher the poet? The one I saw on Johnny Carson last week? How'd she meet him?" Ceci had majored in English in college, but even if she hadn't, she would know who Garrett Fletcher was. He was the only poet in the United States making big bucks. On every best seller list

and familiar to people who didn't even read the newspaper, his books seemed to appeal to everyone. Some of his poems had even been made into Grammy-winning songs by rock groups and country music singers.

"He was here at the university last summer for a workshop and stayed at our house," Dave said. He looked as if he were tired of telling the story, tired of explaining to the world why his wife had abandoned him and their little girl.

"I just can't meet the house payments without her income," he explained patiently. "She went back to teaching so we could afford to buy a big house in Brandermill, but she left me stuck with it." His face had the shocked look of the recently bereaved. The little girl was beginning to whine. She climbed into her father's lap and stared balefully at Ceci and Ginger, sucking her thumb.

Ginger looked at Ceci and raised her eyebrows. Ceci nodded slightly. She liked his soft speech, the care and love with which he stroked the child's head. She was sure that she and Ceci would feel safer with this man in the house.

* * *

Tall and sad-faced, his shoulders stooped from hunching over books, Dave proved to be handy at repairs. When-

ever there was anything to be done, he descended from the third floor in his clodhoppers and a worn pair of jeans, carrying the shiny red Craftsman tool box his wife Margaret had given him the first Christmas in their house. He and Ginger worked out an arrangement for credit on his rent for the work he did around the house, whether it was fixing running toilets or just replacing worn washers and burned-out bulbs. They took weekly turns with the cooking, and soon dinnertime became a family affair, with Dave lecturing all of them on minimum daily requirements and what vegetables contained which vitamins.

Greg and Jamie had been friends since Ceci and Greg had moved in. They already knew each other from school, which was half the battle. But Dave's daughter Samantha seemed overwhelmed by her new large family. She sucked her thumb and stared at the two boys. Samantha attended the sister school of the private boys' school that Greg and Jamie attended. In a way this worked out well since the older boys could make sure she boarded the right bus every day and got off at the right stop. Dave was worried that Samantha was lonely riding home alone in the afternoons when the boys had to stay for sports, but she soon was used to it. She made friends with classmates riding back and forth, although she never lost her dour look and nagged her father daily about her mother.

As soon as the dishes were cleared each night, Dave

climbed the stairs holding Samantha's small hand. The only indication that they were up there at all, until the morning scramble to get ready for school, was the sound of Mahler or Mozart from Dave's compact disc player drifting down the stairs. He never played it loudly enough to annoy the rest of the household, and the two women cautioned their sons to use earphones for their rock music so Dave would not be disturbed while he was trying to write. He had mentioned he was working on a book of poems but had declined, in a goodnatured, modest way, to read any of them aloud, joking that they would have to buy the book when it was published, if it were ever published. Up to now Dave had published only articles in academic journals, erudite critical commentary on the work of dead poets.

"Byron's foot," Ceci said at dinner one evening when Dave had been complaining about a research article he was trying to finish.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Byron's foot," she repeated. "You know, the mandate from all these damned English Departments to write, write, write, analyze, analyze, analyze, publish or perish, even when there's nothing left new or interesting to say and all that's left is to paraphrase or compare what somebody else said. I call it the Byron's foot syndrome. When I was in school I hated that. Eventually there're only these small, insignificant personal details left to write about, once

all the so-called definitive studies have been done or unless new letters or other material pop up. You're reduced to concentrating on the sensational."

Dave laughed. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," said Ceci, "but you know what I'm talking about. Dumb things that don't really make any difference, like whether or not old sexy Byron ever made it with his sister, or speculating on what it did to his poetry to have to stomp around with that wickedly handsome face and that terrible club foot. Or even acne or freckles or warts, or any other creepy problem." She batted her eyelashes at Dave. "I think it's all a waste of your talent and time, don't you? But don't take any of this personally. After all, I just write advertising jingles. What do I know?" The children had giggled at the mention of warts and freckles.

"Yuck," said Jamie.

"That's really disgusting, Mom," said Greg.

"Aren't you being a little tough on poor Dave?" Ginger said. "I mean just because neither of us wanted to remain in the fields of acadème doesn't mean. . . ."

Smiling at Ceci, Dave said, "Well, these days all of us scholars are secretly trying to write the Great American Novel to make a million dollars and go out and live the high life. Either that or become famous <u>after</u> we're dead by writing a slim volume of insightful, well-received, even

though largely unread, poetry." He speared another meatball and sighted along the length of his fork at Ceci.

Ginger picked up the book she had been reading and headed for the stairs. "When you guys have solved this great problem, let me know how it all came out," she said with a smile.

"Anyhow, to add to what you've been saying, I've written my last analysis of Romantic poetry," Dave said, punctuating his words by tapping his fork against the table. "I feel the same way you do, Ceci. There's almost nothing left to say, no research that either hasn't already been done or that wouldn't bore even a proud mother to distraction. Besides, they're all beginning, after lo these many years, to bore the hell out of me. The Romantic poets, I mean. I'm a lot more interested in contributing my bit to the current body of literature than I am in analyzing somebody else's stuff. You know, my personal immortality, not to mention the immortality of all those around me."

Ceci examined Dave's face with interest. Over his glasses his eyes were searching her face as if for clues to a puzzle. The children were whining to be excused, restless at any talk not centering on them.

"I'll help with the dishes," she said.

* * *

When Ceci and Dave began to sleep together, she knew they had to be discreet, avoid any suspicion. Her office was only three blocks from the house, and Dave could walk home from the college in ten minutes. They began meeting for lunch at home, when the children could not surprise them. Ginger worked downtown and hardly ever took a lunch hour, so it was unlikely she would interrupt them. They made love on Dave's bed on the third floor so that if they heard the front door open, they would have time to conceal themselves from anyone showing up unexpectedly.

The brief time they had made Ceci more passionate. Their common interests of literature and poetry were forgotten, lost in satisfying more insistent demands, and they communicated only in moans and sighs. Ceci became insatiable. She simmered with unresolved passion that carried over from one meeting to the next, aggravating her like a stubborn word she couldn't recall. When she lay in bed at night, longing to climb the stairs to Dave's bed, she was half glad that Greg and Samantha were there, preventing her.

The intensity of their lovemaking maintained a nearly unbearable peak as they clawed at each other with silent, almost impersonal lust three times a week. Ceci felt it wasn't enough. It could never be enough. On off days she found herself ill-humored, dissatisfied, sharp with Ginger and the children, complaining of headaches. Her office

mates were beginning to ask sly questions and make teasing remarks. They noticed that she returned from what she called her lunchtime walks with her cheeks scraped pink by Dave's beard and an occasional bruise on her arms or neck. She told them they had dirty minds. She adored being the object of so much curiosity.

"I can't believe it," she panted one day as Dave rolled off her, exhausted. "Five times. I came five goddamn times." She lay on her back breathing slowly and deeply, one of her fingers tracing the sweaty ridge of his shoulder.

Dave said nothing. He got up, made his way to the bathroom and started washing himself as he always did, while she watched.

"What great sex," she said. "Together we are. . . ."

"Don't talk," Dave cut in. He picked at a little bump on his face and frowned for a second.

Ceci looked at him. He was drying himself carefully, looking at his reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

"What?" she asked. "What did you say?"

"Please, just don't talk."

"Why not?"

"You'll ruin it," he said.

* * *

It was unusual for any meal Dave fixed to arrive late to the table. A model of precision and responsibility, he regarded his agreements with Ginger as blood pacts. The two women smiled behind their hands about his compulsiveness, but agreed he was a pleasure to have around compared to their unreliable ex-husbands.

"What's going on, Mom?" whined Greg. "I'm starving." He clinked his knife and fork against his water glass.

"I have no idea," said Ceci. "Maybe we'd better go in and help."

"No," said Ginger. "I think something must have happened to make them this late." Sounds of shrill giggling and horseplay came from the kitchen.

"That's peculiar," Ginger went on. "Usually Samantha's so quiet. Like her father."

"I don't care how much noise they make if they'll just get the food on out here," said Jamie. "I'm dying."

The swinging door to the kitchen opened. Dave and Samantha, large platters and bowls balanced on their arms, entered the dining room, laughing.

"Sorry," said Dave. "I know we're late. It couldn't be helped." He swung his arm in a huge arc, expertly positioning a platter in the center of the table. Setting a large white bowl of refried beans beside it, he announced, "Tia Juana Night! Everyone can make the taco or

tortilla of choice. We've got chicken and beef fillings, hot and mild sauces, chopped veggies, the works." He bowed, his napkin draped crookedly over his arm in comical imitation of a stuffy maître d'.

"So that's what took so long!" Ceci said. "I couldn't imagine what you two were up to."

The boys reached for taco shells and began stuffing them with the meat mixture. Ginger said, "This is a terrific treat for the kids, Dave. We've all been really godawful about not letting them have any junk food, but this stuff actually looks healthy. What put the idea in your head?"

Samantha giggled and covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes shining as she looked up at her father. Dave winked at her. "I had a telephone call today." He looked around the table. "From Samantha's mother. From Margaret."

Samantha squealed, "Mom's coming back! She's coming back to live with us!" She was jumping in her chair.

Ceci was having trouble keeping the shock from showing on her face. What little Dave had told her about his wife's sudden flight with the celebrated but aging poet had made her believe the woman would never be heard from again. Dave had had no idea for months exactly where she was. How could he just sit there smiling as if everything were fine? How could he possibly welcome that woman back after what

she had done to him and Samantha? There was such a thing as being too forgiving.

As the children ate, Dave tried to explain. "Margaret was crying so hard when she called that I could hardly understand what she was saying."

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Ginger asked, voicing what Ceci was thinking but couldn't bring herself to say. "I mean, is she sure that. . . ."

"She said she made the worst mistake of her life listening to Garrett. She says she still loves me and Sam more than life." He ducked his head slightly and almost whispered. "She actually begged me to forgive her." He paused. "It was almost embarrassing."

"I can imagine," said Ceci. "I think embarrassed is the least of what she ought to be feeling."

Dave smiled but gave her a level look. "Let he who is without sin throw the first rock. If we can't forgive our families, then whom?"

Ceci flushed. "I just meant I think you're being awfully understanding."

Ginger said she thought maybe the situation required not only understanding, but patience as well. "I don't believe I am capable of that kind of understanding, but I admire you for having it, Dave."

Dave said what he was hoping if Ginger didn't mind, if she thought it might work, was that Margaret could live

with him and Samantha up on the large third floor where there was plenty of room. He assured Ginger that, despite what appeared to be emotional undependability, his wife was really a quiet, reliable woman who would shoulder her share of the cooking and cleaning.

"Samantha needs her mother," Dave concluded. "Girls seem to really need their mothers at this age." They had all heard Samantha crying for Margaret her first few weeks in the house. They remembered the thumb-sucking. And now Samantha was smiling so widely as she ate her tacos that she was spilling lettuce and meat and cheese out of her mouth, oblivious to the mess on her lap and the floor.

"Of course she does," said Ginger. "All we can do is try it, Dave. If it doesn't work out, then of course I'll give you plenty of time to find another place." As she patted Samantha's shoulder, she glanced across the table at Ceci who raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders.

All Ceci could think of was that this meant the end of her affair with Dave. Her stomach felt hollow, as empty as the faceted crystal fruit bowl in the middle of the table. Stuffing a taco shell with lettuce and cheese she tried to keep her face straight. It was all ridiculous anyhow. There was really no reason she and Dave couldn't continue their affair after Margaret found a job. If anybody deserved such treatment, Margaret did. She had earned it. Dave had said Margaret would start work as soon as she

returned, so it shouldn't really prove difficult to arrange. Ceci was anxious to discuss the whole matter with Dave the next time they met.

She chewed so fiercely at her taco that she bit a hole in the edge of her tongue. The hot sauce stung the open wound, and the bloodstains on her napkin made her a bit faint, almost nauseous.

* * *

Ceci and Ginger watched Samantha clutch at her mother's jacket the day Margaret came back, the family together for the first time in a year. Dave seemed to be trying to keep his face solemn, but a smile played around the corners of his mouth and his eyes gleamed behind the spectacles sliding down his nose as he struggled up the concrete steps with Margaret's two large leather suitcases.

"This is my mother," announced Samantha, suddenly anxious to seem mature enough to earn the gift of her mother's homecoming. "Those are Greg and Jamie, they go to St. Christopher's, and this is Ceci and Ginger, it's her house."

Margaret, a short, pale woman with shoulder-length brown hair and large, luminous eyes, shook hands first with Ginger, then Ceci, saying nervously, "I hope this arrangement will be all right with both of you. Dave says there's

enough room." She peered at Ginger's face anxiously through thick glasses. Ceci wondered what it was about this woman that had engaged the emotions of a poet of national celebrity, even an elderly one. Certainly not her looks.

"Margaret," said Ginger, extending both hands, "this has all been discussed far too much already. It's all settled. We are all glad to have you here. Just come on in, have a glass of wine and rest from your long trip."

Ceci wished ruefully that Ginger wouldn't be so damned friendly to the woman. Margaret looked back over her shoulder for Dave's approval, but he was wrestling happily with the boys, unusual behavior for him. Ceci had never seen him so relaxed. Happy for him in spite of herself, she patted him lightly on the shoulder as she trailed Margaret and Ginger into the kitchen.

Ceci had been disappointed but not really surprised when Dave had announced that their meetings would have to end when Margaret returned. He wanted to start over with Margaret on a note of faith and confidence, with no pointless reproaches about the past. Ceci, Lord knows, he was sure, could understand that.

Carefully folding his slacks over a chair, he had said, "I don't want Margaret to think I've been trying to get revenge on her for running off. With her temper she'd just go flying off again, and I think it would kill Saman-

tha." He had looked at her like a little boy. "You understand, don't you, Ceci?"

Ceci, already naked on her back in the bed, waiting, thinking how there would only be one more time after this, had said, "You know I do. You don't have to explain."

But even while he kept trying to tell her why it had to be this way he had been stifling moans, jerking his shorts down over his legs, stumbling to get to her, to bury himself in her body that was already moving to an ancient rhythm that blinded her open eyes as they fused, both of them thinking, she was certain, mutely and with pain about how this could happen only once more, this brief rocking into relief and security and pleasure. They were quiet and tender as they washed and dressed. They held hands while they walked down the steps to the front hall where they kissed and made promises to meet early on Friday, their last day.

But on Friday the sweetness and wildness had vanished. Dave had seemed to feel like a husband again, his thoughts crowded with plans for the coming summer, the reconciliation, maybe even the familiar, comfortable sex he would soon have with Margaret. His ramblings had seemed to trouble him until Ceci, touched by his confusion, had kissed his body softly all over for the last time. He had then made slow and gentle love to her, the kind he was probably used to with Margaret, the kind between couples so

familiar they know where to touch, couples who look directly into each other's eyes.

As Ceci walked back to her office, she had felt strangely buoyant, as if she were facing an exciting beginning instead of dealing with an ending. She was sure she and Dave would be closer now, without the sex, than they had ever been in their abstract, almost indifferent, and, might as well admit it, selfish, coupling. They had used each other passionately and greedily, she knew, but had emerged somehow liking each other, respecting each other like esteemed colleagues or childhood friends. She felt her body gathering its forces, planning its distractions. She found herself leaning seductively toward men passing her on the street, feeling their eyes follow her as if they knew she had just made love. It would be all right, she was sure.

* * *

Ceci tried to like Margaret because she was Dave's wife if for no other reason. The woman did her chores around the house quietly, usually smiling, a birdlike look of inquiry always on her face. No one had a problem adjusting to the extra adult in the house, and the summer days passed uneventfully with the children away at camp much of the time. Ginger spent most weekends now at her

in-laws' place at the beach. Although she had invited Ceci to come with her a few times, Ceci knew Ginger was seeing a new man down there. He was a lawyer who had gotten rich in a family business and who now spent his idle days bronzing himself in the sun. Ceci was afraid her presence might prove disturbing to the slowly developing relationship.

Besides, Ceci had attracted the attention of a married man in her office. Muscular and dark-eyed, Steve had watched her noontime exits during the months of her affair with Dave without comment until it became apparent that her routine had changed for good. She began bringing her lunch and chatting with the others in the office as if she had been doing this all year, aware of his eager eyes on her. Within a month he asked her to lunch at a new seafood restaurant, a client of the firm.

"I've been watching you," he said, leaning against her shoulder to pour her a glass of wine.

"I'm aware of that," she said. Underneath the table he rubbed his hand slowly up and down the outside of her thigh. How ordinary, Ceci thought, but she felt herself responding to his touch. It had been lonely since Margaret returned. Before she and Steve returned to work they had an understanding.

