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Date Nov 27, 1990

VOICES OF THE SEASONS:
A COLLECTION

A Thesis

Presented for the

Degree of Master of Arts,

with a major in English

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Bonnie Michelle Priebel

December 1990

For my mother,

who always lets me

sit on her lap.

There is a time for
everything,
and a season for every
activity under heaven:

a time to be born and a
time to die,
a time to plant and a time
to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to
heal,
a time to tear down and a
time to build,
a time to weep and a time
to laugh,
a time to mourn and a
time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and
a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a
time to refrain,
a time to search and a time
to give up,
a time to keep and a time
to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to
mend,
a time to be silent and a
time to speak,
a time to love and a time
to hate,
a time for war and a time
for peace.

--Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

ABSTRACT

This manuscript consists of thirteen short stories, varying in length and in point of view, which are divided into four general categories. The first section, "The Initiates," deals with a particular character's initiation or realization. Each story in this section focuses on a young person who, through the course of the story, comes to some realization about life and is thereby initiated into life. The second section, "Kith and Kin," focuses either on the importance of the family as an institution or on individual members and concerns within families. The third section, "Keeping the Faith," is concerned with doubt, faith, and perseverence, not only in religion, but also in life. "An Aside," the final section, symbolizes the author's growth in writing and the directions her writing may take in the future through a short, experimental story.

The author concentrates on the individual characters in the stories and their expression through their particular voices. Influenced by Southern literature and its themes, the author attempts to address the issues of family and to characterize some regional concerns. Though the stories are by no means entirely autobiographical, certain aspects are gleaned from the author's own experiences as she tries to "write what she knows."

This manuscript attempts to portray the stories' characters in such a way as to allow the reader to participate in the experiences. The author created the stories in order to give a voice to personal concerns and emotions, in hopes that the individual characters may speak to the universal human experience.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing, for me, has always been a kind of quest to articulate emotions or revelations that, somehow, seem to need expression. The more I write, the more I am reminded that, to successfully communicate something, one must write what she knows. This is not to say that every character portrayed in these pages acts the way I act, shares my point of view, or has expereinces similar to mine though, truth be told, some of them do. Rather, in writing "what I know," I focus on the characters' emotions and on what they learn from their experiences. While writing these stories, I discovered how important the element of character is, since it is through the characters' voices, struggles, and growth that my "quest for expression" is realized. My aim in portraying these characters and in writing about their experiences is to give a voice to them, in hopes that they may speak to the universal human experience.

Soon after I started writing, I became interested in Southern literature and culture. As my interest in these areas grew, my writing broadened to include Southern characters and themes. Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, T.R. Pearson, Clyde Edgerton, and Lee Smith are a few whose writing has influenced my own. I think, though, that while these writers increased my awareness of Southern concerns such as family, history, and place, my style has remained my own.

I have divided this collection of short stories into four sections: "The Initiates," "Kith and Kin," "Keeping the Faith," and "An Aside." The stories in the first section deal with a particular character's initiation or realization. Each focuses on a young person who, through the couse of the story, comes to some realization about life and is

thereby initiated into life by the experience. The "Kith and Kin" stories, as the category suggests, focus either on the importance of the family as an institution or on individual members or episodes within families. "Keeping the Faith" is concerned with doubt, faith, and perseverence, not only in religion, but also in life. The final story, under "An Aside," breaks from the tradiiton of the rest. It is somewhat experimental, and is included as a symbol of the growth of my writing. At this early point in my life, writing what I know can be somewhat limiting, and "The Invisible Story" is included to represent new things that I will come to know and eventually write about.

As for the title: it is connected with the passage from Ecclesiastes, "A Time For Everything." Reading this collection of stories as a whole put me in mind of that passage because almost every element in the Hebrew writer's poem is included somewhere throughout these stories. My concentration on characters and their expression through what I call their voices suggested to me that they were voicing their particular "seasons" of life. As Valerie and her mother-in-law piece together a quilt in "Welcome Home," the characters in these stories seem to be piecing together parts of life and figuring out what the result of it all is. Sometimes the result is a contented complacency as in Charlene and Tom's marriage in "Blue Light Special"; sometimes it's an acceptance of life's harsh realities as Billy realizes in "Squatter's Hill." Often, the characters are trying to cope with the disturbing issues of death and faith. In any case, the characters present their cases to the reader who, I hope, reaches a greater level of understanding as do the characters themselves.

I.

THE INITIATES

HOMECOMING

It had happened in the winter, about halfway through the semester. In fact, the weather was probably a lot like it is now, with the biting wind driving people indoors and the air full of the smell of smoke from fireplaces. The sky had been a dull gray, just like it looks today, seeming pregnant with snow. Maybe it's the similarities in the weather that make me think of what happened, or maybe I've just had it stored away in the back of my mind over the years.

It was the first real year of high school for me and my buddies. After surviving seventh, eighth, and ninth grades in the junior high, we had finally escaped to the coveted position of sophomore in the senior high. It didn't matter that we were once again low men on the totem pole; we thought we had it all--the world by a string, you know. We would cruise the halls in the mornings before school started, looking for eligible girls to ask to that week's football game, and more often than not, we'd find one who'd consent.

There were five of us who hung around together then. Jimmy, Eric, Keith, Neil and I were a tight group; we went everywhere together, wore the same clothes, liked the same kind of cars and all that. We'd strut around in our faded jeans, blue jeans jackets with the collars turned up, and don't forget the high tops. Yeah, we were all aspiring to junior varsity basketball. Jimmy was a little older than the rest of us; he'd been kept back a year because he failed math. But who passes math anyway? He had his license and a job, so he drove us all around in his '78 Camaro. After school we'd either shoot baskets in the gym or drive around the plaza mall, to see who we would run into.

I said there were five of us; that's kind of for the record. Actually, one of our number didn't have to bother looking for dates. Keith had been dating Nancy Miller ever since the eighth grade, and they went everywhere together. Since none of the rest of us had a steady girlfriend, it was kind of awkward for Nancy to tag along everywhere; you had to watch what you said and everything. Keith spent less and less time with our gang, but we figured it was just a phase he was going through and that he'd wise up to the single life sooner or later. Nancy was usually around her own group of friends (some of them not bad-looking) so we didn't know her that well. She would just come around to see Keith.

It was early November and all Keith talked about was next month's Christmas dance, before the break. He was trying to get us all to get dates so we could go together.

"Nancy's got this great red dress. You ought to see it. I have to get a matching tux pretty soon. Are you guys coming any closer to getting dates?" he said.

"Why don't we just go stag, Keith? Obviously we'll never be able to match you and Nancy." I joked, elbowing the other guys. It was the thing to do to needle Keith about his beloved.

"Cut it out. I just think it would be pretty cool, don't you?"

"I can't even dance," said Neil. "Besides, are we <u>all</u> supposed to pile in Jimmy's car with <u>dates</u> too?"

"Hey," I said, "That might be more fun than the actual dance!" They all laughed, making tasteless comments rivaling my own.

"Why don't we all go get a coke at McD's?" suggested Jimmy, and the dance discussion was dropped as we all jostled each other out to the parking lot.

It was right before that year's homecoming game. We were playing Rogersville, our biggest rival, and the town was psyched up. We lived in a pretty small town for middle Tennessee, and all the families would no doubt be present come game day to cheer on the home team, the infamous Edgerton Hornets. It was practically the year's biggest event, not counting the Old Timer's Day parade. All the community's businesses painted hornets on their windows on Main Street. And every day three or four at least would come by to inspect the progress. It was through their donations that we had a float at all. The whole school had been making floats and banners and having pep rallies for a week solid, and with that weekend's game would come a great release of mounted excitement. The sophomore float was, I thought, a masterpiece. It was supposed to be a giant yellow and green hornet poised to sting the fire out of a bedraggled-looking badger (the other team's mascot). We had it rigged so when the hornet moved back and forth, the badger would cover its eyes with its paws, very coward-like. It was great.

We weren't allowed to work on it during school, so after school that week, everyone stayed until late at night hammering and folding yellow and green tissue paper. One afternoon after school, about the middle of homecoming week, we were all at the school, hidden away in the shop building with the float, working on the festivities as usual, when we ran out of glue. We were stuck with boxes of folded tissue and no way to fasten it on the float. Nancy's brother Seth had a car, an old Mustang, so he volunteered to get some, and he and Nancy drove our Highway 96 to the K-Mart. Like I said, it looked like it was about to snow, and it was terribly cold out. I shiver now to think about it.

Edgerton has your normal fast-food places, a few family-owned businesses uptown, and the usual K-Mart and Walmart. All this is in an area that was pretty close together; stand on top of a big hill and you can pretty much see the whole shebang. So it should have taken Nancy and Seth no time at all to go to K-Mart and back. We all went on merrily drawing out banners and planning out our strategy to win the pep rally contest, not paying much attention. An hour passed, and somebody asked if Seth and Nancy had gotten back yet. They hadn't, and a couple people wondered aloud what could take them so long to get glue at a K-Mart.

"Maybe they had to go someplace else. Everyone's been buying tons of glue this week."

"They probably got something to eat somewhere," suggested someone.

"I wish they'd hurry. These things aren't going to stick on by air, you know."

Nobody really thought much about it since we had other things we could work on, and we all figured they would be back any minute. No sweat. All except Keith, that is, who started in worrying right then.

"Do you think something happened? What if they had a wreck or something?"

"Chill out, Keith," someone said. "Nothing happened."

I felt this little corner of my stomach growing tense, wondering momentarily if they were okay. Keith's face didn't help any.

Keith was really attached to Nancy. She'd been the only girl to pay him any attention through junior high. He had always been reserved and quiet, and his mother made him take piano lessons every Tuesday. He

wasn't picked for junior varsity either. We just told him to cool off; they had probably stopped for a Coke at Hardee's. Even so, he kept messing up on the signs until one of the class officers finally told him to go work on something else.

After another half hour or so, we all started to side with Keith and besides that, we really needed some glue. One of Nancy's girl friends called her house to see if they had been home, but her folks hadn't heard from them.

Keith wanted to go look for them, so a bunch of us piled in Greg Davidson's old blue Chevy and headed out on 96. I went with Keith, and a couple of Nancy's friends went, a friend of Seth's, and Greg drove. It was a long road, winding and rural. The fields on either side of the highway looked withered and brown, drained of their vivid autumn colors, and the bare trees seemed to scrape the sky with their branches. The ominous sky was warning that there would be snow before too long. In the late afternoon, everything seemed to have a gray mist over it. It was a very lonely scene as I remember it. It was all compounded, of course, by the bunch of us, worried, riding down the barren highway.

Keith was fidgeting beside me in the back seat. He was making me very uncomfortable and not doing much good for the girls in the front either.

"Where <u>are</u> they?" he kept saying.

"We're trying to find out, Keith." I had to yell because Greg's car was temporarily (he said) without a muffler. The loud sound of the exhaust disrupted the quiet of the countryside. We seemed out of place.

"What if they're in a wreck somewhere?"

"Then we'll either see them on the road or find out about it once we get where we're going."

"But--" he started.

"Keith." I grabbed his arm, and glanced up towards the front, indicating the girls, who were starting to look nervous. "They're okay." He swallowed hard and tried to settle back in the seat.

Before long we saw Seth's red Mustang on the side of the road, the bright red color glaring out of place with the winter scenery.

"There they are!" Keith yelled. "Stop!" He pointed frantically and kept reaching up to tap Greg on the shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah. I got it, Keith." Greg said.

We were all a little tired of Keith's agitated state. Greg pulled over and turned off the engine. Silence. The intensity of it assaulted our ears and amplified the deserted scene before us. We all jumped out, Keith practically pushing me first onto the gravel and broken glass on the road side. I gave him an irritated look. Seth and Nancy weren't anywhere around. I quickly scanned the surroundings from where I stood, hoping they were somewhere in the fields or woods. Nothing. The Mustang was unlocked, and Nancy's purse was still inside the car, lying on the front seat like she had just stepped outside for a minute.

"What's the deal?" Keith said. "Where <u>are</u> they? She left her purse? What's going <u>on</u>?" His panicked voice got higher and higher and ended with a squeak. He started to dream up all sorts of things that could have happened to them. Nancy's friends exchanged looks, and stood close beside each other. They reminded me of small girls in kindergarten, always holding hands and whispering secrets to each other. I didn't say

anything. Seth's friend and Greg were standing by Greg's car and pointing up the road.

"C'mon, you guys. Let's go into town and see if anyone's seen them."

We all piled back into Greg's Chevy and headed for K-Mart to see if we could at least find a phone. On the way, here comes Seth on the side of the road, his shoulders all hunched up inside his jacket, carrying a gas can back towards his car. We honked the horn, and Greg made a precarious U-turn on the two-lane highway. Pulling onto the side of the road, we stopped and let him in. I wondered where Nancy was, and my stomach had begun to get tight by this time, from all the tension. Besides, Keith was beginning to give me the creeps with his imagination.

Of course, right off Keith demanded to know where Nancy was and why they hadn't called anybody.

"Seth! The least you could have done was called someone! Where is Nancy?"

Seth got this alarmed look on his face and dropped the gas can on my foot. It was crowded with all of us in the car.

"I ran out of gas and had to walk into town to get some. I called at the station after I got there, so people at school know. Nancy wanted to stay and watch the car because she didn't want to walk in the cold. Didn't you see my car on your way in? She wasn't there?" He sat forward, and as he spoke, his volume rose. His eyes grew wide as his imagination turned on him.

Everybody got real quiet except Keith who kept saying "Oh God, Oh God," over and over, and Seth, who kept saying, "I told her to stay there." Greg squealed his tires to try to make it back to Seth's car as speedily as possible.

We pulled off the road by Seth's car with the gravel grinding under the tires, leaving wisps of dust that floated off with the chilled wind. Everyone jumped out, looking around, calling for Nancy. There was an ugly lump in my throat, and I felt like I would throw up if I had to hear Keith say "Oh, God" one more time. Seth headed for the woods nearby, scrambling down the ditch that separated them from the highway. He frantically called his sister's name. I never noticed before but in the cold air, sound travels a lot farther, and I remember hearing Nancy's name trail off into the wind as Seth got deeper into the woods.

"Naan--ceee!" he yelled. "Naan-ceee!"

I was looking with everyone else until I noticed Keith standing beside Greg's Chevy. He had a vacant lost look and seemed to be unable to do anything, move or speak.

"Keith? Bud, you alright?" I asked.

No response.

"Keith, here why don't you sit inside the car out of the wind?"

The same blank stare was my answer. He seemed to prefer standing outside and looking anxiously toward the woods. Maybe he wanted suffering, even if it was just from exposure to the cold, to make him feel more real, more able to cope with what had happened, though coping was not exactly what he was doing so well just then. As I stood there beside him trying to be supportive, his chin wrinkled up, quivered, and suddenly he was crying, losing control. I looked around self-consciously though we were alone, absolutely alone. I gripped Keith's shoudler,not knowing what else to do. What do you do for someone who looked like Keith did then?

Greg had the good sense to drive back to town and call Nancy's father who took the news rather calmly. It wasn't an actual crisis yet, he said. Her mother felt quite differently as she immediately sat down from the shock, and tears welled up in her eyes. "I just know something's happened," she wailed. Nancy's father of course called the police and then drove right out to where Seth was parked. By this time it was almost dark, and the temperature had dropped about fifteen degrees.

People from the school started to arrive, wondering if she could have gotten a ride from someone who had passed. I was worried about Keith. People tried to console him with hopeful thoughts, but he still looked vacant, blank. I just shrugged at them. They seemed to understand. I felt dizzy from the crowd of people that had gathered and the acrid, dusty smell of the highway and exhaust fumes from a growing number of cars. People patrolled up and down 96, trying to catch a glimpse, a sign. Everyone was silent and kept busy by searching the woods, the fields, the roads, everywhere.

After a while, Keith's parents heard about it and came to take him home, even though he protested loudly. This was the first sign of response I'd seen from him since we brought Seth back to his car.

"NO! I want to stay here! You can't ask me to leave! I want to be here when they find her! I want to see her just one more time... She--she's wearing my ring..." his voice trailed off into a whimper and he began sobbing again. I was embarrassed for him, but extrememly glad he went because he was making me nervous.

I didn't know what to think. I hoped Nancy had just gotten a ride

from someone who had been along the highway and saw the car. But then why hadn't she called or gone back to the school? To tell the truth, I didn't really want to search for her anymore because the longer we stayed out there, the darker it got, and the more afraid I was of what we might find. Jimmy, Neil, and Eric had shown up earlier, and every now and then we'd meet and say if we found anything. We didn't.

I finally got Jimmy to take me home. We rode in silence, no radio which normally blasted, and none of the usual cutting up and joking we did. All I could see was Nancy's mother standing by Seth's car crumpling and uncrumpling a handkerchief, her face pinched and white, her dark hair and cheeks red from the cold giving an impression that was macabre. Mr. Miller stood with his arm around his wife, trying to remain strong for her, all the time hearing Seth's voice arrying through the clean, crisp air of winter. I thought it all seemed so obscene and sickening, and I wondered if anything would ever be normal again.

I was in bed that night staring at the ceiling. I had eaten a big dinner, though I felt guilty about it. Running around in the woods made me hungry, I guess. I was almost asleep when the thought came that we had never gotten any glue for the floats.

It was only a day or two before notices started going up in all the store windows. They had a picture of Nancy on them, underneath which was a description of what she was last wearing, and the area she'd been seen in last. The family was offering a reward of $5000 to anyone who knew of her whereabouts. Search parties still kept vigils through the night on 96, hoping they would come up with something, at this point, anything.

Keith and Seth hadn't been at school for a couple weeks after Nancy--

well, after it happened. Nobody talked much about it at school either because you never knew when some of her close friends would be around. Neil told me that someone had had Nancy in their English class, and that the day after it happened, the teacher called out Nancy's name when taking roll, and then got all flushed and embarrassed. It was strange to think that maybe her name might just be crossed off the roll sheet, just crossed off, erased from existence. Some people said they thought it was awful, ten times worse, that the Millers couldn't even have a funeral for Nancy because she had never been found.

The town paper, The Edgerton Herald, carried front page updates of the Nancy Miller story every day, with that same picture, and quotations from her parents on how they were holding up. Keith kept clippings of them all.

November 14, 198-

> County residents continue the search for Nancy Miller, a local high school student who disappeared from her brother's car on Highway 96, November 5, 198-. Her parents, Mr. Todd Miller and Mrs. June Miller of 15 Landcastle Drive are still hopeful that Nancy will be found. "We hope Nancy is out there somewhere where she can read this and know that we are searching for her and that we love her," Mrs. Miller said Tuesday.
>
> "If anyone has any information, please come forward. We've offered a reward of $5000. We want our daughter back for the holidays. We have to find something. Anything would be better than not knowing if she's alive or dead." commented Mr. Miller. The Millers would like to thank all those who have offered their support. If you have any information on the whereabouts of Nancy Miller, contact the police department immediately.

Families in town, with the custom, sent brownies, casseroles, and entire dinners to the Miller house in an attempt to show their support. Every Sunday in church, whoever led prayer would ask especially that Nancy be found. The Edgerton Hornets won the homecoming game 21-7, but

the turn out was less than supportive; everyone was busy combing the county for Nancy. For the first month or so, everyone went out to where Seth's car had been, continuing the search, well into the late hours of the night. Before long, the local banks had matched the reward, and store owners changed the posted signs to $10,000. One night about a month after Nancy disappeared, my family went over to the Catfish Cove in Peggland, two counties over, and the restaurant there had a notice in its window. I kept expecting to see her face on our milk cartons in the cafeteria any day.

Our gang didn't talk about it too much. Keith was too close to home for us to know what to say to each other. Mostly, we tried to concentrate on classes and shooting basketball, no easy task in itself for everything that had happened lately.

After awhile, Keith came back to school, though he was even quieter than usual, and he looked pale with dark circles under his eyes. I didn't know what to say to him, so most of the time I just didn't say anything. I don't think he did very well that year, and I heard rumors, which in a town as small as ours was inevitable, that he was seeing a psychiatrist twice a week. We tried to include him in our gang like we used to do.

"Keith, you want to go to the football game this weekend? It'll be great--just us guys together. Whaddya say? Beats studying for Biology!"

"Some other time maybe. Not this weekend," he said, his voice dull. His hollow-looking eyes were only too evident. "Spooky," Jimmy said after Keith had walked away. We all agreed, but had no solution.

Seth didn't come back to school at all that year. I tried to imagine how he must have felt, since he was the one who had seen her last, and it had been his car she had disappeared from. I saw him just once, when I happened to be at his church one Sunday. After that, I didn't have to imagine how he felt; his face was a million pictures of what was going on inside of him.

Christmas passed that year with the usual sledding and snowball fights. We had all managed to get dates for the Christmas dance, but I for one felt haunted there. Keith should have been there, laughing and smiling with Nancy in her red dress Keith had talked so much about. Down at the pond, when we all went ice skating, I once or twice thought how strange it was not to have Nancy and Keith skating together in a corner, with her hanging onto Keith's arm. I managed to have a good time, though, with everyone else.

Christmas break came and went, of course, and we all shuffled back to school for spring semester. My parents gave me ten dollars for my report card, and I went right over to K-Mart and bought a baseball glove with that and some other moeny I had saved. We were all joining a league some of the local fathers had started, and I was to be pitcher. Good practice, I thought, for making the school baseball team next year. On my way out of K-Mart after buying the glove, I barely even saw the notice on the double glass doors, torn on the edges from where people had touched it going in and out, to and from their shopping.

I saw Eric on the way to my Dad's car, and showed him my glove. He was going to play first base, so we discussed our strategies and boasted about our imaginary ability in baseball.

Seems to me the next time I even thought about the Nancy Miller thing was when I was in Hardee's some time later. I was standing in this long lunch-hour line, and I noticed one of the employees taking down the notice to put up a sign advertising a special on bacon cheeseburgers. I remember it was in July, and that I bought a bacon cheeseburger.

Nancy Miller didn't cross my mind again until today, when I was driving along Highway 96, coming home from college for Thanksgiving break. The highway seemed to stretch on and on as I drove along, singing with the radio. I felt a strange sense of déja vu, as I looked at the brown wintry fields, dotted with bare trees and sprinkled with cattle. I was so glad to be free from college for a weekend, and I was particularly intrigued with the countryside since I was going to school in Chicago.

It took me a full fifteen minutes before I even remembered her name. When it came to me, popping into my mind from nowhere, the impact of it made me say the name aloud. "Nancy Miller," I said to myself as the lightbulb clicked on in my head. Inadvertently, I turned the heat up a notch as just then it started to snow.

SQUATTER'S HILL

Jake Bartlett was killed in the fall. Not that it made any big difference as far as Billy was concerned, though every now and then he would think about it if something chanced to stir up the memory. He thought about it now since there had been more news of Rebecca today. She had been seen again over in Virginia, still with the man she ran off with.

Billy thought about the first time he saw the stranger. It was just when the winds had started blowing a little harsher and the rain, unwelcomed, fell often, turning the hard Kentucky earth to mud. The attentions of the families in Squatter's Hill turned wearily to thoughts of fuel. The dwellings needed heat during the upcoming winter months. Everyone was up along the highway, collecting pieces of coal that had fallen from the passing trucks. Billy had almost filled the bottom of his gunny sack when he looked down the highway and saw a man walking along the road. Most of the coal had been picked up by the time the man got close enough for Billy to notice any details, so Billy remained behind, pretending to find a few last pieces as his curiosity got the better of him.

As the man drew closer, Billy could see that he was of medium build, with wavy black hair and a bushy beard that hid his mouth. He wore faded blue jeans, torn at both knees and missing a pocket, and a brown plaid flannel shirt. Over this was an old green Army jacket, the sleeves too short for the man's arms. This was as close as Billy wanted to be, and he scampered back down the hill to give the sack to his mother and report the stranger. He knew in advance what his mother would say.

Billy knew that people of the valley had their own way of thinking that he sometimes couldn't understand. He was intrigued with strangers because of their differences, but he knew that he too lived in the valley and was as much a part of it as anyone else there.

"There's a man walkin on the road up there, Mom. Do you think he wants somethin?"

"Billy, his business ain't none of ours. He can keep walkin anyhow. There's nothin he could want that anyone here could give him. Just pay him no mind, and go fetch me some water from the creek. I need to start supper. Mind you don't stir up the water none."

Billy took an empty Coca Cola bottle with him and a milk carton to hold the water as he went to the creek. As usual, this late in the day, the water was churned from the valley's daily use. By the end of a busy day it came to look and smell like sewage, but there was still supper to make. Billy used the Coke bottle to siphon off the top of the water and then began to fill his milk carton. He heard someone approaching behind him and seemed to know even without looking that it was the man he had seen on the highway.

"Whaddya know," the man's voice said. It was smooth, like cream. "The world's first chocolate milk creek. Betcha like that, huh kid?"

Billy glanced at the ground by his side and noticed the man's sandaled feet, a thong between the first and second toes.

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Billy snapped, always annoyed when prodded about his surroundings.

"No, no, not at all. I just was makin a joke. You know, conversation. So, what's your name?"

"Billy," he said to the man's sandals.

The man laughed. Billy wondered what was funny. "Billy the kid, eh? Well, Billy, what's the name of this little town?"

With narrowed eyes, Billy raised his face and looked at the man. He was aware of his own dirty straw hair hanging in his face and the dirt that no doubt covered his round freckled face. The man stood with his hands thrust in his faded jeans' pockets, and he had an almost whimsical expression on his face. He had dark eyes, which from Billy's angle were obscured by the shadows of the trees.

"Why are you here, mister? Ain't nothin here you could want. Where do you live? You'd best go back to wherever it is cause folks here ain't too keen on strangers."

"That so? Well, to tell the truth," the man said, in the same fluid voice, "I don't really have a home. And I don't reckon I want anything here." Billy raised his eyebrows in surprise at this last statement. Of course the man wanted something. That was how strangers were. "I just wander around till I find a place that suits me and--"

"Well, this ain't it," muttered Billy, suspicious.

