PLASTIC FLOWERS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the School of Humanities
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English degree.

Marc Roper
DIRECTOR OF THESIS

Master's Committee: Marc Roper, Chairman
Judy R. Rogers
Charles J. Pelfrey

June 16, 1980 (DATE)
Plastic Flowers is a creative thesis. It is a collection of poems, plays, and short stories. Each piece is concerned with some aspect of how lives become stereotyped; i.e. how they take on the characteristics of plastic flowers.

Plastic Flowers have no feelings,
are not gentle,
fade,
are often used in unsuitable ways,
do not grow,
have no fragrance,
no matter how clever, are false,
get broken,
and have no sex.

Throughout the collection, our primary concerns are the "plastic flower" lives of women in a small town. The women in each of the pieces were once alive, innocent, delicate, and subtly shaded, but through their experiences
in life have become frozen into a mold of activity, thought, reaction, and being. We encounter women in various relationships with men, other women, with problems that arise in homes, business, society, and the religious aspects of life. We see emotional, physical, and intellectual involvement and how the characters respond for better and for worse.

The characters in the collection run the gamut from anticipating life with hope and assurance to being totally disillusioned by it. We find mothers and daughters in conflicts ancient and modern and become aware that solutions and "stone walls" have changed little over the years. Many of the characters are the victims of learned fears, guilts--taught and self-imposed--of family ties that strangle growth, of society that impedes and stifles. We encounter characters who find fantasy useful in maintaining life and see how many solutions and resolutions to problems come from painful inward and outward struggle. And we are constantly aware of the effect of the biological being of these women, how it is, at once, their hope and their downfall, their means toward survival of one kind or another.

Edna St. Vincent Millay reminds us in her poem "An Ancient Gesture" ([Collected Poems [New York: Harper and Row, 1956], p. 501) "I thought, as I wiped my eyes on
the corner of my apron: Penelope did this, too." It was ever thus. It will always be. The essences of problems and their solutions change little from generation to generation. They maintain a basic undercurrent of sameness no matter how new and different they may appear. It is the lot of each woman to be cast into the mold of her particular time, place, and circumstances (albeit some are more beautiful than others), but all become Plastic Flowers.

Respectfully submitted,
Sydney Annelle McMullen Lowdenback

Accepted by: [Signature], Chairman

[Signature]
For

my Mother and Father

Opal Bassler
Temple Baker
Dr. James McConkey
Iris Elaine McDonald-Riggs
Dr. Charles Pelfrey
Dr. Marc Glasser
Dr. Judy Rogers

who read, believed and encouraged

and for

Cliff

who was patiently there
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Any similarity to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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1980

Frontispiece Woodcut, "Plastic Flowers"
Mari Tru Lowdenback Neely
1980
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frontispiece</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Plastic Flowers&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by Mari Tru Lowdenback Neely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribute</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christmas--1954</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell Our Daughters</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother, I Will Be Me</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Twenty Years</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Bird On Swirls of Blue</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothering</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sacrifice</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow Flower--Blood Flower</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And They Came To A Place</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursdays</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The End Result</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday's Bulletin</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bond</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelve Flowers</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madame Simba</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Step Forward</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Waltz</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic Flowers</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TRIBUTE

It is,
Since time began,
The most powerful act--
The most lovely, unlovely thing of all,
Joining invisible seed
Strong enough to change the balance of the world.
But it is her love that holds us,
Her blood,
Her warmth,
Her willingness to spar with death
That gives us life.
It is her womb,
That pulsing home
Of kings and slaves,
That saves the race
And sanctifies the world.
CHRISTMAS--1954

The invitation said
"Eight o'clock;
We'll celebrate Christmas together."

It snowed that day;
Hard light crystals
That caught on shrubs and trees--
Enough to bring its own enchantment.
And it was cold--
The moon rose, round and full,
As if hired for the night--
An added thoughtful gesture
To give us light.

Our voices caught on frosty air--
Brittle words with misty sheen.
Our dreams were little more
Than new wardrobe and textbooks.
We came in borrowed family cars
Wrapped by youth and heavy coats
With talk of profs and friends,
Greek letters, teams,
New loves, and plans
To change the world--
Our blond hostess
Was the pampered one of us.
She swished about in a sheath, powder blue,
Offering her smile and interest
To our plans, but sharing few, if any, of her own.

We drank unlaced rosy punch
From crystal cups.
A table groaned
With silver trays on lace--
Sumptuous party fare
Trimmed here and there with holly sprigs
And candlelight.

The Christmas tree was real.
It touched the ceiling of that old house
And filled the room with a galaxy of light.
Ornaments caught reflections of a chandelier.
Heavy tinsel shimmered round
In swirls to touch the top.
From there, a star shined down.
And underneath the tree
A shower of silver packages--
One marked for each of us.
It was a warm, textured cloth
Of smiling faces and fantasy--
A gentle time.
We shared a past;
We trembled together
On the spur of that shining moment.
White Christmas played on the phonograph
And it was real!
We were celebrating us--
Sparkling spirits
In wool, cashmere, and hope.
They came late--
Dark and dusky,
Dressed in rich black.
She wore a red rose on her shoulder
And her black hair bounced with light.
They mingled and smiled,
Fading us out a bit
With their smooth sophistication.
They toasted each other
Near the Christmas tree
And lightly kissed.

The light spilled out
Into the frozen night,
On glistening trees,
In diamond flakes.
Lilting laughter, whistled tunes
And wild good nights
Held back the silence.
In gloved hands we carried home
Our silver-wrapped fantasies;
In our minds, two dusky silhouettes
Before a shining Christmas tree.
TELL OUR DAUGHTERS OF A
GROWING TIME
a one-act
play

Characters: Celia--a woman in her late forties. She is tall and somewhat heavy. She is the mother of Gretchen, her youngest child. Celia is divorced and lives alone.

Gretchen--a willowy strawberry blond, in her very early twenties. She is vivacious and gentle. She is a career girl.

The scene is a sunny kitchen in an old Victorian house in a New England village on an autumn morning. Red-checked curtains hang at the windows. A coffee pot and rack of toast, a bowl of butter and a jar of marmalade sit on the red kitchen table. A woman sits with a mug of coffee cradled in her hands. She is wearing a long, pale-blue robe and slippers, little make-up, and her greying, light-brown hair is brushed carelessly back from her face. She seems deep in thought.
A guitar begins to play softly, *Sunshine On My Shoulder.*
A woman's voice reads besmile brigham's poem, **Tell Our Daughters.** The woman at the kitchen table sits very still.

```
each is beautiful
a woman's life
makes it (that awareness)
through her touch
descendants
of strict age
set against vanity

not secure in loneliness

a girl is born

like a little bird opening its wing
she lifts her face
in a down of feathers
```


a rose
   opens its leaves
with such a natural care
that we give words for
petal deep
in the imagination
   a word becomes
   a bitter thing
or a word is
an imagination
tell our daughters they are
fragile as a bird
strong as the rose
deep as a word.

and let them make
their own growing time
big with tenderness

The music fades out. The woman sips her coffee. From
stage left, a young woman enters. She is dressed in
blue jeans and a heavy tweed sweater. She is carrying
an armload of red and yellow autumn leaves. She is
smiling. These are loving women who enjoy life. They
live comfortably in today's world and are reasonably
happy.
Gretchen  Look Mother! Aren't they lovely. I couldn't resist these lovely red oak and yellow maple leaves. The woods by Bailey's pond are glowing! I've never seen anything like it! Do you have a vase--a pitcher--anything to put them in?

Celia  Oh Gretchen! They're lovely! Let's put them in Grandmother's ironstone pitcher. Let's see--I'm not sure--oh here it is. It'll be just the thing to show them off.

Gretchen  I'd forgotten how lovely autumn can be. We get so busy with life sometimes we forget to live. It's like I'm seeing autumn leaves for the first time. Boston is worth the trip to see. It's glorious in the parks and on the Common. You will go back with me for a couple of weeks, won't you?

Celia  Yes, I think I will if you're sure I won't be intruding.

Gretchen  Of course not! Besides, you just have to see Annie's show at Garland's. Her paintings are really good, Mother. She's giving me one after the show--my choice. Can you imagine!
Celia  It's wonderful! She's very young to have an opportunity like a showing at Garland's. She really must be good.

Gretchen  She is! She's very imaginative with color and line. And her portraits are delicate--intuitive. She catches so much in the eyes.

Celia  You and Annie were lucky to find each other.

Gretchen  I know. Of course, I'm not as creative as she is, but I can balance the check book and she can't.

Celia  (Laughs.) That sounds like a fair trade to me.

Gretchen  It is. And she's such good company. We can talk--you know--it's comfortable. We don't always agree, but we're not thin skinned about it.

Celia  You like each other. That's what you mean.

Gretchen  Exactly! She doesn't try to impose herself on me. I was really nervous about moving in with an artist--you know all those weird stories you hear. But Annie's great. (She fumbles in her pocket.) Look at this lovely lichen I found.
Do you suppose I could ever match the color in paint for my bedroom? It's so delicate.

Celia  I'm sure you could. They can do almost anything with paint these days. It is delicate, isn't it. You have this same grayish-blue in your eyes.

Gretchen Really? Let me look closer. You're right! I do, don't I? Great! I'll just go in some paint store and say "I'd like some paint the color of my eyes, please." Can't you see a salesman trying to match paint samples with my eyes! (They laugh.)

Celia  Want some coffee?

Gretchen Please. It smells good. It's really nippy out today.

Celia  It's supposed to get very cold tonight. Winter isn't long away. I'm glad you're enjoying this autumn so much. I've never seen you so alive, Gretchen. Your promotion to assistant to a vice president certainly agrees with you. Do you like Mr. Carver? Is he a pleasant man?

Gretchen He's very pleasant--really a wonderful man.
I love my job. He's a very--very considerate boss.

Celia That's good. I always thought a bank would be a nice place to work. Tell me about Mr. Carver. What's he like--what does he look like?

Gretchen Well, as I said, he's considerate and very good with people. Lots of personality--you know--he's caring and interested. He's tall--beautifully proportioned for a man of his age. He goes to the gym every morning before work. Really tries to keep in shape. He has brown hair--graying--you know--on the sides. And he has a wonderful smile.

Celia Sounds nice. Have you met his wife?

Gretchen Only once. She's a tiny woman--older than him, I think.

Celia Do they have a family?

Gretchen Two boys. One is at Harvard, and the other is at Northwestern.

Celia Whew! Two boys in college at once! Good thing he has a good job.
Gretchen  Hum--I guess, but he's from an old Boston
family--old money; isn't that what you call
it?

Celia  I think so. Is he snobbish?

Gretchen  Oh no! He's a lovely man--very warm and--and
sincere.

Celia  You sounded hesitant on that one.

Gretchen  Well, you know what I mean, Mother. It seems
men will say anything sometimes to get a job
done. I'm not sure that's sincere, except to
themselves--or their business firm.

Celia  Oh yes. I'm very familiar with that. Your
Daddy was like that. So was Grandfather.
It's part of the package.

Gretchen  (Laughs.) Well, other than that--

Celia  You like him a lot. Your eyes light up when
you talk about him. Am I missing something?

Gretchen  You know me too well. I can't keep secrets from
you.

Celia  You never could. It's my job you know--and my
joy.

Gretchen (Smiles.) That's nice. I like that a lot. Yes, I like him—a lot. And there's more.

Celia What's that?

Gretchen You won't like it.

Celia Try me.

Gretchen I'm in love with him, Mother. I have been for over a year.

Celia Does he know?

Gretchen We're lovers.

Celia Gretchen—if he's married--

Gretchen I know, Mother, I know. It's dumb. It's not even an original story. He's married, but says he doesn't love his wife anymore—you know, the whole "soap opera." Annie tells me I'm crazy.

Celia Maybe Annie's right.

Gretchen I know she is. I am crazy. But I really love him—so much I can even forgive his trivial
little stories about how he plans to leave his wife. I know he has no intention of leaving her. He loves her, in spite of himself.

Celia But, does he love you?

Gretchen Yes, I think he does. He needs both of us, his wife and me. We both fill a place in his life.

Celia I'm sure you do. But it's a very bad place for you to be in.

Gretchen Not really, Mother. I went through that line of thinking--you know, the "used" secretary bit. But it isn't like that. We have a lovely relationship. We go out a lot together. It's not all bedrooms and lovely ceilings.

Celia Gretchen, I really don't know what to say. I--

Gretchen I know. I've thought about telling you so many times, but I knew what a spot it would put you in after the way you were brought up and the way you brought us up.

Celia But Gretchen--what if his wife found out? What if you got pregnant? I just don't see much future for you, that's all.
Gretchen: Yes. Looks a bit dim doesn't it? His wife does know. I don't think she thinks it's terrible. But I know she wouldn't let him go even if he asked.

Celia: But a year--do you see other men--it just doesn't seem like enough!

Gretchen: It's enough. I love him, Mother. He's a beautiful person--kind, gentle, a good companion--a friend. I did see other men at first, but they all seemed so "flat" compared to Jason. I just stopped. Be glad for me, Mother. He's quite a find. I never did fit the dating world anyway. You know that.

Celia: I know. And I'm sorry.

Gretchen: Don't be! I haven't missed much--nothing I feel badly about anyway. Didn't you love Daddy that way--I mean, wasn't he enough?

Celia: No, Gretchen. Honestly, no.

Gretchen: Didn't you love him at all, Mother?

Celia: Not really. No. I didn't love him. Todd and I just happened. I liked him well enough at
first—but I didn't love him: Not ever.

Gretchen But Mother, you had to love him a little! You had the four of us.

Celia I'm afraid having you was a very selfish act on my part, Gretchen. I had all of you for me.

Gretchen Oh, Mother! You needed us that much? You really wanted us, that much?

Celia More than anything in the world. And yes—oh, yes, I needed you. I needed your love and needed someone to love. I had so much to give, and Todd and I had given up on loving. We just tried to make the best of a mistake—

Gretchen Mistake? What mistake?

Celia Gretchen—must we?

Gretchen Please Mother—I need to know.

Celia It's really not all that complicated. I had been—been in love and we had had a fight—I went out with your father for spite and—and got pregnant the first time—with Todd, Jr.

Gretchen But the man you loved—didn't you tell him?
Didn't you try to work it out?

Celia Work it out! What was there to work out?
There was nothing to do but get married.

Gretchen But the man you loved--Mother--it's awful to
love someone and have to give them up because
you're "caught." If you were in love with
another man--how come you hadn't become preg-
nant before--before--Mother--I--I don't under-
stand--Mother, was it--

Celia Gretchen, please! Let's leave it alone!

Gretchen Mother--I--I don't know what to say.

Celia Nothing. Let's say nothing. I wouldn't change'
it now. I wouldn't trade the four of you for
the whole world.

Gretchen But you loved someone like I love Jason. I'll
have to give him up too, but I don't want to
give him up without keeping--keeping part of
what we've been to each other. Oh how can I
tell you! How can I make you understand?

Celia Gretchen you're not! You're not pregnant?

Gretchen No, Mother. I'm not. I just want to be.
Celia: Want to be! Gretchen! What do you mean?

Gretchen: I mean, I want to be pregnant. I want to have Jason's baby. I've wanted to tell you this for a long time--I just couldn't find the right time.

Celia: But you said he won't marry you--can't marry you.

Gretchen: He won't Mother. Please listen. I love Jason Carver with all my heart. I've dated enough to know he's special. I can't expect better. And if I can't, I don't want anyone else.

Celia: But Gretchen, you're so young! How do you know?

Gretchen: I know me. I know if I don't marry Jason, I won't marry anyone. I don't want to. I don't want to have children and--and get left for someone else. I want to choose the way my life is going to go--not just have it happen to me.

Celia: Then why get pregnant? Why not end it cleanly and finally without any strings and move to another city. Start over--adopt a child!
Gretchen But Mother--it wouldn't be his child. Wouldn't you rather have had Todd, Jr. by someone you truly--truly loved?

Celia I couldn't.

Gretchen But--I can. I love you, Mother. You've been a good mother. I've enjoyed growing up, even after Daddy left. You taught me to love beautiful things and to--to love myself--what I am. I'm pleased with me. I feel I have a lot to give. I want to share all these wonderful things--share what I am with a child--Jason's child. I don't want to miss that.

Celia Gretchen--Gretchen--I don't know what to say.

Gretchen Jason is a good man, Mother. He's from a good family. I love him and--

Celia But have you thought about the problems? It isn't easy bringing up a child--especially without a father. How will you tell a child "your father couldn't marry me--he was married to someone else?"

Gretchen As honestly and as lovingly as I can. And yes,
I've thought about the problems. I know it won't be easy. But I know it will be worth it. Somehow, I know it!

Celia You'd make a terrific mother, Gretchen.

Gretchen I'll need a lot of help.

Celia It will take a lot of getting use to for me.

Gretchen For both of us--all three of us.

Celia If you really want a baby, Jason Carver sounds like an excellent father.

Gretchen Oh Mother--.

Celia I think we can work it out. You can live here if you want--as long as you want. I'll do everything I can to help.

Gretchen Oh, Mother! I knew you'd understand. And I'd love to live here with you. With you and me together--well, how lucky can one baby get?

Celia Well, at least we can give it love and a place--a place to begin its own "growing time."

The End
MOTHER, I WILL BE ME

a one-act
play

Characters: Elaine--a woman in her late forties, slender and dignified. Her husband is dying of cancer and her only daughter, Stephanie, is home from school for a visit.

Stephanie--a college senior. She is tall and looks like her mother. She has been spoiled by "too much." She can be very cruel.

The scene is an expensively appointed bedroom in a Tudor mansion in a New England town. A woman sits before a dressing table mirror, brushing her long dark hair. She is wearing a simple lace peignoir with a satin gown beneath. She brushes her hair but stops now and then to examine lines about her eyes or just to look at herself carefully.
A voice reads Sharon Mayer Libera's *Mother* while a harp plays **"I Am A Poor Wayfaring Stranger."**

Mother, I may do violence to you:
Extract a group of proverbs from your flow
Of talk, punctuate your letters, renew
Your beauty from yellow photos that show
You happy. Or, again, I may blacken
Your prejudices, even sour your breath,
Describe in detail what did not happen
But in nightmare: myself stranger to death
By the life stalk. I do not mean to bruise
Your sweet breasts with hard words. Forgive the child
In me that to construct its world must use
Prime matter, and on its own wall sees wild shapes. But tonight, when curled on your feet
You read and doze, too real for me, too deep.


Elaine  (There is a knock at the door.)  Come in.

Stephanie  It's just me, Mother.  (Leans in the doorway.)  I just wanted to say good-night.

(Stephanie is wearing a green sweater and slacks which match. Her long hair is braided down her back in one long braid. She wears little make-up, but is naturally beautiful.)

Elaine  Come in a minute, can you.  It's been a long evening.

Stephanie  (Steps inside, but is obviously uncomfortable.)  I know.  How is Dad?

Elaine  Not good.  (She lays down her brush and moves to one of a pair of velvet chairs.)  Come. Sit a minute.

Stephanie  (Moves slowly to the chair and sits tenuously.)  What can we do for Dad?  Isn't there anything?

Elaine  Nothing.  We've done all we can.  Now we just have to let him die peacefully.  I just hope it won't be long for him—or for us. He needs his dignity. Cancer doesn't understand that.
Stephanie (Settles back in her chair.) I just can't believe it. Why did you wait so long to tell me? You've known it for a year!

Elaine It was his choice, Stephanie. He didn't want to worry you while you were at school. There was nothing to do.

Stephanie But maybe there was something.

Elaine No. Nothing. We exhausted every source we could hear of or invent. It was too late from the beginning.

Stephanie (Doubles her foot under her.) Will you miss him?

Elaine Of course I'll miss him. He's a good man. We will all be poorer for his loss.

Stephanie No--I know that--I mean, will you miss him? I guess what I'm trying to ask is: do you love him?

Elaine (Pauses.) Yes, Stephanie. I love him. It's a quiet kind of businesslike love, but I do love him.

Stephanie How did you and Daddy meet? I don't think I've
Elaine: I met him just after graduation. Your grandparents were living in France at the time. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do in the way of a job. I was torn between New York and Atlanta, where Uncle Ben and Aunt Sally lived. I was just getting over--getting over a love affair and suddenly one day there he was. I'd gone out to dinner with friends who introduced us and we danced till dawn. After that we just seemed to always be together.

Stephanie: What kind of job?

Elaine: Something in art. I had my heart set on working for a magazine.

Stephanie: Did you?

Elaine: No. After your father and I were married he needed to travel a lot and he wanted me along. So I painted on my own but didn't try for a job.

Stephanie: Did you sell any paintings?

Elaine: Several. As a matter of fact I did very well
with my paintings till you came along. Then
I became interested in other things.

Stephanie You said something about a love affair? Who
was he? Do you still know him?

Elaine No, I haven't kept in touch. It was a lovely
time but--I'd rather not talk about it, Steph-
anie. Do you mind?

Stephanie I guess not. Someone hurt you. I'm sorry
about that.

Elaine We all have loves we lose. But I was lucky to
find your father. Don't you agree?

Stephanie Sure! I wish he could have met David. But
that is out of the question for several rea-
sons.

Elaine Several reasons?

Stephanie Yes. I don't think Dad is up to it, do you?
I mean a new person and all.

Elaine It might ease his mind to know what kind of
man David is. As a matter of fact, I'd like
to know myself. Tell me about him.
Stephanie (Uneasy.) He's a nice fellow, Mother. I met him at school last year. He was teaching a class in the school of law, and Jeff Michales and he were good friends. Jeff introduced us.

Elaine Have you met his father and mother?

Stephanie His father is dead. His mother came to visit one weekend in the spring. She's a lovely person.

Elaine (Takes up some knitting.) He sounds nice enough. Why haven't you told us about him sooner?

Stephanie (Uneasy.) I don't know. (She walks to the window.) I guess I didn't think it was important. Do the Taylors still live next door?

Elaine Yes. Mrs. Taylor is away about half the year with her son and daughter-in-law, but they keep servants in the house all the time.

Stephanie Their servants have it pretty good then with no one around to tell them what to do. Pretty good deal. I think it's a lovely house. (Moves to a table where there is a decanter of wine and two glasses.) Want a little wine?
Elaine Yes. That might be nice. (Pauses.) Is David's family wealthy?

Stephanie (Bringing the glass of wine.) No. Far from it. But he'd doing very well for himself. He's working as a lawyer for the Rockingham Corporation. And of course, this night class he teaches on campus must help some.

Elaine I'm sure it does. (Pauses.) Have you decided what to do, Stephanie--with you life I mean?

Stephanie Not completely, but I have a better idea than I did. I've really enjoyed the courses in anthropology. Maybe I can do something with that.

Elaine You need to decide.

Stephanie I know, Mother. I will. Just don't push.

Elaine I'm not pushing, dear. I'm just concerned.

Stephanie Lyle Reagan is a curator at a museum in Maine. He loves it. Maybe I could do something like that.

Elaine Perhaps. (Pauses.) Have you talked to David about it? Maybe he could help you decide.
Stephanie  Mother!  I'll decide.  It's my life.  Why do we have to talk about this now.  Isn't it enough that Dad's sick and things are so uncertain?

Elaine  Stephanie, I just want to know that you'll be all right. You need to find a place to be.

Stephanie  I'll be fine, Mother. If the anthropology doesn't work out, I'll go back to school and try something else.

Elaine  You can't go to school all your life.

Stephanie  I know that. I won't--don't worry about it.

Elaine  You don't need to be defensive, Stephanie. I'm on your side, remember?

Stephanie  Yes. Yes. I remember. I just get uptight sometimes.

Elaine  You mentioned there were several reasons your Dad shouldn't meet David. What else, aside from the fact that he's a new person?

Stephanie  Oh, I don't know. (Pauses.) He's just different. I'm not sure Daddy would like him.
Elaine  Different?  How different?

Stephanie  (Pauses.)  He's black, Mother.

Elaine  (She jerks a glance at her daughter and nearly drops her knitting.)  Stephanie!  He can't be!  You're not seeing a black man!

Stephanie  A very nice black man, Mother.  Yes.  I'm seeing a very nice black man.

Elaine  (Obviously shaken.)  Yes.  I'm sure you shouldn't introduce him to Stephen.  You made the right decision.

Stephanie  I know I did.  I've made another decision too, since we're talking decision.  (Gets up and walks about.)  You asked me what I'm going to do with my life.  I'm not going back to school.  I don't need to.  David has asked me to marry him, and I've said yes.  I can stay here and help with Daddy as long as you need me.

Elaine  Stephanie!  You can't!  You mustn't!

Stephanie  Mustn't stay or mustn't marry David?

Elaine  (Flustered.)  Stephanie!  I'm sure David is a lovely man, but do you realize what you'll be
doing to yourself and to him if you marry?
And what if you have children?

Stephanie I'm sure we will have children—several probably. Mother, it's already settled. We'll be married at Christmas time at his mother's home.
(Sits.)

Elaine (Reaches for Stephanie's hand.) Please, darling. Don't do this. It isn't acceptable.

Stephanie (Jerks her hand away.) Acceptable! To whom?
It isn't acceptable to you and your friends, to Daddy and his! Well, it is to me and mine.
They think it's great!

Elaine They won't have to face the problems you will in a mixed marriage. They will only share in the celebration, not the reality.

Stephanie Oh, Mother! This is impossible! It's all settled. I will be me! I will have what I want, and what I want is David!

Elaine (There is a long pause. Elaine looks at Stephanie. She gets up slowly and pours herself more wine.) I can't change your mind, can I?
Stephanie  No.  You can't.

Elaine  Could I change his?

Stephanie  Mother!  You wouldn't!

Elaine  Oh yes.  Yes, I would.  You said he isn't rich.  Maybe a little money--

Stephanie  Mother!  You're putting a price on me!