Although Ceci didn't like meeting him in cheap downtown motels, she found the affair diverting, not exactly boring. Still, it was a bit tedious, somewhat like busy-

work, just a solution to the problem of the sexual energy awakened in her by Dave and left suspended since Margaret's return.

Margaret and Dave and a new, happy Samantha, who now skipped everywhere she went, settled into their share of the routine of the house. After Samantha left for camp, extracting from Margaret serious promises that she would not disappear again, Ceci began to overhear sounds of lovemaking from the floor above. She knew the squeaks from Dave's bed like her own heartbeat, and at first it vexed her. She held her breath, trying to distinguish words or overhear sighs or ecstatic moans, but she knew that this vicarious participation in Dave's sex life with his wife would only serve to torture her, make her dissatisfied with the relationship she was building with Steve. She was glad when Greg returned from camp. The sound of his voice distracted her from the faint noise of the squeaking bed overhead and dulled her curiosity and growing pique.

Despite the flashes of jealousy she felt whenever she saw Dave's arm around Margaret, <u>any</u> sign of marital affection between them, the last thing Ceci told herself she wanted was to have Margaret suspect her past relationship with Dave. Guilt feelings had a way, she knew, of manifesting truth to the suspicious, and she was plagued by those as well. But if Margaret had arrived armed with suspicions or fears about Ceci or Ginger, she had hidden

them well so far. The three women made an effort to be friendly and nice to each other, and by the time school opened in September Margaret had made herself necessary. She had found a job teaching third grade at the boys' school, eliminating the need for the children to scramble to catch the city bus each morning, and she was able to pick up Samantha and drive her home most afternoons.

* * *

"Could I talk with you a minute?" Margaret's soft voice outside her open bedroom door startled Ceci. Manners in the large house, mostly because of three active children running up and down the stairs, had become lax. Ceci was used to being summoned by someone screeching her name over a stair railing above or below her floor.

"Sure, come on in. I'm just working on a new ad campaign, and I'm stuck."

Margaret shut the door behind her and stood waiting for Ceci to motion her to a chair. She had a habit of hanging back to be invited before she did anything. Ceci had found such reticence annoying in the usually laid-back household.

"Have a seat."

Margaret chose the straight-backed chair near the door that had belonged to Ceci's grandparents. She sat stiffly,

clutching a piece of paper.

"Is anything wrong, Margaret?" asked Ceci. "You look sort of up tight."

"I am very up tight, as you call it, also tense, nervous, shaken, all of the above." Her voice was strained and steely. She paused, looking at the floor. "I'm not sure I should even be asking you about this, but I have to ask someone. I can't just keep on wondering about it, but I don't dare start quizzing Dave yet."

"Well, shoot, tell me what it is. I can't help if I don't know what you're talking about." Despite her fear, Ceci couldn't help being a bit annoyed: all this circling around a subject instead of just blurting it right out. Why didn't she just say what was on her mind?

Margaret rearranged herself in the uncomfortable chair. "Has Dave ever read any of his poems to you and Ginger?"

"No. He refuses to let us see his stuff. He says we'll have to buy it to read it."

"Well, he wouldn't let me read any of it either. When I came back to Richmond, I asked him about his work, tried to catch up with the year I'd missed, and he just said what he was doing was experimental and he'd rather not show it to me." She looked up at Ceci. "I thought I was in no position to push."

"I think you judged that correctly."

A small flush of anger tinted Margaret's cheeks. "Well, O.K.," she said. "Maybe so. But I got real curious about his poems, particularly because I know that in his poetry he always expresses his secret thoughts. You may think Dave is this quiet intellectual who avoids great shifts in mood and feeling, but underneath he's quite the opposite." She hesitated, biting her lip and examining Ceci's face. Ceci maintained her look of polite interest. Tell me about it, she thought.

Margaret handed the piece of paper to Ceci. "I found this when I was looking through the collection he's working on. There are more, about fifty altogether, written to some woman or women he knows, or knew while I was gone, I don't know which."

"How do you know he didn't write them to you?" Ceci asked.

"I know."

Ceci tried to read the poem slowly, but she raced through it, looking for words that might identify her. She knew that the poem was about her. Her heart pounded, partly out of fear, partly from excitement.

She tried to slow down, back up, read the poem for sense - it was not exactly clear - understand the references and connect the images. "The tapestry of our love weaves itself." An awkward line, not one she thought Dave might write. What were these references to blood? It did

not seem, from its mild beginning, to be a poem for such physical words, gutter words for body parts, inserted in the middle of lines that were paeans to a great love affair. The pounding blood in her temples was causing her head to ache.

"Oh, I can't understand this, reading it this fast," she said, irritated. "Let me take a minute to try to get an overall picture."

Margaret stood up hastily, throwing her arms out in sharp, jerky, angry gestures. She looked as if she were beating against someone, as if she might strike Ceci any moment. "What overall picture? It's perfectly clear that the overall picture is fucking, in precise and very clinical terms!" She pounded the paneling on the door with her fists.

Ceci forced herself to speak calmly. "Margaret, what is it about this poem you object to? It just seems to express some kind of sexual ecstasy. God knows there are millions of poets trying to write about <u>that</u> subject. There's nothing unusual or suspicious about that."

"But there is, don't you see? There is!" Margaret's voice shrilled through the room. "Dave must be having an affair, or had one while I was in Mexico. I know this poem isn't about me. He never felt this way about me, not in our best moments. Don't you see, this woman thrashes around? She groans and moans. I never do that." She

twisted her wedding ring.

"And when we make love now, ever since I got back, he does things he never did before. Somebody's been giving him lessons!" She smiled just for a second. "Not that I don't like what he's learned. . .but when I think about him doing this with some bitch the whole time I was gone, I. . . ." She struck the door again.

"Margaret, stop that. You're getting yourself into a dither over something that might be pure fiction, something Dave dreamed, or imagined, or just made up."

Margaret stood motionless for a second, gazing at Ceci. "Does it sound to you like something he made up?"

"Sit down." Ceci gently took Margaret by the shoulders and steered her back into the chair. She remained standing over her for a brief moment, holding the poem in one hand. "Stay there. Let's be logical. First of all, don't forget that you were the one who left. You were gone for a year. If Dave did have an affair while you were gone, I frankly don't think you've got any right to object. As far as I'm concerned, you had no claim on him. You didn't even let him know where you were." Warming to the righteousness of her subject, she shook her finger in Margaret's face. "You were down in Mexico screwing some other guy, for God's sake, and you expected him to just sit here waiting for you to come home?"

Margaret flushed. Drumming her fingers against the

side of the chair, she stared up at Ceci belligerently.

Ceci looked down at the poem in her hand. "First of all, it's not a very good poem." She grinned wryly. "I think you might have more grounds for objection if it were a great work of art."

"It's not the quality I object to," Margaret said tensely. "I just hate it that while I was gone he found what I was looking for."

"Love?"

"Not love." She shook her head. "I don't see any love in this poem. Sex, goddamn it. He found great sex. With some woman he likes a lot. Some woman who doesn't threaten or diminish or smother him the way I do. Some woman who just fucks great." She looked up at Ceci. "Don't tell me you wouldn't be jealous if you were in my position."

"I don't know how I would feel in your position because I'm not sure what your position is. But if you're talking about having your husband screw around on you, how <u>that</u> feels, I know how <u>that</u> feels. I know all about that."

"Your husband did that?"

"All the time. Every day in every way. There were so many women calling up to see what I sounded like that I couldn't keep track of them. My ex-husband hit on everything that moved."

"What did you do about it?"

"I divorced the son of a bitch."

Margaret jumped to her feet. "You see?" she said. "You didn't like it either."

"It was not the same," Ceci insisted. "I didn't walk out on my husband with another man the way you did. I didn't have a lover in the wings like you, a little insurance to make sure I'd come out O.K. either way. In fact, I never even tried to be with another man until after I was divorced."

"By choice?" Margaret's face crimped spitefully.

Ceci toyed briefly with the thought of smacking her. "I don't really know," she said, finally. "When a woman is after a man, she lets him know it somehow. I don't think I had it in me to send out those signals until I knew I was really free of him."

Margaret was studying her again, listening carefully to her words. "All I want is to find out who it is. I want to know if it's anybody I know."

"What difference does that make?" Ceci's heart flipped quickly a few times.

"It makes a big difference. If it's some woman I've never met, someone whose face I can't conjure up and hate, I'll be able to forget it, forgive him. But if it's one of my friends, or. . .anybody I know, well, then, I'm going to have a hell of a big problem." She locked her eyes onto Ceci's.

Ceci could smell her intensity, her meanness, like ozone after a flash of lightning, clear and sharp. Margaret smelled like danger, like the threat of mayhem and affliction. Ceci forced herself to return her stare coolly.

"If I had realized you were coming into my room to make an accusation. . . ."

"Oh, but I didn't," interrupted Margaret. "On the contrary. The thought just occurred to me that, despite your Goody-Two-Shoes act, even you and Ginger are logical suspects."

"As I started to point out, Ginger has been very generous, as far as I'm concerned, to allow your family to keep on living in this house now that you're back. This was not the arrangement she had in mind when she rented to us and to Dave and Samantha."

"I'll bet."

Ceci continued despite the ugly tone of Margaret's voice. "Ginger thought the only way this many people would be able to live together was if they had all experienced the same kind of anguish so they'd be kind to each other and work together for the benefit of the household. She was right, and it worked fine until now. And what do you think this is all going to do to your daughter?"

"I don't intend to let Sam know what her father's been up to, but if you think I intend not to talk about any of

this with Dave. . . ."

"I think it would be a big mistake."

Margaret stood up and took the poem from Ceci's hand. "I don't really care what you think. I intend to take care of this matter my own way." Opening the door, she stalked out. Ceci listened to the sound of her footsteps going up the stairs. She knew Dave would be home soon from taking the three children to the circus. She felt sorry for him, for what he was going to suffer at the hands of this vengeful woman he was married to, for what it might do to his work. Should she try to get to him first, warn him, ask him not to let Margaret pry the name of his lover from him? She decided against it. She had confidence in Dave to handle the whole thing.

Late that night, Ceci heard the sound of urgent, tense voices in the room above her. She listened for a while, but the voices died down and were replaced by the familiar rhythmic squeak of Dave's bed as he dealt with Margaret's insecurities.

* * *

October was Ceci's favorite month. Its last Sunday was so bright and beautiful that she hated having to stay inside working on an ad campaign. Ginger and Jamie had invited Greg to the beach for the weekend, and Dave and his

family had driven toward the Blue Ridge Mountains to see the fall leaves along the Parkway. Having the house to herself was a luxury she had never before experienced, and she was having trouble concentrating.

She piled her papers in a neat stack and pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. Carrying her sneakers, she walked out on the landing and stretched. The crisp blue day seemed to reach in for her through the round window in the hall and the skylight on the third floor.

She walked up the stairs slowly, still carrying her shoes, knowing exactly where she was going and aware of what she intended to do. She had been obsessed with reading Dave's poems since the door closed behind the others that morning, but she had continued working, almost enjoying the wait.

At the top landing she entered the bedroom where she and Dave had spent so many blissful lunchtimes, pausing to examine the unmade bed for signs of love but detecting none, smelling nothing. Moving on into the small front room where Dave listened to his music and wrote his poems to her, she continued to sniff for his odor, the smell she knew so well. She fancied that the air carried the scent of his shave cream and shampoo and deodorant, all aromas she could recall as distinctly and as clearly as if they had made love that very day.

Dave's desk was strewn with loose papers, but when she

examined them, she saw that they were parts of an article on Southey (why on earth was he writing on Southey, of all people?). She opened each of the drawers in his desk one by one and carefully lifted their contents to see if they concealed the poetry manuscript. There were no poems in the typewriter or under it. The small file cabinet contained only tax returns and papers he was marking for undergraduate lit classes.

She examined a few volumes inside the bookcase in case he had secreted them inside other poets' works to hide them from Margaret's prying eyes. She sat down in the swivel chair he loved because it had belonged to his father and tried to think of someplace he might have hidden the poems. Ah, yes, under the rug. No, even though Margaret was a rotten housekeeper he surely wouldn't have hidden them there. But just to be sure, she lifted up all four corners of the rug.

Perhaps he had finished the book and sent it off to his publisher. But he'd have kept a copy somewhere, either here or in his office. The office. That was it! She couldn't blame him. A poet writing of personal agonies and ecstasies had to protect himself at all costs from invasion of privacy when work was in progress. Once it was published, of course, it belonged to the world. Sighing, she left the third floor and walked down Monument Avenue, trying to imagine how many poems there were and exactly

what they might be about. One day she would read them and then she could discover Dave's true feelings about those months of passion, or could she use the word now? of love.

* * *

Just before the end of the school year Dave and Margaret announced at the dinner table one night that he had been offered a professorship at the University of Virginia. They were planning to move to Charlottesville as soon as Dave tied up a few loose ends and finished grading his final set of papers. Ceci felt a brief sense of shock and loss, as she might if a cousin had died, but no more than that. She told Ginger later that she was actually relieved that soon she would not have to listen to the bed squeaking above her head at night and that she was sure Ginger would have little trouble finding someone to replace them. Ginger, somewhat sadfaced, said she was going to miss the Rosses and doubted that they would find anyone as handy as Dave. But there was nothing to be done about it. The move was a big step forward in Dave's career, and his volume of poems was due to be released any day. Ceci got nervous when Dave mentioned the book at the dinner table. She wondered how he could sit there so calmly talking about it in front of Margaret when she knew it was written about another woman. But Margaret had obviously been persuaded

to deal with her problem in an adult way.

On the day the movers arrived to load their furniture, Dave presented signed copies of his book of poems to Ceci and Ginger, each with the same inscription: "All my affection to all of the people in our little colony, best always, David Ross." The title of the thin volume was Colony. Colony? Ceci thought the name puzzling but knew she would be able to figure it out after she had read the book. She could hardly wait for them to leave.

She closed the door to her bedroom and locked it. She did not want Greg to barge in and maybe find her crying. Opening the book, she saw with shock that he had dedicated the book to "Margaret, my dear wife." Did he really think he could throw her off the scent with something like that?

She began to read the first section, entitled "Dark," with an avidity she had shown no book in years. She was right: the poems were all about their affair. He had written about their love exactly as she had expected. The language was rough and concise, funky, the action quite clear. It was all too sexually moving, and Ceci did not doubt that people would become aroused as they read; it was just impossible not to. She herself was reliving every moment, feeling his body still against hers, remembering everything as clearly as if it were still going on. There was no doubt that the "dark spermy nest" where the poet burrowed was hers, as was the "bronze, sweat-slick torso."

Oh, Dave was indeed a genius to be able to commit it all to paper like this! No wonder Margaret had been driven to the edge of insanity when she read the poems for the first time.

The second section was entitled "Light." It, too, was about sex, but sex of a more ethereal, less earthy sort. The couple having sex in these poems barely touched. It was all so clean, the bodies diffused with a celestial glow. There was no perspiration, no noise, no great clang of libidos, no licking or sucking. The poet buried his face in a "golden mass of honeyed coils" and was raised to metaphysical heights instead of orgasm by his contact with the woman's tall, slender body. His description of his muse was delicious and as clear as spring water.

Ceci, the book clutched tightly against her breast, unlocked her bedroom door and started down the stairs. Halfway down, she saw Ginger, holding her copy of the poems, a quizzical look on her face, beginning to climb toward her.

DIRTY LITTLE GIRL

Roseanne dug in the sandpile with Mama's silver tablespoon. She knew that if she got caught she would get a whipping, but she didn't care. She needed to dig a good deep grave for Gray Fluff's baby, whose head had been crushed by Herman Chisenhall's big black boot when he didn't look where he was stepping coming out of her mama's house. The big old fool had jumped like he was shot when Roseanne stuck her head around the corner and saw him with his arm around Mama's waist and his big foot on the kitten. She was going to kill that Herman first chance she got, get Mama's butcher knife and cut off his damn head. Old son bitch.

When the hole was deep enough, at the bottom Roseanne placed the matchbox containing the baby kitten wrapped in pale blue satin scraps from Mama's sewing machine drawer. She had squared off the hole so that the box would fit perfectly. She carefully spooned sand over it, patting it down and saying prayers after each spoonful.

"The Father," she said, dumping sand. "The Son." Sand. "The Holy Ghost." Two tablespoons full for the Ghost.

"Amen, Brother Ben, shot at a rooster and killed a hen," she ended, patting the mound neatly. She chose a daisy from a pile of flowers gathered earlier for decoration and bit off its stem an inch from the flower. She stuck it into the top of the grave and picked up a pink rose.