"And then stay for a while, depending. I ain't too particular."

Billy had been filling his milk carton all this time and was finally finished.

"Oh, and my name's Jake Bartlett."

"I didn't ask you that."

Ignoring Billy's sarcastic remarks, Jake asked, "Say, what are you going to do with that milk carton?"

"My mom is cooking supper."

"With that?" Jake's expression looked as if he had tasted something bitter.

"Yeah," said Billy, his eyes still narrowed. "With that."

Billy walked off toward his shanty and looked back before he went inside. The man--Jake--was surrounded by four or five snuffling, roan-colored dogs, their hair in patches along their protruding ribs. These dogs always ran in a pack in the valley, eating what they could find in the porches and yards. Jake was scratching each of them behind the ears, in turn. Billy watched the scene for a moment longer and then turned to go inside, assuming the man would be gone by supper time.

He threw himself down on one of the shanty's mattresses, which at night he shared cramped with his older brothers, and thought about the stranger. He had looked so calm and casual, so unaffected by the smell or conditions of the valley. Billy knew what outsiders thought of the valley. It was the kind of place people thought about around Christmas time and then forgot. People driving by would wrinkle their noses and roll up their windows until they were well past the assaulting fumes which rose from the valley. Unknowingly, the smell was usually blamed on a sewage leak. A combination of garbage, smoke, sweat, and excrement mixed together to form a barrage of odors which slammed into an unaccustomed stomach the deeper into the valley one went. Billy didn't notice it so much, but when he went to school, he heard what the kids said about it. After being at school all day, he would sometimes notice the smell enough to hold his breath for awhile as he got closer to home.

Often, that odor would be enough to deter the sad-eyed social workers, truant officers or missionaries who came to the valley and tried

to talk to the people. More often than not, they were left to themselves. Which was how they wanted it.

Billy remembered overhearing one of them as he spoke to his companion before they drove away. "Hell no, I'm not coming back here if I can help it. Let the kids skip school. They don't learn much, and they're sent back home anyway because they're so infested." Billy had felt ashamed at first, and then angry because they had insulted the valley. Why did they come around if it was such a chore?

" 'Nother school cop came to check up on me today," Billy told his father one day. "Told him me and Jess had to stay here cause our shirts was bein washed, and it takes a whole day to wash 'em and a whole day to dry."

Billy's mother broke in. "He asked if we didn't have more than one change of clothes. I tole him not to worry cause Billy wouldn't be in school anymore. He's ten now."

Billy thought of his mother Rita Kay and listened to the banging of pots in the kitchen. She was tall with pointed features and, like everyone else in the valley, thin. She had large brown eyes and limp brown hair that hung in her face. Despite her thinness, she managed to carry out her duties like everyone else. Responsible for the laundry, garden, cooking, housekeeping, collecting food and fuel, carrying water, tending children, Rita Kay was tired most of the time, but persistent. She always seemed to have a smile for her five children, including Billy, who was the middle child. He had two older brothers and two younger sisters. Billy and the other children helped out when they could, but housekeeping wasn't much more than washing their few dishes

every week and cooking the simple, scant meals. And of course, they all collected fuel. Everyone who wanted to live and keep on living in the valley did that. Billy's thoughts were interrupted when his two sisters bounced onto the mattress with him announcing supper.

"Okay, okay. Now get off me, will ya?" he mumbled as they all went to the table. The table was made of patchwork lumber, and inverted paint buckets sufficed for seats. Billy was suddenly aware of the shanty's odor. He wondered if the man would want to stay once he saw how he would live. These thoughts were quickly dispersed when he sat down to eat.

His older brothers had stayed late at the mine tonight, the common occupation of the valley people. His younger sisters sat on their respective buckets sucking on their blackened fingers while his mother set the familiar skillet of gravy on the table, along with some bread and a few small potatoes. Expertly and without a word, they all scooped gravy out of the crusted skillet with bits of bread and potatoes. Billy's father sat back, rubbed his face with coal-black hands, and scratched his head.

"Henry said he heard Rebecca was seen in Wytheville by a fella over there. Said she was still hooked onto that gent that showed up here last June. Guess she's doin' alright, bein treated good and all."

"Well, that's just East across the line. Is Henry gonna go after her?" Billy's mother asked.

"Nah, he reckons she'd be home by now if she had a mind to be. Virginia ain't such a bad place. Sure was a shock when she ran off like that, though. Only fifteen and that fella so much older. Henry

ain't likely to be too kind to that fella if he ever catches sight of him, I don't guess."

"They've still got the other four. Guess that's all they want to handle right now anyway with the weather changin so fast," his mother said. "Besides, Sarah is pregnant again, and it ain't likely it'll live. They never do in the winter, bein so thin. Havin another grown girl around won't make it any easier."

Billy thought of Rebecca and the way she had always been so nice to him. It was last summer that the strange man his parents had spoken of had come into the valley. Right as rain, he seemed, and Henry had trusted him with his daughter. Not even a week later, both of them had gone, run off together with no sign. Every now and then they would hear from somebody who had seen them, like today. Billy remembered how Rebecca always used to talk about moving away sometime and wondering what other places were like. Nobody much from the valley ever got to find out. Nobody much cared. He hoped she was someplace where there were some big trees, like here. She had always liked to climb trees with him in the summer time. Blue Grass country was always nice in the summer time.

Since Rebecca had gone off with that man, folks had come to trust outsiders even less than usual. Rarely would any of them have anything to offer anyway. Those who did either wanted you to go to their schools, follow their strange ideas of reforms, or believe in their particular God. Billy couldn't see any use for any of these things, and neither could anyone else who lived in Squatter's Hill.

Billy didn't mention the strange man at supper, thinking his mother

might get angry since he had spoken to him after she had said to ignore him. After supper, he walked outside into the chilled air. The shanty, for some reason, seemed stuffy, even though there were many cracks in the boards that held it together. It was not too bad for a November night. He was surprised to see the man sitting by the creek in the same place he had been earlier. Billy sat on a stump near the shanty and pretended to be absorbed in something on the ground.

Leaning against a tree, Jake had removed a worn back pack which Billy had not noticed before. As Billy watched, Jake took out a small object that caught the light from the sunset. Curiosity gnawed at Billy. Now what was the man going to do? Why was he here? Why hadn't he gone? What was the thing in his hands?

Billy almost gave a start when, after the man brought the object to his mouth, he heard music. A harmonica! A kid at school had brought a harmonica to school once, Billy remembered. The man leaned lazily back and played a few tunes, some fast, some slow, but always the last note wavered on, carried by the cool wind. Billy thought he had never heard anything like it before; it was enchanting. He forgot all about pretending not to notice the man and listened intently to the melodies. The foreign sound of music aroused curiosity other than Billy's as a few people came outside to investigate. Seeing the man at the creek, they fell to talking among themselves.

Billy knew they would have ignored the man had he not played the harmonica, but they, like him, seemed caught by the tunes. The tension and old rule that outsiders were to be shunned or at least ignored as far as possible seemed to momentarily dissolve. Billy looked at the

stranger and wondered why he didn't choose to remain silent and unnoticed, especially after Billy had warned him about the valley's sentiments. Now the people couldn't help but be included in the man's life. Billy could hear the people's talk. Who was he? A social worker? One of the God-squad as they locally called missionaries? Billy heard their mutterings but kept silent. He had told the man the valley's opinion of strangers. Let him find out for himself if he didn't believe.

Billy's sisters had come out from the house and were standing behind him, staring at the stranger along with everyone else.

"Go on back in the house," he told them. He felt important because he had inside information that no one else had. "Go on!" he ordered again, and they scampered inside, pushing each other and calling Billy names. One side of him felt authoritative and responsible for his sisters' correct perception of strangers as no-good. Yet another side of him wanted to tell them to stay and listen to the music from the harmonica because it wasn't likely they'd hear it again anytime soon. Billy began to wonder if Jake was different from the others. But then he'd reconsider and realize that no, there must be something Jake wanted from them; he just hadn't figured it out yet. That's how strangers were.

Henry and two of his daughters stood outside among the circle of others who had gathered. Billy could distinguish Henry's rough, loud voice over everyone else's.

"I don't want him here. Outsiders have never been good news. Rebecca is proof of that. Who the hell's he think he is bargin in on a private place?" he said angrily. He turned and yelled at his daughters. "Go inside you two. Nothin special to see out here." They retreated to

the doorway of their shanty and Henry followed close on their heels, playing the protective father. Billy felt himself growing angry at Henry for no particular reason. Was there something wrong with this guy playing his music? With being here? Was it bad that he had come to Squatter's Hill? Billy's mind raced with questions he had never thought of before. The conflict inside of him rose as he wanted to believe that Jake was different, yet he knew what the valley thought. Henry was older and had had more encounters than he had. Maybe he did know best. His daughter was gone because of a stranger that had been trusted. Still, Billy was confused. What harm was this man doing? Just then Jake stopped playing. The silence was more intense than the music had been. After awhile, people went back inside, still talking but none of them willing to confront this stranger.

Morning brought colder winds and was spent in collecting wood. Billy was up early, and the first to notice that the man had gone. "Got smart, I guess," he thought, and couldn't help thinking of the wavering notes of the harmonica. It had sounded so different from the usual sounds of the children and dogs of the valley. Billy couldn't decide whether to be disappointed or relieved that Jake had gone. At least he wouldn't have to wonder about the man anymore. He munched on a raw turnip and walked across the creek to the grassy hill opposite the valley. Here, he sat under a huge oak tree and surveyed his surroundings.

The community was hidden between the slope of the highway on one side and the grassy hill on the opposite bank of the creek, a kind of intrusion beneath the interstate, Billy thought. From the hillside,

he could see the whole compound. The shacks which sheltered the fourteen families were constructed mostly of scrap lumber, and their tarpaper covering still left many cracks in the ceilings and walls. He often woke up in the night with rain dripping in on him.

The yards and surrounding areas, unfortunately, were not as sparsely furnished as the shanties. A menagerie of trash and junk was scattered about almost creatively. Whole shells of cars sat like ghostly monuments to a better, unattainable lifestyle. Every now and then, a shanty would have a coal pile in front of it. The coal stockpile was a symbol of prestige in Squatter's Hill. If a family had a large store of it, and Billy's never did, it would be left out in plain sight for all to envy.

He watched the women kneeling beside their small patches of gardens, gathering the potatoes, white beans, and wild onions that served as daily meals. They were finished quickly; there wasn't an excessive supply to gather. There was an absence of younger children and men today. The men were all at work in the coal mines, which was what they did every day except the once a week they walked to town to collect the welfare check. Kids were mostly in school today, except for the older ones, like Billy who was now ten and could do more useful things at home.

Billy's mother was outside talking to another woman, Earl's wife. Earl was one of the best traders in the valley. He had more things to trade than anyone, though he wasn't much better off. Most of his trade goods were stolen; it was common knowledge but it didn't matter. Billy thought of the TV Earl had recently "found" to trade. There had been a conversation about it at dinner.

"Earl and them's got a TV set on their porch today," Billy's father Chuck said. "Trading value's going for about thirty bucks. They're having a hard time getting rid of it since ain't nobody here got much worth that. I heard tell Earl was wantin Randy's coal pile for it."

"Now?" Rita Kay asked. "It's a bit late in the year to be trading for fuel. Folks is gonna keep what they got already. Especially not for no TV set."

Billy had stood listening in the corner, scratching himself. He imagined what having a TV set would be like.

"Some kid at school's got one," he had said. "He says it shows all kinds of funny pictures and people on it."

"Foolishness!" his father had snapped. "What would anybody have time for that for? Got a heap more important things to think about than watching pictures, boy."

Billy had sneered at his father and walked out of the shanty, hands thrust in his pockets. He'd fingered the stone he picked up earlier when the coal truck went by. It was smooth, round, like an "O". Walking down to the creek, he had wondered again what the TV was like, but had known that Earl and his family would be protective of it for its trade value and wouldn't show it to him, just a boy who had nothing to trade with anyway.

"Foolishness," Billy said to himself, reaching the creek. "Lots more better'n an old TV set anyhow." And with a quick move of his arm, he'd hurled the stone into the creek, listening to the 'spelunk' sound it's made in the water.

Billy remembered the scene vividly. He had thought of the kid at school who had talked of the TV set, and who wore shoes, and who, Billy

now thought, had a harmonica, but Billy didn't think to wish himself in the other's place. His life would just always be how it always had been. His mother called him for dinner and as he'd walked back to the shanty, he had absent-mindedly kicked one of the skinny dogs as it slunk by him.

Yes, Earl had many things to trade. Every so often, Earl would get hauled into jail by policemen dressed in pressed blue uniforms with gold buttons. Just last month, before Jake showed up, Earl came home from the mines with a rifle, a .22. It was in pretty good condition, and came with a box of hollow-point bullets. Earl came into the valley with it and a freshly-killed squirrel for incentive to trade.

"Probably lifted it out of some fella's truck at the mines," Billy's father said. Billy ran over with most of the rest of the valley's residents to inspect the dead squirrel and listen to Earl brag about how much the rifle was probably worth. By suppertime, Earl had traded it to one of the families for some coal and a clock radio that had been circulated around the valley at least twice already. And by the next week, the rifle had changed hands quite a bit, but had finally landed with Henry and his family. Billy's father recited at supper how many kills Henry had made that week, and since Henry and Chuck were somewhat close, as far as friendships in the valley went, Billy's family was able to get a low trade value for a dove Henry had killed. Billy's reminiscences were interrupted by his mother's call.

"Billy!" she yelled, "Fetch your sack and let's go!" A coal truck had rounded the corner, spraying coal onto the highway and down into the valley. Billy ran to get his sack.

At supper that night, his father spoke of the day's events at the mine.

"That fella was at the mines today askin for work. Jeb told him he could barely handle all those he already had. He hung around all day."

"You talked to him?" asked Billy, licking gravy from his fingers.

"He talked to us. Name's Jake Barkley or something. Wanted us to let him know if a job opened up. He said he'd be stayin around. I don't know about that."

"Staying?"

"How come you're so interested? Anyhow he can't stay too long with no roof and the weather gettin colder. Just as well. All Henry talked about at lunch was Rebecca and that fella from last June. Wouldn't say a word to this Jake fella. Can't say as he looks much like he's out to run off with a man's daughters."

"Neither did that fella that ran off with Rebecca," Rita Kay said. "You gotta protect what you got. Nobody knows that better than the folks around here. You know how people from the outside are. They don't know."

"Any more turnips tonight, Mom?" someone asked, and the conversation was ended.

After the meal, Billy walked outside and wondered where Jake would be staying. What does he want from this place? He walked to the creek and began to throw stones into it. He liked the bloop sounds the smaller ones made as they hit.

"You never told me what the name of this place was," a voice behind him said. Billy whirled around to see Jake standing there, hands in his pockets, looking comfortable. Jake's comfort made Billy even more uncomfortable and untrusting. Billy wondered why Jake seemed so unconcerned when it was obvious that he wasn't a welcome part of the valley. It

seemed as if nothing could ruffle this man's composure. The light-hearted manner was unlike any Billy had ever experienced, and it made the differences between the two more evident.

"Thought you'd gone," Billy said, sounding disgusted. He certainly didn't want Jake, and especially not anyone else in the valley to think that he was actually interested in this man.

"Nope."

They stood in silence as Billy threw more stones. Bloop. Bloop.

"Well? Has it got a name or not?"

"We call it Squatter's Hill," said Billy. "How come you hafta know so bad?"

"If a fella's gonna stay someplace, he likes to know where he is. Plus you're the only one who will talk to me. It ain't like I got some disease or something. Where'd you come up with that name?"

Billy pointed to the grassy hillside where he'd been earlier. At the top of the hill by a large bare-branched oak was a rock, or more appropriately, a boulder.

"That rock up there. It looks like a fella hunched down takin a squat."

Jake laughed. It was deep and throaty, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. "You're right. I was trying to figure last night what that reminded me of." Jake's laughter seemed a natural part of him. Despite his lack of home or friends in the dirty valley, he seemed unaffected, happy even. Billy never thought of it in terms of what Jake might be trying to give the valley, rather than take from it. He bent down to examine a new scab on his knee, and Jake sat beside the familiar

tree. Billy noticed him wince as he took off his sandal.

"Stepped on a dern nail at the mines today. Hurts like the devil. Went right through my shoe!" He rubbed his foot with one hand and with the other he took out his harmonica. Billy grew excited. He wanted Jake to play it again. Instead, Jake held it out to Billy.

"Want to try it? Go ahead. It's pretty easy."

Billy looked at the silver harmonica lying in Jake's open palm. His own hand itched to grab it up. "Go on," Jake urged. "I don't mind."

Billy's hand snatched it up in one quick movement. He held it tight in his hot grubby hand, feeling the coolness of its sides. Then he brought it to his mouth like he had seen the kid at school do, quickly running his lips up and down the scales, and feeling excited, stirred when stray notes floated out into the air. Breathless, he stopped. Jake had been eating a small clump of grapes. Billy realized it was the first time he had ever actually seen him eat anything. Jake held out his hand for Billy to give the harmonica back, but Billy struggled with himself to make his hand let go. He finally handed the harmonica back to Jake and looked at the man.

He thought of Rebecca and of the school cops who came to tell him he should be in school, of the social workers who tried to tell his father to put a plastic skin on so he wouldn't make babies, of the blue uniformed police who came to Earl's to take him to jail. Billy looked at Jake rubbing his foot, remembering him scratch the mangy dogs that ran wild, and he got up and walked away.

"Good night!" called Jake, but Billy didn't answer. Billy felt strangely separated from this man, so different in every way. He saw that the gap could never be bridged.

The next day was Sunday. The men stayed home from the mines, glad of the relief from the dark dusty holes in the ground where they developed hacking coughs and died young. Jake was up early, still leaning against the tree, where presumably he'd spent the night, when Billy walked outside. Jake waved to him across the compound, but Billy pretended not to see. A coal truck had gone by and he was on his way up the highway. Even from the highway he could hear the notes as Jake started playing his harmonica again. He wished Jake would play the long wavy notes like before. Billy brushed his blonde hair from his eyes and stooped to gather coal. His mother sent him back down to the shanty to get another sack, and as he started back up to the road, he stopped and watched Jake from the doorway.

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Lorna was fourteen, with frail limbs and black hair that hung limp to her waist. She had wide green eyes and wore, like most others, a loose house dress made from scraps of material. Lorna was Henry's oldest daughter, since Rebecca had gone. On this particular morning, she had been down at the creek gathering water when the truck had gone by and didn't go up to the highway. Jake played his harmonica and watched her pick bits of plant and debris from her pail.

He shook his head and said under his breath "Squatter's Hill," and laughed softly to himself. At the sound of his laugh, Lorna stiffened.

"Hey, you like music?" he asked her.

She didn't answer. She kept her back to him and tried to hurry, inadvertently wetting her dress with some of the water.

"Guess not. What's your name anyway? I'm Jake. Pleased to meet you."

Lorna glanced sideways in his direction. After he spoke, he'd resumed playing the harmonica again.

"Just trying to be friendly," Jake said. "This is some place."

"I--uh--ain't supposed to talk to you." Lorna said, her voice a whisper. Jake stopped playing.

"Why not? I don't bite." He grinned, showing a set of white teeth. There was a perceptive smile in his voice.

"I just ain't."

"Cause of your father? You're Henry's girl, ain't you? I was at the mine yesterday and he didn't seem too excited that I was around. Did I do something wrong I don't know about?"

"Yeah. It's cause of my sister Rebecca. She--"

"LORNA!" The sound of her name being yelled made her suck in her breath. She stood up quickly and turned to see her father standing in his doorway. Jake saw the girl's fright and wanted to make her feel better. He took up his harmonica and played "Da Da Da Dum" and looked up hopefully to see if she had smiled. She hadn't. Instead, she had caught her dress on a branch in her haste to get up and was trying to get free.

"Here, let me help." Jake stood up and pulled her dress off the branch. As soon as she was free, she ran toward the house where Henry stood, ominous and black-looking in the doorway of the tarpaper shanty. Jake watched from the creek.

Billy glared at Jake as a thought of Rebecca came to mind. "There

he is scratching those old dogs again. Why can't people keep to themselves?" Billy thought. He felt that by Jake's interference the valley's ritual had been upset. This encroachment was taken as a threat to his way of life. Billy felt like a confused, cornered animal, retreating into the safety of its home, familiar territory. He watched with the rest of the valley, viewing Jake with cold eyes. Jake seemed suddenly shifty and repulsive; Billy gritted his teeth, angry that he had not seen this before.

Henry was gesturing wildly at Lorna, his face a frown and his harsh voice audible from the highway. "When I TELL you not to do something, girl, you DON'T do it! You're a hussy like your sister was! Don't think I'm gonna let you do what SHE did! You're gonna stick to your own. Now get inside this house!" he barked.

Apparently Lorna tried to say something in her defense for Henry grabbed her by the arm, spilling the pail of water she had gotten. "DON'T you talk back to ME!" he yelled, and he hit Lorna across the mouth with the back of his hand.

Billy's stomach turned at the sound of the smack. Lorna whimpered as she ran inside, holding her face with both hands. Henry followed Lorna inside. It was as if a cloud of silence had fallen over the valley. Jake stood open-mouthed, hands at his sides, staring at Henry's retreating back. Everyone who had witnessed the scene stared accusingly at Jake. Billy's mouth was dry and his head dizzy. He sat on the stump near his shanty and put his head in his hands. He shivered, for the wind seemed to be growing colder.

Jake shook his head and pocketed the harmonica. His puzzled expres-

sion made it plain that he couldn't understand what exactly had taken place. Squaring his shoulders and scratching his beard, he started for Henry's shanty, followed by the dogs. It seemed they were his sole companions, his only support in this confusing picture. Billy looked up as Jake walked across the trash-strewn compound. He stared after Jake with a blank expression, his eyes vacant.

Jake walked up to Henry's doorway. There was not an actual door, just a space where one could have been. Most shanties had a sheet substituted for the door. Henry's, however, was bare. Neither did most of the shanties have windows. "The flies can come in the door just like everybody else," Billy's mother always said.

"Henry?" Jake called. "Henry, I think there's been a misunderstanding. Your girl didn't do anything. It was my fault, I guess. I don't really know what I'm apologizing for, but all the same..." he broke off. No one from inside Henry's shanty said anything back. Billy stood by the side of Henry's shanty where he had moved during Jake's speech.

Jake was trying to make peace and to clear the air, to ease the tension that had arisen. "Um," Jake began again. "Can I come in? Maybe we could talk this over or something...I didn't mean..."

"Stay right where you are," came the biting reply. "The likes of you ain't settin foot in MY house. You never was welcome in this valley. You should of stayed out from the start. You and all the rest of 'em."

Billy drew in his breath as Henry came out onto the ledge which he proudly called his porch. Henry was holding Earl's rifle, and it was pointed at Jake. Jake's eyes widened, and for the first time Billy saw the clear brown color of them. Jake's mouth was opened slightly, and he was holding his hands out in front of him. He backed up a few steps

and said, "Now hang on here a minute. It wasn't what you thought."

"How do YOU know what I thought? You or any of 'em who come in here think they owe it to us to change everything. It ain't gonna change. And when we don't bow down to you, you take what ain't yours, even if it's a man's daughter."

Jake had been backing up during this. Everyone jumped at the sound of the first shot. Billy started forward as Jake grabbed the sleeve of his Army jacket. The material was torn by a close bullet.

"Wait! Wait!" he yelled. "I just want to talk!"

Henry shot again, this time making a cloud of dust at Jake's feet.

"There's been enough talking! Ain't nothin to say anymore."

"But--" Jake began, shouting as another bullet struck him in the shoulder. "No--you don't understand! I just want--"

"What about what I want?" screamed Henry. "What about THAT? What about what we never have? What about what you want to take from us?"

"Stop!" yelled Jake, desperate now. "Stop!"

Henry was blinded with fury. And then it came. Another obscene explosion pierced the air, and Jake fell backwards, arms out-stretched, his forehead spilling blood. His eyes were wide and unmoving, his mouth open in silent protest. A widening puddle of blood spread around his shoulders, and the dogs, still slinking around, lapped at it greedily.

Billy's initial shock at the gunshot subsided quickly. He stared at Jake's body, almost curious like he had been when he had examined the first squirrel Earl had brought into the valley. His conflict had been resolved for him. Billy had swallowed the memory of Jake's attempts

at friendship and put in its place the scene with Lorna.

Since no one else moved to do anything, Billy walked over to Jake's body, ignoring the dogs, reached into his pocket, and took the harmonica. He looked up at Henry who still held the gun as if he were aiming at something. Behind Henry, he glimpsed Lorna's tear-streaked face and noticed her split lip. Billy nodded his head at her and walked toward his shanty, fingering the silver harmonica. It seemed different from when he'd held it before. Now it was just a plain metal object. He wondered vaguely what he could trade it for, and before he had walked too far, the people of the valley had already started back about their business. It was better this way, without outsiders disturbing the balance of things. A few people went up to Henry and clapped him on the shoulder, their faces grim. It was if they were saying, without words, that they understood. He did what had to be done.

Henry's harsh words echoed in Billy's thoughts. "It ain't gonna change." he'd said. "He's right," thought Billy, "it won't." But it was just as well. They would all manage.

LA FEMME

Charlie glanced uneasily around the store, one hand plunged deep into her pants pocket. The shelves of candy, playing cards, and toys loomed before her ominously. As she glanced towards the store front, she could see the group of three boys looking into the window expectantly. Blood pounded in her ears and her throat ached from dryness. Quickly she dashed out a hand and grabbed two or three pieces of gum, stuffing them into her pocket. Breathing faster, she brushed her long hair out of her face and tried to appear casual. As she walked down the aisle, she pilfered several other items, each time glancing toward the gray-haired check-out lady. The lady was busy with a customer, ringing up a box of tissue and some shampoo. When Charlie judged she had enough, she sauntered to the exit and walked out the door. The ringing bell on the door made her heart leap: it seemed to sound an alarm. She inwardly cringed as she expected several men in dark uniforms to come running towards her, but no one rushed to stop her. At least not this time. There was a boy at school who had had to do community work for sixteen hours because he had been caught, and Charlie thought of him as she left the store, knowing what she was doing was wrong but thinking she'd never do it again if she could just please the boys this once.