Elaine  A much higher price than you're putting on yourself.  (She sits down.)  I know you, Stephanie.  You are doing this because it's different--because it will cause a stir.  But what you haven't realized is that the stir will be mostly negative.  You are going to lose and David is going to lose.  We've loosened up a lot in this country in the last few years, but this is still an area that hits people where they live.  You will have a bad time.

Stephanie  Mother, it isn't like that.  My friends--his friends--

Elaine  What about his family?

Stephanie  Well, I don't know.  They aren't too excited about it--but I don't have to live with them.
Elaine That's true. You don't. But what if you did? What if you had to live with them?

Stephanie I won't! It's not even a--a consideration!

Elaine You'd better consider all the facets of this decision. All of them. Your life will never be the same and neither will David's. You should think of him, too.

Stephanie I am thinking of him. He wants to marry me!

Elaine (Takes a drink of the wine.) Do you know that in all this discussion, I haven't heard the word love. You asked me if I love your father. Do you love David?

Stephanie Of course I do! Of course I love David!

Elaine Enough?

Stephanie Mother--what's enough?

Elaine Enough to have his babies, tend his house, be nice to his friends--his family and someday, maybe watch him die as I'm watching your father? And that only scratches the surface.

Stephanie Mother--I love him. (Pauses.) I don't know
if it's enough. I really don't know. But it's all I have to give him.

Elaine (There is a long pause. Elaine finishes her wine.) Then we can only pray it will be enough. And I am glad you aren't going to tell Stephen. It would only hurt him and he has been hurt enough.

Stephanie I know, Mother. I'm sorry about Daddy.

Elaine I'm sure you are. (Pauses.) Stephanie--I cannot say I approve of this marriage. But you are right in one thing. You do have the right to be you. I can't change that--I have no right to try. It's a terrible thing not to be yourself. Women need a sense of self for all the midnights of their lives. You haven't faced any midnights yet--they've all been mornings and a few afternoons--

Stephanie Stop preaching!

Elaine I'm not preaching. I'm just saying midnights are lonely times. They have to be faced alone even if there is a crowd.

Stephanie Are you saying you won't help--you won't be
there?

Elaine    Yes, I'll be there. I'll reach as far as I can. But I too, will be me.

(She reaches for Stephanie's hand. Stephanie slowly reaches out to touch her mother's hand. Lights fade down and the harp plays Poor Wayfaring Stranger.)

The End
AFTER TWENTY YEARS

a one act
play

Characters: Celia--a middle-class woman in her late forties, who left college before graduation, who is divorced, has four children, and is a grandmother.

Elaine--also in her late forties, but who has been successful financially through marriage. She is recently widowed, has one daughter and one grandchild.

The curtain opens on a black stage with only a pin light spot on a small silver vase of tulips. A woman's voice reads Adrienne Rich's poem, AFTER TWENTY YEARS.* A violin plays softly, A TIME FOR US.**


Two women sit at a table by a window. Light breaks unevenly on both of them. Their talk is a striking of sparks which passers-by in the street observe as a glitter in the glass of that window. Two women in the prime of life. Their babies are old enough to have babies. Loneliness has been part of their story for twenty years, the dark edge of the clever tongue, the obscure underside of the imagination. It is snow and thunder in the street. While they speak the lightening flashes purple. It is strange to be so many women, eating and drinking at the same table, those who bathed their children in the same basin who kept their secrets from each other walked the floors of their lives in separate rooms and flow into history now as the woman of their time living in the prime of life as in a city where nothing is forbidden and nothing permanent. ....
After the voice finishes the poem, the light comes up slowly on a beautifully appointed table for two--white cloth, silver, crystal, a bottle of wine in a silver cooler and the vase of tulips on the table. It is a very proper and expensive restaurant.

A woman sits alone, stage right, in a velvet chair, obviously waiting for someone. She is dressed in black--a black turban, completely covering her hair, a black long-sleeved dress and black shoes. Her face is very white and beautifully made-up; she is wearing diamond earrings, a diamond bracelet and a huge diamond on her marriage finger. A grey fox wrap hangs across the back of her chair.

She lights a cigarette, looks about as if for a waiter and finally pours herself a glass of wine.

Elaine (Holding her wine glass in one hand and gesturing annoyance with the other.) Damn Celia anyway! You'd think she would have learned to be on time after twenty years! (She takes a sip of the wine.)

From stage left, a woman enters hurriedly. She is wearing a bright, yet soft yellow and white outfit--picture hat with a white fabric flower and band, a yellow jacket-
dress trimmed in white, white sandal shoes and a white fabric bag. Her skin is bronze and she has no hair showing from beneath her hat. She is beautifully made-up, but wears no jewelry except white earrings and white bangle bracelets.

Celia                Elaine darling! I'm sorry I'm late. (She puts down her bag and the two women embrace stiffly.)

Elaine               Hello Celia. You're looking wonderful.

Celia                So are you, darling. I can't believe it's been over twenty years since we've seen each other. (They sit uneasily in the velvet chairs.)

Elaine               Well over twenty years. I was getting worried about you. I thought maybe my watch was wrong. (She glances at her watch.)

Celia                You were hoping I had changed. (She laughs nervously.) Well, I guess I've only gotten worse. I just can't get any place on time. But today, it was the traffic. I made a real effort.

Elaine               Ok. It's ok! Let's forget it. How are you getting along? How are the kids? Tell me—I want to hear everything.
Celia (Laughing.) Fine, fine and fine! I'm getting along beautifully. The children are all grown and married except Gretchen and--you know I'm a grandmother three, almost four times. Isn't that lovely?

Elaine Lovely. I'm pleased for you. I'm a grandmother too, but only once. Stephanie has a baby boy.

Celia How exciting! Where do they live?

Elaine In Paris. Stephanie's husband is an attorney for Rockingham Corporation. He asked for the Paris office and got it. I went over last year when little David was born. It's wonderful!

Celia Stephanie is lucky. I've only been to Paris once and that was on a trip Todd won. He sold insurance you know. There were lots of us--couples, you know, from all over the country. I really didn't enjoy it much. I was pregnant with Alice at the time.

Elaine That does cut down on one's fun. Alice is your second, right?

Celia Yea! How'd you remember that? She's my scholar. Has an M.A. from Cornell. Speaks
five languages! I'm so pleased she's found the right job at last. She's been in lots of teaching jobs, but is teaching in a small woman's college in Vermont. Happy as a bug! Writing a book, you know.

Elaine No! That's wonderful. Tell me about the others.

Celia Well, Todd, Jr. is the editor of a small town newspaper in Iowa. He and his wife have two children, Mark and Celia Ann. They're expecting a third. Todd, Jr. takes after his daddy I guess. (She laughs.) Diane is married to a doctor and they live in Chicago. She's a nurse. And Gretchen is a bank teller and lives at home.

Elaine Wonderful! They've all done well. (Pauses.) But you said you have three--almost four grandchildren.

Celia Oh, yes. (She seems put off a bit.) Gretchen has a little girl. Her name is Fanny and she's a doll.

Elaine Oh. I see. (There is an awkward pause.) Want some wine? I ordered an imported Chablis and
the lobster salad. Hope that's ok?

Celia Fine. Anything. It's so great seeing you again. I am so sorry about Stephen. What an awful way for us to find each other after so many years.

Elaine Yes, well--Stephen had a bad time dying. I guess it made it easier to say good-bye. He was really ill for two years you know. Really ill.

Celia I'm so sorry. It must have been awful for you.

Elaine (Lights a cigarette.) Yes. Awful. It is hard to watch someone die so slowly and not be able to--to do anything.

Celia My father died that way, but I wasn't there until the very end. Mother was never the same after that. She died too, you know, two years ago.

Elaine No, I didn't. The years change a lot of things, don't they?

Celia Indeed they do. (She pauses.) You know about Brian?
Elaine: No! What about him?

Celia: He was killed in Viet Nam. We don't know much about it.

Elaine: Oh God! How awful. I have always, well always thought of Brian as he was when we were in college--a pest.

Celia: (Laughs.) Yes. He was. Always doing some wild thing. But I miss him, Elaine. Out of all those brothers and sisters--he was my buddy.

Elaine: (Takes Celia's hand across the table.) I know. I'm so sorry. That awful war! All those men lost! I suppose--oh well! Thank God it's over--but I'm so sorry about Brian. I know how close you were.

Celia: (She takes off her jacket.) Hope you don't mind. I've been melting all day.

Elaine: I like your outfit. I don't remember you liking yellow.

Celia: (Embarrassed.) I don't think it's one of my favorite colors. I just--just wanted a change I guess.
Elaine: Looks as if they'll never bring our salad. Want some more wine?

Celia: Please. It's very good.

Elaine: It was one of Stephen's favorites.

Celia: What will you do now? Now that Stephen's gone I mean?

Elaine: I'm not sure. I've been thinking a lot about that. I'm not sure. Suddenly, there isn't any place to go and no one who needs me. It's very frightening—and freeing.

Celia: I can see frightening. That's how I felt—how I'm sure I would feel. Very frightened.

Elaine: Well, I think I'll visit Stephanie for a few weeks—maybe take her for a trip on the continent. Then I'll decide.

Celia: That sounds lovely. Will you take little David with you?

Elaine: Maybe. It will be up to Stephanie. He has a nurse. It might do her good to get away.

Celia: Do you have a picture of him? I'd love to see
(Hesitates.) I never show pictures. I don't want to presume.

Who's presuming? I asked, didn't I. Come on. I want to show you my grandchildren too.

(Hesitates again.) Well, ok. If you want to. I would love to see yours.

Great! Here they are. The baby is Fanny. (They exchange pictures.)

Celia Ann is lovely and so is Fanny. Little Mark--does he look like his daddy?

(She looks intently at the picture in her hand.) He's--he's--

He's black. Yes, Celia. I know. Stephanie married a black man. He's a wonderful man and I--I love him.

Oh, Honey. I just don't know what to say.

It's ok, Celia. She loves him. I've gotten used to the idea. They have a good life in Paris--not the racial hassle they'd have here.
And he (points to the baby's picture) has lots of staying power. He survives very well.

Celia

He's precious. (She pauses and hands the picture back to Elaine.) Well, you have your little David and I have my little Fanny.

Elaine

Tell me.

Celia

Well, it isn't an unusual story. Gretchen was working for a big bank in Boston and had moved to assistant to the first vice president. She loved the job and she fell in love with him. The bastard was twice her age and married, but you know the usual sob story--he was unhappy--he'd ask his wife for a divorce. Anyway, Gretchen came home to talk to me. She said she knew he had no intentions of leaving his wife, but she loved him anyway and if she couldn't have him she didn't want anyone, but she would like to have a baby--his baby. I nearly died! I wasn't brought up--hell, you know how I was brought up. But can you believe it! I told her if she wanted a child, he would be a great father and I'd help her raise it. Can you believe it! Well, anyway, she has Fanny.
Elaine  Does he know?

Celia  No. She quit her job and came home as soon as she found out she was pregnant. We're having a great time raising Fanny. Like I said--she's a doll!

Elaine  What about Todd? What did he have to say about it?

Celia  (The wine is working.) Nothing! Hell! Why should he? He left me ten years ago. I did the tough part of the child rearing alone. He found him another woman and left. I divorced him.

Elaine  Celia! I had no idea! How awful!

Celia  Awful. Yes, I guess. I wouldn't have had my last three children if he'd left when I wanted him to.

Elaine  (There is a look of shock on Elaine's face.) You mean you weren't in love with Todd? You couldn't wait to marry him!

Celia  I was pregnant. Of course I couldn't wait! My dad would have killed me. You know that!
Elaine (Buries her face in her hands.) I didn't know. I just thought--I just thought--

Celia You thought what? You thought I didn't care for you--that I didn't love you anymore. Is that what you thought?

Elaine Yes--yes! That's what I thought; that you didn't love me anymore!

Celia I got pregnant the weekend we were arguing over whether I ought to go back to school or go to work. Remember? Todd took me to Bailey's Cove for dinner and afterward, we went to a cottage that belonged to his cousin. I was so angry at you and you were at me. I thought what the hell--maybe I'm missing something. Well, one shot did it! I was a fool! Oh, God, was I a fool.

Elaine I can't believe this! I can't believe I'm hearing this! I only married Stephen because you left and I was so alone and suddenly he was there and we got married. Celia, do you know what you did? I loved you! Why!

Celia Hell, I don't know! I always needed your bal-
ance. That night I didn't have it and I blew it. I blew my whole life just because I--I was angry at you. I'm sorry.

Elaine Sorry! You're sorry! I nearly died when you left! I tried to kill myself once! And you're sorry!

Celia What can I say? I've been through hell. I heard about your--your attempt. But I was married by then and "out to here."

Elaine I wouldn't have cared if you were "out to here." Why didn't you do for us what you did for Gretchen and Fanny? Why?

Celia I didn't know how. At that point in my life, I didn't know how. I thought what I did was the only thing to do. I'm sorry.

(They sit looking at each other for a time, slowly join hands and suddenly stand and embrace each other.)

Celia Oh, Elaine, I'm so sorry. I really didn't know.

Elaine I know. I'm sure you didn't.

Celia What about now? Is it too late?
Elaine I don't know. I don't know. It's been a long time.

Celia Come home with me. Come meet Gretchen and Fan- ny. Four heads are always better than three. We have a big old barn of a house and there's room, room, room! We have lots of books and rocking chairs and red-checked curtains in the kitchen--just like you liked. Please Elaine! Give it a try. I'm older. I'll be a better risk this time.

Elaine I've changed Celia--so have you, I'm sure. You seem as warm and loving as ever, but--

Celia Of course I've changed! I hope so anyway--but I think I've changed for the better. I've learned what loving is all about. I couldn't have gone on if I hadn't. I had to leave you to learn how much you and I really cared for each other. But it helped me be a good mother and to care enough about me to try to understand me.

Elaine I could have hated you--

Celia I know. But you didn't--you don't.
Elaine No. I don't. I still care for you. Today as I was getting dressed to come here I felt excited—for the first time in years.

Celia I know. So did I.

Elaine What about Gretchen? What would she say?

Celia She'll be happy. She's a lovely, understanding woman.

Elaine What if it doesn't work?

Celia Then we'll know we tried. We will have given us another chance. We'll know what the years have taught us about loving and being. We can go on together or apart to whatever is ahead. (She hugs Elaine. They laugh, gather their things, leave money on the table and exit left, holding hands and talking. The light fades down to the vase of tulips and the violin plays A TIME FOR US as the curtain closes.)

The End
Ginny walked, barefoot, to the kitchen for a glass of water. The thick carpet in the hallway felt woolly and warm on the soles of her feet.

She glanced at the clock on the soffit above the sink: eleven o'clock. Nadine had told her to put the roast in the oven at one. She picked up a timer from the back of the stove and set it for sixty minutes.

"I'll set it one more time after it goes off and then I won't forget the roast." She smiled and did a little twist of pleasure in the middle of the kitchen floor.

She walked slowly back down the hallway, the timer in one hand and a glass of water in the other. As she passed the stairway, she looked up and wondered why her father hadn't gotten up yet. It was unusual for him to sleep so late. But it was Sunday, and he had had a busy week. Back in the studio she set the timer on a bookcase, took a drink of the water, and set it down beside the timer. Then she stood, hands on hips, looking at her morning's work.

"Not bad," she said softly. "This will set ole Harris back on his heels I bet!"
Before her on a paint-spattered easel was a large canvas. On it was a half-finished painting of a white bird in flight on a swirling blue background. The bird was only beginning to take shape, but the blue background spun in spirals and circles and half circles, changing from light to dark and bright to dull, as if there was a subtle movement as the colors mixed.

Ginny took another drink of water and picked up her paint palette. She began to finish the rough outline of the white bird.

"Hello, Ginny," her father said sleepily from the doorway.

She looked up, startled, and then smiled. "Hi, Dad. You sure are a sleepy head today."

"First time I've slept till eleven o'clock since—hell I can't even remember," he answered. He was barefoot too, and the cool wood of the studio floor made him stand first on one foot and then the other as he tried to warm his feet on his pants legs.

"Well, I'm glad you had the chance." She stepped back from the painting and made a wide circle in the air with an extended arm. "How do you like it? Pretty nifty, huh?"

Miles Ingram put on his glasses and sat down in a chair to view his daughter's work. "I say my girl—"
is pretty nifty." He paused, still looking carefully at the painting. "This for Harris' class?"

"Yea. The old guy got really mad at me the other day and said I wasn't 'living up to my potential'. Thought I'd show him!"

Miles laughed. "Oh you did, did you. And you think you have?"

Ginny shot a stern glance at her father. "I think it's pretty good!"

"I'm only teasing you," Miles countered. "I think it's pretty good too."

Ginny stepped back to the easel. "Want me to fix you something to eat?" she said as she started working on the bird again.

"No thanks. I'll make myself some toast and have some juice." He got up and started for the door. "Want some juice?"

"Yea. That would be nice."

"Be back in a few minutes," Miles said over his shoulder as he headed down the hallway.

Ginny concentrated on the white bird and felt a glow of pride in the way it was taking shape. She stepped back several times to view what she had done and decided she would try some palette knife work on the wings and tail. Then ole Harris really would squirm!
In the kitchen, Miles made himself some buttered toast, poured two glasses of juice, and heated some water for instant coffee. He poured the water into a cup and then realized he had forgotten the coffee.

"It's no good that way!" he muttered, pouring the water down the sink.

When he lifted the teakettle he realized there wasn't enough water for a full cup of coffee, so he had to fill the teakettle and wait again for it to heat.

"Damn!" he said as he put some coffee in his cup. He drank a sip of his juice. "Hell, I may as well eat in here. The toast's cold now!"

He sat down at the kitchen table and took a bite of toast. He was pleased to find it wasn't completely cold and it was extra buttery, the way he liked.

Just then, the telephone rang. "Damn!" he said again and reached over his shoulder for the phone. "Hello," he said gruffly.

"Miles?" his wife laughed into the phone. "You just got up. I can tell."

"And how can you tell?"

"You're grumpy," the voice laughed again. "I'm pleased you could sleep. Have you eaten?"

"Just started. How's it with you?" Miles broke off a piece of toast.
"Pretty good. Dad's better, but I think I need to see the doctor when he comes for rounds. That will make me five or after getting home."

"That's ok, honey. I'm glad he's better." Miles took a sip of juice. He felt a twinge of disappointment.

"What's Ginny doing? Still working on her painting?"

Miles gulped the bite of toast. "Yea. She's awfully pleased with it."

"So am I. I think it's really pretty good." There was a short pause. "Oh Miles, don't let Ginny forget the roast. I don't want to come home and have to start dinner from scratch."

"I won't. I'm sure she hasn't forgotten."

"I was just afraid she'd get all involved and not remember." There was another pause. "I've got to go, Miles. I want a sandwich from the cafeteria before I go back upstairs. You take care now--I love you."

"I love you, too," Miles answered. "Wish you'd been here when I woke up."

Nadine caught her breath in mock surprise. "Really! Did I miss something?"

"Yea, you did."

"Well, maybe tomorrow."

"Yeaa," he laughed. "Maybe tonight?"

"See you later," Nadine said quickly. "We'll talk
about tonight, tonight."

"Yeah, yeah--ok."

Miles hung up the phone. Now his toast was cold, but he ate it anyway and slowly finished his juice.

He was thinking about Nadine. He'd seen so little of her lately. He probably shouldn't have said what he had just now, but it was true. He'd wakened, warm and rested. He had wanted to make love and then had realized she wasn't there. She wouldn't have been in bed anyway at eleven o'clock in the morning whether her Dad was ill or not. She was always up early and had half her day's work done by the time the family came downstairs for breakfast.

But sometimes, on days when he didn't have to be at the store early and after Ginny and Sam had gone to school, he'd convince Nadine to come back to bed and they would make love, slowly and happily, Miles feeling the pressure of her small breasts against his chest and her long willowy legs around his body.

He started, as from a dream and looked around the kitchen. He felt caught, as if someone had seen his thoughts. He took a long drink of coffee, picked up Ginny's glass of juice and headed for the studio.

"Who was on the phone, Dad?" Ginny asked without turning around.
"Your mother. She said Grandad is better and not to forget the roast."

Ginny glanced at the timer on the bookcase. "I won't. I've got a system."

"Oh," said Miles. "Here's your juice. What's the system?" He settled back into the rocking chair with the Sunday paper.

"That timer. I'll set it one more time after it goes off the first time, and when it goes off the second time, it'll be time to start the roast!"

"Clever!" Miles laughed. "You're an amazing kid. Just like your old man."

They both giggled a little and then fell silent, he with his paper and she with her painting.

But Miles couldn't seem to keep his mind on his paper. He kept thinking of Nadine, and there was an unsettling need in him that he couldn't throw off. He found himself toying with the idea of calling her asking her to come home now. Maybe she could see the doctor tomorrow when she went to visit her father.

How selfish can I get! He scolded himself mentally.

He turned defensively to the sports section of the newspaper and tried to force himself to think about the Super Bowl. But nothing worked. Finally he put the paper down, took off his glasses, and watched Ginny work on
her painting.

Ginny had turned her easel to catch the most light from the big windows in the studio. The sunlight made the wet oils of the white bird glow. The studio was a pleasant room, and when they could, the four of them gathered there to paint and read, work jigsaw puzzles, or just sit. In winter they had roaring fires in the stone fireplace and roasted chestnuts to eat.

As Miles watched Ginny, who was totally absorbed in her painting, he noticed how she moved her brush delicately, but surely. She knew exactly what she was doing. She was tall and willowy like her mother and was unaware she was curling the toes of her left foot and leaning slightly toward the canvas.

It was the first time Miles had really noticed how much Ginny looked like her mother. The sunlight shown on her shapely long legs, and her cut-off blue jeans hugged her narrow hips. She wore a red, sleeveless shirt. It was tied in a knot between her small breasts and her midriff was bare. Her long, dark hair was caught in a disheveled pile on top of her head.

Miles was enchanted. At sixteen, she was lovely. He could remember Nadine as a bride. Ginny must look the same way; delicate, yet sensuous. She had the same little body and slightly arrogant movements. Her nipples
must be the same size and darkness and the buttocks smooth and tight. He began to feel unsettled again, but now the feeling had an added dimension. He couldn't take his eyes off Ginny! He felt a shiver of horror at what he was feeling.

My God! What's happening to me? I must be crazy! he thought.

He closed his eyes and tried to think of the store, then Nadine, and finally of Sam's football scholarship to State. Nothing worked. All he could see was Ginny.

He stood up and walked to the sliding doors that led to the patio. Maybe a time outdoors would help. He was unlocking the screen when his eyes caught her reflection in the glass. He felt his skin growing warm and his blood rushing through his body. "Oh, God!" he said softly.

"Daddy. Are you going out?"

"Yes, for a little while. The old man needs some sun." He laughed hollowly.

"Come here a sec before you go, will you. I'm thinking some knife work would be good on the wings and tail. What do you think?"

Miles hesitated and then walked back to where Ginny stood by the easel. He stayed a distance away, pretending to critically eye the painting. Instead he was seeing the knot of Ginny's red shirt between her breasts.
His body felt as if it were on fire.

"See, I could start here and sort of create a feather effect," Ginny was explaining, moving her brush over the white bird.

Miles stepped closer. "I see," he said softly. He caught a hint of her fragrance, a mixture of warmth and musk. He felt weak and stupid. "Ginny," he whispered.

Ginny turned just as his hand touched her small breast. There was a moment of nothing. Then her mouth fell open and she looked down at his hand.

"Daddy!" she gasped. "Daddy! What are you doing?"

Miles was struggling with the knot. "Ginny, please, I won't hurt you." He was speaking so softly she could barely hear him. "Ginny," he said again as the knot began to yield.

"Daddy! No!" Ginny dropped her paint brush and held her palette away from her body. She tried to push him away with her free hand. "Daddy! Stop it! Daddy, please!" She flung the paint palette across the room, but it was too late. Her blouse fell open and Miles's hand pushed it aside. His other hand grabbed roughly at her arm.

"Ginny! You're lovely," he whispered. "You look just like your mother."

She was sobbing now, pushing at his hands, his face,
beating his chest. "Daddy, no!" she said over and over again. Her body had recovered enough to fight him, but she wasn't strong enough. She couldn't think. She felt him forcing her down, and her hands flailed out at him. "Daddy, please don't!"

He pinned her body beneath him and she felt his hands moving wildly. "I won't hurt you, Ginny. I promise, I won't hurt you. Just relax baby. Don't scream. Please don't scream. I need you, Ginny. I promise I won't hurt you."

The easel toppled over as Ginny tried to move from beneath him. It caught the canvas as it fell. There was a three cornered split in the white bird in the wide part of it's unfinished wing.

"Daddy, please don't!" Ginny sobbed once more.

Somewhere in the roar of the room, she heard the timer go off marking the end of the first hour.

The End
It was nine o'clock. A cold April rain was falling. Mary wasn't sure whether that would make things easier or more difficult, but at this point it couldn't matter. It was the perfect time. Claude and Susanna had gone to DAA. Mother Beaton was playing bridge. No one was around except Kathleen; and in her five short weeks of life, she was little concerned with anything beyond wet diapers and an empty tummy.

Mary shivered as she struggled into her jeans. They were too tight since the baby, but she wouldn't be in them long. She put on the long-sleeved plaid shirt of Claude's, slipped her feet into her rain boots, and sat down before the dressing table mirror to put on the tight wool ski cap she had found in the attic. She tucked her hair out of sight and pulled the hat as low over her eyes as she comfortably could.

"That should do it," she said aloud. She struggled again with a pea coat she had had in college. "Now for the finishing touch!"

The finishing touch was a '38 caliber Smith and Wesson that had belonged to her father. When she was a young girl, he had taught her to shoot his handguns and
his rifle. The lessons had stuck, and now she was going to put them to use.

She slipped the gun into the right pocket of her pea coat and stuffed some worn leather gloves into the left. She had cleaned the gun and loaded it a week earlier when she had fully decided what she had to do. She had had the gun hidden in a trunk in the attic and had checked on it many times to be sure it had not been disturbed.