"Where'd you get them roses?" a voice demanded.

Roseanne looked up at her mother, standing spraddle-legged over the grave, suddenly blocking out the sunlight, one finger pointing at the pile of flowers.

"Did you take Nana's roses? Answer me!"

"Yes'm," said Roseanne. "Just three." Her finger traced circles in the sand.

"You know better than that, you little devil," her mother said. "You know you're not s'posed to mess with Nana's roses. What'm I gonna do with you?" She squatted beside the little girl.

"Is this Little Fluff's grave?" she asked.

"Yes'm," said Roseanne. "I wanted it to be pretty."

"Well, you coulda made it pretty without picking Nana's roses," her mother said. "They're off limits to everybody except Nana and Poppy, and that specially means you, little girl."

Roseanne stood up, straddled one of her mother's knees and began jumping up and down. "Ride me horsey," she begged. "Ride me horsey, Mama."

Her mother stood up quickly and Roseanne fell over onto the kitten's grave. When the little girl realized what had happened, she rolled off and stood up, her bottom lip trembling as she pointed down at the flattened mound.

"Look!" she said. "Look what you done, Mama. You messed up the grave. You're gonna have bad luck." She dug at her sandy underwear with one finger.

"Stop that!" her mother hissed. "Don't do that. Come on in the house so I can wash your hands. You look like you been digging in a pig pen."

Roseanne followed her mother across the back yard, past the circular flower bed and the cement bird bath decorated with seashells, her untied sashes trailing behind her. She patted the tops of the asters and dragged her fingers through the scummy green water in the birdbath. She stuck her wet fingers in her mouth.

"Hurry up, Roseanne," her mother said, holding the screen door open. "And get those nasty little hands outa your mouth this minute, you hear me? You'll catch something awful and die."

Roseanne climbed the steps where Little Fluff had been squashed that morning, stooping to touch the stain where she had found the kitten's small body. Herman Chisenhall had been standing by the outside spigot, wearing only one boot, scrubbing at the sole of its mate with a wad of wet newspaper.

"Damn it to hell!" he had said. He had squinted at Roseanne, who had begun a high thin wail the moment she had spotted the dead kitten. She had been sent to Nana's to see if she was baking any cookies, but Nana had said she was too tired to make cookies today and sent Roseanne back home.

The stain was dry now, but she remembered that it used to be Little Fluff's bright red blood and brains. She hated Herman all over again. She would get her daddy's chain saw and cut off his leg, boot and all. She slammed the screen door hard.

Roseanne's mother soaped a washcloth with Octagon and washed the little girl's hands and arms. The soap made her skin itch where she had scratched herself on Nana's thorns. She had squeezed some of her blood onto the kitten's coffin as a blood promise to get even with Herman Chisenhall.

"Here," said her mother. "Let me give your face a lick or two while I'm at it. How'd you get this dirty so fast? Look at your dress! We don't want your daddy to see you looking like this." She wiped at a spot on the dress.

Roseanne examined the front of her blue and white checked skirt while her mother retied her sash into a large floppy bow. To her it looked clean enough.

"Mama," she said.

"What."

"Herman Chisenhall is going to hell."

Her mother's face twitched as if she were trying not to grin. "Prob'ly," she said. "He probably will." She patted Roseanne on the top of her head.

"I'll pray for it in my prayers tonight when I God bless you and Daddy and Nana and Poppy and Little Fluff."

"You do that."

Her mother stood and squeezed the soapy cloth into the kitchen sink. She rinsed it in cold water and gave Roseanne's hands and arms another wiping.

"It stings," the little girl whined. "Stop."

"I gotta get the soap off," said her mother. "That's what stings."

Roseanne stood still, her face screwed up and her eyes squeezed shut, until her mother rinsed her face and gave her a pop on the butt to show she was finished.

"Go change your underwear," she said. "It's filthy."

Roseanne went to her room and pulled off her underpants, leaving them in a wad on the floor. Sand was sticking to her sturdy thighs and backside. She flicked at the little grains with her hand. Squatting, she played with her Lincoln logs a few minutes, but the house didn't look right. It looked stupid.

She crawled up on her bed, spread her legs and scraped at the sand on her thighs. She traced her ABCs on her stomach with one finger, then stuck her finger inside herself and wiggled it a little. It felt good. She could

feel sleep coming and closed her eyes.

"Roseanne, what are you doing?" her mother yelled, jerking her by the arm and pulling her off the bed. "Where did you put your hand? Answer me!" She gave Roseanne a sharp slap in the face.

"On my peepee," wailed Roseanne, crying in earnest. Mama had hurt her.

"Didn't I tell you not to do that?" her mother yelled. "Didn't I tell you only dirty little girls do that? Dirty, nasty little girls that nobody will like?" She shook Roseanne by the shoulders.

"Yes'm," sniffed Roseanne, wiping her nose on her wrist.

"Well, I mean it!" said her mother loudly. "God despises dirty little girls who play with their peepees. It's a mortal sin, Roseanne. You'll go straight to hell when you die, straight to hell." She leaned over and thrust her angry face close to the child's small, tearful features and widened her eyes.

"Do you hear me, Roseanne?" she asked.

"Yes'm," said Roseanne. "I hear."

Her mother stood up and walked over to Roseanne's bureau with the forget-me-nots painted on it. Opening a drawer, she took out a clean pair of white cotton panties and helped the child put them on. Roseanne wiped her nose against her mother's skirt.

"Mama."

"What."

"Can I ask a question?"

"Sure. What?"

"Is it the same hell for playing with your peepee as it is for squashing kitties?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I don't want it to be."

"O.K., then it's not," her mother said. "Go on back outside and play. Try not to get so dirty this time. And behave yourself."

Roseanne followed her mother through the hall and into the kitchen. Her mother walked over to the sink and started peeling Irish potatoes for supper. Roseanne wanted one of the peelings to chew on but decided against reaching for it. She didn't want to be smacked again. She looked out the back door where Gray Fluff lay in the grass nursing the three tiny kittens that were left, the lucky ones not on the step when Herman stomped out the back door.

"Mama," she said.

"What now?"

"What did Herman want?"

"What do you mean?"

"What was he doing over here? Don't he work at the mill no more?"

Roseanne's mother turned and looked at her.

"Roseanne, honey," she said softly, "Herman just came by to see Mama a minute. He wasn't here but a second or two."

"What about?"

"Nothing important, honey. It was business. You go on out and play."

"But I want to know!"

"Roseanne, have I got to pop you again?" Her mother ran water into the pot with the peeled potatoes. "Now get on outside and play while it's still light. Go fix up the kitty's grave some more." She turned and shooed the little girl toward the door.

Roseanne clung to the screen door until her feet reached the bottom step, then let it slam behind her. She returned to the sandpile. Seeing her mama's silver spoon, she picked it up and started digging at the grave.

The flowers, no longer pretty, had wilted in the afternoon heat. Roseanne thought she might as well dig up the box and start all over again. She also wanted to check to see if God had already come to take the kitty up to heaven.

INTIMATE FRIENDS AND CHERISHED COLLEAGUES

The rent-all company's trucks pulled into the cobblestoned drive early on the day of the party. As the setup crew unloaded the giant striped tents, Victoria watched from her bedroom window. In the bright morning sunlight the pink appeared not quite right, not deep enough to match exactly the tablecloths and napkins she had found at Bloomie's. Oh, well, she thought. At night I doubt that anyone besides me will notice the difference. Besides, I have more important things to worry about.

Victoria had been planning Gordon's fiftieth birthday party celebration for nearly a year. With her reputation as Joyner's most imaginative hostess, easily acquired in the small, dull, manufacturing town, she had wanted to insure that Gordon's party would endure forever in the hearts of those selected, carefully selected, over long, agonizing months, to be invited. Victoria had even made plans to tickle the memories, months later, of the fortunate guests with a small Christmas remembrance, artistically-framed photographs of themselves in designer party hats, smiling and having the times of their lives surrounded by the Colcloughs' closest friends.

Choosing two hundred of Gordon's dearest and most intimate friends and relatives had been a difficult task, but one for Gordon himself to oversee. After all, Victoria had lived in Joyner only five years, and even though she had been swift to make her mark as a woman to be reckoned with, a woman with talent and ideas and imagination, she could not presume to speak for Gordon when it came to narrowing down the guest list for such a special occasion.

People like Gordon's ex-wife and their children had to be included--it would be tacky to omit them, considering the milestone nature of the occasion. Inviting all the Colcloughs, a prolific family, had created an immediate space problem since not one could be left out, except possibly the second cousin who would be brought to trial shortly for rape. While the Colcloughs were all certain he had not actually committed this incredible crime (who in their family needed to do such a thing, with all their money? the girl had to be lying, of course), there had been no point in waving the predicament under people's noses.

The problem that only Gordon could wrestle with had been choosing the names of the sixty nonfamily couples to be honored with one of the special shining silver invitations, designed to erupt, upon being opened, with tiny glistening pieces of multi-colored foil that fluttered through the air like bright insects, causing the opener to comprehend immediately that this invitation was for the

party of the year, perhaps of the decade or the century. Victoria's flair for special attention to such details made her parties well-organized, cohesive units of splendid planning that awed the entire town and were the cause for considerable conversation among the country club and political sets for weeks.

Narrowing down the number of politicians to be included had been the first hurdle to be cleared. Since Gordon's losing race for the state senate was barely a year old, he still had felt the need to demonstrate his continuing loyalty, beyond any disappointment he had felt at losing, to those party leaders and cherished colleagues who had backed his effort. After all, he might give it a try again someday. Still, a birthday party was a personal occasion, hardly possessing political significance. Gordon had decided, in the end, to invite only his top contributors, anyone who had given five figures, plus two or three of the key paid staff.

Gordon's favorite tennis and bridge partners had taken up twenty invitations. After totaling the political and partner lists, Gordon had been dismayed to realize that he could invite only eighteen "general category" couples. Choosing those favored eighteen had been his most difficult task, since between them Victoria and Gordon could boast friendship with everyone in the town who could lay claim to old family name, social standing or money.

Gordon had decided that Victoria's opinion was vital after all, and they had derived many hours of pleasure from recounting to each other their favorite anecdotes about the couples on the original list, eliminating them or selecting them on the basis of loyalty, closeness and, certainly not the least consideration, looks. Victoria had wanted women at this party who would wear stunning gowns (and look beautiful in them) while their husbands had to appear in fashionable tuxedos with proper lapels. Gordon, as guest of honor, could wear whatever he liked and had chosen a royal blue velvet tuxedo jacket over standard tuxedo trousers, set off by a golden jacquard cummerbund and matching bow tie. Victoria had kept her dress a secret even from Gordon. No one was to see it until the night of the party, but the guests knew the dress would be incredibly expensive and look it.

Once the eighteen couples had been chosen, it was all Victoria could do not to telephone them immediately and set their minds at ease, knowing how agonizing it would be for them to sit by their mailboxes for another entire month before the good news arrived. But she had practiced her usual restraint, allowing herself only small winks at the lucky people whenever she ran into them at other functions, only a tiny hint that they would be included.

Victoria continued watching the rent-all men until they had finished unloading all of the boxes of silver and

china and crystal before she finished dressing. She intended to supervise personally the laying of the floor over the swimming pool and the erection of the enormous pink and white tents above it. An unforgettable disaster could result if one tipsy guest slipped between the platforms into the pool below and drowned or merely frightened the other guests by screaming for help. There could be not one dangerous crack or ledge in the entire platform. She knew she deserved the compliment when people said, "Victoria thinks of everything."

Something was nagging at her as she dressed to join the workers downstairs. What was it she was supposed to check on this morning? Oh, yes, Cousin Pierce's slide show.

Dear old Cousin Pierce. He was Victoria's favorite Colclough outside of Gordon, certainly the only Colclough who had ever offered to help make one of her galas a triumph. Cousin Pierce had been working for months, compiling slides of Gordon and his dead twin brother Patrick, the former attorney general of the state. He had made slides from old photographs of the two brothers playing together as children, riding horseback, diving off the high board into the shining blue pool at the country club, sitting on their parents' laps, dressed alike in little white sailor suits, on the deck of the Queen Elizabeth. The two boys had looked like twins back then, could hardly be told

apart. They had been twin terrors in tennis tournaments at the club. Pierce, five years older, had fallen naturally into the role of guardian, had for years followed along behind them, insuring their safety.

When Pierce had finished collecting all of the slides, he had arranged them into chronological order and set twin projectors to work in time to recordings of "The Best of Times" and "Those Were the Days." He had previewed the show for Victoria the day before the party, and they had both been gratified to see how smoothly it ran. Victoria had asked him to eliminate one or two slides of Gordon and Cynthia, his first wife, lying on top of each other at the beach or kissing. Victoria had nothing against including pictures of Cynthia; she simply considered it extremely bad taste to remind the audience of the sexual part of their dead marriage. For that part of Gordon's life it would be sufficient reminder to look around at their five children, now grown, some with spouses of their own, or Cynthia herself beside her new husband, a rich barrel manufacturer who was beginning to resemble one of his products. Victoria knew how to be civil without lapsing into vulgarity.

She dialed Pierce's telephone number. When he answered, his voice heavy with sleep, he told her through a yawn, "Now, Victoria, I did exactly what you told me to. Everything's ready to go."

"Thank you, Pierce dear," she said. "I can always

count on you. Oh, Pierce, I can't wait until you see the dessert. It will be the pièce de résistance of the entire evening! Except for the slide show, that is."

Victoria could hear Pierce yawning as she described how the tables would be removed, the deep rose carpet taken up, and a slick dance floor revealed underneath on which guests could dance until the wee hours to Peter Duchin's piano and orchestra. Victoria liked Peter. When it came to making a choice between him and one of the Lester Lanin groups, there simply was no choice. Peter always looked so handsome in his tuxedo, was unerringly correct and stylish in his manners, and paid courtly attention to all the female guests. He was worth every cent he was paid just to hear the stories of his last few parties. Victoria always made sure that Peter had nothing unflattering to tell about her parties or her guests. Well, maybe once in a while one of the guests might provide him with an anecdote, but dear Peter was well aware that she had absolutely no control over the unpredictable humors and impulses of people appearing to be the most trustworthy of guests.

"You just never can tell what even the most reliable person will do if he drinks too much or gets angry or upset, can you, Pierce?"

"That's the truth," Pierce agreed. She was sure Pierce also could recall the free-for-all that had developed in Victoria's dining room one evening when one of

Gordon's business friends, one too many vodka martinis stoking his natural libido, had been caught by his wife with his hand down the front of the low-cut dress on one of Victoria's New York visitors. The woman had fumed right through the hors d'oeuvres and waited until the fish course was served to seize a heavy silver candelabrum and heave it across the table, striking her target in the middle of his balding forehead and staining Victoria's expensive lace tablecloth with blood.

"Let me go, now, Pierce, dear," cooed Victoria. "I have a million things to do before tonight." She was sure he would immediately fall back asleep, which annoyed her. Pierce ought to get up and check the slides one more time.

Inspecting her hair in the gilded Louis Quatorze mirror in the hall, Victoria descended the curving staircase, one hand on the wrought iron railing that twisted cunningly to negotiate the sharp curves of the stairwell. One of the things she loved about this house was the exquisite Carraran marble hall cut in a huge central circle with concentric designs radiating outward, like small waves from a stone dropped into a smooth lake, that led to other parts of the house. At Christmas time, when people dropped in at all hours to see her tree with its magnificent antique decorations from twenty-eight countries, the only unhappiness she felt was that the thirty-foot tall tree, nearly reaching the ceiling on the second floor, covered the

beautiful marble with its lacy branches, making the design nearly invisible. Something was definitely lost when the circular scheme was concealed, even by a showpiece like Victoria's annual Tannenbaum triumph. Oh, well, can't have everything.

"Miz Colclough, can you come down here a minute?" Mamie, her black face twisted into a scowl, stood at the foot of the stairs with her fists clenched. "These mens think they's going to tramp through my clean front hallway with all them tents and mess."

Victoria sighed. Mamie was one of a dying breed, the day worker who, for $25, would come and do all the things Victoria hated, vacuum, iron, polish the furniture, and sometimes even start dinner if she had a few minutes left over. She took pride in her work and made the house shine. Mamie made few demands, and if she wanted those men to carry the tents around the side of the house, then that is what they would have to do. Smiling and gesturing toward the brick walkway that led around the side of the house, Victoria managed to persuade the frowning men that straight through the house was an impossible route, even if it did appear to be a short cut. Grace, grace under pressure, accompanied by a smile and a friendly face, will get you everything you want in this world. Victoria reentered the house, smiling reassuringly over her shoulder at the man in charge.