Once outside the boys crowded around her, buzzing with curiosity.

"Well?"

"Whadd'ya get?"

"C'mon, Charlie. Cough it up."

She emptied her pockets onto the sidewalk, spilling out gum, jacks, fishing tackle, baseball cards, and--

"Look at this, guys," one of them said. The tallest boy, Taylor, quickly snatched up the last object before Charlie had a chance to stuff it back in her pocket. "Lipstick."

Charlie blushed with shame as Taylor held it up for ridicule. She hadn't meant for them to see it. She had taken it at the last minute, on impulse, intending to keep it hidden.

"You almost passed the test, Charlie," said Rick. "Too bad you had to go and do something dumb like that."

"I just picked it up by accident," she protested.

"When we said 'no girls' in our club, we should have stuck to it." This from Jeremy who had been against her from the start.

Taylor tossed the lipstick to Charlie as he and the other two walked off with the rest of her plunder.

"Maybe next time, Charlotte," Jeremy said, using her hated given name to reduce her status even further.

"See you around."

Charlie's blue eyes filled and her freckled face wrinkled as she tried to hold back the tears. She would NOT cry. It was exactly what a girl would do. 'And what exactly are YOU?' a voice inside asked. She ignored it. She had wanted to be part of the gang for as long as she could remember, and now all of her hard work was ruined. Why had she been so stupid? She gazed down the street after the boys. They were laughing and shoving each other while she stood alone. What did she have to go and take the lipstick for?

"Hey, Charlie," said someone behind her. She started and looked up. It was Katherine Horn.

"Hi," was Charlie's barely audible answer. She hated Katherine, who always wore dainty, frilly clothes and constantly twirled a ringlet of her curly hair.

"I'm having a birthday party tomorrow night. Would you want to come?"

Charlie frowned. "No, Katherine. I mean, thanks, but I can't tomorrow. My uncle's coming for a visit."

"Oh, well, Okay. Tell your uncle hello," she said as she flounced down the sidewalk.

Charlie realized she was still gripping the lipstick in her hand. She unclasped her sweaty fingers to look at the cold container. "La Femme," it said. Coral pink. Anger boiled up inside of her as she remembered her humiliation in front of the boys. She threw the lipstick as hard as she could into a nearby trashcan and felt a small sense of satisfaction as it clanged against the side.

For the rest of the day, Charlie played by herself, alienated from the boys and purposely estranged from the flouncy, frilly girls. Since as least as far back as the third grade, Charlie had never quite belonged to either camp. She was constantly outside climbing trees, chasing lizards, swimming, or imaginging herself as a great pirate or soldier. The dolls and tea sets her hopeful mother had given her at Christmas and for birthdays were cast aside casually and with undisguised indifference. Most girls were frightened when she picked up crickets or dug for worms, and they thought of her as strange. But the boys inevitably classified her as a "girl" and therefore an untouchable.

"Charlotte, why don't you sit down and rest for a little while?" her

mother constantly urged. And her father: "Is that any way for my little lady to act?"

Unheeded, Charlie's parents were forced to let her run restless and untamed, with her hair in tangles and her face freckled and bronzed from the sun. No amount of comparisons with her older sister, Suzanne, could persuade her to change her ways or to go by "Charlotte" rather than the boyish "Charlie." She spent her days rough-housing or skate boarding and her nights wishing for a baseball glove.

After being depressed all through dinner that night and sleeping restlessly, Charlie was late for school the next morning. She had been having the most wonderful dream about Marcus Robertson, a boy in her math class, and ignored her mother's calls for her to come to breakfast. Her father was packing to go on a business trip and her sister Suzanne, six years her senior, was fussing over how her hair looked when Charlie ran out to catch the bus. Since her first class was gym, she ran inside the girls' locker room and quickly changed into her blue and white shorts and T-shirt. Next to her, other girls were also changing. Talking and laughing, they discussed boys and hairspray and all those other subjects that Charlie thought were so stupid. But today she listened. Marla Reynolds stood across from her in her underwear, and Charlie couldn't help but notice her chest. She was definitely the most "developed" girl in school. In science class last week, Mr. Gerard had talked about the formation of the earth and its different layers. Charlie had wondered why Jeremy and Taylor were laughing so hard during class, and afterwards they had told her that Marla's new name was "Volcanic Eruption." Charlie had laughed with them then, but

now she didn't think it was so funny. Charlie had never been modest or shy, but now she was aware of her own chest and how flat it was compared to Marla's. After they had played basketball in class, everyone rushed to change so they could get to their second class of the day. Charlie was chosen as girls' team captain for the quarter, and she had felt so proud of herself. Now, however, as they all jostled each other back into the locker room, she was reminded of her previous thoughts.

"Did you see Trish and Meg both jump for that ball?" someone was asking her.

"I think Marcus was watching you, Charlie. I saw him on the other side of the gym," teased Marla.

At this Charlie looked up. "What?"

"I think he likes you."

"Oh, brother," she replied, but she couldn't deny the surge of excitement she felt. She had had a semi-crush on Marcus since the summer, but she had never actually talked to him or said anything more than in passing. Could he really like her? Had he really been watching her?

The girls giggled in separate groups, and Charlie wondered if they had only said that about Marcus to tease her. She was always so different from most girls that she was often told she acted like a boy or called Charles by those who didn't like her. As she pulled her shirt over her head, she glanced down at her chest and her heart sunk. "He was probably looking at Marla," she thought glumly. "I certainly don't have anything to look at."

Charlie looked around at the others in their lace underwear and bras. She wore a plain undershirt and briefs. No wonder they called her Charles. She finished changing and walked out into the gym to go to her next class. She gasped involuntarily when she noticed Marcus waiting by the doorway. She looked aroudn frantically. There was no other way out. She breathed deeply and started toward the door.

"Hi, Charlie. That was a great lay-up you did today."

"Thanks. I didn't know you saw it."

He paused. "Oh, well, you know. I just happened to look over."

They walked along in silence. What did he want? What could he possibly have to say to her?

"Are you--" he began. Charlie looked over at him. His blonde hair and green eyes looked so perfect to her. He walked with her hands in his pockets, and he had the cutest expression on his face. "How embarrassing," she thought, "What am I doing here."

"Am I what?" she asked.

"Are you--uh--do you like Taylor?"

"Taylor?" This was a new one. "Well, sure, I guess. Why?"

"Oh. Just wondered. No reason." He sounded disappointed.

"What do you mean, Marcus? We're just friends. That's all." Charlie thought again of the way Taylor had acted when she had come out of the store with lipstick in her pocket. Well, sort of friends, she guessed. "I mean," she said, "I don't like him like him."

"You don't?" Charlie couldn't help but notice how obviously changed his expression had become at this new information. Maybe it was true what Marla had said. Maybe he did like her. She had always been too busy following around Taylor, Rick, and Jeremy trying to be

one of the guys that maybe she just hadn't noticed before. Marcus started again.

"Would you want to go to Friday's basketball game? I mean, with me? From the way you played in gym today, you seem like you wouldn't be like some other girls who think it's a touchdown when you get the ball through the hoop."

"I'd love to go!" she said. She smiled at him and he grinned back. Just then the bell rang for the next class, and they parted company. It was terribly hard to concentrate on trapezoids when all she could see was Marcus' green eyes before her.

When she got home that afternoon, Charlie noticed a strange car in the driveway. The license plate said "you've got a friend in Pennsylvania." Then she remembered. Uncle Phil and Aunt Debbie were supposed to come today. She ran inside and hugged her uncle, who of course exclaimed at how big she'd gotten.

"Daddy says hello," she said, as she pulled her uncle's beard.

"Sorry to have missed him," he said. "Why don't you go see your aunt? She has a surprise for you."

Charlie ran into the living room and stopped short as she saw her aunt. she was talking to Charlie's mother about patterns and wallpaper, and she was FAT.

"You're pregnant!" she yelled.

Her aunt looked around in surprise. "Well, well look at that," she teased. "I AM!"

Charlie laughed and hugged her aunt, treating her as if she might break. She couldn't believe it. Debbie had always played basketball

with her when she had come to visit. She was the one who taught her the lay-up that Marcus had admired. And Debbie had always been the one to vow that she'd never have children because it would ruin her game. And now she looked like she'd swallowed a watermelon.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, as Debbie placed Charlie's hand on her rounded stomach.

"Sometimes, when he kicks hard." she said. "But mostly it just makes me very happy." Charlie had never seen her aunt act this way before. How could she be so happy about getting fat and motherly? Debbie was supposed to be her ally of sorts. Charlie kept glancing at Debbie's figure all during dinner and the talk was centered around baby things for most of the evening.

Charlie was still thinking about all these thins when she followed Suzanne into her room after dinner.

"What do you want, squirt?" her sister asked, moving to close the door.

"Wait--can I come in?"

Suzanne shot Charlie a halfway bored look and for an answer left the door open. She went to the mirror and started fluffing her hair. Charlie sat quietly on the bed, not knowing why she had come. Suzanne's interests were usually completely opposite her own.

"I have a date. What do you want?"

"Nothing. Can I just sit here?"

"Suit yourself."

Charlie watched as Suzanne pulled on textured stockings, making sure there weren't any runs first. Then she tried on several outfits

before the full-length mirror before finally settling on a black mini-skirt and an expensive looking blouse. Again she fluffed her short hair, curling strands that seemed out of place. She rummaged through her jewelry box and chose a gold necklace and large earrings. Then, she put the finishing touches of makeup on and spritzed herself lightly with perfume.

"You look nice," said Charlie, absorbed in the proceedings.

"Thanks. I hope Brad thinks so, too." She winked at Charlie and slipped her feet into some black flats.

"See ya, kiddo," she said and breezed out of the room.

Charlie looked at herself in the mirror. "Pretty ordinary," she thought as her reflection stared back at her. She turned sideways and surveyed her figure. She was long and skinny and her chest had barely begun to show any signs of life. "C'mon, guys." she said, pushing her breasts together, trying to give her chest the encouragement it seemed to so desperately need by giving it an example of cleavage. She looked at Suzanne's array of makeup. One by one she tested out the colors on her eyes, cheeks, and lips. Her unpracticed eye resulted in her appearing clownish and overdone, but she was pleased.

When she woke up the next morning, Uncle Phil and Aunt Debbie had already left to go back home. At first she felt disappointed that they hadn't spent more time there, but then she remembered that today was Friday. They day of the basketball game and her date with Marcus. Uncle Phil and Aunt Debbie were completely forgotten, and as she got ready for school, she chose carefully what she wore, in case she saw Marcus in the halls. All day long she thought of what the date would be like. What

would they say to each other? How should she act? Would he hold her hand or kiss her? Charlie's imagination staged scene after scene of possible situations, and Mrs. Stanley, her Algebra teacher had had to call her names three times before she heard her. She saw Marcus only once at school, passing in the cafeteria as she went to sit with her friends and he with his.

"Still okay for tonight?" he had asked.

"Yeah. I'll meet you at the doors to the gym," she'd said. And that was all.

An hour before she was to meet him that night, Charlie went to her room to get ready. As she pulled on her favorite jeans she thought of Taylor, Jeremy, and Rick. They seemed so different from Marcus. She thought of them in entirely different ways. She would never want Marcus to see her catching lizards or know she'd played at being a pirate. With Marcus she wanted to show another part of herself, a part she hadn't really known existed until lately. What was it Suzanne had called it? Femininity? It was hard to say, even harder to do. Charlie wanted to look like Suzanne had looked in her mini skirt but her skinny legs and slim figure wouldn't look that way no matter what she did. She looked in the mirror and brushed her hair back from her face. Something was missing.

Charlie knocked on Suzanne's door. "Can I come in?"

"What do you want? I'm on the phone."

"Can I borrow your lipstick?"

"<u>What</u>? Hang on, Barbara, I'll call you back." Suzanne hung up and stared at her sister. "Since when do <u>you</u> wear lipstick? Where are you going anyway?"

"Just to a basketball game, but I want to look--um--feminine." As she said the last word, Charlie lifted her voice, sounding breathy like the actresses in the old black and white movies her mother watched.

"Oh? Just a basketball game?"

"Marcus asked me to go."

"Marcus?"

"Cut it out, Suzanne. Can I borrow it or not?" Suzanne laughed.

"Yes, come here and let me help."

Suzanne held Charlie's face with one hand and applied the lipstick and a touch of other colors with the other. Finally, she stepped back, as if having completed her masterpiece.

"Well?" asked Charlie.

"You look nice."

"Thanks," Charlie said, sounding relieved. "I just hope Marcus thinks so." She winked at Suzanne and left her sister laughing on the bed.

"Bye, Mom." she said, opening the door to leave.

"Look at you. My goodness, the caterpillar came out of its cocoon."

"MOM," Charlie groaned as she rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay, give me a kiss and have a good time."

She kissed her mother goodbye and shut the door. The caterpillar out of its cocoon. She did feel changed, and she liked the way it felt to be wearing perfume for the first time in her life. She thought of her mother kissing her father, Aunt Debbie's baby, and lastly, Suzanne. As she rounded the corner and walked towards the school and the gym, Charlie thought of Marcus and wondered what he'd look like tonight, if he was waiting for her.

Yes, there he was, sitting on a brick ledge outside the gym. He jumped off when she walked over to him. All he did was smile at her, and she wondered if there was something wrong with her.

"Have I got something on my face or something?"

"No, no. You just look real different."

"Is that good or bad?" she laughed.

"Good," he said, almost too quickly. "I mean, I've never seen you look so, so...well, different."

"Marcus, you make it sound like I'm from another planet or something."

"Don't take this wrong, Charlie, but I mean you just look like a girl, but in a good way, you know? I think you--well, you look really pretty." He stumbled over the words and blushed deeply, which pleased Charlie.

"Thanks. You look real nice, too."

They stood smiling at each other for a moment until they heard the pep band start playing in the gym.

"I guess we should go in. We don't want to miss the warm-up patterns." said Charlie. "Michael Reed is starting tonight."

Marcus laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You just know all this stuff about basketball and you could probably beat me in a game, but you still look really nice and stuff, too."

Charlie looked at him quizzically.

"I guess I'm just trying to say that I think that's cool. I think you're cool for being that way," he said, looking down at his sneakers.

"It's mutual," she smiled.

They could hear the crowd cheering inside, and they walked toward the gym doors. When Marcus opened the doors, the band and the cheers were amplified, and the hot air wafted out, contrasting with the cool night breeze. Marcus looked over at Charlie, watching her scan the crowd for people she knew and looking at the players pass the ball back and forth between them. Suzanne had given her a tube of lipstick so she could freshen up, and she pulled it out of her pocket and twisted the top off. With slightly open lips like Suzanne had shown her, she wielded the lipstick expertly and matter-of-factly until her lips were a soft shimmery pink. Marcus watched her, fascinated with this girl, and then took her hand. They walked towards the bleachers as the doors swung shut behind them.

II.

KITH AND KIN

"Fifteen million people in the world and I had to get her for a niece." Dottie crushed out her cigarette and lit another one. "You'd think her daddy'd give more than a flying flip and take notice of her behavior. The whole rest of Wynona County does!" She set down her coffee cup a little too hard so that it clinked against her plate. Momma looked around at her.

Ellen said, "Dottie, now two o'clock isn't really all that late."

"You tell that to Mrs. Caroline P. Fletcher across the street. Just yesterday I was out digging tulip bulbs to save for replanting next spring and here comes Mrs. Caroline P. Fletcher just marching right across the street as if the thought had just crossed her mind. 'Dottie Baker,' she said, 'Wasn't that your niece Florence Baker I seen coming in at two a.m. last night?'"

"Friday night, too?" asked Ellen.

Dottie just shot Ellen a look that said, thinly, "Friday night, too." "You know she ain't cutting hair that early in the morning. The shop closes at five thirty."

"Look, ya'll, Ralph Emery has Minnie Pearl on today. She's just gotten so silly lately. Used to be she was funny, but she's just turned silly."

"Momma, how can you watch Ralph Emery when your granddaughter's reputation is sinking so low?" Dottie looked at Ellen, her eyes plainly showing that she thought Momma was losing her sharpness.

"Florence will get along alright. She always does."

"Well, I think somebody ought to say something to her before Mrs. Caroline P. Fletcher runs her mouth off to every living soul in Wynona."

"You gonna eat those eggs or can I take your plate?" Ellen took the plate Dottie shoved forward and carried it into the kitchen. "Florence's got a good head on her shoulders," she thought. "She'll be alright." The sink filled up with soapy water and Ellen stood staring out the window, lost in thought. She could hear the Oak Ridge Boys on the TV set in the living room.

"Now don't they sound better than they did on that last song?" Momma was asking Dottie.

Ellen smiled. She could just picture Dottie puffing away on her cigarette, fluffing her blonde hair which had lately begun to show its dark roots again. She caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the kitchen window and for a moment quit scrubbing the breakfast plates. Her dark hair was graying along the sides, and her eyes had little crow's feet at the corners. She missed David. He would tell her that gray hairs didn't matter, and he would know how to talk to Florence. They had been married for fifteen years when the trooper came to he door one night to tell her that her truck had been found overturned on an embankment. It had jumped the guardrail and caught on fire when it hit. She had collapsed at the door.

Several months later she'd moved in with Momma, her sister Dottie, and Florence, her brother Amos' girl. Amos had taken up with another woman almost a year ago and told Florence she needed to find another place to stay. So Florence had shown up on Momma's door, dry-eyed, with

suitcase in hand, announcing she aimed to work at Clara's Cut and Curl as a hairdresser. And she had, too, going on about six months now. And here lately she'd been coming in at two and three in the morning, not offering an explanation to anybody.

"Sister! Sis, come in here and see this. Hurry up!" Dottie called, interrupting Ellen's thoughts.

"What is it?" she asked, coming into the living room and drying her hands on a dishtowel.

"Look at this news brief here." Dottie reached over and turned up the volume.

"Authorities are still looking for the man they say robbed Pikeville Federal last week in broad daylight. The suspect got away with more than ten thousand dollars before a clerk notified police. The man is said to be armed and dangerous..." Dottie turned the volume down again and looked at Ellen.

"These are sorry times when the banks get robbed in your own county," said Dottie. "Can you believe it? Right here in Wynona."

"It happens everywhere, Dottie. Some people are desperate."

"Desperate nothing! They're just plain dumb."

Momma limped back into the living room from the bathroom. "My show back on yet? Yesterday this one girl won five thousand dollars on Wheel of Fortune. She's supposed to be on again today."

"Momma, they just said on the news that Pikeville Federal was robbed last week. Did you know that? They still haven't caught the guy."

"Aw, I don't pay attention to any of that stuff. It's all bad

news anyhow. Did I tell you they had that Joan Collins on Johnny Carson last night? She wore this black gown thing that was so sheer you could see every inch of her."

"No, you didn't say so. Is Marlys coming over today?"

"Yeah, she called yesterday." Momma adjusted the large glasses that framed her eyes. "Sister, did I tell you she took me over to see Eddie's grave last month? It'd been quite a while since I'd been there. Yes, indeed." she paused. "But anyhow, she's coming over today to play cards with you girls. She's bringing me the new TV Guide, too." Momma sipped her coffee.

"Lord, Momma, when's she coming? I haven't even rolled my hair yet!" Dottie jumped up from the table and locked herself in the bathroom, trailing smoke behind her.

Marlys arrived at noon and by then Dottie had her face made up and her hair rolled. Ellen just brushed her hair and pulled on a sweater and jeans. The kitchen door was pushed open and in came Marlys with her arms full of canned fruits and vegetables.

"I brought you some peaches, Miss Ruthie!" she yelled, and she put the box of canned goods on the counter before coming into the living room. I also got some tomatoes so we can slice them up for lunch." Marlys was tall and slim, with a loud voice and thick red hair. She wore blue jeans and a green sweater, which matched her eyes, and she constantly fiddled with the rings on her fingers. She was Amos' ex-wife, but Florence's mother in name only. Florence's real mother had killed herself with a pistol behind the azalea bushes. Florence had been eight years old when she'd found her mother lying dead in the sand.

Momma fixed up some tuna sandwiches, potato salad, and iced tea and took it out to the porch where the three women were seated around a card table. Marlys was dealing.

"Well, Momma, we were gonna do that," said Dottie, looking over her hand. "Shoot, Marlys, can't you deal better than this?" She blew smoke across the table.

"That's okay. I needed to get up and walk around before my cooking show came on."

"You don't want to stay out here with us?" asked Marlys. Even though Marlys was Amos' ex, she and Momma had always been close.

"No. I don't understand those old card games. They're gonna talk about angel food cakes today anyway."

"Momma, why don't you sit out here with us for awhile?" Dottie urged. "It's so nice out here on the porch."

"You all go on." Momma retreated into the house as the cooking show theme music began.

"I'm worried about Momma," said Dottie. She took the pencil and pad and wrote each of their names at the top. She was always score-keeper.

"What for?" asked Marlys, munching on a tomato. "Your discard."

"Cause she's so wrapped up in those shows. This morning me and Sis had to hear all about Ralph Emery. Now if it were <u>me</u> and Daddy died, I'd find a nice hobby or something."

"Well, it ain't you." said Ellen. Dottie ignored her.

"It just ain't natural to be so absorbed like she is. It just ain't--oh, Sis I needed that two of clubs--ain't <u>right</u> somehow."

"Oh, let her go. What else has she got to do?"

"Well," said Marlys, "What do you do, Ellen? It's been five years since David passed away."

"I work at the craft store and do volunteer work at the hospital, and I'm happy thank you very much."

"But does that really make you happy? Don't you feel like something's missing in your life?"

"No, nothing's missing. I got Dottie, Momma, and my friends, plus work every week. I'm satisfied."

"Ellen Baker, you're forty-two years old and what are you doing with yourself?"

"Whose turn is it?" asked Dottie.

"Plenty, Marlys. I'm satisfied with my life."

"Is that why you drive up to the lake every weekend and scribble little things in that notebook of yours?"

Dottie looked up. "What notebook? You didn't tell me you scribbled in a notebook, Sis. You know, I used to want to be an artist myself, and--"

"How'd you know about that notebook, Marlys?" Ellen snapped.

Marlys realized she'd made a mistake.

"How'd you know?" Ellen repeated.

"Whose turn is it?" said Dottie. "Is that your eight of hearts?"

"Just wait a minute, Dottie. Well, Ellen, I'll tell you. One weekend I had to borrow your car and you'd just come back from the lake and gone in to take a nap. Well, I didn't want to wake you up cause all I needed was to take it to--"

"Marlys!"

"So while I was driving to the store, I needed a Kleenex and looked in your glove compartment to see if you had one, and you hadn't taken that notebook out because it fell on the floor of the car. So I--"

"Did you read it?" Ellen's face looked pale, and her large brown eyes were even wider than usual.

"I only flipped through just to see what it was, you know, to see if it was important or something."

"You big snoop! That was my personal notebook, and it's none of your business what I wrote!"

"Why? What did it say?" asked Dottie.

"Dottie! It's none of anybody's business except mine!"

"Well, I'm sorry, Ellen. But the point was that you're obviously not satisfied in some aspects..."

"Marlys Louise Gentry! Shut up right this minute!"

"Sister!"

"Whether I'm satisfied or not is none of your affair, and if I choose to live here with my sister and my mother and my niece, who would fare a lot better, by the way, if you ever took a mind to her, then that's my affair too. When David--" she choked on his name. "When David died, I had some problems, I admit, but I am trying to get along without him, and I will thank you not to stick your nose in where it does not belong!"

Dottie and Marlys sat with gaping mouths as Ellen yelled at them and stomped into the house. It was so unlike her usual calm self that they didn't know what to make of it.

"What was so awful that she wrote, Marlys? You ought not to have looked."

"Oh, she wrote about books she'd read, checked out from the library. She said things that a woman her age would naturally think about, especially without a husband."

"What things?" asked Dottie, leaning forward. Dottie, at thirty-six, had never married. She worked in a florist down the street. She crushed out her cigarette and listened expectantly.

"Well, you know, about sex." Dottie leaned back and ate a tomato slice.

"Sister? She seems so calm and happy."

Marlys laughed. "well,honey, what's that got to do with it? She works with sick people and sews all week. Then she comes home to a Momma who can tell you about the private lives of everyone on TV and a sister who--well, there's just no men here."

"What did she write?"

"She checked out Ulysses and Lady Chatterly and some others and wrote about what she thought, you know." Marlys taught English at the high school, but Dottie had no idea what those books were about.

"And what did she think?"

"Dottie. She just wrote about things she'd do with David, and all sorts of things about death and--"

"Death?"

"Well, what with David dying and your Daddy, she seems to seeit as a sort of escape. Books and movies. You know how she's always running downtown to the theatre."

"So do I, Marlys. I like movies, too."

"Why do you go?"

"I like the stories and the places they show."

"But it's not real. That's why she goes and writes stuff down, I think. Because she's trying to decide what she likes about her real life, if anything. It's perfectly normal, I guess. Movies and books are so much more exciting."

Marlys left with the card game unfinished and without saying good-bye to Ellen, who had shut herself in her room until dinner time. Ellen took out her notebook and leafed through the pages wondering desperately what parts Marlys had read. She felt her face flushing hotly, and she flung the notebook on her bed angrily. So what if she liked to read and watch movies? She wasn't like--well, like Momma. She picked up the notebook again and turned to a page where she'd written about death. Sometimes she thought death would be so comforting and so easy. She'd written about Florence's mother killing herself. Ellen didn't think she could ever kill herself. She liked living too much; she liked just sitting back and observing people, and if she died, she'd miss an awful lot. She thought a lot, in her room, about what Marlys had said. Was something missing? Was she satisfied? Yes, she honestly thought she was. If she wanted to do something, like that trip to Greece she and David had always planned, she guessed she could do it. Maybe she'd take off and just go somewhere, have a good time, and see the world, all by herself. Maybe she'd meet someone. Ellen had been talking about a trip for a long time, but had just never gotten around to doing anything about it. If David were here, she thought, he'd do something. We could be on a plane to Greece tomorrow. But David wasn't here. That was the problem. Again her mind drifted back to Marlys. Maybe the truth hurts a little bit, she thought.