At last, Mary turned off the dressing room light and walked into the dim hallway. She had been careful to check all the lights in the house to be sure they were in their usual pattern; there must be nothing different about this evening.

Mary walked to the end of the hall and into the nursery. Kathleen was sleeping soundly under her warm pink blanket. Mary checked to see that she was dry and quickly left the room. As she went into the hallway and started down the back stairs, she felt grateful for their old house with its extra stairs and many exits.

Just then, she heard the first familiar roar. "Right on schedule!" she whispered and hurried down the stairs.

There was another roar and Mary looked through the kitchen window just in time to see the beat up blue car pass slowly down the side street. "Bastard!" she said sullenly.
She took the phone off the hook and went quietly through the back door. For two weeks now she had performed this ritual many times. She had listened over and over again for the blue car to roar into the side street, slow down, occasionally stop, and then roar away only to return a few minutes later to do the same thing again. The timing had varied little from day to day.

Now after her weeks of watching, listening, and planning, she was approaching the moment when she would act on her plan.

Mary walked through the darkness to the garden gate and stood for a moment. She felt her body grow hot with anticipation. Her hands were clammy and her skin felt prickly. What if something went wrong? What if she couldn't do it? What if someone came by?

I can't worry about that now! she thought as she put on the leather gloves and slipped through the gate. Once outside the gate, she hid herself in a clump of bushes and waited.

Tonight she was glad the house across the street was empty. It had been a source of worry to her for several months. She was afraid of empty houses. They invited too many strange people into their vacancy. Mary and Claude had talked often of how the neighborhood had declined in the sixteen years since they were married and
had moved here. The empty house was not helping, but tonight, it was an asset.

A third time the blue car roared by. This time it stopped at the end of the block. Two boys ran out of the darkness and carried on a brief, muffled conversation with the driver, then ran out of sight again.

Bastard! Mary thought again. She decided to wait until his fifth trip. He always made six, but she didn't want to take any chances.

Mary had not known she was capable of hatred as strong as the hatred she felt for the man who drove the blue car. He was not fit to be called a man. He's scum--absolute low-life! she thought. He had corrupted her daughter. As a matter of fact, he had corrupted many young people in the neighborhood with his "Reds" and "Bennies" and "Ludes." Susanna had nearly died the night Kathleen was born from an overdose of "Reds." Mary's realization of the nightmare of having a fifteen year old who took drugs had begun that night.

Claude and Mary had spent hours searching for an answer to "why." They sat, night after night, at the kitchen table with cups of coffee they did not drink, Claude worried and tense; Mary talking, questioning, but reaching only dead ends. At first Susanna was defensive and uncooperative. Then little by little, she had come
around to deciding she could not handle her problem. With the help of a psychologist who was trained in rehabilitating drug abusers, she had joined Drug Abusers Anonymous. Now it was up to Claude and Mary to give her love and support and to pray it would help. Hopefully, Susanna would survive.

The blue car roared by again. Number four, Mary thought. She reached into her pocket and put her hand firmly around the gun. She thought of Susanna's lovely blond beauty and the differences the past few weeks had made in her. And she thought of Todd Holden, Susanna's classmate, who had died from the drugs he had bought from this intruder who came roaring through the neighborhood each evening.

She began to shake. To calm herself, she tried to remember what Claude had said caused a car to roar like that. Was it a straight muffler or no muffler at all? She thought both sounded right and couldn't decide.

She felt herself take a deep breath as she heard the car coming around for its fifth trip. It stopped once on Main Street and then moved into the side street. Mary marveled at the nerve of this man. How had he gotten by—how had he never been caught? Was it because of his brashness that no one suspected him? Or were they afraid—afraid of what he might do?
As the blue car came even with her, it was moving slowly. Mary uttered a boyish "Hey!" The car shuddered to a stop still roaring loudly.

"Yeah?" The voice within the car was not deep, and Mary thought he was not as old as she had imagined.

"Wanna talk. Got a minute?" She spoke quietly.

"Maybe. What about?"

She moved closer to the car. "Gotta friend who says you're sellin. That so?"

"Sellin what?" The answering voice was coarse.

"Come on man! Todd told me you were sellin. I need some Reds man! I need em bad!"

The man inside the car peered into the darkness at his potential new customer. "I don't know you, do I?"

"Naw man. Just moved here. From Pittsfield. I'm dyin man! I'm needin! Todd said your stuff was good."

The windshield wipers of the blue car beat a soft tattoo against the April rain. The driver cleared his throat. "How do I know you ain't the heat?"

"Naw man! I ain't the heat!"

"Let's have a look at you." The man turned to pick up something from the seat beside him. As he did, Mary felt herself react with flawless movements. She pulled the gun from her pocket, aimed at the back of the man's head and fired. He fell in a heap on the seat, and she
walked quickly into the bushes.

She waited with suspended breath for what seemed an eternity. No one came, and there was no movement in the car. It continued to roar as it idled. Finally, she slipped through the garden gate, across the yard and into the back door. She wanted to stop and let her body react to what she had done, but she realized she couldn't. She had to move quickly.

When she was back in the dressing room, she put the damp pea coat, the ski cap, her leather gloves and rain boots into a prepared plastic bag. She twisted a wire around the top of the bag and shoved it into the back of the closet behind some garment bags. Next, she slid out of her jeans and plaid shirt and buried them deep in the clothes hamper. Finally, she put the gun in a shoe box at the bottom of a stack of shoe boxes in the back of a closet of off-season clothes. She would take more permanent steps to put things where they belonged tomorrow when Claude was at work and Susanna was at school. She would not have to hurry then.

She was shaking as she slipped into a gown and warm robe, ran a comb through her strawberry-blond hair, and went to the nursery to check on Kathleen. The baby was still sleeping soundly.

"The phone!" Mary said aloud. She hurried back to
the kitchen and replaced the receiver. A shiver ran over her as she realized she could hear the car still roaring.

The last thing to be checked was the hallway and stairs for mud and wet tracks. There were some and she cleaned them with paper towels which she deposited in the trash compacter in the kitchen.

It was five minutes to ten when she sat down in a wicker rocking chair in the nursery to give Kathleen her bottle. About ten fifteen, she began to hear voices in the side street. She knew she must not look. She sat, trembling a bit, with Kathleen in her arms, rocking and listening.

"Oh God, forgive me! I had to do it!" she prayed silently, over and over again, as she rocked her baby.

At ten thirty, Susanna and Claude arrived home from the DAA meeting. "We stopped at MacDonald's!" Susanna called from the downstairs hall. "And we brought you a treat--a strawberry shake."

"Terrific!" Mary said. "Call Grandmother to see if she got home ok. I have to change Kathleen. Be down in a minute." She spoke to Susanna and Claude over the front stair railing and stood for a minute, listening to them stashing rain gear in the hall closet and then heading for the television.

When Mary came down from tending Kathleen, Susanna
was much more animated about the DAA meeting than she had ever been. Her blue eyes had regained a glimmer of light. But Claude looked weary. His shoulders were stooped and his usual happy smile was absent.

"Was Grandmother ok?" she asked Susanna, as the phone rang.

"Oh gosh! I forgot to call!" and she ran to answer the phone in the kitchen.

"Claude--aren't you feeling well? What's the matter?" Mary questioned as she sat on the edge of a blue, overstuffed chair.

"Yes, I'm ok--just tired I guess. Those meetings really get to me. I sit there and listen to people talk about where they've been with drugs, and I swear I can't believe it! It's like listening to a whole evening of nightmares."

"Would you like me to take her next week?" Mary offered.

"No. No. It isn't that. It's just that I can't believe it. That's all. I guess I'm having as much trouble as Susanna in a different way." He paused and glanced at her. "You've got enough to do. Besides--I started it. I'll see it through."

Mary felt a tightness in her chest as she looked at her husband. He had changed so much in these five weeks.
"Please don't let this evening make it worse!" she prayed silently. "Don't let him find out!"

"Grandmother is fine and she won tonight at bridge--a new teapot! Said she'd see you tomorrow." Susanna walked lightly into the room and sat down on the arm of her mother's chair. "Want your milkshake now?"

"That would be nice. Then I think you'd better head for bed." She patted Susanna's rump. "I'll come up when you're dressed and ready."

"Ok. I have a student council meeting in the morning. I need to be at school twenty minutes early." Susanna spoke as she headed for the refrigerator to get the milkshake.

Mary felt herself stiffen at the change in schedule. She looked at Claude, who was listening, his head leaning against the back of his chair. In his brown eyes Mary saw the same fear she felt. But the psychologist had stressed trust.

Mary was taking tiny sips from the milkshake and waiting for Susanna to call that she was ready for bed when there was a knock at the front door. "Who can that be at this hour?" She looked surprised and started to get up.

"Stay put. I'll get it." Claude pulled himself wearily from his easy chair and went to the front door.
When he opened the door, Sam Cary, the town's policeman, stood brushing raindrops from the shoulders of his blue uniform jacket.

"How you this evenin, Mr. Canby? I know it's late, but I need to talk to you folks a while. Need to ask some questions." Officer Cary appeared tense. "Could I come in a few minutes?"

Claude was surprised by his presence and his question. He stepped quickly back from the door. "Of course! Come in."

Officer Cary took off his cap and walked into the entry hall. Claude noticed, as he looked through the open door, that it had stopped raining.

"Come this way, Sam. Mary's in the family room."

"That's fine." Officer Cary squinted his eyes and pursed his lips. "Sorry to trouble you like this."

"It's no trouble," Claude assured him, as he led the way to the family room.

"Why Sam Cary? What brings you about at this hour? Is something wrong? Nothing's happened--nothing's happened to Mother? We just spoke to her!" Mary was on her feet.

"No, no! No mam! It ain't your mother. No bad news of your family." Officer Cary spoke a bit breathlessly and fingered the brim of his cap.
"Thank God!" She sat down, folding her hands limply in her lap.

"Here. Have a seat, Sam. What's up?" Claude indicated a chair near his own.

"Well, it seems we've had us a shootin in this part of town this evenin--right across the street from you folks."

"A shooting! At the Warren's?" Mary spoke in a shocked voice.

"No, no! Not at the Warren's. On this side street that runs between you and the old Smith place." Sam Cary pointed in what he thought to be the direction of the street. "Did you folks hear anything that sounded like a gun shot between--well, I'd say between nine and ten--some such?"

Claude looked at Mary and she at him, both registering surprise.

"I wasn't here and Mary didn't mention anything like that," Claude said.

"No. I didn't hear anything. I spent most of my time in the kitchen and the nursery while Claude was gone. Looks like I would have heard a shot! Both of those rooms are on that side of the house."

Officer Cary shifted in his chair. "Mind tellin me where you were this evenin, Claude?"
"I don't mind at all. I took Susanna to the DAA meeting at the Christian Church."

"Well, that's fine news! I'm glad she's goin." Sam smiled. "You think it's helpin?"

"Yes, I think so. She's responding very well. Of course she wasn't what they call a 'hard user,' and that's in our favor." Claude's hands rested on the arms of his chair.

"Sure is!" Sam smiled again. "Well, I just needed to check. No offense?" He shifted uneasily again. "I think this guy is the pusher who's been plaguin the neighborhood. Can't tell yet. Can't even tell who he is by lookin. Whoever shot him, shot him at close range in the back of the head and you know what that done. He ain't got no face."

"Oh God!" Mary buried her face in her hands.

"Sorry Mrs. Canby. I shouldn't have been so pictorial about it. Anyhow, it was either somebody who knew a lot about guns or nothin at all. If they was aimin for that kind of result, they had to use a hollow point shell. Even if that wasn't what they wanted, it had to be a hollow point shell."

Claude cleared his throat. "Did you find drugs?"

"Yeah--a few. Some kids found him. I guess they cleaned his car before I got there, but we found quite a
bit of money and some pills on him. And his driver's license. Said his name was Billy Blaker. Stranger around here I'd say. Had a county address. Guess he looked too bad for the kids to take stuff off the body."

Mary was shaking and Claude went over to sit on the arm of her chair. He put his arm about her shoulders. "We ought to be sorry," she sobbed. "But if it's him—the one who sold drugs to Susanna, I'm not! I'm not sorry at all!"

"I can understand your feelin's Mrs. Canby. And it looked like whoever killed him just missed gettin killed themselves. He had a gun in the seat beside him. Looked like he'd turned to pick it up. Either that or a flashlight. He had em both layin beside him, hid under a sweater."

Mary continued to sob and laid her head against Claude's chest. "I'd best go," Sam said as he stood up. "I know this is a bad time for you folks to have somethin like this to happen. How's the new youngin?"

"She's fine. She's five weeks old now. A real beauty." Claude patted his wife's shoulder.

"I'll stop to see her sometime." He shifted from foot to foot and fingered the brim of his cap. "Well, if you hear anything, let me know."
"Absolutely!" Claude said. He didn't get up, but continued to hold Mary. "I--I hope you find out who did it."

"Well between you and me, I doubt it. And just the same, I say he weren't fit to live nohow--anybody that would sell drugs to youngins! I ain't goin try too hard. Figure whoever did it, did the community a service!" Sam stood close to the doorway that led to the hall. Suddenly, he walked back to shake hands with Claude and pat Mary's shoulder. "Don't get up. I'll see myself out. And don't you fret yourself, Mary. You just try to put it out of your mind now--you hear?"

After he was gone, Claude continued to hold Mary and rock her gently. When Susanna called, he reluctantly stood up. "I'll go tonight. I'll tell her the baby needed you. Go up the back stairs." He felt a chill run over his body as he looked at her.

But Mary made no move toward getting up.

"Can you make it?" Claude asked.

Mary lifted her face to look at him. It was tear stained, but Claude was surprised to see the relief written there. "Yes, I can make it," she said calmly. "It's just that I'm so glad--so glad he's dead. Sam was right--he wasn't--he wasn't fit to live." She pressed Claude's hand and turned toward the stairs that led to the nursery.
The End
The dryness of the summer had caused the grass to grow in tight little clumps among the gravels in the yard. The narrow stretch of land sloped roughly to the edge of the lake and then fell away sharply to a sandy beach below. The tall board fence that shielded the yard on two sides was gritty with dust from the wind that swirled through its graveled dryness.

The only buildings on the property were a large grey-shingled house that was touched on either side by the fence, and squarely in front of the house, perched on the edge of the bank, was a small boat house. Close by, on the bank, was a set of five, white concrete steps; and between the boat house and the fence was a large maple tree.

Saffaron loved to play in the shade of the maple tree. She spent hours piling up gravel and rocks from the yard and sand from the beach to make little fortresses for her only doll to live in during the day. At night, she smuggled the doll into her bedroom and put it under the cover of her bed close to her feet so her father would not see it, for her father did not like dolls and would have burned it in the cookstove.

Saffaron's mother had made the doll from old rags and
pieces of cotton once when Saffaron's father had gone hunting. She had warned Saffaron to keep the doll well hidden, for she could never have another one. The child had followed her mother's warning, and she had loved her doll and named it Hannah after her mother.

Besides the doll, Saffaron had a small boat and one oar. Her Uncle Karl had given her the boat and taught her how to handle the oar. She was warned that if she ever took the boat out of sight of the house, she could never use it again.

So within the limits set, Saffaron made herself a world and spent her time singing to her doll, rowing her small boat, and playing on the white concrete steps by the lake.

Saffaron had an older brother whose name was Thor. Sometimes he would take her for a ride in the big boat he and his father and Uncle Karl used for fishing. But this was seldom, and Saffaron thought of these rides across the lake and back again as adventures. She spent much of her time dreaming of the next adventure with Thor.

But in her heart, Saffaron knew the household in which she lived was not a happy one. She often saw tears fall on her mother's mending and heard her mother cry in terror when her father and Uncle Karl were drunk with
wine.

One day, she heard her father swearing at her mother. Saffaron was playing in the yard, but she could hear just the same; and she heard her name used over and over so she crept closer to the house to listen.

"It isn't right for Saffaron to be so happy. She is not a good child and must be made to know sorrow," her father said.

"Lars, she is a good child. She has always been a good child. You do not like her because she is a girl!" her mother cried.

"Shut up, woman! You'll not be insolent with me!" he shouted. "Teach her pain, or I'll do it!"

"Please, Lars. Leave her alone!"

"Do it. Or I will!" was her father's stern reply.

For days, her mother was very silent. Saffaron had no idea what her father meant by teaching her pain, but she felt afraid.

Some days later, Saffaron heard her mother scream inside the house and her father shouting. She listened, but this time she could hear only a voice with no words. Saffaron clutched her doll in fear and ran to her little boat. She rowed and rowed up and down the lake front afraid to go into the house until it was nearly dark and time to go to bed.
The next day, Saffaron's mother looked very pale and ill. She said very little. About noon, Saffaron saw her mother come out of the house with her cutting board and a large butcher knife.

"Saffaron, come here. We have something to do."

"What, Mama? What are we going to do?" Saffaron asked.

"Come along. You'll see," her mother answered.

As Saffaron and her mother walked toward the lake, she turned back to look at the house. In the window stood her father, her Uncle Karl, and her brother, Thor.

"Why aren't they coming too, Mama?" Saffaron asked as she scuffled along, holding her mother's hand.

"We do not need them now," was her mother's reply.

Saffaron and her mother walked to the concrete steps and sat down. Hannah took her daughter's hand and looked at her small plump fingers. She touched the fingernails and the little creases in the joints. At last she said, "Saffaron, I am going to cut off your fingers."

The child drew back her hand in fear. "No, Mama, no! Please don't cut off my fingers. Please don't."

"Child, you must learn pain. You have always been too happy, and your father worries about you. He said you must learn pain. It will be good for you."

"No, Mama, no!"

83
"Yes, Saffaron. I do not want to do this to you, but a great evil will come to both of us if I do not. Can you help me ward off the evil by learning pain?"

"Mama, I do not want you to cut off my fingers! Is there no other way to learn pain?"

"Many ways," Hannah said. "But your father has decided this is best."

After Hannah had talked quietly to the child for a while, she laid the tiny hand on her cutting board. "If you will not cry, Saffaron, I will leave half of your fingers. You will still be able to play with your doll, but it will satisfy your father and ward off the evil."

"I won't cry, Mama."

"Look at the water, Saffaron, and try to think of an adventure with Thor. Please don't cry. Please."

"I won't, Mama."

Saffaron stared hard at the bright water. The sun was making spots on the ripples that fanned out as a breeze touched the lake's surface. Ten times the heavy knife fell on Saffaron's fingers, one after the other, and ten times Hannah heard her child whisper "Mama!"

When the fingers were gone, Saffaron was ill and fainted from her pain. She had not screamed and there were no tears in her eyes.

Lars came from the house and carried the child in-
side. Hannah followed dumbly, her eyes dead with pain for her child.

The days passed and Saffaron's fingers healed to stubs. She cried herself to sleep with the throbbing in her hands, and she did not smile any more. She had learned pain.

Finally, by early fall, Saffaron was able to go outside again, but she found it hard to do anything. Her finger stubs would not reach around the little boat oar so she could not take her little boat out any more. She still played in the gravel sometimes, but it hurt her hands, so she walked and sat sadly in the sand with her doll. Lars had forbidden Thor to take Saffaron out in the fishing boat any more so there were no more adventures. Saffaron felt very lonely and afraid and she was not happy any more. She did not talk and she did not sing.

But Lars was not satisfied. He and Uncle Karl and Thor spent much time drinking wine and talking about the fact that Saffaron had not cried and that they were not sure that she had learned pain since she had not cried.

Again, Saffaron heard her mother screaming, but this time she did not bother to listen. She was sorry that her mother screamed, but she did not want to know why.

Then one cold evening, Hannah led Saffaron to the
kitchen table and helped her climb up onto a chair and then onto the table.

"Lie down, Saffaron," her mother said. "Your father does not believe you have yet learned pain. He and your Uncle Karl and brother, Thor, believe they must send you on to the kingdom before you are so tainted by joy that you will not be accepted there. When you get there you can be happy again, and it will not be necessary for you to learn pain again."

"Will I have my fingers again?" Saffaron asked. "Will I be able to row my boat and to play?"

"Yes, yes, Saffaron! Yes, you will," her mother whispered.

"Then I want to go," was Saffaron's quick reply.

Hannah could only nod, and Saffaron could see that her mother was almost smiling.

"No, Mama! Don't smile!" Saffaron whispered and touched her mother's lips with one of her finger stubs.

Hannah trembled and felt cold.

"It is time," said Lars from the darkness.

Hannah put her hand over Saffaron's eyes and said quietly, "Think of the bright water, child."

Lars and Uncle Karl and brother, Thor came out of the darkness of the big room with a large knife. They each put their hand around the handle, one on top of the
other, and at last, Lars nodded and they drove the knife through Saffaron's heart.

Hannah moved her hand from the child's eyes. She walked away from the table and watched as Lars lifted the limp body of the child and put it into a wooden box that Uncle Karl had made. He hammered a rough lid on top, and he and Uncle Karl carried the box to a deep hole they had dug beside the boat house. They lowered the box into the trench and looked at Thor.

"Fill it!" Lars ordered.

Hannah trembled as she heard the shovels of dirt fall harshly on top of the wooden box. She felt nothing in her body, but her mind ached for her child. Saffaron had been her only joy--her sunshine. Now she had gone to the kingdom, and Hannah was left with nothing but the three men and her harsh life in the grey-shingled house. Under her sweater, she clutched Saffaron's doll, and once from her lips the men heard her whisper, "My babe".

When the trench was filled, Lars turned Saffaron's little boat upside down on top of the fresh dirt. The three men looked at each other with expressions of satisfaction.

Hannah glanced up into their faces before she turned toward the house, and in their faces she saw the shadow of a question when they met her gaze. As she went toward
the house, she smiled.

The End
SNOW FLOWER--BLOOD FLOWER

Who is that standing, white crepe in the snow?
   It is but the moon shining
   It is a winter whirlwind
   It is the lantern's glow.

Who is that weeping frozen tears in the night?
   It is but a snowflake
   It is a falling star
   It is a wheel of ice.

Who is that calling a man's name and a child's?
   It is but the wind in frosty trees
   It is the rail tracks groaning
   It is waiting voices within.

Who is that crying "They did not come again!"
   It is but the roar of the engine
   It is the clatter of freight
   It is the sound of a horse as he patiently waits.

Who is that screaming as the engine moves out?
   It is but steam hissing
   It is but the bell ringing
   It is the crackle of winter air.
Who is that lying, blood red, in the snow?

It is but a wife, deserted--

It is a mother, alone--

It is the ghost of a woman who lived long ago.
AND THEY CAME TO A PLACE

A Readers Theater

for

Three Women

CHARACTERS:  Grandmother--She is in her early eighties. She has reared four children, was widowed when they were half grown, and was the owner-manager of a small town hotel. She is illegitimate.

Kate--She is in her mid-fifties and very stylish. She has a fine home, a husband, one daughter, and a granddaughter.

Evelyn--A young career woman in her early thirties. She is married and has one daughter, Susan. She has become involved with an older man where she works. She has a very good job.

The stage is divided by two screens so that it appears there are three rooms. Against a beige backdrop is seated, center stage, a small, gray-haired woman dressed in pink. She is sitting in an antique rocking chair. Stage left, a beautifully tanned, graying, middle aged woman is
reclining on a white wicker chaise lounge. She is dressed in red shorts and a red and white sports shirt. Stage right, a young woman is seated at a desk, well appointed with the most up-to-date equipment. She is wearing a short-waist dress and fashionable shoes. Around the back of her modern chair hangs a coordinated sweater.

When the curtain opens, the old lady is rocking gently, the middle-aged woman is sitting, rapidly turning the pages of a magazine. The young woman is dialing the phone on her desk.

Meshed spots are dimmed on the two non-speakers to simulate old-fashioned photographs. The two non-speakers sit without movement during the time they are not speaking.

EVELYN--David, this is Evie. Mr. Emmons just called. He wants us to meet him for lunch at Stratton's--12-ish--ok? Great! See you then. Yes. I love you too....(She sits back in her chair, playing with a pencil.)

KATE--Well, I see she's hard at it again! That job is all she thinks about. She never has time for me or her Grandmother or least of all for Susan. When she was Susan's age, I was trailing around paying for piano lessons and dancing lessons, the latest fads and expensive
summer camps. All she can think of to do for Susan is to take her to museums or back-packing up some God-forsaken hollow! She'll live to regret it! A child needs its mother—especially a girl child. It makes a difference in their lives. I made a difference in Evelyn's!

GRANDMOTHER—Listen to her! She made a difference all right! Miss uppity uppity! She did do everything she could think of for Evelyn, but that was the trouble! It was what she thought of—not what Evelyn needed. If she lives to be a thousand, she'll never know that girl. And Evelyn isn't that hard to understand. All she needs is somebody to love her—really love her and to try to understand her. Evelyn and I haven't had any trouble with that—understanding each other I mean. But then I'm not her mother. It's different with mothers and daughters. I guess when you get right down to it, Kate and me had some of the same problems that Kate and Evelyn are having. Wonder if Evelyn will carry it on—to Susan I mean? But Kate—well Miss uppity uppity thinks she's a pillar of society! Society, hump! I've lived in this town all my life and society—well, society just isn't! There isn't a family in this town that doesn't have a skeleton someplace. And of course, I'm Kate's. The funny thing is, she's spent her whole life trying to rise above something
everybody in town knows and don't give a hoot about. I'd say she's wasted her time!

EVELYN--I never thought I'd come to this. What a mess! It just doesn't follow. My whole life has been built on two things—trying to be myself and trying to do the right thing. My mistake! I didn't know myself well enough to not betray myself. That's what I've done! I've betrayed myself! And who knows what the right thing is? The two just do not mesh! You have to do one or the other and now I've made a choice—a selfish choice—but what has it to do with being myself? And how can I know if it's the right thing? I didn't ask to fall in love with David! But I guess I didn't fight it very hard either. And I'm choosing to leave Roger—to break up our home for my own selfish needs. And the whole thing has been a betrayal of myself!

