Grade 10
Short Stories
Coming of Age
Going to the shore on the first morning of the holiday, the young English boy stopped at a turning of the path and looked down at a wild and rocky bay, and then over to the crowded beach he knew so well from other years. His mother walked on in front of him, carrying a bright-striped bag in one hand. Her other arm, swinging loose, was very white in the sun. The boy watched that white, naked arm, and turned his eyes, which had a frown behind them, toward the bay and back again to his mother. When she felt he was not with her, she swung around. "Oh, there you are, Jerry!" she said. She looked impatient, then smiled. "Why, darling, would you rather not come with me? Would you rather-" She frowned, conscientiously worrying over what amusements he might secretly be longing for which she had been too busy or too careless to imagine. He was very familiar with that anxious, apologetic smile. Contrition sent him running after her. And yet, as he ran, he looked back over his shoulder at the wild bay; and all morning, as he played on the safe beach, he was thinking of it.

Next morning, when it was time for the routine of swimming and sunbathing, his mother said, "Are you tired of the usual beach, Jerry? Would you like to go somewhere else?"

"Oh, no!" he said quickly, smiling at her out of that unfailing impulse of contrition - a sort of chivalry. Yet, walking down the path with her, he blurted out, "I'd like to go and have a look at those rocks down there."

She gave the idea her attention. It was a wild-looking place, and there was no one there, but she said, "Of course, Jerry. When you've had enough come to the big beach. Or just go straight back to the villa, if you like."

She walked away, that bare arm, now slightly reddened from yesterday's sun, swinging. And he almost ran after her again, feeling it unbearable that she should go by herself, but he did not.

She was thinking, Of course he's old enough to be safe without me. Have I been keeping him too close? He mustn't feel he ought to be with me. I must be careful.

He was an only child, eleven years old. She was a widow. She was determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion. She went worrying off to her beach.

As for Jerry, once he saw that his mother had gained her beach, he began the steep descent to the bay. From where he was, high up among red-brown rocks, it was a scoop of moving bluish green fringed with white. As he went lower, he saw that it spread among small promontories and inlets of rough, sharp rock, and the crisping, lapping surface showed stains of purple and darker blue. Finally, as he ran sliding and scraping down the last few yards, he saw an edge of white surf, and the shallow, luminous movement of water over white sand, and, beyond that, a solid, heavy blue.

He ran straight into the water and began swimming. He was a good swimmer. He went out fast over the gleaming sand, over a middle region where rocks lay like discoloured monsters under the surface, and then he was in the real sea - a warm sea where irregular cold currents from the deep water shocked his limbs.

When he was so far out that he could look back not only on the little bay but past the promontory that was between it and the big beach, he floated on the buoyant surface and looked for his mother. There she was, a speck of yellow under an umbrella that looked like a slice of orange peel. He swam back to shore, relieved at being sure she was there, but all at once very lonely.

On the edge of a small cape that marked the side of the bay away from the promontory was a loose scatter of rocks. Above them, some boys were stripping off their clothes. They came running, naked, down to the rocks. The English boy swam towards them, and kept his distance at a stone's throw. They were of that coast, all of them burned smooth dark brown, and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body. He swam a little closer; they turned and watched him with narrowed, alert dark eyes. Then one smiled and waved. It was enough. In a minute, he had swum in and was on the rocks beside them,
smiling with a desperate, nervous supplication. They shouted cheerful greetings at him, and then, as he preserved his nervous, uncomprehending smile, they understood that he was a foreigner strayed from his own beach, and they proceeded to forget him. But he was happy. He was with them.

They began diving again and again from a high point into a well of blue sea between rough, pointed rocks. After they had dived and come up, they swam around, hauled themselves up, and waited their turn to dive again. They were big boys — men to Jerry. He dived, and they watched him, and when he swam around to take his place, they made way for him. He felt he was accepted, and he dived again, carefully, proud of himself.

Soon the biggest of the boys poised himself, shot down into the water, and did not come up. The others stood about, watching. Jerry, after waiting for the sleek brown head to appear, let out a yell of warning; they looked at him idly and turned their eyes back towards the water. After a long time, the boy came up on the other side of a big dark rock, letting the air out of his lungs in a spluttering gasp and a shout of triumph. Immediately, the rest of them dived in. One moment, the morning seemed full of chattering boys; the next, the air and the surface of the water were empty. But through the heavy blue, dark shapes could be seen moving and groping.

Jerry dived, shot past the school of underwater swimmers, saw a black wall of rock looming at him, touched it, and bobbed up at once to the surface, where the wall was a low barrier he could see across. There was no one visible; under him, in the water, the dim shapes of the swimmers had disappeared. Then one, and then another of the boys came up on the far side of the barrier of rock, and he understood that they had swum through some gap or hole in it. He plunged down again. He could see nothing through the stinging salt water but the blank rock. When he came up, the boys were all on the diving rock, preparing to attempt the feat again. And now, in a panic of failure, he yelled up, in English, "Look at me! Look!" and he began splashing and kicking in the water like a foolish dog.

They looked down gravely, frowning. He knew the frown. At moments of failure, when he clowned to claim his mother's attention, it was with just this grave, embarrassed inspection that she rewarded him. Through his hot shame, feeling the pleading grin on his face like a scar that he could never remove, he looked up at the group of big brown boys on the rock and shouted, "Bonjour! Merci! Au revoir! Monsieur, monsieur!" while he hooked his fingers round his ears and waggled them.

Water surged into his mouth; he choked, sank, came up. The rock, lately weighed with boys, seemed to rear up out of the water as their weight was removed. They were flying down past him, now, into the water; the air was full of falling bodies. Then the rock was empty in the hot sunlight. He counted one, two, three...

At fifty, he was terrified. They must all be drowning beneath him, in the watery caves of the rock! At a hundred, he stared around him at the empty hillside, wondering if he should yell for help. He counted faster, faster, to hurry them up, to bring them to the surface quickly, to drown them quickly - anything rather than the terror of counting on and on into the blue emptiness of the morning. And then, at a hundred and sixty, the water beyond the rock was full of boys blowing like brown whales. They swam back to the shore without a look at him.

He climbed back to the diving rock and sat down, feeling the hot roughness of it under his thighs. The boys were gathering up their bits of clothing and running off along the shore to another promontory. They were leaving to get away from him. He cried openly, fists in his eyes. There was no one to see him, and he cried himself out.

It seemed to him that a long time had passed, and he swam out to where he could see his mother. Yes, she was still there, a yellow spot under an orange umbrella. He swam back to the big rock, climbed up, and dived into the blue pool among the fanged and angry boulders. Down he went, until he touched the wall of rock again. But the salt was so painful in his eyes that he could not see.

He came to the surface, swam to shore and went back to the villa to wait for his mother. Soon she walked slowly up the path, swinging her striped bag, the flushed, naked arm dangling beside her. "I want some swimming goggles," he panted, defiant and beseeching.

She gave him a patient, inquisitive look as she said casually, "Well, of course, darling."
But now, now, now! He must have them this minute, and no other time. He nagged and pestered until she went with him to a shop. As soon as she had bought the goggles, he grabbed them from her hand as if she were going to claim them for herself, and was off, running down the steep path to the bay.

Jerry swam out to the big barrier rock, adjusted the goggles, and dived. The impact of the water broke the rubber-enclosed vacuum, and the goggles came loose. He understood that he must swim down to the base of the rock from the surface of the water. He fixed the goggles tight and firm, filled his lungs, and floated, face down, on the water. Now he could see. It was as if he had eyes of a different kind — fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water.

Under him, six or seven feet down, was a floor of perfectly clean, shining white sand, rippled firm and hard by the tides. Two greyish shapes steered there, like long, rounded pieces of wood or slate. They were fish. He saw them nose towards each other, poise motionless, make a dart forward, swerve off, and come around again. It was like a water dance. A few inches above them, the water sparkled as if sequins were dropping through it. Fish again — myriads of minute fish, the length of his fingernail, were drifting through the water, and in a moment he could feel the innumerable tiny touches of them against his limbs. It was like swimming in flaked silver. The great rock the big boys had swum through rose sheer out of the white sand, black, tufted lightly with greenish weed. He could see no gap in it. He swam down to its base.

Again and again he rose, took a big chestful of air, and went down. Again and again he groped over the surface of the rock, feeling it, almost hugging it in the desperate need to find the entrance. And then, once, while he was clinging to the black wall, his knees came up and he shot his feet out forward and they met no obstacle. He had found the hole.

He gained the surface, clambered about the stones that littered the barrier rock until he found a big one, and, with this in his arms, let himself down over the side of the rock. He dropped, with the weight, straight to the sandy floor. Clinging tight to the anchor of stone, he lay on his side and looked in under the dark shelf at the place where his feet had gone. He could see the hole. It was an irregular, dark gap, but he could not see deep into it. He let go of his anchor, clung with his hands to the edges of the hole, and tried to push himself in.

He got his head in, found his shoulders jammed, moved them in sidewise, and was inside as far as his waist. He could see nothing ahead. Something soft and clammy touched his mouth, he saw a dark frond moving against the greyish rock, and panic filled him. He thought of octopuses, of clinging weed. He pushed himself out backward and caught a glimpse, as he retreated, of a harmless tentacle of seaweed drifting in the mouth of the tunnel. But it was enough. He reached the sunlight, swam to shore, and lay on the diving rock. He looked down into the blue well of water. He knew he must find his way through that cave, or hole, or tunnel, and out the other side.

First, he thought, he must learn to control his breathing. He let himself down into the water with another big stone in his arms, so that he could lie effortlessly on the bottom of the sea. He counted. One, two, three. He counted steadily. He could hear the movement of blood in his chest. Fifty-one, fifty-two.... His chest was hurting. He let go of the rock and went up into the air. He saw that the sun was low. He rushed to the villa and found his mother at her supper. She said only "Did you enjoy yourself?" and he said "Yes."

All night, the boy dreamed of the water-filled cave in the rock, and as soon as breakfast was over he went to the hay.

That night, his nose bled badly. For hours he had been underwater, learning to hold his breath, and now he felt weak and dizzy. His mother said, "I shouldn't overdo things, darling, if I were you."

That day and the next, Jerry exercised his lungs as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he would become, depended upon it. And again his nose bled at night, and his mother insisted on his coming with her the next day. It was a torment to him to waste a day of his careful self-training, but he stayed with her on that other beach, which now seemed a place for small children, a place where his mother might lie safe in the sun. It was not his beach.

He did not ask for permission, on the following day, to go to his beach. He went, before his mother could consider the complicated rights and wrongs of the matter. A day's rest, he discovered, had improved his count by
ten. The big boys had made the passage while he counted a hundred and sixty. He had been counting fast, in his
fright. Probably now, if he tried, he could get through that long tunnel, but he was not going to try yet. A curious,
most unchildlike persistence, a controlled impatience, made him wait. In the meantime, he lay underwater on the
white sand, littered now by stones he had brought down from the upper air, and studied the entrance to the
tunnel. He knew every jut and corner of it, as far as it was possible to see. It was as if he already felt its sharpness
about his shoulders.

He sat by the clock in the villa, when his mother was not near, and checked his time. He was incredulous
and then proud to find he could hold his breath without strain for two minutes. The words "two minutes",
authorized by the clock, brought the adventure that was so necessary to him close.

In another four days, his mother said casually one morning, they must go home. On the day before they
left, he would do it. He would do it if it killed him, he said defiantly to himself. But two days before they were to
leave - a day of triumph when he increased his count by fifteen - his nose bled so badly that he turned dizzy and
had to lie limply over the big rock like a bit of seaweed, watching the thick red blood flow on to the rock and
trickle slowly down to the sea. He was frightened. Supposing he turned dizzy in the tunnel? Supposing he died
there, trapped? Supposing — his head went around, in the hot sun, and he almost gave up. He thought he would
return to the house and lie down, and next summer, perhaps, when he had another year's growth in him - then he
would go through the hole.

But even after he had made the decision, or thought he had, he found himself sitting up on the rock and
looking down into the water, and he knew that now, this moment when his nose had only just stopped bleeding,
when his head was still sore and throbbing — this was the moment when he would try. If he did not do it now, he
never would. He was trembling with fear that he would not go, and he was trembling with horror at that long,
long tunnel under the rock, under the sea. Even in the open sunlight, the barrier rock seemed very wide and very
heavy; tons of rock pressed down on where he would go. If he died there, he would lie until one day — perhaps
not before next year — those big boys would swim into it and find it blocked.

He put on his goggles, fitted them tight, tested the vacuum. His hands were shaking. Then he chose the
biggest stone he could carry and slipped over the edge of the rock until half of him was in the cool, enclosing
water and half in the hot sun. He looked up once at the empty sky, filled his lungs once, twice, and then sank fast
to the bottom with the stone. He let it go and began to count. He took the edges of the hole in his hands and drew
himself into it, wriggling his shoulders in sidewise as he remembered he must, kicking himself along with his feet.

Soon he was clear inside. He was in a small rock-bound hole filled with yellowish-grey water. The water
was pushing him up against the roof. The roof was sharp and pained his back. He pulled himself along with his
hands — fast, fast — and used his legs as levers. His head knocked against something; a sharp pain dizzied him.
Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two...

He was without light, and the water seemed to press upon him with the weight of rock.

Seventy-one, seventy-two...

There was no strain on his lungs. He felt like an inflated balloon, his lungs were so
light and easy, but his head was pulsing.

He was being continually pressed against the sharp roof, which felt slimy as well as sharp. Again he
thought of octopuses, and wondered if the tunnel might be filled with weed that could tangle him. He gave
himself a panicky, convulsive kick forward, ducked his head, and swam. His feet and hands moved freely, as if in
open water. The hole must have widened out. He thought he must be swimming fast, and he was frightened of
banging his head if the tunnel narrowed.

A hundred, a hundred and one... The water paled. Victory filled him. His lungs were beginning to hurt. A
few more strokes and he would be out. He was counting wildly; he said a hundred and fifteen, and then, a long
time later, a hundred and fifteen again. The water was a clear jewel- green all around him. Then he saw, above his
head, a crack running up through the rock. Sunlight was falling through it, showing the clean dark rock of the
tunnel, a single mussel shell, and darkness ahead.

He was at the end of what he could do. He looked up at the crack as if it were filled with air and not
water, as if he could put his mouth to it to draw in air. A hundred and fifteen, he heard himself say inside his head
— but he had said that long ago. He must go on into the blackness ahead, or he would drown. His head was
swelling, his lungs cracking. A hundred and fifteen, a hundred and fifteen pounded through his head, and he
feebly clutched at rocks in the dark, pulling himself forward, leaving the brief space of sunlit water behind. He felt he was dying. He was no longer quite conscious. He struggled on in the darkness between lapses into unconsciousness. An immense, swelling pain filled his head, and then the darkness cracked with an explosion of green light. His hands, groping forward, met nothing, and his feet, kicking back, propelled him out into the open sea.

He drifted to the surface, his face turned up to the air. He was gasping like a fish. He felt he would sink now and drown; he could not swim the few feet back to the rock. Then he was clutching it and pulling himself up on it. He lay face down, gasping. He could see nothing but a red-veined, clotted dark. His eyes must have burst, he thought; they were full of blood. He tore off his goggles and a gout of blood went into the sea. His nose was bleeding, and the blood had filled the goggles.

He scooped up handfuls of water from the cool, salty sea, to splash on his face, and did not know whether it was blood or salt water he tasted. After a time, his heart quieted, his eyes cleared, and he sat up. He could see the local boys diving and playing half a mile away. He did not want them. He wanted nothing but to get back home and lie down.

In a short while, Jerry swam to shore and climbed slowly up the path to the villa. He flung himself on his bed and slept, waking at the sound of feet on the path outside. His mother was coming back. He rushed to the bathroom, thinking she must not see his face with bloodstains, or tearstains, on it. He came out of the bathroom and met her as she walked into the villa, smiling, her eyes lighting up.

"Have a nice morning?" she asked, laying her head on his warm brown shoulder a moment.
"Oh, yes, thank you," he said.
"You look a bit pale." And then, sharp and anxious. "How did you bang your head?"
"Oh, just banged it," he told her.

She looked at him closely. He was strained. His eyes were glazed-looking. She was worried. And then she said to herself, "Oh, don't fuss! Nothing can happen. He can swim like a fish."
They sat down to lunch together.
"Mummy," he said, "I can stay under water for two minutes — three minutes, at least."
It came bursting out of him.
"Can you, darling?" she said. "Well, I shouldn't overdo it. I don't think you ought to swim anymore today."
She was ready for a battle of wills, but he gave in at once. It was no longer of the least importance to go to the bay.
The basement room was dark and warm, like the inside of a sealed jar, Millicent thought, her eyes getting used to the strange dimness. The silence was soft with cobwebs, and from the small, rectangular window set high in the stone wall there sifted a faint bluish light that must be coming from the full October moon. She could see now that what she was sitting on was a woodpile next to the furnace.

Millicent brushed back a strand of hair. It was stiff and sticky from the egg that they had broken on her head as she knelt blindfolded at the sorority altar a short while before. There had been a silence. a slight crunching sound, and then she had felt the cold, slimy egg-white flattening and spreading on her head and sliding down her neck. She had heard someone smothering a laugh. It was all part of the ceremony.

Then the girls had led her here, blindfolded still, through the corridors of Betsy Johnson’s house and shut her in the cellar. It would be an hour before they came to get her, but then Rat Court would be all over and she would say what she had to say and go home.

For tonight was the grand finale, the trial by fire. There really was no doubt now that she would get in. She could not think of anyone who had ever been invited into the high school sorority and failed to get through initiation time. But even so, her case would be quite different. She would see to that. She could not exactly say what had decided her revolt, but it definitely had something to do with Tracy and something to do with the heather birds.

What girl at Lansing High would not want to be in her place now? Millicent thought, amused. What girl would not want to be one of the elect, no matter if it did mean five days of initiation before and after school, ending in the climax of Rat Court on Friday night when they made the new girls members? Even Tracy had been wistful when she heard that Millicent had been one of the five girls to receive an invitation.

"It won’t be any different with us, Tracy," Millicent had told her. "We’ll still go around together like we always have, and next year you’ll surely get in."

"I know, but even so," Tracy had said quietly, "you’ll change, whether you think you will or not. Nothing ever stays the same."

And nothing does, Millicent had thought. How horrible it would be if one never changed...if she were condemned to be the plain, shy Millicent of a few years back for the rest of her life. Fortunately there was always the changing, the growing, the going on.

It would come to Tracy, too. She would tell Tracy the silly things the girls had said, and Tracy would change also, entering eventually into the magic circle. She would grow to know the special ritual as Millicent had started to last week.

"First of all," Betsy Johnson, the vivacious blonde secretary of the sorority, had told the five new candidates over sandwiches in the school cafeteria last Monday, "first of all, each of you has a big sister. She’s the one who bosses you around, and you just do what she tells you."

"Remember the part about talking back and smiling," Louise Fullerton had put in, laughing. She was another celebrity in high school, pretty and dark and vice-president of the student council. "You can’t say anything unless your big sister asks you something or tells you to talk to someone. And you can’t smile, no matter how you’re dying to." The girls had laughed a little nervously, and then the bell had rung for the beginning of afternoon classes.

It would be rather fun for a change, Millicent mused, getting her books out of her locker in the hall, rather exciting to be part of a closely knit group, the exclusive set at Lansing High. Of course, it wasn’t a school organization. In fact, the principal, Mr. Cranton, wanted to do away with initiation week altogether, because he thought it was undemocratic and disturbed the routine of school work. But there wasn’t really anything he could
do about it. Sure, the girls had to come to school for five days without any lipstick on and without curling their
hair, and of course everybody noticed them, but what could the teachers do?
Millicent sat down at her desk in the big study hall. Tomorrow she would come to school, proudly,
laughingly, without lipstick, with her brown hair straight and shoulder length, and then everybody would know,
even the boys would know, that she was one of the elect. Teachers would smile helplessly, thinking perhaps: So
now they've picked Millicent Arnold. I never would have guessed it.
A year or two ago, not many people would have guessed it. Millicent had waited a long time for
acceptance, longer than most. It was as if she had been sitting for years in a pavilion outside a dance floor,
looking in through the windows at the golden interior, with the lights clear and the air like honey, wistfully
watching the couples waltzing to the never-ending music, laughing in pairs and groups together, no one alone.
But now at last, amid a week of fanfare and merriment, she would answer her invitation to enter the
ballroom through the main entrance marked "Initiation." She would gather up her velvet skirts, her silken train, or
whatever the disinherited princesses wore in the story books, and come into her rightful kingdom…. The bell rang
to end study hall.
"Millicent, wait up!" It was Louise Fullerton behind her, Louise who had always before been very nice,
very polite, friendlier than the rest, even long ago, before the invitation had come.
"Listen," Louise walked down the hall with her to Latin, their next class, "are you busy right after school today?
Because I'd like to talk to you about tomorrow."
"Sure. I've got lots of time."
"Well, meet me in the hall after homeroom then, and we'll go down to the drugstore or something."
Walking beside Louise on the way to the drugstore, Millicent felt a surge of pride. For all anyone could
see, she and Louise were the best of friends.
"You know, I was so glad when they voted you in," Louise said.
Millicent smiled. "I was really thrilled to get the invitation," she said frankly, "but kind of sorry that Tracy didn't get
in, too."
Tracy, she thought. If there is such a thing as a best friend, Tracy has been just that this last year.
"Yes, Tracy," Louise was saying, "she's a nice girl, and they put her up on the slate, but…well, she had
three blackballs against her."
"Blackballs? What are they?"
"Well, we're not supposed to tell anybody outside the club, but seeing as you'll be in at the end of the
week I don't suppose it hurts." They were at the drugstore now.
"You see," Louise began explaining in a low voice after they were seated in the privacy of the booth, "once
a year the sorority puts up all the likely girls that are suggested for membership."
Millicent sipped her cold, sweet drink slowly, saving the ice cream to spoon up last. She listened carefully
to Louise who was going on, "...and then there's a big meeting, and all the girls' names are read off and each girl
is discussed."
"Oh?" Millicent asked mechanically, her voice sounding strange.
"Oh, I know what you're thinking," Louise laughed. "But it's really not as bad as all that. They keep it
down to a minimum of catting. They just talk over each girl and why or why not they think she'd be good for the
club. And then they vote. Three blackballs eliminate a girl."
"Do you mind if I ask you what happened to Tracy?" Millicent said.
Louise laughed a little uneasily. "Well, you know how girls are. They notice little things. I mean, some of
them thought Tracy was just
a bit too different. Maybe you could suggest a few things to her."
"Like what?"
"Oh, like maybe not wearing knee socks to school, or carrying that old bookbag. I know it doesn't sound
like much, but well, it's things like that which set someone apart. I mean, you know that no girl at Lansing would
be seen dead wearing knee socks, no matter how cold it gets, and it's kiddish and kind of green to carry a
bookbag."
"I guess so," Millicent said.

"About tomorrow," Louise went on. "You've drawn Beverly Mitchell for a big sister. I wanted to warn you that she's the toughest, but if you get through all right it'll be all the more credit for you."

"Thanks, Lou," Millicent said gratefully, thinking, this is beginning to sound serious. Worse than a loyalty test, this grilling over the coals. What's it supposed to prove anyway? That I can take orders without flinching? Or does it just make them feel good to see us run around at their beck and call?

"All you have to do really," Louise said, spooning up the last of her sundae, "is be very meek and obedient when you're with Bev and do just what she tells you. Don't laugh or talk back or try to be funny, or she'll just make it harder for you, and believe me, she's a great one for doing that. Be at her house at seven-thirty."

And she was. She rang the bell and sat down on the steps to wait for Bev. After a few minutes the front door opened and Bev was standing there, her face serious.

"Get up, gopher," Bev ordered.

There was something about her tone that annoyed Millicent. It was almost malicious. And there was an unpleasant anonymity about the label "gopher," even if that was what they always called the girls being initiated. It was degrading, like being given a number. It was a denial of individuality.

Rebellion flooded through her.

"I said get up. Are you deaf?"

Millicent got up, standing there.

"Into the house, gopher. There's a bed to be made and a room to be cleaned at the top of the stairs."

Millicent went up the stairs mutely. She found Bev's room and started making the bed. Smiling to herself, she was thinking: How absurdly funny, me taking orders from this girl like a servant.

Bev was suddenly there in the doorway. "Wipe that smile off your face," she commanded.

There seemed something about this relationship that was not all fun. In Bev's eyes, Millicent was sure of it, there was a hard, bright spark of exultation.

On the way to school, Millicent had to walk behind Bev at a distance often paces, carrying her books. They came up to the drugstore where there already was a crowd of boys and girls from Lansing High waiting for the show.

The other girls being initiated were there, so Millicent felt relieved. It would not be so bad now, being part of the group.

"What'll we have them do?" Betsy Johnson asked Bev. That morning Betsy had made her "gopher" carry an old colored parasol through the square and sing "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows."

"I know," Herb Dalton, the good-looking basketball captain, said.

A remarkable change came over Bev. She was all at once very soft and coquettish.

"You can't tell them what to do," Bev said sweetly. "Men have nothing to say about this little deal."

"All right, all right," Herb laughed, stepping back and pretending to fend off a blow.

"It's getting late," Louise had come up. "Almost eight-thirty. We'd better get them marching on to school."

The "gophers" had to do a Charleston step all the way to school, and each one had her own song to sing, trying to drown out the other four. During school, of course, you couldn't fool around, but even then, there was a rule that you mustn't talk to boys outside of class or at lunchtime... or any time at all after school. So the sorority girls would get the most popular boys to go up to the "gophers" and ask them out, or try to start them talking, and sometimes a "gopher" was taken by surprise and began to say something before she could catch herself. And then the boy reported her and she got a black mark.

Herb Dalton approached Millicent as she was getting an ice cream at the lunch counter that noon. She saw him coming before he spoke to her, and looked down quickly, thinking: He is too princely, too dark and smiling. And I am much too vulnerable. Why must he be the one I have to be careful of?

I won't say anything, she thought, I'll just smile very sweetly.
She smiled up at Herb very sweetly and mutely. His return grin was rather miraculous. It was surely more than was called for in the line of duty.

"I know you can't talk to me," he said, very low. "But you're doing fine, the girls say. I even like your hair straight and all."

Bev was coming toward them, then, her red mouth set in a bright, calculating smile. She ignored Millicent and sailed up to Herb.

"Why waste your time with gophers?" she caroled gaily. "Their tongues are tied, but completely."

Herb managed a parting shot. "But that one keeps such an attractive silence."

Millicent smiled as she ate her sundae at the counter with Tracy. Generally, the girls who were outsiders now, as Millicent had been, scoffed at the initiation antics as childish and absurd to hide their secret envy. But Tracy was understanding, as ever.

"Tonight's the worst, I guess, Tracy," Millicent told her. "I hear that the girls are taking us on a bus over to Lewiston and going to have us performing in the square."

"Just keep a poker face outside," Tracy advised. "But keep laughing like mad inside."

Millicent and Bev took a bus ahead of the rest of the girls; they had to stand up on the way to Lewiston Square. Bey seemed very cross about something. Finally she said, "You were talking with Herb Dalton at lunch today."

"No," said Millicent honestly.

"Well, I saw you smile at him. That's practically as bad as talking. Remember not to do it again."

Millicent kept silent.

"It's fifteen minutes before the bus gets into town," Bev was saying then. "I want you to go up and down the bus asking people what they eat for breakfast. Remember, you can't tell them you're being initiated."

Millicent looked down the aisle of the crowded bus and felt suddenly quite sick. She thought: How will I ever do it, going up to all those stony-faced people who are staring coldly out of the window....

"You heard me, gopher."

"Excuse me, madam," Millicent said politely to the lady in the first seat of the bus, "but I'm taking a survey. Could you please tell me what you eat for breakfast?"

"Why...er...just orange juice, toast, and coffee," she said.

"Thank you very much." Millicent went on to the next person, a young business man. He ate eggs sunny side up, toast and coffee.

By the time Millicent got to the back of the bus, most of the people were smiling at her. They obviously know, she thought, that I'm being initiated into something.

Finally, there was only one man left in the corner of the back seat. He was small and jolly, with a ruddy, wrinkled face that spread into a beaming smile as Millicent approached. In his brown suit with the forest-green tie he looked something like a gnome or a cheerful leprechaun.

"Excuse me, sir," Millicent smiled, "but I'm taking a survey. What do you eat for breakfast?"

"Heather birds' eyebrows on toast," the little man rattled off.

"What?" Millicent exclaimed.

"Heather birds' eyebrows," the little man explained. "Heather birds live on the mythological moors and fly about all day long, singing wild and sweet in the sun. They're bright purple and have very tasty eyebrows."

Millicent broke out into spontaneous laughter. Why, this was wonderful, the way she felt a sudden comradeship with a stranger.

"Are you mythological, too?"

"Not exactly," he replied, "but I certainly hope to be someday. Being mythological does wonders for one's ego."

The bus was swinging into the station now; Millicent hated to leave the little man. She wanted to ask him more about the birds.
And from that time on, initiations didn't bother Millicent at all. She went gaily about Lewiston Square from store to store asking for broken crackers and mangoes, and she just laughed inside when people stared and then brightened, answering her crazy questions as if she were quite serious and really a person of consequence. So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them. And really, you didn't have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings.

One afternoon Millicent had started talking with Liane Morris, another of the girls being initiated, about what it would be like when they were finally in the sorority.

"Oh, I know pretty much what it'll be like," Liane had said. "My sister belonged before she graduated from high school two years ago."

"Well, just what do they do as a club?" Millicent wanted to know.

"Why, they have a meeting once a week…each girl takes turns entertaining at her house…"

"You mean it's just a sort of exclusive social group…""I guess so…though that's a funny way of putting it. But it sure gives a girl prestige value. My sister started going steady with the captain of the football team after she got in. Not bad, I say."

No, it wasn't bad, Millicent had thought, lying in bed on the morning of Rat Court and listening to the sparrows chirping in the gutters. She thought of Herb. Would he ever have been so friendly if she were without the sorority label? Would he ask her out (if he ever did) just for herself, no strings attached?

Then there was another thing that bothered her. Leaving Tracy on the outskirts. Because that is the way it would be; Millicent had seen it happen before.

Outside, the sparrows were still chirping, and as she lay in bed Millicent visualized them, pale gray-brown birds in a flock, one like the other, all exactly alike.

And then, for some reason, Millicent thought of the heather birds. Swooping carefree over the moors, they would go singing and crying out across the great spaces of air, dipping and darting, strong and proud in their freedom and their sometime loneliness. It was then that she made her decision.

Seated now on the woodpile in Betsy Johnson's cellar, Millicent knew that she had come triumphant through the trial of fire, the searing period of the ego which could end in two kinds of victory for her. The easiest of which would be her coronation as a princess, labeling her conclusively as one of the select flock.

The other victory would be much harder, but she knew that it was what she wanted. It was not that she was being noble or anything. It was just that she had learned there were other ways of getting into the great hall, blazing with lights, of people and of life.

It would be hard to explain to the girls tonight, of course, but she could tell Louise later just how it was. How she had proved something to herself by going through everything, even Rat Court, and then deciding not to join the sorority after all. And how she could still be friends with everybody. Sisters with everybody. Tracy, too.

The door behind her opened and a ray of light sliced across the soft gloom of the basement room.

"Hey Millicent, come on out now. This is it." There were some of the girls outside.

"I'm coming," she said, getting up and moving out of the soft darkness into the glare of light, thinking: This is it, all right. The worst part, the hardest part, the part of initiation that I figured out myself.

But just then, from somewhere far off, Millicent was sure of it, there came a melodic fluting, quite wild and sweet, and she knew that it must be the song of the heather birds as they went wheeling and gliding against wide blue horizons through vast spaces of air, their wings flashing quick and purple in the bright sun.

Within Millicent another melody soared, strong and exuberant, a triumphant answer to the music of the darting heather birds that sang so clear and lilting over the far lands. And she knew that her own private initiation had just begun.
Responding to the Story
1. Why was the "part of initiation that I figured out myself" the "worst part, the hardest part" for Millicent?
2. How do you interpret the story's last line?
3. Do you agree with Millicent's decision not to join the sorority? Explain your response.

Exploring the Author's Craft
A flashback is an interruption in a chronological narrative that shows something that happened before that point in the story. A flashback provides background information on characters or events that helps explain a character's motivations and reactions. A flashback is not just reminiscence but an actual shift in time to show past events.
1. Where does the flashback in "Initiation" begin and end?
2. What does the flashback in this story accomplish?

Writing Workshop
Create a one- or two paragraph response in narrative form from the following people after they learn of Millicent's decision. Write from the first-person point of view.
   A. Beverly Mitchell
   B. sorority secretary Betsy Johnson
   C. Herb Dalton
   D. Millicent's friend Tracy
Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve

“The Medicine Bag” Word Count: 3533

Published: Grandpa Was a Cowboy & an Indian and Other Stories U of Nebraska Press 1 December 2000.

My kid sister Cheryl and I always bragged about our Sioux grandpa, Joe Iron Shell. Our friends, who had always lived in the city and only knew about Indians from movies and TV, were impressed by our stories. Maybe we exaggerated and made Grandpa and the reservation sound glamorous, but when we'd return home to Iowa after our yearly summer visit to Grandpa, we always had some exciting tale to tell.

We always had some authentic Sioux article to show our listeners. One year Cheryl had new moccasins that Grandpa had made. On another visit he gave me a small, round, flat rawhide drum which was decorated with a painting of a warrior riding a horse. He taught me a real Sioux chant to sing while I beat the drum with a leather-covered stick that had a feather on the end. Man, that really made an impression.

We never showed our friends Grandpa’s picture. Not that we were ashamed of him, but because we knew that the glamorous tales we told didn’t go with the real thing. Our friends would have laughed at the picture, because Grandpa wasn’t tall and stately like TV Indians. His hair wasn’t in braids but hung in stringy gray strands on his neck, and he was old. He was our great-grandfather, and he didn’t live in a tepee, but all by himself in a part log, part tar-paper shack on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. So when Grandpa came to visit us, I was so ashamed and embarrassed I could’ve died.

There are a lot of yippy poodles and other fancy little dogs in our neighborhood, but they usually barked singly at the mailman from the safety of their own yards. Now it sounded as if a whole pack of mutts were barking together in one place.

I got up and walked to the curb to see what the commotion was. About a block away I saw a crowd of little kids yelling, with the dogs yipping and growling around someone who was walking down the middle of the street.

I watched the group as it slowly came closer and saw that in the center of the strange procession was a man wearing a tall black hat. He’d pause now and then to peer at something in his hand and then at the houses on either side of the street. I felt cold and hot at the same time as I recognized the man. “Oh, no!” I whispered. “It’s Grandpa!”

I stood on the curb, unable to move even though I wanted to run and hide. Then I got mad when I saw how the yippy dogs were growling and nipping at the old man’s baggy pant legs and how wearily he poked them away with his cane. “Stupid mutts,” I said as I ran to rescue Grandpa.

When I kicked and hollered at the dogs to get away, they put their tails between their legs and scattered. The kids ran to the curb, where they watched me and the old man.

“Grandpa,” I said, and felt pretty dumb when my voice cracked. I reached for his beat-up old tin suitcase, which was tied shut with a rope. But he set it down right in the street and shook my hand.

“Hau, Takoza, Grandchild,” he greeted me formally in Sioux.
All I could do was stand there with the whole neighborhood watching and shake the hand of the leather-brown old man. I saw how his gray hair straggled from under his big black hat, which had a drooping feather in its crown. His rumpled black suit hung like a sack over his stooped frame. As he shook my hand, his coat fell open to expose a bright-red satin shirt with a beaded bolo tie under the collar. His get-up wasn’t out of place on the reservation, but it sure was here, and I wanted to sink right through the pavement.

“Hi,” I muttered with my head down. I tried to pull my hand away when I felt his bony hand trembling, and looked up to see fatigue in his face. I felt like crying. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I picked up Grandpa’s suitcase, took his arm, and guided him up the driveway to our house.

Mom was standing on the steps. I don’t know how long she’d been watching, but her hand was over her mouth and she looked as if she couldn’t believe what she saw. Then she ran to us.

“Grandpa,” she gasped. “How in the world did you get here?”

She checked her move to embrace Grandpa, and I remembered that such a display of affection is unseemly to the Sioux and would embarrass him.

“Hau, Marie,” he said as he shook Mom’s hand. She smiled and took his other arm.

As we supported him up the steps, the door banged open and Cheryl came bursting out of the house. She was all smiles and was so obviously glad to see Grandpa that I was ashamed of how I felt.

“Grandpa!” she yelled happily. “You came to see us!”

Grandpa smiled and Mom and I let go of him as he stretched out his arms to my ten-year-old sister, who was still young enough to be hugged.

“Wicincala, little girl,” he greeted her, and then collapsed.

He had fainted. Mom and I carried him into her sewing room, where we had a spare bed. After we had Grandpa on the bed, Mom stood there helplessly patting his shoulder. “Shouldn’t we call the doctor, Mom?” I suggested, since she didn’t seem to know what to do. “Yes,” she agreed, with a sigh. “You make Grandpa comfortable, Martin.”

I reluctantly moved to the bed. I knew Grandpa wouldn’t want to have Mom undress him, but I didn’t want to, either. He was so skinny and frail that his coat slipped off easily. When I loosened his tie and opened his shirt collar, I felt a small leather pouch that hung from a thong around his neck. I left it alone and moved to remove his boots. The scuffed old cowboy boots were tight and he moaned as I put pressure on his legs to jerk them off. I put the boots on the floor and saw why they fit so tight. Each one was stuffed with money. I looked at the bills that lined the boots and started to ask about them, but Grandpa’s eyes were closed again.

Mom came back with a basin of water. “The doctor thinks Grandpa is suffering from heat exhaustion,” she explained as she bathed Grandpa’s face. Mom gave a big sigh, “Oh hinh, Martin. How do you suppose he got here?”

We found out after the doctor’s visit. Grandpa was angrily sitting up in bed while Mom tried to feed him some soup.

“Tonight you let Marie feed you, Grandpa,” spoke my dad, who had gotten home from work just as the doctor was leaving.
“You’re not really sick,” he said as he gently pushed Grandpa back against the pillows. “The doctor said you just got too tired and hot after your long trip.”

Grandpa relaxed, and between sips of soup he told us of his journey. Soon after our visit to him Grandpa decided that he would like to see where his only living descendants lived and what our home was like. Besides, he admitted sheepishly, he was lonesome after we left.

I knew everybody felt as guilty as I did—especially Mom. Mom was all Grandpa had left. So even after she married my dad, who’s a white man and teaches in the college in our city, and after Cheryl and I were born, Mom made sure that every summer we spent a week with Grandpa.

I never thought that Grandpa would be lonely after our visits, and none of us noticed how old and weak he had become. But Grandpa knew and so he came to us. He had ridden on buses for two and a half days. When he arrived in the city, tired and stiff from sitting for so long, he set out, walking, to find us.

He had stopped to rest on the steps of some building downtown and a policeman found him. The cop, according to Grandpa, was a good man who took him to the bus stop and waited until the bus came and told the driver to let Grandpa out at Bell View Drive. After Grandpa got off the bus, he started walking again. But he couldn’t see the house numbers on the other side when he walked on the sidewalk, so he walked in the middle of the street. That’s when all the little kids and dogs followed him.

I knew everybody felt as bad as I did. Yet I was proud of this eighty-six-year-old man, who had never been away from the reservation, having the courage to travel so far alone.

“You found the money in my boots?” he asked Mom.

“Martin did,” she answered, and roused herself to scold. “Grandpa, you shouldn’t have carried so much money. What if someone had stolen it from you?”

Grandpa laughed. “I would’ve known if anyone tried to take the boots off my feet. The money is what I’ve saved for a long time—a hundred dollars—for my funeral. But you take it now to buy groceries so that I won’t be a burden to you while I am here.”

“That won’t be necessary, Grandpa,” Dad said. “We are honored to have you with us and you will never be a burden. I am only sorry that we never thought to bring you home with us this summer and spare you the discomfort of a long trip.”

Grandpa was pleased. “Thank you,” he answered. “But do not feel bad that you didn’t bring me with you, for I would not have come then. It was not time.” He said this in such a way that no one could argue with him. To Grandpa and the Sioux, he once told me, a thing would be done when it was the right time to do it and that’s the way it was.

“Also,” Grandpa went on, looking at me, “I have come because it is soon time for Martin to have the medicine bag.”

We all knew what that meant. Grandpa thought he was going to die and he had to follow the tradition of his family to pass the medicine bag, along with its history, to the oldest male child.

“Even though the boy,” he said, still looking at me, “bears a white man’s name, the medicine bag will be his.”
I didn’t know what to say. I had the same hot and cold feeling that I had when I first saw Grandpa in the street. The medicine bag was the dirty leather pouch I had found around his neck. “I could never wear such a thing,” I almost said aloud. I thought of having my friends see it in gym class, at the swimming pool, and could imagine the smart things they would say. But I just swallowed hard and took a step toward the bed. I knew I would have to take it.

But Grandpa was tired. “Not now, Martin,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal, “it is not time. Now I will sleep.”

So that’s how Grandpa came to be with us for two months. My friends kept asking to come see the old man, but I put them off. I told myself that I didn’t want them laughing at Grandpa. But even as I made excuses, I knew it wasn’t Grandpa that I was afraid they’d laugh at.