Ellen resolved to go see the travel agent tomorrow. She would go see life and what it could be like. She would show Marlys and the rest of them. "And yourself, too," a little voice inside her added. When she checked her appearance in the mirror before going downstairs to dinner, she thought she looked better than she had in a long time. She looked at David's picture, touched the glass lovingly, and set it back down on the nightstand with a sigh.

Florence came in just before dinner. "The shop closed late today, Grandma. Sorry if I'm late."

"Nope, we're just putting it on the table. I Dream of Jeannie isn't even on yet."

"Did you have a good day?" Dottie asked, rather tersely Ellen thought.

"Yes, I guess so. Mrs. Fletcher came in wanting a roll-up, you know, but she didn't act too nice about it. Looks you're about due for another peroxide job yourself, Dottie."

Dottie looked indignant and they all sat down to eat. In the background, Momma was keeping an eye on Major Nelson and Jeannie.

"I'm going to the travel agent tomorrow," Ellen announced.

"Yeah, I hear you." said Dottie, giving Ellen a bored look.

"I really am this time. I was thinking about Greece."

Florence glanced over. "That's great, Ellen. You need some time off once in a while."

"That's what I was thinking. You know--"

"Oh, come on, Ellen. This is only the fortieth time you've decided to do this."

"I know, but I've decided to really do it. You'll see."

"Just wait and see, Dottie. Ellen can do it if she really sets her mind to it."

"Florence, I hardly think you are an authority on Ellen."

"Dottie," Ellen said, "Neither are you."

Ellen thought Florence seemed preoccupied, and when the phone rang, she jumped, almost knocking over her tea. Momma picked up the receiver.

"Hello?...what in the world?...Is that you, Amos?" Florence looked up from her cornbread and roast beef. "Settle down now. Quit your ruckus. Yes, she's sitting right here." Momma handed the phone to Florence, who looked rather pale, and Ellen thought she'd looked like she'd lost weight recently. She just hadn't noticed before.

"Hello Daddy...Yes. No, you don't want to do that, Daddy. Just calm down. Come on, now, think what you're saying...Alright. OK,bye." Florence hung up the phone and turned to face the table. Though her voice hadn't shown it while she was on the phone, she had started crying and now wiped the tears away with her napkin.

"What's that boy gone and done now?" Dottie asked.

"Oh, Dottie, don't be so mean. Amos isn't bad, he's just misdirected." said Ellen.

"He sounded like he'd been drinking again," said Momma. "What did he tell you, Florence?"

"I'm gonna go on over there now and see about him. He needs someone to sober him up."

"Why doesn't that woman of his do that for him?" snapped Dottie. "Florence, I don't think it looks right for you to be coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Mrs. Caroline P. Fletcher was just telling me the other day that--"

"Who?" Florence whirled to face Dottie and threw her compact back into her purse. "She was talking about me to you? Well, I'd just like to know if that woman's had anything good to say in all of her life. For your information, Miss Dorothea Baker, I am old enough to come and go when I please and for what reasons I please."

"Florence," said Momma quietly. "You'd best go see about your Daddy."

Florence looked at Momma knowingly and she stormed out of the house, slamming the door.

"She has a lot of nerve," Dottie began. "I was only trying to protect her reputation and maybe even her life, what with banks being robbed and people being snatched up like that girl over in Edgerton County, right here in our own state."

"She's old enough to know right from wrong," said Momma. "You just leave Florence alone, Dottie."

"Well, I won't either. I have to live in the same house with her, and pretty soon people will be talking about us, too, thinking we condone her behavior."

"And just what is her behavior?" asked Ellen.

"Why, her gallavanting around town all hours of the night and morning."

"Dottie, you don't know anything about what she does. The Good Book says 'Judge not lest ye be also judged,'" Momma said.

"All of you seem to be completely blind to what's going on right underneath your noses," said Dottie. "Florence has obviously got some man somewhere."

"That so?" said Momma, disinterestedly.

"What in the world would you know about men, Dottie, living in this house for so long?" Ellen asked.

Dottie reddened and struck back. "Well, I may not know all the juicy things that you seem to know, Sister. I may not write all my fantasies down on paper, but I know a few things!"

Before Ellen could say anything, the phone rang again. "Hello?" Momma said. "What's he done now?...What?" Momma's voice turned icy and she sat down heavily in her chair. "Tell him to hang on, Florence. Don't you worry."

Momma hung up the phone and picked up her purse. "Come on, you two. We gotta get to the hospital. Amos' done shot himself."

Nobody said a word until they were in the car driving out past the rows of oaks and dogwoods that lined the road. The leaves had just started changing, Ellen noticed vaguely. The dogwoods were such a pretty red. Ellen drove the old white Ford past the First Methodist Church on Lynch Street. The people were just getting out of an evening service. Ellen tried to remember the last time she'd gone to church. It was before David had died. She needed to start going again.

Dottie sat in the front seat with Ellen and Momma. She was in the middle and she smoothed out her yellow skirt as they drove along. Momma had her purse on her lap, and she held the handles tightly and stared straight ahead, looking for all the world like she was watching one of her shows back in the living room.

"What did Florence say, Momma?" asked Ellen. "Is Amos--"

"No, he ain't dead yet. As screwed up as Amos is you ought to know he wouldn't be able to kill himself on the first try, especially with liquor in him."

"Poor Florence."

"Yeah, she's got a good head on her shoulders, though, that gal does. Not like her Momma who was just aimless and lost."

"What happened?"

"He was fooling around with that pistol your father gave him."

"I thought he got rid of it after Lucille--"

"No, he kept it around. Said there was no use wasting a good pistol. So he was feeling sorry for himself after that gal left him."

"She left him?" Dottie asked.

"About a month ago. Course he'd never admit that. He's been drinking pretty much ever since if I know Amos. And then he turned crazy and went and--"

"What, Momma?"

Momma glanced at Dottie. "He went and robbed a bank with that same pistol."

Dottie's eyes flew open and Ellen nearly threw them all forward as she almost missed a stop sign.

"He did <u>what</u>?"

"That Pikeville Federal you were talking about, Dottie."

"That was Amos?" Dottie asked, unbelieving.

"So ever since then, Florence's been going out there to keep an eye on him so he doesn't do anything else crazy. That's where she's been going every night."

Dottie looked ashamed and got very quiet. Ellen was amazed that Momma <u>knew</u> all this. Momma had always seemed just absorbed in her shows on TV, unaware of anything else that went on around her. She'd obviously

found some time in between shows to be a mother to Florence and to worry about her son.

"Marlys said just today that books and movies were so much more exciting than real life." said Dottie. Ellen shot her a look.

"I bet Marlys don't know her ex-husband robbed a bank." Momma said bluntly. "Florence's been trying to talk him into turning himself in, and he's been staying drunker and drunker. But I guess she couldn't watch him all the time, and if tons of folks went out to his place all of a sudden, it would look suspicious."

"Why'd he shoot himself, Momma?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know. I guess folks sometimes think they just can't handle this life as it is, and dying looks so much better to 'em."

"I'd be scared to take such a chance," said Dottie.

"Amos' been taking chances all his life. It wasn't anything new to him. He just felt sorry for himself, I reckon, and wanted to get out of his responsibility to this life. He chose a sorry way to do it, considering Florence was right there."

Ellen pulled into the hospital parking lot close to the emergency room. She saw Florence's car by the entrance.

"Ain't nothing wrong with a little escape every once in awhile," said Momma. "Your daddy used to go fishing when he had a heavy heart. But he'd always come back asking what needed to be done around the house. You just can't <u>stay</u> gone fishing all your life."

As they walked toward the emergency room entrance, Ellen looked at Momma limping alond, her hair gray and her round glasses set on her nose. She put one arm around Momma and one around Dottie, and together they walked through the hospital doors.

WELCOME HOME

(Momma:) If I have to lie here one more minute I think I'll sceam! This is not me, this lying down and doing nothing. I never did nothing all my life and now nothing's all I can do. I can't bear it. Where's Jason? If Jason were here he'd tell me calm down, Mother. Getting all upset won't help anything. Well, that's just Jason. How can I be calm when I've got to lie in this damn hospital room with a bum leg? Can't even get up and use the bathroom without calling someone in to watch me. Oh, Sid, why'd you have to leave me so? Sid, I know you would have taken care of me and I wouldn't have fallen on those back stairs. Sid, it makes my heart hurt to think of you anymore. There's just too much to bear, too much for a no-good old woman who's as used up as I am. Where is Jason? He's supposed to bring me lunch. I can't eat the awful food here, carrots and greens that don't have any kind of season at all. Where is Jason?

(Jason:) There would have to be construction in the middle of lunch hour. If I don't get to the hospital in the next five minutes...now, let's think rationally. No need to get upset. That won't help anything. I'll get there when I get there. Yeah, and Mom'll be in a tizzy and won't even be able to eat it. She'll find something wrong with it anyway. Pastrami? Since when do I eat pastrami? That's all they had, what am I supposed to do, go to every store in town until I find the exact right piece of meat? Well, I have things to do besides room service. She's my mother. I owe it to her to do this. What she's done for me in my lifetime I probably can't imagine. You stupid Volvo, will you at least go the speed limit?

(Valerie:) Great. What am I supposed to do with no car? Mine's still being worked on, and he took the only one that runs. Why? To get HER lunch. I'm glad I count for so much around here. What difference does it make if I have to go to the store? So what if Paige calls from school and needs to be picked up? And what do Andrew's baseball games mean anyway? He can miss another practice. Jason, you are such a considerate person. Now I remember why I married you. You're always looking out for others. As long as they're your mother. It's not like she's going to stay there forever. She's coming HERE in another day or two. Can't she eat a hospital lunch like everyone else? How on earth will this ever work? How will I stay sane without killing someone?

(Momma:) Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen. Holy Mary, mother of--well, it's about time. I've only said two rosaries while I'm lying here starving. Such a sweet boy. What a son he is. Brings his mother lunch during his busy day. I don't deserve such blessings. Oh, there I go again. Can't even eat a pastrami sandwich without blubbering. Sid, you did this to me. I didn't use to be so soft. Now I cry at everything. Pastrami--what kind of meat is that? Whatever happened to roast beef? He never got pastrami at my house. I'll bet that wife of his fixed this on purpose. She knows I don't like this. So, a store. He buys me food. His wife is too busy to cook for her own husband's mother? I can see it's all downhill. Why didn't I just crack my head when I fell instead of this leg? God, forgive me, I didn't mean it. I just miss Sid so much and I don't feel very safe without him. I'm tired and old and don't feel myself. Not quite <u>whole</u> somehow. Jason tries so hard. He works too hard. I can see how this

is aging him. How can a mother lie down and watch her son doing too much? He's not strong enough for it. It'll take its toll. Oh, Sid, Sid Sid, see what's happened to all of us? Why didn't you take me with you?

(Jason:) I knew she wouldn't like it. Well, I tried. At least she's quit crying. Mom never used to be so sensitive. I guess with daddy...what a year this has been. What'll she say when I tell her they've closed on the house? Maybe I'll wait until she comes home with us and she sees all her own furniture in her room. I have to tell her. Valerie is so against me. I can't figure out what I'm doing wrong. Isn't it enough that I'm trying so hard? Does she think this is EASY? I have all these responsibilities--Valerie, Paige, Andrew, Mom...where do I fit in? I'm just tired. I can only take so much. Isn't it enough? Mom's been looking so tired and run-down lately. Probably just the medication, but I'm still worried.

(Momma:) So. They've sold our house, Sid. All our furniture and all our things in storage. They say let's have a garage sale later to make more room in the storage place. What you don't want to sell you can give to the family. Vultures! Vultures! These are our things! These are MY things! My little china birds, my vase from Greece, my toys for my grandchildren, mine! They think they can take it all so easily just like that. I'm keeping it. I'm keeping what's mine. Sold the house. And the garden where you and I pulled weeds all summer. The clothes line where I hung the sheets so they'd smell fresh, the driveway the kids used to ride their Big Wheels on. Money changers in the temple, Sid. That was our house. They keep me in here lying down so I can't

interfere but it was our life, you and me, and I can't watch it go and be happy about what sort of down payment it was. To hell with down payments. Just who do these people think they are moving into MY house without so much as a by your leave? Some young couple who'll let it all go to ruin. All to ruin and taken away. Just like that he tells me like it's great news. Why is everything you love taken away from you like it's nothing just for a stupid down payment? Where's my rosary?

(Valerie:) Cleaned all day like I'm expecting a houseful of guests instead of his mother. Guests are so much work. She's not a guest, she's living here, she's a resident. Residents aren't guests, they do their part. Residents like it or lump it in my house. It's not just my house anymore, though. Just when Jason and I could have a little freedom. Next year Paige and Andrew are out of school, maybe off to college and we can go to Mexico or Europe to St. Augustine. But next year is ten years away. Ten more years of cleaning and cooking and catering to guests. Where is the time for me? Will I ever get a chance to get out and SEE things? Did I put clean sheets on the back bed? Yes, this morning after I scrubbed the baseboards. Twelve o'clock...any minute they should be home. Only minutes left to enjoy the silence.

(Jason:) I hope Valerie isn't cold. Please say something nice, maybe offer her a cup of coffee, anything. I know what this does to her, but she's my mother. I'm not leaving her in a home, this is a son's responsibility, and I was not brought up to dodge responsibility. I hope she's put new sheets in the bedroom. Mom doesn't like dingy sheets. If she keeps talking about my driving...How can I think that? She's my mom,

she needs to feel useful, so let her tell me how to drive, just tune it out. When I get home I can run to the store or work outside and forget it for awhile. She's my mother, for God's sake.

(Momma:) He's not listening. They never do. If he keeps driving this fast we'll be dead before I get home. Oh, this leg is such a bother! I don't want to interrupt somebody else's life like this. I could've stayed at home by myself. I'm no dummy! I don't need to be treated like a dummy. Sid never treated me that way. He always acted like I was a regular person. Never could do those crosswords of his, though. He was a regular whiz at those, didn't need a dictionary even, he did so many. One every morning at the breakfast table. Pothole! No wonder these cars don't work right going over bumps like that. There it is. It's not home, but it'll do till I get my own place and get out of their hair. There's Valerie out front watering the lillies. Nice bed this spring. Gotta dig em up and thin em out. I'll tell her so--she probably doesn't know gardening like I was taught...Bedroom way back here down the hall, not very convenient. I can't run to the toilet immediately, crippled like this. All my furniture, desk, lamp, dresser, plant. No pictures hung, not real homey yet. Nap, yes, that's good, I'm so tired. All the excitement. Eighty's no spring chicken. My medicine doesn't seem to be helping my heart spasms. I'll have to remember to tell Jason. Just go to sleep now, oh, clean sheets, well, I worried about that, mmmmm.

(Valerie:) Not a word about how the house looks. See if I do that again. At least the homecoming's over. Wasn't so bad, except that it

happened at all. Come on, be fair. If she was your mother wouldn't she be welcome? But she's not and it's not that she's his mother it's that she's the WAY she is. Had to lecture me about the lillies first thing like I haven't ever had a plant before. And the pictures not up yet, didn't say anything about the sheets or the carpet or the new drapes I made. Only the pictures got noticed. She's impossible! All that stuff she made Jason keep from the house--where's it supposed to fit in here? I guess I just throw all mine away and let her replace it--let her take over my husband my house my children my kitchen...and Jason outside mowing grass like it's nothing.

(Jason:) Didn't realize how tense I was, must be the situation...or maybe it was my driving lesson. Hey, she's just the way she is...at eighty you're set in your ways and you have a routine. Give it time. Val worked hard on the house, I'll tell her so later, didn't want Mom to think we'd gone to any fuss, she'd have had a fit. "Oh, don't go to any trouble, I'll manage, just don't let me interrupt." Interrupt is right, almost got Paige and Andrew off so I could give some time to Val and all this happens. Timing stinks. Just do your duty and live with it. Aw, I'll get Andy to do the trimmming later.

(Valerie:) Jason does too much and Andy doesn't do enough. My knives are worthless, I should get a good set if I'm to use knives at all. I don't water the plants enough. Aren't I concerned about how much Jason works? I've <u>lived</u> with him for thirty years, I think I know what his work habits are. Why don't I make Andy help him? Why doesn't Andy get a haircut? Why are you so contrary and mean? Why

don't you let me live my own life the way you live YOUR own life? I'm going crazy! Even Jason almost lost it when she kept calling him last night to do this or do that. He wasn't even in the mood anymore once he was through doing her bidding. Well, I'm through doing it. She's not a guest. We all have to adjust. ALL of us. My THINGS are important to me. She just can't replace them with HERS. My privacy is important. I need to get out more to get away from this constant presence, this voice always telling me I should've done it another way. We HAVE to adjust.

(Momma:) Can't even go water the plants. Can't cook big meals because I'd have to stand for too long. Useless, useless, useless. Why'd they even let me out of that old hospital? Why do I have to bear all this? I got Jason worried about me, Lord knows he don't need nothing <u>else</u> to worry about the way Andy runs around all hours of the night. That boy. His mother needs to tell him a thing or two. I didn't bring up my boy that way. None of my things are where I want em, got strange furniture in the house that's not mine. Can't even work the darn can-opener, it's so all-fire hard to manage. Useless. I just want to sit and stay out of the way, can't do nothing anyway.

(Jason:) I wish she'd at least find a hobby. All she does is sit. It's not good for her esteem, she could get around better if she'd exercise that leg more, but you can't tell her anything. Look at her, sitting there with her head down on her chest...she falls asleep like that and sits there snoring up a storm during the news and gets all upset if Andy tries to talk on the phone during her soaps. At least

Val and I got out last night. I know having two hens in the hen house is not the best situation. At least Val's better about things now. I wish she'd talked to me about how she felt before, it would've saved a lot of trouble and grief. Look at her sitting. Not miving. Just sits there for weeks on end, mumbling sometimes about daddy, saying Sid this or Sid that. It's been a year and a half, can't she stop thinking about him sometimes? Hell, I can't stop, why should she? Maybe if she had something to do, some hobby...

(Valerie:) Making pillows and quilts all day to sell at the fair on top of cleaning up and making dinners and now he tells me to do this. Sure, I got time. Doesn't everyone? At least it takes her mind off her own troubles. At least she's quit mumbling about her husband, bless his heart. I know it's hard for her. If I lost Jason just when we were supposed to be together taking care of each other, I don't know WHAT I'd do. I suppose I'd feel lonely and sad all the time, probably wouldn't feel like doing much, especially if I was sick or hurt. Probably feels like what she must feel like. What's one more quilt going to matter? Keeps me in practice, keeps her fingers moving. Keeps Jason happy, and keeps her from thinking about all the things that're wrong in this house.

(Momma:) Beautiful pattern. Grandma used to make these when I was little. The star here in each square looks like the sky at night. Feels good to run your hand over all those tiny stitches, thinking about how long each one took you to make. Red goes good with this yellow-gold color, and the green print makes it look like a garden all pieced together. There! Another square done. Coffee sounds good. Where'd Valerie go?

Read my mind, just a little milk to cool it off. Almost done with it now. What would I do without such children, without such a daughter-in-law?

(Jason:) Good to see them working together like that. Think she enjoys it and Val doesn't mind. It's making the peace maybe. Turning out to be a big one, probably queen-size at least. She can work on it while we go on vacation. Need to call Jeff and make sure he and Susan can take her that weekend. I know she's nervous about leaving home and sleeping somewhere else--routine is so important to her--but she knows Val's sister. I don't think it'll be that bad.

(Momma:) Feels good to take a nap today, it being kinda cold out. This keeps me warm, though. Turned out real big and warm. Trees outside are so pretty, the maples all colors, like the ones in this quilt. There goes Valerie, outside to help Jason rake em up. Wish I could help--used to play in em when I was little. Long time ago, back before I had children and before I married Sid. They're good for each other, they cover lots of ground working two at a time. Feel so cozy in this, could just take a long nap and not wake up til Christmas morning. Sid used to wake me up every Christmas, just like a kid, to go open presents. Mmm, I feel floaty with my eyes closed and it all dark. My heart feels jumpy. I'll get up and tell Jason in a minute. Just feel so tired and so slow. Dark and Warm...makes me think of Momma long long time ago.. cozy and warm and wrapped up snug and safe and quiet....

(Jason:) Send her in to check on Mom and she's gone for years. Maybe she wanted coffee. Sounds good come to think of it...got enough raked up to take a break. Let these burn for awhile.

(Valerie:) Had to find some gloves anyway. Feel a blister already. Poor hands so out of shape. Don't you remember last fall how strong you guys were then? Get with the program. Still sitting in her chair. Probably fell asleep watching us rake. Looks so sweet like that, like a sleeping baby all swaddled in that quilt. That's what she is, one of my babies. Almost ninety and she is back to the beginning of things... funny how things reverse like that. Not a gray hair on her head, even at her age. Wish I could be so lucky. Maybe I shouldn't wake her up... but if she wants something later, might as well do it now. Oh! Jason, your mother, she's...oh, Mom, what happened? Jason, mom looks, she's not just asleep...in your house, in our house, Mom, with all your pictures and things around you...Don't do this yet...we haven't had enough time... we had just started that other patchwork...Jason, Jason, Mom is...no...

(Jason:) Momma momma momma momma momma, don't go, we were just starting ...just getting settled, just getting to know each other again. I'm sorry if we weren't as warm as we could've been at first, but things were hard, and we love you, you know that. Don't sit there like that, stay and live in our house with us we <u>want</u> you to, no no no no, it's no trouble, Mom, no trouble at all.

TURNIP SEED

At supper was where it usually started, when everyone was around and he had a full audience. He would lean back in his chair, rub the tablecloth with his rough hands, and belch loudly, as if to compliment the cook. Then he would look around, my grandfather, scratch his whiskers and grace us all with a narrative.

He wasn't exactly the epitome of a southern gentleman, but the fact remained that his roots lay deeply embedded in Southern soil. He did things the way he wanted them done, no arguments, because that's how things worked best. There wasn't a doctor, a preacher, or a banker anywhere that he would trust; he'd tend his own ailments, keep his own money, and save his own soul, with no help from any of them dang cheats.

On this occasion, he began his story with how he got started in life, how he ended up where he was now. It didn't matter that other people were in the middle of conversations; he'd just barge in and say what he had to say, and everyone knew to be quiet and look interested.

"Yeah, I remember when I was sixteen," he said, with all the pronunciation a toothless mouth could manage. He had dentures, but was too proud to wear them. "That's when I left Atlanta and went to Maddie and Autrey, my sisters. I was gonna be a mechanic. That's what I wanted to do."

The rest of the family nodded politely and continued eating their chicken and dumplings. There wasn't much else that could be done. Grandpa was hard of hearing, so he talked loudly, figuring that if he couldn't hear, neither could anybody else. He continued, occasionally making those deep, throaty coughing sounds that old men like him were wont to

do. His stories were always sporadic. Perhaps that's just how his memory worked, in skips and hops.

"Leech, the shop foreman hired me for seventeen dollars a week. And there wasn't no Saturdays off. Weren't no social sucurity checks either. I saved my money when others didn't." As he said this last, he slapped his hand on the table, like a Baptist preacher delivering a sermon.

Had we looked him in the face then, ice blue eyes would have bored into us, as if he were trying to impart his knowledge telepathically. His white bush of hair stood on end from where he'd repeatedly run his fingers back through it, and his skin was tanned and weather worn with wrinkles deeply etched into the surface. The hands that he used for emphasis were rough from work and time. Everything about him was oversized; he stood over six feet tall and had large features and even larger hands. He had grown stout from years of Grandma's cooking, and the only thing anyone had ever seenhim wear was denim overalls. He'd wear them until the buttons wore out, and then he'd hoist them up and pin them with fishing tackle. Never let it be said that Grandpa ever wasted anything.

"Jim Lovell had sense. He was a Swede and the ugliest old thing you ever saw. He showed me how to sharpen drills when I was in Mobile. They had some trucks, and they couldn't bore holes in 'em because them drills were broken. They were next to the Railroad shop, and the head mechanic couldn't do it. I was seventeen or eighteen and I said Lemme do it. I can do it. That old Swede showed me how. By twelve o'clock I had the helper springs on. The head guy came back and wanted to know how we was getting along. I said the trucks were loaded and been gone.

I stayed a week down there! It was a big old town and you could eat what you wanted. Ain't that so, sister?"

"Yes, daddy. Sure could." his daughter yelled into his hand-cupped ear.

He smiled at her, happy she'd given the correct answer. "Yeah, that's right," he said. "I could drill holes better'n anybody cause of that old Swede. I could sharpen knives faster than a machine. I didn't need a machine. I was taught when I was young enough to take it. Learn a far sight quicker when you're young. Half a hundred's a long time, and I'm more than that!" At this he chuckled, like it was some inside joke he had with himself.

"People generally as old as me either done been dead or crippled in old homes. I still get about and get about good." He was silent for a moment, thinking of how to continue.

"In Chalkville I sold Standard, Texas, and Gulf oil all at the same time. I made more money than anybody during the Depression. The head shopman owed me twenty-five dollars, but he payed five dollars interest every week. That's what an old schoolteacher taught me. I made money off'n that. When the Depression came and all the shops shut down, I had more money than anyone. I rented the store for twelve dollars a month from someone who got rich, closed the store, and went to Mardi Gras. We sold shoes at that store, too. Not only groceries. Shoes that buttoned up the sides and high heels. There I was, just me and the old lady after I married her. I added an upstairs and we lived there over the store. That's where you children was born. We could get anything we wanted to eat. There was a man with five or six children

by there. We'd eat butter beans and cracklin' corn bread. Son, I learnt somethin. A man with a store can have anything he wants. The man with the kids said you ruin butter beans by puttin mayonaisse on 'em, but we was fat as hogs."