KATE--Evelyn thinks I don't know how she feels about Susan. She never really wanted her. She only had her because—because—I don't really know why! I'm sure she'd say it was to please me—or to please Roger. Well, I guess that was wasted effort. Susan doesn't care a hoot in hell about me. She loves her father—and her grandfather! Just like Evelyn did! All that time I spent! All those things I did, and she loved him best. And what
did he do? He took her for walks and read her books. He always asked her what she wanted to do--as if a child ever knows what they want. And they certainly don't know what's best for them. Oh well, I did the best I could. And now there's poor little Susan! But you know--Susan loves her mother!

GRANDMOTHER--Poor little Susan indeed! Susan's one of the happiest children I know, and Evelyn doesn't neglect her no matter what Miss Know-it-all says! They understand each other--Evelyn and Susan I mean. They love each other. And Susan does care about her Grandmother! The trouble is, she's afraid of her. Kate even scares me sometimes and she's my daughter! I don't understand why she can't relax. She works so hard at trying to look relaxed I figure she'll break one day. Everything has to be just so--this dress and that car, this paperhanger and that hairdresser--she makes a science out of trying to be perfect. She isn't--perfect I mean. Nobody is, thank the good Lord! But she's letting all the really important things pass her by. It's a sin and a shame she's gotten to be so uppity. She was such a loving little girl. All those black curls and bright eyes and she loved to dance. She made up her own dances and her daddy and me--we'd watch and laugh and clap and she'd curtsy
like she'd seen stage folks do in pictures. And then she'd run and hug us both.... It was just like the light went out when she found out about me. Her world fell in and she's spent all the rest of her life trying to build a new one. I liked the first Kate better. She was a really wonderful person.

EVELYN--I can just imagine what they're going to say! They'll never understand--well, Grandmother might, but she's the only one who will even try. Daddy will say 'it's ok Baby' and then go off and cry in private because he's failed--I've failed--well, somebody's failed! And everyone will go around with long faces and there will be webs of silence. I've been through that so many times--like when I dated Bill Stacy--and when I dropped out of college after a month--and on and on. It's an old friend--being treated like I have the plague! But one thing is for sure. I can't go on like this! I dread to get up in the morning! At thirty, I'm a used up old lady! I'm no good to Susan or Roger or my family--or David--and least of all to myself! So I guess it comes down to what I started with--what's the right thing. How can I do what's right for me? I need to straighten out this mess I've made of my life. But how do I begin? I'm not sure I'm brave enough to begin again.
KATE--But there's something going on--something Evelyn isn't telling me. She's always been outspoken--just plain rude sometimes. She got that from her grandmother! But now, she seems so far away--so deep in thought; preoccupied I guess you'd say. She has plenty she ought to be thinking about! Roger never gets enough to eat--she pushes poor little Susan outdoors to play just to get rid of her. I tell you I could never have slept at night if I'd been so selfish as that! And that house--a new house and she doesn't even take the time to finish buying the furniture for it! She said she's waiting for the right thing! Well, it seems to me a few compromises have to be made here and there to accommodate other folks. But at least, this way she doesn't have to entertain. Well, I know that isn't what she's thinking about! It isn't Susan, or Roger or me or her house. It must be that sainted job of hers. But, who knows? I guess I really don't know her very well.

GRANDMOTHER--Isn't it strange how all the traits children have that parents don't like come from their grandmother or grandfather or aunts or uncles--never themselves! Well, I'm proud of Evelyn. It isn't bad to say what you think. What's bad is saying what you think somebody else wants to hear. I've never held with that and I don't
think I've done too bad. I raised four good children—well, three anyway. And Kate's not bad. It just stunted her growth when she found out I am a bastard. But Kate doesn't know what a good child she has in Evelyn! Like I said before—she doesn't understand her. Evelyn doesn't talk much—especially to Kate. She's like Susan; she's afraid. They know what a tongue Kate has and they aren't either one fools. Sometimes, silence is the best way to stay out of trouble with her. It's bad when mothers and daughters can't talk to each other. They need each other so much so many times in so many ways. But somehow it happens again and again. Mothers and daughters lose each other. I lost Kate long ago.

EVELYN—Mother didn't have to make choices like this. She never allowed herself to get close enough to anyone to have to make choices. It's like she and Daddy were born loving each other—growing up together like they did, going to school together—they didn't have to make a choice. It was sort of made for them. But it wasn't like that for me. Roger and I didn't grow up together. He came along when everyone else was getting married. He was convenient. There wasn't any commitment involved. When we got married, it was like I was free for the first time—free to go and do and be. But it was all so empty!
I thought having Susan would help. But it didn't. She's just one more attempt at doing the right thing that didn't work. No--no--that's not true! She's a dear little girl, but--well she's herself--she's not me! Thank God! She's not me! But I have her and I love her and the choices I make include her--the outcome will affect her. It really isn't just me--it isn't just what's right for me after all.

KATE--What do you suppose it could be that's going on with her? I wonder if--oh no, it couldn't be! Not Evelyn! It couldn't be another man! Oh, God--that's a laugh! She was lucky to get Roger--what with that salty tongue of hers and no boobs! No, it couldn't be another man. Like as not she's worried about her job--a new promotion coming up or--God forbid, the job she has being too much for her. But what if it is another man! It just can't be! Not another disgrace! Oh please, not another disgrace! Rising above Mother's past has been a lifetime job! It's so humiliating--so degrading to have a mother who's illegitimate! And now if my daughter is--oh, I just can't bear another humiliation!

GRANDMOTHER--Now isn't that something? I'm her humiliation! I wonder if she knows she's mine. She can't face
up to things—that's her problem. I learned that lesson early enough—you have to face up to things just the way they are. I couldn't help being a bastard. I had to go right on living. And it took lots of spunk sometimes. But there was no way to hide something everybody knew. I was lucky that the McGraw's were nice enough to give me a home after Mama died. And then when Cleve died and left me with four children to raise and that big hotel to run, I just thought I couldn't do it. But I did! I did a pretty good job of it too. But Kate—poor Kate! Why can't she stop worrying about what she can't change and try to enjoy her life—her daughter—her granddaughter? Life is passing her by!

EVELYN—But I am me! And I have made a choice—but what kind of choice? To leave Roger and just wait for David—wait till he wants to leave his wife—oh, God—it all sounds so sordid—so melodramatic! It's tearing me apart! I'm so unhappy with what I've become. I feel so scattered, as if my self is not one person any more. I'm Roger's wife and Susan's Mother—I'm my mother's daughter and a grandchild and an employee and a--a mistress! The unity is gone!

VOICE—I shall gather myself into myself again,

I shall take my scattered selves and make them one.
I shall fuse them into a polished crystal ball
Where I can see the moon and flashing sun.*

EVELYN--What's left? My scattered selves! Where would I begin to try to bring my scattered selves together again? I don't know if I know the real me anymore!

VOICE--I shall sit like a sibyl, hour after hour content,
Watching the future come and the present go--*

EVELYN--Content! I wonder what that feels like. I haven't been content since I got out of high school! My life is going by and I want so much. I want to reach out, but I don't want it to turn out to be sordid--I don't want to have to be ashamed of what I find in my hands and--I want to be me. But what is me? My scattered selves--I wonder what I'd be like if I was all together again?

VOICE--Watching the future come and the present go--
And the little shifting pictures of people rushing
In tiny self-importance to and fro.*

EVELYN--Well, now is the time to begin--before I get so far away from myself I'll never be able to get myself back. I will gather my scattered selves and get on with my life. But where to begin! Well, I'm here! David's closest at hand. I may as well tell him now. I can't go on trying to be something I'm not. I'm not a mistress! I'm not sure what I will find at the end of this beginning, but my life has to be as good as I can make it--for me!

KATE--It's my imagination! I refuse to consider it any further. She's just having trouble adjusting to something in her job or something. It's none of my business and if I ignore it, it'll go away. She'll work it out! I will not be humiliated again. I've worked too hard to be somebody. Besides, she's not my problem anymore--she's married and has a child of her own and a good husband and a good job and a lovely home and--oh God--don't let it be another disgrace--not another disgrace!

GRANDMOTHER--Well, I suppose I can rock now. There is little I can do to change anything at this point in my life. But it hurts me to see my Kate suffer so. She will spend the rest of her life just like she's spent the first--trying to be something she isn't--I'm not sure what. She'll never learn to face up to things. My life
has been hard, but I wouldn't have missed any of it--not one day. And Evelyn is like me--Kate's right in that. She has spunk and she wants to be true to herself. She won't go too far wrong. She has growing to do, but she'll find herself--bye and bye.

EVELYN--(She picks up the phone and dials a number.)
David--this is Evelyn. We need to talk. Your office or mine.

The End
Janet's blue Ford plowed through puddles on the side streets of Beechmont. She had to stop at Hefner Elementary School to allow the yellow-slickered school patrol guide some children across the street. A boy with an umbrella pushed a boy in a red rain coat, and they both went sprawling into the gutter. They got up quickly, looked at each other, laughed at their wetness, and went running toward the school. Janet laughed too, at their camaraderie.

At the end of Oak Street was her mother's house. She turned the car into the drive and ran for the front door.

"I was getting worried." Her mother stood holding the storm door open. "I was afraid you had had an accident."

"I'm only ten minutes late, Mama. It's a bad morning and I had to stop for the kids at the school."

"Just the same, you know how I worry." Her mother was walking toward the kitchen. "Come on in. I'm not quite ready."

Janet took off her raincoat and hung it on the back of a chair.
"Bring me your coat. I'll hang it up for you," her mother called over her shoulder.

"It's ok here. You'll be ready soon won't you?"

"Are you in a rush again? Can't we sit and talk for a while?" Mrs. Thomas fluffed her short white hair with her fingers.

"Yes, Mama, of course we can if your shopping isn't too long. I have a three o'clock appointment with Dr. Sands."

"Oh, I know. You are so busy. You never have time to just spend the day with me. Well, sit down for a minute anyway."

Janet felt a lump in her throat tighten as she pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table. The kitchen was warm and cozy. Janet had grown up in this house and loved it, but it was not much like home anymore. There was an emptiness that overwhelmed her when she came home. Her father's recent death had changed home forever.

"What have you been doing?" Janet asked. "Been crocheting?"

"Just trying to pass the time. It sure gets lonely. You have no idea how lonely." Mrs. Thomas straightened a stack of letters that lay on the table.

"Has Mrs. Burns been to see you this week?"

"Oh yes, she was here on Monday. But it's not like
"Oh yes, she was here on Monday. But it's not like having your family around."

Janet patted her plump little hand. "I know, Mama. I know you get lonely."

"No, you don't know! You don't know a thing about it, miss. It'll be your turn someday and then you'll know!"

There was a heavy silence.

"Had any interesting mail? I heard from Sarah yesterday. David got his driver's license last week. I can't believe he's that old!"

Mrs. Thomas shook her head. "Time does get by. Children grow up so fast. Well, Sarah had better enjoy him while he's home because when he leaves, it'll be all over. He'll forget he had a mother!"

"Chuckie's going to play little league this year," Janet continued.

"That's nice. Sarah's done a good job with her children. Certainly nice that David has learned to drive. He'll be a big help to Sarah. I know how much I wish I could drive. It would help so much to just be able to drive to the grocery." Mrs. Thomas moved the stack of letters again.

"Did you get an invitation to Eileen's baby shower? It's next Friday, I think."
"I got one, but I don't suppose I'll try to go."
Mrs. Thomas took off her glasses, held them up to the light and polished them on the tail of her sweater.
"Why not?" Janet said with surprise. "I thought you liked Eileen?"
"Of course, I like her, but how would I get there? I'm sure you haven't got time to go." She continued to clean her glasses and then put them on again.
"No, I can't. Tom wants to see his mother that evening. We haven't seen her for a month. Thought we'd drive down and come back on Saturday."
"That's nice. Wish you'd come here and stay all night sometimes. The house is surely big and empty without your Dad." She paused and toyed with a pencil on the kitchen table. "How is Tom anyway? Haven't seen him since your birthday."
"He's fine. He's working too hard, but he loves owning his own business, so I guess that's ok. He sent his love. We'll be over for dinner some evening soon." Janet smiled.
"No you won't. You're too busy with your work and your friends to bother with coming to visit with me."
"Mama--oh Mama, I wish I could come more often, but I just can't. It's a real struggle with only one car and only Thursdays and week-ends off."
"Oh I know! You're full of all kinds of excuses." Mrs. Thomas made a clicking sound with her tongue.
"Well, someday, you won't have to worry about it. Some­day I won't be here to come visit."

"Mama, please don't say that." Janet patted her mother's hand again. "I love you. I try to come, to take you when I can. I have a job, a husband--sometimes I just can't do any more. Please try to understand. You have only you to think about. Please understand, Mama!"

"Huh! The truth hurts doesn't it!" She drummed the table with the pencil. Then changing the subject abrupt­ly she said, "I had a letter from Sally. She is taking two weeks off and she and Dan are taking Aunt Annie to the mountains."

Janet shrugged her shoulders and moved her hand away from her mothers. "How nice. When are they leaving?"

"Sure is nice for your Aunt Annie to have somebody to take her. They're going next week sometime. Wish we could take a trip somewhere. But you don't like to travel so we stay home." Mrs. Thomas got up and walked to the kitchen window, looked out as if searching for some­one, and then returned to the table.

"Where are they staying? Did she say?" Janet asked.

"No, but they'll show her a good time. They are mighty good to their mother!"
The telephone jingled and Mrs. Thomas went to the other side of the kitchen to answer it.

"Hello? Oh, it's you! How are you?" She put her hand over the mouth piece. "It's Mrs. Smith. Pour yourself some coffee."

Janet shrugged again and looked at her watch. It was quarter to ten.

"Just sit down now. You're not in that big a hurry!" Mrs. Thomas said and turned back to the phone. "I know, Addie. It's just awful! That church committee isn't doing any good at all--."

There was a knock at the front door, and Janet went to answer it. It was the paper boy, Andy Jenkins, from down the street. Janet had gone to school with his mother, Anita.

"Hi, Andy! How you doin'?"

"Ok, I guess. Collectin'."

"Just a minute. How's your mother?"

"She's ok. It's four dollars."

Janet got the money from a bowl on the sideboard where her mother always kept money to pay the paper boy and the garbage man.

"Here you go! How did you get out of school today?"

"Had to stay home to help mom. She said I could collect two blocks." The boy shuffled uneasily.
"Is your mother ill?" Janet asked, passing the four one-dollar bills through the doorway.

"Naw. Grannie's comin' and she's cleanin' everything. Buddy gets in the way, and he ain't feelin' good, so she kept me home."

"Oh, I see. Well, tell your mother hi for me."

"Yeah. Thanks!" and he was gone with a flurry into the rain.

"Well, where did you go now?" Mrs. Thomas was calling from the kitchen. "You always disappear into thin air."

"I'm right here, Mama. I was paying the paper boy."

"Paper boy! This time of day on a school day? How come he isn't in school?" Mrs. Thomas looked through the curtains at the living room window to see if she could see the boy. He was on the porch of the house next door.

"He said his mother needed him. You know how Anita is. Her mother is coming for a visit and she's cleaning. I guess she needed Andy to watch the baby." Janet locked the front door.

"Well, if that isn't something! It isn't good for that little boy to be out of school and if he's supposed to be helping, why isn't he home? What's he doing out collecting his paper route?"

"I think he's only doing a couple of blocks. Maybe
Buddy is taking a nap," Janet offered.

"He ought to be in school any way." Mrs. Thomas walked back to the kitchen. "Well, I guess we'd better go. I know your time's so limited."

"Do you have a list, Mama? Maybe we could save some driving time if I knew where you needed to go?"

"Oh yes! Anything to hurry it up and get rid of your mother!" She picked up a notebook from the kitchen table. "I need to go to the drugstore. I'm clear out of medicine. And I need to go to the grocery. And I'd like to go to the fabric shop. I need some material for a new dress."

"Ok. Let's do the drugstore and the grocery first. Then we can use the rest of the time at the fabric shop. Do you want to eat at Snyder's?" Janet picked up her handbag and turned out the kitchen light.

"Snyder's is ok. But now I don't want to do any of this if we have to hurry. You know what it does to me to hurry."

They walked to the living room and put on their raincoats.

"Ready?" Janet's hand shook a little as she turned the front doorknob.

"I suppose. We're always in such a rush I am sure
I'll forget something."

"Well, let's see." Janet let the door close halfway. "Do you have your list of groceries and your prescriptions?"

"Yes. I've got those. I guess I have everything."

They hurried down the front steps and went quickly down the walk to the car. The motor turned over easily and the windshield wipers began a rhythmic flapping sound against the rain. As Janet pulled the car out of the driveway, her mother gave a big sigh.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"Nothing's wrong. Just drive the car. I forgot my shopping bag. That's all."

"Do you want me to go back after it? It'll only take a minute."

"No! No! We've wasted enough time already. Let's get going."

The drive to the shopping center was slow and Janet nearly hit a green Datsun simply because she didn't see it.

"That was close," her mother remarked. "Better be careful. It just takes one time, you know."

At the drugstore, they browsed in cards and magazines while they waited for Mrs. Thomas's prescriptions. It was ten forty-five when they left the drugstore. As
they passed a book store, her mother stopped.

"Let's go in here a minute. I'd like to look for a book for Uncle Buddy's birthday."

They drifted apart as Janet went to look at Gothic novels and her mother went to the gardening section. Suddenly, her mother called out across the store. "Janet, come here! I can't decide this alone. Why do you always disappear and leave me on my own. If only I had someone who was interested in what I want to do."

She paused. "Do you like this do-it-yourself or this question and answer book about gardening?"

Janet looked over the two books but was keenly aware of a clerk who was watching and listening to her mother.

"The question and answer book, I think, Mama. Uncle Buddy isn't doing as much 'building things' as he used to. I think he'd enjoy this one."

Janet looked at the clerk. She smiled and nodded at Janet.

"Oh, he does too build things! You think he's too old to do things. He's just like your Dad--always doing something about the place."

Janet felt herself blush and the lump in her throat tightened. "Well, I guess you're right. Which ever one you want." She shot a glance at the clerk again, but she
had disappeared behind a display of new paperbacks.

"I knew it would be up to me. Well, let's get this one on building and get out of here. I know you're wanting to go."

Janet followed her mother down the aisle to the cash register.

"Do you mail gifts?" her mother was asking.

"Yes, we do," the sales clerk answered as she completed a sale to another customer. "There is a fee for mailing, though."

"Oh, I'm sure of that! Well, I'd like this wrapped and mailed. Do you have an enclosure card?"

"Right, here," the clerk pointed to a rack of small cards. "They're free. Take any one you want. And will you fill out this paper with the name and address you want your gift mailed to and your name and address."

"Oh dear! I don't have the address with me. What'll I do about that?" She looked at Janet, but the salesgirl answered quickly. "You can call me. Just fill out what you can and phone me the rest of the information."

From the book store, they went to Anderson's Grocery and bought her mother's weekly supply of groceries.

"These prices! I can't believe it." Her mother stopped and looked at her list. "Get me some sugar, Janet and I need some paper towels. Get them too."
Janet got the sugar and put it in the shopping cart.
"Where are the towels? I told you to get towels!"
"We haven't come to them yet, Mama. We'll get them when we get there."

The check out clerk was new, and her mother was slow about finding her money. "Are you sure about that amount?" she asked the clerk. "It seems awfully high."

"I'm sure. If you think it's wrong, we'll do it over." The girl looked embarrassed.

"Oh no! I'm sure it's not too much. It just seems that way."

With the groceries safely stowed in the car, they went to Snyder's for lunch.
"Do you want a booth or a table, Mama?"
"Whatever you want. You decide."
"I like a booth best. There's one in the corner. Ok?"

"Of course. Go on! We're holding things up here."

After hanging up coats and stashing umbrellas, they studied the menu. Janet ordered a chef's salad and her mother, barbecued ribs.

"I hope the service isn't too slow." Mrs. Thomas was saying. "I want to stop at Mr. Sweeney's and get my shoe fixed."

"Mama, if we do that, we won't have time to go to
the fabric shop. Can't you leave the shoe to pick up another day?"

"No! I can't! I just never know when I'll get out again. I feel I have to do so many things in such a rush."

"We can leave the shoe next week," Janet said.

"Next week! You probably won't even be over next week."

"I come over 'every week, Mama."

Mrs. Thomas studied her notebook list. "Well, I'll get Eileen to take me one day. She never hurries. It's a real pleasure to go places with her."

"That's good. I think that's a good idea."

Their food came. It looked good and Janet felt hungry, but she wondered how she would swallow around the lump in her throat.

"I like the looks of your salad," her mother said. "I wish I'd got that."

"Your ribs look good too." Janet looked over her mother's plate.

"Janet, I wish you'd take me to see Mrs. Davis on Saturday. She's not well and I need to go see her."

"I'd love to, Mama, but we're going to see Tom's mother on Friday and Saturday. Remember?"

"Oh, of course. You always have things to keep you
from doing things with me. Well, when do you think you can find time to take me? And I do hope you'll do something with your hair before we go. It looks a mess. Mrs. Davis's daughter always looks so nice."

It seemed like the last straw. Janet's appetite faded and her eyes filled with tears. She couldn't believe this was her mother! Who was this lady anyway--this lady who knew how to do nothing but complain? The tears faded like her appetite and anger welled up inside. Janet put down her fork and looked at her mother.

"Mother, stop it!"

"Stop what? I'm just telling you the truth!"

"Well, I don't want to hear it. You've done nothing but quarrel and find fault since I walked in the front door and I've had enough!"

"You're going to hear more! I can't help it if you got up in a bad humor! It's not my fault!" Mrs. Thomas fumbled with her roll and her knife.

"Mother, I was not in a bad humor!"

"Of course you were. You always are when you come home. But you're not that way with your friends!"

"I was not in a bad humor and I was looking forward to coming home," she lied. "But I don't look forward to being told that everything I do is wrong!" Janet felt herself trembling.
"You just don't love me anymore." Mrs. Thomas started to cry.

"Mother, stop it. Eat your lunch."

"I don't want my lunch."

Janet sat for a minute trying to think what to do. Finally, in desperation, she motioned for the check, gave the waitress the correct change, and put on her coat. "Come on, Mama. Let's go home."

"But I want to go to the fabric shop."

"Not today. Another time."

They rode home in silence. Janet carried in the groceries and checked the house to be sure everything was ok. Finally, she stood by the kitchen sink and looked at her mother who sat crying at the kitchen table.

"Mother, why do we have to fight like this? I just don't understand why we can't get along. I really try to please you, to think of things to tell you, but it's always the same--I feel like I'm a bad little girl--like you don't like me anymore."

Mrs. Thomas blew her nose on a tissue. "Oh I know. It's all my fault."

"I didn't say it was your fault." Janet leaned toward her mother. "I'm just not sure what I'm--what we're doing wrong."

There was a long silence. "You had better go."
You'll be late for your appointment. When will you call me? Mrs. Thomas asked in a tearful voice.

"Tomorrow, Mama. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Be careful going to the dentist. You're all I've got and I love my little girl."

"I'll be careful," Janet said and kissed her mother's cheek. "I'll see you next Thursday."

It was still raining as Janet backed out of the driveway and started for Dr. Sand's office. Two blocks away from her mother's house, she pulled into McCory's parking lot and wept.

The End
THE END RESULT
a short story

"Saturdays! I hate Saturdays!" Tom grumbled as he buttered his second piece of toast. "So damn much to do! Did you call the plumber, Bea? Means forty or fifty dollars! God, how I hate that! Really resent plumbers making more than I do. My education and--we need to call Mr. Forbes, too, about Teddy signing up for baseball." There was a pause. "Bea! Are you listening?"

Bea was making designs in the tablecloth with her fingernail.

"Bea! Bea--listen to me! Saturdays are busy for both of us. Now, back to Teddy. You can stop by Henson's on your way to the grocery and pick him up a cup. He'll have to have it before they'll sign him for baseball. Susie wants to play too, but I'd rather she wouldn't. Talk to her Bea. She'll listen to you."

The back storm door banged and Bea rasied her eyes to see Larry and Laura standing in the laundry room, their shoes caked with mud.

"Bea, just look at that! Where in the hell have you kids been? Bea, help them clean up. They'll track the house. Don't want a mess for tonight. Oh yes, I forgot to tell you, I ran into Peter French downtown the
other day. Asked him and Judy for supper tonight. No-
thing fancy--just a quiche or something like that."

Bea looked at her husband with tired eyes as she
pulled herself up from the kitchen chair to attend to
the twins. She felt a wave of nausea.

"We found a mud hole, Mommie! It squishes and feels
good." Laura was explaining as her Mother knelt down to
remove the muddy shoes and socks.

"It's down by Mr. Patty's, Mommie," Larry added.

"What were you doing down there!" Tom roared.
"You're not to go off the street! Bea, don't you have any
control of these children?" Tom walked to the counter
to pour another cup of coffee. "I can't be here all the
time to see that things go right!"

"Mommie, we went with Jerry," Larry piped.

"He took us and brought us back," Laura added as she
stood balanced on one foot.

"It's ok," Bea said gently. "Go put on some clean
socks and play in your room for a while. We'll go to
the grocery in a little bit."

The twins delivered sloppy kisses and ran, screaming,
up the stairs.

Tom slammed his cup down on the counter. "You see
how you undermine my authority. I never say anything to
the kids that you back up. You're always on their side!"
"It's ok, Tom. They play at Mr. Patty's a lot. He loves kids and he looks after them. It's a help to know where they are and that they're being looked after," Bea explained, as she started to run water in the sink to do the breakfast dishes.

"That's not the point. You're the one responsible for them—not Mr. Patty. And when I suggest they shouldn't go off the street, I'd think you'd consider my wishes."