"Mamie," she called. "Did Mr. Colclough leave me a message about where I can reach him today?"

Mamie, a silver coffee pot in one hand and a grimy cleaning rag in the other, emerged from the kitchen door, her vexation apparent. "Ma'am? You call me?"

"I just wondered if Mr. Colclough left word where he will be today in case I need him for any last minute errands. You know I can't be expected to go running around town on the very day of the party doing little piddling errands, not if everything is to run smoothly."

"No'm, and no'm."

"What does that mean?"

"No'm, he ain't left no message, and no'm, ain't nobody expecting you to run around doing no errands on no party day." She turned and waddled out of sight.

Sassy black bitch. Victoria knew better than to say anything aloud when Mamie was in this sort of temper, which she seemed, increasingly, to be whenever there was extra work. It was not as if she did not receive extra pay and a special uniform with a lacy apron to wear. No one else in the world except Victoria would put up with her big mouth and insubordination. Except, of course, Louise Reed, who had been trying to steal Mamie for years and who thought the black woman's hostile public pronouncements on private matters to be "the cutest thing," especially when they were about Victoria or any of the Colcloughs. Victoria wished

she could find someone to replace Mamie; then she'd give her to Louise and stand back and laugh while Mamie blabbed all of her secrets to the world.

Removing her checklist from her pocket, Victoria proceeded through the house, using her fingers to check for dust, rearranging a flower here and there among the dozen or so bouquets the florist had delivered the day before, making sure matching hand towels had been placed in all guest bathrooms, seeing that space was cleared in the kitchen for the caterer, who had barked that the last time he had done a party for Victoria, her maid had refused to allow enough counter space for his crew to work. Mamie, again being protective of her home territory, was, bless her heart, always watchful that careless people merely passing through her kitchen did not leave a mess for her to clean up, or break anything and hide it for her to take the blame later. No, everything seemed, for once, to be ready.

Mamie was still polishing silver when Victoria passed through the kitchen with her list. She grunted but said nothing to Victoria, being used to this ritual and aware of its necessity.

When everything on the list had a small "V.C." beside it, Victoria checked on the progress of the tent-raisers and locked the back door, just in case one of them, seeing her leave to have her hair done, decided to take the short cut anyway.

* * *

"Victoria, Victoria, can you hear me?" Dozing under the heat and drone of the dryer, Victoria did not wish to be disturbed. She had almost been asleep when Martha Blackwell shook her arm and yelled in her ear. She opened her eyes to see Martha, too much rouge caking her cheeks, as usual, leaning over her.

"Hello, Martha. You're looking very nice." Victoria always made sure that, when she most wanted to hurl an insult, she delivered instead a lovely compliment, surely one of the reasons for her popularity.

"Aren't you excited, Victoria, about tonight? About Gordon's party? I can't believe he's fifty years old!" The old woman tittered behind the towel she was holding. "And what does that make me?"

Old, thought Victoria. Real old. Aloud she said, with a winning smile, "Now, Martha, everyone knows that you are the youngest person in town, an inspiration to the rest of us." She saw the wattles on Martha's neck wobble as the older woman threw her head back and laughed with joy at the compliment. No matter how often she heard it, she still seemed to love the lie, revel in it.

"Can I do anything for you, honey?" she asked.

"No, thanks, Martha, I believe everything's in order."

"It always is, dear. We all envy your perfect parties. Are you sure you aren't related to Perle Mesta?"

Irritated at hearing this charge again, Victoria smiled and said, "If I am, nobody told me about it." She wondered what kind of name Mesta might be. She knew Martha loved insinuating that other people's families might have foreign taints.

"Just teasing, dear. We all know you come to us highly trained in such niceties by your wonderful work with President Johnson's daughters, little Luci Baines and the one that married that Marine who became a governor. Lord knows it would be impossible to have a job like that and not come away with all kinds of diplomatic and social talents. That Gordon knew what a treasure he was getting." She paused and fixed her eyes on Victoria. "I simply cannot understand how you came through all that training without learning how to play bridge. I can't understand that at all."

Victoria gritted her teeth. She had no intention of ever learning to play bridge if to do it she had to listen to inane prattle by vicious women like Martha. Martha and her circle did nothing but play bridge all day, every day, at the country club. What a way to spend one's life.

Victoria forced herself to smile at the old lady. She was determined not to let her spoil this day. She raised her hand to her hair and said, "Oh, Martha, I do

believe I'm dry. Thank you for offering to help. You're too kind, but I don't know of a thing you can do. I'll see you tonight, dear."

With a small wave she crossed the aisle to let Larry comb her out. Larry was all right for touchups, but no one in this town would ever lay scissors or rinse on her head if she had anything to say about it. Victoria flew to New York once a month to Helena Rubinstein's salon to maintain her hair to the degree of perfection she demanded. It was just too bad that Martha was married to a twice-removed Colclough or she would remove her name permanently this very minute from her list of invitees. At any rate she intended to discuss the incident with Gordon. Perhaps he might agree that the family connection was indeed too tenuous to maintain. The thought lifted her spirits as she watched Larry remove the large pink rollers, carefully so as not to pull her hair. He had found out the hard way that hair pullers receive very small tips.

* * *

The first guest to arrive was Cousin Pierce, laden down with boxes of slides and two slide projectors. Victoria, not yet dressed, was mildly annoyed at the doorbell's chime until she remembered that the twin projectors still had to be set carefully in place so that all of the guests

would be able to see at least one of the two large screens she had rented. The rent-all people had suspended the screens from the peak of the tent in such a manner that the viewing surface tilted out slightly over the heads of the audience. Garlands of roses had been strung around the edges of each screen so that, until the surprise was sprung upon the unsuspecting guests, anyone looking skyward and noticing the silver reflecting surfaces might imagine them to be merely part of the party décor.

"Victoria," Pierce puffed under the weight of his burden, "let me set this stuff down and go out to the car for the music. Did you get the big speakers set up?" Worry lines puckered around his mouth and across his perspiring forehead.

"Poor, dear Pierce, of course I did," Victoria said. "You've been working so hard for me. You must know how very much Gordon and I appreciate all your kindness. If this party's a success, it will all be due to your efforts." She followed Pierce out onto the front stoop in her blue satin robe, speaking to his retreating back.

"Well, if it flops, I sure don't want the blame, so kindly don't offer me any credit. It was my pleasure. Like a trip back through time." He slammed the lid of the trunk, handed his car keys to one of the men hired to park cars, and reentered the house. "The place looks great, Victoria."

"Why, thank you, Pierce. Why don't you trot on outside and set up the projectors on those little carts among the flowers, you know, the way I showed you last week. All you have to do is plug them in. I've got to run upstairs right now and tie Gordon's tie. He makes such a mess of it. Oh, Pierce, wait until you see what he's wearing!"

Gordon had always had a taste for preppy clothes, but ever since he had married Victoria, his body had been bedecked in fabrics and colors that some of their friends ridiculed as downright unmanly, pinks and oranges and even bright yellow. Joyner men felt it might be all right for young college and high school kids to sport the latest New York designs but whispered that Gordon looked as if he were trying desperately to hang on to his youth and failing sadly. They did not know what they were talking about. Victoria was only sorry she had been unable to persuade Gordon to put Grecian Formula on his curly gray hair, although recently she had concluded that he appeared more distinguished with the gray.

Pierce had barely finished concealing the wires to the projectors when the doorbell began ringing steadily and guests began arriving. Most of Joyner was aware of Victoria's frequently voiced opinion that invited guests should arrive within fifteen minutes of the time stated on the invitation and her scorn for people who ignored the hostess's wishes. Victoria was glad Pierce was there to walk

around the house greeting and speaking to the guests. It was a tribute to the Colclough family that everyone seemed to have taken particular pains with their clothes, especially the ladies, who looked as if they had stepped from the pages of Vogue or Harper's Bazaar. Such a fashionable panorama was the direct result of Victoria's influence and excellent example. She worried that Gordon looked not unlike an overstuffed peacock as he strutted about shaking hands and kissing cheeks, buttoned up in blue velvet, but she had at least done very well by herself. Her Oscar de la Renta dress rivaled the shimmering crystals in the foyer chandelier for sheer sparkle as she moved graciously from one guest to another, calling everyone by first names, adding a personal remark here and there, a light touch of her hand where appropriate. The entire bodice of the simple black gown was encrusted in small jewels, a thousand prisms that cast tiny rainbows in her wake. Her neck, one of Victoria's vanities, was encircled by a thin ring of diamonds, just enough jewelry not to compete with the dress.

When Victoria saw Dougie and Cat Radford enter, she felt just a slight uneasiness. She really liked the couple, but they had had their problems.

Dougie grabbed Victoria by her tiny waist and lifted her off the floor, carefully kissing her long neck as he set her down, Cat standing to one side smiling indulgently,

an expression she confided to Victoria she had worked to master after years of watching Dougie gush over other women.

Victoria thought that a wife would have to expect a goodlooking man like Dougie to go a little crazy when a pretty woman crawled up on his examining table, smiled and spread her legs. Cat was not unreasonable. She knew when she married Dougie that there would be days when temptation would overwhelm him. She just was not thrilled about having had to move to Joyner from Willettsville just to elude the irate husbands lurking in the bushes around their home. Ever since they had been in Joyner Dougie had either been too scared to be anything but faithful or else he had yearned so hard for social respectability in his middle years that he now forwent his favorite diversion.

Victoria had used Dougie for her Paps and mammograms since the day she had married Gordon, and Dougie had always acted the perfect gentleman with her, except for the day he had commented, as she lay helpless with her feet in the stirrups, just after she had lost her only child, "Good God, Victoria, you shouldn't be having children anyway. You've got the body of a prepubescent child."

Victoria took it as a compliment and told the story to all her friends so they would understand she had no intention of going through that agony again. A lot of people thought Victoria was a flirt, but anyone who knew her per-

ceived that she only did that to make men feel wanted and necessary and that there was nothing serious behind it. Absolutely nothing. Still, Dougie and Cat were types that worried Victoria, might spoil her party if their calm feathers became ruffled. She mentally made a note to keep an eye on them.

A single hour had been allowed for cocktails and for the light, feathery Cheddar puffs and Beluga rounds Victoria had asked the caterer to pass among the guests on small silver trays. She believed fervently in tantalizing the taste buds before a feast, not in dulling them with alcohol and filling tidbits. She was gratified to see that all the guests had found their places at the tables outside by nine-fifteen and that the waiters were placing before them bowls of delicately minted jellied consommé, to be followed by plates of tangy séviche nestled in a bed of curly radicchio with thin lime slices.

Appreciative murmurs floated to her ears from all corners of the tents as she abandoned her own fish course to wander among the tables to speak to people. The weather was perfect, there was no lingering smell from the exterminator's visit to deter moths and mosquitoes, there was no detectable difference in the two shades of pink: Victoria's throat was so full with the exquisite beauty of the scene before her that tiny tears formed in the corners of her eyes, but she maintained her control, as always, re-

turning to her seat beside Gordon in time for the main course. She hated always having to serve either beef or chicken, but Gordon had convinced her that in Joyner anything else would offend more than a few palates, a situation she dared not risk. What she would have given to order ris de veau financière or Eugénie, or delicate little partridges drouant. But she had not dared. Joyner people would have gone about whispering she had served them fried "potteridges" and snickered behind their hands since anyone could get those during bird season. No, she knew that filet would suit everyone, and she satisfied her own gourmet sensitivities by surrounding the lovely rare slices of tenderloin en chemise Strasbourgeoise with glazed baby carrots and slender stalks of young asparagus and one perfect pomme de terre soufflé. She overheard an elderly Colclough at the next table grumbling loudly about "only one potato thing" and smiled, wondering what he would say when the palate-clearing salad course arrived after the meat course. But Victoria had no intention of allowing the provincial palates of Joyner to spoil either Gordon's party or her excellent good humor.

Dessert was served in jet-black darkness to heighten the effect of the flames dancing around the base of the enormous, turreted ice cream castle, complete with spun sugar flags and brandied cherry moat. During the lull while the waiters labored to serve the two hundred guests

with huge bowls of Cherries Jubilee and espresso, Gordon, waiting for the applause and the fading notes of Peter Duchin's fanfare to die down, approached the microphone on the bandstand. As the lights came back on, he called for the crowd's attention.

"Testing, 1-2-3, testing," he said jovially, his lips, too close to the microphone, emitting a piercing whistle that served his purpose.

"It's the birthday boy's turn," he announced. "It's not every day you get to be fifty years old. Half a century, can you believe it?" The guests dutifully applauded and whistled.

"Now I know Victoria requested no gifts--who needs gifts when you have Victoria?--but I believe it is my privilege on reaching the half century mark to offer a small gift to all of you, my best friends, my family, my children, my wives past and present, that will jog your memories about the parallel lives we have been leading, lives that have overlapped here and there as we all make our way through this vale of tears. You will observe that there have indeed been a few tears, but there has also been a lot of laughter and happiness. I could stand up here and put all of you to sleep with anecdotes, but Victoria and Pierce decided that would be too boring, so they have prepared a little audio-visual presentation to commemorate the occasion. Gordon Ratcliffe Colclough, this is your

life!"

The lights dimmed, leaving just enough illumination for the waiters to finish serving. Music from the sound-track of "La Cage aux Folles" blared tinnily from the rented speakers placed here and there among the crowd. The two large screens briefly flashed the word "Childhood" and then began showing, for just a few seconds each, a series of shots of Gordon and Patrick as children.

Patrick, with his golden curls and angelic expression, had been called The Little Colonel for his resemblance to Shirley Temple, and also because he was, from the first, a leader, always captain of this team and that team, always attracting the prettiest girls and having the last say, while Gordon, who adored him as much as the rest of the world did, was content with second best, the leavings of whatever project was currently underway, the girls left crying by the wayside, the leadership roles Patrick had not the time to fill. Even in babyhood when the two brothers had briefly resembled each other, fat little Gordon could be seen puffing along anxiously behind the purposeful strides of Patrick, his total adoration of and trust in his handsome brother conspicuous on his round face. Watching the slides it was clear that the boys' parents, Lucille and Kingsbery, always had their eyes turned in the direction of Patrick, the apple of everyone's eye, the darling of his teachers and of all the relatives in the huge Colclough

family.

As the boys grew to manhood up on the screens, the voices of a feminine Greek chorus, all of the women in the audience, cooing its communal admiration and veneration for Patrick, for both the boys, yielded to sounds of loud sobbing as Patrick's two wives fell into each other's arms in mutual grief as an incredibly handsome adult Patrick, usually with Gordon's smiling face somewhere in the background, began flashing on the screens.

Penny, his first wife, remarried now for years to one of Patrick's childhood friends, was reliving the better times in her youthful first marriage, which had foundered when their fourth child was discovered dead in his crib. She and Patrick had each blamed the other until all the love dissipated in their intense anger and grief. Mary Susan, the second Mrs. Patrick Colclough, had not remarried for some years after Patrick's tragic death from liver cancer at thirty-five, but had now for a year been happily wed to the scion of a local mattress manufacturing family. Their two husbands stood by, patting their shoulders consolingly, as the two women wept for the ancient loss of their adored Patrick.

There were few in the crowd who sat tearless as shots of Gordon, his face twisted in agony as he helped carry his brother's casket down the steps of the State Capitol, were shown slowly, out of sync with the chirrupy music. The

remaining pictures of Gordon, primarily of his losing race for the Senate and of his wedding and reception when he and Victoria were married, glimmered, unwatched by most of the guests, on the twin screens, with a final color shot of Gordon, smiling in his stylish party outfit, first with his arm around Victoria, then alone, staring down on the colorful crowd, now buzzing with anecdotes about Patrick, remembering the wonderful days when they had all known he would, very soon, become the President of the United States. The magical fiery desserts melted in their bowls as they talked, shaking their heads in sadness at all of the memories the slide show had recalled for them.

Victoria and Gordon moved among the tables, speaking to each guest individually, directing the roving photographer to any table not yet preserved on film. Victoria's sequined dress caught the light from the flickering candles as she urged the guests to adjourn to the house briefly while the tables were removed so that dancing could begin. She took the arms of Penny and Mary Susan, still tearful as they talked over old times, and led them toward the nearest powder room where they could repair their faces, wipe them clean of the black streaks of mascara and streaked rouge. As she maneuvered the two women toward the house, she spotted Pierce struggling with the slide projectors.

"Pierce, dear," she said. "Let me carry one of those. I can't tell you how impressed everybody was with your

pictures."

"Worked pretty well, didn't it?" he said.

"Beautifully! You could tell by everyone's reaction how moved they all were." She paused as Pierce set down the projector he was carrying. He wiped the flat of his hand across his sweaty brow.