Nothing bothered Cheryl about bringing her friends to see Grandpa. Every day after school started, there’d be a crew of giggling little girls or round-eyed little boys crowded around the old man on the patio, where he’d gotten in the habit of sitting every afternoon.

Grandpa would smile in his gentle way and patiently answer their questions, or he’d tell them stories of brave warriors, ghosts, animals, and the kids listened in awed silence. Those little guys thought Grandpa was great.

Finally, one day after school, my friends came home with me because nothing I said stopped them. “We’re going to see the great Indian of Bell View Drive,” said Hank, who was supposed to be my best friend. “My brother has seen him three times, so he oughta be well enough to see us.”

When we got to my house, Grandpa was sitting on the patio. He had on his red shirt, but today he also wore a fringed leather vest that was decorated with beads. Instead of his usual cowboy boots he had solidly beaded moccasins on his feet that stuck out of his black trousers. Of course, he had his old black hat on—he was seldom without it. But it had been brushed and the feather in the beaded headband was proudly erect, its tip a brighter white. His hair lay in silver strands over the red shirt collar.

I stared just as my friends did and I heard one of them murmur, “Wow!”

Grandpa looked up and when his eyes met mine, they twinkled as if he were laughing inside. He nodded to me and my face got all hot. I could tell that he had known all along I was afraid he’d embarrass me in front of my friends.

“Hau, hoksilas, boys,” he greeted, and held out his hand.

My buddies passed in a single file and shook his hand as I introduced them. They were so polite I almost laughed. “How, there, Grandpa,” and even a “How do you do, sir.”

“You look fine, Grandpa,” I said as the guys sat on the lawn chairs or on the patio floor. “Hanh, yes,” he agreed. “When I woke up this morning, it seemed the right time to dress in the good clothes. I knew that my grandson would be bringing his friends.”

“You guys want some lemonade or something?” I offered. No one answered. They were listening to Grandpa as he started telling how he’d killed the deer from which his vest was made.
Grandpa did most of the talking while my friends were there. I was so proud of him and amazed at how respectfully quiet my buddies were. Mom had to chase them home at suppertime. As they left, they shook Grandpa’s hand again and said to me:

“Martin, he’s really great!”

“Yeah, man! Don’t blame you for keeping him to yourself.”

“Can we come back?”

But after they left, Mom said, “No more visitors for a while, Martin. Grandpa won’t admit it, but his strength hasn’t returned. He likes having company, but it tires him.”

That evening Grandpa called me to his room before he went to sleep. “Tomorrow,” he said, “when you come home, it will be time to give you the medicine bag.”

I felt a hard squeeze from where my heart is supposed to be and was scared, but I answered, “OK, Grandpa.”

All night I had weird dreams about thunder and lightning on a high hill. From a distance I heard the slow beat of a drum. When I woke up in the morning, I felt as if I hadn’t slept at all. At school it seemed as if the day would never end and when it finally did, I ran home.

Grandpa was in his room, sitting on the bed. The shades were down and the place was dim and cool. I sat on the floor in front of Grandpa, but he didn’t even look at me. After what seemed a long time, he spoke.

“I sent your mother and sister away. What you will hear today is only for a man’s ears. What you will receive is only for a man’s hands.” He fell silent and I felt shivers down my back.

“My father in his early manhood,” Grandpa began, “made a vision quest to find a spirit guide for his life. You cannot understand how it was in that time, when the great Teton Sioux were first made to stay on the reservation. There was a strong need for guidance from Wakantanka, the Great Spirit. But too many of the young men were filled with despair and hatred. They thought it was hopeless to search for a vision when the glorious life was gone and only the hated confines of a reservation lay ahead. But my father held to the old ways.

“He carefully prepared for his quest with a purifying sweat bath and then he went alone to a high butte top to fast and pray. After three days he received his sacred dream—in which he found, after long searching, the white man’s iron. He did not understand his vision of finding something belonging to the white people, for in that time they were the enemy. When he came down from the butte to cleanse himself at the stream below, he found the remains of a campfire and the broken shell of an iron kettle. This was a sign which reinforced his dream. He took a piece of the iron for his medicine bag, which he had made of elk skin years before, to prepare for his quest.

“He returned to his village, where he told his dream to the wise old men of the tribe. They gave him the name Iron Shell, but neither did they understand the meaning of the dream. This first Iron Shell kept the piece of iron with him at all times and believed it gave him protection from the evils of those unhappy days.

“Then a terrible thing happened to Iron Shell. He and several other young men were taken from their homes by the soldiers and sent far away to a white man’s boarding school. He was angry and lonesome for his parents and the young girl he had wed before he was taken away. At first Iron Shell resisted the teachers’ attempts to change him and he did not try to learn. One day it was his turn to work in the school’s blacksmith shop. As he walked into the place, he knew that his medicine had brought him there to learn and work with the white man’s iron.
“Iron Shell became a blacksmith and worked at the trade when he returned to the reservation. All of his life he treasured the medicine bag. When he was old and I was a man, he gave it to me, for no one made the vision quest anymore.”

Grandpa quit talking and I stared in disbelief as he covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were shaking with quiet sobs and I looked away until he began to speak again.

“I kept the bag until my son, your mother’s father, was a man and had to leave us to fight in the war across the ocean. I gave him the bag, for I believed it would protect him in battle, but he did not take it with him. He was afraid that he would lose it. He died in a faraway place.”

Again Grandpa was still and I felt his grief around me.

“My son,” he went on after clearing his throat, “had only a daughter and it is not proper for her to know of these things.”

He unbuttoned his shirt, pulled out the leather pouch, and lifted it over his head. He held it in his hand, turning it over and over as if memorizing how it looked.

“In the bag,” he said as he opened it and removed two objects, “is the broken shell of the iron kettle, a pebble from the butte, and a piece of the sacred sage.” He held the pouch upside down and dust drifted down.

“After the bag is yours, you must put a piece of prairie sage within and never open it again until you pass it on to your son.” He replaced the pebble and the piece of iron and tied the bag.

I stood up, somehow knowing I should. Grandpa slowly rose from the bed and stood upright in front of me, holding the bag before my face. I closed my eyes and waited for him to slip it over my head. But he spoke.

“No, you need not wear it.” He placed the soft leather bag in my right hand and closed my other hand over it. “It would not be right to wear it in this time and place, where no one will understand. Put it safely away until you are again on the reservation.

Wear it then, when you replace the sacred sage.”

Grandpa turned and sat again on the bed. Wearily he leaned his head against the pillow. “Go,” he said, “I will sleep now.”

“Thank you, Grandpa,” I said softly, and left with the bag in my hands.

That night Mom and Dad took Grandpa to the hospital. Two weeks later I stood alone on the lonely prairie of the reservation and put the sacred sage in my medicine bag.
Tater Tots. He was eating Tater Tots. Less than an hour after our break-up (a turn of events that left me desolate) my boyfriend of six months was stuffing himself with a frozen potato snack.

I called Steven the minute I got home from what turned out to be our last date. “Just a second,” he said when he realized it was me. “I’ve got some Tater Tots in the microwave,” he returned to the phone munching.

It should’ve come as no surprise that he could eat. After all, he’d initiated the split. His stomach was free to carry on its digestive process. Mine was churning acid rain.

Steven liked to think of himself as a free spirit. At school, he sat at the back of the class, wrote poems during math, and in Canadian history where we had a U-shaped seating arrangement, he stared at me when he wasn’t staring out the window.

At first I was wary. I mean, he seemed so impulsive. He proclaimed his love for me on our first date, a small order of fries at Harvey’s.

Sometimes he brought me flowers—potted flowers, because he said he couldn’t give me cut roses which were technically already dead. And he wrote me poems, pages of verse which I never quite understood, liberally peppered with my name and words like “beloved” and “tender” and “heartbeat.”

The romance did have its weaknesses. Steven sometimes broke our dates, telling me he was feeling a bit dragged out. But when he gave me a gold band on my birthday, I told him that I loved him because I was sure our relationship was solid.

Then it happened. He said he wanted to talk and asked me to drop by the house.

“The problem is,” he began, “I’m a perfectionist. And let’s face it, our relationship isn’t perfect.”

Dry mouth. Weak knees. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s not perfect. I just don’t want to be with you all the time. If we had a perfect relationship, I’d hate it when we weren’t together. I’d miss you. Frankly, I don’t.”


I reminded him of how three weeks ago he’d slipped the ring around my finger by the light of 17 candles on my birthday cake.

“Hey,” he said. “If I lost your friendship, that would really bother me. Why don’t we go down to the harbour this weekend. Just as friends.”

All over numbness. Confusion. “Maybe.”

I went home. I couldn’t believe it. It was just a dream. So I called him. “Look,” I said, “I just want to make sure I know what’s going on here.”

He came on the phone, munching his snack, and clarified what he’d said. When I hung up, my stomach felt like I’d swallowed a lead pipe. Like I’d eaten a barrel full of 40-day-old eclairs.

After that, I did what I knew I had to do. I gathered up everything he’d given me—notes, poems, his faded blue flannel shirt with a hole in the cuff of the right sleeve, a pot of dying chrysanthemums. And the ring. Then I stuffed it all down the garbage chute.

I kept busy. Went out with friends to movies, shopping, restaurants. Concentrated on my school work, got my first and only A in Mr. Sloan’s math class. I changed seats in history so I wouldn’t have to look at him.

It wasn’t long—maybe a couple of months—before I started to recall with disdain Steven’s peculiar habits. And his basic lack of respect for me. I still treasure the day I found a poem he wrote and read it to my mother. We laughed. So inane.

And then I got over him, like one gets over a case of indigestion…like the indigestion I get every time I even see a package of Tater Tots.
I still feel like a nerd. An empty-headed nerd. I can’t believe the words that spilled out of my mouth the night I broke up with her.

And every time I saw her afterwards—laughing with her friends but looking at me with icicle eyes—I almost gagged on what I’d said.

I mean, I thought I was a poet. So cool. But this is what I said to her when we broke up: “Let’s face it, this relationship isn’t perfect. It’s not worth saving.” How lame. How trite. How unpoetic.

It wasn’t me talking. It was desperation.

Geez, I’m only 17…too young for love. Love means commitment and real poets don’t commit themselves, not to anybody.

I mean, like when we kissed, it was poetry. But I should’ve know I was no poet because I was afraid of how far we could go in the name of poetry. In the name of love.

So I tried to keep my distance, even though I told her that I loved her. Because I did love her. I even cleaned that silly ring I found and gave it to her in a pretentious birthday ceremony complete with potted plant and chocolate cake. Thought that’s what a poet would do…be spontaneous. That was me, spontaneous!

And then when she said, “I love you Steven…” I freaked. I saw myself sinking deeper and deeper into it, deeper than I ever thought I could go. Only 17 and I could already see my boring future. Love and marriage. A job and house. Kids…

I mean, I have plans. I’m going to travel the world, write, meet strange people, do crazy things, things you can’t do when you’re cemented down by commitment. Right? I don’t know.

I’m confused. Because I think I hurt her. I didn’t mean to hurt her. I even said to her, that night I broke it up, “It would really bother me if I lost your friendship.” Gag me with an outhouse full of PCBs. As if that well-rehearsed spontaneous line would make up for breaking up!

But she must’ve really loved me because she called me later and asked, “Are you sure? Are you sure it’s over?”

Reprieve! But it was still there, that old emotion: fear. So I acted like an even bigger nerd, an emotionless zombie crunching in her ear while I mumbled empty air-head clarifications about how I meant what I said, especially about the friendship stuff, until she finally took the hint and hung up.

But I sure do miss her. Miss being with her. Miss the crazy things we did together. Miss the way she thought my poetry was fantastic (while she corrected my spelling errors)…

Yep. I was a nerd all right. But I wonder if she knows how frightened I was? So afraid of her love. And sometimes when I’m thinking about her like this, I wonder if she ever thinks of me. I wonder if she’d call me if she knew that I haven’t written a thing since we said good-bye. Because that’s how much I really loved her.
The boy lay on the sidewalk bleeding in the rain. He was sixteen years old, and he wore a bright purple jacket, and the lettering across the back of the jacket read THE ROYALS. The boy's name was Andy and the name was delicately scripted in black thread on the front of the jacket, just over the heart. ANDY.

He had been stabbed ten minutes ago. The knife entered just below his rib cage and had been drawn across his body violently, tearing a wide gap in his flesh. He lay on the sidewalk with the March rain drilling his jacket and drilling his body and washing away the blood that poured from his open wound. He had known excruciating pain when the knife had torn across his body, and then sudden comparative relief when the blade was pulled away. He had heard the voice saying, 'That's for you Royal!' and then the sound of footsteps hurrying into the rain, and then he had fallen to the sidewalk, clutching his stomach, trying to stop the flow of blood.

He tried to yell for help, but he had no voice. He did not know why his voice had deserted him, or why there was an open hole in his body from which his life ran readily, steadily, or why the rain had become so suddenly fierce. It was 11:13 p.m. but he did not know the time.

There was another thing he did not know.

He did not know he was dying. He lay on the sidewalk, bleeding, and he thought only: That was a fierce rumble. They got me good that time, but he did not know he was dying. He would have been frightened had he known. In his ignorance he lay bleeding and wishing he could cry out for help, but there was no voice in his throat. There was only the bubbling of blood from between his lips whenever he opened his mouth to speak. He lay in his pain, waiting, waiting for someone to find him.

He could hear the sound of automobile tires hushed on the rain swept streets, far away at the other end of the long alley. He lay with his face pressed to the sidewalk, and he could see the splash of neon far away at the other end of the alley, tinting the pavement red and green, slickly brilliant in the rain.

He wondered if Laura would be angry. He had left the jump to get a package of cigarettes. He had told her he would be back in a few minutes, and then he had gone downstairs and found the candy store closed. He knew that Alfredo's on the next block would be open. He had started through the alley, and that was when he had been ambushed.

He could hear the faint sound of music now, coming from a long, long way off. He wondered if Laura was dancing, wondered if she had missed him yet. Maybe she thought he wasn't coming back. Maybe she thought he'd cut out for good. Maybe she had already left the jump and gone home. He thought of her face, the brown eyes and the jet-black hair, and thinking of her he forgot his pain a little, forgot that blood was rushing from his body.
Someday he would marry Laura. Someday he would marry her, and they would have a lot of kids, and then they would get out of the neighborhood. They would move to a clean project in the Bronx, or maybe they would move to Staten Island. When they were married, when they had kids.

He heard footsteps at the other end of the alley, and he lifted his cheek from the sidewalk and looked into the darkness and tried to cry out, but again there was only a soft hissing bubble of blood on his mouth.

The man came down the alley. He had not seen Andy yet. He walked, and then stopped to lean against the brick of the building, and then walked again. He saw Andy then and came toward him, and he stood over him for a long time, the minutes ticking, ticking, watching him and not speaking.

Then he said, "What's the matter, buddy'?

Andy could not speak, and he could barely move. He lifted his face slightly and looked up at the man, and in the rain swept alley he smelled the sickening odor of alcohol. The man was drunk.

The man was smiling.

"Did you fall down, buddy?" he asked. "You must be as drunk as I am." He squatted alongside Andy.

"You gonna catch cold there," he said. "What's the matter? You like layin' in the wet?"

Andy could not answer. The rain spattered around them.

You like a drink?"

Andy shook his head.

"I gotta bottle. Here," the man said. He pulled a pint bottle from his inside jacket pocket. Andy tried to move, but pain wrenched him back flat against the sidewalk.

"Take it," the man said. He kept watching Andy. "Take it." When Andy did not move, he said, "Nev' mind, I'll have one m'self." He tilted the bottle to his lips, and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You too young to be drinkin' anyway. Should be 'shamed of yourself, drunk and layin 'in a alley, all wet. Shame on you. I gotta good mind to call a cop."

Andy nodded. Yes, he tried to say. Yes, call a cop. Please call one.

"Oh, you don' like that, huh?" the drunk said. "You don' wanna cop to fin' you all drunk an' wet in an alley, huh: Okay, buddy. This time you get off easy." He got to his feet. "This time you get off easy," he said again. He waved broadly at Andy, and then almost lost his footing. "S'long, buddy," he said.

Wait, Andy thought. Wait, please, I'm bleeding.

"S'long," the drunk said again, "I see you around," and the he staggered off up the alley.
Andy lay and thought: Laura, Laura. Are you dancing?

The couple came into the alley suddenly. They ran into the alley together, running from the rain, the boy holding the girl’s elbow, the girl spreading a newspaper over her head to protect her hair. Andy watched them run into the alley laughing, and then duck into the doorway not ten feet from him.

"Man, what rain!" the boy said. "You could drown out there."

"I have to get home," the girl said. "It's late, Freddie. I have to get home."

"We got time," Freddie said. "Your people won't raise a fuss if you're a little late. Not with this with kind of weather."

"It's dark," the girl said, and she giggled.

"Yeah," the boy answered, his voice very low.

"Freddie . . . . ?

"Um?"

"You're ... standing very close to me."

"Um."

There was a long silence. Then the girl said, "Oh," only that single word, and Andy knew she had been kissed, and he suddenly hungered for Laura's mouth. It was then that he wondered if he would ever kiss Laura again. It was then that he wondered if he was dying.

No, he thought, I can’t be dying, not from a little street rumble, not from just being cut. Guys get cut all the time in rumbles. I can’t be dying. No, that's stupid. That don’t make any sense at all.

"You shouldn't," the girl said.

"Why not?"

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, Angela," the boy said.
"I love you, too, Freddie," the girl said, and Andy listened and thought: I love you, Laura. Laura, I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, this is stupid but I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, I think I'm dying.

He tried to speak. He tried to move. He tried to crawl toward the doorway. He tried to make a noise, a sound, and a grunt came, a low animal grunt of pain.

"What was that?" the girl said, suddenly alarmed, breaking away from the boy.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Go look, Freddie."

"No. Wait."

Andy moved his lips again. Again the sound came from him.

Freddie!"

"What?"

"I'm scared."

"I'll go see," the boy said.

He stepped into the alley. He walked over to where Andy lay on the ground. He stood over him, watching him.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What is it?" Angela said from the doorway.

"Somebody's hurt," Freddie said.

"Let's get out of here," Angela said.

"No. Wait a minute." He knelt down beside Andy. "You cut?" he asked.

Andy nodded. The boy kept looking at him. He saw the lettering on the jacket then. THE ROYALS. He turned to Angela.

"He's a Royal," he said.

"Let's what. . . .what . . . do you want to do, Freddie?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't want to get mixed up in this. He's a Royal. We help him, and the Guardians'll be down on our necks. I don't want to get mixed up in this, Angela."
"Is he . . . is he hurt bad?"

"Yeah, it looks that way."

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"We can't leave him here in the rain," Angela hesitated. "Can we?"

"If we get a cop, the Guardians'll find out who," Freddie said. "I don't know, Angela. I don't know."

Angela hesitated a long time before answering. Then she said, "I want to go home, Freddie. My people will begin to worry."

"Yeah," Freddie said. He looked at Andy again. "You all right?" he asked. Andy lifted his face from the sidewalk, and his eyes said: Please, please help me, and maybe Freddie read what his eyes were saying, and maybe he didn't.

Behind him, Angela said, "Freddie, let's get out of here! Please!" Freddie stood up. He looked at Andy again, and then mumbled, "I'm sorry." He took Angela's arm and together they ran towards the neon splash at the other end of the alley.


The rain was soothing somehow. It was a cold rain, but his body was hot all over, and the rain helped cool him. He had always liked rain. He could remember sitting in Laura's house one time, the rain running down the windows, and just looking out over the street, watching the people running from the rain. That was when he'd first joined the Royals.

He could remember how happy he was when the Royals had taken him. The Royals and the Guardians, two of the biggest. He was a Royal. There had been meaning to the title.

Now, in the alley, with the cold rain washing his hot body, he wondered about the meaning. If he died, he was Andy. He was not a Royal. He was simply Andy, and he was dead. And he wondered suddenly if the Guardians who had ambushed him and knifed him had ever once realized he was Andy? Had they known that he was Andy or had they simply known that he was Royal wearing a purple silk jacket? Had they stabbed him, Andy, or had they only stabbed the jacket and the title and what good was the title if you were dying?

I'm Andy, he screamed wordlessly, I'm Andy.

An old lady stopped at the other end of the alley. The garbage cans were stacked there, beating noisily in the rain. The old lady carried an umbrella with broken ribs, carried it like a queen. She stepped into the mouth of the alley, shopping bag over one arm. She lifted the lids of the garbage cans. She did not hear Andy grunt because she was a little deaf and because the rain was beating on the cans. She collected her string and her newspapers, and an
old hat with a feather on it from one of the garbage cans, and a broken footstool from another of the cans. And then she replaced the lids and lifted her umbrella high and walked out of the alley mouth. She had worked quickly and soundlessly, and now she was gone.

The alley looked very long now. He could see people passing at the other end of it, and he wondered who the people were, and he wondered if he would ever get to know them, wondered who it was of the Guardians who had stabbed him, who had plunged the knife into his body.

"That's for you, Royal!" the voice had said. "That's for you, Royal!" Even in his pain, there had been some sort of pride in knowing he was a Royal. Now there was no pride at all. With the rain beginning to chill him, with the blood pouring steadily between his fingers, he knew only a sort of dizziness. He could only think: I want to be Andy.

It was not very much to ask of the world.

He watched the world passing at the other end of the alley. The world didn't know he was Andy. The world didn't know he was alive. He wanted to say, "Hey, I'm alive! Hey, look at me! I'm alive! Don't you know I'm alive? Don't you know I exist?"

He felt weak and very tired. He felt alone, and wet and feverish and chilled. He knew he was going to die now. That made him suddenly sad. He was filled with sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do. He wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the jumps and the purple jackets had always seemed so important to him before. Now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, a world that was rushing past at the other end of the alley.

I don't want to die, he thought. I haven't lived yet. It seemed very important to him that he take off the purple jacket. He was very close to dying, and when they found him, he did not want them to say, "Oh, it's a Royal." With great effort, he rolled over onto his back. He felt the pain tearing at his stomach when he moved. If he never did another thing, he wanted to take off the jacket. The jacket had only one meaning now, and that was a very simple meaning.

If he had not been wearing the jacket, he wouldn't have been stabbed. The knife had not been plunged in hatred of Andy. The knife hated only the purple jacket. The jacket was as stupid meaningless thing that was robbing him of his life.

He lay struggling with the shiny wet jacket. His arms were heavy. Pain ripped fire across his body whenever he moved. But he squirmed and fought and twisted until one arm was free and then the other. He rolled away from the jacket and lay quite still, breathing heavily, listening to the sound of his breathing and the sounds of the rain and thinking: Rain is sweet, I'm Andy.

She found him in the doorway a minute past midnight. She left the dance to look for him, and when she found him, she knelt beside him and said, "Andy, it's me, Laura."

He did not answer her. She backed away from him, tears springing into her eyes, and then she ran from the alley. She did not stop running until she found a cop.
And now, standing with the cop, she looked down at him. The cop rose and said, "He's dead." All the crying was out of her now. She stood in the rain and said nothing, looking at the purple jacket that rested a foot away from his body.

The cop picked up the jacket and turned it over in his hands.

"A Royal, huh?" he said.

She looked at the cop and, very quietly, she said, "His name is Andy."

The cop slung the jacket over his arm. He took out his black pad, and he flipped it open to a blank page.

"A Royal, " he said. Then he began writing.

The End
All the trouble began when my grandfather died and my grand-mother - my father's mother - came to live with us. Relations in the one house are a strain at the best of times, but, to make matters worse, my grandmother was a real old countrywoman and quite unsuited to the life in town. She had a fat, wrinkled old face, and, to Mother's great indignation, went round the house in bare feet—the boots had her crippled, she said. For dinner she had a jug of porter and a pot of potatoes with-some-times-a bit of salt fish, and she poured out the potatoes on the table and ate them slowly, with great relish, using her fingers by way of a fork.

Now, girls are supposed to be fastidious, but I was the one who suffered most from this. Nora, my sister, just sucked up to the old woman for the penny she got every Friday out of the old-age pension, a thing I could not do. I was too honest, that was my trouble; and when I was playing with Bill Connell, the sergeant-major's son, and saw my grandmother steering up the path with the jug of porter sticking out from beneath her shawl, I was mortified. I made excuses not to let him come into the house, because I could never be sure what she would be up to when we went in.

When Mother was at work and my grandmother made the dinner I wouldn't touch it. Nora once tried to make me, but I hid under the table from her and took the bread-knife with me for protection. Nora let on to be very indignant (she wasn't, of course, but she knew Mother saw through her, so she sided with Gran) and came after me. I lashed out at her with the bread-knife, and after that she left me alone. I stayed there till Mother came in from work and made my dinner, but when Father came in later, Nora said in a shocked voice: "Oh, Dadda, do you know what Jackie did at dinnertime?" Then, of course, it all came out; Father gave me a flaking; Mother interfered, and for days after that he didn't speak to me and Mother barely spoke to Nora.

And all because of that old woman! God knows, I was heart-scalded. Then, to crown my misfortunes, I had to make my first confession and communion. It was an old woman called Ryan who prepared us for these. She was about the one age with Gran; she was well-to-do, lived in a big house on Montenotte, wore a black cloak and bonnet, and came every day to school at three o'clock when we should have been going home, and talked to us of hell. She may have mentioned the other place as well, but that could only have been by accident, for hell had the first place in her heart.

She lit a candle, took out a new half-crown, and offered it to the first boy who would hold one finger, only one finger! - in the flame for five minutes by the school clock. Being always very ambitious I was tempted to volunteer, but I thought it might look greedy. Then she asked were we afraid of holding one finger-only one finger! - in a little candle flame for five minutes and not afraid of burning all over in roasting hot furnaces for all eternity. "All eternity! Just think of that! A whole lifetime goes by and it's nothing, not even a drop in the ocean of your sufferings." The woman was really interesting about hell, but my attention was all fixed on the half-crown. At the end of the lesson she put it back in her purse. It was a great disappointment; a religious woman like that, you wouldn't think she'd bother about a thing like a half-crown.

Another day she said she knew a priest who woke one night to find a fellow he didn't recognise leaning over the end of his bed. The priest was a bit frightened, naturally enough but he asked the fellow what he wanted, and the fellow said in a deep, husky voice that he wanted to go to confession. The priest said it was an awkward time and wouldn't it do in the morning, but the fellow said that last time he went to confession, there was one sin he kept back, being ashamed to mention it, and now it was always on his mind. Then the priest knew it was a bad case, because the fellow was after making a bad confession and committing a mortal sin. He got up to dress, and just
then the cock crowed in the yard outside, and lo and behold! - when the priest looked round there was no sign of
the fellow, only a smell of burning timber, and when the priest looked at his bed didn't he see the print of two
hands burned in it? That was because the fellow had made a bad confession. This story made a shocking
impression on me.

But the worst of all was when she showed us how to examine our conscience. Did we take the name of the Lord,
our God, in vain? Did we honour our father and our mother? (I asked her did this include grandmothers and she
said it did.) Did we love our neighbours as ourselves? Did we covet our neighbour's goods? (I thought of the way I
felt about the penny that Nora got every Friday.) I decided that, between one thing and another, I must have
broken the whole ten commandments, all on account of that old woman, and so far as I could see, so long as she
remained in the house, I had no hope of ever doing anything else.

I was scared to death of confession. The day the whole class went, I let on to have a toothache, hoping my
absence wouldn't be noticed, but at three o'clock, just as I was feeling safe, along comes a chap with a message
from Mrs. Ryan that I was to go to confession myself on Saturday and be at the chapel for communion with the
rest. To make it worse, Mother couldn't come with me and sent Nora instead.

Now, that girl had ways of tormenting me that Mother never knew of. She held my hand as we went down the
hill, smiling sadly and saying how sorry she was for me, as if she were bringing me to the hospital for an
operation.

"Oh, God help us!" she moaned. "Isn't it a terrible pity you weren't a good boy? Oh, Jackie, my heart bleeds for
you! How will you ever think of all your sins? Don't forget you have to tell him about the time you kicked Gran
on the shin."

"Lemme go!" I said, trying to drag myself free of her. "I don't want to go to confession at all."

But sure, you'll have to go to confession, Jackie! she replied in the same regretful tone. "Sure, if you didn't, the
parish priest would be up to the house, looking for you. 'Tisn't, God knows, that I'm not sorry for you. Do you
remember the time you tried to kill me with the bread-knife under the table? And the language you used to me? I
don't know what he'll do with you at all, Jackie. He might have to send you up to the bishop."

I remember thinking bitterly that she didn't know the half of what I had to tell--if I told it. I knew I couldn't tell it,
and understood perfectly why the fellow in Mrs. Ryan's story made a bad confession; it seemed to me a great
shame that people wouldn't stop criticising him. I remember that steep hill down to the church, and the sunlit
hillsides beyond the valley of the river, which I saw in the gaps between the houses like Adam's last glimpse of
Paradise.

Then, when she had manoeuvred me down the long flight of steps to the chapel yard, Nora suddenly changed her
tone. She became the raging malicious devil she really was.

"There you are!" she said with a yelp of triumph, hurling me through the church door. "And I hope he'll give you
the penitential psalms, you dirty little caffler."

I knew then I was lost, given up to eternal justice. The door with the coloured-glass panels swung shut behind me,
the sunlight went out and gave place to deep shadow, and the wind whistled outside so that the silence within
seemed to crackle like ice under my feet. Nora sat in front of me by the confession box. There were a couple of
old women ahead of her, and then a miserable-looking poor devil came and wedged me in at the other side, so
that I couldn't escape even if I had the courage. He joined his hands and rolled his eyes in the direction of the
roof, muttering aspirations in an anguished tone, and I wondered had he a grandmother too. Only a grandmother
could account for a fellow behaving in that heartbroken way, but he was better off than I, for he at least could go
and confess his sins; while I would make a bad confession and then die in the night and be continually coming
back and burning people's furniture.

Nora's turn came, and I heard the sound of something slamming, and then her voice as if butter wouldn't melt in
her mouth, and then another slam, and out she came. God, the hypocrisy of women! Her eyes were lowered, her
head was bowed, and her hands were joined very low down on her stomach, and she walked up the aisle to the side altar looking like a saint. You never saw such an exhibition of devotion; and I remembered the devilish malice with which she had tormented me all the way from our door, and wondered were all religious people like that, really. It was my turn now. With the fear of damnation in my soul I went in, and the confessional door closed of itself behind me. It was pitch-dark and I couldn’t see priest or anything else. Then I really began to be frightened. In the darkness it was a matter between God and me, and He had all the odds. He knew what my intentions were before I even started; I had no chance. All I had ever been told about confession got mixed up in my mind, and I knelt to one wall and said: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned; this is my first confession." I waited for a few minutes, but nothing happened, so I tried it on the other wall. Nothing happened there either. He had me spotted all right.

It must have been then that I noticed the shelf at about one height with my head. It was really a place for grown-up people to rest their elbows, but in my distracted state I thought it was probably the place you were supposed to kneel. Of course, it was on the high side and not very deep, but I was always good at climbing and managed to get up all right. Staying up was the trouble. There was room only for my knees, and nothing you could get a grip on but a sort of wooden moulding a bit above it. I held on to the moulding and repeated the words a little louder, and this time something happened all right. A slide was slammed back; a little light entered the box, and a man’s voice said "Who’s there?"

"Tis me, father," I said for fear he mightn’t see me and go away again. I couldn’t see him at all. The place the voice came from was under the moulding, about level with my knees, so I took a good grip of the moulding and swung myself down till I saw the astonished face of a young priest looking up at me. He had to put his head on one side to see me, and I had to put mine on one side to see him, so we were more or less talking to one another upside-down. It struck me as a queer way of hearing confessions, but I didn’t feel it my place to criticise.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned; this is my first confession" I rattled off all in one breath, and swung myself down the least shade more to make it easier for him.

"What are you doing up there?" he shouted in an angry voice, and the strain the politeness was putting on my hold of the moulding, and the shock of being addressed in such an uncivil tone, were too much for me. I lost my grip, tumbled, and hit the door an unmerciful wallop before I found myself flat on my back in the middle of the aisle. The people who had been waiting stood up with their mouths open. The priest opened the door of the middle box and came out, pushing his biretta back from his forehead; he looked something terrible. Then Nora came scampering down the aisle.

"Oh, you dirty little caffler!" she said. "I might have known you’d do it. I might have known you’d disgrace me. I can’t leave you out of my sight for one minute."

Before I could even get to my feet to defend myself she bent down and gave me a clip across the ear. This reminded me that I was so stunned I had even forgotten to cry, so that people might think I wasn’t hurt at all, when in fact I was probably maimed for life. I gave a roar out of me.

"What's all this about?" the priest hissed, getting angrier than ever and pushing Nora off me. "How dare you hit the child like that, you little vixen?"

"But I can’t do my penance with him, father," Nora cried, cocking an outraged eye up at him.

"Well, go and do it, or I’ll give you some more to do," he said, giving me a hand up. "Was it coming to confession you were, my poor man?" he asked me.

"Twas, father," said I with a sob.

"Oh," he said respectfully, "a big hefty fellow like you must have terrible sins. Is this your first?"

"Tis, father," said I.
"Worse and worse," he said gloomily. "The crimes of a lifetime. I don’t know will I get rid of you at all today. You’d better wait now till I’m finished with these old ones. You can see by the looks of them they haven’t much to tell."

"I will, father," I said with something approaching joy.

The relief of it was really enormous. Nora stuck out her tongue at me from behind his back, but I couldn’t even be bothered retorting. I knew from the very moment that man opened his mouth that he was intelligent above the ordinary. When I had time to think, I saw how right I was. It only stood to reason that a fellow confessing after seven years would have more to tell than people that went every week. The crimes of a lifetime, exactly as he said. It was only what he expected, and the rest was the cackle of old women and girls with their talk of hell, the bishop, and the penitential psalms. That was all they knew. I started to make my examination of conscience, and barring the one bad business of my grandmother, it didn’t seem so bad.

The next time, the priest steered me into the confession box himself and left the shutter back, the way I could see him get in and sit down at the further side of the grille from me.

"Well, now," he said, "what do they call you?"

"Jackie, father," said I.

"And what’s a-trouble to you, Jackie?"

"Father," I said, feeling I might as well get it over while I had him in good humour, "I had it all arranged to kill my grandmother."

He seemed a bit shaken by that, all right, because he said nothing for quite a while.

"My goodness," he said at last, "that’d be a shocking thing to do. What put that into your head?"

"Father," I said, feeling very sorry for myself, "she’s an awful woman."

"Is she?" he asked. "What way is she awful?"

"She takes porter, father," I said, knowing well from the way Mother talked of it that this was a mortal sin, and hoping it would make the priest take a more favourable view of my case.

"Oh, my!" he said, and I could see he was impressed.

"And snuff, father," said I.

"That’s a bad case, sure enough, Jackie," he said.

"And she goes round in her bare feet, father," I went on in a rush of self-pity, "and she knows I don’t like her, and she gives pennies to Nora and none to me, and my dad sides with her and flakes me, and one night I was so heart-scalded I made up my mind I’d have to kill her."

"And what would you do with the body?" he asked with great interest.

"I was thinking I could chop that up and carry it away in a barrow I have," I said.

"Begor, Jackie," he said, "do you know you’re a terrible child?"

"I know, father," I said, for I was just thinking the same thing myself. "I tried to kill Nora too with a bread-knife under the table, only I missed her."

"Is that the little girl that was beating you just now?" he asked.

"’Tis, father."

"Someone will go for her with a bread-knife one day, and he won’t miss her," he said rather cryptically. "You must have great courage. Between ourselves, there’s a lot of people I’d like to do the same to, but I’d never have the nerve. Hanging is an awful death."
"Is it, father?" I asked with the deepest interest—I was always very keen on hanging. "Did you ever see a fellow hanged?"

"Dozens of them," he said solemnly. "And they all died roaring."

"Jay!" I said.

"Oh, a horrible death!" he said with great satisfaction.

"Lots of the fellows I saw killed their grandmothers too, but they all said 'twas never worth it."

He had me there for a full ten minutes talking, and then walked out the chapel yard with me. I was genuinely sorry to part with him, because he was the most entertaining character I'd ever met in the religious line. Outside, after the shadow of the church, the sunlight was like the roaring of waves on a beach; it dazzled me; and when the frozen silence melted and I heard the screech of trams on the road, my heart soared. I knew now I wouldn't die in the night and come back, leaving marks on my mother's furniture. It would be a great worry to her, and the poor soul had enough.

Nora was sitting on the railing, waiting for me, and she put on a very sour puss when she saw the priest with me. She was mad jealous because a priest had never come out of the church with her.

"Well," she asked coldly, after he left me, "what did he give you?"

"Three Hail Marys," I said.

"Three Hail Marys," she repeated incredulously. "You mustn't have told him anything."

"I told him everything," I said confidently.

"About Gran and all?"

"About Gran and all."

(All she wanted was to be able to go home and say I'd made a bad confession.)

"Did you tell him you went for me with the bread-knife?" she asked with a frown.

"I did to be sure."

"And he only gave you three Hail Marys?"

"That's all."

She slowly got down from the railing with a baffled air. Clearly, this was beyond her. As we mounted the steps back to the main road, she looked at me suspiciously.

"What are you sucking?" she asked. "Bullseyes."

"Was it the priest gave them to you? "'Twas."

"Lord God," she wailed bitterly, "some people have all the luck! 'Tis no advantage to anybody trying to be good. I might just as well be a sinner like you."
In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits. I'm in the third check-out slot, with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I ring it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up. She'd been watching cash registers forty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag -- she gives me a little snort in passing, if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem -- by the time I get her on her way the girls had circled around the bread and were coming back, without a pushcart, back my way along the counters, in the aisle between the check-outs and the Special bins. They didn't even have shoes on. There was this chunky one, with the two-piece -- it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale so I guessed she just got it (the suit) -- there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right, and one of these sunburns right across under the eyes, and a chin that was too long -- you know, the kind of girl other girls think is very "striking" and "attractive" but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much -- and then the third one, that wasn't quite so tall. She was the queen. She kind of led them, the other two peeking around and making their shoulders round. She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white prima donna legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it. You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar, but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

She had on a kind of dirty-pink --- beige maybe, I don't know -- bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down. They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim. If it hadn't been there you wouldn't have known there could have been anything whiter than those shoulders. With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just her, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty.

She had sort of oaky hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unravelling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A & P with your straps down, I suppose it's the only kind of face you can have. She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip. Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-
spaghetti-soft drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the packages back. The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle -- the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything) -- were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A & P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking oatmeal off their lists and muttering "Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no, ah, yes, applesauce!" or whatever it is they do mutter. But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few house-slaves in pin curlers even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

You know, it's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A & P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

"Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

"Darling," I said. "Hold me tight." Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

"Is it done?" he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it's called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something.

What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less. As I say, we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about twenty-seven old free-loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years.

The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints. Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it's sad but I don't think it's sad myself. The store's pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk you wonder they waste the wax on, sixpacks of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice' I've often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49¢. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money's coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.
Then everybody’s luck begins to run out. Lengel comes in from haggling with a truck full of cabbages on the lot
and is about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER behind which he hides all day when the girls touch his
eye. Lengel’s pretty dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest, but he doesn’t miss that much. He comes over and
says, "Girls, this isn't the beach."

Queenie blushes, though maybe it’s just a brush of sunburn I was noticing for the first time, now that she was so
close. "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do
when you see the people first, coming out so flat and dumb yet kind of tony, too, the way it ticked over "pick up"
and "snacks." All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were
standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on
toothpicks off a big plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in
them. When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it’s a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses
with "They’ll Do It Every Time" cartoons stencilled on.

"That's all right," Lengel said. "But this isn't the beach." His repeating this struck me as funny, as if it had just
occurred to him, and he had been thinking all these years the A & P was a great big dune and he was the head
lifeguard. He didn't like my smiling -- -as I say he doesn't miss much -- but he concentrates on giving the girls that
sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare.

Queenie's blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back -- a really sweet
can -- pipes up, "We weren't doing any shopping. We just came in for the one thing."

"That makes no difference," Lengel tells her, and I could see from the way his eyes went that he hadn't noticed she
was wearing a two-piece before. "We want you decently dressed when you come in here."

"We are decent," Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a
place from which the crowd that runs the A & P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her
very blue eyes.

"Girls, I don’t want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy." He
turns his back. That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile
delinquency.

All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had
all bunched up on Stokesie, who shook open a paper bag as gently as peeling a peach, not wanting to miss a
word. I could feel in the silence everybody getting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me, "Sammy, have you
run up this purchase?"

I thought and said "No" but it wasn't about that I was thinking. I go through the punches, 4, 9, GROC, TOT -- it's
more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear
words to, in my case "Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul (splat)"-the splat being the drawer flying out.
I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the two smoothest scoops of
vanilla I had ever known were there, and pass a half and a penny into her narrow pink palm, and nestle the
herrings in a bag and twist its neck and hand it over, all the time thinking.

The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say "I quit" to Lengel quick enough for them to
hear, hoping they’ll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero. They keep right on going, into the electric eye;
the door flies open and they flicker across the lot to their car, Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony (not
that as raw material she was so bad), leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his eyebrow.

"Did you say something, Sammy?"

"I said I quit."

"I thought you did."