Steam rose from the dishwater. Bea began to wash the glasses slowly and rinse them under the hot water faucet.

"Don't you have a pan to rinse those in? You're using an awful lot of hot water."

Jerry jolted into the kitchen with a kite in his hand. "Goin' to the park, Mom. Me and T.J. are goin' fly kites a while."

"Have a good time, dear." Bea smiled at Jerry over her shoulder. "If you see Mrs. Bascom, say hello for me."

"Yea, ok." Jerry opened the refrigerator and grabbed an apple. "See ya at lunchtime," Jerry said as he shined the apple on his sweatshirt. "Hi, Dad!" The back storm door slammed. "Bye!" Jerry yelled.

Bea watched him run across the yard, amazed at how
much he had grown.

"Why didn't he ask, Bea? Do they always just tell you what they're going to do? I could never have gotten away with that when I was growing up. And it was Dad we asked. Not Mother."

The last plate clanked into the drainer and Bea began to wipe off the cookstove and countertops. "I'm sorry you asked Peter and his wife for dinner tonight," Bea said slowly. "The children need to know you're available some of the time."

"It's not dinner, it's supper and they can manage one Saturday night without me."

Bea looked at Tom over her shoulder. "They have things planned tonight, Tom. Jerry's going skating, Larry and Laura are invited to Beth Anderson's for cookies and ice cream. Susie is having a friend spend the night. Teddy is too. Bobby wants to go to your mothers for the night, and Andy is teething."

"Well, they're all taken care of then. And what about us? Aren't we supposed to have any friends? Are we supposed to put our life on hold till the kids grow up? We need to have some social life, too!" Tom put his cup into the dishwater. "I'll help."

Andy began to cry from the upstairs. Bea picked up a piece of dry toast from her napkin and started toward
the stairs.

"You feedin' Andy leftover toast? You've even taken a bite of it! Can't we afford a fresh piece?"

Bea broke off the corner where she had taken the bite and threw it at the sink. "He'll like this one fine," she said as the screams from Andy increased.

Tom stood watching her and shaking his head. The piece of toast she had thrown at the sink had landed at his feet. He kicked the toast into the corner under the counter and walked to the back door.

It was a bright April day. The sky was blue and full of clouds. Mrs. Johnson's dogwood tree was beginning to blossom and her daffodils were a riot of yellow across her yard. A cool breeze rustled the trees.

Banner, the children's dog, came bounding across the yard to the back door and stood wagging his tail at Tom. His yellow coat glistened in the sunlight.

"Hello, Banner." Tom scratched on the storm door. "Hungry?"

Banner wagged his tail harder and the phone began to ring. "Don't forget to feed the dog, Bea," Tom yelled as he picked up the phone.

"Hello--Oh, hi Sam--Golf--Gee I don't know--Lots to do around home--Twin Lakes--Jarvis is coming--Good contact--Well, in a case like that I can come--Meet you at
Barney's--Little early for a beer--Ok--Ok--See you in an hour."

Bea came back downstairs from quieting Andy. She had a load of dirty clothes in her arms.

"That was Sam, Bea. Wants me to golf with him today so I can meet Jarvis. He's a good man to know. We'll only play nine holes. That will put me home in plenty of time for a shower and shave before Peter and Judy get here."

Bea dropped the pile of clothes on the laundry room floor and flipped the switch to fill the washer. The nausea passed, fleetingly, again.

"Where's my blue shirt?" Tom asked as he started upstairs.

"In the wash. You wore it day before yesterday."

"You don't have it washed yet?" Tom yelled. "What the hell will I wear. That's my best looking golf shirt." He turned on the stair landing. "Don't you have a basket to put those in? Looks bad to have dirty clothes all over the floor." He disappeared around the corner. "What pants do I have clean?"

"The navy blue and brown ones," Bea answered as she poured some soap powder into a measuring cup and then into the steaming wash water.

"My golf shoes up here?" Tom asked from their bed-
room. "Can't find anything in this house!"

"They're here in the laundry room by the back door," Bea said and added some bleach to her wash water.

"Mommie, I'm hungry." Susie appeared at the back door. "Can I have an apple?"

"Of course, dear. Help yourself."

"My feet are muddy," Susie whined.

Bea walked to the refrigerator and took out an apple, ran some cold water over it, and dried it with a paper towel. She handed it through the back door to the waiting Susie.

"Thanks, Mommie," Susie yelled as she scampered across the lawn.

Bea turned and loaded the washing machine. She took up a broom and quickly swept the kitchen and laundry room. Then she emptied the dishdrainer and took out the trash.

Banner was still waiting in the sun for his breakfast. "Hi Banner! Hungry?" Bea patted his head. She put the trash can back in its place and poured some dry dog food into a dish for Banner. "Here ya go, Banner. Oh, I've got a treat for you. I almost forgot. Don't go 'way!"

She turned to the refrigerator and pulled out two pieces of cooked beef.

"Here, Banner! Have a nice day!" Bea smiled as the
dog looked at her appreciatively.

"Giving that dog good beef. I swear, Bea, you must think money grows on trees." Tom was back in his navy pants, a red shirt and red sweater. He was in his stocking feet, golf shoes in hand.

"It was old. Nobody wanted it," Bea defended. Her nausea came in a brief wave again.

"I have to meet Sam in half an hour. Look ok? Where are my loafers? Don't forget Teddy's cup, and I need deodorant when you go to the grocery." Tom sat down on the stairs to slip into his loafers after Bea pointed them out on the second stair step.

"I was hoping you could watch the children while I went to the grocery," Bea said softly. "I hate to wake Andy."

"Hell, Bea! I can't spend the day looking after the kids! Takem' with you! It won't hurt Andy. Might do you all good to get out a while. Besides, this meeting with Jarvis is important!"

Bea put a piece of hard candy in her mouth and turned toward the living room.

Tom looked at the dish of hard candy and then at Bea. "Why do you keep this stuff sittin' around? Don't you know its bad for the kids' teeth and look at your hips!"
"Gotta go," Tom said, jangling his car keys. "See ya." He kissed Bea's lips and ran his hand over her bottom. "Think we could have a little party late tonight?" He winked at her as he slammed the front door.

The motor of his MG roared as he backed out of the drive. Bea watched him go and then silently straightened the living room.

"Mommie, I hurt my hand!" Susie screamed from the back door.

Bea walked to the door and looked at Susie's hand. An ugly red gash spread along the top of her hand and across the back of her wrist.

"What happened?" Bea asked as she pulled the child inside. "Slide off your shoes."

"A piece of glass! I fell on a piece of glass."

"Well, we'll fix it. Come on to the bathroom. You'll be good as new in no time."

"It'll hurt!" Susie whimpered.

"Not long. Come on now. We're going to the grocery in a little bit. You don't want your face all red, do you?"

"No."

"Well, try to stop crying then." Bea washed and sprayed the deep cut with an antibacterial spray. She bandaged it with a gauze pad and strips of gauze and
tape. "Gorgeous!" she said at last and kissed Susie's fingers.

"Oh, Mommie." The tears had turned to giggles and a toothless smile.

"Find Teddy for me and Bobby. I want them to go to the grocery store with us."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, mam. Now scoot!"

"Ok!" Susie drawled as she headed for the back door.

"How long?"

"About fifteen minutes."

Susie slammed the door and Bea walked to the kitchen to make a last check of her grocery list. She put the list and some coupons together on the kitchen table and went up stairs to get Andy, the twins, and her handbag.

The twins were eager, but Andy began to squall as soon as she picked him up. "Laura, get Mommie's handbag, please, and Larry, would you bring the car keys?"

Larry and Laura eagerly complied and shoeless, romped downstairs.

"Shoes!" Bea yelled as she put a cap on Andy's head.

The twins ran back upstairs and scrambled under their bed for shoes. They passed Bea and Andy in the hallway, shoelaces flying.

"Hold it! Tie your shoes!" Bea cautioned.
They sat together on the top step and tied their shoes while Bea stood waiting with the squirming Andy in her arms.

"I found Teddy, Mommie, but I can't find Bobby," Susie yelled from the back door.

"We'll help!" the twins sprang up and down the stairs.

"No!" Bea said loudly. "You stay here. Susie, Bobby is at Mrs. Johnson's, I think. Try there."

"Yes, mam." The storm door banged again.

"Why can't we go?" the twins said, waiting at the foot of the stairs. Their faces were long.

"Because I don't want to have to send someone to hunt for you two." Bea picked up the grocery list and coupons from the table. "Put these in my bag," she said, handing them to Laura. "Larry, get Mommie's checkbook from the desk."

Larry bounded off and Laura busily zippered the compartments in Bea's handbag. Andy was still whining. Bea walked to the back door and looked out. Teddy, Susie, and Bobby were walking slowly across the lawn. Bea opened the back door. "Come on," she yelled. The three looked up and began to run toward the house.

As she put the key in the ignition of the station wagon, Bea prayed silently that she wouldn't have car
trouble. The motor ground to a wheezy start, and she backed slowly into the street.

Andy was pulling Laura's hair and Larry was screaming at him to stop. Teddy and Bobby began to pass a ball back and forth in the back of the station wagon. The ball hit Andy on the head, and he began to cry.

"Settle down, children!" Bea yelled.

There was a lull, but only briefly. The four blocks to the supermarket seemed very long. Traffic was heavy and the bouncing ball sounded like a cannon in Bea's ears. Andy was still crying.

She pulled in at Henson's to buy Teddy's athletic cup, and all the children wanted to go with her. Andy was so fussy, she carried him.

"Don't touch anything!" she warned as they collectively burst through the door. Mr. Henson was not busy, so the sale was quickly completed, but not before Bobby had accidentally knocked over a large basket of baseballs. He came crying to his mother.

"Larry pushed me," he sobbed.

"Help pick them up," Bea said. Bobby clung to her jacket tail. "Bobby, mind mother," she said in a stern voice, and he moved reluctantly away.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Henson," Bea said.

The children scrambled for balls and gleefully...
filled the basket in record time.

"It's ok. Don't worry about it. Kids will be kids."

When the balls were all recovered, they made a hasty retreat to the station wagon. Andy was still crying and the ballgame started in the back of the wagon again. Only Susie sat quietly beside her mother. Bea noticed her face was flushed and made a mental note to check her temperature when they got home.

The traffic moved slowly, and once they had reached the supermarket, Bea had a difficult time finding a place to park.

Crossing the parking lot, Teddy nearly stepped in front of a moving truck. Bea felt the nausea she had experienced earlier, but she found a nearby shopping cart and deposited Andy in the baby seat. That seemed to help her nausea a little, and she walked into the market with Susie beside the shopping cart and the other children plunging ahead of her.

Once inside, the children disappeared down the long aisles except for Andy in his baby seat and Susie who clung to her mother's jacket.

"Mommie, can I help?" Susie asked.

"Yes, I think so." Bea started down the aisle where bins of fresh produce glistened under florescent light. She had a strange pain above her right temple and she was
still sick to her stomach.

They had picked out heads of lettuce, bags of carrots and kale and were examining the display of oranges when Teddy appeared with a bag of cookies. "Can we have these, Mom?" he asked, holding up the cookie bag.

"Put them in the cart." Bea glanced back at the oranges.

"No, I mean now," Teddy said.

"It's too near lunch time," Bea answered, over her shoulder. "Put them in the cart."

"Oh, Mom!" Teddy said in disgust, as he put the cookies in the front of the basket. He turned on his heel and disappeared again.

The bags of apples and oranges Susie and Bea had chosen shared the shopping cart with the bag of cookies and a still squirming Andy. Susie was leaning against her mother. Bea felt her face. It was hot. She did have a fever. Her own nausea was coming in waves now and her whole head ached. She heard the other children laughing across the store.

They turned into the aisle where boxes of spaghetti and macaroni lined the shelves. She and Susie picked up boxes of macaroni and cheese. Andy saw another child in a shopping cart ahead of them and began to cry. Larry and Laura appeared, their faces smeared with chocolate.
"What have you two been into? Where did you get chocolate?" Bea asked.

"We split a bar," the two grinned sheepishly.

Bea felt sick again. Her stomach churned and her head ached. "You didn't have any money."

"You'll pay for it, won't you?" Laura looked worriedly, first at Larry and then at her mother.

"Yes, I'll have to now that it's eaten. Don't eat anything else. Find the others. I'll give you each something to hunt." Bea leaned on the cart and tried to comfort Andy.

"Yea!" the twins screamed and ran off in search of Bobby and Teddy.

"Me too?" Susie asked, looking up at her mother.

"No dear. I need you with me. Ok?"

"Ok!" Susie looked pleased. Bea noticed her eyes had begun to water.

The four children came racing down the aisle.

"What'd ya want, Mom?" Teddy asked.

"I need some help. Teddy is biggest, so you find five pounds of sugar. Bobby, you get a big carton of cottage cheese. Larry, you get some dog food and Laura, find some paper towels--two rolls."

"Yea!" they screamed and ran off to see "who could beat."
Andy screamed also and leaned forward in an attempt to follow. As Bea tried to quiet him, he accidentally kicked her in the stomach. Her nausea gripped her and she felt faint. That might end number eight, she thought. The sick feeling did not pass this time, and the aisle of canned goods began to blur before her eyes. Her head was pounding.

"Susie--Susie, Mommy's sick. Find Teddy for me, please."

"Mommie! Mommie! Don't be sick!"

"Please, Susie. Find Teddy. I'll be fine."

Susie ran down the aisle. As Andy saw her go, he let out another scream. Bea felt herself drifting away from the reality of her surroundings. Her eyes seemed out of focus. The aisle of canned goods alternately danced from light to dark. She sat down on a box of cans and held her head in her hands. She could see lights and feet, white floor tile and shelves of cans. She could hear Andy screaming and Susie calling Teddy. They seemed very far away.

Then, suddenly, the light was gone. Everything was gray. There was no movement. Somewhere, Bea could hear Tom's voice saying things to her--"Get a basket--quiche for supper--Peter and Judy--responsibility--for supper--feed Banner--responsibility--where are my shoes--golf--
play golf--your responsibility--responsibility--" She could hear Andy screaming, and she knew she needed to fight this overwhelming grayness.

"I want some light," she thought. "If I can find the light, I can fix everything. The children need me. They are my responsibility." Her mind whirled. "I want my mother! Daddy, please come and help me! I'll be all right children. Don't worry. Who would feed Banner."

Bea felt herself drifting again. The grayness whirled about her. She could not move. She wanted to move. "Children--" The thought was vague and didn't mean anything. She tried to move her hands. She could not. She wanted to hear something besides the sound of her own thoughts. But her thoughts were quieter now. The grayness had stopped whirling. It was very still where she was. She felt one last impulse to struggle up and out and then it didn't matter. She felt safe and quiet. Her head had stopped hurting and she wasn't sick to her stomach anymore. The struggle was over. She rested.

Teddy found his mother sitting on the carton of cans. She would not look at him or talk to him. Susie sobbed into her mother's jacket and the twins promised her a candy bar if she would talk to them. Andy screamed.
"Mammie! Mommie!" they all said in desperate little voices. "Mommie--please, Mommie!"

"What's the trouble here?" a man asked as he saw the children crowding around their mother. "What's wrong?"

"Mommie!" Susie said softly.

"Mommie's sick!" Teddy looked at the man with frightened eyes. "Help her!"

The man smiled at Bea and spoke to her. "Mam? Mam, what's the trouble?"

She did not look at him and she did not answer. "Mam? Can't you hear me?" the man asked again. Bea did not respond. "Where's your father, son?" The man took Teddy's hand.

"She said he was going to play golf." Teddy could not take his eyes off his mother.

"Which golf course?" the man asked.

"I don't know. Just golf!" Teddy was trembling.

"Mommie, please listen." Susie was trying desperately to get her mother's attention.

The twins sat on the floor in front of Bea and held her hands.

"Will you stay with your mother, children, until your brother and I can locate your father?"

"Yes, sir," they responded in chorus.

"Now, what is your father's name, son?" the man ask-
ed as he and Teddy went hand in hand down the aisle toward the front of the store.

"Thomas Duffy," Teddy said as he hurried to keep up.

The ambulance was the first to arrive. Bea made no sign that she was aware she was lifted to a cot and wheeled out. The children followed the cot to the door, their frightened faces, tear streaked. Only Andy was happy now. A checkout girl named Louise was holding him and had given him a sucker.

Twenty minutes later, Tom arrived.

"What the hell happened here? Bea wasn't sick this morning!" Tom was saying in a loud voice.

"She seems to have had a breakdown, Mr. Duffy. She's been taken to St. Anne's."

"A breakdown? What kind of breakdown?"

"We don't know, sir. She just doesn't respond to anyone or anything."

"God! A breakdown! What'll I do with these kids? You know that golf game could have changed my life? I was making some really good contacts. Really important men!" He paused and looked at the children. Louise put Andy in his arms. "God! What'll I do? She better sure as hell get well in a hurry! These kids are her job!" He stood Andy on the floor and he started to scream again. "How could she have a breakdown today!"
The End
SUNDAY'S BULLETIN

a short story

The church office door stood open to the autumn day. Reverend Young sat at his desk working on some notes for the Sunday bulletin. He was in shirt-sleeves, and a light, warm breeze fluttered the curtains at the open window.

Sandra walked down the narrow walk to the stoop outside the office door. "I'm going to practice a while," she said, after tapping lightly on the door.

"What?" Reverend Young looked up with an air of surprise. "Oh, hello, Sandra. You're going to practice? Fine. I'm just doing notes for Sunday's bulletin."

"I just didn't want to startle you," Sandra said, shifting her stack of music from one arm to the other. "I'm afraid I did after all. Sorry."

Reverend Young walked to the open door. "No. No. That's ok. I was just engrossed in my work. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Lovely. I had to force myself to come to practice. My schedule this week is so tight. I knew if I didn't practice today I wouldn't have any time."

"Well, that's fine. A little melody wafting on the
autumn air will be nice." He winked at her. "How's that for pretentiousness?"

Sandra laughed. "Pretty good. So I guess I'd better go do some 'wafting'." She laughed again. "See you later."

Reverend Young watched her go back up the narrow walk. He liked Sandra. She was conscientious. He admired that. And she was good looking. Her blue-jeaned hips swung evenly as she walked away from him and her sandals scuffed on the bluestone walkway.

She turned the corner toward the door to the sanctuary. Reverend Young stood for a moment in the sunny doorway and then went back to his desk. "Well, Julian, old boy. You wouldn't lust, would you? You're a preacher--remember?" he said quietly.

Julian Young was no longer young. He had had his fiftieth birthday, and even though he was not sure how one should feel at fifty, he was sure he felt much older than that most days. His hair was gray and thinning and his shoulders stooped a bit. He smiled often, but his blue eyes were filled with an urgent sadness.

The telephone jingled. "Hello," he said and waited. "Yes, Larry. What's the trouble?" He doodled with his black ink marker as he listened. "Yes. Well, if you need the car, come get it. I'll walk home, but I'm too
busy to bring it to you." There was another pause. "Fine. Bring your mother's keys. I'm really busy."

Julian looked long at the phone and then pressed the receiver hook to break the connection. He laid the receiver quietly on his desk. "Too many interruptions," he muttered and went back to his bulletin notes with new enthusiasm.

MRS. R. K. JERRALS IS ILL AT COUNTY GENERAL. HER ROOM IS 306. SHE WOULD ENJOY A CARD.

The breeze through the door scattered some of his notes across his desk. He slammed down his black ink marker to collect the disheveled papers. "I don't understand it. Interruptions!" he said under his breath. Then he laughed at himself and went to the open door again.

The afternoon was very still except for the sound of the cicadas and falling leaves. But there was something else--"What is that?" Julian said aloud. And then he made a wry face as he remembered. "It's the organ. Sandra is 'wafting'." And he laughed. He stepped over the threshold onto the stoop and listened. The organ sang through the autumn air, first light and flute-like, then heavy with harmony, and finally a full swell of the music surrounded him as he stood in the autumn air.

Sandra shivered as she finished the prelude she had
chosen for the Sunday morning service. The church was
damp and cold, and she wished she had brought a sweater.
She had decided against opening the windows because it
took time and because she was afraid she would disturb
Reverend Young.

She set a new order of stops and started the offer­
tory. It was full of mistakes because her mind wasn't on
it. She was thinking of Groverner's Point and how she
would like to be there, lying in the sun with Kevin and
Alice playing on the beach.

"Drat!" she said aloud and climbed off the organ
bench. "I'm freezing!" She pushed open the window near­
est the organ and on an impulse headed for the back room
and the cabinet where the choir robes were kept. "Maybe
my robe will help," she said aloud again.

She slid her arms into the folds of the maroon robe.
It felt cold against her skin. "Well, this was a mis­
take," she said. But, as she zipped up the front of the
robe, she felt the fabric warming around her and she slid
quickly back onto the organ bench. A warm breeze from
the window ruffled the pages of her music. She secured
it with a hymn book and began the offertory again, trying
diligently to concentrate. Her mistakes were fewer this
time. Groverner's Point was forgotten. Sandra's full
attention was on the stop changes in the piece of music
before her and the delicate melody she was playing.

As Reverend Young stood on the stoop listening to Sandra's music, he felt lifted in spirit. The aggravations of the day dwindled away. He was feeling, not just a loss of the day's problems, but of several weeks of bickering with his elders. They had been arguing over needed repairs to the church building and a pledge to the world mission fund. He had finally conceded the world mission fund, but he was still holding out for the repairs. Time was short, and winter would be upon them before everything would be accomplished that needed doing even if the elders could agree at their next session.

And Julian had problems at home. Larry was giving too much of his time to the wrong crowd and was always cross with the family. Julian had tried talking to him, but realized he had little influence any more on his teenaged son. Somewhere along the way, between moves from parish to parish and the never ending duties of being a pastor, they had lost respect for each other, and he could find no way to reconcile their misunderstandings.

But, now, right now, Julian was caught by Sandra's music. He found himself drifting idly up the walk to the sanctuary door. He pushed it open and quietly settled in the back pew.
The music rose and fell. Sandra was deeply engrossed in her final practice of the offertory. The breeze from the open window lifted her short hair softly. In the dim light of the sanctuary, Julian imagined her hair to be a sort of halo.

The music ended, and Sandra quietly closed one book and opened another. Her movements were gentle and deliberate. She busily set stops in preparation for her rehearsal of the postlude, and at last the music began. The piece was dissonant and brilliant. There was an anticipation toward a climax and then the full swell of the organ again as the music vibrated through the room.

Julian felt the music catch him in every part of his being. His mind quickened and his pulse raced. He felt pulled upward, away from his everyday world, away from the pew where he sat—pulled toward the sound of the music.

When the piece was ended, he found himself standing beside the organ bench. "Marvelous!" he said as he slid onto the bench beside Sandra. "It was marvelously!"

Sandra started a bit and then smiled, sliding over on the bench and pushing in the foot pedal stop. "I'm glad you like it," she said, wiping an imaginary fleck of dust from one of the organ keys.

"You do a superb job. I hear it from our members
every Sunday." Julian felt a sudden deep affection for the girl beside him. "I want to thank you," he said, sliding his arm about her waist and gently kissing her forehead.

"Reverend Young!" Sandra recoiled and spoke in a shrill, surprised voice. "Reverend Young--what is this?" She slipped off the far end of the bench.

"Sandra! I didn't mean anything. I was only--only caught up by your music. I was only trying to say thank you!" Julian lifted his arms and flattened his hands in the air. "Oh, Sandra--please don't misunderstand. I didn't mean anything."

"I've heard about you," she said sharply. "I've heard about the other women you've taken advantage of in churches where you've been."

"Sandra! Please!" Julian felt something crushing him inside. "Sandra--"

"Well, you can forget it! I'll not be party to one of your cheap little--little episodes." She was frantically unzipping her choir robe and talking at the same time.

Julian listened and then he ceased to hear. There were wild noises in his head, and he could only see her mouth move. He put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes. He did not want to hear Sandra's words. He
just wanted everything to be silent again.

When he looked up minutes later, Sandra and her music were gone. Her choir robe lay in a heap on the floor. From long practice, she had remembered to push the OFF switch on the instrument.

Julian sat for a time trying to think. Why had she misunderstood? Why had she taken a compliment and turned it into something sordid? He didn't understand. It always happened this way. Women always misunderstood him.

He got down from the organ bench and closed the window. He picked up the choir robe and started for the back room. As he held it up by the neck to let it fall into shape again, Julian caught a fleeting hint of fragrance. He held the robe closer to him, and the fragrance enveloped him. He sat down in a Sunday School chair and folded the robe over his arm.

"It can't be!" he said softly. "I didn't mean anything!"

Then Julian remembered Sandra walking away from him in the autumn sunlight. He remembered the jeans, smooth over her hips and the way her sandals scuffed the blue-stone walk.

"I didn't mean anything," he whispered. "Sandra, I didn't mean anything."
As he spoke, he gathered her choir robe into a mass and buried his face in it. He caught the rich flower fragrance she had left, and as he did, he began to sob gently.

"I didn't mean anything," he said again, but the words were lost in the folds of the garment he held crushed in his hands.

The End
THE BOND

a short story

The old Buick refused to start. Carol had pumped the accelerator and held it to the floor, but nothing worked. She released the hood and stepped outside the car. The hood was stubborn, then finally yielded. But Carol had no idea what she was looking for in the maze of belts and tubes and hoses.

"Mommie! Mommie! Me go! Me go!" Jimmy was running wildly down the hill to the car where his mother stood.

"Jimmy! Come back here!" Lural Stanton was running after Jimmy, her black arms flailing the air. "You can't go. Your Mommie told you--you can't go!"

Carol caught Jimmy in her arms and held him. "No, Jimmy. You can't go with Mommie this time. We'll go for ice cream when I get home--if I ever get started. Do you know anything about cars, Lural? I'm going to be late and Dr. Watson--Oh, God, what am I going to do?"