"Can I just leave these parked here in the hall while I order the car?" he asked.

"Of course. No one will bother them. I could use a few seconds' rest myself. I'll just plop down here in the alcove and catch my breath while you go get the car." She batted her false eyelashes and smiled up at him. "Pierce, do you have to leave so early? I'm counting on at least one dance with you."

"I think I'd better get on home, Victoria. I'm feeling a bit tired." He wiped his brow again and looked at her. "So, they really liked seeing all the old pictures of the boys, huh?"

"It was wonderful. You did a marvelous job, Pierce." Victoria stood on tiptoe and gave him a swift kiss on the cheek. "Gordon and I will never forget it. You really made this party special. Now you run on. I'll wait right here for you." She sank down on the blue velveteen loveseat and kicked off her sparkly shoes.

Pierce went through the front door, leaving it gaping open behind him. Victoria was annoyed. What was it about

men that they could never remember to close a door? He handed his car check stub to the valet parking attendant, then leaned against the brick wall to rest. He rubbed his chest with one hand and wiped his still-wet brow with the other. Victoria thought he looked a bit peaked. She had noticed he had not eaten anything on his plate, but that was hardly unusual. He was always teasing her about her rich party food. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his perspiring face as he peered past the yellow gleam of the courtyard lights into the darkness of the driveway where the attendant could be heard whistling, his shoes clicking on the cobblestones.

Victoria was glad to be off her feet. She stood and checked her hair in the small ornate mirror that hung above the loveseat, then sat down again and sighed. The distant murmur of voices, like the faint humming of bees, was making her sleepy. Down the hall she heard the back door open and close.

"Well, whose birthday are we supposed to be celebrating anyhow?" Cat Radford's elegant and artificial intonations echoed in the empty hall. "I thought this was Gordon's party!" Her whisper was shrill and carried clearly to Victoria's ears.

"Be quiet, Cat," said Dougie. "You've got the biggest mouth in Joyner. It's none of your business. After all, Patrick <u>was</u> his brother."

Cat persisted, her voice dripping with truculence. "Well, damn it, Dougie, Patrick's dead and Gordon's still alive. It seems to me they might have concentrated on Gordon and not felt the necessity of exhuming his illustrious dead brother. It was all more like a wake than a birthday party. And to cap it off, those two bitches bawling all over each other."

"I wish you would keep your voice down," Dougie said. "Most of the people at this party are kin to the Colcloughs in some way. And they seemed to like everything just fine."

"That's because they all liked Patrick better than they ever will like poor old Gordon. Patrick was a winner and Gordon's a loser." Her heels clicked her impatience as she paced the marble floor. It sounded to Victoria as if they were just outside the alcove.

"I feel sorry for Gordon," Cat continued. "He's always walked in Patrick's shadow. You've seen old Mrs. Colclough's house?" She paused briefly. Victoria could hear her sucking on her cigarette and wondered what she was doing with the ashes. "The damned place is a shrine to Patrick, the whole house! There are oil paintings and photographs of him everywhere--framed newspaper headlines and sports trophies and ribbons and medals in every bedroom. I was there for Gordon and Victoria's engagement party, you remember, Dougie, you were out of town and I had

to go by myself?"

Victoria visualized Cat's pouting mouth. Whenever she was in a sulk, which was most of the time, her bottom lip obscured her top one and her eyes narrowed to slits as she twisted her feet.

"Yeh, but I know what the house looks like," Dougie said. "I spent a lot of time there while Patrick was dying, flying back and forth to New York for treatment with old man Colclough. Why he wanted me, I'll never know, unless it was to get proper respect and attention from all those oncologists at Columbia Presbyterian. And he liked me, I suppose, ever since I was called down from Willetts-ville on consultation about Old Mrs. Colclough's problems." Victoria heard Dougie sigh. "The old man would call me in after every trip and try to get me to drink with him. He would start drinking on the plane and try to reach total unconsciousness no more than ten minutes after he staggered in the door." He paused. "It was a real bad time for everybody."

"Honestly, Dougie, you're just like the rest of them." Exasperation hung on her every word. "You can't sit around moaning about something that's over and done with. All of you people ought to be thinking about Gordon tonight. After all, you're supposed to be <u>his</u> friends, too. He's at least here and not six feet under."

"You don't understand." Dougie's voice became gentle

and soft. "Patrick was unique, someone you couldn't forget once you met him, a magnetic, stimulating personality who could captivate your heart and mind in a second if he wanted to. As handsome as a movie star and with more charisma than Jack Kennedy. There isn't a single person here tonight, including Gordon, who didn't love him. And he would have been the President of this country by now, if he hadn't died so young." Dougie's voice broke. Victoria sat unmoving on the edge of the loveseat, holding her breath. She was sure Pierce would stick his head in any moment to retrieve his equipment. But she could see him slumped outside against the wall, still waiting and mopping his forehead.

"Oh, screw who might've been President a hundred years ago! I still ask if there's anyone here tonight who loves Gordon. The ugly duckling. The RE-ject. On his birthday." Victoria was sure Cat was pursing her bright red lips.

"Gordon's got Victoria to love him," said Dougie finally. "You don't need the rest of us if you've got Victoria. Gordon said so himself." He laughed.

"Jesus," Cat said, arranging the rustling fabric of her skirt. "I think I'll go find Gordon and let him know that I care, at least." As her heels clicked down the hall, she said loudly, "And don't think the whole town doesn't know how many men Victoria the whore loves besides

Gordon, including you, sweetheart."

Victoria sat like stone until she heard Dougie's slow, reluctant steps follow Cat out to where Peter Duchin's orchestra was well into its first set. She stood up and moved to where she could survey the empty hallway, then emerged slowly from the alcove into the foyer, her features twisted in anger.

"Bitch!" she said. "Those ungrateful bastards! Who the hell do they think they are?" She stood very still for a minute until the heat left her reddened face. She smoothed her hair briefly, straightened her skirt and started down the hall toward the open back doors and the loud music of the orchestra. Gordon, surrounded by a crowd of his political friends, came through the doors laughing and talking excitedly. Victoria watched his face change as she approached him, his head cocked in quizzical wonder at something behind her.

Turning, Victoria saw Pierce entering the hallway, his wet handkerchief dangling from his fingers, the other arm outstretched towards her and Gordon, his eyes unfocused and teary. As they hurried toward him, he sank to his knees on the cool white marble, his eyelids puffy and fluttering.

"Patrick," he whispered as he sank to the floor.

Victoria, her hot breath like an August breeze across Pierce's still face, whispered back to him, "Oh, no, Pierce, not you, too. Not you."

SERPENT'S TOOTH

Mary Sue rinsed the last glass and set it in the rack to drain. She trembled with anger. Eighteen sticky, dirty glasses set just anywhere, all over the house! On the basement steps, sweating up against her hardbacks on the bookshelf, leaving white rings on the new mahogany coffee table, even outside on the brick wall next to the carport. She had begged those boys to use just one glass a day each for water while the dishwasher was broken, or take one of the little clear plastic cups she had stacked beside the sink in plain view, but either they forgot or they just didn't care how long she had to stand on that hard terrazzo floor with her back killing her and the place in her mouth where the gold inlay had come out feeling like she had a knife stuck in her tooth. Being home for summer vacation didn't make them guests in the house, like it was some motel and she was their maid. There was no justice in the world. And after all she had done for them.

Now they had gone off to play video games somewhere without even taking out the trash. She would have to struggle down the high back steps carrying all three of the leaking paper bags filled with <u>their</u> garbage--pizza boxes

with half-eaten slices glued to the lids, crushed Dr. Pepper cans, and ice cream cartons dripping melted Burgundy Cherry. Every time she had to do this job herself she ruined whatever she was wearing and had to change clothes, and this morning she didn't have time to change. Having to clean up behind them was causing her to run late.

Ever since those two went off to college they had the idea that chores were just a disagreeable part of their past lives, discarded like holey t-shirts or tires with no tread left. After all, they weren't being paid allowances any more, so why did they need to do those little jobs they got paid for in high school? They knew good old Dad, anxious for them to stay in school, would still come through with tuition money, and they both had jobs at school to pay for their parties and clothes and dates.

They had driven off leaving their two old cats and the ancient dog for her to look after, to feed and brush and take for shots. And with her allergy to animal hair. Luke and Sugar and Bill had been bought to help the children develop responsibility, but the older they had become the more the boys had ignored the poor animals, and now they had been abandoned without so much as a goodbye kiss or a final pat. Mary Sue had been unable to stop sneezing for two hours after the last time she had groomed Bill the dog. What a sad animal he was, fat and bleary-eyed, imprisoned out back on a steel cable in his concrete run, not even up

to barking at strangers any more. Preston never took him hunting any more, said Bill was too old even to roll his eyes in the direction of birds, much less stiffen his old drooping bones into a genuine point. Poor thing ought to be put to sleep, but every time she brought it up, Preston asked her when she would like to be put to sleep, said she herself wasn't able to hold her point any too well these days either.

She hated to admit it, thought she would never see the day, but she would be glad when Pres Jr. and Pete left to go back to school. The mess they made was more than she could bear. She had been thinking about having the couch in the den covered, if she could find the right material, but there was no use spending the money as long as they and their careless friends flopped down on it with their muddy shoes on. And there was no reason to have their bathroom ceiling scraped and repainted as long as they came home summers and took half hour steaming showers that made the paint peel off in little curls that floated to the floor like dandruff. She'd just have to wait until they graduated and got jobs and went off to live in their own places where they could make all the messes they wanted to. She was sure they'd walk right around even their garbage, too, until the stink of rotten meat forced them to take it out. There was no teacher like experience. She could talk herself purple in the face and they would never hear a word

she said.

Mary Sue took off her apron and folded it in a neat square, first scraping at a small splotch of hardened tomato sauce on the pocket. Opening her purse, she checked to make sure she had everything she would need. Then she reached into a cabinet for a black plastic leaf bag, stuffed all three bags of garbage inside it and closed the top tightly with a plastic tie. She bumped the cumbersome bag down the steep back steps and crammed it into one of the new cans on wheels the city was requiring everyone to use now. At least this way she kept the dripping wet leftovers off her clean dress even if she did have to waste a perfectly good leaf bag.

Climbing back up the steps made her tired. She had been unable to sleep the night before. A little after one she had awakened from that same dream, the one she had all the time now about a man with a stocking over his head who stuck a gun in her face and gave her orders she couldn't understand. "Take off that mask so I can hear you," she kept saying. The man just kept on yelling and pointing, but she had her glasses off and couldn't see what he was pointing at. This continued until her frustration and fear grew so great that she woke up. It was the same every time. She couldn't get back to sleep for hours after she had that dream.

After she had checked all the windows to make sure

they were locked, and double-checked all the doors, she got into the car and drove down Mulberry to the expressway entrance. Ever since the city had built the interstate extension that circled the city, getting downtown to offices had been a lot easier. She had not been happy when they started taking people's houses away from them (even if it was for a good price) and pouring asphalt and concrete and creating great big dirt clouds that drifted as far as her own home, covering everything in red dust and stinking up the air with the smell of tar. But that had been five years ago, and now she was grateful to be able to get downtown so quickly. Dr. Friedman had stubbornly remained in his Main Street office when other medical people were moving out to complexes in suburbs near popular shopping malls. He believed that abandoning the city professionally was the same as laying the foundation for a ghetto, and he did not want to see his home turned into one big ghetto like Cleveland and Detroit and Chicago.

She was really fond of Dr. Friedman. He was a man of principle and character. And such a handsome man not to be married. She only hoped Pres Jr. and Pete would turn out half as nice as he had. He had been married when he first set up practice fifteen years earlier, but things had turned sour and he and his wife had parted company. He had told all his patients he was glad they didn't have any children to be hurt by the divorce, which made it better

but still not right. Mary Sue had kept hoping he and his pretty wife would patch things up, but it was not to be. She always asked him if he had heard from his wife, if there was any chance they might get back together again. But he seemed not to be interested in that or in getting remarried either, not after making such a big mistake the first time.

"Ouch!" she said as her snaketooth throbbed painfully, its nerve bared to the wind rushing into the car window. She called it a snaketooth instead of a dogtooth, like most people. Canines, she remembered, not dogteeth. But it had always looked to her more like those fangs snakes have, the long scary kind they showed when they were rearing back to strike.

She closed her mouth and poked her tongue into the hole the gold inlay had left when it got stuck in a Caramello. She had been so mesmerized watching a chase scene on TV that she had chomped down too hard on the candy and jerked the inlay right out. After the last time, Dr. Friedman had warned her to be careful with sticky things and hard food like apples. He was so nice. He always held her elbow when she crawled out of the chair after her cleaning, always said to call him if she had any trouble at all. Now she was going to have to 'fess up how she had ignored his good advice, how careless she had been. But still it was lucky for her she had been chewing a sticky

Caramello: at least she hadn't swallowed the inlay this time and been forced to collect all her dumps for days and dig for it with toothpicks like last time. When she had finally found the tiny piece of gold, shining up out from its awful-smelling hiding place among yellow niblets of corn and undigested nuts, she had felt like a prospector. "Eureka!" she had cried. Preston had made a face and told her he wasn't sleeping in the same bed with a woman who played with her own shit. She was glad the boys hadn't been there to hear him talking dirty like that.

The inlay was wrapped tightly in a pink Kleenex and rested safe in the breast pocket of her dress. Thank goodness it could just be glued back in again and she wouldn't have to wait a month while a new one was made.

Mary Sue parked in the new high-rise deck next door to Dr. Friedman's building, checked her brakes and used one of the plastic tunnelways connecting the deck to the sponsoring offices rather than cross the street in the thick city traffic. Modern architects thought of little things like crossovers to make life safer. She wondered why they hadn't thought of them years before. It seemed so obvious.

When she opened the door to Dr. Friedman's waiting room, Mary Sue saw that it was crowded, all the seats taken except for one next to a young mother with two small boys sliding up and down her bare legs and crawling off and on her lap. Her short white skirt was wrinkled and had wet

pink spots where the two boys had drooled as they sucked on the cherry lollipops stuck in their mouths. Mary Sue could smell the cherry flavor as they followed her to the receptionist's window and stood up close to her while she wrote her name neatly on the patient registry. She was proud of her handwriting.

"Good to see you again," she said to the receptionist, even though she wasn't sure it was the same girl as last time. She just wanted to make sure the girl realized she was a regular, that she had been here before. "All I need is for the doctor to glue this gold inlay back in. It won't take him a minute." She patted the pocket where the inlay nestled, wrapped snugly in a tissue.

The receptionist smiled and said, "Have a seat. Doctor will be with you as soon as possible."

Mary Sue wedged herself into the empty chair between the wall and the young mother. The two boys reminded her, with their blond hair and blue eyes, of Pres Jr. and Pete when they were this age. They stood in front of her sucking on their candy, staring.

"How old are your little boys?" Mary Sue said pleasantly to the mother, who was trying to sneak a look at People magazine while the boys were distracted.

"Two and three," she said, not looking up. "They're not twins." Mary Sue smiled. She could tell the woman had been asked that question enough times already. They looked

more like twins than Pres Jr. and Pete though, except one was slightly shorter and chunkier than the other. He seemed to be the bully of the two, even now was pushing against his brother with one stubby, muscular little leg. But she could tell they weren't twins. Mary Sue knew twins when she saw them.

"What school do you boys go to?" asked Mary Sue. She always used this question with small children. They usually thought it was hysterical that she would think they were old enough for school.

The two boys stared at her. Neither of them said anything. Cherry-red streaks ran down their chins, had already stained their little t-shirts.

"Cat got your tongue?" she said.

The two boys began pushing up against their mother again, their feet slipping over against Mary Sue, picking her stockings and scuffing her shoes. She had just polished them that morning, so she tucked them up over the rung of her chair. The shorter boy suddenly began walking around the room, grabbing at plant leaves in a frenzy and tearing off small bits, pushing magazines off tables and stepping on any foot not tucked back like Mary Sue's. He seemed to be following some private plan of destruction, whispering to himself as he marched in the same pattern over and over, accumulating a thick pile of leaf pieces in his fat little hand.

"Eric, you stop that," said his mother. "Get a magazine and come on over here and I'll read to you."

The little boy's angry shriek was so shrill it made Mary Sue's tooth throb. She rolled her eyes at the other patients as he continued his march. In his wake Mary Sue saw pink splotches from the lollipop soiling the green tweed carpet. She looked to see what there was in the wooden magazine rack that hung high up on the wall, out of the reach of children. Only The New Yorker, Time and People. Nothing to interest a child. Eric's brother was whining to his mother questions about what the doctor was going to do to his teeth. "I don't want to," he said over and over.