Everyone laughed appreciatively at that statement. None of the family was exactly skinny even now.

"When I got out of the store business, I killed hogs and sold 'em to people. They'd give me the heads. I'd take a hundred pounds of salt and salt two or three hogs. It was worth five dollars each. I was still makin money, all kinds of money. I had four houses in Birmingham and rent was comin in."

To look at him now you couldn't tell he had money. His house was old, been lived in for over thirty years; the kitchen floor was starting to slant. He gave Grandma twenty-five dollars a week for grocery allowance. That was all she saw of the money. They didn't have air-conditioning, though they easily could have, and it would've made Grandma more comfortable. But no questions asked; you just did things how they'd always been done.

"Then I got into the fishing business." he said. That was all I'd ever known him to be. When visitors came, the only thing he'd talk about was fishing stories and how his deckhand Steve would charter so many people. How they'd chartered over a hundred for this year. They won't go out unless it's fifteen or twenty-four hours at a time, you know, and it's thirteen hundred dollars every time they go out. He especially enjoyed telling about how they'd taken out a group of ten or twelve niggers and caught a mess of fish for them. Those people would always

bring fried chicken that their women had cooked for 'em, and they'd always share it with the deckhands and Grandpa.

He laughed, a hearty laugh, and there was almost a perceptible smile in his voice when he spoke of fishing. I suppose because that was the last thing he'd ever done, in his long tale of life, ever cared about really, his boat and those fish. He couldn't tell you the names of his grandchildren, but he could sure explain the details of an electric rod and reel, or name a hundred different kinds of fish. He had air-conditioning on that boat in the summers, but none for Grandma as she canned his peaches. Grandma never said anything, though. I expect that's because he couldn't have heard her anyway. It's not that he didn't love her, he just didn't think of those kind of things.

Fishing was not what he wanted to talk about at supper, though.

"Do you know what faith is? Believing in something. Faith is a foolish thing. Believing in something you know ain't so. Preachers are the biggest liars in the world. Money and power are what they're after. Religion wars. I got preacher friends. Preacher Crabtree gimme that knife I got, but he knows I don't believe his stuff. Somebody can tell me something that ain't so and I can ask em a few questions and tangle em up so! I shoulda been a lawyer. That's what I shoulda been."

There were a few laughs around the table. We could all imagine Grandpa in his overalls interrogating a witness in a courtroom. No, Grandpa couldn't have been anything else than what he was, a timeworn old fisherman with twinkling blue eyes, and a lot of extra underneath that he didn't show often.

"See life going on around you," he said then, and he became serious. Enjoy it. You ain't comin back. Don't listen to what they tell you about no other life. They ain't talking. You can't even make a pissant turn around and come back. It's like turnip seed."

He turned to me then, and I'll never forget this.

"Ever seen turnip seed?" he asked.

"No sir!" I yelled.

"Get it in your hand and wiggle your fingers. When you look down, it's gone."

He coughed, slid back his chair, and retired to the living room to watch television, without so much as a word. Supper was awfully quiet after Grandpa was gone.

12:52

Mother died at exactly 12:52 which I know because in that last breath of hers, in that last moment of life, she thrashed her arms about the bed, yelled, "Get out of the way!" and proceeded to dash the alarm clock to the floor, stopping the hands and cracking the face. It is 12:52 forever on that clock. It is still sitting on the bedside table and here, even now at 6:00 in the evening, it says 12:52.

"Why don't you get that clock fixed?" I asked my father. "Or throw it out?"

He said: "It was the last thing she touched."

The last thing? No, the last thing she touched, is still touching, will always be touching, is the coffin she is lying in. That big mahoganey-colored box surrounded by flowers at the front of the church. She was touching it, all two-hundred pounds of her, two months ago, with her thick black hair kind of patted in place. If there was one thing Mother never had, it was patted-in-place hair. It always stuck up and frizzed out and hung into her face if she didn't order it into submission with a batallion of bobby pins. Another thing she never had was powder-pale skin. It was always red and slightly sweaty from cooking over that stove, usually some kind of red sauce. Red from cooking or from swatting kids. And never have I seen her still and quiet. Her hands would be stirring up sauces or gravies or sewing on patches or shooing kids out from under her feet where inevitably we always were. She was always thrashing about, red-faced and loud.

So when the undertaker says to me, he says, "Doesn't she look natural?" I say, "Hell, no, she looks DEAD." My kid brother almost

wet his pants at that one, and I almost told him to shut up and quit laughing because Mother would say it wasn't proper to laugh in a church and he'd be in for a good licking if he didn't keep quiet. But then I remembered she'd given her last thrash and yell at 12:52 a couple of days ago. And when I looked at her laying there so completely unlike she'd been before, I just wished she'd sit up once more and whack my kid brother a good one, and maybe tell that undertaker exactly what she thought of his powder-pale looks and the stupid way he'd done her patted-in-place hair, which is something Mother would have done in a New York minute if she could have.

So I left my father alone about the clock and didn't care that it still said 12:52. And as I put it back on the bedside table and feel all angry and sad and lonely at the same time, I think: "No, that coffin isn't the last thing she touched." She touched me. And I have to leave the room before I hear her voice yelling out loud and angry, "Get out of the way!" Who was she talking to when she said that? Knowing Mother, she was probably telling the Lord Almighty Himself to move aside so she could walk through the Pearly Gates without anybody in her personal space.

THE DIARY

Sept. 1

Dear Diary,

My name is Michelle Diane Carter, and Daddy came home from work today and told me that Mama had four months to live. He cried when he told me, and I've never seen Daddy cry before. I felt like I'd just eaten asparagus or something yucky and my stomach was going to be sick. I was brave, though, and didn't cry. He said she would be very sick because of the cancer and her medicine and that sometimes I would have to be quiet and not make her upset. I think it will be scary to not have a Mama.

Sept. 3

Dear Diary,

Yesterday Mama explained to me how it would be when she got sick. She said she has to go to the doctor and get radio treatments or something. I didn't all the way understand. She said the doctor would make her very sick, sometimes so sick that she won't know who I am or be aware of things. How could my Mama not know who I am? She always used to let me sit on her lap, and she would play with my hair and tell me how she carried me in her stomach for nine whole months. She told me that she loved me more than anything. So if all that is true how could she not know me sometimes? I think she will know me, even if she is too sick to see me standing by her bed. Mama cried and told me that she didn't want to be sick, but that that's what happens to people sometimes, even if they have been good all their life. She and Daddy

always tell me to be a good girl, but if being good might get you killed just like being bad, then I don't see the use. After Mama told me all this about her being sick, she read me my favorite story, Black Beauty. We didn't get finished because she got too tired, but we'll finish this week sometime. It's hard to go to school when I want to spend time at home with Mama.

Sept. 10

Dear Diary,

Mama is going to the doctor tomorrow for her first radio treatment. Tonight she read some more of Black Beauty and we got to the part where Black Beauty's best friend Ginger dies and is taken down the street in a cart. It was the saddest part of the whole book, and even Daddy cried as he listened to it. Daddy always stays in the room with us when we read. He says Mama doesn't always know when she needs to stop, so he's there to tell her when. I think he just wants to be in there with Mama. I get to sleep with Mama tonight since she is going to the doctor tomorrow.

Sept. 20

Dear Diary,

Mama has been very sick for a long time. When she came home from the doctor, she looked pale and didn't eat dinner. What did those doctors do to her? Aren't doctors supposed to make people feel better? Mama doesn't sleep good anymore, and she hasn't eaten anything for almost a week. Daddy looks so worried, and he makes me scared. When I go in to see Mama, she holds my hand, but she just says stuff that doesn't make sense. Is Mama losing her mind? She looks real bad. Did I ever tell

you what she <u>really</u> looks like? She's pretty. She's very tall and she wears pretty flowered dresses and nice perfume. She has smooth tan skin because she likes to plant flowers in our garden. Her eyes are big and green and she has long, thick red hair, almost as long as mine, except mine's brown like Daddy's. I have eyes like Mama's though. Daddy tells me that all the time. Mama likes to play the piano, too. She has long, thin fingers and she can reach across a whole octave. Mrs. Pargo, my piano teacher, says mine will be that way when I grow some more. I wish we could put the piano in Mama's room so I could play some music for her and make her feel better. She gets sick all the time, and Daddy has to help her to the bathroom all during the night. It scares me when I hear her from my room, and I have to shut my eyes real tight and cover my ears so I can't hear.

Sept. 25

Dear Diary,

Mama is some better today! I went in to see her and she smiled at me, more like her old self. Maybe she's getting better! Daddy opened her curtains so it would be sunshiny in her room, and I sat on the side of the bed because I promised I wouldn't bounce. She asked me how school was, so I told her all about Mrs. Piedmont saying I didn't pay attention very good, but I told Mama that was okay because I was thinking about her. We are having a school play called <u>Robin Hood</u> and I am going to be Maid Marion. Mama said she was proud of me and that she would help with the costume if she could. Maybe she will be better by then to come see it. I couldn't stay very long because she got sleepy, but I told her about my piano idea. She said there wouldn't be any room to put a piano .n her room. Maybe we can buy a smaller one?

Sept. 30

Dear Diary,

I did good on a spelling test today. We had to spell the fifty states. The only one I missed was the island state because it has two i's. It is spelled H-A-W-A-I-I. Anybody could miss that one. Mama was happy I did good on my test, and Daddy made my favorite dinner--hamburgers! Mama made part of my Maid Marion gown today because she felt so good. She got up and sat in the living room chair. Mrs. Bernie (that's our nurse who lives here with us now) changed Mama's sheets and cleaned her room all up for her. Daddy brought some flowers home for Mama, and they looked real pretty by her bed where she can look at them whenever she wants. They're roses. I asked Mama did the cancer hurt, and she said sometimes a lot, sometimes not so much. It's under her arm and in her legs, she said. She made me stand and model my costume so she could adjust it. Diary, I love my Mama.

Oct. 3

Dear Diary,

Mrs. Bernie said Mama was going back to the doctors tomorrow. That means she's going to be sick again, doesn't it? Last time she was sick for a long time, but Mrs. Bernie says it might be even longer this time. I wish Mama could stay home instead of having to go to those doctors. Daddy won't let me go to the hospital when he takes Mama. I have to stay here with Mrs. Bernie and she helps me do my homework. She said she would finish reading Black Beauty to me and I got mad. "Mama's reading that to me!" I told her. She said she was sorry but she better not try to butt in between me and Mama anymore.

Oct. 10

Dear Diary,

Mrs. Bernie was right. Mama's very sick. Daddy even took off work some to stay with her. He says she is just reacting wrong to the radio treatments. I said when will she stop having the radio stuff done, and h said pretty soon, he hopes. Daddy's real tall and strong and he has pretty brown eyes. He has lots of curly hair on his chest and a little scar by the side of his mouth. He says Mama bit him there, but he's just teasing. Really he was in a fight when he was in the Army. He has a tattoo of an eagle on his arm which he got in the Army too. He says it will never come off. When I asked him why he got it he said that was before he married Mama and before she tamed him. I thought that was funny because it sounded like he was a wild animal. I bet Mama <u>could</u> tame a wild animal if she wanted to. She could do <u>anything</u> she wanted to, except get well.

Oct. 15

Dear Diary,

Mama is <u>still</u> sick, and my play is tomorrow. I don't think she'll get to go. Daddy says he will come, but I will feel like something's missing if Mama's not there. Then I think: if Mama misses my play, when she goes to heaven she'll miss everything I do! She'll miss me graduating to the 5th grade, and high school, and college. She won't see me get married or have boyfriend or a baby. She won't even see me become a prima ballerina which I will be when I grow up. Mama's gonna miss all my birthdays and all our Christmasses! Why does she have to go to heaven? Why can't she stay here with us who will love her more than the people in heaven?

Oct. 16

Dear Diary,

I was great as Maid Marion! They clapped and clapped and we had to come back out TWICE!! Daddy picked me up and hugged me afterwards, and we went out for ice cream. I had a double scoop of chocolate chip and rocky road. Daddy had a fudge sundae. I wanted to bring some to Mama, but Daddy said she couldn't have it. Poor Mama. No ice cream! She's really getting punished. She was asleep when we got home, so I didn't get to tell her how great I was. Even though I was kind of happy about the play, I cried in my pillow.

Oct. 25

Dear Diary,

Mama's better again. She looked at the pictures Daddy took of my play. She cried because she missed it, but I told her it was okay. My costume was the best one of all, and Daddy clapped hard enough for him and Mama, too. I told her that I can play two new songs on the piano now. She said I was growing up and learning a lot, but she seemed sad about it. Do you think she knows she'll miss all my fun stuff like having a baby and being a ballerina? She read more of Black Beauty tonight. It had been so long, I forgot where we left off. Black Beauty is now doing hard work as a cab horse, and he is owned by mean owners. I went over to Debra's house today. She's my best friend in case I haven't written that yet, and she knows I'm sad about Mama being sick. We played Barbie's and Ken came over for the first time. Debra got Ken for her birthday. It was fun, but Debra's Mom looked at me like I was the one who had cancer. She patted me on the head like I was a dog who'd

been hit by a car or something the way she acted. Grown-ups don't understand.

Oct. 31

Dear Diary,

My Uncle Nathan is visiting us. He's Mama's brother and he came all the way from Texas to Pittsburgh to see her. He's funny and always making jokes. It was six o'clock and he asked me what I was waiting for-when was I going trick-or-treating? Me and Daddy looked at each other. We totally forgot it was Halloween! So I didn't have a costume, but Uncle Nathan went out and bought some orange and green dye and colored some sheets real quick, and I was a pumpkin! We dyed some of my ballet tights, too, so I had orange legs. I was such a good pumpkin, you should have seen me. I even had a little pumpkin hat with a green stem. Mama wasn't feeling too good but she saw me in my pumpkin outfit, and then Uncle Nathan and I went around the neighborhood together. I ate so much candy I almost got as sick as Mama! (well, not <u>that</u> bad)

Nov. 4

Dear Diary,

The leaves are almost all gone off the trees. Mama watches them fall when she looks out of her window. Mama's sick almost all the time now, and it's true what she said at the start. Sometimes she doesn't know who I am even when I stand real close. Daddy says she didn't forget me, that just means she's real sick. While Uncle Nathan's here, Mrs. Bernie doesn't live here. Daddy has to go to work because he says the doctors charge a lot of money. I think it's stupid to pay money for making Mama feel so bad, but Daddy does it anyway. When I come

home from school, Uncle Nathan hugs me and rubs his scratchy beard on my face. He taught me a magic trick where you can pick any card from the deck and I can tell you what it is. I did it at school and wouldn't tell how because Uncle Nathan says a good magician doesn't tell. he is what you call a bechelor. He's shorter than Mama is, and has gray hair and a gray beard. He wears jeans and flannel shirts all the time like a cowboy. I asked him, though, and he says he's never even ridden a horse.

Nov 6

Dear Diary,

Uncle Nathan took me to church today. Normally we don't go to church because Daddy is Jewish. Uncle Nathan said that Mama's not Jewish and that's why we have Christmas trees every year. I didn't understand why Jewish people didn't want Christmas trees and presents, but he says that's just the way they are. If Mama dies, will Daddy not want Christmas anymore? I asked Uncle Nathan, but he didn't know. Uncle Nathan says that praying to God helps you feel better and helps you be a better person. He also says that you can ask God for things. I thought that was like Santa, but he says no, not quite like Santa. So we went to the church and I kneeled down beside him and he taught me how to pray. It was weird at first, but then it was easy. I asked God over and over to help Mama feel better. Uncle Nathan says God always answers prayers, but that sometimes the answer wasn't what you wanted. Sometimes his answer is no.

Nov 14

Dear Diary,

Uncle Nathan had to go back to Texas, so Mrs. Bernie is back. Before he left, he found me up in the tree in our yard. He asked me what I was doing there and I told him it was my thinking spot. He said a thinking spot was a good spot to have, better than an itchy spot. Uncle Nathan's so funny! I said I was thinking about what I was going to do without a Mama. It made me real sad to say it out loud, so I started crying. Uncle Nathan climbed right up in that tree with me and let me cry all I wanted. I felt a lot better after, but my face was all red. He gave me his handkerchief to use. I miss him. I wish he lived in Pittsburgh instead of Texas.

Nov 21

Dear Diary,

I talked to Mama today. I asked her if Daddy would have Christmas anymore. She said that he would. I fell asleep on her lap and woke up in my bed later. I heard Mama and Daddy talking when I got up to go to the bathroom. They said lovey things to each other, and I knew I shouldn't listen. Then they talked about me, and Daddy said Uncle Nathan talked to him some. What did Uncle Nathan tell Daddy? Their voices were real low and I couldn't hear it all, but Mama asked about Christmas and Daddy said if she wanted, he would keep it. Mama's still looking out for me!

Nov 24

Dear Diary,

I'm stuffed! Mama's sister Aunt Sarah is here and she made a turkey dinner for all of us, except Mama couldn't eat much. We ate all

day long, seemed like. Mama had to have her Thanksgiving in her room, but she said she could smell the turkey cooking anyway. Mama says she feels cold all the time, and she doesn't look anything like she used to. Her hair is real thin, and she's not tan anymore. She's real skinny and sometimes when I hug her I feel like she's going to break. I thought the other day it's strange for us to be taking care of Mama when she always used to take care of us. A lot of things have changed since Mama got sick. Daddy is real quiet all the time, and he stands in Mama's room when she's asleep just looking at her or playing with her hair. Mrs. Bernie combed Mama's hair into a ponytail and tied it with one of my ribbons. Mama looks like a little girl now, just like me, with her hair that way. Aunt Sarah calls Mama Elaine, which I guess is her name, but to me her real name will always be Mama.

Nov 30

Dear Diary,

It seems like Mama would be sad about going to heaven, but she says once you get used to the idea it's not so scary. She says it's only sad for the ones who don't get to go to heaven with you. Could I go with her? I asked her that and she said it wasn't time yet. I still have lots of growing up to do. I told her that Laura Simon, a girl in my class died from a disease and she was only in the 5th grade. Mama says it must have been time for Laura, but it's not time for me. I hope when it's time for me, I'll have time to get used to the idea so it won't be sad or scary. She says now I have to stay and take care of Daddy and keep him out of trouble. That was funny because Daddy's the one always keeping me out of trouble! Mama looks real tired all the time and she says that she thinks she's ready to go.

I don't want her to, though. I want her to stay with me and Daddy and be well again and make chocolate chip cookies and plant flowers. Am I being selfish?

Dec 3

Dear Diary,

Mama looks so thin and pale, almost like a paper person, like we used to cut out of newspapers on Sunday afternoons. She would blow away if there was a big wind. It snowed today and Jack Frost made prety ice patterns on her window. It was cold out when I went to play, but I brought Mama a snowball so she could play too. She smiled when it dripped on her hands. She said it made her feel real again instead of glass. How can someone feel like glass? Mama says some strange things sometimes. She takes medicine with big long names that makes her sleepy. Daddy says when she sleeps she doesn't feel so bad. I heard Mama and Daddy talking about a funeral today. I've never been to a funeral but we buried Queen Victoria, my hamster, when she died. But Mama's not the same as a hamster.

Dec 10

Dear Diary,

Daddy and I talked today, just the two of us. We went ice skating on a pond near our house and he told me that pretty soon we'd have a funeral for Mama. He said she'd be in sort of a wooden bed and then we'd bury her so she could rest where it's real quiet under the earth. I guess that's okay, but it seems like it would be real dark and lonely in a wooden bed under the earth. I can't see Mama under there. Daddy said we can plant flowers there so she could look up and see her favo-

rite flowers bloom in the spring. I said we could plant a Christmas cactus and poinsettias in the winter. He thought that was a good idea, too. He carried me home on his shoulders and I held onto his head for balance. I touched his cheek once and couldn't tell if it was cold from ice skating or if it was cold from the wet tears.

Dec 14

Dear Diary,

Today we buried Mama. Uncle Nathan, Aunt Sarah, and lots of other people were there. I stood between Daddy and Uncle Nathan and I couldn't help it but I cried when they put her in the ground. I remembered she said she was ready and that it was only sad for the people who can't go with you. Well, it <u>was</u> sad. I miss her so much already. Her room looks empty without her in bed. Mrs. Bernie left yesterday with all her things. Now it's just me and Daddy. We're going to Texas with Uncle Nathan for Christmas. There won't be snow there, but he says Santa can find his way anyway. I told Uncle Nathan that God's answer must have been no. It makes me sadder to see Daddy than to think of Mama, but I told him that Mama will feel better now because she'll be sleeping all the time. It's too cold to go out to my thinking spot, so I stay in my room a lot thinking about Mama. Next month I turn 10. It sure will be strange without Mama there singing happy birthday. It'll be even stranger without her at Christmas. When I think about it, though, I think she will still be there, still looking out for me. We planted a Christmas cactus and Uncle Nathan says that when we go to the airport we can stop by the cemetery to see if it has bloomed yet. I feel all sad and lonely inside even though Daddy's here. Uncle Nathan says after

awhile I will stop feeling so sad. I found Black Beauty on her night-stand where we left it. I'll have to finish the last two chapters by myself, but I think I'll wait awhile.

KITH AND KIN

A thick haze hung over the house, a haze that made it look as hot as the still air felt. The ninety-seven degree temperature and the steamy haze created the impression that, for today at least, the Gulf Coast of Florida was like a tropical jungle.

Momma yawned and ambled out into the sandy yard. She wore a thin white house dress that clung to her skin as soon as she stepped outside. It looked long on her small frame, and dirt streaked the hem of it where it brushed the ground as she bent over. She picked up the watering can and the spade and headed over to her rose garden, humming snatches of Elvis tunes to herself.

Evie watched Momma from behind the tool shed. She sat with her bak against the shed and her knees up to form a kind of desk. Today she sat composing poems, and the strains of "Love Me Tender" were interrupting her creative process. Grudgingly, she rose and walked with her hands on her hips over to where Momma was digging out the weeds with her spade.

"Momma! Can't we have a little peace and--" She broke off at the sound of a loud motor rumbling up the street. A revved-up Mustang pulled into the yard, parking itself dangerously close to a budding forsythia bush, and Evie's brother Emmett tumbled out of the car, spilling beer cans.

He held up his hands. "Don't even say it. I'm going to bed."

Momma shook her head and turned back to the roses. "I'm just glad Daddy's not home. Eleven o'clock in the morning and he's just now going to bed. And on a Sunday." She sighed and pushed her spade into the sandy earth.

"Momma, why don't he just move out?"

"Are you kidding? When he's got it so nice and comfortable here? Shoot!"

"What if Daddy--"

"Family's family. We take care of our own. Remember that." she said sharply. "When you're left with nothing else in this world, you still have them with you, whether you want em or not. Most important thing in the world, Evie."

Evie watched Emmett stumble up the steps and slam the screen door. What was wrong with him? She and her sister weren't wild like that. But then, she and Amanda weren't fighting tooth and nail with Daddy every day either. Emmett had been out of school for two years and he was becoming more restless and wild every day. Just two weeks ago Momma had had to bail him out of jail for starting a fight in a barroom. And now here he was coming in like this after a night of who knows what.

"Look here, Evie. I want to show you something." Momma got up and walked over to the end of the rose bed. She pointed with her spade. "See this one? That bright red color and the way its petals are so full and smooth?" Evie nodded. "That's a pure rose bush. Nothing prettier. Now this one here, this one is pure, too. White petals, but lookit the thorns on it. Bigger'n your little finger. This one's pure just like the red one, but it's a little different. The red one doesn't have thorns." She took a few steps to the middle of the bed and surveyed her garden.

"What about the pink one? And that yellow one there?"

Momma frowned. "Those are what you call hybrids. People gave those to me, so I planted 'em. See how the colors ain't so bright and perfect and the petals are kind of short? And they may or may not have

thorns. No way to tell until they come up."

"I like them best." Evie said, smelling one. "Their colors are different than plain old red and white."

"Yeah, they're different, and they're hardier, too. But they take a lot of garden space and try to choke the pure ones out if you're not careful. And sometimes you think you've cut off all the thorns, and there another one'll come, sticking you and drawing blood no matter how careful you are. This sandy ground don't help much either. Or the salt coming in from the ocean."

"So why do you even mess with em, Momma?"

"Because roses are roses and they're all beautiful in their own way. What you don't want to do is get a pure one and a hybrid together. It ruins a pure strain. A hybrid will connect with another hybrid much better. But then, of course, you may get even more colors and types."

"I saw some black ones the other day in Mason's Garden Department."

Momma wrinkled her nose. "The best kinds are the ones you raise from seeds. You start em yourself, get to know their temperaments, how much pruning and spraying and watering they need. Each one's different. And keep the weeds out--you can't let em run wild or they'll take over the whole yard. The ones raised out in the open are better'n those old hot house flowers. They get air and have to learn to fight for space. They get the natural sunshine, too. Haven't you ever noticed how pretty the roses of summer are after the frosts?"

"Yes, yours are always blooming."

"There you go," Momma said. "Mind what I say, Evie. If you tend em right, you shouldn't have any problems. But if you get one start up that

wants to shoot its vines through the wrong part of the trellis, sometimes you gotta clip it off good, sometimes even dig it up altogether to keep all the rest growing good."

Evie nodded, and saw Amanda walk up the driveway.

"Did you all see Emmett come through here?" she demanded.

"Yeah, and I wouldn't go bothering him if I were you. He looked about ready to bite a couple of heads off."

She waved her hand. "So what? He deliberately passed me on the road back there and would not stop to pick me up. I had to walk all the way home from the diner in this heat!" Amanda flipped her long dark ponytail and turned to stomp into the house.

"Mandy. Hold your horses."