Jimmy began to cry. Lural took him in her arms and cuddled him against her heavy breasts. "Now, now," she crooned to the child, gently rocking her body from side to side. "I don't know anything about cars except they run or they don't run. Why don't you take my car?" She hesitated, looking questioningly at Carol. "It ain't
much, but it runs. John sees to that."

Carol looked into Lural's eyes. There was a slight fear there, and Carol knew Lural was afraid she had insulted her. "If you don't mind. I don't know how to thank you," Carol said.

"I don't mind a bit." Lural looked relieved. "I'll get the keys from the house. You just wait."

"No. No. I'll come with you. You won't have to bring Jimmy out again. He's nearly asleep." Carol touched Jimmy's blond curls as the two women walked back to the house.

Lural rummaged into the bottom of her handbag, holding Jimmy in one arm and came out with a round disc bearing a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. and a beaded chain from which dangled three keys.

"The square one starts the car, the round one is for the door. The other's my house key."

She held the three keys spread out in her palm.

"You are a love! Thank you so much. I'll see you later," Carol said with a quick smile.

"Drive safe!" Lural cautioned as Carol walked and ran, by turns, toward the beat-up black Chevy at the foot of the drive.

The motor turned over at first try; Carol backed the car into the street and headed east toward Dr. Watson's
office.

Lural was right about the car. It was a mess, and the inside smelled of beer. When Carol put on the brakes at a stop light, two empty Schlitz cans rolled from under the seat.

Carol laughed. "Just like home!" she said.

The drive to Dr. Watson's went quickly, and she pulled into the parking lot with ten minutes to spare.

Once inside the office, Carol signed her name on the waiting list and sank into one of the deeply cushioned blue chairs. It felt good to sit quietly. She felt a little queasy and lightheaded.

Too soon, the nurse called Carol's name and led her first to a bath dressing room and then into an examining room.

"How you doing, Carol?" said Marsha Stringer. She and Carol had come to know each other through office visits. Marsha had worked for Dr. Watson for several years, and together, they had helped Carol through three difficult pregnancies.

"Not so good. I've felt rotten lately."

"Well, Dr. Watson will be in in a few minutes. Do you have a history of your monthlies for him?" Marsha patted Carol's knee.

"In my sweater pocket. I'm sorry. It's back in the
"That's ok. I'll get it." Marsha patted her knee again. "Just relax. He'll be along in a minute." And Marsha was gone.

Carol sat on the end of an examining table shrouded in a white cotton gown. The room was cold and full of strange bottles and boxes and wicked-looking instruments. She felt alone and a little frightened. A shiver ran over her, and she pulled her arms close about her body. There was soft background music playing through the suite of examining rooms. The song of the moment was "Happy Days Are Here Again" and she wondered how it would be to be told she had uterine cancer with that song being played in the background. She shivered again.

The door opened a few inches, and Marsha looked in. "I found it--your history I mean. I clipped it to your chart."

"Fine!" Carol smiled as the door closed.

On the wall were charts showing the female reproductive system in bright, whorish pinks and purples and another showing how to give a breast examination. It all looked complicated and simple at the same time. Carol shrugged and looked at the floor.

"Wonder why we have so many problems if it's so wonderful and so natural to be pregnant and give birth and
all the rest of that crap?" she said aloud to a wad of
cotton that lay on the floor in front of the examining
table. "Crap!" she said vehemently, leaning forward
toward the wad of cotton. "Crap, crap, crap!"

The door opened wide and Dr. Watson, his long white
coat ballooning about him, and Marsha stepped inside.

"Hello, Carol! I haven't seen you for a while. How
have you been?" Dr. Watson only glanced at her and then
laid a heavy hand on her shoulder while he read her
chart.

"Ok, I guess," Carol answered numbly.

"Not so good I see. Well, well. We must check this
out. Feeling lousy? Nausea--dizziness! Now, Carol, we
can't have that!"

Carol looked at Marsha who winked and shook her
head.

The examination was slow and thorough. It seemed
an eternity before Dr. Watson helped her sit up again.

"Get dressed, dear, and come to my office," he said
as he went out the door with her chart in his hand.

Marsha helped Carol step down to the floor and began
tidying the examining room for the next patient.

"Just go in his office and have a seat when you're
dressed. He'll be along in a minute."

Carol stood unsteadily for a moment with her hand on
the end of the examining table.

Marsha turned and saw her looking pale and weaving a bit from side to side. "You ok? Want to sit a minute?"

Marsha whipped an ammonia capsule from an open jar on the counter along the wall, broke it, and waved it widely under Carol's nose.

Carol grimaced and put up her hand to avoid the fumes. "I'll be ok. Just feel--feel sick."

"I know." Marsha sympathized as she opened the door to the hallway.

Once inside the bath dressing room, Carol leaned again on the sink and threw up in the commode. After that, she felt better. She dressed quickly and went to Dr. Watson's office.

"Well, well!" Dr. Watson said as he closed the door to his office and sat down behind his desk.

Carol was looking past him. On top of his filing cabinet was a female figure with pieces to take apart and put together showing how a woman's body is supposed to function. Beside it was a large jar full of gray looking liquid. In the fluid was a fetus. She felt her stomach knotting again and a wave a nausea swept over her.

"Well, well," Dr. Watson said again, making notes on her chart. Finally he looked up. "It's not bad. You don't need to look so frightened. But you are going to
have to take care of yourself. You're pregnant. That's all."

Carol gripped the arms of her chair. "I can't be." she said weakly.

"'Fraid so. I'd say six weeks along. Why'd you wait so long to come?"

Carol looked at Dr. Watson. He was grinning happily.

"I can't be!" she said, hitting her fist against the chair arm.

"Now, now! Don't get yourself overwrought, child. You must stay calm."

"Stay calm! Dr. Watson—how can I stay calm. I can't be pregnant! I can't be—." And she began to sob.

"Carol!" he said sternly. "Stop now. This is bad for you. It's bad for the baby."

"The hell with the baby! I don't care about the baby! I care about me! I've got to get out and now I can't. Now I can't!" Carol's words came in gasps.

Dr. Watson pressed a buzzer and almost instantly Marsha opened the door.

"Bring me a hypo of the valium. Carol's having a bad time," he said softly.

"Yes sir." Marsha was gone and then returned with the needle full of clear liquid.

"Want me to give it, sir?" she asked. Dr. Watson
nodded and after some struggle she gave the shot in Carol's inside forearm. "Good girl," she said, patted Carol's shoulder, and was gone again.

Carol, almost instantly, felt the medication begin to work. She did feel calmer and more in control.

Dr. Watson was sitting in a chair next to her now. He took her hand and patted it gently. "Do you want to tell me why you're so upset?" he asked.

At first, Carol shook her head, no. She sat twisting a tissue into shreds on her grey slacks. Then she looked at Dr. Watson and felt anger begin to replace her anguish. "Well, yes--yes--I'll tell you! I hate my husband! I can't bear the thought of living with him any longer. And to think--oh, to think he started this--this baby! I hate him!" She paused. When she started to speak again, her voice was soft and full of pain. "He's a drunk! He can't keep a job! He's mean to me--to the children! And it has taken me months to get up the courage to file for a divorce, and now--now--what will I do!"

"Carol, I had no idea! But surely this will change things between you?" Dr. Watson offered.

"Oh, sure! The other three really changed things didn't they? He's still the same beer-drinking slob he's always been. He won't change." Carol wrung her hand
free from Dr. Watson's grasp and blew her nose on a new tissue she pulled from her sweater pocket.

"Carol...how...how did this...." The words seemed to stick in his throat.

"How did it happen? I don't know! I told him I was going to get a divorce. He'd been drinking and he was all "luvy" like he gets sometimes, and then he cried--really cried tears because I said I was divorcing him and--oh--one thing led to another--it was the last time." Carol wept gently now. "And do you know he left the next day with some of his buddies on a four-day spree?" She laughed lightly.

Dr. Watson frowned. "What will you do then? Will your parents take you in?"

She shook her head. "No. They were against the divorce. My father is a Baptist preacher. He warned me something bad would happen if I didn't learn to respect and obey my husband. Respect and obey! Can you believe that?"

There was a long silence.

"Your pregnancies have been difficult. We could consider an abortion--for--for medical reasons."

Carol looked at Dr. Watson. She could see the pain the idea had caused him and how much it had taken for him to offer the alternative. She patted his hand. "No, sir.
I couldn't do that." She paused. "I'm not saying I don't wish I could but--but I couldn't. I guess I'm too much Baptist, too."

He looked relieved and smiled again. "We'll get through it then. You'll be fine. I know you will. Both of you."

Back in Lural's car, Carol sat for a few minutes to steady herself for the drive home. She felt sick again, but it passed.

Once on the road the idea of turning the car in another direction and escaping crossed her mind. But, then she laughed. "Escape to where--with what? And what would I do with 'it'?"

She drove slowly, trying to think. She felt caught, betrayed, and angry. It wasn't fair! How could this have happened when she had worked so hard to decide to leave! She had fought battle after battle with her parents, with herself, and with her responsibilities. An act of compassion! That's what that night had been! An act of compassion--not love. There wasn't any love any more. She could not love a man who hit her, who abused himself with too much drinking. She could not respect him either, as her father suggested, and she was surely not going to obey him! It would be a cold day in hell before she ever slept with him again--for any reason! It
was not her duty anymore! Never, ever again!

Suddenly she was home. Lural stood in the doorway waiting for her.

"The car was great. But I forgot gas. I'll give you some extra money. I'm sorry!" Carol said a bit absently as she handed the keys to Lural.

"That's ok. What's he say? Are you ok?"

Carol stood looking about the shabby room with its worn-out furniture and faded wallpaper. She felt tears running down her cheeks again as she saw the broken shutters and patched curtains. And then she remembered the house wasn't even theirs! It belonged to his mother, and she refused to do anything to it. She charged no rent--that was enough help, she said! The thin rug swam up to meet her as she sat down in a heap on the floor and buried her face in her hands.

"Baby...." she said softly. "Another baby."

Lural sank down beside her and took her in her arms. She held her close against her breast as she had held Jimmy a few hours before. The two women rocked gently in a rhythm. Carol felt the tears still falling down her cheeks, but there was no sobbing--only tears. And suddenly she was aware that Lural was weeping, too.

The End
TWELVE FLOWERS

* The names of the following poems are the names of flowers with their meanings as listed in Kate Greenaway's LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS.
HEMLOCK

(you will be my death)

She was fifteen when he married her.
He held strong opinions and hints of scandal;
She was the end of gentility.
They loved, it seemed; she always quiet,
Obedient, motherly—he willful and singular.
When she was forty-five he left her
For a younger woman he didn't try to hide.
She closeted herself, at first, and cried,
Then went to work in a local shop
Never speaking except to customers and family.
She chain smoked and died a little more each day
Amid knowing eyes and an unsigned Bill of Divorcement.
ROSEMARY

(remembrance)

I've seen her sit in that upstairs room
Day after day after day
Watching tv and not answering her door
Except to the black woman around the corner
Who practices Christianity.
She hasn't had a new dress in years,
But the incentive isn't there;
Her man is dead,
Her friends, dead or dying.
We had her to dinner once;
She didn't say much, but ate a good meal
And stayed late.
Now she's gone to a home for the aged.
At least she saw her dogwood tree
Bloom its best in years this spring.
She didn't say good-bye;
She just went--and I miss her.
WHITE CATCHFLY
(betrayed)

Her husband died.

Her inheritance was a piano and a son.

In desperation, she went to bed with a man

Who failed to tell her he had six children

Before he started one in her.

Now, as his wife,

She faces days of desperation;

Fearing him and his sons,

Hating herself for her betrayal,

Keeping herself thin on self-pity and Darjeeling tea

And wishing she had the courage to change it all.
(for once may pride befriend me)

Her father was a coal miner, a drunk,
Brawling his way through West Virginia Saturday nights
Until her mother crumbled and
She and her sister left home.
She badgered her way through college,
Ran away to Virginia to get married
After a fraternity dance and
When he woke up, she had a fantasy
Of a perfect family and society.
When he went back to work,
She fed her dream with a perfect house,
A perfect son, an unlisted phone and secrecy.
But in the depth of the night,
When fantasies fade,
She trembles and sleeps,
Her knees against her chin.
ASPHODEL

(my regrets follow you to the grave)

Her house sits on a piece of land
That looks like a pedestal.
It's appropriate.
After all, it is a shrine
To her late husband
Whom she watched die,
Muscle by muscle
For nine long years.
She redecorated the house,
Goes out with rich men
In shiny cars
And drinks herself into bed with them.
But she wakes with the same needs,
Confessions to be made
And penance to be paid.
Her guilt for past and present
Itches at the core of her.
Her help is dust in country graves;
Her daily aim is reunion.
RED COLUMBINE

(anxious and trembling)

"I raised my kids to be respectful!"
She said, cleaning green paint from the window
Where vandals had smeared her name.
"No respect no more--especially for old folks."
No suit would be filed;
The vandals were her neighbors.
She couldn't afford to move.
She would shut the doors and pray
They wouldn't use her blood the next time.
YELLOW JASMINE
(grace and elegance)

She had a sister who wore big hats;
A brother who was an ace.
Her husband turned out to be a tough-hided lawyer,
Her adopted child a whore.
But she read Shakespeare with a flair,
Diagrammed lines from *Vanity Fair*
And loved her students through high school English.
She held herself proud—she was a Whitney!
She kept herself independent—she was a woman!
She stayed—until she was ready;
She took herself—with dignity.
MISTLETOE

(I surmount difficulties)

She collects things--
Brass mostly--
And a man now and then.
There is a learned dignity about her
But tacky talk about money and possessions;
Worth is only in what she has
Or her daughter or son.
But her brother is retarded,
Her sister was "rough,"
Her mother was a seamstress
And her father is long dead.
The cost of that is high:
Velvet chairs and antique coverlets are soft;
Polished brass and polished men shine.
The raven hair is gray now
But the expression is the same.
She talks to herself and walks stooped a bit,
Wears her dead father's bathrobe to the grocery
And never moves the window shades.
Her house smells of fresh corn; it has
For the sixty years she's taught piano,
Called herself "the Reverend's daughter;"
And tried to be the lady her mother was.
Today has no relevance to her life;
She is what she was and will be.
CABBAGE ROSE
(ambassador of love)

They live together, in the same house
On different floors
But never speak.
If you asked why, they couldn't tell you;
Some age old grievance they wouldn't solve.
So evenings, they eat at a long table,
Italian food after a Catholic blessing,
Never talking of latest books read
Or blue-jay's wings,
That the river's rising
Or of memories.
After they go their way
To silent apartments
She weeps in a darkened kitchen
Praying to the Virgin
To forgive her sin.
WILD TANSY
(I declare war against you)

She gardens and cooks,
knows where to buy exotic things,
gossips and drinks too much.
She feels obligated to direct the world
in choices, large and small,
running wild with words and movements
but avoiding eyes and never touching hands.
She wanted children and
a husband who could take care of her;
but there are no children and her husband
uses her strength, having none of his own.
She survives on cigarettes, Sunday golf,
her name and memories of her cat
knowing if she ever looks around
the battle's lost.
BLACK MULBERRY

(I shall not survive you)

What I remembered,
As she walked away,
Were her eyes
Filled with fear.
Gray eyes--
Caught in a round face;
Her lumpy, limping body
Poorly dressed--
Her tales of family illness,
Of her husband's neglect--
She reached out for pity,
But what I saw
Was fear.
"I'll have a lemon phosphate, please," Miss Olivia said to the young man behind the fountain. He was polishing the white marble counter with a linen cloth and looked a bit bothered by her request. But he complied and set the foaming golden drink before her on the counter.

"That'll be five cents," he said quietly.

"Thank you." Miss Olivia put a nickle in his palm, took her drink and a napkin to one of the six small tables in the back of the store, and sat down. A big fan overhead stirred the hot, late afternoon air and a dusty breeze blew through the side street screen door.

Miss Olivia patted her straw sailor hat to make certain it was at the proper angle on her ash-blond hair and smoothed some imaginary wrinkles from her white pleated blouse and black skirt. She had dressed carefully. Mr. Chase was always in the pharmacy in the late afternoon, and she was hoping he would see her and sit down to talk a while. She had even worn her crocheted gloves and carried her beaded handbag. And if Adaline knew she had on Mama's cameo--well, she wouldn't think about that now. First things first and right now that was Mr. Chase.

A few customers drifted in and out the front screen
door and each time there was a soft little bang. The young man behind the counter had finished polishing the marble slab and was giving his attention to the shiny spigots and handles of the soda fountain. He whistled softly a tune Miss Olivia did not recognize, and finally she decided he was making it up as he went along.

Miss Olivia drank her lemon phosphate very slowly. She planned to have enough left when Mr. Chase arrived to look as though she had time to talk, but not so much that he would think she had been dawdling, perhaps waiting for him. They had talked before. They had even walked down to the river one hot summer morning and had sat together at a Sunday band concert on the courthouse square. She was sure he knew she liked him.

Just then, the front screen door banged gently and Miss Olivia saw Mr. Chase step up to the white marble counter.

"Root beer, please," she heard him say and felt herself blush with anticipation.

When Mr. Chase started toward the table where Miss Olivia sat, she looked down and took a dainty sip from her drink.

"Miss Olivia! What a nice surprise. How are you today?"

"Fine, Mr. Chase. And how are you?"
"I'd be better if it weren't so stiflin' hot!" Mr. Chase had taken off his straw hat and tucked it under his arm. "Would you mind if I join you?"

"Of course not," said Miss Olivia, waving her hand. "I'd be pleased."

"Thank you. I had no idea I'd have such delightful company on such a hot afternoon." Mr. Chase sat carefully on a small chair and laid his hat on the table.

Miss Olivia blushed and brushed an imaginary lock of hair off her forehead. "I haven't seen you in town for a while. I thought you were away."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have been. Took the train to Cincinnati last week. Had business there."

"How nice." Miss Olivia immediately envisioned getting on a train with Mr. Chase and going happily off to Cincinnati on a lark. "You picked a good time to go. It's been very quiet here."

"Well, yes, I know. But after the bustle of such a big city, I was glad to get home." Mr. Chase paused and took a swallow from his mug of root beer. "Have you ever been there--to Cincinnati, I mean?" He patted the corners of his moustache with a napkin.

"No, I'm sorry to say. Papa always promised to take us when we were older. He passed away before we came of age."
"That's too bad. You'd like it I'm sure. There's much to see. Fountain Square, the zoo, an art museum. You can even hear an opera if you've a mind. I've never cared for that."

Miss Olivia laughed behind her gloved hand. "I'm afraid I wouldn't understand."

Mr. Chase looked from left to right and leaned closer to Miss Olivia. "And do you know they have burlesque! Girls and all!"

"Mr. Chase! I don't believe my ears! A gentlemen like you wouldn't know about such things!"

He straightened up and took a drink from his root beer. "Well, I've heard tell nonetheless."

A trio of little boys in knickers and touring caps were badgering the boy at the soda fountain for a free soda with three straws. The young man stood his ground, and at last the three left, banging the screen door as hard as they could behind them.

"Were your business ventures successful?" Miss Olivia asked, stirring what was left of her lemon phosphate with her straw.

"What? What--oh yes! Why yes, they were very successful. But one has to be careful of shady deals around a city."

Miss Olivia looked serious. "Oh, I'm sure of it,
she said. "But I'm sure you know how to stay away from all that."

He looked pleased. "Experience! That's what it takes. And I've had lots of experience." He paused. "How is your sister, Miss Adaline, and your brother? I haven't been home long enough to stop by the store!"

"Why, they're fine, thank you. Chester's been ailing in his back, but he's better." Miss Olivia took a sip of phosphate and saw she had only enough left for one more sip.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I hope it wasn't serious."

"No, no. Just lumbago or some such. He works so hard you know." She pushed her glass away. She thought it would seem more genteeel to leave a bit than to drain the glass. "Well, Mr. Chase, it's been a pleasure. I'm so glad to hear of your trip and to enjoy your company."

"Now wait a minute! Hold on! You don't have to go, do you?" Mr. Chase held his root beer mug in mid-air. "We've just got started talkin'. I--I've missed seein' you around, little lady."

Miss Olivia blushed again. "Mr. Chase! I've been right here all the time. You're the one who's been away."

"Well, yes, I know, but I'm not away now. Come on. Sit a spell. Catch me up on the news." He patted her hand.
Miss Olivia looked him in the eye. He was a fairly nice looking man she decided. He was a bit too heavy, but he was clean and almost neat. His moustache was well clipped and he had twinkling blue eyes. She noticed that his shirt collar was frayed and his brown suit was a bit in need of pressing, but she was sure that the reason for that was that he had no wife. The singular most impressive thing about Mr. Chase was his smile. He seemed to be always smiling or about to, and she liked that. How pleasant it was to be with someone who knew how to smile!

"Well, I suppose I could stay a few minutes," She answered at last. "Do you have the hour?"

Mr. Chase fished in his vest pocket for his watch. He snapped open the cover and snapped it shut again. "Five o'clock on the button. You aren't expected yet are you?"


"Well, now tell me--tell me the news." He leaned back and caught the thumb of his left hand in the arm hole of his vest.

"I really don't know any to tell, I'm sorry to say," Miss Olivia replied. "There haven't been any new people in the hotel for two weeks, and there wasn't even a band concert on Sunday. It's a slow time this time of year. Too hot for folks to work up much interest in anything."
"Yes, you're right. Too blasted hot to think some days." He looked around, pausing as if searching for something to say. "Well, at least there wasn't a catastrophe or anything like that while I was away."

She laughed, "No. Nothing like that." She played with the beaded handle of her handbag. "I really must go, Mr. Chase. My sister will be worried."

He stood up abruptly. "Well, if you must little lady. Give my best to your brother and sister. I'll be around to see them soon." He shook her hand. "I'll be around," he repeated and winked.

"I'll tell them." She looked evenly into his blue eyes. "It's been pleasant talking with you, Mr. Chase."

He watched her go. She could feel his eyes on her even after she had passed through the screen door to the side street and stepped across the way to her own back gate. She felt her cheeks burning with pleasure. Mr. Chase had missed her. She was sure he would call. Soon--soon, he would call.

... 

"Olivia! Olivia, is that you."

Olivia heard Adaline calling from the kitchen as soon as she stepped through the back screen door.

"Yes, Addie, it's me," she answered.
"Where have you been? I've been worried sick." Adaline appeared in the kitchen door with a half peeled potato and a paring knife in her hands. She had her dark skirt tucked in her skirt band to form a kind of apron, and her dark sleeves were turned up to her elbows. Her collar button was undone and she was perspiring heavily.

"I'm here now," said Olivia as she unpinned her hat and laid it with her crocheted gloves and beaded bag in a chair. She fluffed her hair and tucked up her skirt the way Adaline had hers. "I'm here. What's to be done for supper?"

"I don't know how you can go off in the middle of the afternoon to God knows where and leave Chester and me here to do all the work! What do you think Papa would say?"

"I'm here now. I'm sorry, but I had to step out for a while." Olivia pushed past her to the kitchen and began to assess the progress of supper.

"Finish these potatoes. I'll take care of the rest of it," Adaline said, thrusting the potato and knife she was holding into Olivia's hands.

Olivia obediently peeled the remaining potatoes and put them on to cook after Adaline noisily added a handful of corn cobs to the firebox of the kitchen stove.

"Where were you anyway? Where did you 'step out' to?" Adaline questioned as she set the table.
Olivia didn't answer. She opened the warming oven to see if there was any apple pie left. "Want me to put this pie out for dessert?" she asked, glancing at Adaline.

"I suppose." Adaline had finished the table and was getting down a heavy platter from the cupboard. "You didn't answer me. I asked you where you were."

Olivia set the pie on the table and cut it into three pieces. "To the pharmacy. I had to go to the pharmacy."

"And what do they have at the pharmacy that requires a hat and gloves and Mama's cameo in the middle of the afternoon?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I guess. I just felt the need of fixing up."

"Well, ain't that wonderful. You felt the need of fixin' up while Chester and me stay here and slave, is that it?"

"Adaline, I wasn't gone an hour. Why such a fuss?" Olivia took down a small white pitcher from the cupboard. "I'm going to get some zinnias for the table. I saw some pretty ones by the fence as I came in."

She didn't wait for an answer from her sister, but hurried out the back door to the street side of the yard. She gathered a half-dozen of the bright colored flowers and walked back toward the house. As she walked, she looked up into the pear tree and noticed it was loaded with
ripe fruit that would need to be picked in the next few days.

Olivia loved their back yard. It was long and narrow and enclosed by a board fence. Mr. Hatton had had the fence built to keep the children from wandering off or running into the street. He saw to it that the fence was white washed each year, but since he was dead, Chester seemed never to get around to looking after it and it had mellowed to a mottled gray. In the center of the yard was the pear tree, and a narrow brick walk curved through the grass from the street to the back door. Along the fence between the gate and the necessary, Olivia had planted a border of bright flowers, and all during the spring and summer she enjoyed the daffodils, the roses, lilies, and bright zinnias that bloomed there.

She looked at the flowers in her hand. They were orange and yellow—so nearly perfect. Next year, she decided, she would plant more by the shed near the back of the yard. She'd be able to see them from her bedroom window then; that was if she was still living here.

Olivia felt herself blush. She was thinking of Mr. Chase. She liked him. He was nice to her and so pleasant. What if he liked her, too? What if he liked her enough to ask her to marry? Suddenly, she ran for the back door.
"How's it coming?" she asked, as she hurried into the kitchen and began to arrange the zinnias in the white pitcher.

"Fine lot you care," Adaline pouted. "In and out--in and out! Zinnias for the table indeed!"

Olivia shivered. "Don't you like zinnias, Adaline?"

Adaline didn't answer, but poked the potatoes to test their doneness. "These'll be done by the time we get the rest of it up," she said crossly.

"Hello sisters!" Chester suddenly came through the door from the back of the store. "Something smells good--mighty good! I'm hungry. Hope there was apple pie left."