"Jess," said his mother, "you have to unless you want to grow up with crooked old teeth that fall all over each other. Then you'll have to have all of them pulled out like Uncle Jimmy and get false teeth."

"I don't want to," said Jess.

Eric was methodically walking to all three doors and trying the doorknobs. "Open up," he shouted. The receptionist leaned out her window and said, "Mrs. Greenbaum, he's ready for you." An elderly lady with a cane made her way carefully around Eric into the inner offices. He threw the handful of torn plant leaves at her back as she went through the door. Mary Sue wished he was hers just for a few minutes. He wouldn't do that twice.

"You, too, Mrs. Poe," said the receptionist. The mother took tight hold of Jess's sticky hand and half-dragged him toward the door, Eric prancing behind, his little butt wagging as he bobbed up and down, back and forth, through the door.

"Well, I believe things will be a little more quiet now," said Mary Sue to the four people still in the waiting room. None of them even looked up at her, but they did look up a few seconds later when a red-faced young man, his curly blond hair drooping down in his wild-looking eyes, stuck his head in the door leading to the hall. He looked around the room, then let go the door and disappeared. Mary Sue could hear his tennis shoes thumping against the carpet as he ran down the hallway.

"Guess he didn't find whatever it was he was looking for," she said cheerfully to the other patients. This time they all looked at her but still no one said anything. Mary Sue took a New Yorker and thumbed through it looking at the cartoons. She didn't think they were very funny. None of them seemed to have much point. She sighed and leaned her head sideways against the wall and closed her eyes. Her tooth was really hurting now. She felt for the gold inlay in her breast pocket. It was still there, safely wrapped in tissues. She had almost dropped off to sleep when she heard the receptionist calling her name.

"Oh, my gracious," she said, embarrassed. She won-

dered if she had been snoring. Preston had complained that every time she closed her eyes lately she sounded like a hog in heat, snorting loudly through her nose because of her allergies stopping everything up. The other people looked up at her as she made her way through the door, but none of them smiled. Friendly bunch, she thought.

The receptionist led her into the small room in the back and took her purse and set it on the floor. "Doctor will be with you in a minute," she said, returning to her cubicle down the hall. Dr. Friedman's voice was droning in the larger office next door. Mary Sue could hear the little boys knocking things over and squealing. She thanked her lucky stars they weren't hers. At this age, hers had at least been better trained, better behaved. Still, they seemed to have outgrown all that training since they got to be big shot smarty-pants college men. They didn't think she knew anything any more, and when they'd been little like these children they had hung on every word she said. Well, she had news for both of them. She'd been around a while, long enough to know that no-trump outranked suit bids, where the Big Dipper was, and a whole lot more than that.

The young mother walked into the hall with the children clutching at her skirt. "When will I hear from you?" she said.

"I'll call you soon," said Dr. Friedman in a low

voice, almost a whisper. He put his hand on the young mother's shoulder and smiled down at her. "You two guys take good care of your pretty mom," he said to the children as he ushered them all out the back exit.

"Well, well, well," he said to Mary Sue as he entered the office where she was leaning back in the dental chair. "It looks like you've done it again. Shame on you. What were you eating this time?"

Mary Sue smiled up at him. "This time I was lucky. It was a Caramello."

"What's so lucky about that?" he asked, fiddling with the pile of shining silver picks on his tray. "You lost your inlay again, didn't you?"

"Well, yes," she said, "but I didn't have to go fish in the toilet to find it this time." She giggled. "It caught in the candy and I didn't swallow it."

"Thank God for small favors," said Dr. Friedman, pulling on rubber gloves. He and his hygienist had begun using thin, pale ivory-colored surgical gloves about a year ago after someone in a lab somewhere caught AIDS from touching an infected person's blood. He had told Mary Sue he didn't really think you could get AIDS that way, but people needed to feel they were protected so he wore them for his patients' peace of mind. Mary Sue thought the gloves smelled and felt awful, but she sure didn't want AIDS. Everybody just assumed you were queer if you got

AIDS. It was so wonderful the way Dr. Friedman explained everything to her. He was so caring, so polite. She hoped Pres Jr. and Pete always acted nice to strangers even if they couldn't bring themselves to act that way to her. She stretched her mouth as wide open as she could for Dr. Friedman to clean out the aching stump of a tooth. She was anxious to be cooperative to anyone who showed her the attention and care Dr. Friedman had always shown to her.

"There you are, you son of a bitch!" A man's voice from behind Dr. Friedman's back startled Mary Sue, who was concentrating on forcing herself to relax for the ordeal ahead.

Dr. Friedman turned, holding his gloved hands up in the air. The small red rubber bulb that blew air into her tooth fell out of his hand and bounced on the floor. He looked frightened. The man standing in the doorway was the same young man who had stuck his head into the waiting room earlier. His face was even redder now, angrier. His features worked comically. He was pointing a small chrome automatic pistol at Dr. Friedman. In his large fist it looked ridiculous, like a woman's gun.

"Now, Ted," said the doctor, "don't do anything stupid."

Mary Sue could hear the sounds of people scrambling about down the hall, probably the receptionist and the technician trying to get out of the office so they wouldn't

get shot.

"You're the one did something stupid, you bastard," said the young man. He pointed the gun at Dr. Friedman's chest, his hand trembling slightly. "You don't go around fucking people's wives and not expect to pay for it."

"You're making a mistake," said the doctor. "Nothing like that happened."

"Come on, man, there's no mistake. She just told me, you dumb fool. She told me all about it. Asked me for a goddamned divorce right out in the goddamned hall."

Mary Sue saw beads of sweat running down Dr. Friedman's face. He was still standing with his gloved hands halfway up, as if he were being robbed, his mouth hanging slack.

"Now, young man," she said, putting out her hand like a traffic policeman. She tried to slide out of the chair.

"Shut up, you old biddy," the young man snarled.

Mary Sue was not about to sit there and watch while this lunatic waved a gun at her and Dr. Friedman and called them names. Who did he think he was anyhow? It wasn't <u>his</u> office. She didn't even know him.

"Just a minute, now," said Mary Sue, struggling up out of the chair. "You can't expect us to sit here and. . . ."

The gun went off and Dr. Friedman, a funny look in his eyes, fell back against the wall and began to slide toward the floor. There was blood all over his white jacket.

Mary Sue tried to pull herself up by holding onto the instrument tray. The tray swung crazily to one side and cracked against the wall. She fell back into the chair, kicking the tray with one foot. She was so annoyed and embarrassed at herself for being so clumsy that she barely noticed the young man run out.

She got down from the chair. Her gold nugget was lying on the floor next to Dr. Friedman. She picked it up and stuck it safely back in her pocket before she started trying out her CPR, trying to blow life back into poor Dr. Friedman. It was funny how she had had these wistful little dreams about him being her third son, the perfect one, taking care of her in her old age. Not now. Not any more. Not since she had found out what a runaround he was. It was all too upsetting, too upsetting for words. When she got home, and God only knew when she would get home now, she would really have some story to tell Preston and the boys. And she bet they'd listen to her this time, hang on every pearl that dropped out of her mouth.

FAULKNER'S BABY BOY

The first phone call came at two in the morning. Her voice was gravelly and thick with whiskey, and until she began cursing Snopes I had no idea who she was.

"That bas'ard's out there barking his goddamn butt off," she said. "You stop him. Right this damn minute, you hear me?" Her words rose and fell like sound from a warped record.

I cocked my head to listen for Snopes's bay but could hear nothing through the open bedroom window. Cradling the phone between my shoulder and my ear, I crawled out of bed and peered out into the cool spring night. The bright red azaleas I had planted that day along the walkway to the kennel had faded to pink in the light from the full moon.

Glass shattered at her end of the phone. "Made me drop my goddamn drink," she muttered.

I handed the phone to Dave, who had turned over onto his back, his sleep-swollen eyes now half open. The moon shining through the skylight above lit his profile as he sat up and yawned. "Who is it?" he whispered. I knew he thought it was one of his clients. His law practice was corporate, mostly tax and securities work, but sometimes

one of the rich people he represented would call him at two or three in the morning in a panic over some personal crisis, like the wife walking out, or a teenager in the lockup for drugs or drunk driving.

"Mrs. Gathright, I think. It sounds like her."

"Oh, God, what could she want at this hour?"

We had been in the new house only two months, but at a welcoming party given for us by a neighbor Mrs. Gathright had arched her painted eyebrows at every answer we had given to her nosy questions.

"Where do you say you come from originally?"

"You couldn't be connected to the Westmoreland County Ryans by any chance, could you?"

Her puffy-lidded eyes had narrowed as she tracked us around the room. A small-boned woman in a tight black dress, large diamonds flashing at her neck and fingers, she inquired about our children, the dog, Dave's work, my hobbies, her lip curled. At first her antagonism had unnerved me, but the other neighbors said to ignore her. Brian Stewart, a frail elderly man who had the house on the other side of her, had chortled and said, "That Mary's a real character, you understand, but she does have a little problem handling her liquor. Don't worry about it. Every time she gets on one of her benders, she has to pick on somebody." He had smiled indulgently as his wife Carolyn shook her head back and forth and rolled her blue eyes in

sympathy.

"That old biddy makes me mad as hell," I'd said to Dave on the way home. "Who does she think she is, nosing around about our ancestors, making those snotty remarks?"

"Why let her bother you?" he had said. "People with that kind of money say and do exactly what they want to. And they don't really care what you think. You know that." He had had this tired look on his face I know real well after twelve years. The frown lines in his forehead had looked like deep ditches.

Remembering this, I pitched the telephone across the bed to Dave and crawled back into bed.

"Mrs. Gathright, Dave Ryan. What can I do for you?" Somehow he made his voice sound alert, interested. I could hear her husky drone rising and falling and sputtering like an airplane in trouble. Every once in a while Dave would say "uh-huh" or "m-m-m" but she didn't give him a chance to say much of anything. I didn't hear a single bark out of Snopes the whole time.

Dave threw back the covers and began pacing back and forth between the window and the bed. "Our dog's not making any noise, Mrs. Gathright," he said, finally. From clear across the room I heard her scream that he was a lying son of a bitch. Dave scratched his head and yawned.

"Hang up on her," I hissed. I was so mad I had hopped up on my knees.

He switched on the light and began poking his feet into his slippers. "I'll go out and get him right now," he said, hanging up the telephone. "If we're going to get any more sleep tonight, I've got to bring Snopes in the house."

"But he's not barking," I protested. "Why didn't you tell her it must be somebody else's dog up the hill that she's hearing?" Far off in the distance I had finally caught the faint yawp of another dog.

"It's easier this way," he said, straightening his twisted pajama pants. "You can't win a pissing contest with a skunk."

In a few minutes he struggled into the room with Snopes straining against the leash, slobbering and leaping joyously, jumping up against Dave and licking his face. On his hind legs he was almost as tall as Dave.

"Get down, dog," he said. "Have I got to tie you down?" He turned to me and pleaded, "Can we let him in bed with us just this once?"

"No way," I said. In the past few years I had developed an allergic reaction to animal hair. Snopes was a long-haired English setter just starting his spring shed, and I knew if I let him roll his hairy body all over the bed I would sneeze and ooze from the eyes for a week.

"Put him on the back stairs," I said, pointing down the hall. I didn't like being forced to bring him in the house. It was a bad precedent.

Dave had hunted since he was a kid, and he did not want our move into town to keep him from doing the one thing that took him away from his work and city tensions. Ever since we had been married, he had always kept a dog, usually an English setter, but he had had real bad luck with them. They had all either gotten sick and died or been run over or stolen.

Snopes wasn't the handsomest dog we had ever owned, but he had lineage to boast about and interesting origins. When William Faulkner, the writer, moved to Charlottesville, one of the things he did besides booze and lecture occasionally was raise bird dogs. We bought one of his puppies and named him after one of Faulkner's characters. When we told Mr. Faulkner what we had decided to call the pup, he didn't smile, just commented, "Well, I'll take that as a compliment, even though he looks more like a Faulkner than a Snopes." It was true. With his white hair next to the pup's snowy head as he whispered goodbye to him, I thought I could see a family resemblance.

"Goodbye, little boy," he had told the pup, nuzzling him. "Take care of my baby," he'd said to me. "I know how you mothers must feel the first day of kindergarten. I hate to see every one of 'em go."

Since William Faulkner himself had charged me with taking care of Snopes, I intended to, especially against this unfair attack by our ill-tempered neighbor, but my

allergy from Snopes's shedding hair and the doggy smell in the back hall and stairs got to me, and I couldn't control my sneezing and sniffing.

"I need my sleep," Dave complained. "You'll just have to sneeze. I can't go out and earn money if I don't get my sleep."

Each morning I would lead Snopes back out to his pen, a fenced concrete run where his house still overflowed with cedar shavings from the winter. I vacuumed up the dog hair matted in the back stairs carpet, but I still sneezed all day. After a week of this I decided to chance leaving him outside again for the night. For a while this worked out.

Then we began to hear from Mrs. Gathright about once a month. She ran in cycles with the moon. I had always loved the full moon, loved to watch it float through the distant sky. It stirred memories of courting days and old romances. Now I watched it through the skylights as it inched past, prodding Mrs. Gathright's demons.

Late one afternoon she and her drinking buddies, all widows, were sitting in a circle on her back terrace surrounded by her outsized azaleas, still with a little bloom on them, more than could be said for the ladies. I was out back hosing down Snopes's pen in my jeans and the Superman t-shirt the boys gave me for Mother's Day. I had finished and was winding up the hose when Mrs. Gathright yelled, "Hey, you! You down there!" I looked up the hill and

waved at her and her friends. "You'd better not let that terrible hound make any noise tonight. He kept me awake again last night." She pointed one long red-nailed finger at Snopes, who was standing a cardinal up a nearby tree.

"No problem, Mrs. Gathright," I hollered, setting an amiable look on my face. "We'll keep him inside." Bitch, I thought. I toyed briefly with the idea of turning Snopes loose. He would scatter that covey of old biddies real fast.

Her voice floated down the hill clearly as she turned to her friends and said, "That little countrified twit thinks she can move onto a lovely street like this, build that ridiculous looking house and then drag all her damned farm animals down here with her. They have completely ruined my view and my sleep. I'm not going to have it!" They snickered and looked down at me over the tops of their drinks. I decided Dave would not be happy if I got into an argument with that many Country Club of Virginia ultrasuede suits, so I fastened the gate and wandered down the driveway to wait for the boys to arrive home from school. They were the only other "farm animals" besides Snopes that we had dragged with us when we moved to this street.

The reason we had moved into town was to be closer to the boys' school. I was tired of driving them thirty miles into town and back every day. It was taking too much out of my life. Dave chose the area because it looked as near

to country as any place in town could be expected to look, with tall oaks and elms everywhere. We had scrimped to afford the little lot that backed up to Mrs. Gathright's property.

Most of the people nearby, now in their sixties or seventies, had owned their homes forty or fifty years, their children long ago grown and scattered. At the welcoming party they gave us, we had felt a little out of place, or at least out of time, since we were the age their children might now be. But I was frankly tired of being snubbed by bossy old people with Civil War ancestors and inherited money who had nothing to do with their leisure time and became enraged at the sight of anything modern.

Our new home had a flat roof and was only one story high. Dave had the architect install arched glass skylights in every ceiling to give a look of height and to let in the little bit of sun that peeked through the thick foliage of the tall trees around the house. While it was being built, several of the neighbors stopped by whenever we came by the site to tell us it was "certainly different" from all the other houses. They were still a lot more polite than Mary Gathright, who strolled down the hill one day to announce that we had ruined the looks of the neighborhood altogether by building "that monstrosity."

"Aren't you nervous about all that glass right over your head?" Carolyn Stewart asked me, giggling. "I'd be

worried somebody might see me running around in the buff." Laughing, I assured her that only squirrels and helicopters ever got to see that. The Stewarts were the nicest old couple in the neighborhood. Carolyn was always stopping by with brownies for the boys, saying how it took her back a few years to see them whiz down the hill on their bikes. She had had three sons also, who were always getting into scraps with Mary Gathright's three when they were small children. She said the Gathright boys were "disturbed."

Mrs. Gathright called every few weeks, several times during a night, to scream drunkenly at whoever answered the phone. I started laying the phone down and throwing a pillow over it so I could get back to sleep, but Dave, polite to his elders as always, would sit there, if he answered the phone, and listen somberly, mutely, until she finished. He wouldn't let me unplug the telephone because a client might want to reach him. We would bring Snopes in the house for a few nights and that would shut her up for a while, which we never understood because sometimes a Lab that lived half a mile up the hill would be moaning and whining in the night, and sometimes there was not a sound to be heard in the stillness except for an occasional whippoorwill or an owl. Something about the dog and our different house together focused her rage on us whenever she drank into the night and wandered sleepless and alone through that big house. Just before going to bed, I often

would glance up and see her dark, still silhouette at a window, like Tony Perkins' mother in "Psycho." It gave me the willies.