"But Momma, he--"

"Just do as I tell you."

Amanda's green eyes flared and her mouth pinched together in a pout. Why did Emmett get all the special treatment? He couldn't even hold a job and here she'd been working at the diner for a whole year. She'd just wait and see what Daddy had to say about this.

"And don't you go bothering your Daddy about this neither."

With that, Amanda pranced off into the coolness of the house, under the huge magnolia trees. Evie, too, took her little book and went off to await supper when her father would come home from the docks and raise hell.

As the afternoon wore on, the skies got cloudier and cloudier, preparing for the usual Florida rainstorm. Long about five o'clock, Emmett dragged himself out of bed and pounded on the bathroom door until Amanda opened it. A cloud of steam came out as she opened the door.

She smiled pertly into his glaring face and marched past him. Emmett gave her a little shove before he leapt into the bathroom, slamming and locking the door behind him while Amanda shrieked.

Emmett took his time and re-emerged a little later with his dark hair slicked back and his big bronzed body clean and dressed sharply. He tucked his shirt into his jeans and headed back to his room.

"Emmett!"

He stopped and turned around to face what he knew was coming. Daddy stood in his overalls, filling the doorway with his huge form. He smeled of fish and salt.

"Where were you today, boy?"

"I had to do some stuff." Emmett mumbled, feeling himself start to sweat.

"When I tell you to show up with me for work at six a.m. I don't want to hear any of this crap about stuff you had to do. It was so important, eh? From the smell of your car, it was drinking and whoring again."

"I bought that car with my own money."

"A fat lot of good it did, too, only giving you more time to spend in the bars with those sluts." Daddy's eyes were flashing with rage. He'd been through this before.

"I want you with <u>me</u> tomorrow morning. You be out waiting by the truck at five thirty or that's it, boy."

"That's <u>what</u>?" Emmett challenged.

In one quick moment, Daddy was next to Emmett, holding him by the arm. He slapped Emmett's face sharply, and from the kitchen, Emmett heard a gasp that he knew must have been Momma. He hated hurting Momma

and he knew she felt the sting of the hand on her cheek just as strongly as he did himself.

"You just be there, you good for nothing...." Daddy released Emmett's arm and stomped off into his bedroom, muttering loudly.

Emmett rubbed his jaw. "Son of a bitch." he said. He sulked in front of the TV until supper.

"Pass the beans," Momma said to Evie. As the bowl went round the table, Daddy started in.

"What did you do today, Mandy?"

"I was working at the diner," she said proudly, almost visibly arching her back to be scratched, like a cat.

"That's what I like to hear," he said, winking at her. Emmett bit off a piece of cornbread.

"I saw Mrs. Turner today," said Momma. "She brought us some more canned okra. She's just the nicest lady."

"We need to give her something in return. I don't want people thinking we're a charity case."

"Oh, no, she was just--"

"You give her some of tomorrow's catch, Momma. Me and Emmett are gonna check the piers tomorrow, ain't that right boy?"

Emmett pressed his lips together.

"And then, on Tuesday, we're all going to Alabama."

"What for, Daddy?" asked Amanda.

"Alabama?" Momma's eyebrows arched.

"I'm getting me a real boat, one that'll take trips into the ocean and make us a pile of money."

"Can I ride on it?" asked Evie.

"We all can. But once we get there, we'll have to cruise it back. Ya'll can ride the boat home and I'll drive the truck and meet you at the docks."

"Who'll drive it then?" asked Momma.

"Emmett." Daddy said it simply. Once announced, that was how things were.

"Oh, Emmett, you'll be the captain!" Momma beamed.

"Hold on a minute. Emmett's taking it back down the coast. I'm still the owner and captain. If he wants to work out his share of it, then we'll see."

Emmett lifted his head. His interest was piqued. He could work for his father until the boat became his, and then think of the money he'd make! Think of the women he could have! And he'd be his own man, his own boss with no orders from anyone, especially Daddy. He got up and kissed Momma's cheek.

"Good supper, Momma." He went to his room. Momma quickly grabbed a plate and took it to the kitchen, but not before Evie saw her wipe her eyes with her apron. Evie and Amanda sat staring at each other long enough for Momma to come back into the dining room.

"Do I have to do everything, girls?"

Driving to Alabama was about the farthest away from home any of them had been. After nine hot hours in a pickup truck, Daddy pulled into the marina and walked into the office. After a good twenty minutes, he came back out, a grin on his face.

"I got me a boat!" he said proudly. They trooped down to the dock.

"There, that one with the horn on the deck. Look at that, will ya? See, there's a place to sleep underneath, and chairs up on the bow for fishing and a radio all set up inside. Got a good deal, too. Owner owed me a big favor."

They all got on board and looked around, except Momma who stood on the dock watching nervously. Daddy showed Emmett how to work the radio and the wheel. He showed him the dials and what they meant. He pointed out the depth-finder and the choke for the engine.

"Well, get on board. Take off. I got nine hours to go before I meet you back home. Evie, Mandy, go get the cooler outa the truck. Momma, ain't you getting on?"

"Maybe I should ride back with you? Nine hours is a long way all by yourself."

"No, now, I want you to feel her out, see how she rides. There's a couple of rods on board. You can even fish some if you want."

When Evie and Mandy came back with the cooler, Momma got on board with everyone else. They waved goodbye to Daddy as Emmett motored them out into deeper waters. He had his shirt off and was even appearing to enjoy himself.

"Steers easy enough. I can't wait til she's all mine, and I can start my <u>own</u> business."

Evie and Amanda sat back and enjoyed the breeze, Momma beamed proudly at her son, and twelve hours later, Emmett was puttering into the Florida marina. Even way offshore they could see Daddy standing on the docks waving. He had a spot all marked out with the strongest ropes to tie the boat.

Emmett climbed out after everyone was on the dock. "Nice boat," was all he said to Daddy, but Daddy could see that Emmett was excited.

Emmett went out that night and celebrated with the woman he called his "girl." Her name was Celie, and she had thick red hair and half-closed eyes. Celie lived in a house on the beach and most nights was out working the night clubs. Momma whispered her name with a nasty tone of voice. To her, Celie was a "bad sort," one of those women who'd hop from bed to bed and not be ashamed to take money for it. On the evenings when Celie and Emmett "went out," Celie would leave her five-year-old son Matthew with Evie and Amanda. Matthew was cute as a button, if a little rambunctious. But what could you expect with a Momma like Celie? Evie thought it was so cute that Matthew called Emmett "Daddy," though of course he wasn't. Momma didn't think it was cute at all.

"He's <u>not</u> family. Don't you let him call you aunt Evie. And keep him out from under my feet."

"Matthew loves you so much, " Celie told Evie. "He couldn't stop talking about how you played games with him and all." She'd flash her big-toothed smile and Evie would squeeze Matthew harder. She didn't care that he wasn't family. At least she was good at taking care of him. And Daddy liked him, too.

That night, Emmett got to bragging about how that boat would someday be his and he'd call it the "Captain Emmett" and make money off of it. And the more he drank, the louder he bragged. Several people in the bar looked at him with calculated glances. Celie was nervous and tried to get Emmett to be quiet. When they left the bar, Celie took Emmett back to her place. She told him he shouldn't talk about coming

into a lot of money around folks he didn't know. Rosie Gillespie had been beaten in a back alley for less than that. Celie herself hadn't been in with the best of people lately.

"Emmett honey," she said, taking off her blouse, "we got lots to celebrate."

"That's a sure thing, Celie, cause I'm gonna have me a business away from that ol' tyrant." Emmett unbuckled his pants and fell on the bed.

"More'n that, Emmett," said Celie, coming to him, "Because we got our love to celebrate."

"Sure, honey," he said, holding her close.

Celie sat up and took Emmett's hand. "No, Emmett, darlin, I mean you and me are gonna have a baby."

"What's that?"

"We got to celebrate our new baby. You and me."

Emmett looked sideways at Celie. Then he stood up and found his pants. "Celie, I just got through telling you how free I was gonna be with my boat and my new business. Now you want to go get me all entangled again." She sat quietly watching him dress. "I can't have no baby, Celie. I'm only nineteen, and I got my whole life ahead of me."

"So does our baby. Look, honey, you and me are two of a kind, throwbacks to some old generation of rip-roarers and hell-raisers. But sometime we gotta stop and live life like real people. Real people don't do some of the stuff I done. I want Matthew and our baby to grow up half-way normal. And I want em to have a Daddy."

"I'm not daddy material, Celie. Isn't that obvious?"

"Emmett, you got a little bit of devil and a little bit of angel running around inside of you. I know you got stuff you need to set free in there, too. But sooner or later, you gotta take a step either forward or back. If you go forward, you'll be close to an angel. Or you could go back and be Lucifer's first cousin. Sooner or later you gotta pick. Right now we're dangerous mixtures of both sides, waiting to explode."

"I gotta go think about it, Celie. I'm sorry if I'm not being the perfect gentleman, but I gotta figure all this out. Don't be mad if I don't come around for a few days."

"Emmett--" Celie started to stop him but he was gone, slamming the door and starting his engine. She heard the tires squeal as he took off, and she placed her hand on her abdomen.

"Little baby, what a mixture you gonna be. Not a purebred gentleman and sure not a purebred lady."

The next day, Emmett drove over to Celie's, where he saw her mother's car parked out front.

"Great," he thought, "That's all I need."

Celie's mother was an overweight Italian woman who worked in many of the same night clubs that Celie did. She had a mass of frizzy black hair and thick red lips that could let out a barrage of angry Italian if provoked. Emmett imagined that "provoked" was what he was in for. He knocked.

"You! Celie, your no-good boyfriend come to pay visit. After running away on important day he come back to get forgive. Let me tell you, you young little no-good home-wreck, my Celie, she don't want to

see you face no more! You get out!"

Celie appeared behind her mother. "Ma, I'll talk to him."

"Talk to him, the son bitch leave you alone after you have his baby! Look like you want to throw out, not talk!"

"I'll call you later, Ma." Celie pushed her muttering mother out and let Emmett in.

"I didn't expect to see you," she said. "Not quite the celebration I had in mind."

"I'm sorry. I thought it over."

"So did I, Emmett. Maybe we'd better say goodbye."

"Why? I'm willing to be the baby's father. I can be responsible, especially now with the boat and all."

"How can I believe that?"

"Because, Celie, you're right. I need to take my pick. Forward or back. I think we should get married."

"Married? Oh, my."

"The kid should have a name anyway. And I like it out here on the beach with you. Whad'ya say?"

"I say that'll make Matthew happy. He thinks you're his daddy already."

By the time Matthew's eighteenth birthday rolled around, he had learned to worship his "daddy." Every day when Matthew didn't have school, Emmett would take him on the boat. Emmett worked as he never had on the boat. He put in extra hours to polish the deck or scrape off the barnacles. Daddy went out, with Emmett as his first mate, on more and more ocean trips, chartering people who wanted to go deepsea fishing.

Emmett hauled old tires until his back and arms ached, dumping them in select spots of the ocean to create fish beds attracting the biggest groupers and snappers, which Daddy would then chart on his depth-finder. Most of Emmett's pay checks went back into the boat. Daddy named the boat the Miss Ruthie, after Momma, and he was right--the money started to pile in.

Emmett got used to those big pay checks. If he got tired of taking orders, Daddy would be quick to remind him that he was Emmett's source of income, so he'd best watch his step. Emmett swallowed his words and lived for the day when he'd put in enough time and money to buy the rest of the boat from Daddy. If Emmett hated taking orders at work, he'd come home, kiss Matthew and Patsy, and tell Celie he was going out for the evening.

"Sure don't look like you made much of a change to me, Emmett," Celie said, her eyes narrowed.

"Oh, and you're out of the night clubs completely, I've noticed."

"We need the money. And I got some obligations."

"I'm making money. And I'm going to spend it, too."

Emmett would come home smelling of whiskey and other women, and Celie would bite her lips and roll over, looking at her children sleeping in the fold-out beds in the living room. Daddy had taken a liking to Matthew, and he was happy to have the extra free help on hand. Matthew learned fast, and he tried to copy his Daddy in everything. When he turned sixteen, Matthew got drunk and lost his virginity all in one night.

About that time, Celie walked up to Daddy and Momma's one day, dressed in her conservative best. Daddy sat on the front porch, fixing fishing reels.

"Why, Celie, what are you doing here?"

"Well, Mr. Parker, I came by to see you." She looked at her feet nervously.

"What can I do for you? Emmett's not giving you trouble, I hope."

"Well, Emmett tries real hard. Actually, Mr. Parker, I came to ask you a favor. You know how much Matthew loves being out on the Miss Ruthie, and Patsy, well, she's doing real good in school these days."

"Is that a fact? You got some good kids, Celie."

"Yes. They're maybe a little wild sometimes, but they are good. I wanted to ask you--if anything should happen to me, will you take them and raise them?"

Daddy looked serious, and he ran his fingers through his hair. "Now, Celie, what makes you ask that particular question?"

"Well, just in case, you know. Can't be too careful."

"You in some kind of trouble?"

"Will you promise me, Mr. Parker?"

"What about Emmett?"

"Emmett's a little wild for raising kids. He's got a good heart, but I think you and Miss Ruthie would do better by em."

"I'd sure do my best to raise em."

"Thank you. I'm very grateful."

"Celie, you never--"

She put a finger to her lips and shook Daddy's hand. "I gotta go now. You tell Miss Ruthie I came by, will you?"

"Sure thing, Celie."

"Emmett, can't you stay home sometimes? I need you at the house."

"To do what?"

"To be a husband and a father, for one."

"Aw, Celie."

"Emmett, I have to go to Juno's tonight to take care of some business."

"Juno's? What kind of business you got there?"

"I owe some money on my old tab. I want to clear it up is all."

"I'll do that for you. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"No, I--uh--have to do it myself. Will you please, this once, stay with Matthew and Patsy?"

"Can't you take em over to Momma's? She loves to see them."

"To see Patsy you mean."

"Celie."

"Emmett."

"Fine, sure. I think there's a game on TV anyway."

"I'll be back soon."

Before she left, Celie kissed Matthew and Patsy and told them to be sweet. Patsy, her eleven-year-old face so much like her mother's, hugged Celie.

Emmett had missed three days on the boat when the phone rang.

"Mr. Parker?" a voice said.

"Yes."

"This is Seargent Curcio. We think we've found your wife."

"Well, where is she?"

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Parker. Celia Parker is dead."

"I can't figure why you didn't tell me about this," Momma said.

"I didn't think it was important." Daddy replied.

"You didn't think raising two kids was important? Well, of course you wouldn't. You're a man."

Matthew and Patsy sat on the back porch talking to each other.

"Evie and Mandy are already out on their own, Harv, and now you bring in kids to start all over again?"

"I said I'd raise em."

"Shoot! You? What do you know about raising kids?"

"I got three of my own, don't I?"

"You may've conceived children, but you don't know the first thing about raising em! You didn't stay up late waiting for em nights or help em with schoolwork or fix their meals or heal their hurts!"

Daddy grunted indignantly and left the kitchen.

"Look, we got em. Obviously their daddy don't show much interest."

"One of em's daddy we don't even know. Doesn't blood mean anything to you?"

Daddy looked sharply at Momma. "That's never going to be said again." He said. "You got that?" Daddy walked outside, and Evie and Amanda met him on the way in.

"Momma, what's all this about Emmett? Eddie told me you called." Amanda said. Eddie was Amanda's husband of five years.

Momma sighed. "That woman got herself killed."

"Who?"

"Celie. And now we got Patsy and that boy."

"What are you saying, Momma? Celie was killed? Where's Emmett?"

"She was missing for three days, and they finally found her off of Bard's Pier. Your daddy seems to think she'd got herself into trouble. He thinks she was pushed by someone."

"Pushed?" Amanda and Evie said together.

"She'd said something to Emmett about paying someone. Daddy thinks some lowlifes at a bar somewhere. I didn't know anything about it. Next thing you know, Emmett's calling us up, saying Celie's drowned, and he needs somewhere to keep Matthew and Patsy."

"What about Emmett? Ain't he their father?" Evie asked.

Momma shot Evie a look. "Maybe. But your daddy told Celie before she died that he'd be happy to raise her kids. Didn't say word one to me about it."

"You're kidding." Amanda said. "You mean Daddy knew she was gonna die?"

"She acted like she knew her time was coming soon."

"Where's Emmett now?"

"My guess is drowning his sorrows in a bottle. That poor boy. I'd better get over there and see about him."

After two years of raising Matthew and Patsy, Momma was tired. Tired of waiting up nights all over again like she did for Emmett, tired of fixing and cleaning for them, and tired of having her love go unappreciated. And she was tired of hearing Daddy tell people how wonderfully he was raising those two kids. Without a mother or a daddy they were like wild Indians. They knew Momma was not their mother, and they knew she wouldn't throw them out because of Daddy. So they ran all over her, especially Matthew, who was Emmett all over again, only worse.

After so much time spent working for Daddy, Emmett figured he'd got enough money to buy the boat and his freedom along with it.

"I been thinking, Daddy," he said. "I figure with all the years I been working on Miss Ruthie, the work I put into her, and the money I used to make improvements over the years, I got about enough saved up to buy her from you and start her out on my own. I know the ropes, and you don't even go out on trips like you used to, so I could take over your job. Whad'ya say to it?"

During Emmett's speech, Daddy had frowned more and more.

"Buy her from me? Buy the Miss Ruthie? Well, son, I bought the Miss Ruthie thirteen years ago. This here boat's mine, and you work for me. We're in business together."

Emmett was unprepared for this. "You mean you won't sell? Not even after all the time and money I put in?"

"Emmett, I'm the captain and you're the first mate. That's it, son."

Emmett turned red, then purple in his anger. "You can't, you can't do this! That boat's as good as mine! I worked her ever since I drove her back from Alabama. I got a right to her!"

"Who has the papers? That's who has a right to her."

"Daddy, you can't rule me forever."

"Son, you're mine and that boat is mine. You leave and where you gonna get your money from? Even your kids are as good as mine."

Emmett shook with rage and hurt. He clenched his fists.

"Don't defy me, Emmett."

"Damn you, Daddy! Damn you and your boat to hell! I earned this and you ain't keeping me from what's rightfully mine!" With that, Emmett

stormed off, leaving people to stare after him and leaving Daddy scowling.

That night at dinner, Daddy asked Matthew what he planned on doing after high school.

"I hadn't thought about it much, sir."

"How'd you like to work for me, permanent like?"

"Oh, that'd be lovely," Momma said. "Emmett could use some help."

"Emmett won't be there. I want you to be captain of the Miss Ruthie, Matthew."

"But what about my daddy?" he asked.

"Yes, what about Emmett?" Momma asked, her eyes wide. "Just what are you doing?"

"Emmett's decided he don't want the boat anymore. He can't have his own way for once, so he left. Good riddance. He was lazy anyway. Never could work the reels like I showed him."

"What are you saying? Your own son? You kicked your own son off the boat he slaved over?"

"He wanted to buy her out from under me, the son of--he wants what's not his to have. And I won't stand for it."

"But you're giving it to Matthew here instead?" Momma's voice was rising. Matthew looked at Momma in triumph.

"Matthew's got a good head on his shoulders. He knows all the ropes. Why not?"

"Why not? You can say "why not" when it's a quesiton of family? Your son--"

"Matthew will take over, won't you Matthew?"

"Well, what about my daddy? I wouldn't feel right without him there."

"You see?" Momma said.

"That's it! I want no more said about Emmett! He brought it on himself! And as for you, Matthew, Emmett is not your daddy, so you don't have to worry about feeling disloyal!"

Matthew stood up from the table. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Emmett moved in with your Momma when you was already born. He never was your daddy and never cared about you neither. If he did, you think you'd be living in this house with us instead of with him?"

"That's not true!" Matthew ran out the back door and Patsy sat silently crying at the table.

"If that was meant to hurt Emmett," Momma said, "You got the wrong one. You know Matthew adores him. And I cannot believe you have betrayed your own flesh and blood for someone who'd not even connected with this family except through your promises! There is nothing more important than family! You may have just gained a captain, but you lost a son! And as far as I'm concerned, you're close to losing a wife, too."

Momma left the room and Patsy followed her, if only to not be left alone with Daddy.

"No, I told you Mr. Parker's not here. Why don't you go check at the marina at your boat?"

"Listen, Miss Ruthie," Matthew said, looking harsh despite his nineteen years, "I asked you a simple question. No need to be nasty."

"You get off this porch. After the way you treated Emmett, I don't want to ever see you here again. You can see Mr. Parker at the boat if you must speak to him."

Momma started to shut the door, but Matthew pushed it open and stepped inside.

"I'm sorry about your precious Emmett," he said. "But as it turns out, he's not such a good guy. He's no angel, Ruthie. I'm glad he's not my father. Next time you see your Emmett," he said, "give him this!"

He slapped Momma then, and she fell back against the cabinets. She held her cheek and cried, "Get out of here!" She screamed, "Get out of this house!"

Matthew laughed and backed down the porch steps.

"If you tell Mr. Parker about this, who do you think he'll believe--the captain of his beloved boat or the woman who's so against me and who'd say anything for her son?"

"Get OUT!" Momma sank against the floor, feeling the hated hand on her face and, worse, knowing that Matthew was right.

Momma pulled into the marina parking lot at nine-thirty. She knew Matthew would be in Juno's getting drunk. That's where he always was. She waited until ten forty-five and saw Matthew stumble out of the bar, a silly grin on his face and a bottle in his hand.

She walked up to him then, thinking of Emmett and feeling Matthew's hand on her face.

"Well, Mrs. Parker," he said, his speech slurred, a vague look of surprise on his face.

"Yes, Matthew. I wanted to talk to you."

He leered at her. "I knew you'd come around. Ready to accept me into your precious family with open arms?"

Momma walked out onto the pier. "This is where your Momma died, you know?" she said. "She fell in the water down there and that was the end of it."

"What do you know about my Momma? You never liked her."

"No, I didn't. But she got herself in trouble with the wrong sort of people, flashing my boy's money around and sharing her favors."

"That's a lie, old woman," he yelled, teetering towards her.

"You take after her, Matthew, you and your dirty ways."

Matthew lunged at Momma, swinging his bottle in the air. She glared at him. "How dare you? You come into my family and hurt my flesh and blood. I don't care if you kill me right now, you coward, but you cannot touch my children. And you will not hurt them or me anymore."

He laughed at her, mocking her. As he took a swig from his bottle, Momma reached over to the side of the pier where fishing poles stood anchored into the posts. She swung one of them at Matthew, hitting him squarely in the stomach. He grunted and doubled over, a surprised look on his face. She swung the rod again and hit him across the legs. In his stupor, he stumbled and fell backwards off the pier. Momma watched as he struggled against the undertow, then she got back in the car and drove home.

Evie drove into the driveway the next morning. A movement in the yard caught her attention.

"Momma? What are you doing out here in this heat?"

"I have some work to do."

"Momma, your roses!"

As Evie came closer, she saw that Momma had hacked all the roses

down. Strewn on the ground lay the colored petals she had taken years to cultivate.

"What are you doing?"

Momma was digging violently with her spade, uprooting all the younger roses and chopping the roots of the older ones. She still wore the clothes from the night before, and she hacked the roses in a manic trance.

"Too many hybrids, remember? Too many hybrids ruin the whole bed. And there's thorns that're big and sharp enough to hurt someone badly."

"What are you saying? Momma, come inside where it's cool."

"The worst ones have to be uprooted."

"Momma?" Evie knelt down beside Momma and put her hand on the spade to stop its furious digging. Momma looked up at Evie, a mixture of sweat and tears on her face.

"Nothing's more precious to a mother than her children. I can't stand by and have them deliberately hurt."

"I know, Momma. We're family and we stick together. What is it the Bible says? This, too, shall pass? We'll get through it. If this is about Emmett, I talked to him and he bought a boat from a man up North. Now he's out from under Daddy where he can make his own decisions and have a little breathing room. And Mandy told me he's seeing a girl, one that she says is clean and respectable. She says he's trying to straighten up for her."

"Really? That's wonderful."

"And Patsy had dinner with the two of them, too, so he's taking an interest in his kids."

"He only has one."

"Well, that's what I meant."

Momma looked tearfully at her garden. "These roses have given me so much trouble." She looked at her hands which were black with dirt and pricked all over from brushing against thorns in her fury.

"But you always said they were pretty too, especially in the summer. Why are you chopping them all down? Does this thing with Emmett have you that upset?"

"Oh, Daddy and I had another argument over Emmett and Matthew." She was tense, her hands clenched.

"Momma, can't you <u>try</u> and forgive Daddy?"

"Family is family. Daddy's not my flesh and blood. He has betrayed one of my <u>own</u>, a part of <u>me</u>.

Evie looked softly at Momma. "Well, look, Momma. Here's a couple you missed." She changed the subject, hoping that in time, this really would pass. "Let's clear out all these branches and stake these two up against the trellis."

"Alright. I guess it's not the garden's fault." she laughed.

They salvaged two bushes, one red and one white. The rest of the branches they put in the compost pile, and some of the less destroyed blooms they gathered to take inside.

"Let's go have some iced tea." suggested Evie. Momma wiped her brow, and they walked inside. Daddy's truck drove up a few minutes later.

"What is it, Daddy?" His face looked stressed.

"They just found Matthew under Bard's Pier."

"What?"

"They're saying he was drunk," he said. Momma sighed and seemed relieved of a great burden.

"How could that happen?" Evie asked.

"He was drunk," Daddy said. "Maybe he got to thinking too much about his Momma and stumbled around out there with his liquor."

"Does Emmett know?" Evie asked.

"We'd better call him," Momma said, picking up the phone as Daddy shook his head.

"Lost a damn good captain today," said Daddy.

Momma shot him a look, unconsciously touching her cheek. She still felt the sting from Matthew's hand. At least now she wouldn't have to live in fear and hatred of him.

"Maybe things can get back to how they oughta be around here." she said, listening to Emmett's phone ring.