Chester pumped some water into a zinc washpan in the sink and began to wash his face and hands. "Thought old man Jenkins would never get finished fillin' that order for Mr. Stone. He can't hear hardly at all. Sure makes him hard to talk to." He wiped his face and hands on a green-striped towel.

"Well, did you find everything he wanted? Mr. Stone is one of our best customers." Adaline was pouring milk into heavy glasses. "I wouldn't want to lose his business."

"Yes, Adaline. I found everything." Chester shook his head as he took his seat at the head of the table.

"But sometimes--sometimes I wish I'd listened better when
Papa tried to explain things about the business. You know. I just wish I'd really understood we'd be taking over the store sometime--when they were dead. You know."

"I know," said Olivia sympathetically. "But they must have had problems, too--when they first started, I mean. Just think how it must have been for them; newly married, learning the mercantile business, living here with three babies!"

"They taught us what we need to know." Adaline looked first at Chester and then at Olivia. "Can't rightly say they would be too proud that we haven't done better with what they left us, though."

"It's a successful business!" said Chester.

"Successful if you mean keeping body and soul together. But it ain't growin'. It's standin' still!" Adaline took a drink from her glass of milk.

"Well, I'm glad they left us a place to live and a business to run! We'd have been in some fix if they hadn't been thinkin' ahead." Chester spoke emphatically. "And I think we've done pretty well by it!"

"Me too," Olivia nodded agreement. "They'd both be proud!"

Adaline salted her potatoes. "Papa would have taken us all to task over our laziness! It's a good thing Mama and Papa had good solid customers like Mr. Stone or I
don't know what we'd do. We don't seem to be any good at buildin' new trade."

It occurred to Olivia that the lack of new trade might be related to her sister's bad temper and her brother's unwillingness to take charge of the business with a more decisive hand. But she was not worried about the business--she had other things to think about.

Suddenly, Olivia became aware that the kitchen was very hot. "Wouldn't it be nice if we had a nice cool dining room to eat supper in?" Olivia remarked as she sliced a loaf of bread. "The range makes the kitchen so hot! There's not a breath of air stirring this evening."

"You and your highfalutin ideas! Dining rooms, zinnias on the table--we're just mighty blest to have what we have," said Adaline.

"Oh, I know that, Addie. I'm not complaining. I'm just saying wouldn't it be nice," Olivia defended herself cheerily as she took her place next to the range and blithely slipped her napkin from its ring.

After Chester said grace, they fell into silence as they ate. Finally Chester said, "Mighty good meal. You girls do yourselves proud."

Chester was the Hatton's middle child. He was very blond and blue-eyed and had always been of a quiet nature. The only people he really felt at ease with were his sis-
ters, and working as a salesman in the store had always been very difficult for him. He found it hard to talk to people and when he could, he spent his time unpacking and marking merchandise and filling long orders to be delivered.

"Mighty good!" he repeated as he buttered a slice of bread.

"Might have been better if Miss high-and-mighty here hadn't chosen supper time as a time to 'step out for a bit'."

"Did you go out, Olivia? I thought you were busy back here--sewing or something." Chester looked up, surprised.

"I had to step out to the pharmacy for a little while." Olivia answered. "I wasn't gone long."

"Long enough," Adaline gave her a chilling look. "Long enough that I had it all to do." She laid a chicken bone on the side of her plate and wiped her fingers on her napkin.

"I'll fix supper tomorrow evening, all by myself," said Olivia. "You can have a whole evening off. I'll even do the dishes alone."

"Can't beat that," Chester smiled. "Sounds more than fair to me."

Olivia clapped her hands. "Thank you, brother."
"Now ain't that dandy. It's all made up and accounted for." Adaline laid down her fork and looked at her brother. "And why do you reckon she had to go to the pharmacy anyway? Huh? Answer me that, brother. Hat and gloves—even Mama's cameo! What have they got at the pharmacy that requires such fixin' on a hot summer day?"

Olivia blushed and felt a knotting sensation in her stomach.

There was a long pause. Then Chester laughed. "I can't imagine! Tell us, Olivia. What was so special about today?"

"Nothing! Nothing was so special. I just needed to step out for a bit and I felt like—like looking nice for a change! Anything wrong with that?"

Chester laughed again. "Sounds fine to me. You do look fetchin' in your straw hat."

The kitchen clock ticked loudly, and the dying fire in the kitchen stove made a sizzling sound.

"I'm glad you understand, brother," Olivia said softly. She was aware that Adaline was looking at her through narrowed eyes. "I'm sorry I left you at such a bad time, Addie. I'll try not to do it again."

There was still no comment from Adaline. A horse and buggy passed through the soft dust of the side street. Chester began to pass the slices of apple pie and was
about to take a bite when Adaline broke her long silence. "You was seein' him, wasn't you?"

"Who? Seeing who?" Olivia stiffened. "You know who. Mr. Chase, that's who!"

Olivia took a bite of pie and kept her eyes down. She made no reply to her sister's angry suggestion. "Answer me!" Adaline said sternly.

Chester watched the drama with no comment. He had not seen Adaline so angry in quite some time.

Olivia continued to eat her pie in small bites. She did not look up. At last, she said, "I had a lemon phosphate and sat under the fan for a time."

"And he was there too, wasn't he? That no good, driftin' salesman of God knows what! He was there, wasn't he? Tell me!"

Olivia shivered and put down her fork. She slipped her napkin into its ring and looked at her sister. "What if he was?"

"Answer me! He was there, wasn't he?"

"Mr. Chase did come in while I was in the pharmacy, but it is a public place."

"A public place, indeed." Adaline looked triumphant. "And he came to see you. He sat with you."

"Adaline, he came in for a root beer. How could he have know I was going to be there. I'm sure it couldn't
matter to him what I do." Olivia rolled and unrolled the corner of her napkin:

"That's true, Addie. How could he know?" questioned Chester. "He's been away I hear--to Cincinnati."

Olivia gave a relieved glance at her brother. "He has. He said he had a lovely trip. And he said to give you both his very best."

"Oh, he did, did he! That no account! He ain't worth powder and lead to blow him sky high and here you are bringin' us messages from him!"

"Adaline, please. He was only being neighborly," Olivia answered.

"Neighborly I'm sure! Butterin' up your brother and sister and pullin' the wool over your eyes. That's what he's doin'! Well, let me tell you, little sister, I don't want to hear of you spendin' no more time with Mr. Chase, ever! You hear!"

"I wasn't spending time--I was--"

"You hush your mouth! I know why women dude up. It's to attract men. That's why. And you was tryin' to attract Mr. Chase! Well, you wasted your time. You aren't goin' see him any more. You hear me!" Adaline brought her fist down on the corner of the oak table for emphasis and Olivia and Chester jumped with surprise.

"He's not much good," said Chester and patted Oliv-
ia's hand. "I've heard tell."

Olivia felt hot tears of anger and shame begin to run down her cheeks.

"First thing you know, he'll be comin' around with flowers and candy and weddin' rings and we'll end up with another mouth to feed." Adaline began to stack the dishes. "I'll not have it! You hear? I'll not have a sister of mine givin' herself to no slick salesman. Mr. Chase, indeed!"

Olivia looked at Adaline. "What right do you have to tell me what to do? I only went to the pharmacy."

"It's not the goin' to the pharmacy that worries me. It's the 'why' you went. Spendin' time with a no account like him! And wearin' Mama's cameo at that! I just don't understand you--you and your high-flown ways! You got to come down, little sister, to reality. And this is reality." Adaline pointed her finger at Olivia. "You ain't goin' see him no more!"

Olivia stood up suddenly and turned toward the parlor. Across the parlor was her bedroom and safety, and all she wanted to do was to go there. She needed to be alone, away from Adaline's voice. As she passed the end of the table, her hand struck something soft. Then there was a crash and she realized she had knocked over the white pitcher that held the zinnias.
"Now look what you've done!" Adaline said harshly. "You've broken Mama's pitcher. You and your zinnias--you and your highfalutin ways!"

After Olivia had gone to her room and locked the door, she could still hear Adaline's coarse voice, but she could not understand the words she was saying. She sat in her rocking chair by the window and looked out at the yard and the coming night. The town was quiet except for a passing horse and carriage now and then and some small boys playing "roll-the-hoop" down the side street.

Suddenly, Olivia began to cry. She had not cried for a very long time, but now she could not stop herself. It felt good to be able to release her anger and frustration in tears. She was angry at her sister for talking to her as she had and she was angry at her brother for saying so little to help her. But most of all, she was angry at herself for allowing her sister to speak to her in such a way.

After a time, she stopped crying and began to think of Mr. Chase. She remembered his bright blue eyes and his ready smile. He was so nice--so pleasant--and she was sure he liked her. He'd even said he had missed seeing her.

But Olivia did not know how Mr. Chase made his living. She did not care. All she cared about was that she
liked him. He made her feel good inside—warm and wo-
manly—and made her want to "fix up" even on a hot summer
day. She could not understand why Adaline disliked him
so. He had given her no cause. He had always been a
gentleman.

All through the darkening evening, Olivia tried to
sort out what she felt. Slowly, her anger turned to fear.
Waves of fear and isolation swept over her. She felt the
need to escape, to leave the room she inhabited, the
store, the town, the people who refused to understand
her or care about her needs. But where could she go;
what could she do? She thought of searching out Mr.
Chase and telling him what she was feeling. She con-
sidered running away, but she had no money and no place
to go. She tried desperately to think of a relative who
might take her in or a friend with whom she might seek
sanctuary. She considered facing Adaline and telling
her she would do whatever she chose to do, on her own;
she would live her own life. But Olivia had lived her
whole life with Adaline. She knew her, and she knew
she was no match for Adaline's viciousness. Olivia had
always felt she had come into Adaline's life guilty of
something; she had no idea what it was, but it was there
between them like a wall—an unspoken barrier in which
there was not a chink of understanding. And now as she
searched for a way out of her dilemma—her dead-end life—she always ended each train of thought by seeing Adaline's face. There seemed to be no way around it.

About ten o'clock, there was a knock at Olivia's door. She did not answer. Someone knocked again and then Adaline's voice spoke sharply through the heavy wood. "You get over your mad tonight, Olivia. We've got to start workin' up those pears tomorrow."

Olivia did not answer. She listened to the quiet night and an occasional sound from her brother's room next door. She began to cry again, not like before, but quietly—almost without tears. And she felt a desperation within she had never felt before. Her body felt alien, as if her mind was adrift—completely apart from the woman's body which sat stiffly in her rocking chair. She longed for her mother and father. She longed for a house filled with happy, smiling people and a large, cool dining room. She longed for pretty flowers and a new dress. She longed for a happy afternoon with Mr. Chase. She longed to be loved and needed. And most of all, she longed to never see Adaline again.

The thought stuck in her brain like a knife, and she felt her body go damp with cold perspiration. How could she feel that way about her own sister! Was it...
that she wanted her sister to go away or to die? Did she really hate her; hate her that much? Surely it was just that she was tired of listening to Adaline's voice always telling her what she had done wrong. She could never remember being right! And now the nicest gift Olivia could imagine would be the gift of never having to listen to Adaline again--never to endure her icy stares and her making fun of the little things that gave her pleasure.

She heard the clock strike eleven. She had decided what to do. A new awareness possessed her, and she felt excited, tingly. She had found an answer born of her desperation, her aloneness, her fear, her disappointment.

She was sure her brother and sister were soundly sleeping by now, but she would have to be very quiet.

Olivia lit the lamp on her bedside table and looked around the familiar room. It was small, but neat and full of her little treasures. She had crocheted a heavy spread for her bed and had Mrs. Wynn hook her two rugs; one with bright yellow flowers and the other with a bowl of fruit. There were embroidered pillows and a picture of her parents, baskets of yarn and spools of thread, and in a tiny rocker by the fireplace was
her childhood doll. This room was her special place, her own small world; one she had created.

She took off her mother's cameo and laid it on her dresser along with her grandmother's ring, which she always wore. She took the heavy tortoise shell comb from her upswept hair and put it beside the cameo and ring. Then she lit a shaded candle that sat on the mantel, blew out the bedside lamp, and silently crept out of the room.

Once outside, the sweet night air warmed her face, and she realized she had been cold. She walked down the brick path to the shed at the back of the yard and went in.

The shed smelled old and musty. It was full of garden tools, broken furniture and odds and ends of lumber. In the corner, she found an old wooden packing crate. She dragged it out into the middle of the floor, turned it up on its end, and then began to hunt a piece of rope. There was a small coil of rope hanging by the door, and she sat down on the crate to figure out how to make a slip knot in such heavy cord. Her father had taught her how when she was only a child, and she used it often when tying packages.

Finally, she fastened the end of the rope to one of the roof supports and climbed up on the packing crate. She had to get down once to blow out the candle—she
certainly didn't want to burn down the shed. As she climbed onto the crate for the last time, the thought crossed her mind that she ought to pray.

... 


"Well, what is it Chester? What are you tryin' to say?"

"Addie. It's Olivia."

"Olivia? What about Olivia? Is she still poutin'? Tell her breakfast's near ready."

"Addie--she's--she's dead."

"Dead! Chester, what are you sayin'? Addie ain't dead. Asleep maybe, but she ain't dead."

"She's hanged herself in the--in the shed. She's dead. Addie--she's dead."

Adaline looked at her brother's face. She caught her breath sharply. "She can't be dead. Let's have a look. She can't have gone and done a fool thing like that--not and leave me with all these pears to can."

She reached for her brother's hand as they crossed the yard to the shed.

The End
MADAME SIMBA

Madame Simba came to town
On the five o'clock local.
She wore rouge on her cheeks and lips,
Gold bangles in her ears
And a red dress with a train.

She checked into the Chambers House,
Demanding a suite for a queen
And because her eyes were dark and fiery
Mr. Chambers gave her the only room with a bath
And called it "the Queen's suite."

Madame Simba read palms in the bandstand
On the courthouse square
Or among the flower beds on the river bank
Where the ferry landed.
Her business was good--she managed to pay her bills.

"I am Madame Simba, The Gypsy Queen," she'd say
And since everyone wanted to believe her,
She was.
Madame Simba wore bright turbans on her coal black hair
And frightened the children
Telling of awesome spells she'd cast:
Once she had changed a naughty boy to a toad, she said,
And she had the power to know everyone's thoughts!

In the winter she danced in the hotel lobby
As a cultural event
And everyone came to watch.
She moved slowly, smoothly, with a smile,
While Charlie Sharp banged a tambourine.

Madame Simba carried a black velvet bag
Filled with nuggets that looked like peppermint drops,
And she gave one to everybody she met
Promising they held magic powers
To assure happiness and good health.

"I am Madame Simba, the Gypsy Queen," she'd say
And since everyone wanted to believe her,
She was.
Madame Simba gave her funeral plans,
All written out, to Lawyer Vise.
"A glassed in coach," it said, "and six white mares
With red tassels on their harness.
No music but a tambourine and certainly no flowers.

I want to wear my red dress--
The one with the train;
Cover me with my shawl--
Everything else the same, but don't put me in
My casket until I've reached my grave."

Madame Simba died the spring of the following year--
She had been ill all along we guessed and
Since gypsy powers seep past the grave
Her plans were followed faithfully;
No one would risk her spells, even in death.

The sunlight shined on the ancient hearse,
Her red dress gleamed within.
The white mares walked slow through the
Village streets till they stopped at the top
Of the hill.
And over the clang of the tambourine,
As her casket was slowly lowered,
The Mayor read our tribute aloud--

"For hours of shadowed fantasy
For spells of love
For lively brightness,
We loved Madame Simba--
the Gypsy Queen."
"Goddamn it, Ira--I wish you could at least hit the spittoon when you spit! Bad enough to have that messy thing to clean, but the floor--well, that's something else again!"

Ira glanced up, crossing his left leg over his right and folding his arms across his lap. "Yeahup!" he said solemnly.

"You've been chewin long enough you ought to do better. Try, will you?"

"Yeahup," Ira replied, blinking his eyes.

The River Town station was deserted except for Ira Toombs and Frank Meyers. Frank was the station master. He always looked forward to the five o'clock train because it meant that after the passengers had dispersed and the freight was stored away, he could go home. Tonight, the word from down the line was that the train was only five minutes late at Plattville which more than likely meant it would be on time at River Town. There was a straight stretch between Plattville and River Town where Evans, the engineer, always made up time.

"Dark evenin, ain't it?" It really wasn't a question. It was more like a comment and Ira must have per-
ceived this for he didn't answer. "Looks to start rainin any time." Frank stared anxiously at the night sky.

To this, Ira made a slight glance at the west window, blinking his eyes rapidly. "Yeahup," he replied and re-crossed his thin legs from right to left.

Down the street, Frank hear the crunch of horses' hoofs on the gravel road that ran along the railroad from River Town to the station. He was sure it would be Buck Wilson coming to carry any of the incoming passengers into River Town to Chambers House or to their homes. And tonight, Frank would be glad to see Buck. The eerieness of the expected storm had set him on edge and he felt very uneasy.

Buck Wilson was black. He was a big man—the strongest man in town, it was said. He made his living "helping people", as he called it, with his strength and ready ideas. Buck seemed to have an answer for everything from cutting trees to a remedy for the grippe.

"Evenin!" Buck boomed, as he entered the station's wide west doors. "Bankin up to rain, I'd say."

"Looks like it." Frank was checking some figures he had entered in a long black ledger. "Sure looks to be a wet spring."

"Maybe so." Buck backed up to the pot bellied stove and rubbed his big hands together. "Hope we ain't gettin
set for a flood."

Ira blinked his eyes even faster than usual at that remark and looked in Buck's direction. "Yeahup!" he said.

Just then they heard the first blast from the incoming train. Buck Wilson went quickly outside to pull his team into the shelter of the overhang at the end of the station. Frank busied himself with the closing details of the day and Ira limped to the south window to watch the train come in.

As Buck came back inside, he felt the first cold spray of rain on his face. A gust of wind stirred up a cloud of dust on the station floor. It settled reluctantly after Buck closed the door. "Could have held off a mite longer," he said, his deep voice echoing through the empty station. "Might some folks get wet this evenin."

Frank came out from behind his ticket cage and buttoned his sweater against the anticipated chill from opening doors and gusting wind. Down the line, they heard the train engine give another blast on her whistle.

"3026, right on schedule!" Frank looked at the large clock that hung between the big double doors and the east window. "I don't know how he does it, but Evans always makes it right on schedule."

Buck laughed loudly. "You ever ride that train? I stoked for him one day and he liked to worked me to death!

203
He really puts her over the tracks between her and Plattville." Buck laughed again.

The train whistled its approach, but the sound was caught by the wind and blown up the valley so that what was left for the men in the station to hear was deceivingly weak. Soon they heard the soft clanging of the bell and knew the train's arrival was eminent.

The wind was blowing strongly against the west side of the building and rain hit the window panes with soft little pings.

"Must be some ice in this weather," Frank said with surprise. "How you goin get the ladies home without them gettin wet?"

"You spectin ladies? They ain't usually no ladies on this run!" Buck rubbed his gloveless hands together in front of the stove.

"There should be tonight. Miss Lucy Sprague and her aunt, Mrs. Vise, went out to Little Caney on the early run. Guess Miss Lucy's tryin to get the Little Caney school for next term." Frank peered out the window at the glaring light from the incoming train. The lamps he had lighted earlier along the side of the building and at the end of the freight ramp seemed to be lost in the darkness of the evening.

Buck turned to warm his backside again. "Hump," he
said. "Ain't no girl got no business goin' that far away from home to teach school!"

"She's not that much of a girl." Frank eyed the big black man. "Besides, somebody's got to teach the youngin's and I've never heard Lucy Sprague called faint of heart."

Ira made no contribution to the conversation but came back from the window to the spittoon, leaned over it and spat heavily, causing tobacco juice to spatter on the floor around the brass receptacle. He blinked his eyes rapidly and sat down, crossing his thin legs in their usual manner and folding his arms across his lap.

Frank watched this little drama from his place at the window, shaking his head with distaste. Buck laughed and clapped his hands. "You did good that time, Ira," he said. "Real good!"

"Yeahup!" Ira replied, watching the door for the first passengers to enter.

Outside, the wind roared and the rain still beat the windows with a heavy content of ice. The passengers were few—only six to be exact. Mr. Joe Owens was first, back from a business jaunt to Lexington. Seth Jackson and Jesse Pierce burst through the door together, as they seemed always to do, talking excitedly to each other. Miss Sprague and Mrs. Vise were assisted through the wind.
and rain by Judge Patrick Mills who had firm hands on their elbows. Both women were holding tenaciously to their hats and Mrs. Vise was complaining about the weather.

"My, my! What a blow this has turned out to be!" Mrs. Vise checked her hat pin and began brushing the dampness from her blue traveling suit with a small gloved hand.

"Indeed!" Judge Mills gave his grey homburg a sharp rap on his arm. "Seems winter is having another go at it. Anything amiss with you, Miss Sprague?"

"The weather is the very least of my concerns at this moment." Lucy Sprague walked with deliberate steps to stand with Buck Wilson before the pot bellied stove. "And how's it with you this evening, Mr. Wilson?"

Buck was always a bit put off when Lucy Sprague called him Mr. Wilson. She was the only person in town who did and it had taken him a very long time to decide that she was being genuinely friendly and not condescending.

"I guess things are movin along, Mrs. Sprague--movin a-long," he answered with a short laugh. "My worry is how I'm goin get you ladies into town without gettin wet."

"Oh my, Buck, don't concern yourself! It isn't far and we'll have hot baths and warm brandy waiting when we arrive." Mrs. Vise waved her small hand. "Are you riding with us, Judge?"
"I believe I will if Buck has the room. What say?"
Judge Mills had seated himself beside Mrs. Vise on one of
the waiting room benches.
"Plenty of room, Judge! Plenty of room for ev­
one!" Buck sang out.

Jesse Pierce and Seth Jackson had already departed,
in spite of the weather. They were co-owners of a lumber
yard which was only a block from the railroad station.
They had obviously decided to try for the lumber yard of­
office before going home.

But Joe Owens paced nervously from the door to the
ticket cage and back again. Finally, Judge Mills spoke
loudly, "Come sit here, Joe. How was your trip?"

The man turned quickly with a startled expression.
He was wearing a flat black hat with a wide brim and a
silver buckle on the side. He grabbed the hat from his
head as if the invitation had been a reprimand. "Oh,
fine! It was a successful trip," he said haltingly. Then,
clutching his hat and his small valise, he came and sat
down opposite the Judge. "I thank you, sir, for askin."

"Why are we not going home?" Lucy Sprague asked sud­
ddenly.

"We're waiting to see if there is any urgent cargo
to be taken into town," Judge Mills offered. "Right,
Buck?"
"Right, sir. I'll go see how things are coming. There ain't usually much to haul from this evenin run."
He pulled his coat collar tight about his neck and disappeared through the door.

"It's been a most disconcerting trip," Mrs. Vise was saying. "I can imagine what Davis will do when he hears!"

"When he hears what, Mrs. Vise?" Joe Owens toyed with the bright buckle on the side of his hat.

"Miss Sprague didn't get her job," Judge Mills said, looking past Owens to the window. The wind was gusting harder and the rain pelted the window panes.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Where did you apply?" he asked.

"Little Caney," Lucy Sprague answered, with a look of disgust on her face. "I hope the people we met today are not an example of the only kind of people living on Little Caney!"

"Now, dear, there's no call to be rude," Mrs. Vise smiled. "Some folks can't help what they are."

"Pshaw!" Lucy said vehemently. "Those children haven't a chance in--oh, they just haven't a chance, that's all!"

"I'm afraid I don't understand. Would you mind telling me what happened? Or am I asking things I shouldn't?" Joe Owens looked very interested.
"It's no secret, I guess," Lucy answered. "I saw two of the three trustees and they both expected a bribe— or worse!"

"Lucy!" Mrs. Vise put her leather-gloved hand over her mouth.

"Well, it's true! You know it's true! Those scoundrels would have hired me on the spot if I'd have gone armed with a quart of liquor for each of them or been prepared to—"

"I know what you mean." Joe Owens held up his hand.

"I am sorry, Miss Sprague. I understand it is a common occurrence."

Frank Meyers came in from the freight room with a handful of colored slips of paper and disappeared behind his ticket cage. "Damn people anyway!" he thought. "What are they waitin for? Why don't they go on home?" He began to pigeonhole the colored paper.

"Well, Lucy, we'll just have to try again...in another place," Mrs. Vise said. Her voice carried a slight lilt.

"I doubt Davis will hear to it after he finds out what happened today," Judge Mills said quickly.

"Seems to me those fellows have gotten by with that sort of thing long enough." Joe Owens put his hat down on the bench beside him and leaned forward, nervously press-
ing his fingers together. "There ought to be something done. School teaching's too important a job to be muddled up in such a way."

"Precisely my opinion!" Lucy Sprague shook her head emphatically. "There must be a better way of choosing teachers than through bribery and immoral acts!"

Judge Mills laughed lightly. "I agree. But I doubt much will change until a new system is worked out by the legislature in Frankfort. Maybe we've outlived the usefulness of trustees. Maybe it's time to move on to another type of school government."

"I don't think there's any question about that. But that legislature is about as interested in education as I am in being president." Lucy made a fan shaped sweep through the air with her hand. "I just don't see it happening. It will take an act of God to get those men to change their ways!"

Mrs. Vise sat rolling and unrolling the end of her belt. "I've been teaching for twenty years and I've never experienced anything like that."

The Judge patted her hand. "That's because Thomas Vise or Davis Sprague always took care of finding you positions." He paused and looked at Lucy. "And how is it that Davis isn't doing the same for you, Miss Sprague?"

"She wouldn't hear to it!" Mrs. Vise piped up.
"These young people! You know how they feel about standing on their own two feet!"

"There's nothing wrong with a little help from the right quarters," Judge Mills said sternly.