"You didn't have to embarrass them."
"It was they who were embarrassing us."

I started to say something that came out "Fiddle-de-doo." It's a saying of my grand- mother's, and I know she would have been pleased.

"I don't think you know what you're saying," Lengel said.

"I know you don't," I said. "But I do." I pull the bow at the back of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders. A couple customers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each other, like scared pigs in a chute.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years. "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells me. It's true, I don't. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, "Sammy" stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you've ever wondered. "You'll feel this for the rest of your life," Lengel says, and I know that's true, too, but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs "pee-pul" and the drawer splats out. One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes, I just saunter into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before, and the door heaves itself open, and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.
Her name was Helen, but Kath called her Mouse from her very first day at our school. “What is that Mouse doing at our table?” Kath said loudly, so Helen would know she had already broken one of the most important rules. No one sat at Kath’s table without an invitation. I expected her to skitter away, like anyone else would, but instead she looked up and smiled. She did look like a mouse, with mouse-brown hair and small, sharp features but that smile said, maybe you could like me. So I ignored Kath, slide past the others, and sat down.

“Hi,” I said, “My name’s Kevin.”

Then everyone else sat down. Even Kath. I didn’t look at her, but I could feel the anger steaming off her. That winter, I seemed to be the only one who knew how to do things Kath didn’t want. I had a secret weapon though, I’m her twin brother. And that winter, it seemed to be my job to prove you didn’t get vapourized or turned into a frog if you did something that made Kath angry.

“Ready for the big concert?” I asked Renee across from me. I was trying to make things normal. Renee rolled her eyes and the conversation took off. She played percussion in the school band. I played trumpet, but I wasn’t serious about it. Piano is really my instrument. Kath played oboe. It’s a hard instrument and even I had to admit she was starting to get good. It wasn’t just natural talent either. She really worked at it, forty-five minutes every day. Not that anyone else knew. If anyone phoned while she was practising, we were supposed to say she was out.

Renee and I talked about the concert until things seemed pretty normal. I was just beginning to relax when Kath spoke.

“So Helen, do you play an instrument?” She put such a sneer in her voice that everyone at the table fell silent, waiting to see how this new kid would react.

When Helen spoke, her voice was very quiet. “No,” she said, “No instrument. I just sing.”

Kath snorted. “Sing! No choir in this school. Guess you’re out of luck.” Kath stood up then, to signal that the eating part of lunch was over. Everyone else at the table picked up their trays, following her like robots. Everyone except me and Helen, who now reminded me of a mouse I’d had to take away from our cat once, wounded.

“You could probably play in band if you wanted,” I said, “Even this late. Mrs. Cromwell is really nice.”

Helen shook her head. “No. I talked it over with Mom after Dad left. Voice is good for someone who moves a lot. I guess we won’t move much now that we’re in Torbay. The instrument is free and it isn’t hard to
move.” She smiled, as if this were an old joke. Then she lifted her chin. “Besides, I’m a very good singer.” The pride in her voice made her sound completely different. I was so surprised, I just nodded.

I hoped Kath would leave Helen alone, but I was dreaming. She started on Helen’s backpack in the school bus on the way home. I was pretty odd looking, made of heavy, faded cloth, like denim, only pink. A name, “Robyn,” was written on the flap in ballpoint pen. Kath leaned over the seat to stare at it. I was sitting across the aisle from Helen.

“Who’s Robyn, Mouse?” Kath asked.

Helen ducked her head like she’d been hit. “I don’t know.”

“Where’d you get the backpack then?”

Helen kept her head down. “At a garage sale,” she said. “I like it,” she added.

“Right,” Kath said, “It’s so…unique.” Everyone laughed.

By the time we got off the bus, I was so mad I could hardly see straight. “Who made you queen of the world?” I yelled at Kath in the driveway.

She didn’t even bother to get angry. She just gave me a look that made me feel cold all over and said, “It doesn’t matter, does it? I just am, so you better get used to it,” and walked away.

I knew something was up in gym the next day the way Kath and her friends came out of the change room giggling. Then Amanda asked Ms. Sao to help her find some goal gloves in the storage room. As soon as they disappeared, Kath shot a soccer ball at Helen, hard. Helen dodged as Jen opened the gym door behind her. The ball flew out. “Oops,” Jen said. I think I’ll help look for those goal gloves.”

Helen stood near the open door.

“Go get the ball, you klutz,” Kath ordered. “It’s getting cold in here.” I was standing across the gym, by the boys’ change room. Helen hesitated, then did what Kath said. As soon as she stepped outside, another of Kath’s friends closed the door. It was about ten below zero. Everyone else saw what happened. Nobody did anything. It only took half a minute for me to jog across the gym and open the door, but Helen was already shivering. I took the ball from her and hurried her inside.

I slammed the soccer ball down and kicked it so hard it flew all the way across the gym. “One more trick like that,” I yelled at Kath, “And I tell. I mean it.”

“Kevin, you’re such a baby,” Kath said. “We’re just having fun.” But I thought she looked worried.

After that, Kath was more careful. She had classes with Helen that I wasn’t in. She knew she could do what she wanted, and no one would tell me. And it occurred to me that Kath might be mean to Helen just to bother me, so I backed off. I couldn’t spend my life keeping track of Kath. Anyway, I had a piano conservatory exam coming up. It was nice to be able to just sit and play. The music was hard, but it was never mean.
Maybe Kath thought she could be queen of the school forever, but she made a mistake. Kath made fun of a girl named Christine, just once; more specifically, her ears. Christine was a good athlete, and popular. She started having parties. Sleepovers, horror movie parties, even dances. Kath was never invited. Christine wasn’t mean; she just acted like Kath didn’t exist. Kath tried to pretend it didn’t matter, but it did. I knew when she came to me one Saturday night and said, “Dad will drive us into St. John’s. Do you want to see a movie?”

“Aren’t you afraid someone will see us together?” I teased.

She shrugged. “Everyone else was invited to Christine’s.”

That was truer than she knew. I’d been invited myself. But I didn’t go and I didn’t tell Kath. She was still my sister. “Let’s go,” I said, “But I pick the movie.”

The next week, posters went up for a talent show to raise money for new library books. Overnight, our school changed. Suddenly, the halls were full of step dancers, clumsy jugglers, bad magic acts – everyone had a hidden talent, mostly ones they should have kept hidden. I thought about playing something from the conservatory exam, but it wasn’t going to be that sort of night. I was pretty surprised when Helen came to me. I’d almost forgotten about her by then.

“You play piano, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Could you play this?” she showed me sheet music for “My Heart Will Go On,” from Titanic. I almost told her nobody wanted to hear an old song like that, but, then I thought, sheet music is expensive. So I opened it up instead. It looked medium hard.

“You want to sing at the talent show?” Helen bit her lip, but then she nodded.

“Give me a week to practise. Then we’ll try it together, okay?”

Her smile changed her face completely. “Thank you,” she said, “That would be great,” and she was gone. I’d never really listened to the song but the more I played the music, the more I liked it.

“That’s a switch,” Kath said when she heard me one night. “I thought that piano only played Bach.”

“Ha, ha,” I said. “If you’ll excuse me,” and I started to play again, loudly, so she couldn’t ask questions.

Helen found a church basement where we could practise without anybody knowing. The piano was badly out of tune. Helen’s voice was thin and nervous. We sounded awful.

“It’s pretty good,” I told her.

Her look told me she knew how bad we were. “Maybe I should sit down,” she said. “My knees are knocking.”

She sounded better, but the piano was still awful. “We should practice at my place,” I told her.

She laughed. “Right, and afterwards, your sister could have me for supper. As the main course.”

“I don’t know why she’s like that,” I said.
Helen shook her head. “I don’t either. I used to think maybe the girls picking on me were secretly miserable or something, but lately, I’m not sure.”

“You don’t have to prove yourself, you know,” I said.

“But maybe I want to. Let’s try one more time.”

That night after supper, Kath made an announcement. “I’ve decided to audition for the talent show,” she said.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Kathryn Morris and her magic oboe.”

“Funny Kevin, but I’m not playing the oboe. I’m going to sing.”

She watched me carefully while she said this, so I willed myself not to react.

“Aren’t you going to offer to accompany me?” she asked.

“No, I’m not.”

“I thought I might try that song you’ve been playing.”

“It’s not available.”

“Kevin, that’s mean.” Kath looked like she might cry. She wasn’t used to hearing no. I felt bad, but I couldn’t explain. I was afraid of what Kath might do to Helen.

When she finally realized I was serious, she turned away. “Be that way then. It’s not as if I need you.”

At the audition, everyone was edgy. Girls in strange costumes giggled while they worked through bad dance moves, guys with decks of cards walked around muttering to themselves. Helen looked pale. “Want to give it a run-through?” I nodded towards the piano.

She shook her head. “I’d rather wait.”

I don’t know when Kath slipped into the room. She was dressed in hippie clothes and carried our father’s battered old acoustic guitar. When she saw me with Helen, she waved me over. “This is why you wouldn’t play for me?”

I nodded.

“I thought you were just being mean.”

“No, Kath,” I said. “I wasn’t being mean. Truce?”

“Okay, truce.”

Then people started disappearing towards the stage. After an act was auditioned, kids could stay in the audience if they were quiet. Three acts waited in the wings ahead of time. Kath was three acts ahead of us, so we got to see her. She sang an old Bob Dylan song, “Blowing in the Wind,” and played three-chord guitar. It wasn’t very good. When she finished, the applause was limp. A few months before, Kath would have brought the house down with the exact same song.
Two acts later, it was our turn. Helen didn’t look pale anymore. He looked green. As I put the music on the piano, she rushed off-stage. For a minute, I thought she’d bolted, but she came back with a stool to sit on. Out in the audience, I saw Kath. When she smiled, she looked like the sister I’d always wanted.

What happened next was magic. With the piano in tune, Helen didn’t have to struggle. Her voice blended and soared with the music, and for the first time, I understood what a terrific singer she was. She did too. Halfway through the song, she stood up, walked to the edge of the stage and sang to the audience like she’d been there every day of her life. When the final chords died, there was a deep silence then long applause. “My goodness,” Mrs. Cromwell said. “That was lovely.”

When we came off-stage, Christine came over to slap Helen on the back. “You’ve got to sing at my party Saturday! Say you’ll come.”

Helen nodded shyly.

I had a feeling no one would ever call her Mouse again. I looked at Kath, sitting alone. Queen of nothing now. So I went and sat beside her.
What did you do the last time someone asked you to do something you’d rather avoid? Read on to find out what Trish does.

It wasn’t till Trish was talking on the phone to Gavin about their plan for Saturday that her mother told her she would be babysitting that night. Trish covered the mouthpiece. “I can’t, Mom. I’m going out with Gavin.”

“I already said you’d do it.”
“Without even asking me?”
“Barb Stanley needs someone to stay with Helen for a few hours.”
“Gavin, can I call you back? Yeah, love you too, bye.” Trish picked her books up from the counter and hugged them to her chest. “You said I would babysit Barb’s mother? That weird old lady who came for lunch and kept going ‘Isn’t that marvellous?’ every time she made the wooden gull flap its wings?

“It’s just for a few hours. Barb said Helen will probably sleep the whole time. And Trish,” her mother argued, “you do see Gavin every day.” Trish stomped upstairs to her room. Didn’t mothers know anything about love?

Trish shoved her homework and a couple of tapes into her knapsack, just in case Gavin wasn’t home when she called him from Helen’s. She threw on her coat and flung her knapsack over her shoulder.

Helen was awake when Trish arrived. She was watching TV. Four bright coloured barrettes–pink and red rabbits–were stuck haphazardly into her wispy white hair. Her brown sweater was on inside out.

Barb ushered Trish into the kitchen. “Mom had a longer nap than usual this afternoon,” she said. “She wanted to make a cake this morning. I guess it tired her out. I’m sorry,” Barb explained, “but with the long nap…”

“Does she know who I am?” Trish interrupted. “Won’t she think it’s kind of weird having a babysitter?”

“I’m afraid Mom doesn’t know who many people are any more,” Barb said. “And you can just tell her you came over to watch TV.”

Trish shook her head. “What’s with the barrettes?”

“My granddaughter left them here last weekend.” Barb scribbled a phone number on a pad by the phone. “And for some reason, Mom has decided there’s going to be a party tonight. So, just play along, okay? She’ll get tired soon without anything actually happening.” As she slipped out the back door Barb added, “Don’t let her out of your sight for more than a few minutes, eh? She gets into things.”

Right.

“Thank you for coming, Trish.”

In the living room Helen was fixed on the TV. Trish sat down where she’d be able to watch them both. Crayons and old-fashioned stickers were scattered over the coffee table. Barb must have dug them
out of some old box for the granddaughter’s visit last weekend, Trish figured. And that must be her, the granddaughter—the little girl in the photo on the piano.

“Are you here for the party?” Helen said.

“Um, yeah.”

“Your outfit is lovely.”

Trish glanced down at her jeans and the old sweatshirt she only wore when she knew she wouldn’t run into anybody that mattered. “Thanks. Um. You look lovely too.”

Helen laughed. She was a tiny woman but her laugh came from deep inside and went on and on. Trish wondered what she’d said that was so funny.

“Would you just look at that!” Trish followed Helen’s gaze to the TV, where mechanical pink rabbit was marching across the screen beating a drum. “Isn’t that the darndest thing?”

For the next fifteen minutes Trish and Helen watched “Golden Girls”.

Helen sat quietly through the funniest bits and laughed when nothing funny was happening at all. She seemed to like the commercials better than the show, and when the battery bunny started across the screen with his drum again, Helen laughed and exclaimed, “Would you just look at that! Isn’t that the darndest thing?”

Trish pretended to laugh along at the boring rabbit with its ability to keep on going and going and going.

When the rabbit stopped, Helen got up and looked out the window. “Where is everyone?”

“Barb just went out for a little while,” Trish said. “She’ll be back soon. Why don’t you come watch the rest of your show?” Or better yet, she thought, why don’t you go to bed so I can call Gavin?

“Where do you live?” Helen demanded to know. Before Trish could answer, Helen asked, “You live at the bottom of our garden, don’t you?”

“Well actually,” Trish said, “I live up the street. You know the Carters? They’re my parents.”

“At the bottom of the garden,” Helen said. “That’s just what I thought.” Then she wandered away in the direction of the kitchen.

Trish could hear canisters being moved around on the counter and the scraping of a chair across the tiled floor. Don’t leave her alone, Barb had said. But she couldn’t check up on a grown woman like she was some two-year-old. As a peach-skinned model on the TV smoothed moisturizer onto her cheeks, Trish concentrated on the sounds in the kitchen. When something heavy banged against the counter and onto the floor, Trish leapt from her chair, thinking 911.

She found Helen standing on the counter. “Dear, would just pass me that tin of beans that fell?” Helen said.

Trish held up a hand, as if it might keep Helen from falling, and retrieved the tin from under the edge of the cupboards.

“Helen, it’s time to come down now.” Trish’s heart had stopped beating, but from her mouth came her calm trying-to-reason-with-a-three-year-old voice. “Take my hands, I’ll help you.”

Helen turned back to the open cupboard. “But I haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

If Helen fell, she’d break something for sure. And if she broke a hip—well, didn’t old people get pneumonia and die if they had to stay in bed for too long?

“What are you looking for?” Trish asked, fighting not to cry. “Maybe I can find it for you.”

Helen stared into the cupboard for a long moment. “I’ve forgotten.” Her knees shaking, she reached her hands down to Trish. “My mind—” She leaned against Trish as she lowered herself to the chair pushed up against the counter. “It’s not what it used to be, you know.”
Surprised at how little Helen weighed, Trish lifted her the rest of the way down. She felt Helen’s feet touch the ground, a rush of relief. She wanted to hug Helen. She wished, unexpectedly and momentarily that her own mother was there to hug her.

Trish picked the canisters up off the floor, where Helen had set them out of her way, and returned them to the counter. “Would you like a piece of chocolate cake?”

“Would that help my mind, do you think?”

“It can’t hurt,” Trish said. “You get some plates and I’ll cut the cake.”

Trish was pushing the knife through the layers of chocolate when Helen said, “I don’t think we can do that yet.” She touched her hands to the pink and red rabbits in her hair. “Everyone isn’t here.”

“Right.” Trish followed Helen back to the living room.

Helen picked up the photo of Barb’s little granddaughter on the piano. “We used to have such lovely parties. She adored getting all fancied up.” Helen held the photo closer to her face. “I don’t remember that dress though.”

“Who do you think–?” Trish swallowed. “Who is that in the picture, Helen?”

“Why, it’s Barbara. Do you know Barbara?” She set the photo back on the piano. “Of course, you live in the bottom of the garden, don’t you. You can go home now if you’d like.”

“No, I think… I think I’d like to stay–” Trish took a deep breath, “for the party.”

Helen smoothed her skirt and sat down in front of the TV. “I love parties, don’t you?” There was effort in her words. When the battery bunny came on she said, “Would you just look at that. Isn’t that the darndest thing?” But her eyes were without laughter. Trish knew how upset and out of control little kids got when they were up much past bedtime. Would Helen get like that if she got overtired trying to stay up, waiting for something that wasn’t going to happen?

“Maybe you’d like to go to bed now,” Trish suggested.

“You know I can’t miss the party.” The look in Helen’s eyes reminded Trish of a TV movie she’d seen in which a girl, all dolled up, was starting to realize no one was going to show up for her party. “Not,” Helen said, composing herself, “after you’ve gone to so much trouble.”

Trish looked at her watch. Barb wouldn’t be home for another two hours. Should she–could she–try to give Helen her party?

Trish slid onto the piano bench and slowly, softly, started to pick out the notes of the first party song that came to her. *Hap-py birth-day to you, Hap-py birth-day to you...* Standing beside Trish, Helen began to move her head back and forth to the rhythm. *Hap-py birth-day, Hap-py birth-day...* Helen swayed, her eyes closed, and a trembling smile on her lips, as Trish played.

It’s working, Trish thought. If this will keep Helen happy, I’ll play all night. But in the middle of the next time through, Helen stopped moving and opened her eyes. Her expression was cross.

“What is it? Do you want me to stop playing?”

“Your party is lovely.” Helen placed her hands on her hips. “But it’s not much of a party without hats, now is it.”

Party hats? She’d never find any in this house. Trish piced up the TV guide. “I wonder if there are any good movies on tonight.”

“Every good party,” Helen insisted, “has hats.”

What was it with this party thing? Helen couldn’t concentrate on anything for more than two minutes, but she was determined there was going to be a party–with hats. Trish sighed. Party hats. Party hats.

In the kitchen cupboard she had seen paper plates. She’d brought pencil crayons for her map homework–Helen was supposed to be asleep–and of course, there were the stickers and crayons too.
“Look,” said Trish. “We’ll make hats.” She knelt beside the coffee table. “With these stickers, we’ll make beautiful hats.”

“I can make a hat!” Helen grabbed a plate and a sticker. “You live in the bottom of the garden, don’t you.”

“Yes,” Trish said. “Will you come and visit me there some day?”

“That would be lovely, dear.” Helen rubbed the sticker over her tongue.

“Not too much,” Trish said. “You’ll lick off all the glue.”

“I know that!” Helen laughed from deep inside.

Trish watched as Helen stuck stickers on her paper plate, licking and sticking, licking and sticking, one after another till two paper plates were covered. Please, energetic bunny, you’ve got to wear down soon.

Trish tied Helen’s hat around her head.

“You too,” Helen insisted.

“There,” Trish said, her hat in place. “Now, ready for bed?”

“Don’t be silly.” Helen planted herself firmly beside the piano. “The party is just beginning!”

Helen swayed through the first round of “Happy Birthday”. The second time Trish played it, Helen’s feet were lifting off the ground. The third time, she was swaying in circles, a spring in every step.

Trish played on as Helen danced. And then Helen began to sing.

Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you. Her voice was strong, her face radiant. Happy birthday, dear Edward, she belted out, Happy Birthday to yoo-ouuu!

When Barb came home, Trish was watching “Saturday Night Live” and colouring in the continents on her geography map. Beside her on the sofa, Helen was asleep, chocolate cake crumbs on her chest, homemade party hat perched on her head.

Barb eyed the three plates on the coffee table. Each held a fork, a few crumbs, and a birthday candle. “Did you have company?”

“I’m—not exactly.”

Barb rummaged in her purse. “I’m sorry if Mom gave you a hard time.”

Trish crumpled the money Barb handed her into the pocket of her jeans. “She’s a neat lady.”

Careful not to disturb any of the stickers, Trish slid the hat Helen had made for her into her knapsack.

“I’ll come back and party with her any time.” Trish opened the door to leave. “Barb?” she asked, “Who is Edward?”

“Edward? My father’s name was Edward.” Barb looked at Trish, puzzled. “Why?”

“That’s who the party was for tonight,” Trish said.

“Dad died two years ago.”

“But when was his birthday?”

“November 24th. That’s—”

Trish nodded. “Tonight.”

From the sofa came a contented sigh. Barb and Trish turned. Helen was smiling in her sleep.
“Hey, Walter, are you planning on staying all day?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure.”

The auditorium is rapidly emptying, and with it comes a thick blanket of silence. Enveloped in my own thoughts, I have missed most of the assembly, but that isn’t important. Now we have the next six minutes to go to our lockers and our first class, but I already have the books I need.

Thinking back over the past month, I remember numerous times when I wasted hours upon hours of valuable time, lying in front of the television or just daydreaming. Our English teacher gave the assignment five weeks ago.

“This short story is, in your own way, to symbolize something. Just make sure that someone with a little intelligence, namely me, will be able to recognize what you are trying show. Have your story, with at least two thousand words, completed by April 21.

Today is April 21.

Three days ago I began to get worried about the story. I know I shouldn’t procrastinate the way I do, but you know how it goes. When the assignment doesn’t have to be handed in for two or three weeks, or even a week, it seems like a long way off. I always excuse myself by saying that I work better under pressure, but for some reason it didn’t work that way last night.

Last night I still hadn’t begun to write the stupid story. I mean, I had tried, but success had evaded me. Well, I was sitting there with the radio on, because of course I work better with noise in the background, trying to make my pen write a story. On my seven or so previous attempts, I could get about one hundred or two hundred words and then my mind would go blank. Then I started thinking that I could use a story from a magazine as a model. I mean, I could use the plot for an idea and maybe even use some of the phrases and incidents. For about three hours I browsed through my old magazines and read all the short stories in them, along with jokes, cartoons, and the eye-catching articles. From the beginning I could tell that it was going to be more or less a waste of time because the only magazines I had were Time and Sports Illustrated, which aren’t exactly literary magazines. But I just kept reading and losing time. Finally it dawned on me that my mother’s Good Housekeeping magazines are rather well-known for their interesting short stories, at least around my house. Maybe I could find one making use of symbolism.

The twelfth Good Housekeeping that I picked up had the perfect story in it, and it was even written by a man. By this time I had read eleven magazines, and it was 11:30. I sat for an hour or so trying to figure out how I could change it, but still maintain the plot and the use of symbolism. When it got to be one o’clock my leaden eyelids were becoming too heavy for the weary muscles that hold eyelids up. Of course I had stayed up rather, well very late the previous night because of a history report I handed in yesterday, a day late.

Then I got to thinking: “This is not only an old issue, but this magazine is written for and usually read by women.” Since my English teacher is a man, I could see no earthly reason why he would ever read the story. The fact that he was a bachelor prodded me on even more. After about two more minute or deliberation, I recopied the story…, changing only the names of the characters.

Sled
By Walter Milburn

All the adventure of the night and snow lay before him: if only he could be out of the house...

Now I'm sitting in this auditorium seat. How can I possibly turn this in as my own work? The decision is weighing heavily upon my mind. I begin my journey through the endless corridors of the school.

“Beat Bears.” We played them last week. That sign ought to be taken down. It’s only taking up space now... Could I be put in jail?... The Miracle Worker. I hope this year the senior-class play is a more effective performance than it was last year... How could anyone ever know?... Jim got a new pair of shoes. It’s about time. His old ones were falling apart... Who would know? I’ll know. I haven’t stolen since I was eight... until now... This door needs a good job of lubrication and the glass isn’t exactly immaculate. My parents pay enough taxes. Why can’t things be kept in good condition?... If by some stroke of misfortune... but, no, what possible way?... Here’s Room 23. The “2” is almost one-quarter of a centimeter taller than the “3”... My seat, middle row, second from the back.

“Please pass in your stories.”

I don’t think I can.

“Well, Walter, isn’t yours completed? Your grade can’t take that.”

“What? Oh, I, I must have been daydreaming. Here it is.”

Well, I did it. I had to do it. If I failed English this semester, my parents would be more than mad. What’s done is done. He’ll never know the difference, and my parents will be happy.

“Now, class, I’d like to read this story to you. I told my aunt, who used to be an English teacher herself, about the assignment I gave, and she said that she had kept a story, written by one of her former pupils, on file because it is an excellent example of symbolism. The pupil is now a well-known author, and the story has been published.

“‘Sled,’ by Thomas E. Adams. ‘All the adventure of the night and snow lay before him: if only he could get out of the house...’”
After I started going to school my father scarcely talked any more. I was very intoxicated by the new game of spelling; my father had little skill for it (it was my mother who wrote our letters) and was convinced I was no longer interested in hearing him tell of his adventures during the long weeks when he was far away from the house.

One day, however, he said to me:
‘The time’s come to show you something.’
He asked me to follow him. I walked behind him, not talking, as we had got in the habit of doing. He stopped in the field before a clump of leafy bushes.
‘Those are called alders,’ he said.
‘I know.’
‘You have to learn how to choose,’ my father pointed out.
I didn’t understand. He touched each branch of the bush, one at a time, with religious care.
‘You have to choose one that’s very fine, a perfect one, like this.’
I looked; it seemed exactly like the others.
My father opened his pocket knife and cut the branch he’d selected with pious care. He stripped off the leaves and showed me the branch, which formed a perfect Y.
‘You see,’ he said, ‘the branch has two arms. Now take one in each hand. And squeeze them.’
I did as he asked and took in each hand one fork of the Y, which was thinner than a pencil.
‘Close your eyes,’ my father ordered, ‘and squeeze a little harder….Don’t open your eyes! Do you feel anything?’
‘The branch is moving!’ I exclaimed, astonished.
Beneath my clenched fingers the alder was wriggling like a small, frightened snake. My father saw that I was about to drop it.
‘Hang on to it!’
‘The branch is squirming,’ I repeated. ‘And I hear something that sounds like a river!’
‘Open your eyes,’ my father ordered.
I was stunned, as though he’d awakened me while I was dreaming.
‘What does it mean?’ I asked my father.
‘It means that underneath us, right here, there’s a little fresh-water spring. If we dig, we could drink from it. I’ve just taught you how to find a spring. It’s something my own father taught me. It isn’t something you learn in school. And it isn’t useless: a man can get along without writing and arithmetic, but he can never get along without water.’

Much later, I discovered that my father was famous in the region because of what people called his ‘gift’: before digging a well they always consulted him; they would watch him prospecting the fields or the hills, eyes closed, hands clenched on the fork of an alder bough. Wherever my father stopped, they marked the ground; there they would dig; and from there water would gush forth.

Years passed; I went to other schools, saw other countries, I had children, I wrote some books and my poor father is lying in the earth where so many times he had found fresh water.

One day someone began to make a film about my village and its inhabitants, from whom I’ve stolen so many of the stories that I tell. With the film crew we went to see a farmer to capture the image of a sad man: his children didn’t want to receive the inheritance he’d spent his whole life preparing for them — the finest farm in
the area. While the technicians were getting cameras and microphones ready the farmer put his arm around my shoulders, saying:

‘I knew your father well.’
‘Ah! I know. Everybody in the village knows each other... No one feels like an outsider.’
‘You know what’s under your feet?’
‘Hell?’ I asked, laughing.
‘Under you feet there’s a well. Before I dug I called in specialists from the Department of Agriculture; they did research, they analyzed shovelfuls of dirt; and they made a report where they said there wasn’t any water on my land. With the family, the animals, the crops, I need water. When I saw that those specialists hadn’t found any I thought of your father and I asked him to come over. He didn’t want to; I think he was pretty fed up with me because I’d asked those specialists instead of him. But finally he came; he went and cut off a little branch, then he walked around for a while with his eyes shut; he stopped, he listened to something we couldn’t hear and then he said to me: ‘Dig right here, there’s enough water to get your whole flock drunk and drown your specialists besides.’ We dug and found water. Fine water that’s never heard of pollution.

The film people were ready; they called to me to take my place.
‘I’m gonna show you something,’ said the farmer, keeping me back. ‘You wait right here.’
He disappeared into a shack which he must have used to store things, then came back with a branch which he held out to me.

‘I never throw nothing away; I kept the alder branch your father cut to find my water. I don’t understand, it hasn’t dried out.’

Moved as I touched the branch, kept out of I don’t know what sense of piety—and which really wasn’t dry—I had the feeling that my father was watching me over my shoulder; I closed my eyes and, standing above the spring my father had discovered, I waited for the branch to writhe, I hoped the sound of gushing water would rise to my ears.

The alder stayed motionless in my hands and the water beneath the earth refused to sing. Somewhere along the roads I’d taken since the village of my childhood I had forgotten my father’s knowledge.

‘Don’t feel sorry,’ said the man, thinking no doubt of his farm and his childhood; ‘nowadays fathers can’t pass on anything to the next generation.’

And he took the alder branch from my hands.
Tante Rose had promised me at a very early age that if I studied my piano lessons very hard, she would some day send me to New York to take lessons at a school where I would study to become a concert pianist.

Tante Rose was a concert pianist. She was my mother’s older sister and my only aunt. She was tall, thin, and pale, with thick, black hair that she wore cropped at the back of her neck. Tante Rose was older than my mother but younger than my father. She had never married, choosing instead to live a private life with few acquaintances and still fewer friends. If I ever asked her why she had chosen to remain single, she laughed at me and said with a strange smile, “One day, Hannah, you will understand why I made that choice. One day you will understand how all choices are made.”

When I was ten, Tante Rose had to give up performing as a pianist. Arthritis, coupled with an old injury to nerves under her collarbone, had sent her slender fingers curling in toward themselves and had swollen her knuckles so they were like knotted wood. She settled five blocks from us, in the north end of Winnipeg. Every year she joined us for the Jewish holidays of Passover, Yom Kippur, and Chanukah. In her small second-storey apartment, she gave piano lessons. She was my teacher; I was her favourite pupil. Late some nights, Tante Rose sat in our living room, drinking strong, black coffee and talking with my parents. Though I was supposed to be at my desk studying Hebrew lessons, I would press my face tight up against the bedroom door and listen to hear Tante Rose tell my parents that I had a brilliant future as a concert pianist. I was eleven and in love with the life of music she described to me in so much detail. I dreamed of myself in flowing dresses with my long black hair grown out to my waist and a string of pearls at my throat. I saw myself travelling on airplanes to giant concert halls where people threw me flowers and chocolates and shouted my name. Tante Rose told my mother I had a special gift and that gift must be nourished. Tante Rose said if I made a few sacrifices and worked hard, I would be famous.

I practised every day for Tante Rose. After school I sat at the piano bench in the living room and studied finger exercises and simple Chopin études and little pieces by Bach and Mozart. Each was like a small, beautiful trinket to me. On Wednesdays I had my lesson with Tante Rose in her apartment. She had a grand piano that was like a magical animal; it was big and intriguing. She sat next to me on the bench, circling in the music when I played wrong notes, telling me when to play soft and when to play loud and sometimes speaking under her breath in Hebrew (which I knew) or Yiddish (which I did not). Always she looked pleased with my progress.

By my thirteenth birthday I was playing the music of Beethoven and Liszt with proficiency. I was a hard worker. I had to work if I was going to be a concert pianist like Tante Rose. I had no choice.

When I was fourteen I moved in to share Tante Rose’s apartment. The move would allow me to devote all my free time to my studies in piano. It was decided that I would spend Saturday and Sunday night with my parents and brothers, but the rest of my week would belong to Tante Rose. I packed all my things into two big leather bags and carried them the five blocks to her apartment.

Tante Rose was at the apartment every day when I arrived from school. We sat down at four-thirty and worked together at the piano until seven at night. Then we stopped for soup and bread and tea. We began our work again at eight-thirty and went until ten. If I had homework it had to be done in the morning, before my classes began. Tante Rose demanded of me total commitment and devotion.

On Fridays, before sundown, Tante Rose insisted that I should close the piano and not open it again until nightfall on Saturday. She said that it was my duty to keep the Jewish Sabbath as a holy day for myself. On Friday nights she lit Sabbath candles, praying and singing the traditional songs while gently swaying back and forth to the music. She taught me to make the traditional Jewish bread, challah. Tante Rose braided the three stands of dough almost magically, her hands spinning the ropes around until she had two loaves that always seemed to come out of the oven crisp and perfect. The next morning, we got ready for synagogue, and we sat in the second row from
the back. Tante Rose wore plain black dresses and crinkled soft scarves. She prayed in a soft voice and she knew all the prayers by heart. Saturday night, after the sun had gone down and we had eaten our evening meal, we went right back to work, feeling somehow refreshed for the week to come.

Once a month, Tante Rose took me to Eaton’s downtown where she bought me clothes and shoes and things for school. My mother and father always seemed to be occupied with my three younger brothers. I once heard Tante Rose say to my parents, “Don’t worry about Hannah. I will see that she gets all she needs in this life. I will take care of her.”

At Eaton’s, Tante Rose would buy me any dress I liked. She favoured long velvet skirts and white blouses with collars that made me feel like a queen. Once she bought me a gold chain with my name on it. “You are beautiful—my Hannah has grown up so fast,” she said to me one day as we rode the bus home. “I will send you to New York in a year. You will be ready.”

I worked hard that winter. It seemed as though I spent all my time practising. Sometimes it seemed there was nothing else in the world but Tante Rose and me and Tante Rose’s piano. Tante Rose’s piano became my friend, a familiar presence. When my fingers rushed over its flat white keys, from one end of the keyboard to the other, the instrument laughed like I was tickling it or cried like I was hurting it. Always Tante Rose was there with her pen, marking the wrong notes in red ink and promising me that soon I would be ready to study in America with the best teachers, to take my place in life. I listened to her trustingly, lovingly. I loved my Tante Rose so much.

Tante Rose had only ever forbidden me to do two things. One thing she forbade me to do was break the Sabbath in any way. This meant no piano, no homework, no playing with friends. The second thing she forbade me to do was ride a bicycle. Tante Rose had hurt herself badly once when she was pitched from a bicycle. Her collarbone had been broken and it had never healed properly. She worried constantly about my having an accident that would cost me my career. It was perhaps an irrational fear on her part, but I knew it was important to Tante Rose. Consequently, she never allowed me even so much as to sit on my brother Avi’s bicycle. I never thought much of this when I was young. It seemed a small price to pay for Tante Rose’s devotion.

Yet in my mind there was always the memory of how it felt to ride a bicycle. Until my seventh birthday, I had navigated the neighbourhood streets on a two-wheeler, just like all of my friends. When I began to study piano with Tante Rose, she said I must stop riding a bicycle. I stopped, but I still liked looking at bicycles, I liked touching them. My friends passed me on their way home from school, riding as fast as cars, then dragging their feet along the pavement to make themselves slow down, scuffing their good shoes. When the girls rode bicycles, their hair streamed out behind them and looked the way hair looks when you float motionless in the bath. I could never help staring at their hair. I had black hair like Tante Rose, only mine was long and braided from the temple down. I remembered what it felt like to have your hair fly out behind you. I wanted to feel the wind in my hair.

By my fifteenth birthday I was obsessed with the idea of riding a bicycle. I closed my eyes in class and thought about how it would be to be perched up on the leather seat and pedalling until I was out of breath. I looked at the pictures of the bikes in the Eaton’s catalogue and I desperately, passionately, wanted a bicycle.

At the same time, I had begun to notice puzzling differences between myself and the other girls in my class. My friends Ilana and Leah, I observed, rode bikes and talked about movies and books and had dates and dance classes and Hebrew lessons. And after school, when Ilana and Leah went to Israel club or to the library, I went home to Tante Rose. Leah and Ilana sometimes telephoned me, but Tante Rose didn’t like it when I talked on the phone because she thought it was a waste of time. Even on Friday, the one night when I did not practise, Tante Rose insisted that I stay home to celebrate the Sabbath. I felt lonely and isolated, increasingly aware of the differences between myself and girls like Ilana and Leah. I vowed that I would break my promise to Tante Rose. I would ride a bicycle, just once, to prove that I was at least a little bit like Ilana and Leah, to prove that I had some control over my own life. I needed somehow to prove this to myself.

I would have to decide on a time and a place. It was spring, and the melting snow meant I couldn’t sneak a ride down the back lane because the lanes were too full of mud. I could ride through the park, but the park would be full of my friends, and someone might see me and tell Tante Rose. I would have to ride the bike on the path by the river, which was a ten-minute walk from my house. I would take my brother Avi’s bike and it caught, I would say I had been returning it to him.
On a clear Friday afternoon in April, Tante Rose asked me to go to my parents’ house to get my mother’s recipe for potato kugel while she took a short nap. I walked there quickly, hurriedly. When I arrived and called out to my parents from the kitchen, Avi came around the corner of the stairs and told me they were at the dentist with my brother David. Then Avi went back up to his room.

Was this the chance I had been waiting for? I stood in the kitchen for a moment and thought very hard. Then I snuck out to the back yard, still in my velvet skirt and top, wearing my patent leather shoes with buckles. I felt my heart pounding inside my chest and I wondered about what would happen if Avi came out to get his bike and it was gone.

I pulled the bicycle, with its gleaming chrome handlebars and polished metal frame, out of the shed. My hands gripped it firmly; I saw my knuckles go white. It was such a strange thing to want to do, and yet, more than anything, I wanted to do it…

I pushed the bicycle to the end of my street and turned it around the corner. My family was occupied and Tante Rose was at home in bed, napping. I would be back at the house just before sundown, in time for Shabbat. Who would see me?

When I got to the corner I swung one of my legs over the bar at the top of the bike so that I was sitting on the seat. I put a hand on each of the brakes and flexed them. I had seen Avi use the brakes. I would use them too. Placing a foot on each of the pedals, I strained with my knees to push each one down to the ground. I felt the wheels move as this happened, and a second later the bicycle was moving down the street, creeping slowly along the curb toward the road.

I wouldn’t be able to feel the wind in my hair unless I was going faster, and so I pushed, harder and harder, against the pedals with my feet. I felt my legs sinking each time, then rising with the motion. I rode down to the river. I shook my head and felt my hair fly out behind me, and I went faster and faster until it was like a cape at my back. It was a good feeling. It was not as good as I thought it would be, but it was still a good feeling.

When I finally thought to look at my watch it said five-thirty. The sun would be going down in twenty minutes. With a sigh, I turned the bike back toward my house and rode it there slowly and reluctantly.

At the corner of Moon Street I noticed a man leaning up against a dark blue car. He had a beard and a round wide face. I had never seen him before. Out of my other eye I saw our neighbour, Mrs. Solomon, sitting on her front porch. She waved at me but I pretended not to see. As I passed the man with the beard, I had the strange feeling that he was pointing something at me. A minute later I turned around and saw that he had gone over to Mrs. Solomon and they were talking on her porch. I could barely make out their figures in the dim light.

It was late; the sky was visibly darkening. I locked the bike in the shed and went into the house to say hello to my parents. Tante Rose was in the kitchen with them; she looked irritated.

“Where do you go on Shabbos that you don’t tell anyone where you’re going?” she said in Hebrew.

“I had an errand to run,” I replied hurriedly, coming over to kiss her and my mother on the cheek. I slid in next to Avi at the table.

“Go wash your hands and say the blessing,” Tante Rose barked at me. “You should be home Friday right at sundown.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly. Tante Rose cleared her throat. She got up to wash her hands for the meal and didn’t mention my lateness again.

I looked at her during dinner and wondered if I should feel guilt for what I had done. I did not; I knew I would not do it again. I was only sorry that I had unconsciously marred the Sabbath. I thought to myself that in one evening I had broken both the promises I had ever made to Tante Rose.

The next morning Tante Rose and I dressed for synagogue as usual. We walked the two blocks in a friendly silence, the offences of the previous night all but forgotten.

We entered the synagogue through the carved wooden doors at the front of the building. As we stepped inside, we each nodded hello to a number of our friends and acquaintances. I saw my schoolmates, Ilana and Leah, come toward us with broad smiles on their faces.

Ilana nodded to my aunt. “Hello, Miss Lutterman.”
Leah turned to me. “Good Shabbos,” she said, kissing me on the cheek. Then she giggled. “You’re so famous now!”

I felt a wave of alarm rush through my body. I had not the slightest idea what Leah was talking about—until it suddenly occurred to me that Mrs. Solomon must have told everyone in the synagogue that she had seen me riding the bicycle. I smiled faintly at Leah and waved at her parents before taking my seat next to my aunt.

As soon as the service was over, I told Tante Rose I was not feeling well and would like to leave the synagogue quickly.

She looked at me with some sympathy. “We’ll have our lunch and then you may have a short rest if you like.” I nodded again. I felt sick to think that Mrs. Solomon might tell Tante Rose I had been riding the bicycle. I took a deep breath and let it out silently. I must have misunderstood Leah. It was all just a mistake.