Evie put her hands on Momma's shoulders and leaned her head against her face. This close to her, Evie noticed a faint salty odor that reminded her of something.

"Momma, you been down to the docks today?"

Momma hung up. "Emmett must not be home yet. What a silly question. You know I never go down there. I hate to see those boats lined up next to each other reminding me of too many things I want to forget. I haven't been down there since this whole thing started."

Evie nodded.

Momma made a mental note to do a load of wash that evening to get rid of the smell. She smiled to herself as she rearranged the roses in the vase on the table. Not a hybrid in the bunch.

III.

KEEPING THE FAITH

THE VIGIL

The young priest quietly asked God to cleanse him from all iniquities and wash away all his sin before turning to the altar to begin the ritual prayers of the mass. His dark hair was combed neatly back, revealing a broad unwrinkled forehead and icy-blue eyes. His full mouth moved silently as he offered petitions to his God. The mass was in memory of Señor Eduardo Fernando, who had died very suddenly in the middle of the night. The man's daughter, Elena, knelt draped in black at the back of the church. Occasionally she would dab at her dark eyes with her handkerchief, but mostly she watched the priest as he held up first the host, then the chalice.

"Do this," the priest was saying, "in memory of me." Candles lit in the back of the church flickered, casting shadows on the walls, and Elena rose and walked up the front of the sanctuary to receive the Eucharist. She lifted her black veil and looked at the priest with eyes still shining from tears.

"The body of Christ," he said, placing the host on Elena's tongue. She bowed her head and returned, strangely calm, to her seat. She watched as several others went up to the priest and remained kneeling as he gave the benediction in his smooth, soft voice. As the parishoners left the church, the priest walked through the door to the left of the altar to his office. He removed his collar, hung the purple robes in a small closet, and sat wearily in his chair, swiveling it around to face the window which overlooked the grounds of St. Stephen's. It was chilly outside, though occasionally a warm breeze would blow, announcing the beginning of spring. It had been a long, dreary winter, even for

New York, and he was anxious for April to arrive, though for what he didn't know.

He rubbed his face and reflected on the morning's mass. Señor Fernando had been to confession only a few days before his death, and he had seemed so alive then, so happy. "Ah, well, the ways of God are not for man to know," he thought.

"Father Roarke?" He looked up at the sound of his name. Elena stood in the doorway to his office, her veil lifted, her handkerchief working nervously in her olive-colored hands.

"Yes, Elena? Come in." He motioned for her to sit. "What can I do for you? Was the celebration alright?"

"Oh, yes, I appreciate you doing the mass on such short notice. Papa would have been happy." Her voice was small, yet it had a strength in it that was not lost on him. Her accent made her speech sound thick and staccato. "I wondered," she began, "if Papa had told you anything about our state of affairs?"

"The shop, you mean?"

"So he told you?"

"He mentioned it, yes."

"Since Mama died he had not been careful about the accounts. We--or I, now--am very much in debt to the bank." She stopped and looked down at her hands. She looked very pretty. It had been a long time since he had seen a pretty woman. Most of his parishoners were old women or very young children of the barrios. But then, he was not supposed to think of such things.

"I want to ask you," she said, "will you help me?"

"What can I do?" he asked, spreading his hands before him.

"You know the man at the bank who holds our account. You could speak to him." She swallowed. He knew this was difficult for her, yet he would not make it easier. Perhaps he needed, in some perverse way, to know that someone else also struggled. "You could persuade him not to foreclose just yet. The Easter season is coming up, and I know there will be a pick-up in business. Everyone wants Easter flowers."

He smiled at her. How tired he felt! "Yes," he said, "I will speak to him for you." She reached across the desk and took his hands in hers without saying anything. She held his hands there, firmly, looking into his eyes. He felt hot and flushed. What was it he saw in her eyes? He had known that look before, before he became a priest. He squeezed her hands and released his own, rising from his seat. How uncomfortable she made him. She made him confused. He was a priest. How could he think of her as anything other than a parishoner?

"I will come to see you on Monday then, Elena. At lunchtime?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Monday."

Elena left the office as quietly as she had come, and Father Roarke sank again into his chair. Looking out the window, he saw Mrs. Quinn outside by the Shrine of Our Lady. He watched her cross herself and kiss the crucifix on the end of her rosary. Elena emerged from the church's door, and she walked on the sidewalk toward her home. Mrs. Quinn stopped her and they spoke briefly. He saw that Mrs. Quinn must be saying something about Señor Fernando because Elena was nodding and wiping her eyes. Mrs. Quinn patted Elena on the arm and pressed something into her hand. It was the rosary. Father Roarke looked away and wondered what he would say to Johan Jowarska at the bank tomorrow.

Donald Roarke hadn't always wanted to be a priest. In college in Boston, far away from his parents' Montana farm, he had started out as a law student, not even very religious. As he studied civil torts and memorized pages of precedents, he decided something was missing in his life. He had deep, probing discussions with his friends about poetry, government, and love, and all these issues had seemed so immediate, so pressing. Then his father had died. He had come back from his first sememster at law school to find his mother empty and moving slowly about the day's routines. She sent him out to help bring a calf and he had walked back inside, the remnants of the birth still steaming on his hands in the cold air, to find his mother lying dead on the floor of the bathroom, a razor blade in one hand and a rosary clasped tightly in the other. He saw his mother and the beads lying in blood and he sat slumped against the wall, sobbing out his first prayer.

"I felt," as he told Father Martinez later, "as if God were telling me to rely on Him only, and Mama's rosary beads were sort of a flashing sign pointing the way." So six years later, at twenty-eight, he'd been ordained at the Church of Our Lady of Mercies in Boston. It had all been a blur, a rush of prayers, Latin phrases, and church fathers. And now he'd been here, for the last four years, over a parish in the barrios, ministering to the meek and lowly with Father Martinez several blocks away in his own church for occasional company.

Monday morning Father Donald woke early, said a somewhat hasty prayer, and scrubbed his face with icy water from the tap. He dressed quickly, the cold air in the rectory giving him incentive to hurry. He had not yet collected enough money to fix the heater. He combed back

his hair, shaved, and adjusted his collar. His dark clothes and hair made him look smart, business-like, and made his eyes stand out. He looked at his reflection. His eyes seemed distant, sad, yet he smiled to himself, thinking where he was going that morning. He made sure the church doors were locked before heading out.

As he walked towards the store where he had arranged to meet Mr. Joworska, the man from the bank, he looked up at the cold sky. Today it had patches of blue in it, and the clouds seemed to be moving towards the coast. A woman waved to him from a window of one of the tall, sooty buildings. She was stringing laundry across the distance between buildings, adding to the swaying shirts and towels that already flapped in the breeze.

"Hello, Mrs. Evita!" he called. "You're up early!"

"Es the only time I have before the bambinos come home for lunch!" she yelled back. She threw up her hands and laughed. She enjoyed her five children, Donald knew, yet they were always hungry, and when the two oldest came home from school for lunch, they didn't return for the rest of the day because they had to go to work.

Donald walked along the sidewalk, occasionally nodding to people he knew and surveying the surroundings. Brick tenement houses stretched to the sky like ugly scars on the city's face. Here and there, women sat on the front steps of the buildings talking to each other or just watching the day go by. Now and then he oculd hear a baby crying, a dog's bark, or, far away, a siren's wail. On one end of the tenement section, locally known as the barrios, was St. Stephen's, a small white building with a little grassy lot between it and the rectory where he lived. At the other end of the barrios, the city began, yawining wide, smoky, hazy.

He sat on a bench by the corner drugstore and watched the people walk past him. The banker walked up, dressed warmly in a long coat, and shook Donald's hand.

"Father Donald, how good to see you." Johan bought a cup of coffee and a paper from the clerk in the store and then walked back out and sat down beside Donald. "Now then, what did you want to see me about?" He sipped from the steaming cup.

"I have a favor to ask, Johan."

The banker leaned back. "Ah, you Catholics," he laughed, "Always looking for a handout from us."

Father Donald smiled. "It's for a friend," he said. "Elena Fernando."

"Elena?" Johan's bushy eyebrows raised, and he brushed his thick hands through his mop of gray hair. "Consorting with women are you, Father?" He rubbed his forefingers together and shook his head. "Shame, shame."

"Her father died Saturday and she needs an extension on the florist's mortgage, Johan." Father Donald felt almost guilty offering this explanation. Consorting with women?

"Don't they all," he said tiredly. "I'm beginning to wonder if Yaweh has forgotten us all down here. Why are <u>you</u> here for her?"

"She asked me to come yesterday. She is all alone now, and must run the store by herself. She says she expects business to pick up around Easter, and she could make a payment."

"Everybody wants flowers for the Savior, eh?" he mocked. "Do you know how many have asked for extensions this week, Father?"

"I know it's hard. I wouldn't normally have bothered you, but Elena is a worthy case, I think."

"They are all worthy cases, Father." He considered a moment. "For you, I will give her until Easter."

"Thank you, Johan. You're a good man."

"That's what they tell me," he said. "I'm afraid it will someday ruin me! I must be getting back to the bank." Johan rose and started off down the street.

"You left your paper," Donald called after him.

Johan raised his hand. "Keep it."

He went in the store and bought several peppermint sticks before returning to the bench to read his paper. He soon found the words were passing by his eyes without comprehension as his mind wandered. He thought back to his meeting with Bishop Feldman.

He had taken a cab over to Long Island to the bishop's church, and he remembered being shocked by the extravagance. The church was all stone with stained glass windows and a marble foyer. The pews were carved cherry wood, and the ceiling in the sanctuary was domed, and all stained glass. He had gone into the bishop's office, its walls lined with shelves of books and pictures of saints. The bishop had been asleep, even at eleven, and was awakened with the announcement of Father Donald's arrival. He was not an old man, at fifty-six, and he still had plenty of strength left. He had sat down behind his huge mahogany desk and stared at Father Donald, waiting.

"I've come because Father Martinez sent me." he'd said.

"Oh, yes. What can I help you with, Father?"

He remembered being confused at the question. He hadn't known how to answer. Why had he come? Because he was doubting his faith? Because

he felt tired of a life of uncertainties? Because of Elena and their growing friendship? He couldn't say that. What would the bishop think--a new priest already breaking his vows mentally.

So he'd said, "I have a lot of questions about God and the purpose He has for me."

"Questions about God." the bishop answered, sipping his coffee slowly. "And what are they?"

"I'm confused about how He works. I guess I never was sure about my place in the priesthood.

"You were ordained weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Bishop Feldman kept fiddling with the cloth of his robes. It made Father Donald nervous.

"I thought it was what He wanted. I thought it was the right thing to do. But now..." he stopped.

"But now?" the bishop asked. "Now you aren't so sure?"

"My parish is wonderful, the people are very sincere. I feel that they are sometimes above me."

"Have you read Augustine, Father?"

"Yes, some time ago."

"Read him again."

"I'm still confused about the ways of God. How can I--"

"Father, it is not for man to know the ways of God. I suggest you apply yourself more to your faith. Fast and pray. And read the church fathers. Say a mass. You will feel better."

The bishop had risen to go, and Father Donald got up, feeling sick and angry, still unresolved.

That had been a month ago, and he had since followed all the bishop's instructions. During this Lenten season he had fasted weekly and stayed up much later reading, pouring over books as if he expected to find the solution written on a page somewhere. He thought often of his mother, her hand clasped onto the rosary, and he wondered how God could've let her die that way, how the bishop's rich apartments could contrast so severely with the barrios, how he could get through another mass without weeping. What was it he had dedicated his life to? He thought hard, but no definition came. What did that make him? Undefined? And he thought of Elena, her softness, her beauty. He managed to keep away from her as much as possible.

He looked at his watch. Eleven o'clock. He was to meet Lydia Pascelli to pray with her about her sick son. He walked slowly to her apartment, his heart heavy and his soul empty. Lydia's apartment was much like all the other barrio spaces, cold, small, and bare. She had stuck newspapers all over the walls for insulation, and she had some wonderful-smelling bread in the oven. A crucifix hung over Antoine's bed, her son, who lay covered up, sleeping. Father Donald sat by the bed and pulled out his prayer book and a small bottle of water which he had blessed the night before. He and Lydia spoke in whispers so as not to wake the boy, and Lydia's worn hands brushed back the sweaty strands of hair from Antoine's forehead.

"He gets sicker," she said. "Guiseppe has lost hope." Guiseppe was her husband. He had been at church a lot recently.

"Let's pray, Lydia," said Father Donald, taking her hand and reading from the prayer book. When they were finished, Lydia rose and wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"Antoine," she whispered achingly. "Antoine." Father Donald looked at the boy as he slept, his small face pale and his breath heavy and raspy. He looked so frail and small to be four years old. He had been the first child he had baptized at St. Stephen's.

"You would like some bread?" asked Lydia, taking it from the oven.

"No, thank you. I must go meet someone." He knew she had just enough for her family.

He walked briskly to Elena's shop, glad that he could bring good news to at least one place that day. As he opened the door, the bell jingled, and he stood inside, noticing the tidy counters and the cleanly swept floor. Plants hung everywhere, huge potted spider plants, violets, philodendrons, ivy, and ferns. In another corner were all the flowers, arranged in pretty springtime bouquets: roses, carnations, daffodils, and daisies.

"Elena?" A dark head appeared over a leafy fern. She hadn't heard him come in.

"Father Roarke!" she smiled. She came out from behind the plants wiping her hands on a smock. "I was digging as you can see. It is hard to do everything with just one." She wore a dark burgundy dress with a black lace head covering to show her mourning.

"The daffodils are beautiful," he said. "They remind me that Easter is almost here."

"Yes." She turned the shop's sign in the window so that it showed she was out to lunch. "They are beautiful. Yellow is such a happy color. Come, I have lunch in the other room."

She led the way into her apartment which joined to the store. It was small, just a kitchen and living area connected to a bedroom. A

picture of a matador hung over the couch, and in one corner of the room she had set up a small shelf with a candle and a crucifix.

"It is flour tortillas with beans," she said, motioning to the table.

"Smells wonderful!" They sat, and after she dished out the meal, he said the perfunctory grace.

"How are you, Elena?"

"I am managing. It is not so bad."

"You make delicious tortillas."

"Family recipe." she said. She looked hard at him. "Are you unhappy, Father?" The question startled him. Was it so obvious?

"Why do you ask?"

"Your face seems so sad," she said, and she reached out to touch his cheek by his mouth. "Here," she pointed, moving her finger toward his mouth. "You frown. You remind me of Papa."

He swallowed hard. His mind was racing with questions and emotions. "Nothing is wrong," he lied. "I went to see the banker, and you have been given an extension until Easter." He wiped his mouth with his napkin, wiping also the place where she touched, as if she'd left a mark. But how he wished she'd touch him again. He banished the thought.

"Oh," she cried. "Què bueno! I'm so happy. Thank you, Father, for your help. I'm sure I would not have gotten it without you."

He waved his hand, dismissing the subject. "Nonsense. It was a special favor."

She smiled at him warmly and took his plate. She was about to put another tortilla on it, but he stopped her. "No more, please." He

rose from the table. "I must go back to the rectory. But thank you, Elena, for a lovely lunch."

"Thahk you, Father. I will come to see you soon." Was he mistaken or did she seem disappointed that he was leaving? He took her hand and as he saw the warmth in her eyes, he impulsively pulled her to him and kissed her lightly on the lips. She didn't resist.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "Forgive me!" He rushed out of the apartment before she could tell him that it was okay.

As he walked home from Elena's shop, he thought about her, his mind racing. He had just talked to Johan as a favor to her, hadn't he? How could he have kissed her like that? Was he out of his mind? Was he confusing his feelings and doubts about his faith with those feelings for Elena? He hurried back home to say prayers for his sin. He passed Evita's children coming back from school. He gave them each a peppermint stick.

Father Donald said the Easter mass the following Sunday. The service was beautiful, with the candles, his white robes, the smell of incense. It all seemed so mysterious to him, so beyond his grasp. He prayed solemnly and tried to digest the words he spoke, yet his hands trembled when he held up the chalice, and he feared he would spill some of the wine. He noticed that Guiseppe Pascelli was not present. He often had to work late at the factory, and Father Donald didn't think anymore about it.

Elena spoke to him after the mass. He had stayed away from her shop all week, trying to sort out his feelings. Her presence had added some new feelings to his confusion, feelings that he thought had been

dismissed when he'd taken his vows. But then, he thought, how could they be wrong? Does God really want men to never marry? He didn't know anymore what, if anything, God wanted from him. For two months now God had been silent. He felt abandoned, afraid of what his feelings were telling him, and on top of that, guilty. It was like he was confined, stuffed into his rectory in New York, his questions silenced from quotations from Augustine, his feelings denied and shut up within himself. He felt afraid and on the verge of something.

The incense during the mass had made him a bit heady. As he stood by the doorway catching some fresh air, he looked at the flowers planted around the statue of Mary and thought of Elena in her flower shop. She had been at mass, dressed in dark purple, her long hair in a braid.

"Father?" It was Elena. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "Father, are you alright?" He turned towards her. Tendrils of hair hung around her face, and she looked at him wide-eyed.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"I haven't seen you in awhile." She placed her hand on his arm. "Do you like the flowers?" she gestured towards the daffodils around the statue. "I remembered you liked the daffodils. They are a thank you. I will be able to pay the bank tomorrow."

"You planted them? They're lovely, Elena." Her name sounded thick as he said it. Why was she here?

"I was going to plant some more this afternoon, around the front steps. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind." He sounded distant, vague. "Did you know, Elena, that purple was my mother's favorite color? You look very nice in it." He left her there, walking back inside the church. He was to hear confessions that afternoon.

Later, before he went into the confessional, he knelt before the picture of Christ which hung in his office and tried to pray. The words stuck in his throat, so he just knelt quietly, in silence, almost apologetically. He sat in the confessional for fifteen minutes, before he heard someone enter the confessional. It was a woman, confessing unchaste thoughts and sins of anger and pride. He granted penance with a guilty heart and waited ten more minutes before he heard the door open again. Someone sat in the other booth quietly.

"Do you wish to confess?"

A broken voice replied, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." It took a moment before Father Donald recognized the voice as Guiseppe's.

"And your sins?" he asked gently.

"No," the voice said, "No, I wanted to say...I wanted to say--"

"Take your time."

"My son died this morning, Father. He coughed up blood all night long and suffered through the whole night without a doctor. The doctor wouldn't come because we could not pay. All night long we begged God not to take our boy. And at sunrise, he died. He looked me in the face and said 'Make it go away, Daddy. make it not hurt.' And I could not help him. No God would do that to a little boy, Father. After all that praying...Lydia said you came last week and prayed, too. Even you didn't help him, Father. I don't think there is a God, Father, because if there was, my boy would still be alive." He sobbed for a while longer before he gained control. "I just had to say that."

Father Donald heard the confessional door bang shut. He felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He sat in disbelief for some time. He

was numbed with the realization of how much alike he and Guiseppe were. He could have replaced Guiseppe's feelings for his son with those of his own for his mother. It had taken two months of rituals, prayers, and agonizing, yet he had nothad the courage of this poor immigrant who had lost his only son. Guiseppe, mad with grief, had given him a voice. All the things he had wanted to say, had been denied to say, and had been too afraid to say were said in a burst of honest emotion by someone else. Guiseppe had lost his son. What had he lost? The priesthood? Guiseppe had felt more emotion towards God in the past few hours than he, a priest, had in the past two years. And now the man had left his confessional, uncomforted because he hadn't known what to say or how to anser. Had he said anything it wouldn't have made a difference. The gulf had already widened leaving a gaping hole between him and his God. Finally, Father Donald lowered his face into his hands and wept.

He stumbled out of the confessional and into his office, tearing off his robes, still sobbing. He stood in front of the picture he'd knelt before not long ago and in a pained voice asked the picture, "Why?" He cried out, feeling tortured inside. The doubt and despair he had kept hidden for so long poured out in a torrent of cries and sobs, inarticulate, but somehow the emotion seemed to cleanse him. He needed to go away and be alone. He had spent over eight years of his life doing... doing what? He wasn't sure he belonged here, ministering to the barrios when he couldn't even minister to himself. He pictured his mother. Had it been for her? Montana, he thought. He would go there to be alone. He would go to think about his feelings for Elena, somewhere where she wasn't constantly reminding him of his passions. And he would have a long talk with his soul.

As he whirled around to leave, there in the doorway stood Elena, her arms full of daffodils. She looked at him with frightened eyes, and he imagined how he must look after ranting.

"Elena," he whispered hoarsely.

She took a step forward and he came to her, hugging her so tightly that the daffodils were crushed between them. A few fell to the floor at their feet.

"What have I been doing here? I'm so afraid of myself." he told her. He held her away from him, and she looked at him questioningly, tears falling silently down her cheeks. "Oh, don't cry," he said. "Don't cry, m y dear." He brushed the tears away with his hands. Her face was so soft. And then he kissed her, both of their faces still wet with tears, and he could taste the salt on her lips.

"Elena, I'm going away. I'm going back to Montana where I can have room to think and walk and ask any question I want to ask myself."

"Why?"

"You told me before that I looked unhappy. And I was. But I'm starting to see things that I couldn't--or wouldn't see before. Dear Elena, I need to just be away for awhile. I'm taking the first train tonight. Antoine was the first child I baptized and now he's gone, pointlessly. Maybe, if there <u>is</u> a God, he has finally spoken to me."

He was talking more for himself than for her. He thought vaguely that he would call Father Martinez to take his place at the mass. He stopped and looked at her small face. She looked so much like a child as she stood there with her big brown eyes and wet lashes. But she was strong, he knew.

"Please understand, Elena." he paused. Her expression stiffened as she absorbed it all. She straightened and pushed her shoulders back, showing him she wasn't afraid, that she understood. "You looked so beautiful this morning," he said. "I'll come back soon to see you. Perhaps then we'll know better how to talk. You have stirred my heart, and there are so many questions I need to sort out." He kissed her lightly. "Goodbye," he said, squeezing her hand one last time. He walked out of the office. She stood quietly for a moment, and then bent down to pick up the flowers.

P.S. JESUS LOVES YOU

Aug 19

Dear Marshall,

So how was your birthday weekend? Did you do anything fun? Anything I'd care to hear about, that is. That narrows it down, doesn't it? Oh, listen, I asked my professor your Buddhism question. She said you should read Zen Action, Zen Person. So there you have it. I know that you know what I think about all that, so I won't say it. Do you realize that today is our 4 year anniversary of writing to each other? A lot of water under the bridge in 4 years, eh? Four years ago, I was just starting my Master's in psychology at Boston U. and you were dating--what was her name?--Desiree? What a fiasco--for both of us! I'm glad I transferred to Syracuse. Much more my speed. And Desiree wasn't your type anyway. I'm finishing up the ol' Ph.d. in 4 months. What do you DO with a theology degree? It's just as well you didn't go to college, for all that moaning you do about your job. Speaking of which, how's it going?

Here's the next play: My new X is middle left.

O	O	X
X	X	
O		

Your friend,
Sylvia

P.S. Jesus loves you.

Aug 29

Sylv--

Got your letter. About time you wrote. Happy Anniversary to you, too. IF I had gone to college, I wouldn't have majored in something as useful as theology. I would've been in English so I could be a writer. Did I send you my latest poem?

Drifting down
Into the miry muck
The face of a clown

Looks into my eyes
Before I go under
To the sound of a suck
Like the last bit down a bathtub
drain.

Now, why wouldn't someone be happy to publish that, I ask you? I'm just doomed, fated to failure with poetry, jobs, life, and the inevitable--women. Why'd you have to bring up Desiree? She WAS my type. I just wasn't HERS. Surprise, surprise. My birthday was one big thrill after another. I dropped acid to celebrate number 29. I'll rush down to the library and get that book you mentioned. Why do people always recommend books instead of having real, substantive conversations about things? I have nothing against books, you understand. Some of my best friends are books. But still. How's my job? Just as exciting and intellectually stimulating as being produce manager at the A&P can be. I'll bet you rue the day you entered college instead of getting on the ol' produce career ladder, don't you? Next play:

My new O is middle left. I win!

O	O	X
O	X	X
O		

as usual,
Marshall

Sept 7

Marshall!

You cheated! I can't believe anyone would stoop so low as to cheat at tic-tac-toe! The middle left was MY move. If you didn't destroy all my letters as soon as you read them, you'd KNOW that. I'm through. A person can only take so much, you know. Sheesh.

If you want to fry your brain, ruin your life, and defy God, fine. Just don't expect me to applaud from the sidelines. What gives you the right to do stuff like that? Do you want a reaction? OK, I'll give you

one. Don't you ever wonder why I'M happy and YOU'RE not? It's about priorities. I don't get off on Buddhist nonsense instead of looking at The Way that is clearly laid out for me. If you had any sense, Marshall, you'd stop complaining about how terrible your job is and your life is and DO something about it! Why don't you SEND IN a poem instead of letting them collect dust in a pile? Why don't you quit your job and give God your life? He gave it to YOU first. Oh, and by the way, if Desiree was your type, then where did I fit in way back when? Love,
Sylvia

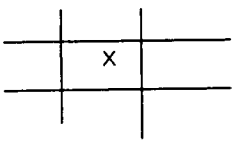
P.S. Jesus loves you, too.

Sept 14

Marshall,

I know my last letter was harsh, and I'm sorry I lost my temper. I felt like we're close enough even after I moved out here that I could say all that to you without you getting mad. Was I wrong? You're the one who first picked up a pen and wrote me, you know, though I never knew why. Because I seemed a likely candidate who'd write back to every letter yo sent for 4 years? Well, you didn't write back this time. I'm sorry,
Sylvia.

Truce?



P.S. Jesus loves you.

Sept 15

Dear Marshall,

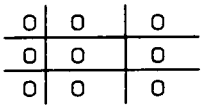
I don't want you to think that I take all that back because everything I said <u>was</u> true. I just wanted you to <u>think</u> a little, OK?