Lucy Sprague eyed the Judge and her aunt. "No, sir. I've never contended there was. But to be perfectly honest about the whole thing, it does appear that Lucy Sprague will always be Lucy Sprague, not Mrs. Somebody-or-other. And it is also a fact that I am a woman with aging parents. Now doesn't it follow, that barring some disaster, I will have to be self-reliant sooner or later? Well, it has occurred to me I'd like it to be sooner while there are still folks around who care enough to say-- "Lucy, that's great!", or by the same token, "Lucy, you've got it all wrong!"

Joe Owens applauded. "Amen!" he said loudly. "I think you're absolutely right, even if a Mr. Somebody-or-other does come along."

Lucy beamed.

The Judge cleared his throat and gave Mrs. Vise a quick glance. Just then Buck Wilson came quickly through the door, a gust of cold wind swirling into the waiting room behind him.

"Rain's slackin. Looks to change to snow. Might give it a few more minutes fore we start out to see if it
will be better travelin weather," Buck said as he headed for the stove. "My, my, but it's cold out there!"

Frank Meyers shrugged his shoulders and turned off the lamp at the ticket cage. "Of all nights for these people to want to visit!" he thought, taking off his green eye shade and putting it on top of his ledger, ready for tomorrow's work. He picked up his jacket and put it on. Then, with his greatcoat, cap and muffler in hand, he switched off the overhead light and walked into the waiting room. "Maybe they'll take the hint," he thought hopefully.

The train had moved out slowly to the River Town round house to be readied for its morning run. The freight had been checked and housed, except for a couple of small boxes that Buck had decided should go to town tonight. They had been stashed under the seat of his open carriage.

Frank checked the pendulum clock on the waiting room wall. It was five minutes to six. He looked around at the passengers who sat on the benches closest to the stove. Finally, he chose a seat within hearing distance and sat down.

The Judge had settled back comfortably and was deeply interested in a rather hushed conversation with Mrs. Vise. Buck seemed to have broken the group's train of
thought with his most recent observations about the weather.

Suddenly, Joe Owens slapped his hands together and stood up. "You know what I think?" They all looked at him with startled expressions. "I think Lucy Sprague should run for office! I think she should try for the next legislature."

Judge Mills opened his mouth to laugh but thought better of it. Instead he patted Mrs. Vise's hand again and smiled sympathetically. "Now, Joe--we can't have our ladies bothering their heads about things like the legislature! They have enough to do trying to keep us men civilized." And then he laughed.

"That's a very good point, Judge. Civilized indeed! Where do we need to be civilized more than in our law making bodies! And who can do a better job of presenting a problem than someone who's been faced with it first hand?" Joe Owens ran his fingers through his sparse brown hair. "I tell you, Lucy Sprague is a natural!"

Lucy had straightened her tall frame and stood looking at Joe with an expression of amazement mixed with pleasure. Her lips were drawn into a tight line and her gloved hands were clasped in front of her.

Mrs. Vise laughed and waved her hand. "Davis would never hear to it," she said. "He would never allow Lucy
to make a spectacle of herself!"

There was no comment from Lucy. She shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as she moved her gaze from first one to the other of Joe's audience.

"I agree with Mrs. Vise. Davis would never allow his only daughter to do all the things that need to be done to seek and obtain public office. It's unheard of!" Judge Mills looked amused.

"All the more reason it would probably work!" said Joe Owens. "It is unheard of! But I'm telling you one thing, the teachers of this county are sure to be on her side not to mention all the parents who want a better education for their children. She'd have no trouble getting signers for a petition. I'll lay you odds she'd have a landslide vote!"

At this the Judge laughed heartily and glanced again at Mrs. Vise. "I'm not a betting man, but if I were I'd call you on this one!" he said. "I'd be sure to make money!"

Buck Wilson was still standing beside Lucy. He leaned backward a bit, his great arms folded over his chest. His brown eyes glistened and he frowned slightly. Then he turned to Lucy. "And what's you thinkin about all this?" he asked quietly.

A smile played around Lucy's tightly closed lips.
"I'm interested!" she said. "Very interested!"

Mrs. Vise jerked to attention. "Lucy Sprague! You can't be serious?"

"Why not? I haven't heard one good solid reason not to be! Give me one!"

"We've given you several! The most important one being that your father will never hear to it!"

Lucy rocked back on her heels. "I'm not so sure about that!" she said vehemently. "I think he will like the idea."

"My dear! You're not really going to consider this ridiculous--ridiculous plan?" Judge Mills had stopped laughing and looked very serious.

"Yes sir, I believe I will. Today has been a most unhappy experience for me and I'm what my father likes to call "a strong woman." I think I'm one of the fortunate ones. But what about all the women my age and younger who have the same experience with no one to back them or advise them; women who have no inkling of what to expect from men who care nothing for them or their abilities and even less for the children they may or may not be hired to teach. And I'm sure men who apply for teaching positions suffer some of the same unsavory experiences. There need to be safeguards for teachers--ways to assure they will be hired for their training and ability and past ex-
perience—not because they buy the right man a fifth of bourbon or a fancy box of cigars—at the very least!" Lucy's eyes were narrowed and she spoke calmly.

"You see, Judge! She's a natural!" Joe Owens applauded.

The Judge shot Owens a chilly glance and slapped his hands down on his knees as he stood up. "Well, to be sure, we will not elect her here tonight. How about a ride to town, Buck?"

"Yes, sir! Comin right up!" Buck boomed.

Frank Meyer stood up with a sigh of relief and walked over to where Ira Toombs sat against the east wall, seemingly asleep. "You take care of the stove, Ira, you hear? And after we've gotten away, turn off the outside lamps, will you?"

Ira looked up. He was blinking his eyes rapidly. He took two or three toothless chews on his tobacco and recrossed his legs. "Yeahup!" he said loudly.

"Lock the doors after us. The freight room is already locked." Frank offered this as a final instruction as he struggled into his greatcoat and threw his muffler recklessly around his neck. He used both hands to establish his cap at a proper angle and then stuffed his hands deep in the pockets of his coat.

Lucy watched all of the preparations for departure
with her lips in a thin line and a slight smile around her eyes.

Suddenly, Ira Toombs limped by to lock the west door. As he passed in front of Lucy, he took a hard chew on his tobacco, looked at her with a quick movement of his head and blinking rapidly, he said "Yeahup!"

A startled look came over Lucy's face. "What's that?" she asked.

The old man kept moving, but over his shoulder, he replied, "Yeahup!"

"You're sure?" she said softly.

"He ought to know!" Joe Owens laughed triumphantly. "He knows more about what people in this county think than almost anybody else."

"Well, so be it!" Lucy took a step forward and held up her hands. "Lady--and gentlemen, I'd like you to know it is my firm intention to seek a seat in the Kentucky legislature. Do I have your support?"

There was a deep hush in the room. The only sounds were the wind whistling around the corners of the station, and the stove crackling. Mrs. Vise looked helplessly at Judge Mills and put her gloved hand over her mouth. Joe Owens beamed and Buck Wilson stood with his arms folded across his chest.

"I repeat," Lucy said in a firm voice. "Do I have
your support?"

"You have mine and any help I can give you!" Joe Owens sang out.

Buck gave an affirmative nod and put on his cap.

Frank Meyers walked slowly toward the east door. "I guess it's not a bad idea," he said haltingly. "I'll do what I can for you, Miss Sprague."

The Judge and Mrs. Vise exchanged quick glances. "Lucy, your father--" Mrs. Vise began.

"You leave father to me," said Lucy quietly. "I'm asking where you stand, Auntie."

"Well, well, I suppose if you insist on this--this idea--I--I stand with you!" Mrs. Vise said reluctantly.

"I think it is ridiculous!" the Judge snapped as he put on his homburg and gave it a sharp tap to set it firmly in place. "But I've been on the side of justice all my life. I can't very well stop now," he said as he took Mrs. Vise firmly by the elbow and started her toward the door.

Lucy made a slight curtsy and glanced at Ira. "Thanks!" she said.

He stood by the west door, his thin arms hanging limply at his sides. "Yeahup!" he answered quietly.

The End
The old lady said, "I'll not go with you!"
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She sat in a faded blue, overstuffed chair. Her body ballooned over the arms and front of the chair and her pudgy hands held firmly to the chair's wooden trim.

"You have to!" Tom Carter said. He stood in front of her with his hands on his hips. His sheriff's badge caught the reflection of a dim light from a silk-shaded lamp on a table behind the old lady.

Molly Moss shook her head. "No sir! I'll not go!"

"Molly, why you makin this so hard? Elder told me to arrest you. Now git up and come on!"

The old lady shook her head again and gripped her hands tightly to the wooden trim till her fingers turned white.

Somewhere in the dimness of the stairway, a giggle went up into the heavy air. "That's tellin em, Moss!" a woman's voice said from the head of the stairs.

"Aw hell, Molly! We ain't goin mistreat you. We just goin put you in jail over night. You can post bond tomorrow. It's a formality!"

Molly shook her head making her silver curls bounce. She looked hard at the faded rose-filled carpet.
"Aw hell!" Tom Carter cracked his knuckles, looked at the old woman, and stormed out the front screen door, banging it behind him. His boots clicked hard on the wooden porch and down the steps.

As his police car pulled away, a cheer went up from the stairway, and six women scampered down to the sitting room where Molly Moss sat like a queen on her throne.

"You told him a thing or two!" Brenda patted one of Molly's soft hands.

"Men in uniform! What gets into em anyhow?" Sally sat down on a stool at Molly's feet.

Angel lit a cigarette, and the smoke drifted toward the silk shade of the lamp. "He's been here plenty on other business," she said. "Who's the bastard think he is anyhow?"

"Wonder what got into Elder?" Dee Dee swung her hips in a grinding motion. "I'll take care of him next time. You must not have done a very good job last time, Silk."

"Aw, shut your mouth. The bastard couldn't get it up! How you take care of Elder when he can't get it up?"

"You don't! That's why I said I'll do it next time," Dee Dee retorted, swinging her hips again. "I'll bet he don't have no trouble gettin it up with me."

Silk's hand shot out and swatted Dee Dee's swinging behind.
"Ouch! That hurt, you bitch! I'll thank you to keep your hands to yourself!"

Molly looked from woman to woman. "What a lot you are!" she said. She relaxed her grip on the chair arms and drew little circles on the velvety material of the arm with her right index finger. "Not one move! None of you! Not one move!"

The six women looked at each other in panic.

"What could we do?" Sally asked, stretching her long legs out in front of her. "He's the law--whatever else he is."

"Not a move!" Molly repeated.

Angel seemed to sense the depth of Molly's displeasure and pulled up a straight-backed chair so she could look Molly in the eye. "He'll be back," she said. "Let's get us a plan."

Molly shook her head and continued to make her invisible circles on the chair arm.

"Aw, he won't be back. Not for Moss anyhow," Sally said, running her hand up and down her long silk-stockinged leg.

"He will. He will be back. Tom Carter don't like to be told no--especially by a woman. He'll be back all right, with help, and they'll take Molly to jail just like he said." Angel stopped to take a drag on her cigarette
and crush it in a nearby ashtray.

"Who made you so smart, missy? How you know so much?" Brenda mocked.

"I know. You know too if you'd use that head of yours." Angel shot a look at the tall redhead. "He'll be back. We need to be ready."

Molly sat very still, blinking her eyes and listening to Angel. "I'll not go. I'll not go to jail now or any other time. Get me the pistol Silk!" she said slowly.

"Naw, Molly! That ain't the way to handle this. You don't want to shoot him. Then they'll really take you to jail. We got to think of something good." Angel patted the old woman's knee.

A clock chimed in the next room. It was eight-thirty and dusky dark. The smell of honeysuckle drifted through the screen door; fireflies were beginning to rise out of the darkening grass. A boat blew a long mournful whistle as it plowed through the river in front of the house.

"That's Fred Mackey!" Dee Dee chirped as she ran to the front door and onto the porch. "Blink the porch light, Silk! Blink the porch light!"

Silk walked quickly to the front of the room and gave three short blinks of the porch light. In response, there were three short blasts of the boat whistle.

"Hi Freddy!" Dee Dee called out. "Hi Freddy baby."
Soon the boat was gone, and Dee Dee returned to the circle about Molly.

"Decided yet?" Dee Dee asked.

"Naw!" Brenda said gruffly. "What can we do? We're in as much trouble as she is."

"He didn't want to arrest us! He wants Molly. Why n't you go Molly? He said it was just overnight. Why n't you go? You can get bail tomorrow." Sally stroked her legs.

Janie, who had been silent up to now, stepped forward from the darkness with a small glass of sherry and handed it to Molly. "They ain't goin arrest nobody if they is too busy to think about it. And they ain't goin arrest nobody if they just committed a crime themselves."

"What are you talkin about! How can we get them to commit a crime? You're crazy!" Brenda said.

"Naw. I'm not neither. We can get em to pay in front of one another. Then they can't buck out. They is seven of us to tell!"

"Who'd listen to us?" Dee Dee giggled.

"Wait a minute. She might have something!" Angel held up her hand for silence. "We wouldn't have to worry about anybody listening. They wouldn't tell if they thought they was goin be in trouble too!"

"Git the pistol, Silk. I'll shoot the bastard! I'll
not go!" Molly shouted from her chair. "Then I'll fire
the lot of you and be free!" She finished off her
sherry in one gulp and handed the glass to Angel.

"Come on, Molly! We're tryin to help you," Angel
said. "That pistol won't help!"

"I'll tell you what let's do," said Janie. She mo-
tioned for all the women to gather closer. "Let's do
this. We can all dress up--our shinest clothes and dude
up our hair and wear lots of Blue Waltz and divide em
up. If they is only two, we can go three with each. If
they is three, we can go two. If they is four, Dee Dee
can take one all by herself, and Silk can take one, and
we can go two with the others. They won't be no more than
four. The whole county ain't got no more than that!"

"And then what?" asked Brenda.

"We really take em good--wear em down and then charge
em extra when they come down, but be sure they is all here
with all of us at the same time. They got to pay before
one another or we don't let em leave."

"How you goin do that? We're women! How we goin
fight three men?" Brenda asked.

Silk laughed. "You do it all the time. This time
the only difference is they'll have their drawers on--
some of the time."

"Ain't you got a hat pin?" Janie asked. "They ain't
goin be no vilence if they get stuck in the right place if en they try leavin!"

The women laughed in chorus; Molly Moss leaned forward, her eyes narrowed.

"It sounds good to me," Molly said. "I'll collect. Get goin!" she said, settling back in to her chair and waving her fat hands.

The women disappeared in a flurry up the stairs.

Molly sat in the semi-darkness of the sitting room listening to the clock tick. "Why the hell do they want to arrest me now?" she murmured. "I been runnin a house for twenty years. Law men been some of my best clients!"
She shook her head and shifted in her chair.

One by one, the women drifted downstairs. Brenda was first. She swished by Molly for approval.

"Best I own," she said, running her hand over her ruffled blue dress and down her blue-stockinged leg. "I never wore it here before."

"Pretty," Molly nodded. "Real pretty."
Brenda moved her hand quickly over her plunging neckline. "Low enough?"

"Real pretty," Molly repeated.

Sally was next in a sheer red voile. Dee Dee and Angel had flowers in their hair, and Janie's black skin
gleamed through white eyelet. Silk was last. She had a heart-shaped beauty mark on her bosom and a purple plume for Molly's silver hair.

The room resounded with the scent of Blue Waltz. There was a soft rosy glow from a red lamp in the front window.

"Well, you ain't too bad," Molly said, looking around. "Pretty damn good whorehouse for such a one-horse town. Sure would hate to lose it."

"You won't," said Silk with a flair of confidence.

Outside, another boat passed, and they listened in silence to the waves from the wake slap against the shore. The cicadas sang a loud rhythmic song into the warm night.

About ten past ten, a car came roaring down Front Street. A red light flashed on top of the car.

"Let's get em!" Angel said from a chair by the window.

Tom Carter and his deputy, Arthur Sloan came quickly up the walk, stomping loudly on the wooden porch and in the front screen door.

Molly sat where Tom had left her. "Back so soon?" she asked sullenly.

"You got to go Molly. We'll carry you if we have to," Tom said. "Elder's mad."

Molly laughed. "You got a hernia ain't you Tom?
How you goin carry me? I weigh three hundred pounds!"

"God!" said Arthur.

"We'll do it!" Tom looked at Arthur with contempt.

"You don't have to be in such a hurry, do you?"
Brenda came out of the darkness and swished by Tom. She put her hand on Arthur's arm. "Been a long time ain't it Arthur? Need to spend a little time?"

Arthur gulped and stepped back. Brenda latched on to his arm "God!" Arthur said.

"I ain't seen you in a while either, Tommy," Silk said, touching Tom's shoulder. "I'm free tonight."

The Blue Waltz swam in waves in the heavy air of the dimly lighted room.

"I'm needin too," Dee Dee crooned as she pushed close to Arthur. "You'll share him won't you Brenda?"

"He's enough for both of us," Brenda laughed.

"How about three?" Sally said, standing in front of Arthur and running her hands down her thighs.

Arthur swayed a bit and looked at Tom. "Ain't we goin arrest her now?" He nodded at Molly.

"No," Angel sang out. "We got plans for him. We don't want Tom to feel neglected," she laughed as she and Janie caught Tom's arms at the same time. Angel began to unbutton his shirt.

"Don't forget me," said Silk as she ran her hand
over Tom's behind. "Nice," she whispered.

Arthur had begun to sweat and to try to pull away. "Tom!"

"Let me go!" Tom shouted as he raised his arms a bit as if to shake off the two women who held him. "Let me go!"

"Not you," said Angel. "It's a slow night."

Molly watched the proceedings without a word. "I demand you let me go." Tom's voice drifted off as Angel began to caress him under his now unbuttoned shirt.

"Oh my God!" Arthur said in a groaning voice.

The next few minutes were filled with voices and movement as the women herded the two men up the stairs. The two men were powerless in the hands of six so well schooled in their art.

Once upstairs, the noise continued for a time, and then it was quiet. Outside, the red light on top of the sheriff's car continued its silent announcement. Molly sat disinterestedly in her chair and finally dozed.

A while later, two disheveled men were led down to the sitting room by the now half-clothed women. Arthur looked dazed, and Tom was no longer aggressive.

"Why'd you do it, Molly?" he asked. "We didn't mean
no harm. We was just following Elder's orders. Why'd you--"

"I didn't do nothin, Tom Carter. What you talkin about?" Molly retorted.

The women giggled.

"You know what I mean," Tom whined.

Arthur moaned and sat heavily on the sofa.

"Well you come for sportin. You got it. Now you pay and get out. I'm closin early tonight. My girls need their beauty sleep."

"Pay! We didn't come--" Tom started.

"What's this? You ain't goin pay? Now Tom, you know you are goin pay!" Molly said roughly.

"They'll put you in jail forever for this Molly!"

Tom continued.

Arthur sat with his head in his hands. Silk patted his shoulder, and Brenda held his hat.

"Pay me Tom Carter. Three times ten is thirty. It's thirty dollars each," said Molly.

"Thirty dollars!" Tom shouted. "Thirty dollars for bein hornswoggled!"

"Is that what you call it," Molly asked in a low voice. "It don't matter none to me what you call it. Just pay me and be on your way."

"And what you goin do when I tell Elder. What you
goin do about trickin a police officer?" Tom asked with more assurance.

"Tricked! Any man willing to take on three women at one time and pay triple price ain't tricked! He's desper­ate!" Molly laughed.

The women giggled and Arthur moaned.

"Old woman, I'm tellin you--"

"What? What you tellin me? Two of Elder's golden-haired boys refusin to pay for services rendered in a whorehouse!" Molly paused. "Well girls, we do need to convince these fellows we are to get our just pay for such fine service. Maybe you can make em understand--"

Arthur moaned again. "Pay em Tom! For God sake, pay em!" He began to rummage for his money in his buttoned back pocket.

"No! I'll not pay for bein--"

"Ok girls," Molly said and settled back again in her chair.

"Tom! Pay em! How do you know what else--Oh God!" Arthur was moaning again. "Please pay em. I'm goin be sick!"

There was another giggle around the room.

"Well mister? What's it to be?" Molly leaned forward again. "You goin pay for services rendered?"

"Here's my thirty!" said Arthur as he staggered over
to Molly's chair.

"You bastard coward!" said Tom as he took out three ten dollar bills, and the two men gave their money to Molly. "We'll get you yet!" Tom shook his finger at Molly.

"Now mister, you best forget that! There are six women in this house to swear you paid for vice, and I got the payoff right here. If I was you, I'd get me a real good story in mind fore you see Elder again about how your hernia is actin up and you can't lift no three hundred pound woman who ain’t done nothin no how." Molly looked Tom in the eye. "Or somethin!"

"Goddamn!" Arthur said and ran for the porch.

Tom glanced around the room at the six women and back at Molly.

"We'll be goin now Molly Moss and we'll be wishin you a good night's sleep."

"I'll have that, thank you," answered Molly. "You do the same."

Tom went quickly out of the house. The red light on top of the police car clicked off and the car pulled away slowly.

"What a lot you are," Molly chuckled, and the six women laughed loud and long in the warm Blue Waltz air.

The End
PLASTIC FLOWERS

a dramatic monolog

Well I remember when this town was!
It was tree-lined—they formed a kind of canopy—
But the streets were mud;
Paths of ashes led from brick sidewalk to brick sidewalk.
One spent a lot of time looking up!
There were flower beds and grape arbors and prized fruit trees.
The courthouse square was always full
Of traders from the country
And cracker-box politicians
All with different ideas
About why the world was going to hell.
Saturday was stock day.
People came from miles around
With handsome mules, draft horses,
Morgans, bulls and beef.
Ladies took their egg-money
To the dry goods store
And sent their daughters to the movies
And for a lemonade at the corner pharmacy.
There wasn't so much prejudice then.
We were only a few steps in front of "civilization"
And it took everybody to hold it back.
People had a kind of stoic dignity;
Even worn clothes were starched and ironed
And promises were kept.

But now the trees are gone
And that town--the one I knew--
Has moved up to the hill.
They're all there, well, nearly all,
Buried in rich loam.
I've always said that cemetery
Takes up the best house sites around!
And it's getting full; fuller every year.
The population there is more than here!
Of course there are pioneers buried there--
Men and women who worked themselves to death
To make this county grow.
And there are some folks who just wandered in
Like Miss Annie Hartley.
She came here on a riverboat
And opened a dry goods store;
She said the money was inherited,
But we always heard she won it in a poker game.
She finally married Mr. Chase
After Olivia Hatton hanged herself--
He ran through with every cent she had
And she was buried in a paupers grave.

Not many had peaceable deaths it seems--
Especially the women,
Except for Molly Moss and Madame Simba.
Molly died just sitting in her chair.
It took ten strong men to put her in her grave;
Big woman she was and ran the finest "house" around.
Madame Simba was a gypsy queen she said.
She wrote her funeral "wants" down in black and white--
Everyone was afraid to do different for she could cast spells!
After Molly passed away, her "house" fell into decline.
Dee Dee Blake was murdered by a rowdy from the river
And Brenda Blue died having some man's child.
Silk Thompson left town in the dark of night.
Angel Smith was the last one left--
She died the night Molly's house burned down;
No one knows why.

I guess you might say
Miss Lucy Sprague died peaceable though;
At least she wasn't feeling any pain.
She fell to "holding school" in her parlor
In her last years—no one complained;
It kept her busy and out of the way.
But it seemed strange to see food spots on her clothes;
She'd always been so genteel and precise.
It's awful when you count them up—
The ones who died violently.
Arthur Sloan was shot by moonshiners
Out in the back of the county;
Miss Adaline Hatton was hit by a train—
Seems somehow fitting after the way she treated Miss
    Olivia!
Miles Ingram drowned—that was always suspect
After that terrible business with his daughter.
And that Billy Blaker who was shot—
They never did find out who did it.
Carol Sprague Owens was found beaten to death
By that no-account husband of hers—
Left four little tikes!
Her father, the Reverend Sprague,
Swore it was her punishment from God,
But he didn't last long either after Carol went.
Some folks say he died of guilt;
I think they're right!
Of course there are a lot who didn't die of violence,  
But they were sad deaths just the same.  
Like Nadine Mills, who died because she couldn't breathe.  
After her man left, she wilted like a flower  
And the doctor said she killed herself with cigarettes.  
The old piano teacher froze to death;  
No one knew she had no money--  
She'd have been too proud to take help anyway.  
Mrs. Pierce died in an old ladies home  
And Rose Taylor was put in an institution--  
That was from a combination of grief and alcohol.  
Mrs. Vise refused to eat until she wasted away from  
hunger;  
It was her choice--she wasn't sick.  

Looking back, they're not a happy lot,  
These people that I knew.  
Makes the town look pretty scary;  
Kind of grotesque, a bad luck place,  
And you take to wondering what end  
Each person will have.  
Nothing is the same here!  
I guess the cemetery shows the way it is,  
Overgrown with angel grass and teasel.  
Dead tree limbs block the paths,
Ancient stones are overturned and broken.
The town's the same way.
It's dirty and neglected;
The dignity's disappeared!
This town used to have a bandstand and a band,
Nice hotels, shops, houses with clean lawns and fresh paint
And well attended churches.
But now the trees are gone;
The streets are paved, but dirty--
The fine old homes have fallen into disrepair,
The hotels have been razed,
The churches are all but empty.
And the terrible thing is, no one seems to care!
It's as if a dark cloud of lethargy has settled down.
The transients who come and go
Leave scars and hurts, adding only to the dirt!
But worst of all is that in the cemetery,
Out among the angel grass,
The Johnson grass, the cockleburs and tangled honeysuckle vines,
Are the faded plastic flowers--
Roses, daffodils, larkspur and poinsettia--
Standing on single stems or sagging from wreath or spray--
Out of season, out of time, out of place!
They are pitiful momentos to these lives that were!
Foreign made, sun-drained molds
Cast amid the graves of people so like them—
Frozen, molded plastic flower lives
Who only with their dying
Became real.