When we arrived at Tante Rose’s apartment, I unlocked the door with the key she had given me. As I pushed it open she bent down to pick up the Saturday newspaper from the floor. She seemed to stand stooped over, looking at it, for a long time.

“Hannah,” she said in a barely audible voice. “Hannah, what is this?”

“That’s the newspaper, Tante Rose,” I said without thinking.

“Hannah, what is this photo on the front page of the newspaper?” I took the paper from her hand and froze suddenly.

In the upper left-hand corner was a photo of me, Hannah Golandsky, riding a bicycle down Moon Street on Friday night at dusk. My hair was streaming out behind me and my velvet skirt was dangling around the pedals. In bold letters below was the caption Spring is Finally Here…

Tante Rose was absolutely silent. She pushed past me into the apartment without even looking at my face. I followed behind her, feeling numb. I shut the door.

“Tante Rose…” I started to say. She turned around and held up a finger for me to stop speaking. Then she stood with her hand across her mouth, forehead knotted.

She did not shout at me. Instead she came toward me so that she was only a few inches from my face, and then she spoke.

“I do not ask so much of you, Hannah. I buy the things you need. I let you share my house. I have only two rules in this house. You will be observant of the Sabbath and you will not ride a bicycle.” She held up the photo and waved it in front of my face. “I do not make these rules up to test you. I ask you to observe the Sabbath out of respect for your family and your people. I ask you not to ride a bicycle because you have a gift. I did not want you to foolishly jeopardize your gift.” She threw the paper down and turned away from me. “It is not the danger of riding a bicycle that I am concerned about. It is the discipline that you needed, Hannah, to stop yourself from doing what you wanted to do. It is about discipline.”

“But Tante Rose, why does it matter that I rode a bicycle?” I said feebly, my voice trembling.

“It matters that you should take foolish risks.” She stared into my eyes and her face was red like fire.

“When God gives you a gift you cherish it. You showed me today that you do not yet cherish yours.”

“I just wanted to be like my friends,” I said to her, my voice nothing more than a whisper.

“And, Hannah, how many of your friends would like to be like you…but will never be pianists because they lack a gift?”

I had no answer for Tante Rose. I stood staring at her, feeling worse than I had ever felt in my life.

“Go home, Hannah,” she said. “You cannot stay with me any more.”

My eyes opened in utter disbelief. Never had I dreamed that Tante Rose would punish me in such a way.

“Tante Rose, I’m sorry! I had to know what it was like.” I felt my insides begin to tremble and stared at the tips of my red shoes. “I wanted to be like the other kids.”

“Then go!” she shouted at me. “Be like the other kids! You made your choice!”

I began to weep. “Don’t make me go, Tante Rose.”

We stood staring at each other for a long time; I remember thinking that there was not a trace of emotion on her face. Anger had hardened her skin into a mask of stone.
She went into her bedroom and locked the door behind her. Then a dreadful silence descended on the house. I stood still for a moment, then ran out the front door, down the stairs, and out of Tante Rose’s building into the street. In my good shoes I ran the five blocks to my house and, breathless, entered the kitchen.

My father smiled slightly. “Yes, I know you rode the bicycle. We saw in the paper.”

My brothers Avi and David came into the hall, laughing. “We saw your picture!” they shouted in unison.

I looked at my father. “Are you angry that I rode a bicycle on Shabbos?”

He looked thoughtful, then shook his head.

“Hannah, your mother is perhaps angry. But I would be lying if I said that I had never done something I should not have done on the Sabbath. I have no opinion.”

I heard my mother’s shoes scratching on the stairs and suddenly felt unable to face her or her anger. I backed out the door and ran blindly to the shed, grabbing Avi’s bicycle. I threw myself onto the seat and rode down the back lane. I went down to the park and rode along all the streets and I even rode in front of Tante Rose’s apartment but the blinds were closed.

I’m not strong like you, Tante Rose, I thought to myself. I can’t give up everything because I have a gift. When I came back to the house there was a white envelope on the table.

“What’s that?” I asked my father.

He scratched his chin. “It’s from your Aunt Rose.”

I gasped. “She came here?”

“While you were riding the bike.”

My face reddened. “What did she say?”

“Open the envelope,” said my father.

My fingers shook as I pried the paper apart. I was shocked to find inside one airplane ticket to New York for the following week in April.

“Tante Rose said it was time for you to go, to audition at the school, and they will take you in September,” said my father.

“Because she’s angry at me?” I said, my eyes filling with tears.

“No,” he said softly. “Not because she’s angry. Just because it’s time, Hannah.”

“I’m not going,” I said to him.

“Hannah,” he said gently, “of course you’ll go. You have a gift.”

I shook my head; it was very clear to me now. “I am not going to New York.”

My father sat at the table, looking at me. He seemed suddenly to sense that I had aged in the years I had been living with Tante Rose—that I had aged in a way he would never understand.

Tante Rose had said one day I would understand how choices were made. I understood as of that moment. I did not go to New York.
I am speaking here of a time when I was eleven and lived with my family on our small farm on the west coast of Cape Breton. My family had been there for a long, long time and so it seemed had I. And much of that time seems like the proverbial yesterday. Yet when I speak on this Christmas 1977, I am not sure how much I speak with the voice of that time or how much in the voice of what I have since become. And I am not sure how many liberties I may be taking with the boy I think I was. For Christmas is a time of both past and present and often the two are imperfectly blended. As we step into its nowness we often look behind.

We have been waiting now, it seems, forever. Actually, it has been most intense since Halloween when the first now fell upon us as we moved like muffled mummers upon darkened country roads. The large flakes were soft and new then and almost generous and the earth to which they fell was still warm and as yet unfrozen. They fell in silence into the puddles and into the sea where they disappeared at the moment of contact. They disappeared, too, upon touching the heated redness of our necks and hands or the faces of those who did not wear masks. We carried our pillowcases from house to house, knocking on doors to become silhouettes in the light thrown out from kitchens (white pillowcases held out by whitened forms). The snow fell between us and the doors and was transformed in shimmering golden beams. When we turned to leave, it fell upon our footprints and as the night wore on obliterated them and all the records of our movements. In the morning everything was soft and still and November had come upon us.

My brother Kenneth, who is two and a half, is unsure of his last Christmas. It is Halloween that looms largest in his memory as an exceptional time of being up late in magic darkness and falling snow.

“Who are you going to dress up as at Christmas?” he asks. “I think I’ll be a snowman.” all of us laugh at that and tell him Santa Claus will find him if he is good and that he need not dress up at all. We go about our appointed tasks waiting for it to happen.

I am troubled myself about the nature of Santa Claus and I am trying to hang on to him any way that I can. It is true that at my age I no longer really believe in him yet I have hoped in all his possibilities as fiercely as I can; much in the same way, I think, that the drowning man waves desperately to the lights of the passing ship on the high sea’s darkness. For without him, as without the man’s ship, it seems our fragile lives would be so much more desperate.

My mother has been fairly tolerant of my attempted perpetuation. Perhaps because she has encountered it before. Once I overheard her speaking about my sister Anne to one of her neighbours. “I thought Anne would believe forever,” she said. “I practically had to tell her.” I have somehow always wished I had not heard her say that as I seek sanctuary and reinforcement even in an ignorance I know I dare not trust.

Kenneth, however, believes with an unadulterated fervour, and so do Bruce and Barry who are six-year-old twins. Beyond me there is Anne who is thirteen and Mary who is fifteen, both of whom seem to be leaving childhood at an alarming rate. My mother has told us that she was already married when she was seventeen, which is only two years older than Mary is now. That too seems strange to contemplate and perhaps childhood is shorter for some than it is for others. I think of this sometimes in the evenings when we have finished our chores and the supper dishes have been cleared away and we
are supposed to be doing our homework. I glance sideways at my mother, who is always knitting or mending, and at my father, who mostly sits by the stove coughing quietly with his handkerchief at his mouth. He has “not been well” for over two years and has difficulty breathing whenever he moves at more than the slowest pace. He is most sympathetic of all concerning my extended hopes and says we should hang on to the good things in our lives as long as we are able. As I look at him out of the corner of my eye, it does not seem that he has many of them left. He is old, we think, at forty-two.

Yet Christmas, in spite of all the doubts of our different ages, is a fine and splendid time, and now as we pass the midpoint of December our expectations are heightened by the increasing coldness that has settled down upon us. The ocean is flat and calm and along the coast, in the scooped-out coves, has turned to an icy slush. The brook that flows past our house is almost totally frozen and there is only a small channel of rushing water that flows openly at its very centre. When we let the cattle out to drink, we chop holes with the axe at the brook’s edge so that they can drink without venturing onto the ice.

The sheep move in and out of their lean-to shelter restlessly stamping their feet or huddling together in tightly packed groups. A conspiracy of wool against the cold. The hens perch high on their roosts with their feathers fluffed out about them, hardly feeling it worthwhile to descend to the floor for their few scant kernels of grain. The pig, who has little time before his butchering, squeals his displeasure to the cold and with his snout tosses his wooden trough high in the icy air. The splendid young horse paws the planking of his stall and gnaws the wooden cribwork of his manger.

We have put a protective barricade of spruce boughs about our kitchen door and banked our house with additional boughs and billows of eel grass. Still, the pail of water we leave standing in the porch is solid in the morning and has to be broken with the hammer. The clothes my mother hangs on the line are frozen almost instantly and sway and creak from their suspending clothespins like sections of dismantled robots; the stiff-legged rasping trousers and the shirts and sweaters with unyielding arms outstretched. In the morning we race from our frigid upstairs bedrooms to finish dressing around the kitchen stove.

We would extend our coldness half a continent away to the Great Lakes of Ontario so that it might hasten the Christmas coming of my oldest brother, Neil. He is nineteen and employed on the “lake boats,” the long flat carriers of grain and iron ore whose season ends any day after December 10, depending on the ice conditions. We wish it to be cold, cold on the Great Lakes of Ontario, so that he may come home to us as soon as possible. Already his cartons have arrived. They come from different places: Cobourg, Toronto, St. Catharines, Welland, Windsor, Sarnia, Sault Ste. Marie. Place that we, with the exception of my father, have never been. We locate them excitedly on the map, tracing their outlines with eager fingers. The cartons bear the lettering of Canada Steamship Lines, and are bound with rope knotted intricately in the fashion of sailors. My mother says they contain his “clothes” and we are not allowed to open them.

For us it is impossible to know the time or manner of his coming. If the lakes freeze early, he may come by train because it is cheaper. If the lakes stay open until December 20, he will have to fly because his time will be more precious than his money. He will hitchhike the last sixty or hundred miles from either station or airport. On our part, we can do nothing but listen with straining ears to radio reports of distant ice formations. His coming seems to depend on so many factors which are out there far beyond us and over which we lack control.

The days go by in fevered slowness until finally on the morning of December 23 the strange car rolls into our yard. My mother touches her hand to her lips and whispers “Thank God.” My father gets up unsteadily from his chair to look through the window. Their longed-for son and our golden older brother is here at last. He is here with his reddish hair and beard and we can hear his hearty laugh. He will be happy and strong and confident for us all.
There are three other young men with him who look much the same as he. They too are from the boats and are trying to get home to Newfoundland. They must still drive a hundred miles to reach the ferry at North Sydney. The car seems very old. They purchased it in Thorold for two hundred dollars because they were too late to make any reservations, and they have driven steadily since they began. In northern New Brunswick their windshield wipers failed but instead of stopping they tied lengths of cord to the wipers’ arms and passed them through the front window vents. Since that time, in whatever precipitation, one of them has pulled the cords back and forth to make the wipers function. This information falls tiredly but excitedly from their lips and we greedily gather it in. My father pours them drinks of rum and my mother takes out her mincemeat and the fruitcakes she has been carefully hoarding. We lean on the furniture or look from the safety of sheltered doorways. We would like to hug our brother but are too shy with strangers present. In the kitchen’s warmth, the young men begin to nod and doze, their heads dropping suddenly to their chests. They nudge each other with their feet in an attempt to keep awake. They will not stay and rest because they have come so far and tomorrow is Christmas Eve and stretches of mountains and water still lie between them and those they love.

After they leave we pounce upon our brother physically and verbally. He laughs and shouts and lifts us over his head and swings us in his muscular arms. Yet in spite of his happiness he seems surprised at the appearance of his father whom he has not seen since March. My father merely smiles at him while my mother bites her lip.

Now that he is here there is a great flurry of activity. We have left everything we could until the time he might be with us. Eagerly I show him the fir tree on the hill which I have been watching for months and marvel at how easily he fells it and carries it down the hill. We fall over one another in the excitement of decoration.

He promises that on Christmas Eve he will take us to church in the sleigh behind the splendid horse that until his coming we are all afraid to handle. And on the afternoon of Christmas Eve he shoes the horse, lifting each hoof and rasping it fine and hammering the cherry-red horseshoes into shape upon the anvil. Later he drops them hissingly into the steaming tub of water. My father sits beside him on an overturned pail and tells him what to do. Sometimes we argue with our father, but our brother does everything he says.

That night, bundled in hay and voluminous coats, and with heated stones at our feet, we start upon our journey. Our parents and Kenneth remain at home but all the rest of us go. Before we leave we feed the cattle and sheep and even the pig all that they can possibly eat so that they will be contented on Christmas Eve. Our parents wave to us from the doorway. We go four miles across the mountain road. It is a primitive logging trail and there will be no cars or other vehicles upon it. At first the horse is wild with excitement and lack of exercise and my brother has to stand at the front of the sleigh and lean backwards on the reins. Later he settles down to a trot and still later to a walk as the mountain rises before him. We sing all the Christmas songs we know and watch for the rabbits and foxes scudding across the open patches of snow and listen to the drumming of partridge wings. We are never cold. When we descend to the country church we tie the horse in a grove of trees where he will be sheltered and not frightened by the many cars. We put a blanket over him and give him oats. At the church door the neighbours shake hands with my brother. “Hello, Neil,” they say. “How is your father?”

“Oh,” he says, just “Oh.”

The church is very beautiful at night with its festooned branches and glowing candles and the booming, joyous sounds that come from the choir loft. We go through the service as if we are mesmerized.

On the way home, although the stones have cooled, we remain happy and warm. We listen to the creak of the leather harness and the hiss of runners on the snow and begin to think of the potentiality
of presents. When we are about a mile from home the horse senses his destination and breaks into a trot and then into a confident lope. My brother lets him go and we move across the winter landscape like figures freed from a Christmas card. The snow from the horse's hooves falls about our heads like the whiteness of the stars.

After we have stabled the horse we talk with our parents and eat the meal our mother has prepared. And then I am sleepy and it is time for the younger children to be in bed. But tonight my father says to me, “We would like you to stay up with us a while,” and so I stay quietly with the older members of the family.

When all is silent upstairs Neil brings in the cartons that contain his “clothes” and begins to open them. He unties the intricate knots quickly, their whorls falling away before his agile fingers. The boxes are filled with gifts neatly wrapped and bearing tags. The ones for my younger brothers say “from Santa Claus” but mine are not among them any more, as I know with certainty they will never be again. Yet I am not so much surprised as touched by a pang of loss at being here on the adult side of the world. It is as if I have suddenly moved into another room and heard a door click lastingly behind me. I am jabbed by my own small wound.

But then I look at those before me. I look at my parents drawn together before the Christmas tree. My mother has her hand upon my father's shoulder and he is holding his ever-present handkerchief. I look at my sisters who have crossed this threshold ahead of me and now each day journey farther from the lives they knew as girls. I look at my magic older brother who has come to us this Christmas from half a continent away, bringing everything he has and is. All of them are captured in the tableau of their care.

“Every man moves on,” says my father quietly, and I think he speaks of Santa Claus, “but there is no need to grieve. He leaves good things behind.”
Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk bareheaded in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum on it, because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf–rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a button–hole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease; this is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so that they don’t have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don’t like, and that way something bad won’t fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man; and if this doesn’t work there are other ways, and if they don’t work don’t feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn’t fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh; but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?
"I beat the crap out of this guy at the mall yesterday," Adam Lockwood said. He was leaning on the stone wall of the bridge, smoking a cigarette and watching the cars speed by on the highway beneath him. His black hair fell down into his eyes.

"How come?" Seth Dawson asked, leaning on the stone wall next to him.

Adam shrugged. The turned-up collar of his leather jacket rose and fell along his neck. "He just bugged me, that's all. He was bigger, probably a senior. I guess he thought he could take me 'cause I was smaller. But I don't let anyone push me around."

"What'd you do to him?" Seth asked. He too was smoking a cigarette. It was his first ever, and he wasn't really inhaling. Just holding the smoke in his mouth for a while and then blowing it out.

"I'm pretty sure I broke his nose," Adam said. "I couldn't hang around to find out because the guy in the pizza place called the cops. I'm already in enough trouble with them."

"What for?" Seth asked. He noticed that when Adam took a drag, he seemed to hold the smoke in his mouth and then blow it out his nose. But it was probably just a different way of inhaling. Adam definitely inhaled.

"They just don't like me," Adam said. "You know how it is."

Seth nodded. Actually, he didn't know how it was. But there was no way he'd admit that. It was just pretty cool to think that the cops didn't like you. Seth was pretty sure the cops didn't even know who he was.

The two boys looked back down at the highway. It was a warm, spring afternoon, and instead of taking the bus home after school they'd decided to walk to the diner. There Adam had instructed Seth on how to feed quarters into the cigarette machine and get a pack of Marlboros. Seth had been really nervous about getting caught, but Adam had told him it was no sweat. If the owner came out, you'd just tell him you were picking them up for your mother.

Now the pack of Marlboros was sticking out of the breast pocket of Seth's new denim jacket. It wasn't supposed to look new because he'd ripped the sleeves off and had washed it in the washing machine a hundred times to make it look old and worn. But somehow it had come out looking new and worn. Seth had decided to wear it anyway, but he felt like a fraud. Like a kid trying to imitate someone truly cool. On the other hand, Adam's leather jacket looked authentically old and worn. The right sleeve was ripped and the leather was creased and pliant. It looked like he'd been in a hundred fights with it. Seth had never been in a fight in his life. Not a serious punching fight, at least.

The other thing about Adam was, he wore the leather jacket to school every day. Adam wasn't one of these kids who kept their cool clothes in their lockers and only wore them in school because their parents wouldn't let them wear them at home. Seth had parents like that. His mother would have had a fit if she ever saw him wearing his sleeveless denim jacket, so he had to hide it in the garage every day before he went into the house. Then in the morning when he left for school he'd go through the garage and pick it up.

Seth leaned forward and felt the smooth cold granite of the bridge with his fingers. The bridge was old and made of large granite blocks. Its heavy stone abutments stood close to the cars that sped
past on the highway beneath it. Newer bridges were made of steel. Their spans were longer and the
abutments were farther from the road.

On the highway, a red convertible approached with two girls riding in the front seats. Adam
waved, and one of the girls waved back. A second later the car shot under the bridge and disappeared.
He turned to Seth and grinned. "Maybe they'll get off on the exit ramp and come back," he said.
"You think?" Seth asked. Actually, the thought made him nervous. "They must be old enough at
least to drive."

"So?" Adam asked. "I go out with older girls all the time."
"Really?" Seth asked.
"Sure." Adam took another drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out of his nose. Seth wanted
to try that, but he was afraid he'd start to cough or do something else equally uncool.
"What do you do with them?" Seth asked.
Adam glanced at him with a sly smile. "What do you think I do with them?"
"I mean, do you go out?"
"Sure, if they want to take me out, we go out. Otherwise sometimes we just hang around and
make out."

Seth was awestruck. At a party once he'd played spin the bottle and pass the orange and had
kissed a few girls in the process. But he'd never seriously made out.

In the distance a big semi trailer appeared on the highway. Adam raised his arm in the air and
pumped his fist up and down. The driver responded with three loud blasts of his air horns. A moment
later the semi rumbled under them and disappeared.

"Let me try that," Seth said. Another truck was coming and he leaned over the stone ledge and
jerked his arm up and down. But the trucker ignored him.

Adam laughed.

"How come it didn't work?" Seth asked.
"You gotta do it a special way," Adam told him.
"Show me," Seth said.

"Can't, man," Adam said. "You just have to have the right touch. It's something you're born with."
Seth smirked. It figured. It was just his luck to be born without the touch that made truckers blow
their horns.

The traffic was gradually getting thicker as the afternoon rush hour approached. Many of the
drivers and passengers in the cars seemed unaware of the two boys on the overpass. But a few others
stared up through their windshields at them.

"Bet they're wondering if we're gonna drop something on them," Adam said. He lifted his hand in
the air as if he was holding an imaginary rock. Down on the highway more of the people in the cars
were looking up at him now. Suddenly Adam whipped his arm forward. Even though there was nothing
in his hand, a woman driving a blue sedan put her hands up in fear. Her car swerved momentarily out of
its lane.

Seth felt his jaw drop. He couldn't believe Adam had done that. If the car had been going faster it
might have gone out of control and crashed into the stone abutment next to the highway.
Meanwhile Adam grinned at him. "Scared the crap out her."

"Maybe we ought to go," Seth said, suddenly worried that they were going to get into trouble.
What if a cop had seen them? Or what if the woman was really mad?
"Why?" Adam asked.
"She could get off and come back here."
Adam shrugged. "Let her," he said. "The last person in the world I'd be afraid of is some old lady." He took a drag off his cigarette and turned away to watch the cars again.

Seth kept glancing toward the exit ramp to see if the woman the blue car had gotten off. He was really tempted to leave but he stayed because he liked being with Adam. It made him feel good that a cool guy like Adam let him hang around.

A few minutes passed and the blue car did not appear on the exit ramp. Seth relaxed a little. He had smoked his Marlboro almost all the way down to the filter and his mouth tasted awful. Smoke kept getting in his eyes and making them water. He dropped the cigarette to the sidewalk and crushed it under his sneaker, relieved to be finished with it.

"Here's the way to do it," Adam said. He held the butt of his cigarette between his thumb and middle finger and flicked it over the side of the bridge and down into the traffic. With a burst of red sparks it hit the windshield of a black car passing below. Adam turned and grinned. Seth smiled back uncomfortably. He was beginning to wonder just how far Adam would go.

Neither of them saw the black car pull off onto the exit ramp and come up behind them on the bridge. Seth didn't notice it until he heard a door slam. He turned and saw three big guys getting out of the car. They were all wearing tight shirts which outlined their muscles. Seth suddenly decided it was time to go, but he quickly realized that the three guys had spread out, cutting off any way to escape. He and Adam were surrounded.

"Uh, Adam." Seth nudged him with his elbow.

"Wha-?" Adam turned around and his mouth fell open. In the meantime the three big guys came closer. Seth and Adam backed against the bridge wall. Seth felt his stomach tighten painfully. His heart began to beat like a machine gun. Adam looked pale and pretty scared too. Was it Seth's imagination, or was his friend trembling?

"Which one of you geeks flicked that butt on my car?" The question came from the husky guy with a black moustache and long black hair that curled behind his ears.

Seth and Adam glanced at each other. Seth was determined not to tell. He didn't believe in squealing on his friends. But suddenly he noticed that all three guys were staring at him. He quickly looked at Adam and saw why. Adam was pointing at him.

Before Seth could say anything, the husky guy grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and lifted him off the ground. Seth's feet kicked uselessly in the air for a second and then he was thrown against the front fender of the black car. He hit with a thud and lost his breath. Before he had a chance to recover, the guy grabbed him by the hair and forced his face toward the windshield.

"Lick it off," he growled.

Seth didn't know what he was talking about. He tried to raise his head, but the husky guy pushed his face closer to the windshield. Lord, he was strong.

"I said, lick it." "Lick what?" Seth wanted to ask. Then he looked down at the glass and saw the spot of gray ash where Adam's cigarette had hit. Oh, no. He stiffened. The thought made him sick. He tried to twist his head around, but the guy leaned his weight against Seth and pushed his face down again.

"Till it's clean," the guy said, pressing Seth's face down until it was only an inch from the smooth tinted glass. Seth stared at the little spot of ash. With the husky guy's weight on him, he could hardly breathe. The car's fender was digging into his ribs. Where was Adam?

The husky guy leaned harder against him, squeezing Seth painfully against the car. He pushed Seth's face down until it actually pressed against the cool glass. Seth could feel a spasm in his chest as his lungs cried for air. But he clamped his mouth closed. No way was he going to give that guy the satisfaction of seeing him lick that spot.
The husky guy must have known it. Suddenly he pulled Seth’s head up, then slammed it back down against the windshield. Wham!

Seth reeled backwards, his hands covering his nose and mouth. Everything felt numb, and he was certain his nose and some teeth were broken. He slipped and landed on the ground in a sitting position, bending forward, his throbbing nose and mouth covered by his hands.

He heard someone laugh. Looking up he saw the three guys get back into the black car. A second passed and the car lurched away, leaving rubber.

"You’re bleeding," Adam was standing over him. Seth took his hands away from his mouth and saw that they were covered with bright red blood. Blood dripped down from his nose and chin onto his denim jacket, leaving slowly darkening red spots. He tilted his head back, trying to stop the bleeding. At the same time he squeezed the bridge of his nose. It hurt, but somehow he knew it was not broken after all. He touched his front teeth with his tongue. They were all still there, and none felt loose.

"You want a hand?" Adam asked.

Seth nodded and Adam helped him up. He was shaky on his feet and worried that his nose was going to start bleeding again. He looked down and saw that his denim jacket was covered with blood.

"I tried to help you," Adam said, "but one of them held a knife on me."

Seth glanced at him.

"It was a small knife," Adam said. "I guess he didn’t want anyone to see it."

Seth felt his nose again. It was swollen and throbbed painfully. "Why’d you point at me?" he asked.

"I figured I could jump them if they made a move on you," Adam said. "How could I know they had knives?"

Seth shook his head. He didn’t believe Adam. He started to walk toward home.

"You gonna make it okay?" Adam asked.

Seth nodded. He just wanted to be alone.

"I’ll get those guys for you, man," Adam said. "I think I once saw one of them at the diner. I’m gonna go back there and see."

Seth nodded again. He didn’t even turn to watch Adam go.

On the way to his house, Seth stopped near some garbage cans a neighbor had left at the curb for collection. He looked down at his denim jacket. The spots of blood had turned dark. If he took it home and washed it now, the stains would probably make it look pretty cool. Like a jacket that had been worn in tons of fights. Seth smirked. He took it off and threw it in the garbage can.
Sandy was tired of not fitting in. Monday morning dressed in black, belly button exposed, and wearing a sneer, she approached the cool kids. Her body tensed. Her steps faltered. "Hey man," she said uncertainly. "What's up?"

They turned and smiled. Acceptance! She's in.

Then she realized how ridiculous she felt. Taking another look, Sandy knew she wasn’t one of them. She turned and made her way to the library.
Belonging & Acceptance
When I was twelve, maybe thirteen, my mother announced that we were going to Salt Lake City to visit my sister who had left the reserve, moved across the line, and found a job. Laetitia had not left home with my mother’s blessing, but over time my mother had come to be proud of the fact that Laetitia had done all of this on her own.

“She did real good,” my mother would say.

Then there were the fine points to Laetitia’s going. She had not, as my mother liked to tell Mrs. Manyfingers, gone floating after some man like a balloon on a string. She hadn’t snuck out of the house, either, and gone to Vancouver or Edmonton or Toronto to chase rainbows down alleys. And she hadn’t been pregnant.

“She did real good.”

I was seven or eight when Laetitia left home. She was seventeen. Our father was from Rocky Boy on the American side.

“Dad’s American,” Laetitia told my mother, “so I can go and come as I please.”

“Send us a postcard.”

Laetitia packed her things, and we headed for the border. Just outside of Milk River, Laetitia told us to watch for the water tower.

“Over the next rise. It’s the first thing you see.”

“We got a water tower on the reserve,” my mother said. “There’s a big one in Lethbridge, too.”

“You’ll be able to see the tops of the flagpoles, too. That’s where the border is.”

When we got to Coutts, my mother stopped at the convenience store and bought her and Laetitia a cup of coffee. I got an Orange Crush.

“This is real lousy coffee.”

“You’re just angry because I want to see the world.”

“It’s the water. From here on down, they got lousy water.”

“I can catch the bus from Sweetgrass. You don’t have to lift a finger.”

“You’re going to have to buy your water in bottles if you want good coffee.”

There was an old wooden building about a block away, with a tall sign in the yard that said “Museum.” Most of the roof had been blown away. Mom told me to go and see when the place was open. There were boards over the windows and doors. You could tell that the place was closed, and I told Mom so, but she said to go and check anyway. Mom and Laetitia stayed by the car. Neither one of them moved. I sat down on the steps of the museum and watched them, and I don’t know that they ever said anything to each other. Finally, Laetitia got her bag out of the trunk and gave Mom a hug.

I wandered back to the car. The wind had come up, and it blew Laetitia’s hair across her face. Mom reached out and pulled the strands out of Laetitia’s eyes, and Laetitia let her.

“You can still see the mountain from here,” my mother told Laetitia in Blackfoot.

“Lots of mountains in Salt Lake,” Laetitia told her in English.

“The place is closed,” I said. “Just like I told you.”

Laetitia tucked her hair into her jacket and dragged her bag down the road to the brick building with the American flag flapping on a pole. When she got to where the guards were waiting, she turned,
put the bag down, and waved to us. We waved back. Then my mother turned the car around and we came home.

We got postcards from Laetitia regular, and, if she wasn't spreading jelly on the truth, she was happy. She found a good job and rented an apartment with a pool.

"And she can't even swim," my mother told Mrs. Manyfingers.

Most of the postcards said we should come down and see the city, but whenever I mentioned this, my mother would stiffen up.

So I was surprised when she bought two new tires for the car and put on her blue dress with the green and yellow flowers. I had to dress up, too, for my mother did not want us crossing the border looking like Americans. We made sandwiches and put them in a big box with pop and potato chips and some apples and bananas and a big jar of water.

"But we can stop at one of those restaurants, too, right?"

"We maybe should take some blankets in case you get sleepy."

"But we can stop at one of those restaurants, too, right?"

The border was actually two towns, though neither one was big enough to amount to anything. Coutts was on the Canadian side and consisted of the convenience store and gas station, the museum that was closed and boarded up, and a motel. Sweetgrass was on the American side, but all you could see was an overpass that arched across the highway and disappeared into the prairies. Just hearing the names of these towns, you would expect that Sweetgrass, which is a nice name and sounds like it is related to other places such as Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw and Kicking Horse Pass, would be on the Canadian side, and that Coutts, which sounds abrupt and rude, would be on the American side. But this was not the case.

Between the two borders was a duty-free shop where you could buy cigarettes and liquor and flags. Stuff like that.

We left the reserve in the morning and drove until we got to Coutts.

"Last time we stopped here," my mother said, "you had an Orange Crush. You remember that?"

"Sure," I said. "That was when Laetitia took off."

"You want another Orange Crush?"

"That means we're not going to stop at a restaurant, right?"

My mother got a coffee at the convenience store, and we stood around and watched the prairies move in the sunlight. Then we climbed back in the car. My mother straightened the dress across her thighs, leaned against the wheel, and drove all the way to the border in first gear, slowly, as if she was trying to see through a bad storm or riding high on black ice.

The border guard was an old guy. As he walked to the car, he swayed from side to side, his feet set wide apart, the holster on his hip pitching up and down. He leaned into the window, looked into the back seat, and looked at my mother and me.

"Morning, ma'am."

"Good morning."

"Where you heading?"

"Salt Lake City."

"Purpose of your visit?"

"Visit my daughter."

"Citizenship?"

"Blackfoot," my mother told him.

"Ma'am?"

"Blackfoot," my mother repeated.
“Canadian?”
“Blackfoot.”

It would have been easier if my mother had just said “Canadian” and been done with it, but I could see she wasn’t going to do that. The guard wasn’t angry or anything. He smiled and looked toward the building. Then he turned back and nodded.

“Morning, ma’am.”
“Good morning.”
“Any firearms or tobacco?”
“No.”
“Citizenship?”
“Blackfoot.”

He told us to sit in the car and wait, and we did. In about five minutes, another guard came out with the first man. They were talking as they came, both men swaying back and forth like two cowboys headed for a bar or a gunfight.

“Morning, ma’am.”
“Good morning.”
“Cecil tells me you and the boy are Blackfoot.”
“That’s right.”
“Now, I know that we got Blackfeet on the American side and the Canadians got Blackfeet on their side. Just so we can keep our records straight, what side do you come from?”

I knew exactly what my mother was going to say, and I could have told them if they had asked me.

“Canadian side or American side?” asked the guard.
“Blackfoot side,” she said.

It didn’t take them long to lose their sense of humour, I can tell you that. The one guard stopped smiling altogether and told us to park our car at the side of the building and come in.

We sat on a wood bench for about an hour before anyone came over to talk to us. This time it was a woman. She had a gun, too.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Inspector Pratt. I understand there is a little misunderstanding.”

“I’m going to visit my daughter in Salt Lake City,” my mother told her. “We don’t have any guns or beer.”

“It’s a legal technicality, that’s all.”
“My daughter’s Blackfoot, too.”

The woman opened a briefcase and took out a couple of forms and began to write on one of them.

“Everyone who crosses our border has to declare their citizenship. Even Americans. It helps us keep track of the visitors we get from the various countries.”

She went on like that for maybe fifteen minutes, and a lot of the stuff she told us was interesting.

“I can understand how you feel about having to tell us your citizenship, and here’s what I’ll do. You tell me, and I won’t put it down on the form. No one will know but you and me.”

Her gun was silver. There were several chips in the wood handle and the name “Stella” was scratched into the metal butt.

We were in the border office for about four hours, and we talked to almost everyone there. One of the men bought me a Coke. My mother brought a couple of sandwiches in from the car. I offered part of mine to Stella, but she said she wasn’t hungry.

I told Stella that we were Blackfoot and Canadian, but she said that didn’t count because I was a minor. In the end, she told us that if my mother didn’t declare her citizenship, we would have to go back.
to where we came from. My mother stood up and thanked Stella for her time. Then we got back in the
car and drove to the Canadian border, which was only about a hundred yards away.

I was disappointed. I hadn’t seen Laetitia for a long time, and I had never been to Salt Lake City.
When she was still at home, Laetitia would go on and on about Salt Lake City. She had never been there,
but her boyfriend Lester Tallbull had spent a year in Salt Lake at a technical school.

“It’s a great place,” Lester would say. “Nothing but blondes in the whole state.”

Whenever he said that, Laetitia would slug him on his shoulder hard enough to make him flinch.

He had some brochures on Salt Lake and some maps, and every so often the two of them would spread
them out on the table.

“That’s the temple. It’s right downtown. You got to have a pass to get in.”

“Charlotte says anyone can go in and look around.”

“When was Charlotte in Salt Lake? Just when the hell was Charlotte in Salt Lake?”

“Last year.”

“This is Liberty Park. It’s got a zoo. There’s good skiing in the mountains.”

“Got all the skiing we can use,” my mother would say. “People come from all over the world to ski
at Banff. Cardston’s got a temple, if you like those kinds of things.”

“Oh, this one is real big,” Lester would say. “They got armed guards and everything.”

“Not what Charlotte says.”

“What does she know?”

Lester and Laetitia broke up, but I guess the idea of Salt Lake stuck in her mind.

The Canadian border guard was a young woman, and she seemed happy to see us. “Hi,” she said. “You
folks sure have a great day for a trip. Where are you coming from?”

“Standoff.”

“Is that in Montana?”

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“Standoff.”

The woman’s name was Carol and I don’t guess she was any older than Laetitia. “Wow, you both
Canadians?”

“Blackfoot.”

“Really? I have a friend I went to school with who is Blackfoot. Do you know Mike Harley?”

“No.”

“He went to school in Lethbridge, but he’s really from Browning.”

It was a nice conversation and there were no cars behind us, so there was no rush.

“You’re not bringing any liquor back, are you?”

“No.”

“Any cigarettes or plants or stuff like that?”

“No.”

“Citizenship?”

“Blackfoot.”

“I know,” said the woman, “and I’d be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to
be American or Canadian.”
When Laetitia and Lester broke up, Lester took his brochures and maps with him, so Laetitia wrote to someone in Salt Lake City, and, about a month later, she got a big envelope of stuff. We sat at the table and opened up all the brochures, and Laetitia read each one out loud.

“Salt Lake City is the gateway to some of the world’s most magnificent skiing.”
“Salt Lake City is the home of one of the newest professional basketball franchises, the Utah Jazz.
“The Great Salt Lake is one of the natural wonders of the world.”

It was kind of exciting seeing all of those colour brochures on the table and listening to Laetitia read all about how Salt Lake City was one of the best places in the entire world.

“That Salt Lake City place sounds too good to be true,” my mother told her.
“It has everything.”
“We got everything right here.”
“It’s boring here.”

“People in Salt Lake City are probably sending away for brochures of Calgary and Lethbridge and Pincher Creek right now.”

In the end, my mother would say that maybe Laetitia should go to Salt Lake City, and Laetitia would say that maybe she would.

We parked the car to the side of the building and Carol led us into a small room on the second floor. I found a comfortable spot on the couch and flipped through some back issues of *Saturday Night* and *Alberta Report*.

When I woke up, my mother was just coming out of another office. She didn’t say a word to me. I followed her down the stairs and out to the car. I thought we were going home, but she turned the car around and drove back toward the American border, which made me think we were going to visit Laetitia in Salt Lake City after all. Instead she pulled into the parking lot of the duty-free store and stopped.

“We going to see Laetitia?”
“No.”

“We going home?”

Pride is a good thing to have, you know. Laetitia had a lot of pride, and so did my mother. I figured that someday, I’d have it, too.

“So where are we going?”

Most of that day, we wandered around the duty-free store, which wasn’t very large. The manager had a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other. His name was Mel. Toward evening, he began suggesting that we should be on our way. I told him we had nowhere to go, that neither the Americans nor the Canadians would let us in. He laughed at that and told us that we should buy something or leave.

The car was not very comfortable, but we did have all that food and it was April, so even if it did snow as it sometimes does on the prairies, we wouldn’t freeze. The next morning my mother drove to the American border.

It was a different guard this time, but the questions were the same. We didn’t spend as much time in the office as we had the day before. By noon, we were back at the Canadian border. By two we were back in the duty-free shop parking lot.

The second night in the car was not as much fun as the first, but my mother seemed in good spirits, and, all in all, it was as much an adventure as an inconvenience. There wasn’t much food left and that was a problem, but we had lots of water as there was a faucet at the side of the duty-free shop.
One Sunday, Laetitia and I were watching television. Mom was over at Mrs. Manyfingers’s. Right in the middle of the program, Laetitia turned off the set and said she was going to Salt Lake City, that life around here was too boring. I had wanted to see the rest of the program and really didn’t care if Laetitia went to Salt Lake City or not. When Mom got home, I told her what Laetitia had said.

What surprised me was how angry Laetitia got when she found out that I had told Mom.

“You got a big mouth.”

“That’s what you said.”

“What I said is none of your business.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Well, I’m going for sure, now.”

That weekend, Laetitia packed her bags, and we drove her to the border.

Mel turned out to be friendly. When he closed up for the night and found us still parked in the lot, he came over and asked us if our car was broken down or something. My mother thanked him for his concern and told him that we were fine, that things would get straightened out in the morning.

“You’re kidding,” said Mel. “You’d think they could handle the simple things.”

“We got some apples and a banana,” I said, “but we’re all out of ham sandwiches.”

“You know, you read about these things, but you just don’t believe it. You just don’t believe it.”

“Hamburgers would be even better because they got more stuff for energy.”

My mother slept in the back seat. I slept in the front because I was smaller and could lie under the steering wheel. Late that night, I heard my mother open the car door. I found her sitting on her blanket leaning against the bumper of the car.

“You see all those stars,” she said. “When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to take me and my sisters out on the prairies and tell us stories about all the stars.”

“Do you think Mel is going to bring us any hamburgers?”

“Every one of those stars has a story. You see that bunch of stars over there that look like a fish?”

“He didn’t say no.”

“Coyote went fishing, one day. That’s how it all started.” We sat out under the stars that night, and my mother told me all sorts of stories. She was serious about it, too. She’d tell them slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one.

Early the next morning, the television vans began to arrive, and guys in suits and women in dresses came trotting over to us, dragging microphones and cameras and lights behind them. One of the vans had a table set up with orange juice and sandwiches and fruit. It was for the crew, but when I told them we hadn’t eaten for a while, a really skinny blonde woman told us we could eat as much as we wanted.

They mostly talked to my mother. Every so often one of the reporters would come ever and ask me questions about how it felt to be an Indian without a country. I told them we had a nice house on the reserve and that my cousins had a couple horses we rode when we went fishing. Some of the television people went over to the American border, and then they went to the Canadian border.

Around noon, a good-looking guy in a dark blue suit and an orange tie with little ducks on it drove up in a fancy car. He talked to my mother for a while, and, after they were done talking, my mother called me over, and we got into our car. Just as my mother started the engine, Mel came over and gave us a bag of peanut brittle and told us that justice was a damn hard thing to get, but that we shouldn’t give up.

I would have preferred lemon drops, but it was nice of Mel anyway.

“Where are we going now?”

“Going to visit Laetitia.”
The guard who came out to our car was all smiles. The television lights were so bright they hurt my eyes, and, if you tried to look through the windshield in certain directions, you couldn’t see a thing.