In the fall, when the leaves carpeted the ground so thick and fast I couldn't keep up with them, she called me once, sober, during the day to complain that I really should hire a lawn service if I couldn't get my "lazy sons" to help rake up the leaves. "That roof of yours is a disgrace and an eyesore to the rest of us," she said.

"My boys stay at school until after dark for sports, Mrs. Gathright," I told her. "But they help out on weekends." As far as I was concerned it was none of her business, but I was trying to be cooperative for Dave's sake. He said to be polite. I was being polite.

"It's good for children to do hard work," she said. "My father always insisted we do the hardest jobs around the house before we were paid our allowances. He believed it was a debt we owed him and those others who preceded us, our ancestors who were forced to live such terribly deprived lives. It was a small ceremonial recognition of the hardships they went through." She paused for a moment, then asked, "Speaking of our ancestors, do you meet the qualifications for D.A.R. or U.D.C. membership? I know you don't attend the meetings."

"I really have no idea, Mrs. Gathright," I answered. I figured this was her idea of being friendly. "I've never

had my family line traced. Dave goes to the annual Sons of the Revolution dinner, but I've never been much of a joiner. . . ."

"Well, that is a grave mistake. If you do happen to qualify, it would be in your best interests to register your genealogy with the secretary and get on the rolls. Especially if your husband is a Son. Men are defined, my dear, by the women who share their lives. It is your duty to make your husband look as good as you can. And I have never heard of anyone qualified for the Daughters who didn't join." She puffed breathily into the telephone.

"I leave all that historical stuff to Dave and Snopes," I said.

"What's that wretched dog got to do with this?" she snarled.

"Snopes has wonderful papers," I said. "He's A.F.S. and a direct descendant of William Faulkner to boot."

There was a silence on the line.

"You know," I continued, "the famous writer, William Faulkner? He's from Mississippi, but he lives in Charlottesville now and lectures at THE University. We bought Snopes from him."

Mrs. Gathright made a choking noise, as if she were strangling. "Young woman," she shouted, "I do not appreciate your making light of the Daughters. I was trying to give you some good advice. Who cares about some writer

from Mississippi? Instead of trying to be smart with me, and stomping around your disgraceful yard in those tight t-shirts and faded blue jeans, you should spend your time finding out what your dear sweet husband has been up to lately." Her breath came in short, raspy spurts. I didn't say anything.

"What about that?" she asked. "Does he always arrive home after midnight?" Dave had been slaving away on a big securities case and was staying at the office late.

"He's real busy these days," I said.

"So I hear. But I'll bet you don't know with whom. And doing what." She chortled low in her throat and rattled the ice in her afternoon drink so I could hear it over the telephone.

"I obviously know things you don't know, sweetie," she continued, when I didn't answer. "Some of my best friends are your husband's partners, and they come over here and tell me all the dirt on everybody down on Main Street."

I still said nothing. "Are you there?" she snarled.

"Yes," I said, "but it's not real clear what you're talking about, so maybe I'd better have Dave call you when he gets home so you can discuss it with him." She slammed the telephone down so hard it cracked in my ears like a gun shot.

When Dave came home I confessed to him what had happened, even though I was unsure myself exactly what I had

been trying to do, baiting the old lady like that. She was bringing out the worst in me.

"I swear I wasn't deliberately trying to antagonize her," I said. "I was only making a little joke."

"Oh God," he said, "we're in for it now. The woman's not maniac enough. You had to go stir her up worse." He rubbed at his temples.

"What about what she said about you?" I asked. "Is it true?" I glared at him.

"Jesus Christ, of course not," he shouted. "You're letting that old drunk get to you, can't you see that? She's trying to make trouble any way she can."

"She sounded like she knew what she was talking about. I wish I'd asked a few pointed questions while I had her on the line."

"I don't need to be picked on like this. I have to take enough crap off my clients and partners. I sure as hell don't need any from you."

"All right, for God's sake," I said. "If you're screwing around, I'll find out about it sooner or later. I won't need Mary Gathright to tell me."

Dave was right. The old witch was getting to me. I didn't really think Dave was playing around, but it touched a nasty little nerve in me to know she was going around telling people he was. When she called that night around three o'clock, I was ready for her. I took the phone off

the hook and threw a comforter over it. Her voice floated up through the layers of goose feathers and down the hill in the moonlight as she shrieked out the window for us to pick up the goddamned telephone or else. At five-thirty she finally stopped screaming, or passed out.

I polled a few of the neighbors, asking them if they had any complaints about Snopes barking. They all said they never heard anything and assured me that Mrs. Gathright's "little problem" made her imagine things.

"But why is it always us?" I asked Carolyn Stewart. "What is it about us that makes her so angry?"

"Well," she said, thinking, "you're new. That's one thing. Your house is different, that's another. But I think the reason she picks on you all the time is that your family, with the three little boys, reminds her of times she'd like to forget."

"What times?"

"Now, I can't say any more than that. Just don't worry about it. She'll wind down sooner or later." She patted me on the hand in a reassuring manner. I was not reassured.

* * *

The boys had been begging for a kitten, so I drove over to the S.P.C.A. one afternoon to pick one out. When I

told the volunteer my address, she said, "Oh, I know where that is. One of our biggest donors, our former president, lives near you. Mary Gathright. Do you know her?"

"She used to be president of the S.P.C.A.?" I had decided Mrs. Gathright hated all animals since she didn't have any of her own. I told the lady what had been going on.

"Oh, I kno-o-ow it," she said. "Isn't it a shame? She does this sort of thing all the time. She has this little drinking problem, you know, and doesn't have any idea what she's doing. It's so pitiful. I feel so-o-o sorry for her." I tucked the soft calico kitten under my arm and left, feeling sorry for myself and angry at all the people who were so quick to forgive Mary Gathright for everything just because she inherited her father's money.

I dreamed of hauling Mrs. Gathright into court for harassment but figured the judge would turn out to be just another of her friends and acquaintances and I would be the one thrown in jail for disturbing the peace.

Dave said, "You're a hundred percent right about that. With her money she can buy or manipulate anybody in this town. You've already managed to send her on a rampage about you, you know. She's been shooting off her mouth about you and Snopes to Jack Harris and Buford Scoggins and even old Stringfellow."

Jack Harris, one of his older partners, in his sixties

like Mrs. Gathright, had dated her when she was a debutante. He said the reason he never grew very fond of Mary was that she was overly possessive and demanding, always insisting on having her way. He said she reminded him of one of those feisty little terriers that nip and hang on stubbornly to your pants leg with tiny sharp teeth even while you're kicking at them. After a summer in Illinois he had announced his engagement to the daughter of a prominent Chicago family. Mary and her mother accepted Jack's invitation to the wedding, but showed up dressed in mourning veils and black fingernail polish and lipstick. Jack's bride was unable to forget it, couldn't stop talking forty years later about how Mary had tried to ruin their wedding.

"You all would do well to stay out of her way, if you can," Jack warned us. "Mary's as mean as she is crazy. If she's not happy, she'll make sure the whole world is miserable with her." The world, for now at least, seemed to be me and Snopes.

One day the new kitten disappeared. Anything might have happened to it, but I was sure Mary Gathright was responsible. I called Dave at the office and told him the boys were outside crawling around under all the bushes calling the little cat and that I was mad enough to go bang on Mary Gathright's door and demand the cat back.

"You don't know whether or not she's even got the damned cat," he said. "I forbid you to go around accusing

people of things before you are absolutely sure they're guilty."

"I don't have to be sure," I said. "I know that woman took the cat." I banged down the telephone and broke into tears. Just once I wanted Dave to soothe my feelings or at least agree with me. What I really wanted was for him to do something about her, threaten her, or swear out a warrant to stop her from bugging us. What good was being a lawyer if you couldn't use it to protect your own family?

Before a week had passed I was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes when I saw Mrs. Gathright's back door open and the kitten come wandering out. When it reached our yard it sat down in the fall sun peacefully licking its paws as if it had never been away. Mrs. Gathright watched at one of her windows, her arms folded over her chest. All kinds of violent revenges flickered through my mind, but all I did was go outside and bring the kitten in the house. When the weekend came, I told the boys they had to play inside or go visit friends. Our new glass house had become a prison.

When Mrs. Gathright left in December on a trip to Florida, we were hopeful that our first Christmas in the new house would pass uninterrupted by screaming demands and threats. But a few days before Christmas as the boys and I were down on the floor wrapping gifts a policeman knocked on the kitchen door.

"Ma'am," he asked politely, "can I come inside a minute?" He looked nervously over his shoulder. I let him in and he said he was investigating a complaint that our dog had been barking all afternoon.

"Well," I admitted, "the dog has been barking off and on during the past hour. A telephone repairman has been here and every time he went out to his truck the dog barked at him."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded. "I drove around the block several times and noticed that. But once the repairman left I didn't hear him bark until I got out of the squad car."

"That's right," I said. "He never barks unless a stranger comes on the property. And I think I know who sent you, officer. My dear friend Mrs. Gathright up the hill must be home from sunny Miami. She has this weird complex about our dog. She even imagines he's barking when he isn't." I made a circular motion toward my temple.

"Yes, ma'am. I agree. I was just up there responding to her call. She could hardly stand up by herself. But I feel I ought to tell you she made some pretty serious threats. Took me into the house and showed me her gun collection."

"Gun collection! What gun collection?" I was alarmed by his serious expression.

"I think you better be real concerned, ma'am. She's

got this huge collection of pistols and shotguns up there, every kind you can name, and bullets spread out everywhere. She swears she's a champion shot, says she can hit a bulls-eye at a hundred yards with a handgun."

The sharp crack of a pistol shot interrupted him. I jerked open the back door and ran outside. It had started to rain but in the near-dark I could see Mary Gathright in her white raincoat scrambling up the hill towards her house.

"You'd <u>better</u> run, you old crow," I yelled. "If you've hurt this dog, you'll be sorry. . . ." I opened the gate to the kennel and got down on all fours and crawled into the doghouse where Snopes was huddled in the corner, a pale trembling ball. I dragged him out of the house and fingered his body carefully from his snout to the tip of his tail. No blood. Then I saw a large hole in the top ridge of the dog house. She really had shot at him but had missed, instead splintering a hole in the roof. I shuddered, wondering if Snopes had been outside when she shot at him, up on his hind legs as usual against the fence, wagging his tail at her.

Mary Gathright's back door slammed. My heart was pounding so loudly I could hear it. Over my shoulder the children and the policeman, still in the kitchen, were silhouetted like paper dolls in a row at the windows. I grabbed Snopes's collar and dragged him into the house.

In a rage I yelled, "What kind of policeman are you. . . ?"

The cop interrupted me. "Lady, I've had too many buddies gunned down trying to play peacemaker in neighborhood battles. I don't intend to get offed by some old drunk angry at a dog." He shook a finger at me. "If she'd tried to get in your house, I would've stepped in. And lady, I don't want to tell you how to behave in your own neighborhood, but what you just did was real stupid. That woman had a gun in her hand and she's crazy as hell and drunk to boot. You were just asking for it charging out of here like that."

"What was I supposed to do, stand here and let her kill our dog?" Snopes huddled in one corner of the kitchen while the boys clustered around patting him. Their eyes were wide with fright.

"That would be better than letting her kill <u>you</u>, leave these little guys here without a mother." He paused. "I think you'd better keep these boys indoors. I'm not real sure that woman would know the difference between one of them and the dog. Or care."

I asked him about the law, what I could do about her legally. He said not much, except he could charge her with discharging a firearm, but this wouldn't stop her from creeping down the hill and killing us all. He said I should talk with my husband and in the meanwhile lock the

house and keep the drapes closed.

When Dave came home that night, I told him what had happened. "That policeman thinks she's coming to a head, like a boil," I said. "We've got to do something before she hurts one of us. And if you can't bring yourself to do anything, I think I'd better take the boys and go stay with your parents until you can figure something out."

I had never been one to make emotional, manipulative threats and Dave knew it. My style was to come right out and say exactly what I thought in plain language. He had always told me that was one of the reasons he had married me, but I was starting to wonder about that

The first thing he did was call some of the neighbors for advice. They all said to call Putney, her oldest son, who lived with his family over in Northside. We looked him up in the telephone book and, after I put the boys to bed, I listened on the extension as a witness to what Dave said and what Putney said, in case there was any serious disagreement. That was Dave's idea, always the careful lawyer.

"Putney?" Dave said. "This is Dave Ryan. We live next door to your mother. . . ."

"Oh, God," he said, "what's she up to now? I was hoping. . . ."

"We just need your advice, Putney," Dave said. "We don't quite know how to handle the situation, and we'd appreciate any help you can give us."

"Oh, God, she's drinking again," Putney said in an agonized tone of voice.

We were on the phone over two hours, listening to Putney's stories about growing up with Mary Gathright for a mother and about the years of therapy he and his two brothers had required to deal with her cruelty and neglect. It was the saddest story I'd ever heard. What she was doing to us sounded benign compared to the verbal abuse and drunken beatings she had inflicted on her boys over the years.

The worst story he told us was about his father. Mary had married him on the rebound after she lost out on catching Jack Harris. Mr. Gathright was the tennis pro at the Country Club of Virginia, flattered at the chance to marry a society girl as goodlooking and as wealthy as Mary. But he paid the price in misery.

"I hardly ever went to bed that I wasn't woke up by their fighting," said Putney. "Mama was always telling Daddy he wasn't good enough for her, that he was a nobody from nowhere who had ruined her life. At least once a day she said she hated him."

"That must have been terrible for you," Dave said.

"It was worse than I'm describing. It was how she said things that made it so bad. Usually she was drunk and screeching at the top of her lungs. She would attack him, too, scratch him on the face and arms. His shirts always

had these little blood spots on them where he had rolled down his sleeves to hide the claw marks from us. But finally he couldn't take it any more, not even for us." He sniffed. We could tell he was trying not to cry.

"What happened?" Dave's voice was filled with concern.

"Well, we never saw it, of course, but we've heard the story from so many people since we grew up that it has to be true. Daddy ordered this great big mahogany coffin delivered to the garage. Then he went upstairs and dressed up in his tux and stuck a red carnation in his lapel. Then he laid down in all that white satin and blew the top of his head off with one of Mama's pistols. I guess he did all that so he'd be the least trouble to Mama, even dead. All they had to do was close the lid and bury him."

"My God!" said Dave. "Who found him? What did your mother do?"

"I guess she was trying to protect us," Putney said. "She found him when she got home from the club early that afternoon. She called the police and went through whatever she had to go through with them, then had Bliley's come get him. She met us at the front door and took us to the movies while they hauled away the coffin and scrubbed up the mess. She didn't tell us Daddy was dead until the next morning. For years we thought he died of a heart attack."

Dave and Putney talked a while about what could be

done about his mother. Putney was as worried as we were that she might hurt somebody.

"I don't know what to do except get Reverend Edwards to go by there again. He's an old boy friend of hers. He almost talked her into going into a drying out place a couple of years ago. I hate to put her in a place like that, but she'll die if I don't. The doctors have already told her she's pickled her liver, and her kidneys and heart aren't worth a damn either. She just laughs about it, says she's not scared of the Grim Reaper. She says she'll just grab him by the balls and squeeze if he tries to mess with her."

Dave promised we would do whatever we could to help him with his mother. Dave's like that, no malice at all. I just wanted her off my back.

She was away three months, got herself all dried out nice and fluffy. When she came home she called me and said, "I want to apologize to you all for being so difficult about that dog of yours, but now, since I've had all these medical problems, my nerves are on edge so bad that I'm going to have to insist you finally do something about his annoying barking."

Well, I would be damned. She might be sober, but she hadn't changed her tune any and still didn't know what was barking when or how loud. I only said, as politely as I could, that I would discuss it with Dave and call her back.

She demanded that we check around to see if there was anything a vet could do. She said there was a throat operation that could be done on Snopes that would at least keep the noise down.

Ever since he was shot at, Snopes had turned sort of nervous and irritable. He barked a lot more than he ever had before. Some of our other neighbors were complaining a little, especially when he howled late at night to the Lab up the hill.

We talked to the vet to see if there was anything to be done. He said that occasionally, when he had a nonstop barker, he would perform minor throat surgery on the animal's larynx, just a tiny slit that made him sound like he had laryngitis. He assured us the dog would have no idea his bark had become a whisper. He wouldn't be able to make enough noise to bother anyone any more, and it wouldn't affect his performance in the field.