P.S. Jesus loves you. Sylvia

Sept 23

S--

It's me. Got your letters. All three of them. I'm not mad. Just preoccupied. Why does YOUR X always go first and always go in the middle?

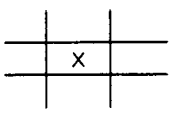


Breaking tradition,
Marshall

Sept 30

Marshall,

What kind of letter was <u>that</u>? You didn't tell me anything. What's going ON? The X goes first and in the middle because that's HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME. You can't break tradition. Why do you think there are no women priests in the Catholic church? Why do you think Jewish boys are all circumcised? Tradition. You don't just change it on a <u>whim</u>. It's there for a reason. Just have faith that it's <u>meant to be</u>. And I'm X because I'm <u>always</u> X. It's almost genetic. What's preoccupying you?



P.S. You know the rest. --Sylvia

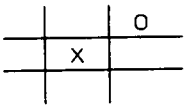
Oct 7

aivlyS,

You don't just do something because that's how it's always been done. You have to stop and ask WHY sometimes. Question authority and all that. How do you think civil rights ever occurred? What's the use in blind faith? None that I can see. I didn't cheat ON PURPOSE. Couldn't you have let me win once anyway even if it was a fake win? You wouldn't have had to tell me or yell at me for it. But I suppose you would have classified that as lying--and we couldn't have that, could we? I'm

dating someone named Cheryl. She's into New Age stuff...you know, Tarot cards and crystals. She's also a nympho, which is not the ONLY reason I'm seeing her, though it helps. I think I'm going through a mid-life crisis. Your concept of God, by the way, is skewed. The way I see it, if he exists at all, he's this nice old guy, kinda like Santa Claus, who sits up in heaven. When I die, I hope he'll take me on his knee and show me a video of my life. He can show me what I did right (that shouldn't take long) and where I could've improved, and then give me another chance at it all. That's how it SHOULD be if it's not already.

--llahsraM

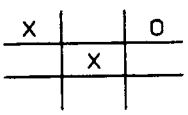


Oct 15

MARSHall,

I thought we'd agreed not to talk about our love lives with each other. It brings up too much stuff that we agreed to bury. Cheryl doesn't sound very good for you. Remember Desiree? My idea is not skewed. Maybe the way you look at it is partially right. But you have to qualify first to get in to SEE the "Divine Santa Claus." And you only have one chance at it. If, after you watch the video, you do more wrong than right, you may not STAY in heaven. If you do stay, you STAY and don't get another chance. This is not Shirley MacClaine. I <u>have</u> questioned authority. I haven't <u>always</u> had the sort of faith I do now. I wish you could just spend one day from my point of view, Marshall. Then you'd know how important it is and what a difference it makes!

P.S. Jesus loves you!!



My X is top left. Love, Sylvia

Oct 22

Sillvee-a,

I've been reading Franny and Zooey by Salinger. It talks about a kind of meditation called the "Jesus prayer." Ever done anything like that in those masses of yours? Don't you all chant the rosary or something? I'm thinking of trying it out. Anyway, my life's not so bad. I have Cheryl and I have my writing, right? Why is YOUR point of view so all-fire superior? I think all women just get into these power games. I've been trying out different things, and I think I'm finally happy.

X		O
	X	
		O

My O is bottom right.

Looks like I've got you,
if you're not careful.

Love and peace,
Marshall

Oct 29

Marshall,

Great. You haven't listened to a thing I've said (written) for the past 4 years, have you? There's something else that can change your life--and not through some weird Jesus prayer you've picked up from a book. No, there's not a parallel to Catholicism and the rosary. It's not a chant just for the sake of chanting. There's something behind it. Are you TRULY happy if you have to THINK about whether you are or not? My X is middle right. I've got you on the run!

P.S. Jesus loves you, marshall, prayer or no prayer.

Sylvia

X		O
	X	X
		O

Nov 5

Sylvia, Sylvia, Sylvia.

Must you always lecture me? You are not, thank the Powers That Be,

my mother. So what if the things that change my life aren't the ones that change yours? Am I truly happy? Good question, Sylv. I have my moments. But, let's be truthful. Even YOU, Sylvia, are not in utter bliss every second, with your religion and your perfectly ordered life. Even YOU are not. I got to the end of Franny and Zooey and figured out that Franny was using the Jesus prayer as an excuse, sort of a substitute. Her motivations were wrong, which made her just as bad as the people she condemned. I think you're living in a world of miracles--get real, Sylvia. It's only Planet Earth. Write Soon.

Love, Marsh

x		o
	x	x
o	o	o

HA!

Nov 12

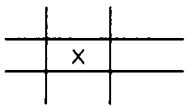
Marshall!

You cheated AGAIN! You took two turns in a row! If you're not going to play by the rules, why did you start playing at all?! I really can't believe you. That's just like you,Marshall. When the heat's turned up, you just vacate the whole kitchen. Sometimes you gotta face the facts, kiddo.

Are you suggesting my motivations are wrong? How do you know? You haven't even tried my way God's way) of living life. You run around trying everything else possible--drugs, sex, zen, Jesus prayers,--but you refuse to do it this way. why? Is it to get back at ME for something? This thing with Cheryl's just another example. You're running around like Pee Wee Hormone, convincing yourself you're happy. One day you'll wake up and see something's missing. Maybe you'll keep asking yourself what it is. You think you have faith in these things you dig up and "try out"?

There was this guy, a stunt man, who was walking a tightrope across the Grand Canyon. Crowds of people gathered, amazed at his ability. He didn't even wobble. Then he asked them if they thought he could do it a second time. "Yes!" they said, for they had seen his ability. So he did it. Then he asked them if they thought he could push a wheelbarrow across the rope. "Yes!" they said. They believed in his ability. So he did. Next, he asked if they thought he could push the wheelbarrow across with a PERSON in it. "Yes!" they said, for he'd proven his prowess again and again. "OK," he said, "Who will volunteer?" Nobody spoke up. It's pretty easy when you don't have to involve yourself. Faith, Marsh, is to VOLUNTEER! And anyone who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist. Love, Sylvia.

P.S. Jesus loves you.



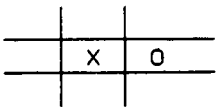
Nov 22

Dear Sylvia,

It's taken a little longer to write back this time because I woke up. Cheryl left. Actually she OD'd on this new drug we found. So she's in re-hab in L.A. I'm sitting there in the living room with my latest poetic masterpiece and she's passed out on the bathroom floor. And so.

Another love lost. But without her and the constant mind games, I'm back to produce manager at the A&P. Your little anecdote was charming. I'll let you know next time I run into a tightrope walker by the Grand Canyon. I'm sure you'll personally want to illustrate the point further by volunteering YOURSELF. How can you have faith in what you haven't seen? How do you know God even exists? Are you just letting youself be convinced because vou want to be? And what's the Big Deal?

So you haven't given up, eh? I got confused again...I didn't know I'd gone twice. Don't you think you can lay off the P.S.? There IS such a thing as overkill.



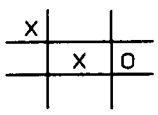
Marshall

Nov 29

Marshall,

How was your Thanksgiving? We all ate at my aunt's house in Long Island. Youmay not believe this, but I really do hope Cheryl's OK. And maybe she WAS good for you, in a round about sort of way. What did you wake up TO, Marshall? You have faith in what you don't see (God) because of the evidence in the world around you. Evidence like a place as incredible as the Grand Canyon in the first place! Evidence like the written records of witnesses of Christ. I'm not LETTING myself be convinced. I just look at the evidence and can't HELP but BE convinced. And the Big Deal is that life can be full of hope and inner peace or it can be pointless--and just end when you die. I'm floored when I think of all God's done for us--from forming us as humans to forgiving us our base natures. That's a VERY big deal, Marshall. Look at all the VERY intelligent people who are also convinced...it's not just me, a lowly grad student. I'm not the one who made all this up just to plague you. Ask yourself where it came from! The P.S. is the most important thing I say in my letters! Leave it OUT?

P.S.



I'm top left.

Love, Sylvia

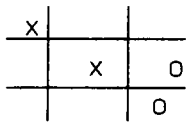
P.P.S. There, it's implied at least.

Dec 6

Sylvia!

You'll appreciate the irony of this. When you left out that broken record of a P.S., well, I was reading along and when I came to the invisible P.S. you left, I supplied the missing words myself. I finally said them to myself instead of you force-feeding them to me. So. What I did was go to the fair. I walked around for 5 hours just thinking about how my life was at an all-time low. I yelled at my superviser, which promptly got me fired. Plus, my girlfriend's in re-hab in another city and I don't even have enough money to get drunk and forget about it. Plus, I thought about what you said--I mean, REALLY thought about it. And I think there IS evidence. I think that YOU, Sylvia, are evidence. A light in my darkness, so to speak. Which made me think that's what God is, too. As far as faith, well, I guess if you know the guy can push a wheelbarrow across, why NOT a person, too? What have you got to lose if you volunteer? And look what you have to gain! But it's not just faith by default. It all makes SENSE somehow. After all my searching, it makes SENSE that I no longer feel something's missing.

So, Sylvia, I found the Lord. He was at the Frisco Fair, specifically at the dunking machine. Get this, Sylvia, I VOLUNTEERED to sit for a guy in the booth, and while I waited, while people took pot shots at the target, I realized that God was the only one who stayed around and who always loves me. Right then, this big jock beaned the target and down I went. Born again. Whatever you want to call it. What do you think of THAT? For the first time, I didn't even have to think about it, I was happy. So chalk one up for you, Sylvia. You and your P.S. finally did it.



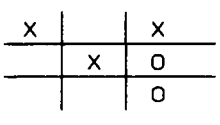
O is bottom right.
Love and praise, Marsh

Dec 12

Marshall,

Are you kidding? Did all that really happen? I hope so because if it did maybe you can finally have the peace of mind I've been trying to tell you about, even when you don't feel like being happy. Just think what it'll be like, Marshall. Heaven is greater and better than anything you could ever imagine. And when life is over, we get to BE there! Isn't that incredible? I'm sending you a Bible in case you don't have one. You can get to know God and his will even better. I've highlighted some parts for you. Maybe you should think about talking to someone about questions you may have--a local priest maybe? I hope you aren't confusing your "finding the Lord" with your realization that I am some sort of light in the darkness for you. "I" am not the goal, here. Just so you know. Faith is like a diet plan. Sometimes you get weak and really crave that piece of cheesecake or wonder why you are even dieting at all. But the more you keep working at it, the more you understand and the more you persevere, the better it gets and the less you're tempted by that dessert tray (doubt, etc.). Maybe that's a weak analogy, but you get the point. I DO think you should talk to someone--there can be a lot of confusion and emotions at first. But take it slow. You can't expect to go straight from the bottle to a prime rib. But I have faith in YOU. Way to go!

Love, Sylvia



My X is top right.

P.S. Now you know how important the P.S. is!

Dec 20

Sylvia,

Life has been a constant high since I last wrote. Don't worry, I'm not naive to think this is how it is all the time. And no, I'm not confusing you, my dear self-important Sylvia, with God. I read the parts you highlighted and I've come to decide that what I said before is still true: people always recommend books instead of having real conversations about real things. I bet Jesus never said, "Well, sir, you just consult Webster's on the meaning of love and tell me later what you found out." I'm truly happy. But I realize more than ever how unhappy YOU must be. Because, Sylvia, with all this incredible love, just think--heaven is four zillion times that! And I love you as a sister, Sylvia--since we share this common ground. It took me awhile to be able to say that, I admit, because Cheryl and Desiree may have been substitutes for you. But it's changed now. So we're just sitting here going through divorces, death, crimes, and puberty when we COULD be experiencing the ultimate. You always said I sold myself short so I'm going to cut to the chase. I hope this will make you think about it. I hope you'll join me and not wait until you're eighty-five. See you there! And Merry Christmas!

x		x
	x	o
o		o

Love,
Marshall

My O is bottom left. The ball's in your court, Sylvia. You'll have to let me know how it turns out.
P.S. Sylvia, Jesus loves you!

Dec 29

Marshall,

What are you talking about? You are hanging on to some cosmic

pendulum and you've swung way out to the other end. Give it some time and you'll be a little more moderate. Earth to Marshall! Snap out of it! You're sounding strange. Faith isn't supposed to be an all or nothing thing--is it? I guess I'M the one who's supposed to answer that. I have my Ph.d. in theology now. But,I'm stuck on what to do with it. Isn't that always the way it is? Looks like I shouldn't be so quick to point out that pendulum. I may be taking a little ride myself. But you don't need to hear this...you just go right on with your studying and questioning and exploring. We'll both come around eventually.

X	X	X
	X	O
O		O

My X is middle top. You left yourself wide open for that one, Marshall. It's all in the strategy, kiddo. You should retrace your steps and see where you made your critical error. Love, Sylvia.

Jan 16

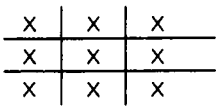
Dear Sylvia,

I have been going through Marshall's mail trying to contact all of his friends. I know Marshall wrote to you often, but I don't remember ever meeting you. He used to talk about you constantly. I'm sorry to tell you that Marshall took his life on Dec 22. If you knew Marshall at all, you knew that he was very unhappy. I'm sorry you have to find out like this, but maybe he'd in a better place where he can be truly happy. You can at least know Marshall got particular joy from your letters. Thank you for being his friend. I found an unmailed letter addressed to you by his front door. Perhaps he meant to mail it. In any case, I've enclosed it.

God Bless,
Cheryl Patterson

Dec 22

Dear Sylvia, Hurry home! Love, Marshall



BLUE LIGHT SPECIAL

I'm not even sure I can remember why we did it, now, so long after the fact. I think that must have been the year they set up the nuke plant on the other side of Kingston. That must have been it. There was something in the air that affected people's judgement. Here I am, thirty-two years old, darning socks on a Friday night. It must have been the nuke plant.

Thomas and I eloped fourteen years ago today. I guess the weather outside reminded me. A storm's been brewing all afternoon, and the night we eloped had been a night just like this one. We had both just graduated from high school, fresh out into the world, you might say. We didn't tell anybody about our plan to run off and get married. We couldn't very well tell our parents because my father is a preacher and Tom's is a lawyer. They would have jerked us apart so fast we'd still be seeing stars.

Of course, back then Tom and I were high school sweethearts. He was tenth in our class and, although we didn't discuss it much, I was fifth. Oh, we'd walk through the halls with our feet never touching the floor and all that sort of thing. Tom was so popular with everyone, always something to say. And handsome, too. He was tall and dark with these gorgeous blue eyes that he used to stare right through me with. When I first met him, his eyes seemed kind of far apart, but after awhile, I didn't notice little things like that about him. I remember he'd breathe kind of loudly sometimes. He'd say," It's because I'm trying to get a sense of space." That always made me dopey and dreamy-eyed because Tom had this way of sounding so deep and intellectual.

In high school I was so surprised someone as handsome and well-liked as Tom could actually like me. I've got this straight brown hair that never seems to do anything but get in my eyes, which are just a plain hazel color. I had my share of boyfriends, I guess, but nothing ever as serious as Tom was. He worked at a hardware store all through school, so not only could he tell you all you wanted to know about 2 X 4's and monkey wrenches, but he also had money. Every weekend we would go out someplace. Tom would always be a gentleman and open all the doors and things like that. We'd go to a restaurant or something and sit across from each other, holding hands like in the old black and white films. We'd make it be romantic and I'd say something like, "Oh, Tom," letting it out in a sigh and gazing into those blue eyes of his. About that time the cheeseburgers would come, and the waitress would look at us kind of funny, but we never cared.

I guess it was almost the natural thing to get married after graduation. Although I never would have imagined a little apartment like this, with him gone most of the time being a salesman and me sitting home Fridays darning socks and sewing on buttons. We had the most wonderful time arguing over what kind of furniture to put in this place, and he bought that awful yellow lamp on the end table at a garage sale when I wasn't looking. He looked so excited to have found such a "bargain" that I just couldn't forbid it to cross our doorstep. It's sat there faithfully for a lot of years now.

I remember he came to pick me up the night we eloped in his old Ford. It was pouring down rain outside. He came to the door, just like always, and my father called him Thomas. He hated that, but he always smiled, just the same. So we ran to the car, after getting my things

from the garage where I'd hidden them. Oh, we had everything planned to a "T." Once we got in the car, we were dripping wet, and Tom turned sideways to look at me with this little smile on his face. He dug in his pocket and took out this little box. Then with a blush on his wet cheeks, he took my hand and said, "Charlene, will you marry me?" really fast, but in the sweetest little voice. So I got all teary and said, "Oh, Tom, of course I will!" So he put this ring on my left hand. It was a real diamond, but so small you could barely see it. I thought it was great anyway. We drove off to Kingston, and I kept thinking how this was so much like the black and white films we used to stay up late to watch. I imagine I was nervous, though I can't remember now just how I felt. After fourteen years, I suppose you forget a lot of things. I don't remember arriving or anything, just this small, pointy-looking man holding a Bible and asking me "Do you?" "Do I what?" was out of my mouth before I realized what was happening, and then my mind did a few flips. I do, I don't, I do, I don't...It was pure chance that it happened to land on "I do" when the time came. Ah, well, you win some, you lose some.

When we left, I didn't really feel any different, any more MARRIED. Maybe somewhere in there I thought I'd feel this giant surge of love or something. As it was, I felt like Tom was taking me home and he'd call me tomorrow, same as always. So I was surprised when we pulled in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn in Kingston. It's beyond my ability to even attempt to describe what happened after that. I remember thinking a string of things something like: Where's the orchestra? Where are the fireworks? and Didn't they just open that nuclear plant on the other side

of Kingston? There was this rental place across the street flashing a big blue neon sign right through our curtains. So Tom, in all his delicacy, called our honeymoon the blue light special. Catchy, isn't it?

What killed me was that when I woke up, you know, after, Tom was watching the Ole Miss-Alabama game, pretty as you please, all stretched out on the floor.

"Tom?" I said, "What are you doing?"

"Just catching the highlights," he said. "You can't NOT watch the Rebels play when you KNOW they're on."

I just went back to bed and waited until half-time. What could I say?

Probably the hardest thing to get used to was waking up next to somebody every morning. There were times, later, when I wondered just who this person was lying here beside me, and just how he happened to get there. Another shocker was finding men's underwear in the laundry. Then there were our parents, who would grudgingly let us visit every now and then, and my father who'd sigh and give us money and wonder aloud where he'd gone wrong. Honestly, they acted like the world had caved in.

My Aunt Martha from Pittsburgh would stalk through the house in her clunky shoes and falling-down nylons and mutter under her breath. Aunt Martha was always the sort of person who had to be in control of every situation. The fact that Tom and I didn't have a Decent Church Wedding was, to Aunt Martha, disgraceful. We must have been Trying to Hide Something. We denied Aunt Martha her only chance to cry at her niece's wedding. Unforgiveable.

Frankly, my parents weren't much better. My mother would constantly

remind me of all she'd done for me to Better My Chances. Wasn't I fifth in my class? Wasn't I planning to go to Swanson's Business College? What about The Future? Why wasn't I preparing myself for The Future? Was this the thanks I gave her, after the nights she sat up nursing me through the chicken pox and flu? Was I going to settle for the First One to Come Along? Didn't I want to Explore the Opportunities? And how could I be sure I Really Loved Him?

My father reluctantly admitted it was better than living together or getting in trouble and <u>having</u> to get married, which he was convinced was practically the only reason people got married anyway. As Paul says, it's better to marry than to burn with passion, and after all, marriage was the proper place for sex. Not that Tom and I hadn't talked about all this. I was the Preacher's Daughter, remember?

Getting married wasn't really that big of a deal, if you ask me. Tom and I had a good time of it. It wasn't so terrible and shocking. Except for the day I found out I couldn't have children because of some deformed ovary or something. <u>That</u> was terrible and shocking. Tom and I made the best of that, though. We called it our built-in birth control and tried to laugh. Tom worked two jobs and I worked one and the earth still revolved around the sun day after day. We'd go to K-Mart and pick up car wax, fabric, maybe a shirt or two, and every once in awhile we'd catch a good blue light special and get a real bargain on a six pack of coke or some film. Sometimes standing in line for the coke, I'd look over at Tom and wonder why I never went to business school. I could be racing around with the jet set in some studio apartment in New York or hob-nobbing with the other suits in the executive washroom of some big company, having my pick of rich and eligible men. Yes, sometimes I'd

wonder that. Sometimes, I still do. But once, while I was doing laundry I turned it around. I mean, what if Tom wonders things like that? I held up a pair of my underwear. It was a pair of those granny kind that go way past your navel. He probably dreams of skinny young things who wear a bra size bigger than 34 A. So in a fit of, I don't know, panic or desperation or something, I ran out to K-Mart and got two packages of the bikini kind, some of them polka-dotted, and, get this, I got there just in time to hear them announce a blue light special in Ladies' Lingerie. Was that fate or what?

I don't know if it helped anything, but that's the sort of thing Cosmo says to do for Your Man. And never let it be said that I don't comply with what works for seventy-eight percent of women surveyed.

Sometimes, you know, it's hard when we have those little suburbia neighborhood parties and all the Young Mothers bring their kids. I really don't know what it is I'd DO with children. They're always underfoot and getting into something, but it seems like, from watching the Young Mothers and Proud Fathers, they would be nice to have anyway. Without them, Tom and I are free to do whatever we want without worrying about babysitters or having to lock the bedroom door. We went to Disney World last month for a week's vacation. Tom is so funny at places like that. He has this thing for tacky souvenirs, so we both had to get Mickey Mouse ears with our names on the back. That was money well spent.

And on the rollercoasters he's the biggest chicken. He has to act really tough and tease all the kids in line, making them scared to get on the rides, but one look at his face when it's over tells you he probably wishes he'd taken his own advice and skipped it. I don't know, I think "It's A Small World" is more our speed. Doesn't sound quite

like the exciting, action-packed life I dream about, does it? But hearing all those little voices singing in different languages, doing their little international dances actually puts a lump in my throat. I probably wasn't cut out for the Big Apple anyway.

And Tom is so cute, he lays his head on my shoulder all the way through the ride. He used to do that at the county fair in high school. He used to say, when we were at the top of the ferris wheel, silly things like he didn't need a ferris wheel to feel on top of the world. He had me for that. Silly, isn't it? I can't believe I still remember stuff like that.

It was probably five years ago that we went out to eat at Eliot's Bar and Grill. We still sat across from each other, except my hands were in my lap and Tom's were around the sports page. I leaned across the table, and for some reason, a thought struck me.

"Thomas," I said, matter-of-factly. And at this he raised his eyebrows. "You know, when I first met you your eyes looked far apart. After awhile, I didn't even notice it. But now..now they look far apart again." The eyebrows rose higher, but that was all.

Just last week I had to wait half an hour in traffic to get to the grocery store. When we finally started moving, I passed the accident that had held us up, and saw them loading a body into the ambulance. Apparently, someone had been killed, on the same road that Tom and I drive every day. Four police cars blocked a lane of traffic, and the cops were directing cars and talking to people who had stopped. The police cars had their flashing lights on, to warn people to slow down. I thought about Tom being in an accident like that. I saw him being

loaded into an ambulance, just a body under a sheet, and people sweeping the glass out of the road. I wondered if I could sweep the glass away that easily. That was that. Another fifteen minutes and you wouldn't have been able to tell there'd been an accident there at all. But if that had been Tom in that ambulance, I would've been left to sweep up the glass and go on. And the more I thought about it, the more upset that accident made me.

Of course, I knew it wasn't Tom, but I don't know what I'd do without him hanging around watching his football games and buying his Mickey Mouse hats. And as I passed the last police car, its lights reflecting in my windshield, I thought, you know, that life is just a series of blue light specials, from the honey moon to the cop cars at the end.

I suppose, all things considered, that I love Tom in a settled and conventional sort of way. And I suppose, all things considered, that he loves me, too. I wonder where we'd be now if we hadn't eloped that night in the spring? I suppose I'd be married to someone else, someone named Edward or Steven or maybe Matthew. I've always liked the name Matthew. Perhaps I'd be out in California somewhere with a great tan and a big swimming pool. Maybe I'd run into Tom at a law firm in L.A. He might even be handling my divorce from Edward or Steven...and I'd say, "Well, Tom Jordan! Fancy seeing you here!" And we'd laugh and talk about that spring night a million years ago, when we'd almost eloped.

Isn't it funny, me sitting here with these Mickey Mouse ears in my lap, underneath all these socks, waiting for Tom to get home from a sales conference? That must be Tom now. I can hear his loud breathing

from here. And I just finished the last pair of socks. Before I can look up, he hands me a rose.

"Happy anniversary, Charlene."

"Thank you, Tom," I say. It's amazing how little he's changed in fourteen years. I kiss him on the cheek and glance out the window. "Looks like you got in just in time. It's really starting to come down out there."

IV.

AN ASIDE

THE INVISIBLE STORY

Once , prince

princess.

marry, but

evil dragon. ?

"No!"

" , my love."

many tears.

land far away, .

, .

! , .

Instead, her. " !"

roaring, gnashing, flaming .

scales . Sir

. , .

princess. , thrusting his sword,

. , !

! last gasp, shattered

armor . roar,

triumphed, eating .

grisly .

died of grief

from her tower.

Moral:

VITA

Bonnie Michelle Priebel was born in Hokkaido, Japan on May 14, 1969. She attended elementary schools in South Carolina and Florida and junior high in Florida before moving to middle Tennessee. She was graduated from Dickson County Senior High in 1986, and after a year of undergraduate study at the University of Florida, she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English at the University of Tennessee in August, 1989. The same month, she entered the graduate program in English at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and began study toward a Master's Degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing. In July of 1990, she attended the Publishing Institute at Denver University. The following December, a Master's Degree was awarded.

The author is a member of Gamma Beta Phi, Gamma Sigma Sigma, Phi Kappa Phi, and the Society of Technical Communications. Ms. Priebel will be employed in technical writing after graduation, but she hopes to enventually enter a career in publishing.