“Morning, ma’am.”
“Good morning.”
“Where you heading?”
“Salt Lake City.”
“Purpose of your visit?”
“Visit my daughter.”
“Any tobacco, liquor, or firearms?”
“Don’t smoke.”
“Any plants or fruit?”
“Not any more.”
“Citizenship?”
“Blackfoot.”

The guard rocked back on his heels and jammed his thumb into his gun belt. “Thank you,” he said, his fingers patting the butt of the revolver. “Have a pleasant trip.”

My mother rolled the car forward, and the television people had to scramble out of the way. They ran alongside the car as we pulled away from the border, and, when they couldn’t run any farther, they stood in the middle of the highway and waved and waved and waved.

We got to Salt Lake City the next day. Laetitia was happy to see us, and, that first night, she took us out to a restaurant that made really good soups. The list of pies took up a whole page. I had cherry. Mom had chocolate. Laetitia said that she saw us on television the night before and, during the meal, she had us tell her the story over and over again.

Laetitia took us everywhere. We went to a fancy ski resort. We went to the temple. We got to go shopping in a couple of large malls, but they weren’t as large as the one in Edmonton, and Mom said so.

After a week or so, I got bored and wasn’t at all sad when my mother said we should be heading back home. Laetitia wanted us to stay longer, but Mom said no, that she had things to do back home and that, next time, Laetitia should come up and visit. Laetitia said she was thinking about moving back, and Mom told her to do as she pleased, and Laetitia said that she would.

On the way home, we stopped at the duty-free shop, and my mother gave Mel a green hat that said “Salt Lake” across the front. Mel was a funny guy. He took the hat and blew his nose and told my mother that she was an inspiration to us all. He gave us some more peanut brittle and came out into the parking lot and waved at us all the way to the Canadian border.

It was almost evening when we left Coutts. I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, and then they rolled over a hill and disappeared.
It had been a really long week, sexually speaking.

On Monday I had to walk past a construction site and hear four overweight construction workers whistle, belch, and make base comments about my anatomy.

On Tuesday Billy Grummond wore a “Coed Naked Ice Hockey” shirt to school and got sent home, but not before he asked me if I wanted to play on his team.

On Wednesday my cousin Biff came over and watched a TV show with my brother, Alex, about bikini-clad, big-busted blondes who hang-glide. There were lots of close-ups during takeoff and landing.

On Thursday, at our weekly extended-family dinner, over which I had toiled selflessly making lasagna, Biff held up the bottle of olive oil when my parents were out of the room and said, “Why do they call it extra virgin anyway?” He broke up laughing. So did my brother.

I decided to give him the technical answer. “Because it’s made from the first pressing of the olives, you moron.”

“That don’t sound like no virgin anymore to me.”

Snort, snort.

On Friday I had a blind date with Leonard Flicker. All that can be said of the experience is that if there was ever a reason to sign up for lifetime virginity, Leonard was it.

I confess that I come to the whole issue of sex as an irritated observer. On the other hand, my parents tell me it’s the most wonderful thing that can happen between married people. And you know what? I believe them. On the other hand, I don’t like the way society usually deals with it, don’t like how certain people can make such idiots of themselves when the subject comes up, don’t like advertising that’s always shoving sex in my face to get me to buy something, like everyone in my generation can only and forever think about one thing.

If that is totally true, explain to me, please, how anyone ever gets into college.

Now, I admit that in the blooming department I am a late bud. I was still in a T-shirt when all my friends were in bras. I was just getting into flossing when everyone I knew got their first kiss. Regarding guys, I am fussy (there are far worse things). But you can’t just decide one morning you’re going to wake up and lower your standards.

Leonard Flicker springs immediately to mind.

In school we talked about abstinence and safe sex. I am definitely in the abstinence corner. All the facts on teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases scare me. But there’s another thing too. I really want to wait until I’m married. That’s the right decision for me. I’ve heard people say that abstinence will be hard to hold on to at times, but I’ve shrugged that off. When you date guys like Leonard Flicker, abstinence is not a rough road to travel—it’s a six-lane interstate highway.

So I’m working the late shift at The Ice-Cream Man Cometh on Twelfth and Luther. It’s the first hot day of May, and we’re busy. We’ve got big problems, too, because the freezer was on extra cold all day and all the gallons of ice cream have turned glacial. People are ordering double scoops tonight because everyone’s in a festive mood due to the weather. My right arm feels like it’s going to break off from digging into the Mocha Java. I need an ice pick to dent it. I’ve got a spasm in my neck from the stress,
but the show must go on. I’m smiling for the customers. People don’t want to think that their ice-cream server has any problems whatsoever.

I look up to see the growing line of ice-cream lovers.
And that’s when he walked in.
Tall—about six two; dark hair; a day’s beard—the planned kind. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. His arms were muscled, but not like he spent all day lifting barbells. He was alone, mysterious, reading the flavor board.

I felt energy hit my face and flow through my hands into my powerful pink scooper. I was boring through the Double Fudge Delight, sprinkling miniature marshmallows on a little kid’s sundae.
Barley Millforth, my co-worker, was doing his Darth Vader voice to amuse three girls, who were giggling. Everyone in line was laughing. Darth Vader hissing deep, “One scoop or two,” is pretty funny.
Mystery Male played it cool.
He turned to face the counter and looked directly at me.
Our eyes locked. I swear.
Barley was moving down the line taking orders. I helped three more people, trying to time it just right so I could wait on this guy who kept watching me.
I could feel his eyes staring deep into the barrel of Blueberry Madness as I dug powerfully with my scooper, plopped one scoop into a cup, handed it to a large woman.
He was in front of me now.
Barley as Darth asked him, “What can I get you?”
A total invasion of my space.
He said, “I’d like her to help me,” in this low, craggy voice.
And I nearly keeled right there because low and craggy has always hit a major chord with me.
I raised my scooper. “You can’t win, Darth. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine.”
Mystery Male laughed and ordered Coconut—two scoops in a cup—which was wonderfully distinctive.
He ate it at a table, watching me. He was there until closing. He asked if he could buy me coffee, which I never drink, and I wasn’t sure if I should go, because I didn’t know him.
“Just across the street,” he said, and I went. I knew the owner. It was safe.
We talked until 2 A.M. about absolutely everything. His name was Cal. He was a freshman at Penn State (one town over), staying for the summer semester. He hadn’t chosen a major yet but was leaning toward computer science. I hated telling him I was still in high school—but I was a senior, an eighteen-year-old senior (i.e., functioning adult), and I emphasized that twice. I told him about how I was going to Rutgers for the fall term and I was interested in sociology, which didn’t seem to turn him off, unlike most guys, who at the mere mention of sociology look at me as though I’ve just passed gas.
“So what group in society do you find the most interesting?” Cal asked. A finely etched question. I told him about my term paper on immigrants and the struggles they faced in a new land.
“And what does this tell me about you?” he asked, smiling.
A male who had in-depth thoughts.
“I think it says I’m not afraid of challenges, and when I make a decision, I stay committed to it. That’s what immigrants had to do.”
“That’s a good way to be,” he said.
We talked about music and art and traveling. We closed down the coffee bar.
I called my mom three times so she wouldn’t worry.
“Can I see you tomorrow?” Cal asked.
Absolutely.
Then he kissed my hand. I swear. And it wasn’t in a lame way; it was natural, like you’d expect a steamy actor to do it and leave some poor girl in a blob on the street.
“I’ll see you tomorrow.” My voice was an octave lower.
That’s how it began with Cal and me.
And it went on like that for a while. We’d meet and have coffee. He’d ask great questions. I’d forget to order decaf and would be awake for hours into the night.
“If you could have dinner with anyone living or dead, who would it be?” he asked me one night.
I ran through my list. “William Shakespeare…no…Winston Churchill…Margaret Mead…no Eleanor Roosevelt…no…Nancy Drew…”
He laughed. “A great American.”
“Who would you choose, Cal?”
He took my hand. “I’d choose you.”
We grew closer and closer. We saw each other every day. Our kissing got deeper—there was a fire to it.
I was feeling things I’d never felt before, feeling terribly mature, and pretty young at the same time.
Once when we were kissing deep, he called me “my Beth.” No one in my life had ever called me that.
Hon, yes. Sweetie. Miss. Mrs. Ice-Cream Lady—a little girl shouted that once. “Elizabeth!” the parental voice thundered when I was bad.
But never my common old name with a personal pronoun in front of it.
Now, my mother. She’s a very sensitive person. She can tell when a storm is coming. The National Weather Bureau has yet to discover her powers. And she was getting more and more sensitive every time Cal came to the door. She’d look at me with X-ray vision when I came in from a date, her maternal eyes boring a hole into my heart, which was probably open and throbbing on my sleeve.
A knock one night on my bedroom door.
Mom’s there looking nervous. She comes in, sits on the bed.
“I want to talk to you about Cal.”
Groan.
“I sense you’re on complicated ground with him, Beth, maybe for the first time in your life.”
I looked down. “I’m handling it.”
“I know what it’s like to be there. It’s hard to pull away when you want something so much.”
It seemed strange she was saying this.
“I want you to be honest with me, honey, about what’s happening.” She searched my face. “We haven’t had a talk about sex in a while.”
She laughed. “They weren’t dancing.”
“There was disco music, Mom. Remember, the egg was king of gyrating.”
Mom covered her face. “This is what you remember.”
“You don’t have another bad video you want us to watch, do you?”
“No. I just want to remind you of how these things—”
“—can backfire. I’m in control, Mother.”
“Honey, it’s best not to let yourself get into situations where one thing might lead to another.”
“Don’t you trust me?”
“Yes. I do. But it’s good to talk about these things, Beth. It’s good to remember what to do, what you believe, and how to not let things get out of hand.”
“I know all this, Mother.”
But now a week later…

“Beth.” He breathed it heavily in my ear. “I want you so much.”

Those words.

We were in his dorm room—a bad move, I know. I hadn’t really wanted to come here, but somehow here I was. His roommate was gone for the weekend. At first we sat on his bed eating chips and salsa. Then Cal pushed the chips out of the way, put the bowl of salsa on the shelf above his bed. We lay down, which took a real commitment because his college dorm bed was short and narrow. It had probably been picked out by mothers who were trying to make these situations as difficult as possible. Cal started kissing me, and it didn’t take long before I felt my resolve slipping. He rubbed his body into mine. I felt heat in places that had heretofore remained at room temperature. My skin was just tingling and my brain was somewhere else. And when Cal took my face in his hands and kissed me deeper than I thought possible, when he told me that he loved me in that low, craggy voice, when his hand stroked the back of my leg, something about that just made me wild with wanting him.

“Let me show you how much I care, baby.”

I was finished.

Electric shocks were hitting everywhere in my body.

He threw the pillow on the floor, rolled me on my back and directly onto the bag of salted tortilla chips, which had scattered during our tumble. I felt the whole Muchas Grande sixty-four-ounce bad and its strewn contents go crunch underneath me.

Few people think about this in the heat of passion, but tortilla chips have very pointy edge.

For me, this lightened the mood, but Cal was dead serious about moving forward.

“I have chips digging into my back.” I said this tenderly.

He reached for the bag and hurled it across the room. “I’ve got a condom.”

“There’s a tortilla particle lodged between my shoulder blades.”

He flailed for it. “Okay, okay, I’ll get it.”

And I guess between the crunch of Mexican food and my Catholic-school upbringing, which basically taught you that at any moment, day or night, no matter where you are or what you are doing, three nuns could jump on the scene and start screaming at you, I embraced this visual and found the resolve to say, “Cal, we need to stop.”

I pushed him gently away.

He wasn’t getting the idea.

“We’re just getting started.” He went back to kissing my neck, brushing crushed tortilla pieces from the bed.

“No, Cal, this is too much.”

“Beth, you feel so good.”

“Cal, no. We’ve never talked about this.”

“Don’t talk.” A huge deep kiss.

God.

I was sinking, feeling a hundred things at once. But I knew someplace distant that I wasn’t ready for this.

“Cal, I can’t go to bed with you.”

I managed to sit up, which was when I found the salsa, or rather it found me. Toppled from the shelf above the bed, just missing my head, landed in a plop of red, chunky muck right there on the striped sheets.

Not exactly three screaming nuns, but it worked.
I reached to turn on the light—knocked it over, actually—at which point Cal uttered an extended series of four letter words, but that was good because it broke the hold of the moment.

I sat there shaking.
He sat there with his shirt opened, breathing hard, looking absolutely gorgeous despite the mess around him.

“I’m a virgin.” I said it louder than I meant to. Like I was trying to convince myself. Cal was trying to catch his breath. “Okay…”

“And I’m not ready to go to bed with anyone. I mean, I’ve made a decision sort of…not sort of… I’ve made a decision to wait…you know…”

“Till when?”
“Well…till I’m sort of…married.”
He lay back on the bed, put his arms under his head. “Sort of married?”
“I mean definitely…married…in years to come.”
If I didn’t die first from sounding stupid.
He opened a Coke, propped himself up, took a swig, said nothing.
I picked up the lamp that had fallen. It was casting a weird glow over the Muchas Grande salted tortilla chip bag. That bag had probably saved me. I’d never thought of Mexican food as having that kind of power.

I shook the crushed chips from my back, my hair. It was so clear to me that I’d almost gone to bed with him. It would have been so easy to do it.

“I…I shouldn’t have come here, Cal.”
Still silence.
I touched his hand. “I care for you very much.”
He nodded. Got up, buttoned his shirt. “I’ll take you home.”

A long walk to the Volvo. Car doors shutting, safety belts locked. No great questions. Nothing to tell me he cared. Silence in the car.
My house loomed. The front-porch light beamed. Mom had gotten a brighter bulb when I started going out with Cal. My brother, Alex, joked about how it attracted low-flying aircraft.

“I’ll call you, Beth.” Flat voice.

No you won’t.
I slumped up the walk feeling totally alone.

“You’re not alone,” Sister Angelina would have told me. “You have your principles.”
I always hated it when she said that.
He drove away.

Bye, Cal.
I walked in the house.
My mother, of course, imagined the worst. “Oh, God, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Look at you!”
I looked at myself in the mirror. Face splotched. Mouth kind of swollen. Hair disheveled.

“Beth, you can tell me anything, you know that.”

“Buy tortilla chip stock, Mom. It’s going to go through the roof.”

“What are you talking about?”
“I didn’t go to bed with him, okay? I wanted to, but I didn’t!”
I ran up the stairs as my great-aunt Minerva walked out from the kitchen, drop jawed.
I ran down the hall, into my room.
Flopped on the bed.
Looked at the phone. I wanted it to ring. I wanted Cal to call so I could tell him everything I was feeling–how much I probably loved him, how turned on he made me feel. I wanted to tell him that I wasn’t a prude or some frozen female. I wanted to go to bed with him as much, maybe, as he wanted to go to bed with me.
I wanted to find the right words, like they had in the brochures that I’d read at school, where couples had great conversations about this and no one ever got hurt. I knew that waiting was the right decision. Cal was close to becoming my best friend, and now I had two losses to deal with.
Tears ran down my face.
I’m sorry that you couldn’t let me be myself, Cal.
I’m sorrier about that than you’ll ever know.
A postcard from my cousin Dana was on my pillow. My mother had put it there probably. Dana had gotten married last month and moved to Seattle. The postcard said simply, HOW GOES THE BATTLE?
Dana was my example in life and abstinence. Whenever anyone gave me a hard time about my stand, I’d point to Dana–a twenty-eight-year-old, attractive, popular, successful person who had just gotten married as an official virgin.
“We don’t know that for sure,” said my cousin Margaret at the wedding. “I mean, we can’t drop her in the lake and see if she floats.”
“Virgins float?”
“You know what I mean. Like Ivory soap.”
Dana’s wedding was wonderful. I thought of her in her long dress; the surety on her face. What I loved about Dana was that she was never self-righteous about her decision. She knew lots of people didn’t agree with her. She just quietly lived her life, making the choice that were right for her beliefs.
A knock at the door.
The lady or the aunt?
I threw my pillow on the carpet. It couldn’t get worse.
“Come in.”
It was my mom, taking in the scene. I looked really pitiful.
“Are you okay?”
“No.”
“I think it’s brave what you did, Beth.”
“I don’t feel very brave.”
“I know.” She sat on the bed.
“Did…Aunt Minerva hear…what I said?”
“Every word.”
“I thought she was hard of hearing.”
“So did I.”
We laughed.
I picked up Dana’s postcard. It was like a lifeline to what I hoped to be.
Mom looked like she did whenever she was going to say something really major–i.e., give a speech. She was rustling around in her pocket, looking for something. All month long she’d been
June 14. Two days after my high school graduation. I’m at The Ice-Cream Man Cometh, waging war against a fierce tub of Banana Butter Brickle. So far today work has been yawnfest because it’s raining like a monster outside and people don’t think of treating themselves with little cold goodies in the middle of a monsoon. One customer in the place—a middle-aged woman. Barley’s going strong with Darth Vader: “Would you like whipped cream and nuts on that sundae?”

“Why not?” said the woman nervously. Not a Star Wars fan.

“As you wish, my master.” Deep, galactic breathing.
I was in the back lugging jars of butterscotch out from the stockroom.

“Beth…” It was Barley. “We got busy all of a sudden.”

“Coming.” I spilled the butterscotch on my apron, my hands.
Rushed back out.

Barley pointed at Cal, who was standing there smiling.

“Double Coconut,” he said. “I missed you.”

I felt two things simultaneously.

Caring and caution.

He held out his hand. I didn’t take it right away. I did finally. Got him real sticky with butterscotch.

This is how it goes in the ice-cream world.

“I want to talk about things, Beth.”

I swallowed. “Okay.”

Darth: “Something tells me there will be a sequel.”

“We could go for coffee when you get off,” Cal offered.

Barley said I could take a half hour now if I wanted—no one would be coming in that he and the Dark Side couldn’t handle.

Cal opened the front door for me. We walked to the coffee bar across the street. Past the magazine stand displaying X-rated covers. Past a poster of a model in underwear flagging down a taxi. Past a big sign that read JUST DO IT. Past a movie theater placard with a man and woman kissing passionately underneath the grabber headline THEY COULDN’T SAY NO TO THE FIRE THAT RAGED WITHIN THEM.

It’s lonely in this old world sometimes.

We sat at the table where we first sat six weeks ago.

“Okay.” Cal leaned forward. “What was the worst part for you this last month?”

That was easy. “Feeling like you were only going out with me for one thing. What was it for you?”

He looked at me sadly. “Knowing I’d been a jerk when I took you home after…”

“The dorm incident.”

“The dorm incident.” He put his hand out. “Can we try again, Beth?”

“I’m not going to change, Cal.”

“I figured. That immigrant strength of yours. I meant can we try again with your rules? I’ll respect where you’re at. I promise.”

This was sounding a lot like the brochure they’d passed out in school.

I searched his face like my mother searched mine.

He laughed. “Do you want me to sign something?”

I grinned. “Maybe.”
He picked up a napkin, took a pen, wrote, “Abstinently yours, Cal Fedders.”
“Date it,” I said, grinning.
He wrote “June 14th,” gave it to me.
I folded it and put it in my pocket. I’d have it plasticized later for my mother.
“Are you hungry?” he asked.
“Starved.”
“Mexican food?”
We looked at each other, shook our heads.
“A cuisine that doesn’t crunch,” I suggested.
We had a really nice Italian dinner at Pellicci’s down the street, and when the waitress put the bottle of extra-virgin olive oil on the table, we both started laughing.
“You want butter instead?” she asked.
“No,” Cal assured her and me. “This is right.”

About “Extra Virgin”

This is a story that took me, the writer, on a journey. I’m always slightly irritated when I hear people talk about how easy certain choices in this world can be. On losing weight: “Just stop eating.” On being less stressed: “Simply learn to relax.” I’ve always found in my own life that when I try to set boundaries, I usually have to think them through again and again, and sometimes I must put them to a test to really make them stick.

Now, in the big sexual arena in which we live, abstinence isn’t always the most popular choice and can be considered prudish and boring. We live in a sex-driven culture, where sex is used to sell everything from motor oil to makeup. But I know many young people (and older ones too) who are choosing to wait. I wanted to write a story about a girl who had chosen abstinence for a number of reasons and then had to put it to the test when she met a guy she went crazy over.

“Extra Virgin” is a story about choices. But it’s also a story about the pervasive sexiness of our culture and how that affects the way we see ourselves as human beings. I greatly admire my eighteen-year-old character, Beth, because she sets boundaries, learns from her mistakes, and grapples with the issues even when it hurts to do so. When I wrote the scenes with her mother, I felt like her mother. It’s not always easy to talk about sex with a teenager, and adults feel the struggle too. We feel inept sometimes, downright dumb. But you know how it is with fiction writers—we put so much of our personal self into a story. Maybe I am Beth’s mom. I like to think so.
Miss Hancock was plump and unmarried and over-enthusiastic. She was fond of peasant blouses encrusted with embroidery, from which loose threads invariably dangled. Like a heavy bird, she fluttered and flitted from desk to desk, inspecting notebook, making suggestions, dispensing eager praise. Miss Hancock was our teacher of literature and creative writing.

If one tired of scrutinizing Miss Hancock's clothes, which were nearly always as flamboyant as her nature, one could still contemplate her face with considerable satisfaction. It was clear that this was a face that had once been pretty, although cloakroom discussions of her age never resulted in any firm conclusions. In any case, by now it was too late for simple, unadorned prettiness. What time had taken away from her, Miss Hancock tried to replace by artificial means, and she applied her makeup with an excess of zeal and a minimum of control. Her face was truly amazing. She was fond of luminous frosted lipsticks—in hot pink, or something closer to purple or magenta. Her eyelashes curled up and out singly, like a row of tiny bent sticks. Surrounding her eyes, the modulations of colour, toners, shadows could keep a student interested for half an hour if he or she were bored with a grammar assignment. Her head was covered with a profusion of small busy curls, which were brightly, aggressively golden—“in bad taste,” my mother said, “like the rest of her.”

However, do not misunderstand me. We were fond of Miss Hancock. In fact, almost to a person, we loved her. Our class, like most groups that are together for long periods of time, had developed a definite personality. By some fluke of geography or biology or school administration, ours was a cohesive group composed of remarkably backward grade 7 pupils—backward in that we had not yet embraced sophistication, boredom, cruelty, drugs, alcohol, or sex. Those who did not fit into our mould were in the minority and made little mark upon us. We were free to respond positively to Miss Hancock's literary excesses without fear of the mockery of our peers, and with an open and uninhibited delight that is often hard to find in any classroom above the level of grade 5. So Miss Hancock was able to survive, even to flourish, in our unique, sheltered environment.

Miss Hancock was equally at home in her two fields of creative writing and literature. It was the first time I had been excited, genuinely moved, by poems, plays, stories. She could analyze without destroying a piece of literature, and we argued about meanings and methods and creative intentions with passionate caring. She had a beautiful deeply modulated voice, and when she read poetry aloud, we sat bewitched, transformed. We could not have said which we loved best, Miss Hancock or her subject. They were all of a piece.

But it was in the area of composition, in her creative writing class, that Miss Hancock made the deepest mark upon me. She had the gift of making most of us want to write, to communicate, to make a blank sheet of paper into a beautiful or at least an interesting thing. We were as drugged by words as some children are by electronic games.

One October day, just after Thanksgiving, Miss Hancock came into the classroom and faced us, eyes aglitter, hands clasped in front of her embroidered breasts.

“Today,” she announced, clapping her dimpled hands together, her charm bracelets jingling, “we are going to do a lovely exercise. Such fun!” She lifted her astonished eyes to the classroom ceiling. “A whole new world of composition is about to open for you in one glorious whoosh.” She stood there, arms now raised, elbows bent, palms facing us, enjoying her dramatic pause. “After today,” she announced in a loud confidential whisper, “you will have a brand-new weapon in your arsenal of writing skills. You will possess…(pause again) The Metaphor!” Her arms fell, and she clicked to the blackboard in her patent-leather pumps to start the lesson. Her dazzling curls shone in the afternoon sunlight and jiggled as she wrote. Then, with a board full of examples and suggestions, she began her impassioned discourse on The Metaphor. I listened, entranced. Miss Hancock may have been in poor
taste, but at that time in my life she was my entry to something I did not yet fully understand but that I knew I wanted.

“And now,” Miss Hancock announced, after the lucid and fervent presentation of her subject, “The Metaphor is yours—to use, to enjoy, to relish.” She stood poised, savouring one of her breathless pauses. “I now want you to take out your notebooks,” she continued, “and make a list. Write down the members of your family, you home, your pets, anything about which you feel deeply. Then,” she went on, “I want you to describe everyone and everything on your list with a pungent and a telling metaphor.” She gave a little clap. “Now start!” she cried. She sat down at her desk, clasping her hands together so tightly that the knuckles looked polished. Smiling tensely, frilled eyes shining, she waited.

All but the dullest of us were excited. This was an unfamiliar way of looking at things. Better still, it was a brand-new method of talking about them.

Miss Hancock interrupted us just one more time. “Write quickly,” she urged from her glowing, expectant position at the desk. “Don’t think too hard. Let your writing, your words, emerge from you like a mysterious and elegant blossom. Let it all out” – she closed her lacy eyes – “without restraint, without inhibition, with verve.”

Well, we did. The results, when we read them out to her, were, as one might expect, hackneyed, undistinguished, ordinary. But we were delighted with ourselves. And she with us. She wrote our metaphors on the blackboard and expressed her pleasure with small, delighted gasping sounds.

“My dog is a clown in a spotted suit.”
“My little brother George is a whirling top.”
“The spruce tree was a tall lady in a stiff dress.”
“My dad is a warm wood stove.”

And so it went. Finally it was my turn. I offered metaphors for my father, my grandmother, my best friend, the wave at Peggy’s Cove. Then I looked at the metaphor for my mother. I had not realized I had written so much.

“Miss Hancock,” I hesitated, “the one for my mother is awfully long. You probably don’t want to write all this stuff down.”

“Oh, heavens, Charlotte,” breathed Miss Hancock, “of course I want it! Read it all to us. Do, Charlotte. Oh, do!”

I began: “My mother is a flawless modern building, created of glass and the smoothest of pale concrete. Inside are business offices furnished with beige carpets and gleaming chromium. In every room there are machines—telex machines, mimeograph machines, and sleek typewriters. They are buzzing and clicking away, absorbing and spitting out information with a speed and skill that is not normal. Downstairs, at ground level, people walk in and out, tracking mud and dirt over the steel-grey tiles, marring the cool perfection of the building. There are no comfortable chairs in the lobby.”

I sat down, eyes on my desk. There was a pause so long that I finally felt forced to look up. Miss Hancock was standing there at the front of the room, chalk poised, perfectly still. Then she turned around quickly and wrote the whole metaphor verbatim (verbatim!) on the board. When she faced us again, she looked normal once more. Smiling brightly, she said, “Very, very good, class! I had planned to discuss with you what you all meant by your metaphors; I had hoped to probe their significance. But I have to leave early today because of a dental appointment.” Then, with five vigorous sweeps of her blackboard eraser, the whole enticing parade of metaphors disappeared from the board, leaving us feeling vaguely deprived. It also left me feeling more than vaguely relieved. “Class dismissed!” said Miss Hancock cheerily, and then, “Charlotte. May I see you for a moment before you go.”

When the others had gathered up their books and their leftover lunches, they disappeared into the corridor. I went up to the front of the room to Miss Hancock’s desk. She was sitting there soberly, hands still, eyes quiet.

“Yes, Miss Hancock?” I inquired, mystified.

“Charlotte,” she began, “your metaphors were unusually good, unusually interesting. For someone your age, you have quite a complex vocabulary, a truly promising way of expressing yourself.”

Ah. So this was why she wanted to see me. But apparently it was not.
“I wonder,” she continued slowly, carefully, “do you have anything you would like to discuss about your
mother’s metaphor?”

I thought about that.

“No,” I replied. “I don’t think so. I don’t really know what it means. It just sort of came out. I feel kind of
funny about it.”

“Lots of things just sort of come out when you’re writing,” said Miss Hancock quietly, oh so quietly, as
though she were afraid something fragile might break if she spoke too quickly, too loudly. “And there’s no need to
feel funny about it. I don’t want to push you even a little bit, but are you really sure you don’t want to discuss it?” I
could tell that she was feeling concerned and kind, not nosy.

“Lookit,” I said, using an expression that my mother particularly disliked, “that’s really nice of you, but I
can’t think of anything at all to say. Besides, even though you say there’s no need to feel funny, I really do feel sort
of creepy about it. And I’m not all that crazy about the feeling.” I paused, not sure of what else to say.

Miss Hancock was suddenly her old self again. “Well!” she said cheerfully, as she rose. “That’s perfectly fine.
I just wanted you to know that your writing was very intriguing today, and that it showed a certain maturity that
surprised and delighted me.” She gathered up her books, her purse, her pink angora cardigan, and started off
toward the corridor. At the door, she stopped and turned around, solemn and quiet once more. “Charlotte,” she
said, “if you every need any help—just let me know.” Then she turned abruptly and clicked off in the direction of
the staff room, waving her hand in a fluttery farewell. “My dental appointment,” she called merrily.

I walked home slowly, hugging my books to my chest. The mid-October sun shone down upon the coloured
leaves that littered the sidewalk, and I kicked and shuffled as I walked, enjoying the swish and scrunch, savouring
the sad-sweet feeling of doom that October always gives me. I thought for a while about my metaphor—the one
Miss Hancock had asked about—and then I decided to push it out of my head.

When I arrived home, I opened the door with my key, entered the front porch, took off my shoes, and read
the note on the hall table. It was written in flawless script on a small piece of bond paper. It said: “At a Children’s
Aid board meeting. Home by 5. Please tidy your room.”

The hall table was polished, antique, perfect. It contained one silver salver for messages and a small ebony
lamp with a white shade. The floor of the entrance hall was tiled. The black and white tiles shone in the sunlight,
unmarked by any sign of human contact. I walked over them carefully, slowly, having slipped and fallen once too
often.

Hunger. I went into the kitchen and surveyed it thoughtfully. More black and white tiles dazzled the eye,
and the cupboards and walls were a blinding spotless white. The counters shone, empty of jars, leftovers,
canisters, appliances. The whole room looked as though it were waiting for the movers to arrive with the furniture
and dishes. I made myself a peanut-butter sandwich, washed the knife and plate, and put everything away. Then I
went upstairs to my room, walking up the grey stair carpet beside the off-white walls, glancing absently at the
single lithograph in its black frame. “My home,” I said aloud, “is a box. It is cool and quiet and empty and
uninteresting. Nobody lives in the box.” Entering my room, I looked around. A few magazines were piled on the
floor beside my bed. On my dresser, a T-shirt lay on top of my ivory brush and comb set. Two or three books were
scattered over the top of my desk. I picked up the magazines, removed the T-shirt, and put the books back in the
bookcase. There. Done.

Then I called Julia Parsons, who was my best friend, and went over to her house to talk about boys. When I
returned at six o’clock, my mother, who had been home only one hour, had prepared a complicated three-course

Since no one else had much to say at dinner, I talked about school. I told them about Miss Hancock’s lesson
on The Metaphor. I said what a marvellous teacher she was, how even the dumbest of us had learned to enjoy
writing compositions, how she could make the poetry in our textbook so exciting to read and to hear.

My father listened attentively, enjoying my enthusiasm. He was not a lively or an original man, but he was
an intelligent person who liked to watch eagerness in others. “You’re very fortunate, Charlotte,” he said, “to find a
teacher who can wake you up and make you love literature.”

“Is she that brassy Miss Hancock whom I met at the home and school meeting?” asked my mother.
“What do you mean, brassy?”
“Oh. You know. Overdone, too much enthusiasm. Flamboyant. Orange hair. Is she the one?
“Yes,” I said.
“Oh,” said my mother, without emphasis of any kind. “Her. Charlotte, would you please remove the dishes and bring in the dessert. Snow pudding. In the fridge, top left-hand side. Thank you.”
That night I lay in the bath among the Estée Lauder bubbles (gift from my father on my last birthday) and created metaphors. I love baths. The only thing nicer than one bath a day was two. Julia said that if I kept taking so many baths, my skin would get dry and crisp, and that I would be wrinkled before I was thirty. That was too far away to worry about. She also said that taking baths was disgusting and that showers were more hygienic. She pointed out that I was soaking in my own dirt, like bathers in the fetid Ganges. I thought this a bit excessive and said so. “For Pete’s sake!” I exclaimed. “If I have two baths a day, I can’t be sitting in very much dirt. Besides, it’s therapeutic.”
“It’s what?”
“Therapeutic. Water play. I read about it in Reader’s Digest at the doctor’s office. They let kids play with water when they’re wild and upset. And now they’re using warm baths to soothe the patients in mental hospitals.”
“So?”
“So it could be useful if I happen to end up crazy.” I laughed. I figured that would stop her. It did.
In the bath I always did a lot of things besides wash. I lifted up mounds of the tiny bubbles and held them against the fluorescent light over the sink. The patterns and shapes were delicate, like minute filaments of finest lace. I poked my toes through the bubbles and waved their hot pinkness to and fro among the static white waves. I hopefully examined my breasts for signs of sudden growth. If I lay down in the tub and brought the bubbles up over my body and squeezed my chest together by pressing my arms inward, I could convince myself that I was full-breasted and seductive. I did exercises to lengthen my hamstrings, in order to improve my splits for the gymnastics team. I thought about Charles Swinimer. I quoted poetry out loud with excessive feeling and dramatic emphasis, waving my soapy arms around and pressing my eloquent hand against my flat chest. And from now on, I also lay there and made up metaphors, most of them about my mother.
“My mother is a white picket fence – straight, level. The fence stands in a field full of weeds. The field is bounded on all sides by thorny bushes and barbed wire.”
“My mother is a lofty mountain capped by virgin snow. The air around the mountain is clear and clean and very cold.” I turned on more hot water. “At the base of the mountain grow gnarled and crooked trees, surrounded by scrub brush and poison ivy.”
Upon leaving the bath, I would feel no wiser. Then I would clean the tub very carefully indeed. It was necessary.
Not, mind you, that my mother ranted and raved about her cleanliness. Ranting and raving were not part of her style. “I know you will agree,” she would say very oh ever so sweetly, implying in some oblique way that I certainly did not agree, “that it is an inconsiderate and really ugly thing to leave a dirty tub.” then she would lead me with a subtle soft-firm pressure into the bathroom so that we might inspect together a bathtub ringed with sludge, sprinkled with hair and dried suds. “Not,” she would say quietly, “a very pretty sight.”
And what, I would ask myself, is so terrible about that? Other mothers—I know; I had heard them—nagged, yelled, scolded, did terrible and noisy things. But what was it about my mother’s methods that left me feeling so depraved, so unsalvageable?
But of course I was thirteen by now, and knew all about cleaning tubs and wiping off countertops and sweeping up crumbs. A very small child must have been a terrible test to that cool and orderly spirit. I remember those days. A toy ceased to be a toy and began to be a mess the moment it left the toy cupboard. “I know you will agree,” she would say very oh ever so sweetly, implying in some oblique way that I certainly did not agree, “that it is an inconsiderate and really ugly thing to leave a dirty tub.” then she would lead me with a subtle soft-firm pressure into the bathroom so that we might inspect together a bathtub ringed with sludge, sprinkled with hair and dried suds. “Not,” she would say quietly, “a very pretty sight.”
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“But Mother, I’m making a garden.”
“Then make a little garden. They’re every bit as satisfying as large, sprawling unmanageable farms.”
And since no one who was a truly nice person would want a large, sprawling unmanageable farm, I would move my blocks behind the chair and make my small garden there. Outside, our backyard was composed of grass and flowers, plus one evergreen tree that dropped neither fuzzy buds in the spring nor ragged leaves in the fall. No swing set made brown spots on that perfect lawn, nor was there a sandbox. Cats were known to use sandboxes as community toilets. Or so my mother told me. I assume she used the term toilet (a word not normally part of her vocabulary) instead of washroom, lest there be any confusion as to her meaning.

But in grade 7, you no longer needed a sandbox. My friends marvelled when they came to visit, which was not often. How serene my mother seemed, how lovely to look at, with her dark-blond hair, her flawless figure, her smooth hands. She never acted frazzled or rushed or angry, and her forehead was unmarked by age or worry lines. Her hair always looked as though a hairdresser had arrived at six o’clock to ready her for the day. “Such a peaceful house,” my friends would say, clearly impressed, “and no one arguing or fighting.” Then they would leave and go somewhere else for their snacks, their music, their hanging around.

No indeed, I thought. No fights in this house. It would be like trying to down an angel with a BB gun–both sacrilegious and futile. My father, thin and nervous, was careful about hanging up his clothes and keeping his sweaters in neat piles. He certainly did not fight with my mother. In fact, he said very little to her at all. He had probably learned early that to complain is weak, to rejoice is childish, to laugh is noisy. And moving around raises dust.

This civilized, this clean, this disciplined woman who was and is my mother, was also, if one were to believe her admirers, the mainstay of the community, the rock upon which the town was built. She chaired committees, ran bazaars, sat on boards. When I first heard about this, I thought it a very exciting thing that she sat on boards. If my mother, who sat so correctly on the needlepoint chair with her nylon knees pressed so firmly together, could actually sit on boards, there might be a rugged and reckless side to her that I had not yet met. The telephone rang constantly, and her softly controlled voice could be heard, hour after hour, arranging and steering and manipulating the affairs of the town.

Perhaps because she juggled her community jobs, her housework, her cooking and her grooming with such quiet calm efficiency, she felt scorn for those less able to cope. “Mrs. Langstreth says she is too tired to take on a table at the bazaar,” she might say. It was not hard to imagine Mrs. Langstreth lounging on a sofa, probably in a turquoise chenille dressing gown, surrounded by full ashtrays and neglected children. Or my mother might comment quietly, but with unmistakable emphasis, “Gillian Munroe is having trouble with her children. And in my opinion, she has only herself to blame.” The implication seemed to be that if Gillian Munroe’s children were left in my mother’s care for a few weeks, she could make them all into a perfectly behaved family. Which was probably true.

Certainly in those days I was well behaved. I spoke quietly, never complained, ate whatever was put before me, and obeyed all rules without question or argument. I was probably not even very unhappy, though I enjoyed weekdays much more than weekends. Weekends did not yet include parties or boys. It is true that Julia and I spent a lot of our time together talking about boys. I also remember stationing myself on the fence of the vacant lot on Seymour Street at five o’clock, the hour when Charles Swinimer could be expected to return from high school. As he passed, I would be too absorbed in my own activity to look at him directly. I would be chipping the bark off the fence, or reading, or pulling petals from a daisy—he loves me, he loves me not. Out of the corner of my eye, I feasted upon his jaw line, his confident walk, his shoulders. On the rare days when he would toss me a careless “Hi” (crumbs to a pigeon), I would have to dig my nails into the wood to keep from falling off, from fainting dead away. But that was the extent of my thrills. No boys had yet materialized in the flesh to offer themselves to me. Whatever else they were looking for, it was not acne, straight, brown stringy hair or measurement of 32-32-32.

So weekdays were still best. Weekdays meant school and particularly English class, where Miss Hancock delivered up feasts of succulent literature for our daily consumption. Hamlet was the thing that spring, the spring before we moved into junior high. So were a number of poems that left me weak and changed. And our composition class gathered force, filling us with a creative confidence that was heady stuff. We wrote short stories, played with similes, created poems that did and did not rhyme, felt we were capable of anything and everything;
if Shakespeare, if Wordsworth, could do it, why couldn’t we? Over it all, Miss Hancock presided, hands fluttering, voice atremble with a raw emotion.

But Hamlet dominated our literature classes from April to June. Like all serious students, we agonized and argued over its meaning, Hamlet’s true intent, his sanity, his goal. Armed with rulers, we fought the final duel with its bloody sequence, and a four-foot Fortinbras stepped among the dead bodies between the desks to proclaim the ultimate significance of it all. At the end, Miss Hancock stood, hands clasped, knuckles white, tears standing in her eyes. And I cannot pretend that all of ours were dry.

At the close of the year, our class brought an enormous tasteless card of thanks and affixed it to a huge trophy. The trophy was composed of two brass-coloured Ionic pillars that were topped by a near-naked athlete carrying a spiky wreath. On the plate below was inscribed: “For you and Hamlet with love. The grade 7 class. 1965.”

When my mother saw it, she came close to losing her cool control.
   “Who chose it?” she asked, tight-lipped.
   “Horace Hannington,” I answered. Oh, don’t spoil it, don’t spoil it.
   “That explains it,” she said, and mercifully that was all.

*   *   *

Junior high school passed, and so did innocence and acne. Hair curled, makeup intact, I entered high school the year that Charles Swinimer left for university. But there would be other fish to fry. Outwardly blasé, single-minded, and sixteen, I came into my first grade 10 class with a mixture of intense apprehension and a burning unequivocal belief that high school could and would deliver up to me all of life’s most precious gifts – the admiration of my peers, local fame, boys, social triumphs. During August of that year, my family had moved to another school district. I entered high school with a clean slate. It was terrifying to be so alone. I also knew that it was a rare and precious opportunity; I could approach life without being branded with my old failures, my old drawbacks. I was pretty; I had real curves; I was anonymous; I melted into the crowd. No one here would guess that I had once been such a skinny, pimply wretch.