We pondered and argued about it off and on for a month. I had never heard of such a thing. To take away Snopes's bark seemed like removing his very dog-ness. But some of Dave's hunting friends had had their dogs debarked. They said it was a simple operation that barely caused a sore throat and that their dogs didn't seem to notice any difference.

Dave said for me to take Snopes in for the operation. I loaded him in the car and he lay on the seat beside me

pressing his big head hard against my thigh the whole way over there. I hadn't been back home an hour when the vet called and said Snopes was dead. His knife had slipped and sliced through poor Snopes's jugular vein. He bled to death in seconds. The vet was so upset he brought us a little urn with Snopes's ashes. It had a bas relief on its side of a setter on point.

"No charge for the cremation," he said, backing down the front steps. I hid the urn in the basement before the boys and Dave came home.

When I could control my voice, I called Mrs. Gathright and told her she could relax, that William Faulkner's baby boy was dead. She was so drunk she could hardly speak. Who the hell is Wim Fau'k'er?" she asked.

"Just a nobody from Mississippi," I said. "Not anybody you'd associate with."

"Well, all the same I just have to say I feel real bad about shooting your little doggie," she said.

"You didn't shoot Snopes, Mrs. Gathright," I said. "The vet killed him. It was an accident."

She wouldn't listen. She wanted the credit for herself.

Before the next full moon rose Putney called to say he had just put his mother in the hospital. Her liver and kidneys had finally stopped working.

"She's got tubes sticking out of everywhere," he said

sadly.

"I'm sorry, Putney," I lied.

"You know what she asked me? She said, 'How 'bout hooking up one of these things to a bottle of Virginia Gentleman?' Can you believe that?"

I hadn't a single doubt.

She died two days later. I didn't go to the funeral. Instead I buried Snopes's urn underneath one of the new azaleas in the back yard.

Faulkner died a month later down in Mississippi, never knowing how I had failed his trust in me. He had returned home not long after we bought Snopes from him, still working on books about the human Snopeses.

A nice couple with two children bought Mrs. Gathright's house from Putney and his brothers. They got a real bargain because the Gathright boys were anxious to get rid of it quickly.

On damp days a faint smell of dog drifts up from our backstairs carpet. When the moon is full, Dave and I often wake up at two or three in the morning, but we don't talk much. The pen belongs now to a sedate black and white English setter named Jonathan's King William the Fifth who wouldn't think of standing a song bird and who has yet to bark in the night.

FINESSING FOR THE QUEEN OF TRUMPS

The reason I had to get in touch with Bobby after all those years was because, like it or not, Mama needed his help. She's one of these people who throws away everything the minute she's through with it, including documents about her very life, like old divorce papers, and now she was paying for this particular neatness habit.

Her third husband Eduardo had got downright nasty during their divorce. The jerk told his lawyers that Mama had never been divorced either from Dad or from Bobby, who was her second husband. Eduardo was just trying to make trouble, you understand, trying to keep her from gouging as much money out of him as she eventually managed to get, but the very idea of anybody, even Eduardo, making her out to be a bigamist drove her crazy.

"You find him, Maxine," she said, whimpering a little. "I gotta get a copy of those papers and you know Bobby, he never throws away anything. You find him, Maxine, you hear me? You always were the best at finding things." Whenever she wants something, Mama can suck up with the best of them.

I called up Aunt Vi, who's sort of the family histori-

an. She files away anything and everything pertaining to our family that appears in print, even real estate ads when we sell a house, can you believe it. I asked if she still had a copy of the ad Bobby put in the Herald ten years back asking if anyone in Bottoms Bridge knew where Mama was. He'd written letter after letter to our old address, but Mama had just tossed them in the trashcan. Over the years we had gotten totally out of touch, and I guess he hoped somebody here would know who she was and where she was. The whole family saw it and tried to get Mama to call him, but she wouldn't do it for anything, said there was no good reason in the world after all these years Bobby would want to find her unless maybe he needed money. I frankly thought it would serve her right if it turned out now he was dead. But he wasn't. I got him on the first ring of the telephone out in La Mirada.

"Hey, Bobby," I said. "You'll never guess who this is."

He busted out crying right off the bat. He knew exactly who I was, even though I had been just a kid of sixteen when he and Mama broke up back in 1950. He had thumbed out to California afterward, still trying to break into singing, hoping it was easier there than it had been in New York. Twenty years ago, after crying drunk over long distance telephone for two weeks, trying to get Mama to change her mind, Bobby finally drove down to Tia Juana

and did what Mama insisted was going to happen even if she had to thumb down there and do it herself.

"Little Maxie, it's little Maxine," he kept saying to somebody with him who turned out to be his second wife May Lee.

She took the phone away from him and talked to me a while until Bobby could get control of himself. She sounded real nice and we got along fine. I told her exactly what it was Mama wanted and it turned out May Lee was the one who knew where the divorce papers were, not Bobby. They had four children, she told me, but the last one had brain damage and would never be able to take care of himself even though he looked perfectly normal.

"He can do little things like answer the phone and call us to the phone, but he can't write down messages and he don't remember things any too good," she said.

When Bobby finally got back on the phone, I said, "Bobby, I'm sorry about your last boy having brain damage." He started crying again and had to give the phone back to May Lee. I promised I would call again in a week or so to make sure May Lee had found the papers and sent them off, and maybe also to have a talk with Bobby to catch up on news of the past twenty years. If he could just keep from getting so upset.

I told Mama about Bobby's boy and she said, "I'm not a bit surprised. Bobby was a little bit of a retard himself

about a lot of things."

"That's not true, Mama," I said. It made me mad how she used to run him down after she found out he was never going to make the big time and get famous like Frank Sinatra or Vic Damone. It seemed like she was so disappointed she would never be able to forgive and forget. She told everybody in the family how he blew the audition for Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts, how his voice kept on cracking from nothing in the world but nerves, then how Godfrey offered her a place on the show playing the piano because he felt so sorry for her, being married to a psycho.

Not that Bobby was really any kind of a psycho. He definitely was not. He took real good care of us the four years that he and Mama stayed married, made us eat the right fruits and vegetables and take lots of exercise. He taught me how to play handball down in Riverside Park at a time when not too many girls could play that game. That was way back in the forties when nice girls didn't exert themselves too much. Nowadays girls will try anything a man can do, even body building like Nathan Quinones, one of my boy friends at the time. It never entered my mind to work up a sweat trying to develop my muscles to look like Nathan's great big old knots. But styles change with the times, I suppose.

Bobby was really into exercise. He played handball regularly at the Y with people like Fred Allen, you remem-

ber him, the radio comedian. When Mama asked him why he didn't get his famous hifalutin friend Mr. Allen to arrange a few auditions for him, Bobby said that would be taking advantage of a strictly sports relationship and you just didn't do that, not in Minnesota where he came from. People in Minnesota didn't act pushy like that.

Bobby made all of us walk everywhere we went in New York, said it was the best exercise you could get and it would keep us out of the subway. A lot of bad stuff happened in the subway, he said, and the whole island was only twelve miles long after all, which wouldn't kill anybody. He followed me to school one day and nearly had a conniption in the middle of Columbus Circle because some dark Spanish-looking guy was following me. Bobby thought all the Spaniards and Italians in New York City were after Mama and me because we both had such light blond hair and pale blue eyes. He said people are fascinated by whatever they're not used to, although I haven't found that to be true. My husband Johnny and me, for one, we're an awful lot alike.

Mama and Bobby and my brothers and I lived in two rooms on 80th Street. I slept in a narrow bunk, with a folding screen separating me from my two brothers. Mama called it a sop to the proprieties. Between our room and Mama and Bobby's there was this narrow closet with a little bitty hand sink, where we washed the dishes from the meals

Mama cooked on a one-burner hot plate, mostly fried hamburger and canned peas. Missus Pless (that's the way she said it), our landlady, liked Mama so she paid no attention to our cooking odors floating down the hall. Cooking was strictly against the rules, and she wouldn't let anybody else in the place do more than keep fruit and milk on the window sills in the wintertime. She said the way we talked sounded soft and polite, not like New Yorkers.

I couldn't remember where it was I did my studying in that little room, and when I asked Bobby if he could remember, he said no but he remembered being proud of my good grades and how hard I tried. What I remembered about their room was those ugly pink walls covered with brown splotches where Bobby pitched his size thirteens at the cockroaches crawling around looking for our food. I remember hearing thumps and Bobby yelling, "Gotcha!" in the middle of the night when he couldn't sleep because he was worried about blowing another audition. He would switch on the lamp and start chasing roaches. One night about three o'clock I heard him say, "Four with one shoe, a new world record," and Mama told him to shut up and let her sleep until he got himself a million-seller record so she wouldn't have to work any more.

I also can't remember where we hung up our clothes and when I asked Mama about that, she said I didn't have any.

My two brothers and I thought Bobby did a great job as a stepfather. He was eight years younger than Mama, somewhere between us and her, so he could always see both sides of any arguments we had. It even tickled us that he refused to use deodorant, said it wasn't manly or natural either. All his shirts soaked up that manly sweat smell and built up layers until all of them had this odor we all recognized as Bobby's particular smell. Even blindfolded I would have been able to sniff him out in a crowded subway car.

After Bobby and May Lee mailed me a copy of the divorce papers to give to Mama, he started writing to me once in a while, on my birthday and at Christmas. He asked me to keep in touch and let my brothers know where he was and maybe they would drop him a line too. Bobby had already had one heart bypass and just wanted to tie up all his loose strings before he passed on. May Lee told me once that the doctors had thought he wouldn't live through the bypass.

Considering all that, I couldn't figure out why Mama made such a fuss when Bobby and May Lee called and said they were going to be on vacation at Colonial Williamsburg and would like to come through Bottoms Bridge for a visit. Bobby said he sure would like to see Mama and make his peace with her, which would be practically an impossibility considering Mama's bad temper. Why, her own mother, who

named all her daughters after flowers, Violet, Rose, and Lily (Mama was the Lily), said if she had known what Mama's temper was going to be like she would have named her Nasturtium and called her Nasty.

Mama refused to let me give Bobby her address or telephone number even after he saved her all that trouble by sending the Mexican divorce papers. I can see her now standing by the window watching for the mailman (her alimony check was due) with her arms crossed the way she always does when she's made up her mind.

"Now Maxine," she said, "you might as well reconcile yourself right now. When Bobby and his wife get here, I'm just not gonna be home." She was looking at herself in the living room mirror, and I suspected her problem might be she just didn't want Bobby to see her since she got old and wrinkled and saggynecked, or she was scared May Lee might turn out to be better looking than her.

"Tell 'em I went on vacation or down to visit Pa's grave or something. I don't give a fig what you tell 'em as long as you keep 'em away from my front door. I know how much you loved Bobby. You thought he really put the lie to all those stories about mean stepfathers. You thought he was just about perfect, didn't you, Missy? Well, I'm here to tell the world that perfect just ain't the right word for Bobby if you're calling him husband. He had his faults, no matter what you and your brothers

think."

She snorted and turned her back on me. She was right though. It just about killed me when Mama said she was leaving Bobby. It just about killed me when she married old Eduardo because there went my last hope she and Bobby would get back together. When she and Eduardo got a divorce too, I knew it wasn't anything about Bobby or Dad or even Eduardo. It was Mama who couldn't get along with people. And I knew that there was no point whatsoever in trying to locate Mama if she didn't want to be found. Johnny and me, we play a lot of bridge on weekends, and I always have trouble locating queens, so behind her back I called Mama the Queen of Trumps.

I picked up Bobby and May Lee at their motel. I had never seen May Lee, of course, but Bobby looked exactly the same, not even much gray in his hair. It was like time stood still. The minute they got in the car, the smell of Bobby's short-sleeved shirt was all over everywhere, the same smell he used to have years ago. I got real tickled, couldn't wait to tell Mama.

I had invited them to come out and have dinner with me and the kids and Johnny, but there was no question in my mind that the one he really had come to see was Mama. He asked about her first thing.

"Are you sure Lily won't be home while we're here?" he asked.

"She really is out of town, Bobby," I lied. "She was real sorry not to be able to be here for your visit." I turned and looked at May Lee, wondering how she felt about this. Her face never showed a thing, but she was a Mormon so maybe she was used to not showing how she really felt about other women. If I had been in her place, I would have been more than a bit put out at Bobby.

I thought about just up and taking them over to Mama's, dropping them off right on her darned doorstep, but I knew she would kill me if I did something like that. She was still convinced Bobby needed a loan, but I could tell she was wrong as she could be about that. Once Bobby got away from Mama and hooked up with May Lee, he had got himself a real good office job with one of the big oil companies and did right well, he told me, gave up on all that singing nonsense.

"Besides, Maxie," he said, "something your mama never understood was it's just a miracle, pure and simple, when anybody makes it big in show business anyhow. It just takes too much luck unless you know somebody to get you in the back door. She was mad at me because I did know somebody but just couldn't bring myself to be pushy with him." His face looked old and sad. May Lee just watched and listened with no expression on her face.

After dinner I put the children to bed and Johnny excused himself to go back down to the station and work on

this Porsche they had towed in that day off of I-64. Bobby and May Lee and I sat around talking and looking at old pictures. I had some Bobby had never seen, taken out at Far Rockaway and Coney by Lloyd Smalley, one of my old high school boy friends who had a camera. When he died a hero in the Korean War, with a Purple Heart and a Silver Star, his mother sent me a clipping about his medals along with all the pictures he had kept of me and my family. Bobby remembered Lloyd and his maroon convertible, said what a nice boy he was. Lloyd had taught me to drive in that car up and down the West Side Highway. Bobby got tears in his eyes when he heard how Lloyd died a hero and all.

"Looky here, Bobby," I said. "Here's one of you and Mama and me standing by Lloyd's car out in front of our building." Mama and Bobby were smiling, and they looked so young and happy nobody would ever have thought divorce was just down the road for them. Bobby looked at the picture a long time, but he patted May Lee's hand to make it all right.

"Are you real sure your mother's not in town?" he asked again.

"I'm sure," I lied, knowing full well she was sitting looking at "Dallas" in her house not ten blocks away. "She was real distressed not to be here while you were traveling through."

"It's the only chance I'll ever get to talk to her,"

he said with a sad look on his face. "I won't be able to travel across the country again. It costs too much."

May Lee shook her head and said, "It sure does. It costs too much even with these special rate tickets."

"What exactly did you want to talk with her about?" I asked. I decided if it was all that important he could tell me and I could tell Mama.

"It's between me and her," he said. "I just thought we ought to get together one more time before we die. Nothing to cause a fight or anything, I just want to see her. I mean, after all, we spent four years of our lives together. She was the first woman I ever really loved." May Lee's face was a study. You had to admire that woman, acting that cool even after four children and one of them not quite right.

"She doesn't owe you any money or anything, does she?" I asked, remembering what Mama had said.

Bobby looked hurt. "What on earth gave you that idea?" he said. "I'll bet that was Lily's notion, that I was trying to get back that money I loaned her when we separated."

"Then she owes you!"

"It wasn't much," he said. "Wouldn't amount to a hill of beans today. But I never expected that money back, even if she did promise to repay it someday. All I want, Maxie, is to see her one more time to tell her how sorry I am

things turned out the way they did. We had big plans, her and me, and they all came to nothing. I talked a lot of pie in the sky back then, and she believed it. When she stopped believing it, she begged and begged me to get a regular job so she could stop working, but I wouldn't do it. I kept on hoping I would get the big break and get to be a famous crooner. She knew better, but I just wouldn't listen. I still feel bad about that."

"Aw, Bobby, come on," I said, putting my arm around his shoulders. I noticed for the first time how bent over he was.

May Lee patted his hand and said, "You tried, honey. That's all you ought to expect of yourself."

All I could think of was how much class May Lee had to be helping Bobby come all the way across the United States to apologize for letting his first wife down. If that didn't beat all. There was no question she loved him an awful lot, and that made me feel better.

I drove them by Mama's place on the way back to their motel, partly out of meanness, hoping Bobby would spot her through the window with her face glued to the TV and catch her in the lie, partly hoping something nice would happen, Mama would come out and wave and they could all get together and talk over old times after all. Of course, the lights were out and the place was all dark. Bobby didn't even know we were passing by Mama's house. There just

wasn't anything else I could do.

But I was so mad at Mama for being so hardheaded that next time she called me to come over and drive her to the Safeway it was my turn to be just not at home. When I simmered down I told her how handsome Bobby looked and what a great figure May Lee had, being younger than Mama, and how terrific they looked together. And later that same year when Mama got the Asiatic flu and asked me to call up Bobby and tell him she might die, it didn't bother me any that I had to leave the message with Bobby's youngest boy, because just like I expected she was back on her feet in less than a week.

Vita