Our first class was geography, and I knew enough of the material to be able to let my eyes and mind wander. Before the end of the period, I knew that the boy to pursue was Howard Oliver, that the most prominent and therefore the most potentially useful or dangerous girl was Gladys Simpson, that geography was uninteresting, that the teacher was strict. To this day I can smell the classroom during that first period – the dry and acrid smell of chalk, the cool, sweet fragrance of the freshly waxed floors, the perspiration that travelled back to me from Joey Elliot’s desk.

The next period was English. My new self-centred and self-conscious sophistication has not blunted my love of literature, my desire to write, to play with words, to express my discoveries and confusions. I awaited the arrival of the teacher with masked but real enthusiasm. I was not prepared for the entrance of Miss Hancock.

Miss Hancock’s marked success with fifteen years of grade 7 students had finally transported her to high places. She entered the classroom, wings spread, ready to fly. She was used to success, and she was eager to sample the pleasure of a group of older and more perceptive minds. Clad in royal blue velour, festooned with gold chains, hair glittering in the sun pouring in from the east window, fringed eyes darting, she faced the class, arms raised. She paused.

   “Let us pray!” said a deep male voice from the back row. It was Howard Oliver. Laughter exploded in the room. Behind my Duo Tang folder, I snickered fiercely.

   Miss Hancock’s hands fluttered wildly. It was as though she were waving off an invasion of poisonous flies.

   “Now, now, class!” she exclaimed with a mixture of tense jollity and clear panic. “We’ll have none of that! Please turn to page seven in your textbook. I’ll read the selection aloud to you first, and then we’ll discuss it.” She held the book high in the palms of one hand; the other was raised like an admonition, an artistic beckoning.

   The reading was from Tennyson’s “Ulysses.” I had never heard it before. As I listened to her beautiful voice, the old magic took hold, and no amount of peer pressure could keep me from thrilling to the first four lines she read:
“I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’  
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades  
For ever and fore ever when I move.”

But after that, it was difficult even to hear her. Guffaws sprang up here and there throughout the room. Gladys Simpson whispered something behind her hand to the girl beside her and then broke into fits of giggles. Paper airplanes flew. The wits of grade 10 offered comments: “Behold the Bard!” “Bliss! Oh, poetic bliss!” “Hancock! Whocock? Hancock! Hurray!” “Don’t faint, class! Don’t faint!”

I was caught in a stranglehold somewhere between shocked embarrassment and a terrible desire for concealment. No other members of the class shared my knowledge of Miss Hancock or my misery. But I knew I could not hide behind that Duo Tang folder forever.

It was in fact ten days later when Miss Hancock recognized me. It could not have been easy to connect the eager skinny fan of grade 7 with the cool and careful person I had become. And she would not have expected to find a friend in that particular classroom. By then, stripped of fifteen years of overblown confidence, she offered her material shyly, hesitantly, certain of rejection, of humiliation. When our eyes met in class, she did not rush up to me to claim alliance or allegiance. Her eyes merely held mine for a moment, slide off, and then periodically slid back. There was a desperate hope in them that I could hardly bear to witness. At the end of the period, I waited until everyone had gone before I walked toward her desk on the way to the corridor. Whatever was going to happen, I wanted to be sure that it would not be witnessed.

When I reached her, she was sitting quietly, hands folded on top of her lesson book. I was reminded of another day, another meeting. The details were blurred; but I knew I had seen this Miss Hancock before. She looked at me evenly and said quietly, simply, “Hello, Charlotte. How nice to see you.”

I looked at her hands, the floor, the blackboard, anywhere but at those searching eyes. “Hello, Miss Hancock,” I said.

“Still writing metaphors?” she asked with a tentative smile.

“Oh, I dunno,” I replied. But I was. Nightly, in the bathtub. And I kept a notebook in which I wrote them all down.

“Your writing showed promise, Charlotte.” Her eyes were quiet, pleading. “I hope you won’t forget that.” Or anything else, I thought. Oh, Miss Hancock, let me go. Aloud I said, “French is next, and I’m late.”

She looked directly into my eyes and held them for a moment. Then she spoke. “Go ahead, Charlotte. Don’t let me keep you.”

She did not try to reach me again. She taught, or tried to teach her class, as though I were not there. Week after week, she entered the room white with tension and left it defeated. I did not tell a living soul that I had ever seen her before.

One late afternoon in March of that year, Miss Hancock stepped off the curb in front of the school and was killed instantly by a school bus.

The next day, I was offered this piece of news with that mixture of horror and delight that so often attends the delivery of terrible tidings. When I heard it, I felt as though my chest and throat were constricted by bands of dry ice. During assembly, the principal came forward and delivered a short announcement of the tragedy, peppered with little complimentary phrases: “...a teacher of distinction...” “...a generous colleague...” “...a tragic end to a promising career...” Howard Oliver was sitting beside me; he had been showing me flattering attention of late. As we got up to disperse for classes, he said, “Poor old Whocock Hancock. Quoting poetry to the angels by now.” He was no more surprised than I was when I slapped him full across his handsome face, before I ran down the aisle of the assembly room, up the long corridor of the first floor, down the steps, and out into the parking lot. Shaking with dry, unsatisfying sobs, I hurried home through the back streets of the town and let myself in by the back door.

“What on earth is wrong, Charlotte?” asked my mother when she saw my stricken look, my heaving shoulders. There was real concern in her face.
“Miss Hancock is dead,” I whispered.
“Miss who? Charlotte, speak up please.”
“Miss Hancock. She teaches – taught – us grade 10 English.”
“You mean that same brassy creature from grade 7?”
I didn’t answer. I was crying out loud, with the abandon of a preschooler or someone who is under the influence of drugs.
“Charlotte, do please blow your nose and try to get hold of yourself. I can’t for the life of me see why you’re so upset. You never even told us she was your teacher this year.”
I was rocking back and forth on the kitchen chair, arms folded over my chest. My mother stood there erect, invulnerable. It crossed my mind that no grade 10 class would throw paper airplanes in any group that she chose to teach.
“Well, then,” she said, “why or how did she die?”
I heard myself shriek, “I killed her! I killed her!”
Halting, gasping, I told her all of it. I described her discipline problems, the cruelty of the students, my own blatant betrayal.
“For goodness’ sake, Charlotte,” said my mother quiet but clearly irritated, “don’t lose perspective. She couldn’t keep order, and she had only herself to blame.” That phrase sounded familiar to me. “A woman like that can’t survive for five minutes in the high schools of today. There was nothing you could have done.”
I was silent. I could have said something. Like thank you for grade 7. Or yes, I still have fun with The Metaphor. Or once, just once in this entire year, I could have smiled at her.
My mother was speaking again. “There’s a great deal of ice. It would be very easy to slip under a school bus. And she didn’t strike me as the sort of person who would exercise any kind of sensible caution.”
“Oh, dear God,” I was whispering, “I wish she hadn’t chosen a school bus.”
I cried some more that day and excused myself from supper. I heard my father say, “I think I’ll just go up and see if I can help.” But my mother said, “Leave her alone, Arthur. She’s sixteen years old. It’s time she learned how to cope. She’s acting like a hysterical child.” My father did not appear. Betrayal, I thought, runs in the family.
The next day I stayed home from school. I kept having periods of uncontrollable weeping, and even my mother could not send me off in that condition. Once again I repeated to her, to my father, “I killed her. We all killed her. But especially me.”
“Charlotte.”
Oh, I knew that voice, that tone. So calm, so quiet, so able to silence me with one word. I stopped crying and curled up into a tight ball on the sofa.
“Charlotte. I know you will agree with what I’m going to say to you. There is no need to speak so extravagantly. A sure and perfect control is what separates the civilized from the uncivilized.” she inspected her fingernails, pushing down the quick of her middle finger with her thumb. “If you would examine this whole perfectly natural situation with a modicum of rationality, you would see that she got exactly what she deserved.”
I stared at her.
“Charlotte,” she continued, “I’ll have to ask you to stop this nonsense. You’re disturbing the even tenor of our home.”
I said nothing. With a sure and perfect control, I uncoiled myself from my fetal position on the sofa. I stood up and left the living room.
Upstairs in my bedroom I sat down before my desk. I took my pen out of the drawer and opened my notebook. Extravagantly, without a modicum of rationality, I began to write.
“Miss Hancock was a birthday cake,” I wrote. “This cake was frosted by someone unschooled in the art of cake decoration. It was adorned with a profusion of white roses and lime-green leaves, which drooped and dribbled at the edges where the pastry tube had slipped. The frosting was of an intense peppermint flavour, too sweet, too strong, inside, the cake had two layers – chocolate and vanilla. The chocolate was rich and soft and very delicious. No one who stopped to taste it could have failed to enjoy it. The vanilla was subtle and delicate; only those thoroughly familiar with cakes, only those with great sensitivity of taste, could have perceived its true
fine flavour. Because it was a birthday cake, it was filled with party favours. If you stayed long enough at the party, you could amass quite a large collection of these treasures. If you kept them for many years, they would amaze you by turning into pure gold. Most children would have been delighted by this cake. Most grown-ups would have thrown it away after one brief glance at the frosting.

“I wish that the party wasn’t over.”
Dr Trevor McTeer woke up while it was still dark on the morning of his killing spree. It was August, but he was freezing, because his wife, Petrina, insisted on both blasting the air conditioner and rolling herself up in the blanket like a cheung-fan - a rice roll. The bedroom was dark, and McTeer was glad that he did not have to see the sickly pink and powder blue décor. At Petrina’s insistence, the bed they chose reflected the Cantonese idea of Western luxury - a large scallop-shaped headboard of silver gilded wood, with their wedding photo mounted in its center. For her, pure chic. For him, pure rot. Their wedding portrait -- him, the gawky gweilo, wearing a tuxedo and gigantic orchid boutonnière – a corsage really, and her, wearing a garish red and gold Chinese wedding dress - not a proper gown - just a silly dress, flowers in her piled-on hair and bloody awful makeup. And that was after he told everyone that he was allergic to flowers.

His eyes itched throughout the honeymoon.

Trevor shuffled into the living room, with its large Chinese style rosewood furniture, Sumatran masks and delicate Kashmiri hangings on the creamy walls, and huge entertainment system that gave him a jolt of pride. He moved toward his leather easy chair, the only piece of Western furniture in the room. He caught his pajama sleeve on a large rainbow faux-Ming vase. ‘Lord, I'm more tired than I thought. If I broke it, Petrina would kill me.’ He did not feel like reading, and he knew there was nothing to watch on English TV. He stepped up to the picture window and drew the heavy beige curtain. The black sky above, the glassy black water below, ringed by the light-spangled shoreline. God, Hong Kong harbor was beautiful, and all the travel books didn't lie, either. Even at - what, Trevor checked the clock - 4:30 in the morning - there were ships lights’ blinking, and the shore blazed with neon adverts, building lights, and traffic as well. There was even a traffic jam, the line of headlights forming a lemon-spotted street snake. Hong Kong was still up. He looked at the residential blocks built below at different levels of the hillside. Three-quarters of the rent for his place was the view; God, it was worth it to look down on the lively mouse village of Hong Kong.

Besides, the McTeers lived on expat terms, so he did not have to pay anyway. Trevor had the officious-sounding post of Chief Veterinary Surgeon of the Hong Kong Zoological Gardens. The Hong Kong government's way of saying that he was the only full-time vet. At times Trevor was overworked like a dog's body, but treating exotics beat squeezing beagles' bladders in Bristol, or docking a sheep in Devonshire. Exotics. Trevor's life brimmed with exotics. He even married one. And he knew that even the exotic could turn tedious. The job, the animals, this home, this wife and his life began to choke him. He stared out the window, and he really wanted to step out on the tile balcony, but at 23 floors up, he would have to worry that Voodoo, Petrina’s cat, might slink out and jump off. He stared into the blackness, gradually ignoring the buildings below his flat, the lights and the nighttime activity of Hong Kong.

He saw the odd full moon. Trevor had never seen the moon so large or so low in the sky, a great shining white plate that nearly touched Mount Davis. Then he noticed the peculiar way that the trees bent, not like the storm-whipped palms around Repulse Bay after a typhoon, but as if they had been magnetized or drawn to the ground. The scene looked oppressive, and Trevor felt the aura of a migraine. ‘Damn, that’s all I need’, he thought. He snapped the drapes closed, clutching the brocade in his sweating hand.
Trevor forced a pleasant scene into his mind. While not scientific, he found that doing this exercise sometimes blocked a headache. Better than getting hooked on painkillers, or ruining his stomach with aspirin. Trevor went over to a rosewood and mother-of-pearl inlaid piece that served as a liquor cabinet. He poured a snort and a half of brandy, and returned to his chair. He swirled the amber liquid in the thin glass, and enjoyed its mellow burning aroma. He recalled someone he met at a large animal veterinary conference in Nairobi three months earlier.

Dr Gaye Medford headed a bovine pneumonia research group at Texas A&M University, and she knocked him out. Tall - an inch taller than he was - blond, blue-eyed - everything he expected from a Texan - and she was brilliant. He had never met anyone from Texas before, and, for him, the place only insisted on TV. Then, in between papers on a new lungworm discovered in Egypt and the high incidence of nasal tumors in Polish oxen, Gaye spoke. After the symposium, Trevor introduced himself, mentioned the troubles he had with a group of sambar deer from Malaysia, and after an excellent French dinner alfresco, they confirmed more than a friendship.

Sleeping in the next morning, Trevor opened his eyes to see a mass of straw-colored hair caressing his cheek, golden waves that delighted him with their difference. Straight black hair was dull, Newfoundland dull, Labrador retriever dull, Doberman dull. Petrina dull. As they ate breakfast in bed, Trevor trying to figure out how to marry this glorious American, Gaye invited him to Texas A&M. The highly respected vet school would have an opening in eight months. She promised him a chance to teach and work together, all on the Texas equivalent of expat terms. Petrina in Texas? Never. Professor McTeer? The thought was even more seductive than the way Gaye nibbled a croissant and smiled as he croaked, "Yes, I’d like..." without finishing the sentence.

"You don't have to answer right now," she trilled. "It's a life-bending situation to change your life." Trevor thought she said "wife" instead of "life", and he knew that he heard wrong, but blushed anyway. "I want to make a change," he replied.

He returned to Hong Kong determined to give up his post and leave Petrina. He actively thought about breaking the news to her. His even hinted that his marriage was rocky to a lawyer friend of his, over whiskey sours in the lobby lounge at the Mandarin Hotel, but his pal was as potted as a potto, and equally attentive. Then Trevor started writing to Gaye. She answered by e-mail, but he persisted in writing notes on his classy beige stationery. She teased him, suggesting that he join the electronic age, and stop using his parrot green iMac as a fancy paperweight. She teased, but at least she responded, and he believed she appreciated his European sensibilities and continental procrastination. It took a month for him to write his c.v., and another week before he sent it to College Station, Texas. He wanted Gaye, and to wake up in a sunny Tex-Mex style hacienda or ranch or whatever they were called, his face against her lemony hair, being careful not to knock over a cactus as he reached for the alarm clock. Dry, sunny mornings, a rough Navajo rug under his bare feet as he eagerly jumped out of bed to teach Aggies the difference between distemper in hyenas and pugs.

Whether from the Napoleon or his Gaye reverie he did not know, but Trevor was grateful that a migraine had been averted. Suddenly enthusiastic, Trevor wanted to do something. He thought about jotting a note to Gaye, but that felt like something he should not do at five in the morning with a strange moon out there. He thought about attacking the book - not something he was writing, but one he was trying to read. A feed supplier gave him a copy of the definitive biography of Hannah Drayne, the first female to scuba dive in the Antarctic. Trevor was less than 300 pages into an 800-page book. Obviously, she survived. Would he? He decided to take up an easy task, and clicked on the lights of his marine aquarium. He peered into forty gallons of Coral Sea, but the lights seem to startle the indigo triggerfish, neon blue devils, and an iridescent fish that looked like a Christmas ornament. The candy-striped and highly toxic lionfish moved its blank eyes upward, and drifted upward on wing-like fins. The lionfish bubbled at the surface, and Trevor dropped in a foul-smelling food pellet, avoiding the poisonous red and
white barbs that flashed above the water. A bit of the pellet settled on the pink-purple tentacles of a sea anemone, and disappeared.

He heard footsteps behind him, and turning, he saw Dessie, the Filipina maid. At thirty, she was still cute in both face and body. In a robe and pajamas, her hair tousled and round golden face muzzy with sleep, she looked soft and inviting.

"Everything OK, Dessie?" he asked.

"Yes, Dr McTeer. I heard you and saw the light, and I wondered what it was."

"Sorry I woke you."

"That's O.K. You need something?"

"No, I'm fine. Couldn't sleep, so I might as well dress and go to the zoo early."

"I'll make breakfast."

Trevor shook his head. "No thanks."

"May I just use the bathroom first?"

"Go ahead."

Trevor always liked taking hot showers, because the mirror got steamy and he did not have to see his nakedness. Brown hair thinning down to baldness, ribby chest and a low-slung belly. Every time he looked at himself, a new worry, from the red sacs under his eyes to new wrinkles and more lumpiness, but Gaye still teased him by e-mail. He chuckled to himself that Gaye, a great-looking American, and Petrina, his so-so Chinese wife, both saw something in him.

He clicked on the novelty radio-toothbrush holder to hear the morning news. Radio Three crackled on, and he heard the Dundee brogue of Iain Conor prattle on about the latest troubles in China, then he mentioned that the moon was at its lowest point in the sky than it had been in over 130 years. This once in a century event caused an extraordinary gravitational pull, and fortunetellers predicted violent and weird behavior. ‘Great’, Trevor thought. Lunacy. More business for the psychologists.

Down in the lobby of the building, Trevor said good morning to Ganung, the Gurkha security guard. He snapped to attention. "Morning, Dr McTeer. May I ask you a brief question?"

"Of course."

"Are you still a vet?"

"Yes, licensed and in good standing."
"An interesting story. You probably don’t know the Wu’s on the 10th floor. OK people, but bratty kids. They have an unusual dog. Jack Russell terrier."

"They’re not that unusual."

"Maybe so, but those dogs are hard to find in Hong Kong. The Wu’s got theirs from Australia. Very expensive, maybe $9000 Hong Kong, sir."

"So?"

"They kill them."

"What?" McTeer stared at the short, stocky man in an olive uniform, a sky blue beret crumpled in his hand.

"They kill them. First they had one, a cute little pup, and he was run over by the kid’s bicycle. Nobody cares. They buy a second pup. This one gets washed with the laundry and drowns or something. Now I hear that their next one is sick. Perhaps you should check on this."

"Why?"

"Being a qualified veterinary surgeon,..."

"I’m sure they have their own man." Ganung seemed unconvinced, so Trevor added, "Look, I’m a partner in a private clinic in Sheung Wan. If they want me, I’m in the book. But I’ll tell you something, Ganung."

"Sir?"

"If people are determined to kill their pets, expensive or otherwise, there is nothing a vet can do. Cheers."

"Should I do something?"

"You, Ganung? The law’s in place. You could call the police or the cruelty association, Amnesty International, even, but it’s hard to prove all that, and if you did? You work for this building. The management association is not going to like you giving a tenant family trouble." He stared into Ganung’s broad brown face. "Do nothing."

He thought about Ganung’s tale as he drove to the zoo. A giant baleful morning moon hung low in the milky blue sky. Unsettled by the sight of it, Trevor wondered if it had something to do with all the smog, or industrial pollution wafting down from China. Turning back to the dogs made him feel better.

When he arrived at his office, it was too early to contact the Hong Kong Kennel Association, so he telephoned the clinic. His partner, Carter Wang, picked right up. "Carter, any idea how many Jack Russell terriers in Hong Kong?"

"No, but I guess not too many. Check the Kennel Association, but at a decent hour. You’re in luck, though."

"Why?" Trevor’s curiosity came through in his voice. Carter always laughed at how easy reading gweilos could be.
"Trev, we got a Jack Russell pup in here yesterday. Needs a de-worming and the battery of shots, but other than that, she's fine."

"That's one right there."

"Thinking about this, we have another one. Five-year-old dog, I think."

"Owned by the Wu's?"

"Don't think so, Trev. Owners local, but that name doesn't click with me." Carter paused. "Why the sudden love of Jack Russells?"

"Nothing special. I'm thinking of writing an article about them."

"Jack Russells? You've got the most successful breeding record for sable antelope in Asia, and your tops in the world for golden lion marmosets, and you want to write about an expensive version of a fox terrier? Who gives a damn about Jack Russells?"

"I do."

Trevor sounded so cold that Carter did not know if he should push it.

Carter pushed. "What is special about them? You're not wasting your time on this study of them because of that one on the American sitcom?"

"Certainly not. I happen to be thinking about buying one myself."

"With that gorgeous black Persian at home? A big furry cat and terrier pup. Good combination. Now I have a real idea. Mrs. Sidwani has a fine female Persian and she's willing to pay a decent stud fee. You ought to consider it."

"Voodoo belongs to Petrina, and I don't think she thinks of him as a stud."

"What's the problem," Carter laughed, "Petrina still trying to smother him with a mother's love?"

"No, she thinks of him as more like a priest. Celibacy makes him truer."

After hanging up, he called the Kennel Association. The slug who identified himself as the acting information officer said that he had no idea how many there were in the territory. Trevor then looked over the summary reports prepared by each curator. After a cursory check of a bandaged, half-dead Gila monster, Trevor returned to his office to go through his mail and deliveries. A Japanese pharmaceutical salesman left an interesting sample with Sally, his secretary. Elurex, a new veterinary anesthetic, recommended for large animal use. Limited testing with exotics. 'Why did he bother leaving that junk with us? Do they expect us to experiment on our endangered species? Don't think so.' Leaving dangerous controlled substances with office workers did not strike him as wise, either. 'Bloody foreign salesmen,' he thought, and he felt the stirrings of another headache. The yellow-white flickers of a migraine aura danced in front of already aching eyes. The bits of light shredded thoughts of Gaye like
shards of razor. He took out a can of ginger ale from his small fridge, popped the ring and began drinking. The flickers lessened.

He took a compact disc, a Baroque quintet playing something by Bonporti, and put it into his player. The solo flute that began the piece sounded like spring. He was ready for something musically fuller when the two violins, a viola and cello joined in, making the piece now sound like spring in a village or a small town. He shut his eyes with the pleasure, and he had to admit it to himself. He missed the West.

Did Gaye like classical music? He wondered. He imagined Locatelli or Puccini would give a Texan a migraine. What did those people listen to? Country and western, cowboy music and polkas, no doubt. Songs played by musicians named Chet or Clint. Who knew. Smiling, he imagined that bedroom scene, waking up to find the sun streaming into their room, the strains of a Bach concerto in the air. Could Gaye tolerate it? He began to imagine the paintings she had in her house. Giant cowboy pictures and heavy frames, or thick bronze steers dashing about. He could tolerate an oil entitled "How the West was Won" as long as he could choose the music.

He shook the brown vial of Elurex. The oily liquid inside swirled and frothed. It looked evil. It looked like freedom. He went to his locked cabinet and removed a box of syringes. He grabbed a handful of assorted sizes, and slipped them into his jacket pocket. He left his building and briskly walked down the main path. A jaguar in an antique cage grunted as he strolled by, a Japanese macaque squealed and an unseen peacock boomed from the aviary. Trevor stopped in front of an ornate Victorian concrete and iron cage housing a pair of Himalayan lesser pandas. The raccoon-like creatures, about a yard long and covered with red and gold fur, watched him with beady eyes. Trevor dipped under the visitors' rail and reached into the cage. The male climbed over to have his head scratched. "Got a gift for you, mate." He reached into his pocket, touched the syringes and vial, and withdrew quickly. "Not those, mate." His other pocket had the dried apricots and he fed the pair.

Trevor went back to his office. Sally came in early, and was just settling into her desk with a cup of tea. "Morning, Trevor," she said brightly.

"I find you annoying, Miss Chan."

She cocked her lovely head to one side. "Why?"

"Because you're so awake, clear and terrific at this lousy hour."

"Too early for you, doctor?"

"Quite. And the moon, too." Seeing that she did not follow, he continued. "Just look out the window. Nearly nine and the moon never set. And I heard some rot on the radio that it's like an equinox. Highly irregular."

Sally looked out the window. "It is quite full, but it doesn't bother me."

"It's giving me a headache."

"I saw the ginger ale and figured." She held up her cup with delicate fingers. "Would you like a nice cup?"
"No, thanks. I'll stick to soda this morning." He stared into her large dark eyes. "Sally, I look at you and can't help wondering... Why such a beautiful girl is wasting her life in the office of a bloody zoo?"

"I love the animals."

"You don't work with the animals. This job offers nothing that you couldn't get in any other office anywhere. I dare say you'd make more money elsewhere."

"Sounds like you want to give me a raise," she laughed.

"If only I could. No, I look at you each day. You're young, beautiful, you've got everything going for you."

"I don't know if I should thank you graciously or tell you that you sound wet."

"When is that cop boyfriend of yours going to marry you?"

"That's what you're getting at. You shouldn't ask me that."

"I know, but my life is so empty that I've developed a kink thinking about yours."

"Chi-sin."

"I may be bonkers, but I'm not chi-sin. You should be with someone as marvelous as you, instead of typing stool sample reports. You go with one of Hong Kong's finest, yet the skinny lout hasn't got the lychees to make you his wife. What the hell's he waiting for?"

"His mother is sick, and he's afraid of upsetting her."

"Bloody fool."

"We are together. And when the time is right, and his mother can accept the thought of her baby being married, it will happen." Sally paused. "Sometimes I think we're waiting for her to die."

"Nothing is longer than waiting for someone to die. Of course, you'd be avoiding a mother-in-law."

They laughed together, and Trevor moved over to Sally's desk. He sat on the edge. "What are you up to?" she sighed.

Trevor's fingers delicately lifted her chin. Sally's soft skin and firm jaw-line pleased him, and his eyes blazed as he touched her. He loved firm chins; both Petrina and Sally had them. But Sally was an adventure sitting inches away from him, and Petrina, great lines or not, had turned into a harpy eagle.

"Trevor, you are the strangest thing," she said.

He kissed her, right on that smooth firm jaw-line. "Don't call the cops."
As she turned her head toward him, her jet hair glinted in many color flashes. "I had a dream the other night. I think you’d be interested in it."

His eyes widened.

"I was in this office typing a personal letter on the computer, but then, I may have been writing it with pen and ink."

"A quill pen, perhaps?"

"No, but I'm writing this letter for you. I think it was to Dr Medford. I was telling her what you wanted to say, and then she walked into this office, looking for you. She was going to be your... what's the word she used... ‘partner’.”

"She actually said that?"

"Oh, yes! What she meant by it, ...well, you can interpret ‘partner’ in many ways."

He leaned in close. "What did Dr Medford look like?"

Sally covered her mouth with her fingers to block a chuckle. "That's where my dream went pear-shaped."

"Pear-shaped?"

"That's right. When she talked, she was human."

"I'd hope so." Trevor shrugged.

"Being human, she had to be Chinese. When she was quiet she was like that tall blond Barbie doll. Isn't that weird?"

"Oh, yes. Gaye Medford is definitely more than a Barbie doll. And she came to this office, looking for me."

"In my dream."

"In mine, too." He stood up, reverting to his professional persona. "Pass a message to Ah-Kwok. Tell him to put the clouded leopard back on a regular diet."

"Done."

"And have him change Flower's dressing at least thrice daily.”

"Thrice?" She repeated.

"As in three times."
"Got it. But which Flower do you mean? The rabbit, the parrot—"

"The elephant."

"Trevor, I don't think Ah-Kwok is going to be too thrilled about that. He says he's not qualified to deal with large animals."

"It's a bloody dressing I'm asking that tosser to change. Tell him he's lucky I don't order him to give the elephant an enema."

"He'll threaten to quit."

"Sally, if he does, then give him an enema."

Trevor left this office, and drove from Central to the London Veterinary Clinic of Sheung Wan. This silly, pretentious name reflected Carter's sensibilities; he wanted the practice to have a classy sounding name to impress the locals, and since the senior partner was a genuine Brit, it would have been a shame not to take advantage of the opportunity. Trevor protested that he came from Manchester anyway, but Carter insisted on the name and the ridiculous logo of a lion wearing a crown. As a person, Carter could be a prat, but he was a damn fine vet, and painfully ethical. Lo, one of the assistants, said Dr Wang was in the operating room and he would be joining him.

After Lo grabbed and slipped on his greens, Trevor went into the holding area. Not too many patients, so he quickly spotted the cute Jack Russell pup tumbling around in its cage, enthralled with a piece of newspaper. Best use for the *South China Morning Post*, he thought as he prepared the syringe. "As for you, little lass, sometimes bad things happen to nice dogs."

The brown and white puppy yipped when it got the shot, wavered and buckled. Within ten seconds, it shut its eyes. Trevor put it back in the cage, then eyed a fox terrier. She almost looked like a Jack Russell, but she just wasn't the same. A mangy cat hissed at Trevor, breaking his spell. "Don't push it, strawberry face. I got plenty of medicine for you."

As he walked into the lobby of the building where he lived, he startled Ganung. "Dr McTeer, back so soon." Ganung sprang up from his chair, and straightened the sky blue beret on his head.

"What you said this morning made me think. That little terrier in trouble, remember?"

"Yes, belongs to the Wu’s. You want to examine it?"

"I feel that I should. Give me the phone number, will you?"

Trevor slipped the number into his pocket, went up to his flat, and called. He spoke to a local man, and practically forced Mr. Wu to invite him up. As he stepped out of the lift, he saw a tall thin Chinese gentleman standing next to a dour Filipina amah in a doorway, the iron grillwork outer door already pushed aside. Stiff and unfamiliar, they almost seemed at formal attention as Trevor stepped up to them. Trevor smiled, suddenly unsure of why he came up to their flat.
Surprisingly, the man held out his hand. "I'm Dr B. K. Wu."

"Trevor McTeer." He shook Wu's hand, noting the bony limp fingers.

"How may I help you?" Wu asked, as he gestured for Trevor to enter the apartment.

"No, sir, I'm here to possibly help you." Trevor stepped into the flat, and the chaos struck him. The place was nicely decorated in sunny yellow, blue and gray, with heavy lacquered furniture. The living room was strewn with toys, and with a sudden pang, Trevor remembered those arguments. Entering into the flat, he narrowly avoided stepping on a small red altar box by the side of the doorway, a gweilo cliché.

"You must take care." Wu smiled, showing tobacco-stained, uneven teeth. "Please excuse my messy home, but I have several young children."

Trevor looked around, and noticed a large jack-in-the-box, an impossibly small tricycle and a board game already set up on the floor. He did not hear children nor dogs, and he could not smell dogs or animals around the place. "I've heard something, Mr. Wu, from the security guard downstairs. You have Jack Russell terriers. I'm a vet, and I'm quite interested in the breed."

"They are very interesting dogs, Dr McTeer. I have had four, two females and two males. I considered breeding them, but then changed my mind. You have one, I'm guessing."

"No, but I'm about to get one."

"Think before you buy one. They can be quite clever and naughty. At the moment, we have only one."

"He's not very active. The usual terrier would be jumping around any visitor to the house."

"Not Tiger," Wu shrugged. "Well, not anymore. My children saw the first one at a pet shop in Central. She was very expensive, more than $3000 Hong Kong."

"That is pricey."

"Yes. But then my children did not pay attention to her. They should have been playing with her, instead of letting her run around the carpark with this maid of ours." Wu snickered weakly. "I ran over the dog with my car. Aye-yah, the children were so upset. They made me get them another pup almost immediately. That's when I bought two, a boy and girl, imported from Australia. Very attractive. I tried to teach them tricks, like one could roll and the other would crawl. They both rolled, but they did it badly. I found it frustrating. Then I had another accident in the carpark, so the female was gone."

Trevor raised his eyebrows. "Accidents happen."

"They do. Shortly after, my daughter threw the mate out the window." Wu saw that Trevor was aghast. "My little Annie likes to experiment with gravity. Perhaps she'll be a physicist someday."

"But you have another one now?"
"Yes, Dr McTeer, the best one of all. I'll get him."

Wu disappeared for a moment, which seemed like a very long moment under the unblinking gaze of the maid. Wu returned carrying a stuffed Jack Russell terrier, mounted on polished wood. The small brown and white dog looked stiff and oddly angled, and the glass eyes stared in shock. A plastic tongue stuck out between sharp teeth, the jaws permanently gaped.

Trevor reached out to touch the little horror.

"Tiger's our best dog. But he wasn't always this good. He bit me when I tried to train him. Now he knows what 'stay' means. And no barking, either. Sometimes you have to take control of your dog, or even your own life. Good luck and goodbye, Dr McTeer."

Wu reached out and shook hands. Trevor left the flat.

His mind reeled, but he knew that a migraine was not rising. He watched some television, looked at his fish, and paid no attention to Petrina's babbling throughout the evening. He almost laughed aloud when he realized that when Petrina talked, it was like the air pump on his aquarium. Noise, bubbles and hot air. His fingers reached for the vial in his pocket. He shook the vial, and studied the tiny bubbles that formed on the surface of the oily liquid.

"Trev, which would you prefer?" Petrina's voice in the kitchen. He put the vial away as she walked up to him. "Would you like Cointreau or Amaretto with your coffee?"

"Whichever you prefer, love."

He watched her walk away, and he slowly moved over to his balcony window. He opened the glass doors, and stepped out on the balcony. He loved the balmy air, the smoky black sky, and the dazzling jewels of Hong Kong harbor. His mind slid into a new level of reverie, and he barely felt the large Persian rub his leg. He stooped to pick up the heavy cat. The cat purred as Trevor ran his fingers through the luxurious jet black fur. Trevor looked down into the cat's huge gold eyes. "You like that, Voodoo? Voodoo the Baby Panther. Do you know what Dr Wu says? He says you've got to take control of the animals in your life."

His lips parted in a grin as he carried the Persian to the edge of the balcony.
The long June twilight faded into night. Dublin lay enveloped in darkness but for the dim light of the moon that shone through fleecy clouds, casting a pale light as of approaching dawn over the streets and the dark waters of the Liffey. Around the beleaguered Four Courts the heavy guns roared. Here and there through the city, machine guns and rifles broke the silence of the night, spasmodically, like dogs barking on lone farms. Republicans and Free Staters were waging civil war.

On a rooftop near O'Connell Bridge, a Republican sniper lay watching. Beside him lay his rifle and over his shoulders was slung a pair of field glasses. His face was the face of a student, thin and ascetic, but his eyes had the cold gleam of the fanatic. They were deep and thoughtful, the eyes of a man who is used to looking at death.

He was eating a sandwich hungrily. He had eaten nothing since morning. He had been too excited to eat. He finished the sandwich, and, taking a flask of whiskey from his pocket, he took a short drought. Then he returned the flask to his pocket. He paused for a moment, considering whether he should risk a smoke. It was dangerous. The flash might be seen in the darkness, and there were enemies watching. He decided to take the risk.

Placing a cigarette between his lips, he struck a match, inhaled the smoke hurriedly and put out the light. Almost immediately, a bullet flattened itself against the parapet of the roof. The sniper took another whiff and put out the cigarette. Then he swore softly and crawled away to the left.

Cautiously he raised himself and peered over the parapet. There was a flash and a bullet whizzed over his head. He dropped immediately. He had seen the flash. It came from the opposite side of the street.

He rolled over the roof to a chimney stack in the rear, and slowly drew himself up behind it, until his eyes were level with the top of the parapet. There was nothing to be seen—just the dim outline of the opposite housetop against the blue sky. His enemy was under cover.

Just then an armored car came across the bridge and advanced slowly up the street. It stopped on the opposite side of the street, fifty yards ahead. The sniper could hear the dull panting of the motor. His heart beat faster. It was an enemy car. He wanted to fire, but he knew it was useless. His bullets would never pierce the steel that covered the gray monster.

Then round the corner of a side street came an old woman, her head covered by a tattered shawl. She began to talk to the man in the turret of the car. She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer. The turret opened. A man's head and shoulders appeared, looking toward the sniper. The sniper raised his rifle and fired. The head fell heavily on the turret wall. The woman darted toward the side street. The sniper fired again. The woman whirled round and fell with a shriek into the gutter.

Suddenly from the opposite roof a shot rang out and the sniper dropped his rifle with a curse. The rifle clattered to the roof. The sniper thought the noise would wake the dead. He stooped to pick the rifle up. He couldn't lift it. His forearm was dead. "I'm hit," he muttered.
Dropping flat onto the roof, he crawled back to the parapet. With his left hand he felt the injured right forearm. The blood was oozing through the sleeve of his coat. There was no pain—just a deadened sensation, as if the arm had been cut off.

Quickly he drew his knife from his pocket, opened it on the breastwork of the parapet, and ripped open the sleeve. There was a small hole where the bullet had entered. On the other side there was no hole. The bullet had lodged in the bone. It must have fractured it. He bent the arm below the wound. the arm bent back easily. He ground his teeth to overcome the pain.

Then taking out his field dressing, he ripped open the packet with his knife. He broke the neck of the iodine bottle and let the bitter fluid drip into the wound. A paroxysm of pain swept through him. He placed the cotton wadding over the wound and wrapped the dressing over it. He tied the ends with his teeth.

Then he lay still against the parapet, and, closing his eyes, he made an effort of will to overcome the pain.

In the street beneath all was still. The armored car had retired speedily over the bridge, with the machine gunner’s head hanging lifeless over the turret. The woman’s corpse lay still in the gutter.

The sniper lay still for a long time nursing his wounded arm and planning escape. Morning must not find him wounded on the roof. The enemy on the opposite roof covered his escape. He must kill that enemy and he could not use his rifle. He had only a revolver to do it. Then he thought of a plan.

Taking off his cap, he placed it over the muzzle of his rifle. Then he pushed the rifle slowly upward over the parapet, until the cap was visible from the opposite side of the street. Almost immediately there was a report, and a bullet pierced the center of the cap. The sniper slanted the rifle forward. The cap clipped down into the street. Then catching the rifle in the middle, the sniper dropped his left hand over the roof and let it hang, lifelessly. After a few moments he let the rifle drop to the street. Then he sank to the roof, dragging his hand with him.

Crawling quickly to his feet, he peered up at the corner of the roof. His ruse had succeeded. The other sniper, seeing the cap and rifle fall, thought that he had killed his man. He was now standing before a row of chimney pots, looking across, with his head clearly silhouetted against the western sky.

The Republican sniper smiled and lifted his revolver above the edge of the parapet. The distance was about fifty yards—a hard shot in the dim light, and his right arm was paining him like a thousand devils. He took a steady aim. His hand trembled with eagerness. Pressing his lips together, he took a deep breath through his nostrils and fired. He was almost deafened with the report and his arm shook with the recoil.

Then when the smoke cleared, he peered across and uttered a cry of joy. His enemy had been hit. He was reeling over the parapet in his death agony. He struggled to keep his feet, but he was slowly falling forward as if in a dream. The rifle fell from his grasp, hit the parapet, fell over, bounded off the pole of a barber’s shop beneath and then clattered on the pavement.

Then the dying man on the roof crumpled up and fell forward. The body turned over and over in space and hit the ground with a dull thud. Then it lay still.

The sniper looked at his enemy falling and he shuddered. The lust of battle died in him. He became bitten by remorse. The sweat stood out in beads on his forehead. Weakened by his wound and the long summer day of fasting and watching on the roof, he revolted from the sight of the shattered mass of his dead enemy. His teeth chattered, he began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.
He looked at the smoking revolver in his hand, and with an oath he hurled it to the roof at his feet. The revolver went off with a concussion and the bullet whizzed past the sniper's head. He was frightened back to his senses by the shock. His nerves steadied. The cloud of fear scattered from his mind and he laughed.

Taking the whiskey flask from his pocket, he emptied it a draught. He felt reckless under the influence of the spirit. He decided to leave the roof now and look for his company commander, to report. Everywhere around was quiet. There was not much danger in going through the streets. He picked up his revolver and put it in his pocket. Then he crawled down through the skylight to the house underneath.

When the sniper reached the laneway on the street level, he felt a sudden curiosity as to the identity of the enemy sniper whom he had killed. He decided that he was a good shot, whoever he was. He wondered did he know him. Perhaps he had been in his own company before the split in the army. He decided to risk going over to have a look at him. He peered around the corner into O'Connell Street. In the upper part of the street there was heavy firing, but around here all was quiet.

The sniper darted across the street. A machine gun tore up the ground around him with a hail of bullets, but he escaped. He threw himself face downward beside the corpse. The machine gun stopped.

Then the sniper turned over the dead body and looked into his brother's face.
He said nothing when he entered. I was passing the best of my razors back and forth on a strop. When I recognized him I started to tremble. But he didn't notice. Hoping to conceal my emotion, I continued sharpening the razor. I tested it on the meat of my thumb, and then held it up to the light. At that moment he took off the bullet-studded belt that his gun holster dangled from. He hung it up on a wall hook and placed his military cap over it. Then he turned to me, loosening the knot of his tie, and said, "It's hot as bell. Give me a shave." He sat in the chair.

I estimated he had a four-day beard. The four days taken up by the latest expedition in search of our troops. His face seemed reddened, burned by the sun. Carefully, I began to prepare the soap. I cut off a few slices, dropped them into the cup, mixed in a bit of warm water, and began to stir with the brush. Immediately the foam began to rise. "The other boys in the group should have this much beard, too." I continued stirring the lather.

"But we did all right, you know. We got the main ones. We brought back some dead, and we've got some others still alive. But pretty soon they'll all be dead."

"How many did you catch?" I asked.

"Fourteen. We had to go pretty deep into the woods to find them. But we'll get even. Not one of them comes out of this alive, not one."

He leaned back on the chair when he saw me with the lather-covered brush in my hand. I still had to put the sheet on him. No doubt about it, I was upset. I took a sheet out of a drawer and knotted it around my customer's neck. He wouldn't stop talking. He probably thought I was in sympathy with his party.

"The town must have learned a lesson from what we did the other day," he said. "Yes," I replied, securing the knot at the base of his dark, sweaty neck. "That was a fine show, eh?"

"Very good," I answered, turning back for the brush. The man closed his eyes with a gesture of fatigue and sat waiting for the cool caress of the soap. I had never had him so close to me. The day he ordered the whole town to file into the patio of the school to see the four rebels hanging there, I came face to face with him for an instant. But the sight of the mutilated bodies kept me from noticing the face of the man who had directed it all, the face I was now about to take into my hands. It was not an unpleasant face, certainly. And the beard, which made him seem a bit older than he was, didn't suit him badly at all. His name was Torres. Captain Torres. A man of imagination, because who else would have thought of hanging the naked rebels and then holding target practice on certain parts of their bodies? I began to apply the first layer of soap. With his eyes closed, he continued.

"Without any effort I could go straight to sleep," he said, "but there's plenty to do this afternoon." I stopped the lathering and asked with a feigned lack of interest: "A firing squad?" "Something like that, but a little slower." I got on with the job of lathering his beard. My bands started trembling again. The man could not possibly realize it, and this was in my favor. But I would have preferred that he hadn't come. It was likely that many of our faction had seen him enter. And an enemy under one's roof imposes certain conditions. I would be obliged to shave that beard like any other one, carefully, gently, like that of any customer, taking pains to see that no single pore emitted a drop of blood. Being careful to see that the little tufts of hair did not lead the blade astray. Seeing that
his skin ended up clean, soft, and healthy, so that passing the back of my hand over it I couldn't feel a hair. Yes, I was secretly a rebel, but I was also a conscientious barber, and proud of the preciseness of my profession. And this four-days' growth of beard was a fitting challenge.

I took the razor, opened up the two protective arms, exposed the blade and began the job, from one of the sideburns downward. The razor responded beautifully. His beard was inflexible and hard, not too long, but thick. Bit by bit the skin emerged. The razor rasped along, making its customary sound as fluffs of lather mixed with bits of hair gathered along the blade. I paused a moment to clean it, then took up the strop again to sharpen the razor, because I'm a barber who does things properly. The man, who had kept his eyes closed, opened them now, removed one of his hands from under the sheet, felt the spot on his face where the soap had been cleared off, and said, "Come to the school today at six o'clock." "The same thing as the other day?" I asked horrified. "It could be better," he replied. "What do you plan to do?" "I don't know yet. But we'll amuse ourselves." Once more he leaned back and closed his eyes. I approached him with the razor poised. "Do you plan to punish them all?" I ventured timidly. "All." The soap was drying on his face. I had to hurry. In the mirror I looked toward the street. It was the same as ever: the grocery store with two or three customers in it. Then I glanced at the clock: two-twenty in the afternoon. The razor continued on its downward stroke. Now from the other sideburn down. A thick, blue beard. He should have let it grow like some poets or priests do. It would suit him well. A lot of people wouldn't recognize him. Much to his benefit, I thought, as I attempted to cover the neck area smoothly. There, for sure, the razor had to be handled masterfully, since the hair, although softer, grew into little swirls. A curly beard. One of the tiny pores could be opened up and issue forth its pearl of blood. A good barber such as I prides himself on never allowing this to happen to a client. And this was a first-class client. How many of us had he ordered shot? How many of us had he ordered mutilated? It was better not to think about it. Torres did not know that I was his enemy. He did not know it nor did the rest. It was a secret shared by very few, precisely so that I could inform the revolutionaries of what Torres was doing in the town and of what he was planning each time he undertook a rebel-hunting excursion. So it was going to be very difficult to explain that I had him right in my hands and let him go peacefully -alive and shaved.

The beard was now almost completely gone. He seemed younger, less burdened by years than when he had arrived. I suppose this always happens with men who visit barber shops. Under the stroke of my razor Torres was being rejuvenated-rejuvenated because I am a good barber, the best in the town, if I may say so. A little more lather here, on his Adam's apple, on this big vein. How hot it is getting! Torres must be sweating as much as I. But he is not afraid. He is a calm man, who is not even thinking about what he is going to do with the prisoners this afternoon. On the other hand I, with this razor in my hands, stroking and re-stroking this skin, trying to keep blood from oozing from these pores, can't even think clearly. Damn him for coming, because I'm a revolutionary and not a murderer. And how easy it would be to kill him. And he deserves it. Does be? No! What the devil! No one deserves to have someone else make the sacrifice of becoming a murderer. What do you gain by it? Nothing. Others come along and still others, and the first ones kill the second ones and they the next ones and it goes on like this until everything is a sea of blood. I could cut this throat just so, zip! zip! I wouldn't give him time to complain and since he has his eyes closed he wouldn't see the glistening knife blade or my glistening eyes. But I'm trembling like a real murderer. Out of his neck a gush of blood would spout onto the sheet, on the chair, on my hands, on the floor. I would have to close the door. And the blood would keep inching along the floor, warm, ineradicable, uncontainable, until it reached the street, like a little scarlet stream. I'm sure that one solid stroke, one deep incision, would prevent any pain. He wouldn't suffer. But what would I do with the body? Where would I hide it? I would have to flee, leaving all I have behind, and take refuge far away, far, far away. But they would follow until they found me. "Captain Torres' murderer. He slit his throat while he was shaving him a coward." And then on the other side. "The avenger of us all. A name to remember. (And here they would mention my name.) He was the town barber. No one knew he was defending our cause."
And what of all this? Murderer or hero? My destiny depends on the edge of this blade. I can turn my hand a bit more, press a little harder on the razor, and sink it in. The skin would give way like silk, like rubber, like the strop. There is nothing more tender than human skin and the blood is always there, ready to pour forth. A blade like this doesn't fail. It is my best. But I don't want to be a murderer, no sir. You came to me for a shave. And I perform my work honorably. . . . I don't want blood on my hands. Just lather, that's all. You are an executioner and I am only a barber. Each person has his own place in the scheme of things. That's right. His own place.

Now his chin had been stroked clean and smooth. The man sat up and looked into the mirror. He rubbed his hands over his skin and felt it fresh, like new.

"Thanks," he said. He went to the hanger for his belt, pistol and cap. I must have been very pale; my shirt felt soaked. Torres finished adjusting the buckle, straightened his pistol in the holster and after automatically smoothing down his hair, he put on the cap. From his pants pocket be took out several coins to pay me for my services. And he began to bead toward the door. In the doorway he paused for a moment, and turning to me he said:

"They told me that you'd kill me. I came to find out. But killing isn't easy. You can take my word for it." And he headed on down the street.
"OFF THERE to the right--somewhere--is a large island," said Whitney. "It's rather a mystery--" "What island is it?" Rainsford asked.

"The old charts call it `Ship-Trap Island,"' Whitney replied. "A suggestive name, isn't it? Sailors have a curious dread of the place. I don't know why. Some superstition--"

"Can't see it," remarked Rainsford, trying to peer through the dank tropical night that was palpable as it pressed its thick warm blackness in upon the yacht.

"You've good eyes," said Whitney, with a laugh," and I've seen you pick off a moose moving in the brown fall bush at four hundred yards, but even you can't see four miles or so through a moonless Caribbean night."

"Nor four yards," admitted Rainsford. "Ugh! It's like moist black velvet."

"It will be light enough in Rio," promised Whitney. "We should make it in a few days. I hope the jaguar guns have come from Purdey's. We should have some good hunting up the Amazon. Great sport, hunting."


"Don't talk rot, Whitney," said Rainsford. "You're a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels?"

"Perhaps the jaguar does," observed Whitney. "Bah! They've no understanding." "Even so, I rather think they understand one thing--fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death."

"Nonsense," laughed Rainsford. "This hot weather is making you soft, Whitney. Be a realist. The world is made up of two classes--the hunters and the huntees. Luckily, you and I are hunters. Do you think we've passed that island yet?"

"I can't tell in the dark. I hope so." "Why?" asked Rainsford. "The place has a reputation--a bad one." "Cannibals?" suggested Rainsford.

"Hardly. Even cannibals wouldn't live in such a God-forsaken place. But it's gotten into sailor lore, somehow. Didn't you notice that the crew's nerves seemed a bit jumpy today?"

"They were a bit strange, now you mention it. Even Captain Nielsen--"

"Yes, even that tough-minded old Swede, who'd go up to the devil himself and ask him for a light. Those fishy blue eyes held a look I never saw there before. All I could get out of him was `This place has an evil name among seafaring men, sir.' Then he said to me, very gravely, `Don't you feel anything?'--as if the air about us was actually poisonous. Now, you mustn't laugh when I tell you this--I did feel something like a sudden chill.
"There was no breeze. The sea was as flat as a plate-glass window. We were drawing near the island then. What I felt was a--a mental chill; a sort of sudden dread."

"Pure imagination," said Rainsford. "One superstitious sailor can taint the whole ship's company with his fear."

"Maybe. But sometimes I think sailors have an extra sense that tells them when they are in danger. Sometimes I think evil is a tangible thing--with wave lengths, just as sound and light have. An evil place can, so to speak, broadcast vibrations of evil. Anyhow, I'm glad we're getting out of this zone. Well, I think I'll turn in now, Rainsford."

"I'm not sleepy," said Rainsford. "I'm going to smoke another pipe up on the afterdeck."

"Good night, then, Rainsford. See you at breakfast."

"Right. Good night, Whitney."

There was no sound in the night as Rainsford sat there but the muffled throb of the engine that drove the yacht swiftly through the darkness, and the swish and ripple of the wash of the propeller.

Rainsford, reclining in a steamer chair, indolently puffed on his favorite brier. The sensuous drowsiness of the night was on him."It's so dark," he thought, "that I could sleep without closing my eyes; the night would be my eyelids--"

An abrupt sound startled him. Off to the right he heard it, and his ears, expert in such matters, could not be mistaken. Again he heard the sound, and again. Somewhere, off in the blackness, someone had fired a gun three times.

Rainsford sprang up and moved quickly to the rail, mystified. He strained his eyes in the direction from which the reports had come, but it was like trying to see through a blanket. He leaped upon the rail and balanced himself there, to get greater elevation; his pipe, striking a rope, was knocked from his mouth. He lunged for it; a short, hoarse cry came from his lips as he realized he had reached too far and had lost his balance. The cry was pinched off short as the blood-warm waters of the Caribbean Sea dosed over his head.

He struggled up to the surface and tried to cry out, but the wash from the speeding yacht slapped him in the face and the salt water in his open mouth made him gag and strangle. Desperately he struck out with strong strokes after the receding lights of the yacht, but he stopped before he had swum fifty feet. A certain coolheadedness had come to him; it was not the first time he had been in a tight place. There was a chance that his cries could be heard by someone aboard the yacht, but that chance was slender and grew more slender as the yacht raced on. He wrestled himself out of his clothes and shouted with all his power. The lights of the yacht became faint and ever-vanishing fireflies; then they were blotted out entirely by the night.

Rainsford remembered the shots. They had come from the right, and doggedly he swam in that direction, swimming with slow, deliberate strokes, conserving his strength. For a seemingly endless time he fought the sea. He began to count his strokes; he could do possibly a hundred more and then--

Rainsford heard a sound. It came out of the darkness, a high screaming sound, the sound of an animal in an extremity of anguish and terror.
He did not recognize the animal that made the sound; he did not try to; with fresh vitality he swam toward the sound. He heard it again; then it was cut short by another noise, crisp, staccato.

"Pistol shot," muttered Rainsford, swimming on.

Ten minutes of determined effort brought another sound to his ears--the most welcome he had ever heard--the muttering and growling of the sea breaking on a rocky shore. He was almost on the rocks before he saw them; on a night less calm he would have been shattered against them. With his remaining strength he dragged himself from the swirling waters. Jagged crags appeared to jut up into the opaqueness; he forced himself upward, hand over hand. Gasping, his hands raw, he reached a flat place at the top. Dense jungle came down to the very edge of the cliffs. What perils that tangle of trees and underbrush might hold for him did not concern Rainsford just then. All he knew was that he was safe from his enemy, the sea, and that utter weariness was on him. He flung himself down at the jungle edge and tumbled headlong into the deepest sleep of his life.

When he opened his eyes he knew from the position of the sun that it was late in the afternoon. Sleep had given him new vigor; a sharp hunger was picking at him. He looked about him, almost cheerfully.

"Where there are pistol shots, there are men. Where there are men, there is food," he thought. But what kind of men, he wondered, in so forbidding a place? An unbroken front of snarled and ragged jungle fringed the shore.

He saw no sign of a trail through the closely knit web of weeds and trees; it was easier to go along the shore, and Rainsford floundered along by the water. Not far from where he landed, he stopped.

Some wounded thing--by the evidence, a large animal--had thrashed about in the underbrush; the jungle weeds were crushed down and the moss was lacerated; one patch of weeds was stained crimson. A small, glittering object not far away caught Rainsford's eye and he picked it up. It was an empty cartridge.

"A twenty-two," he remarked. "That's odd. It must have been a fairly large animal too. The hunter had his nerve with him to tackle it with a light gun. It's clear that the brute put up a fight. I suppose the first three shots I heard was when the hunter flushed his quarry and wounded it. The last shot was when he trailed it here and finished it."

He examined the ground closely and found what he had hoped to find--the print of hunting boots. They pointed along the cliff in the direction he had been going. Eagerly he hurried along, now slipping on a rotten log or a loose stone, but making headway; night was beginning to settle down on the island.

Bleak darkness was blacking out the sea and jungle when Rainsford sighted the lights. He came upon them as he turned a crook in the coast line; and his first thought was that he had come upon a village, for there were many lights. But as he forged along he saw to his great astonishment that all the lights were in one enormous building--a lofty structure with pointed towers plunging upward into the gloom. His eyes made out the shadowy outlines of a palatial chateau; it was set on a high bluff, and on three sides of it cliffs dived down to where the sea licked greedy lips in the shadows.

"Mirage," thought Rainsford. But it was no mirage, he found, when he opened the tall spiked iron gate. The stone steps were real enough; the massive door with a leering gargoyle for a knocker was real enough; yet above it all hung an air of unreality.

He lifted the knocker, and it creaked up stiffly, as if it had never before been used. He let it fall, and it startled him with its booming loudness. He thought he heard steps within; the door remained closed. Again Rainsford lifted the heavy knocker, and let it fall. The door opened then--opened as suddenly as if it were on a spring--and
Rainsford stood blinking in the river of glaring gold light that poured out. The first thing Rainsford's eyes discerned was the largest man Rainsford had ever seen—a gigantic creature, solidly made and black bearded to the waist. In his hand the man held a long-barreled revolver, and he was pointing it straight at Rainsford's heart.

Out of the snarl of beard two small eyes regarded Rainsford.

"Don't be alarmed," said Rainsford, with a smile which he hoped was disarming. "I'm no robber. I fell off a yacht. My name is Sanger Rainsford of New York City."

The menacing look in the eyes did not change. The revolver pointing as rigidly as if the giant were a statue. He gave no sign that he understood Rainsford's words, or that he had even heard them. He was dressed in uniform—a black uniform trimmed with gray astrakhan.

"I'm Sanger Rainsford of New York," Rainsford began again. "I fell off a yacht. I am hungry." The man's only answer was to raise with his thumb the hammer of his revolver. Then Rainsford saw the man's free hand go to his forehead in a military salute, and he saw him click his heels together and stand at attention. Another man was coming down the broad marble steps, an erect, slender man in evening clothes. He advanced to Rainsford and held out his hand.

In a cultivated voice marked by a slight accent that gave it added precision and deliberateness, he said, "It is a very great pleasure and honor to welcome Mr. Sanger Rainsford, the celebrated hunter, to my home."

Automatically Rainsford shook the man's hand. "I've read your book about hunting snow leopards in Tibet, you see," explained the man. "I am General Zaroff."

Rainsford's first impression was that the man was singularly handsome; his second was that there was an original, almost bizarre quality about the general's face. He was a tall man past middle age, for his hair was a vivid white; but his thick eyebrows and pointed military mustache were as black as the night from which Rainsford had come. His eyes, too, were black and very bright. He had high cheekbones, a sharp-cut nose, a spare, dark face—the face of a man used to giving orders, the face of an aristocrat. Turning to the giant in uniform, the general made a sign. The giant put away his pistol, saluted, withdrew.

"Ivan is an incredibly strong fellow," remarked the general, "but he has the misfortune to be deaf and dumb. A simple fellow, but, I'm afraid, like all his race, a bit of a savage."

"Is he Russian?" "He is a Cossack," said the general, and his smile showed red lips and pointed teeth. "So am I."

"Come," he said, "we shouldn't be chatting here. We can talk later. Now you want clothes, food, rest. You shall have them. This is a most-restful spot."

Ivan had reappeared, and the general spoke to him with lips that moved but gave forth no sound.

"Follow Ivan, if you please, Mr. Rainsford," said the general. "I was about to have my dinner when you came. I'll wait for you. You'll find that my clothes will fit you, I think."

It was to a huge, beam-ceilinged bedroom with a canopied bed big enough for six men that Rainsford followed the silent giant. Ivan laid out an evening suit, and Rainsford, as he put it on, noticed that it came from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of duke.
The dining room to which Ivan conducted him was in many ways remarkable. There was a medieval magnificence about it; it suggested a baronial hall of feudal times with its oaken panels, its high ceiling, its vast refectory tables where twoscore men could sit down to eat. About the hall were mounted heads of many animals--lions, tigers, elephants, moose, bears; larger or more perfect specimens Rainsford had never seen. At the great table the general was sitting, alone.

"You'll have a cocktail, Mr. Rainsford," he suggested. The cocktail was surpassingly good; and, Rainsford noted, the table appointments were of the finest--the linen, the crystal, the silver, the china.

They were eating borsch, the rich, red soup with whipped cream so dear to Russian palates. Half apologetically General Zaroff said, "We do our best to preserve the amenities of civilization here. Please forgive any lapses. We are well off the beaten track, you know. Do you think the champagne has suffered from its long ocean trip?"

"Not in the least," declared Rainsford. He was finding the general a most thoughtful and affable host, a true cosmopolite. But there was one small trait of the general's that made Rainsford uncomfortable. Whenever he looked up from his plate he found the general studying him, appraising him narrowly.

"Perhaps," said General Zaroff, "you were surprised that I recognized your name. You see, I read all books on hunting published in English, French, and Russian. I have but one passion in my life, Mr. Rainsford, and it is the hunt."

"You have some wonderful heads here," said Rainsford as he ate a particularly well-cooked filet mignon. "That Cape buffalo is the largest I ever saw."

"Oh, that fellow. Yes, he was a monster." "Did he charge you?" "Hurled me against a tree," said the general. "Fractured my skull. But I got the brute." "I've always thought," said Rainsford, "that the Cape buffalo is the most dangerous of all big game."

For a moment the general did not reply; he was smiling his curious red-lipped smile. Then he said slowly, "No. You are wrong, sir. The Cape buffalo is not the most dangerous big game." He sipped his wine. "Here in my preserve on this island," he said in the same slow tone, "I hunt more dangerous game."

Rainsford expressed his surprise. "Is there big game on this island?" The general nodded. "The biggest." "Really?" "Oh, it isn't here naturally, of course. I have to stock the island." "What have you imported, general?" Rainsford asked. "Tigers?"

The general smiled. "No," he said. "Hunting tigers ceased to interest me some years ago. I exhausted their possibilities, you see. No thrill left in tigers, no real danger. I live for danger, Mr. Rainsford."

The general took from his pocket a gold cigarette case and offered his guest a long black cigarette with a silver tip; it was perfumed and gave off a smell like incense.

"We will have some capital hunting, you and I," said the general. "I shall be most glad to have your society." "But what game--" began Rainsford.

"I'll tell you," said the general. "You will be amused, I know. I think I may say, in all modesty, that I have done a rare thing. I have invented a new sensation. May I pour you another glass of port?"

"Thank you, general."
The general filled both glasses, and said, "God makes some men poets. Some He makes kings, some beggars. Me He made a hunter. My hand was made for the trigger, my father said. He was a very rich man with a quarter of a million acres in the Crimea, and he was an ardent sportsman. When I was only five years old he gave me a little gun, specially made in Moscow for me, to shoot sparrows with. When I shot some of his prize turkeys with it, he did not punish me; he complimented me on my marksmanship. I killed my first bear in the Caucasus when I was ten. My whole life has been one prolonged hunt. I went into the army--it was expected of noblemen's sons--and for a time commanded a division of Cossack cavalry, but my real interest was always the hunt. I have hunted every kind of game in every land. It would be impossible for me to tell you how many animals I have killed."

The general puffed at his cigarette.

"After the debacle in Russia I left the country, for it was imprudent for an officer of the Czar to stay there. Many noble Russians lost everything. I, luckily, had invested heavily in American securities, so I shall never have to open a tearoom in Monte Carlo or drive a taxi in Paris. Naturally, I continued to hunt--grizzlies in your Rockies, crocodiles in the Ganges, rhinoceroses in East Africa. It was in Africa that the Cape buffalo hit me and laid me up for six months. As soon as I recovered I started for the Amazon to hunt jaguars, for I had heard they were unusually cunning. They weren't." The Cossack sighed. "They were no match at all for a hunter with his wits about him, and a high-powered rifle. I was bitterly disappointed. I was lying in my tent with a splitting headache one night when a terrible thought pushed its way into my mind. Hunting was beginning to bore me! And hunting, remember, had been my life. I have heard that in America businessmen often go to pieces when they give up the business that has been their life."

"Yes, that's so," said Rainsford.

The general smiled. "I had no wish to go to pieces," he said. "I must do something. Now, mine is an analytical mind, Mr. Rainsford. Doubtless that is why I enjoy the problems of the chase."

"No doubt, General Zaroff."

"So," continued the general, "I asked myself why the hunt no longer fascinated me. You are much younger than I am, Mr. Rainsford, and have not hunted as much, but you perhaps can guess the answer."

"What was it?"

"Simply this: hunting had ceased to be what you call 'a sporting proposition.' It had become too easy. I always got my quarry. Always. There is no greater bore than perfection."

The general lit a fresh cigarette.

"No animal had a chance with me any more. That is no boast; it is a mathematical certainty. The animal had nothing but his legs and his instinct. Instinct is no match for reason. When I thought of this it was a tragic moment for me, I can tell you."

Rainsford leaned across the table, absorbed in what his host was saying.

"It came to me as an inspiration what I must do," the general went on.

"And that was?"
The general smiled the quiet smile of one who has faced an obstacle and surmounted it with success. "I had to invent a new animal to hunt," he said.

"A new animal? You're joking." "Not at all," said the general. "I never joke about hunting. I needed a new animal. I found one. So I bought this island built this house, and here I do my hunting. The island is perfect for my purposes-- there are jungles with a maze of traits in them, hills, swamps--"

"But the animal, General Zaroff?"

"Oh," said the general, "it supplies me with the most exciting hunting in the world. No other hunting compares with it for an instant. Every day I hunt, and I never grow bored now, for I have a quarry with which I can match my wits."

Rainsford's bewilderment showed in his face.

"I wanted the ideal animal to hunt," explained the general. "So I said, `What are the attributes of an ideal quarry? And the answer was, of course, `It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason."

"But no animal can reason," objected Rainsford. "My dear fellow," said the general, "there is one that can." "But you can't mean--" gasped Rainsford. "And why not?" "I can't believe you are serious, General Zaroff. This is a grisly joke." "Why should I not be serious? I am speaking of hunting." "Hunting? Great Guns, General Zaroff, what you speak of is murder."

The general laughed with entire good nature. He regarded Rainsford quizzically. "I refuse to believe that so modern and civilized a young man as you seem to be harbors romantic ideas about the value of human life. Surely your experiences in the war--"

"Did not make me condone cold-blooded murder," finished Rainsford stiffly.

Laughter shook the general. "How extraordinarily droll you are!" he said. "One does not expect nowadays to find a young man of the educated class, even in America, with such a naive, and, if I may say so, mid-Victorian point of view. It's like finding a snuffbox in a limousine. Ah, well, doubtless you had Puritan ancestors. So many Americans appear to have had. I'll wager you'll forget your notions when you go hunting with me. You've a genuine new thrill in store for you, Mr. Rainsford."

"Thank you, I'm a hunter, not a murderer."

"Dear me," said the general, quite unruffled, "again that unpleasant word. But I think I can show you that your scruples are quite ill founded."

"Yes?"

"Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be, taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure. I am strong. Why should I not use my gift? If I wish to hunt, why should I not? I hunt the scum of the earth: sailors from tramp ships--lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels--a thoroughbred horse or hound is worth more than a score of them."

"But they are men," said Rainsford hotly.
"Precisely," said the general. "That is why I use them. It gives me pleasure. They can reason, after a fashion. So they are dangerous."

"But where do you get them?"

The general's left eyelid fluttered down in a wink. "This island is called Ship Trap," he answered. "Sometimes an angry god of the high seas sends them to me. Sometimes, when Providence is not so kind, I help Providence a bit. Come to the window with me."

Rainsford went to the window and looked out toward the sea.

"Watch! Out there!" exclaimed the general, pointing into the night. Rainsford's eyes saw only blackness, and then, as the general pressed a button, far out to sea Rainsford saw the flash of lights.

The general chuckled. "They indicate a channel," he said, "where there's none; giant rocks with razor edges crouch like a sea monster with wide-open jaws. They can crush a ship as easily as I crush this nut." He dropped a walnut on the hardwood floor and brought his heel grinding down on it. "Oh, yes," he said, casually, as if in answer to a question, "I have electricity. We try to be civilized here."

"Civilized? And you shoot down men?"

A trace of anger was in the general's black eyes, but it was there for but a second; and he said, in his most pleasant manner, "Dear me, what a righteous young man you are! I assure you I do not do the thing you suggest. That would be barbarous. I treat these visitors with every consideration. They get plenty of good food and exercise. They get into splendid physical condition. You shall see for yourself tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll visit my training school," smiled the general. "It's in the cellar. I have about a dozen pupils down there now. They're from the Spanish bark San Lucar that had the bad luck to go on the rocks out there. A very inferior lot, I regret to say. Poor specimens and more accustomed to the deck than to the jungle." He raised his hand, and Ivan, who served as waiter, brought thick Turkish coffee. Rainsford, with an effort, held his tongue in check.

"It's a game, you see," pursued the general blandly. "I suggest to one of them that we go hunting. I give him a supply of food and an excellent hunting knife. I give him three hours' start. I am to follow, armed only with a pistol of the smallest caliber and range. If my quarry eludes me for three whole days, he wins the game. If I find him" -- the general smiled -- "he loses."

"Suppose he refuses to be hunted?"

"Oh," said the general, "I give him his option, of course. He need not play that game if he doesn't wish to. If he does not wish to hunt, I turn him over to Ivan. Ivan once had the honor of serving as official knouter to the Great White Czar, and he has his own ideas of sport. Invariably, Mr. Rainsford, invariably they choose the hunt."

"And if they win?"
The smile on the general's face widened. "To date I have not lost," he said. Then he added, hastily: "I don't wish you to think me a braggart, Mr. Rainsford. Many of them afford only the most elementary sort of problem. Occasionally I strike a tartar. One almost did win. I eventually had to use the dogs."

"The dogs?" "This way, please. I'll show you."

The general steered Rainsford to a window. The lights from the windows sent a flickering illumination that made grotesque patterns on the courtyard below, and Rainsford could see moving about there a dozen or so huge black shapes; as they turned toward him, their eyes glittered greenly.

"A rather good lot, I think," observed the general. "They are let out at seven every night. If anyone should try to get into my house--or out of it--something extremely regrettable would occur to him." He hummed a snatch of song from the Folies Bergere.

"And now," said the general, "I want to show you my new collection of heads. Will you come with me to the library?" "I hope," said Rainsford, "that you will excuse me tonight, General Zaroff. I'm really not feeling well."

"Ah, indeed?" the general inquired solicitously. "Well, I suppose that's only natural, after your long swim. You need a good, restful night's sleep. Tomorrow you'll feel like a new man, I'll wager. Then we'll hunt, eh? I've one rather promising prospect--" Rainsford was hurrying from the room.

"Sorry you can't go with me tonight," called the general. "I expect rather fair sport--a big, strong, black. He looks resourceful--Well, good night, Mr. Rainsford; I hope you have a good night's rest."

The bed was good, and the pajamas of the softest silk, and he was tired in every fiber of his being, but nevertheless Rainsford could not quiet his brain with the opiate of sleep. He lay, eyes wide open. Once he thought he heard stealthy steps in the corridor outside his room. He sought to throw open the door; it would not open. He went to the window and looked out. His room was high up in one of the towers. The lights of the chateau were out now, and it was dark and silent; but there was a fragment of sallow moon, and by its wan light he could see, dimly, the courtyard. There, weaving in and out in the pattern of shadow, were black, noiseless forms; the hounds heard him at the window and looked up, expectantly, with their green eyes. Rainsford went back to the bed and lay down. By many methods he tried to put himself to sleep. He had achieved a doze when, just as morning began to come, he heard, far off in the jungle, the faint report of a pistol.

General Zaroff did not appear until luncheon. He was dressed faultlessly in the tweeds of a country squire. He was solicitous about the state of Rainsford's health.

"As for me," sighed the general, "I do not feel so well. I am worried, Mr. Rainsford. Last night I detected traces of my old complaint."

To Rainsford's questioning glance the general said, "Ennui. Boredom."

Then, taking a second helping of crêpes Suzette, the general explained: "The hunting was not good last night. The fellow lost his head. He made a straight trail that offered no problems at all. That's the trouble with these sailors; they have dull brains to begin with, and they do not know how to get about in the woods. They do excessively stupid and obvious things. It's most annoying. Will you have another glass of Chablis, Mr. Rainsford?"

"General," said Rainsford firmly, "I wish to leave this island at once."
The general raised his thickets of eyebrows; he seemed hurt. "But, my dear fellow," the general protested, "you've only just come. You've had no hunting--"

"I wish to go today," said Rainsford. He saw the dead black eyes of the general on him, studying him. General Zaroff's face suddenly brightened.

He filled Rainsford's glass with venerable Chablis from a dusty bottle. "Tonight," said the general, "we will hunt--you and I." Rainsford shook his head. "No, general," he said. "I will not hunt."

The general shrugged his shoulders and delicately ate a hothouse grape. "As you wish, my friend," he said. "The choice rests entirely with you. But may I not venture to suggest that you will find my idea of sport more diverting than Ivan's?"

He nodded toward the corner to where the giant stood, scowling, his thick arms crossed on his hogshead of chest. "You don't mean--" cried Rainsford.

"My dear fellow," said the general, "have I not told you I always mean what I say about hunting? This is really an inspiration. I drink to a foeman worthy of my steel--at last." The general raised his glass, but Rainsford sat staring at him.

"You'll find this game worth playing," the general said enthusiastically. "Your brain against mine. Your woodcraft against mine. Your strength and stamina against mine. Outdoor chess! And the stake is not without value, eh?"

"And if I win--" began Rainsford huskily.

"I'll cheerfully acknowledge myself defeat if I do not find you by midnight of the third day," said General Zaroff. "My sloop will place you on the mainland near a town." The general read what Rainsford was thinking.

"Oh, you can trust me," said the Cossack. "I will give you my word as a gentleman and a sportsman. Of course you, in turn, must agree to say nothing of your visit here."

"I'll agree to nothing of the kind," said Rainsford. "Oh," said the general, "in that case--But why discuss that now? Three days hence we can discuss it over a bottle of Veuve Cliquot, unless--" The general sipped his wine.

Then a businesslike air animated him. "Ivan," he said to Rainsford, "will supply you with hunting clothes, food, a knife. I suggest you wear mocassins; they leave a poorer trail. I suggest, too, that you avoid the big swamp in the southeast corner of the island. We call it Death Swamp. There's quicksand there. One foolish fellow tried it. The deplorable part of it was that Lazarus followed him. You can imagine my feelings, Mr. Rainsford. I loved Lazarus; he was the finest hound in my pack. Well, I must beg you to excuse me now. I always' take a siesta after lunch. You'll hardly have time for a nap, I fear. You'll want to start, no doubt. I shall not follow till dusk. Hunting at night is so much more exciting than by day, don't you think? Au revoir, Mr. Rainsford, au revoir." General Zaroff, with a deep, courtly bow, strolled from the room.

From another door came Ivan. Under one arm he carried khaki hunting clothes, a haversack of food, a leather sheath containing a long-bladed hunting knife; his right hand rested on a cocked revolver thrust in the crimson sash about his waist.

Rainsford had fought his way through the bush for two hours. "I must keep my nerve. I must keep my nerve," he said through tight teeth.
He had not been entirely clearheaded when the chateau gates snapped shut behind him. His whole idea at first was to put distance between himself and General Zaroff; and, to this end, he had plunged along, spurred on by the sharp rowers of something very like panic. Now he had got a grip on himself, had stopped, and was taking stock of himself and the situation. He saw that straight flight was futile; inevitably it would bring him face to face with the sea. He was in a picture with a frame of water, and his operations, clearly, must take place within that frame.

"I'll give him a trail to follow," muttered Rainsford, and he struck off from the rude path he had been following into the trackless wilderness. He executed a series of intricate loops; he doubled on his trail again and again, recalling all the lore of the fox hunt, and all the dodges of the fox. Night found him leg-weary, with hands and face lashed by the branches, on a thickly wooded ridge. He knew it would be insane to blunder on through the dark, even if he had the strength. His need for rest was imperative and he thought, "I have played the fox, now I must play the cat of the fable." A big tree with a thick trunk and outspread branches was near by, and, taking care to leave not the slightest mark, he climbed up into the crotch, and, stretching out on one of the broad limbs, after a fashion, rested. Rest brought him new confidence and almost a feeling of security. Even so zealous a hunter as General Zaroff could not trace him there, he told himself; only the devil himself could follow that complicated trail through the jungle after dark. But perhaps the general was a devil--

An apprehensive night crawled slowly by like a wounded snake and sleep did not visit Rainsford, although the silence of a dead world was on the jungle. Toward morning when a dingy gray was varnishing the sky, the cry of some startled bird focused Rainsford's attention in that direction. Something was coming through the bush, coming slowly, carefully, coming by the same winding way Rainsford had come. He flattened himself down on the limb and, through a screen of leaves almost as thick as tapestry, he watched. . . . That which was approaching was a man.

It was General Zaroff. He made his way along with his eyes fixed in utmost concentration on the ground before him. He paused, almost beneath the tree, dropped to his knees and studied the ground. Rainsford's impulse was to hurl himself down like a panther, but he saw that the general's right hand held something metallic--a small automatic pistol.

The hunter shook his head several times, as if he were puzzled. Then he straightened up and took from his case one of his black cigarettes; its pungent incenselike smoke floated up to Rainsford's nostrils.

Rainsford held his breath. The general's eyes had left the ground and were traveling inch by inch up the tree. Rainsford froze there, every muscle tensed for a spring. But the sharp eyes of the hunter stopped before they reached the limb where Rainsford lay; a smile spread over his brown face. Very deliberately he blew a smoke ring into the air; then he turned his back on the tree and walked carelessly away, back along the trail he had come. The swish of the underbrush against his hunting boots grew fainter and fainter.

The pent-up air burst hotly from Rainsford's lungs. His first thought made him feel sick and numb. The general could follow a trail through the woods at night; he could follow an extremely difficult trail; he must have uncanny powers; only by the merest chance had the Cossack failed to see his quarry.

Rainsford's second thought was even more terrible. It sent a shudder of cold horror through his whole being. Why had the general smiled? Why had he turned back?

Rainsford did not want to believe what his reason told him was true, but the truth was as evident as the sun that had by now pushed through the morning mists. The general was playing with him! The general was saving him for
another day's sport! The Cossack was the cat; he was the mouse. Then it was that Rainsford knew the full meaning of terror.

"I will not lose my nerve. I will not."

He slid down from the tree, and struck off again into the woods. His face was set and he forced the machinery of his mind to function. Three hundred yards from his hiding place he stopped where a huge dead tree leaned precariously on a smaller, living one. Throwing off his sack of food, Rainsford took his knife from its sheath and began to work with all his energy.

The job was finished at last, and he threw himself down behind a fallen log a hundred feet away. He did not have to wait long. The cat was coming again to play with the mouse.

Following the trail with the sureness of a bloodhound came General Zaroff. Nothing escaped those searching black eyes, no crushed blade of grass, no bent twig, no mark, no matter how faint, in the moss. So intent was the Cossack on his stalking that he was upon the thing Rainsford had made before he saw it. His foot touched the protruding bough that was the trigger. Even as he touched it, the general sensed his danger and leaped back with the agility of an ape. But he was not quite quick enough; the dead tree, delicately adjusted to rest on the cut living one, crashed down and struck the general a glancing blow on the shoulder as it fell; but for his alertness, he must have been smashed beneath it. He staggered, but he did not fall; nor did he drop his revolver. He stood there, rubbing his injured shoulder, and Rainsford, with fear again gripping his heart, heard the general's mocking laugh ring through the jungle.

"Rainsford," called the general, "if you are within sound of my voice, as I suppose you are, let me congratulate you. Not many men know how to make a Malay mancatcher. Luckily for me I, too, have hunted in Malacca. You are proving interesting, Mr. Rainsford. I am going now to have my wound dressed; it's only a slight one. But I shall be back. I shall be back."

When the general, nursing his bruised shoulder, had gone, Rainsford took up his flight again. It was flight now, a desperate, hopeless flight, that carried him on for some hours. Dusk came, then darkness, and still he pressed on. The ground grew softer under his moccasins; the vegetation grew ranker, denser; insects bit him savagely.

Then, as he stepped forward, his foot sank into the ooze. He tried to wrench it back, but the muck sucked viciously at his foot as if it were a giant leech. With a violent effort, he tore his feet loose. He knew where he was now. Death Swamp and its quicksand.

His hands were tight closed as if his nerve were something tangible that someone in the darkness was trying to tear from his grip. The softness of the earth had given him an idea. He stepped back from the quicksand a dozen feet or so and, like some huge prehistoric beaver, he began to dig.

Rainsford had dug himself in in France when a second's delay meant death. That had been a placid pastime compared to his digging now. The pit grew deeper; when it was above his shoulders, he climbed out and from some hard saplings cut stakes and sharpened them to a fine point. These stakes he planted in the bottom of the pit with the points sticking up. With flying fingers he wove a rough carpet of weeds and branches and with it he covered the mouth of the pit. Then, wet with sweat and aching with tiredness, he crouched behind the stump of a lightning-charred tree.

He knew his pursuer was coming; he heard the padding sound of feet on the soft earth, and the night breeze brought him the perfume of the general's cigarette. It seemed to Rainsford that the general was coming with
unusual swiftness; he was not feeling his way along, foot by foot. Rainsford, crouching there, could not see the
general, nor could he see the pit. He lived a year in a minute. Then he felt an impulse to cry aloud with joy, for he
heard the sharp crackle of the breaking branches as the cover of the pit gave way; he heard the sharp scream of
pain as the pointed stakes found their mark. He leaped up from his place of concealment. Then he cowered back.
Three feet from the pit a man was standing, with an electric torch in his hand.

"You've done well, Rainsford," the voice of the general called. "Your Burmese tiger pit has claimed one of my best
dogs. Again you score. I think, Mr. Rainsford, I'll see what you can do against my whole pack. I'm going home for
a rest now. Thank you for a most amusing evening."

At daybreak Rainsford, lying near the swamp, was awakened by a sound that made him know that he had new
things to learn about fear. It was a distant sound, faint and wavering, but he knew it. It was the baying of a pack of
hounds.

Rainsford knew he could do one of two things. He could stay where he was and wait. That was suicide. He could
flee. That was postponing the inevitable. For a moment he stood there, thinking. An idea that held a wild chance
came to him, and, tightening his belt, he headed away from the swamp.

The baying of the hounds drew nearer, then still nearer, nearer, ever nearer. On a ridge Rainsford climbed a tree.
Down a watercourse, not a quarter of a mile away, he could see the bush moving. Straining his eyes, he saw the
lean figure of General Zaroff; just ahead of him Rainsford made out another figure whose wide shoulders surged
through the tall jungle weeds; it was the giant Ivan, and he seemed pulled forward by some unseen force;
Rainsford knew that Ivan must be holding the pack in leash.

They would be on him any minute now. His mind worked frantically. He thought of a native trick he had learned
in Uganda. He slid down the tree. He caught hold of a springy young sapling and to it he fastened his hunting
knife, with the blade pointing down the trail; with a bit of wild grapevine he tied back the sapling. Then he ran for
his life. The hounds raised their voices as they hit the fresh scent. Rainsford knew now how an animal at bay feels.

He had to stop to get his breath. The baying of the hounds stopped abruptly, and Rainsford's heart stopped too.
They must have reached the knife.

He shinned excitedly up a tree and looked back. His pursuers had stopped. But the hope that was in Rainsford's
brain when he climbed died, for he saw in the shallow valley that General Zaroff was still on his feet. But Ivan
was not. The knife, driven by the recoil of the springing tree, had not wholly failed.

Rainsford had hardly tumbled to the ground when the pack took up the cry again.

"Nerve, nerve, nerve!" he panted, as he dashed along. A blue gap showed between the trees dead ahead. Ever
nearer drew the hounds. Rainsford forced himself on toward that gap. He reached it. It was the shore of the sea.
Across a cove he could see the gloomy gray stone of the chateau. Twenty feet below him the sea rumbled and
hissed. Rainsford hesitated. He heard the hounds. Then he leaped far out into the sea. . . .

When the general and his pack reached the place by the sea, the Cossack stopped. For some minutes he stood
regarding the blue-green expanse of water. He shrugged his shoulders. Then be sat down, took a drink of brandy
from a silver flask, lit a cigarette, and hummed a bit from Madame Butterfly.

General Zaroff had an exceedingly good dinner in his great paneled dining hall that evening. With it he had a
bottle of Pol Roger and half a bottle of Chambertin. Two slight annoyances kept him from perfect enjoyment. One
was the thought that it would be difficult to replace Ivan; the other was that his quarry had escaped him; of course, the American hadn't played the game—so thought the general as he tasted his after-dinner liqueur. In his library he read, to soothe himself, from the works of Marcus Aurelius. At ten he went up to his bedroom. He was deliciously tired, he said to himself, as he locked himself in. There was a little moonlight, so, before turning on his light, he went to the window and looked down at the courtyard. He could see the great hounds, and he called, "Better luck another time," to them. Then he switched on the light.

A man, who had been hiding in the curtains of the bed, was standing there.

"Rainsford!" screamed the general. "How in God's name did you get here?"

"Swam," said Rainsford. "I found it quicker than walking through the jungle."

The general sucked in his breath and smiled. "I congratulate you," he said. "You have won the game."

Rainsford did not smile. "I am still a beast at bay," he said, in a low, hoarse voice. "Get ready, General Zaroff."

The general made one of his deepest bows. "I see," he said. "Splendid! One of us is to furnish a repast for the hounds. The other will sleep in this very excellent bed. On guard, Rainsford."

He had never slept in a better bed, Rainsford decided.
Miscellaneous
Owen and I sat on the steps of John Quincy Adams Junior High School, squinting into the fading sunlight. We had just been cut from the school basketball team. I didn’t particularly care, but Owen was really down.

“Danny,” he said mournfully, “my parents are not going to be happy about this at all.”

“We can still play on the intramural team,” I offered consolingly. But maybe that wasn’t the best thing to say. In our school, intramural ball was at the bottom of the athletic food chain.

Owen just sighed and buried his face in his hands.

In Indiana, where we lived, basketball was everything. If people weren’t playing, watching, or talking about a game, they were either sleeping or dead. I used to think that all the people of Indiana had some kind of genetic disposition toward basketball, my parents included. Of course, that would make me a mutant, because basketball never did much for me.

My parents’ genes must have skipped a generation.

“I could really go for some Chicken Chunks at Mercer’s Market,” Owen announced. This usually meant two things: One, I would go with Owen because I loved the food at Mercer’s, and two, I would end up paying for him, because Owen never had any money.

We got on our bikes and pedaled across town.

Mercer’s Market was a fried-chicken restaurant, and you could smell it halfway down Route 20, which wasn’t surprising since it was the only building on that three-mile stretch of dusty road. All of their dishes were good, but it was the corn bread that made them famous. Sweet, hot, and crumbly—just thinking about it made my stomach grumble. Maybe a little side order wouldn’t be a bad idea.

When we walked up to the counter, Owen ordered the Chicken Chunks with extra barbecue sauce. He picked up his ticket, pushed his tray along the counter, and waited for his order.

“A million bucks sure would be sweet,” Owen said, staring at the banner that hung over the counter. “For just one basket.” He mimed a jump shot.

He was talking about the Million-Dollar Bucket giveaway. There were posters and signs all over the restaurant, and you couldn’t watch TV for 15 minutes without seeing an ad for the promotion. Some poor sap was going to be Mercer’s millionth customer, and he or she would get a chance to win a million dollars by sinking a half-
court shot at an upcoming Indiana University game. The whole thing sounded like a nightmare to me.

"I mean, just one shot," Owen said, a pinched expression on his face.

I wanted to point out that someone who had just become a basketball outcast probably shouldn't make such bold statements, but I kept quiet. Talking before thinking was Owen's chief characteristic. Besides, he was my best friend.

We picked up our orders and marched up to the cashier.

"Hey, Danny, I'm a bit short. Could you cover me?"

I already had the money out. The cashier, a woman with red hair piled high and thick black glasses, totaled our bills.

Suddenly an alarm went off. Startled, I spun around, half expecting to see thieves with ski masks and guns. The cashier nearly fell off her stool.

From across the store, the manager, a lanky guy sporting a bolo tie and a goatee, raced toward us. I glared at Owen, positive he was to blame for the commotion. The manager looked at the cashier. She stared back at him blankly. I looked at them both, then everybody in the store stared at me.

"You..."—the manager pulled off his paper cap, crumpling it in his trembling hands as a smile crept across his face—"you are the millionth customer."
Well, what can I say? It happened. I was Mercer's Market's millionth customer, and there was nothing I could do about it. My reward: In two weeks I was going to humiliate myself in front of an arena full of screaming fans. Hoosier fans, like my parents.

My parents. How would I ever tell them? How would they respond to this? Of course, they would go berserk, which is exactly what I didn't want. Needless to say, I took my time getting home that afternoon.

Dinner that night was quiet. Dad mentioned something about the wrong pipes being delivered to the construction site where he worked as a supervisor. Mom talked about the paper piling up at the insurance office. It was the same boring conversation we had every night, and it never sounded better.

Maybe if I didn't tell anyone about the contest, Mercer's Market would forget about me. Or maybe they'd be unable to contact me, although there was little chance of that. They had taken my address and phone number, and the scrappy manager had snapped my picture with an instant camera. It had felt more like being arrested than winning a contest.

Finally my father leaned over the table. "Didn't you have basketball tryouts today?" With all the excitement, I had forgotten about the first indignity of the day. This bad news was almost a pleasure to deliver. Dad nodded and continued chewing. His work shirt was rolled up to his elbows and his hands were scrubbed red, but there was still dirt under his nails.

"Are you feeling okay?" mom asked. "You've barely touched your food."

I poked my potatoes. Now is as good a time as any, I thought. "Well, Owen and I went to Mercer's Market today, and—"

My mother interrupted, shaking her head. "Danny," she said, "I told you not to snack before dinner. Now you've ruined your appetite."

"I didn't eat anything, Mom, which makes it even more ironic."

"What are you talking about?" dad asked without looking up from his plate.

"Nothing. It's just that... do you know about the million-dollar promotion they're sponsoring at Mercer's? Well, I was the millionth customer."

For a moment it got so quiet in the kitchen, you could hear the gravy curdle. They knew what it meant. Like everybody else in town they'd seen the banners and endless television commercials. But their expressions—Mom's lower lip nearly reached her plate and dad's eyes seemed pinned wide open—told another story. Maybe it was my nonchalance that threw them. Anyway, they both sat there practically comatose until mom finally blurted out, "A million dollars! My son's gonna win a million dollars!"

Dear God.

My father just kept repeating, "Assembly Hall! My son's going to play at Assembly Hall!"

It's bad enough to be a lousy basketball player whose parents are basketball fanatics; it's another thing altogether to be a lousy basketball player who stands to win a million dollars if only he can hit a half-court shot.

I hid my face in my hands.

After dinner dad paced the kitchen floor and announced that shooting practice would begin the following evening after he got home from work. Mom bounced between the table and the phone, calling neighbors and relatives she hadn't spoken with in years. When the doorbell rang, we all looked at each other, not knowing what to expect.

"Hello, I'm Cindi Sherman," the grinning reporter announced after I opened the door.

Cindi Sherman! I couldn't believe she was standing at my front door. I had seen her many times before. Usually she was at the scene of a fire, flood, or some other disaster, so her unexpected arrival seemed appropriate to me. My parents were beyond impressed. The way they stuttered and stammered when they met her, you'd think she was the queen of England.

"And you must be Danny."

Believe me, if I could have denied it, I would have. But before she could ask me another question, my mother was already asking her about her hair. "It looks blond on TV. Is it your natural color?"

The cameraman quickly set up the lights, positioned the camera, and posed me and my parents on the old sofa, which my mother had covered with an afghan to hide the places where stuffing was coming through. Then, just as everything was in place for the interview, the doorbell rang again.
My father opened it, and Uncle Morty’s head popped in. He was wearing an Indiana University cap.

“Oh,” he said, peering inside. Then he looked straight at me. “Congratulations, Danny.” He stepped into the living room. “I don’t mean to interrupt anything . . .”

Uncle Morty was my mother’s brother. We usually saw him only twice a year, on Christmas and Thanksgiving. On those occasions he scarfed down dinner and fell asleep while watching a game on television, the top button of his pants popped open to free his belly. But today he was dressed up, full of smiles, and shaking every available hand.

“Name’s Morty. I run a little catering company, Tip Top Caterers. Maybe you’ve heard of it?” Like a magician he pulled a business card out of thin air and handed it to Cindi Sherman.

Things settled down, and the interview was fairly quick and painless. Judging by the kinds of questions Cindi asked me, you’d think I’d really accomplished something, or that maybe this half-court shot was something I’d been working on all my life.

“You must be a good little basketball player,” she said.

The same smile she’d had when she first stepped through the door was still frozen on her face.

“Actually, I’m not,” I began. “I didn’t even make the school team.”

“That’s not so, son.” I could feel my father go rigid next to me. “He’s a fine player. Danny’s just being humble, that’s all.”

Humility had nothing to do with it. If this contest had actually relied on basketball skills, I wouldn’t have been picked. It was dumb luck and bad timing that had gotten me this far. I said, “I’m probably better at eating corn bread than playing ball.”

Cindi laughed demurely, and my mother joined her. “Danny just loves the corn bread at Mercer’s,” she jabbered. “Mercer’s is a name we trust, at a price we like.”

On the news you could actually see my jaw drop when my mother said this.

The next day at school an article about me from the Cornell County Observer was taped to my locker. It showed the picture that the Mercer’s Market manager had taken of me at the moment of impact. I tore down the page, crumpled it up, and tossed it into a wastebasket.

“One million dollars!” Owen cheered from behind me. “Now, what do you plan to do with your winnings?” He extended his hand as if holding a microphone.

I glared at him. “This is all your fault.”

“That’s right, and you should be thanking me. I made you a star.”

He was right. I was an overnight celebrity. All around school, people were wishing me good luck. Even teachers were running up and slapping me on the back and asking when I was going to be on television next. Owen, who had become my self-proclaimed agent, said he was trying to get me on Letterman. Melissa Mills even asked me to autograph a copy of the newspaper article. She had never talked to me before, and probably never would again after I blew the shot on television. Dad had once told me that there’s nothing worse than a missed opportunity.

I smiled shyly and signed the paper for her.

With the game less than two weeks away, Owen and I went to the school yard that afternoon to practice half-court free throws. Owen stood under the basket and held down one end of the measuring tape, and I walked across the court, unrolling 47 feet of yellow line, which was how far the half-court line was from the basket in the auditorium. I was practically under the opposite basket.

“No sweat,” Owen said.

I’d never disliked Owen more than at that very moment. “Easy for you to say,” I yelled back to him. “You don’t have to choke in front of all those people.”
Owen said, "You act like you've already lost. You have as much chance of sinking that bucket as anyone else."

Like I said, Owen was my friend.

I reeled in the flapping measuring tape and took my first shot. It was underhand and fell way short. My next attempt was overhand and sailed left of the backboard. Owen retrieved the ball and came over to where I was standing.

"You just have to relax," he sighted the basket and heaved the ball. Swish. We looked at each other with surprised expressions. Thankfully, none of his other attempts was successful. I felt slightly redeemed.

We spent the better part of the afternoon taking shots at the distant basket as clouds scudding overhead and the sun settled on the horizon. I actually hit a couple, but most of my throws were returned by some kids playing kickball at the far end of the playground.

When I got home, the Tip Top Caterers' station wagon was parked in our driveway. I was not in the mood for Uncle Morty, so I went to the corner of the house and sat in the bushes even though I knew that trying to outwait him was a loser's bet. He could linger forever. Luckily, he didn't stay too long. I waited for the station wagon's taillights to disappear around the corner before I went inside.

"Oh, Danny, you just missed Uncle Morty," mom said cheerfully.

"Really?"

"He dropped off this T-shirt for you to wear to the big game."

It was yellow and black with the Tip Top Caterers' logo and phone number. "I think it would be okay if you wore it to the game, but your father thinks the Mercer's people might not like it. He might have a point. What do you think?"

Before I could answer, dad piped up behind me. "It would be a conflict of interest. Wear an Indiana University T-shirt. Show your Hoosier pride. Let's keep the sponsors happy first. We'll give Uncle Morty a picture of you to put in his window or something." My father sighed and patted me on the back. "Can you imagine a million dollars, Danny? That would really set things right."

My stomach turned to lead. Could he imagine me not winning? It amazed me that he hadn't even considered that possibility. And what's this Hoosier pride? He knows I've never been a basketball fan, let alone a Hoosier's fan. What had become of these people overnight?

"We could really fix up this old house," dad mused. "Add a porch out back and get the driveway paved."

"Fix up the house?" my mother said. "We could get a whole new place out by the lake and still have more than half left over. We could take a really nice trip. Florida, or maybe even Europe!"

"Oui, madame," my father said in what I think was supposed to be a French accent.

"What if I miss the basket?" I mumbled.

An odd silence descended over the living room. My parents glanced nervously at each other, then at me.

"That would be fine," mom said with an exaggerated smile.

"Your mother's right, Danny. Just give it your best shot." Again he patted me on the back, only much harder this time.

The weeks before the game I had nightmares, as if I weren't worrying enough during the day. And each night my nightmare was the same. I was walking down a dark hallway. Unseen things scurried in the shadows. Water and slime dripped from the low ceiling. My legs were chained, and two tall men guided me on either side. They were dressed like referees, but they were wearing black hoods like executioners. After an impossibly long walk we came out of the tunnel and onto the court. The stands were full of fans, but they weren't making a sound. They just sat in their seats and stared at me. The college band played a slow, scary-sounding dirge.

The basket stood like a gallows, tall and threatening. It leaned toward me, the net swaying like a noose. I didn't have a ball, and the grim officials weren't carrying any. One ref pointed a hairy finger at the ground and nodded his black hood for me to look. A ball rested on the hard-
wood by my foot. I tried to lift it, but it was as heavy as a cannonball and chained to my ankle—waist-high was about as far as I could heft it. The hooded official commanded me to shoot. A drummer in the band began a chattering drumroll while the other official tied a blindfold over my eyes. Everything went black, and then...

I couldn't sleep the night before the game, and at dawn my father found me in front of the television, staring blankly at the Weather Channel.

"You're up pretty early, sport." He stood behind the sofa, tall and shadowy in the gray morning light, his voice still rough from sleep.

"I feel kinda blah," I gave him a little cough for effect. It was worth a try, but I would probably have had to come down with the bubonic plague to miss the game. He sighed as he came around and settled next to me.

"I bet you're a little nervous."

"A little."

He put his arm around my shoulder. "Well, try not to get too worked up. This is only going to happen once in your life, so enjoy it while you can." He pulled on his upper lip. "If you miss, you miss. No big deal."

"But if I miss I'm going to disappoint you and Mom. I mean, a million dollars..."

"Don't be silly. Sure, we're all excited about it. Something like this doesn't happen every day. But the money doesn't really mean anything to us. If we really wanted to try to win a million dollars, we'd play the lottery every day. Our chances of winning would be about the same."

"Thanks a lot."

"I didn't mean it like that." He smiled shyly, then rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Nope, getting a million dollars for putting a ball through a hoop just doesn't seem right. For that much you should have to do something really great."

"But what about the house by the lake?"

"That was just talk—mom and me dreaming. We didn't mean to pressure you, son. If we did, we owe you an apology. A new house and a trip would be nice, but things are just fine the way they are. Don't you think?"

I had to agree. In the last two weeks I had gone from anonymity to minor basketball celebrity, and the old days seemed pretty good.

Outside, a sliver of sun peered over the horizon, setting the sky on fire. I was still pretty nervous, but for the first time in nearly two weeks it didn't seem like the end of the world.

When we reached Assembly Hall that afternoon, a smiling attendant named Anne showed us to our seats, which were practically on the court. For my father, who usually got tickets up in the nosebleeds, this was almost a religious experience. As he staggered down to touch the floor, his knees seemed as shaky as mine.

"I'll be back midway through the second quarter to take you to the floor," Anne said.

I told her not to hurry.

"Stay calm, I told myself, but I couldn't keep my legs from bouncing on the floor like twin jackhammers."

I scanned the court. From where we were sitting I could hold the distance from mid-court to the basket between my hands. About four inches, I told myself.

The Indiana University and Notre Dame teams came onto the court, and the crowd went crazy. Mom and dad were having a great time. I guess it was a good game. I couldn't tell. I felt like I was about to explode. Everywhere I looked there were numbers, buzzers, and timers. And shot clocks winding down. Maybe someone should check them, I thought. They're going way too fast.

I stared straight up at the roof. Cameramen were hunched in the rafters like gargoyles. It reminded me of how many people were watching this on television. Owen would be sitting cross-legged in front of his TV, his parents asking why he couldn't be more like his friend Danny. Uncle Morty was spread out on a couch with his belt undone about to discover that I wasn't wearing the T-shirt he gave me. Even Melissa Mills was probably watching.

The first quarter slipped by quickly, and before I knew it there were only two minutes left in the second. Halftime was approaching.

I started to hope that Anne had forgotten me, but suddenly she emerged with a smile to take me away. Mom
and dad wished me good luck, trying not to sound too enthusiastic.

We went through a series of doors, bypassing security guards until we entered a dim, narrow hallway. Anne introduced me to two well-dressed gentlemen. I think she said they were both presidents, one from Mercer's, the other from the university, but with all the echoing cheers coming from the arena, I didn't hear which one was which.

"Pretty big opportunity, isn't it?" the taller one asked.

"I guess."

A giant bucket of chicken with legs walked up to me. It carried an oversized check with my name and a lot of zeros on it.

"Ready?" Anne asked.

"Do you think we could do this after the game, when everybody's gone?" I asked.

The giant bucket led us down the hall to the glowing doorway. With each step the roar of the crowd swelled in my ears, and when we hit the floor, the university band erupted with a brassy rendition of "Louie, Louie." The cheerleaders spun and danced around me, shaking their pom-poms and screeching. So much for making a quiet entrance. Overhead the loudspeakers barked my name, but I couldn't make out anything after that. For all I knew the announcer was speaking Cantonese.

At center court we posed for pictures. The flashes seemed to explode inside my head and left blue ghosts floating in front of my eyes. It was unexpectedly hot on the court. I kept wiping my forehead. Anne handed me a ball, and the crowd's cheering reached a new high. I felt the blood rush out of my legs.

Then I was alone, standing at the half-court line, ogling the hoop. It might as well have been a mile away.

All at once the noise and the heat seemed to collapse in on me. Faces in the crowd blurred. I was going to faint, as sure as I was alive. It was now or never.

I took a deep breath and heaved the ball with all my might.

As soon as the basketball left my hands, I felt about a hundred pounds lighter. I was still sweaty and out of breath, but the butterflies that had been soaring around my stomach since that terrible day in Mercer's two weeks ago had vanished. I felt somehow free.

Then, to my total surprise, I looked up along with everyone else in the auditorium and saw that the basketball—the one I had launched—was on a direct course for the basket.

A nervous chuckle escaped my throat like a butterfly from a bush.

"It can't be."

All eyes watched as the ball suddenly landed with a clunk on the rim, bounced several feet up in the air, then came back down and began to spin around the rim for what seemed like an eternity.

The intramural team that Owen and I ended up playing for won only two games that season. The losing record didn't bother me much, and Owen didn't seem to mind, either. It gave him endless opportunities to complain during the games and to criticize the refs. Losing also gave us an excuse to go for corn bread after the games. You know, to help the healing process.

"Mercer's?" I suggested after a particularly futile team effort one afternoon.

Owen groped around in his pants pocket and then shrugged.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't worry. It's on me."

Actually, I didn't mind paying for Owen—at least, not as much as I used to. It was just the way things were. He was my friend, and he never had any money. No big deal. Besides, I had plenty of money.

Even after we bought the house by the lake.
NORTH RICHMOND STREET, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbours in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces.

The former tenant of our house, a priest, had died in the back drawing-room. Air, musty from having been long enclosed, hung in all the rooms, and the waste room behind the kitchen was littered with old useless papers. Among these I found a few paper-covered books, the pages of which were curled and damp: *The Abbot*, by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant* and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*. I liked the last best because its leaves were yellow. The wild garden behind the house contained a central apple-tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the late tenant's rusty bicycle-pump. He had been a very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions and the furniture of his house to his sister.

When the short days of winter came dusk fell before we had well eaten our dinners. When we met in the street the houses had grown sombre. The space of sky above us was the colour of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness. When we returned to the street light from the kitchen windows had filled the areas. If my uncle was seen turning the corner we hid in the shadow until we had seen him safely housed. Or if Mangan's sister came out on the doorstep to call her brother in to his tea we watched her from our shadow peer up and down the street. We waited to see whether she would remain or go in and, if she remained, we left our shadow and walked up to Mangan's steps resignedly. She was waiting for us, her figure defined by the light from the half-opened door. Her brother always teased her before he obeyed and I stood by the railings looking at her. Her dress swung as she moved her body and the soft rope of her hair tossed from side to side.

Every morning I lay on the floor in the front parlour watching her door. The blind was pulled down to within an inch of the sash so that I could not be seen. When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood.

Her image accompanied me even in places the most hostile to romance. On Saturday evenings when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels. We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a come-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises
converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes. Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not, or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration. But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires.

One evening I went into the back drawing-room in which the priest had died. It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house. Through one of the broken panes I heard the rain impinge upon the earth, the fine incessant needles of water playing in the sodden beds. Some distant lamp or lighted window gleamed below me. I was thankful that I could see so little. All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: "O love! O love!" many times.

At last she spoke to me. When she addressed the first words to me I was so confused that I did not know what to answer. She asked me was I going to Araby. I forgot whether I answered yes or no. It would be a splendid bazaar, she said; she would love to go.

"And why can't you?" I asked.

While she spoke she turned a silver bracelet round and round her wrist. She could not go, she said, because there would be a retreat that week in her convent. Her brother and two other boys were fighting for their caps and I was alone at the railings. She held one of the spikes, bowing her head towards me. The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing. It fell over one side of her dress and caught the white border of a petticoat, just visible as she stood at ease.

"It's well for you," she said.

"If I go," I said, "I will bring you something."

What innumerable follies laid waste my waking and sleeping thoughts after that evening! I wished to annihilate the tedious intervening days. I chafed against the work of school. At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read. The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me. I asked for leave to go to the bazaar on Saturday night. My aunt was surprised and hoped it was not some Freemason affair. I answered few questions in class. I watched my master's face pass from amiability to sternness; he hoped I was not beginning to idle. I could not call my wandering thoughts together. I had hardly any patience with the serious work of life which, now that it stood between me and my desire, seemed to me child's play, ugly monotonous child's play.

On Saturday morning I reminded my uncle that I wished to go to the bazaar in the evening. He was fussing at the hallstand, looking for the hat-brush, and answered me curtly:

"Yes, boy, I know."

As he was in the hall I could not go into the front parlour and lie at the window. I left the house in bad humour and walked slowly towards the school. The air was pitilessly raw and already my heart misgave me.

When I came home to dinner my uncle had not yet been home. Still it was early. I sat staring at the clock for some time and, when its ticking began to irritate me, I left the room. I mounted the staircase and gained the upper part of the house. The high cold empty gloomy rooms liberated me and I went from room to room singing. From the front window I saw my companions playing below in the street.
Their cries reached me weakened and indistinct and, leaning my forehead against the cool glass, I looked over at the dark house where she lived. I may have stood there for an hour, seeing nothing but the brown-clad figure cast by my imagination, touched discreetly by the lamplight at the curved neck, at the hand upon the railings and at the border below the dress.

When I came downstairs again I found Mrs. Mercer sitting at the fire. She was an old garrulous woman, a pawnbroker's widow, who collected used stamps for some pious purpose. I had to endure the gossip of the tea-table. The meal was prolonged beyond an hour and still my uncle did not come. Mrs. Mercer stood up to go; she was sorry she couldn't wait any longer, but it was after eight o'clock and she did not like to be out late as the night air was bad for her. When she had gone I began to walk up and down the room, clenching my fists. My aunt said:

"I'm afraid you may put off your bazaar for this night of Our Lord."

At nine o'clock I heard my uncle's latchkey in the halldoor. I heard him talking to himself and heard the hallstand rocking when it had received the weight of his overcoat. I could interpret these signs. When he was midway through his dinner I asked him to give me the money to go to the bazaar. He had forgotten.

"The people are in bed and after their first sleep now," he said.

I did not smile. My aunt said to him energetically:

"Can't you give him the money and let him go? You've kept him late enough as it is."

My uncle said he was very sorry he had forgotten. He said he believed in the old saying: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." He asked me where I was going and, when I had told him a second time he asked me did I know The Arab's Farewell to his Steed. When I left the kitchen he was about to recite the opening lines of the piece to my aunt.

I held a florin tightly in my hand as I strode down Buckingham Street towards the station. The sight of the streets thronged with buyers and glaring with gas recalled to me the purpose of my journey. I took my seat in a third-class carriage of a deserted train. After an intolerable delay the train moved out of the station slowly. It crept onward among ruinous houses and over the twinkling river. At Westland Row Station a crowd of people pressed to the carriage doors; but the porters moved them back, saying that it was a special train for the bazaar. I remained alone in the bare carriage. In a few minutes the train drew up beside an improvised wooden platform. I passed out on to the road and saw by the lighted dial of a clock that it was ten minutes to ten. In front of me was a large building which displayed the magical name.

I could not find any sixpenny entrance and, fearing that the bazaar would be closed, I passed in quickly through a turnstile, handing a shilling to a weary-looking man. I found myself in a big hall girdled at half its height by a gallery. Nearly all the stalls were closed and the greater part of the hall was in darkness. I recognised a silence like that which pervades a church after a service. I walked into the centre of the bazaar timidly. A few people were gathered about the stalls which were still open. Before a curtain, over which the words Cafe Chantant were written in coloured lamps, two men were counting money on a salver. I listened to the fall of the coins.

Remembering with difficulty why I had come I went over to one of the stalls and examined porcelain vases and flowered tea-sets. At the door of the stall a young lady was talking and laughing with two young gentlemen. I remarked their English accents and listened vaguely to their conversation.

"O, I never said such a thing!"

"O, but you did!"
"O, but I didn’t!"
"Didn’t she say that?"
"Yes. I heard her."
"O, there’s a... fib!"

Observing me the young lady came over and asked me did I wish to buy anything. The tone of her voice was not encouraging; she seemed to have spoken to me out of a sense of duty. I looked humbly at the great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance to the stall and murmured:

"No, thank you."

The young lady changed the position of one of the vases and went back to the two young men. They began to talk of the same subject. Once or twice the young lady glanced at me over her shoulder.

I lingered before her stall, though I knew my stay was useless, to make my interest in her wares seem the more real. Then I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.
It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws.

Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment.

Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop walked along the fence till it ran into the stream made by the spring. Around the spring, where the family got drinking water, silver ferns and wildflowers grew. Along the shallow banks pigs rooted. Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream.

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes. She found, in addition to various common but pretty ferns and leaves, an armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges and a sweet suds bush full of the brown, fragrant buds.

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep.

Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes. Her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose, and she reached down quickly, unafraid, to free herself. It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise.

He had been a tall man. From feet to neck covered a long space. His head lay beside him. When she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris Myop saw that he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken, long fingers, and very big bones. All his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls. The buckles of the overall had turned green.

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frizzled--barely there--but spinning restlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.
Ray Bradbury

“There Will Come Soft Rains”  

Published: Collier’s magazine, 6 May 1950.

In the living room the voice-clock sang, Tick-tock, seven o’clock, time to get up, time to get up, seven o’clock! as if it were afraid nobody would. The morning house lay empty. The clock ticked on, repeating and repeating its sounds into the emptiness. Seven-nine, breakfast time, seven-nine!

In the kitchen the breakfast stove gave a hissing sigh and ejected from its warm interior eight pieces of perfectly browned toast, eight eggs sunnyside up, sixteen slices of bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk. "Today is August 4, 2026," said a second voice from the kitchen ceiling, "in the city of Allendale, California." It repeated the date three times for memory’s sake. "Today is Mr. Featherstone’s birthday. Today is the anniversary of Tilita’s marriage. Insurance is payable, as are the water, gas, and light bills."

Somewhere in the walls, relays clicked, memory tapes glided under electric eyes.

Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o’clock, off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one! But no doors slammed, no carpets took the soft tread of rubber heels. It was raining outside. The weather box on the iron door sang quietly: “Rain, rain, go away; rubbers, raincoats for today...” And the rain tapped on the empty house, echoing.

Outside, the garage chimed and lifted its door to reveal the waiting car. After a long wait the door swung down again.

At eight-thirty the eggs were shriveled and the toast was like stone. An aluminum wedge scraped them down a metal throat which digested and flushed them away to the distant sea. The dirty dishes were dropped into a hot washer and emerged twinkling dry.

Nine-fifteen, sang the clock, time to clean. Out of warrens in the wall, tiny robot mice darted. The rooms were acrawl with the small cleaning animals, all rubber and metal. They thudded against chairs, whirling their mustached runners, kneading the rug nap, sucking gently at hidden dust. Then, like mysterious invaders, they popped into their burrows. Their pink electric eye faded. The house was clean.

Ten o’clock. The sun came out from behind the rain. The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes. This was the one house left standing. At night the ruined city gave of a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles. Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers whirled up in golden founts, filling the soft morning air with scatterings of brightness. The water pelted windowpanes, running down the charred west side where the house had been burned evenly free of its white paint. The entire west face of the house was black, save for five places. Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images burned on wood in one titanic instant, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of thrown ball, and opposite him a girl, hand raised to catch a ball which never came down. The five spots of paint- the man, the woman, the children, the ball - remained. The rest was a thin charcoaled layer. The gentle sprinkler rain filled the garden with falling light.

Until this day, how well the house had kept its peace. How carefully it had inquired, ‘Who goes there? What’s the password?’ and, getting no answer from the only foxes and whining cats, it had shut up its windows and drawn shades in an old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia. It quivered at each sound, the house did. If a sparrow brushed a window, the shade snapped up. The bird, startled, flew off! No, not even a bird must touch the house!

The house was an altar with ten thousand attendants, big, small, servicing, attending, in choirs. But the gods had gone away, and the ritual of the religion continued senselessly, uselessly.
Twelve noon.
A dog whined, shivering, on the front porch.
The front door recognized the dog voice and opened. The dog, once large and fleshy, but now gone to bone and
covered with sores, moved in and through the house, tracking mud. Behind it whirred angry mice, angry at having
to pick up mud, angry at inconvenience.
For not a leaf fragment blew under the door but what the wall panels flipped open and the copper scrap rats
flashed swiftly out. The offending dust, hair, or paper, seized in miniature steel jaws, was raced back to the
burrows. There, down tubes which fed into the cellar, it was dropped like evil Baal in a dark corner.

The dog ran upstairs, hysterically yelping to each door, at last realizing, as the house realized, that only silence
was here. It sniffed the air and scratched the kitchen door. Behind the door, the stove was making pancakes which
filled the house with a rich odor and the scent of maple syrup. The dog frothed at the mouth, lying at the door,
sniffing, its eyes turned to fire. It ran wildly in circles, biting at its tail, spun in a frenzy, and died. It lay in the
parlor for an hour
Two 'clock, sang a voice.
Delicately sensing decay at last, the regiments of mice hummed out as softly as blown gray leaves in an electrical
wind.
Two-fifteen.
The dog was gone.
In the cellar, the incinerator glowed suddenly and a whirl of sparks leaped up the chimney.
Two thirty-five.
Bridge tables sprouted from patio walls. Playing cards fluttered onto pads in a shower of pips. Martinis manifested
on an oaken bench with egg salad sandwiches. Music played.
But the tables were silent and the cards untouched.
At four o'clock the tables folded like great butterflies back through the paneled walls.

Four-thirty.
The nursery walls glowed.
Animals took shape: yellow giraffes, blue lions, pink antelopes, lilac panthers cavorting in crystal substance. The
walls were glass. They looked out upon color and fantasy. Hidden films clocked though the well-oiled sprockets,
and the walls lived. The nursery floor was woven to resemble a crisp cereal meadow. Over this ran aluminum
roaches and iron crickets, and in the hot still air butterflies of delicate red tissue waivered among the sharp aroma
of animal spoors! There was the sound like a great matted yellow hive of bees within a dark bellows, the lazy
bumble of a purring lion. And there was the patter of okapi feet and the murmur of a fresh jungle rain, like other
hoofs falling upon the summer-starched grass. Now the walls dissolved into distances of parched weed, mile on
mile, and warm endless sky. The animals drew away into thorn brakes and water holes. It was the children's hour.

Five o'clock. The bath filled with clear hot water.
Six, seven, eight o'clock. The dinner dishes manipulated like magic tricks, and in the study a click. In the metal
stand opposite the hearth where a fire now blazed up warmly, a cigar popped out, half an inch of soft gray ash on
it, smoking, waiting.

Nine o'clock. The beds warmed their hidden circuits, for nights were cool here.
Nine-five. A voice spoke from the study ceiling: "Mrs. McClellan, which poem would you like this evening?"
The house was silent.
The voice said at last, "Since you express no preference, I shall select a poem at random." Quiet music rose to
back the voice. "Sara Teasdale. As I recall, your favorite...

"There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground, And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;
And frogs in the pools singing at night, And wild plum trees in tremulous white;
Robins will wear their feathery fire, Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;
And not one will know of the war, not one Will care at last when it is done.
Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree, If mankind perished utterly;
And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn Would scarcely know that we were gone."
The fire burned on the stone hearth and the cigar fell away into a mound of quiet ash on its tray. The empty chairs faced each other between the silent walls, and the music played.
At ten o'clock the house began to die.
The wind blew. A falling tree bough crashed through the kitchen window. Cleaning solvent, bottled, shattered over the stove. The room was ablaze in an instant! "Fire!" screamed a voice. The house lights flashed, water pumps shot water from the ceilings. But the solvent spread on the linoleum, licking, eating, under the kitchen door, while the voices took it up in chorus: "Fire, fire, fire!"
The house tried to save itself. Doors sprang tightly shut, but the windows were broken by the heat and the wind blew and sucked upon the fire.
The house gave ground as the fire in ten billion angry sparks moved with flaming ease from room to room and then up the stairs. While scurrying water rats squeaked from the walls, pistoled their water, and ran for more. And the wall sprays let down showers of mechanical rain.
But too late. Somewhere, sighing, a pump shrugged to a stop. The quenching rain ceased. The reserve water supply which filled the baths and washed the dishes for many quiet days was gone.
The fire crackled up the stairs. It fed upon Picassos and Matisses in the upper halls, like delicacies, baking off the oily flesh, tenderly crisping the canvases into black shavings.
Now the fire lay in beds, stood in windows, changed the colors of drapes!
And then, reinforcements.
From attic trapdoors, blind robot faces peered down with faucet mouths gushing green chemical.
The fire backed off, as even an elephant must at the sight of a dead snake. Now there were twenty snakes whipping over the floor, killing the fire with a clear cold venom of green froth.
But the fire was clever. It had sent flames outside the house, up through the attic to the pumps there. An explosion! The attic brain which directed the pumps was shattered into bronze shrapnel on the beams.
The fire rushed back into every closet and felt of the clothes that hung there.
The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air. Help, help! Fire! Run, run! Heat snapped mirrors like the first brittle winter ice. And the voices wailed Fire, fire, run, run, like a tragic nursery rhyme, a dozen voices, high, low, like children dying in a forest, alone, alone. And the voices fading as the wires popped their sheathings like hot chestnuts. One, two, three, four, five voices died.
In the nursery the jungle burned. Blue lions roared, purple giraffes bounded off. The panthers ran in circles, changing color, and ten million animals, running before the fire, vanished off toward a distant steaming river...
Ten more voices died. In the last instant under the fire avalanche, other choruses, oblivious, could be heard announcing the time, playing music, cutting the lawn by remote-control mower, or setting an umbrella frantically out and in the slamming and opening front door, a thousand things happening, like a clock shop when each clock
strikes the hour insanely before or after the other, a scene of maniac confusion, yet unity; singing, screaming, a
few last cleaning mice darting bravely out to carry the horrid ashes away! And one voice, with sublime disregard
for the situation, read poetry aloud all in the fiery study, until all the film spools burned, until all the wires
withered and the circuits cracked.

The fire burst the house and let it slam flat down, puffing out skirts of spark and smoke.
In the kitchen, an instant before the rain of fire and timber, the stove could be seen making breakfasts at a
psychopathic rate, ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips, which , eaten by fire, started the
stove working again, hysterically hissing!
The crash. The attic smashing into the kitchen and parlor. The parlor into cellar, cellar into sub-cellar. Deep freeze,
armchair, film tapes, circuits, beds, and all like skeletons thrown in a cluttered mound deep under.
Smoke and silence. A great quantity of smoke.
Dawn showed faintly in the east. Among the ruins, one wall stood alone. Within the wall, a last voice said, over
and over again and again, even as the sun rose to shine upon the heaper rubble and steam:
"Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is..."
In an otherwise unremarkable September morning, long before I learned to be ashamed of my mother, she takes my hand and we set off down New Jersey Avenue to begin my very first day of school. I am wearing a checkered like blue and green cotton dress, and scattered about these colors are bits of yellow and white and brown. My mother has uncharacteristically spent nearly an hour on my hair that morning, plaiting and replaiting so that now my scalp tingles. Whenever I turn my head quickly, my nose fills with the faint smell of Dixie Peach hair grease. The smell is somehow a soothing one now and I will reach for it time- and time again before the morning ends. All the plaits, each with a blue barrette near the tip and each twisted into an uncommon sturdiness, will last until I go to bed that night, something that has never happened before. My stomach is full of milk and oatmeal sweetened with brown sugar. Like everything else I have on, my pale green slip and underwear are new, the underwear having come three to a plastic package with a little girl on the front who appears to be dancing. Behind my ears, my mother, to stop my whining, has dabbed the stingiest bit of her gardenia perfume, the last present my father gave her before he disappeared into memory. Because I cannot smell it, I have only her word that the perfume is there. I am also wearing yellow socks trimmed with thin lines of black and white around the tops. My shoes are my greatest joy, black patent-leather miracles, and when one is nicked at the toe later that morning in class, my heart will break.

I am carrying a pencil, a pencil sharpener, and a small ten-cent tablet with a black-and-white speckled cover. My mother does not believe that a girl in kindergarten needs such things, so I am taking them only because of my insistent whining and because they are presents from our neighbors, Mary Keith and Blondelle Harris. Miss Mary and Miss Blondelle are watching my two younger sisters until my mother returns. The women are as precious to me as my mother and sisters. Out playing one day, I have overheard an older child, speaking to another child, call Miss Mary and Miss Blondelle a word that is brand new to me. This is my mother: When I say the word in fun to one of my sisters, my mother slaps me across the mouth and the word is lost for years and years.

All the way down New Jersey Avenue, the sidewalks are teeming with children. In my neighborhood, I have many friends, but I see none of them as my mother and I walk. We cross New York Avenue, we cross Pierce Street, and we cross L and K, and still I see no one who knows my name. At I Street, between New Jersey Avenue and Third Street, we enter Seaton Elementary School, a timeworn, sadfaced building across the street from my mother’s church, Mt. Carmel Baptist.

Just inside the front door, women out of the advertisements in Ebony are greeting other parents and children. The woman who greets us has pearls thick as jumbo marbles that come down almost to her navel, and she acts as if she had known me all my life, touching my shoulder, cupping her hand under my chin. She is enveloped in a perfume that I only know is not gardenia. When, in answer to her question, my mother tells her that we live at 1227 New Jersey Avenue, the woman first seems to be picturing in her head where we live. Then she shakes her head and says that we are at the wrong school, that we should be at Walker-Jones.

My mother shakes her head vigorously. “I want her to go here.” 5 my mother says. “If I’d’a wanted her someplace else, I’d’a took her there.” The woman continues to act as if she has known me all my life, but she tells my mother that we live beyond the area that Seaton serves. My mother is not convinced and for several more minutes she questions the woman about why I cannot attend Seaton. For as many Sundays as I can remember, perhaps even Sundays when I was in her womb, my mother has pointed across I Street to Seaton as we come and go to Mt.
Carmel. "You gonna go there and learn about the whole world." But one of the guardians of that place is saying no, and no again. I am learning this about my mother: The higher up on the scale of respectability a person is—and teachers are rather high up in her eyes—the less she is liable to let them push her around. But finally, I see in her eyes the closing gate, and she takes my hand and we leave the building. On the steps, she stops as people move past us on either side.

"Mama, I can’t go to school?"

She says nothing at first, then takes my hand again and we are down the steps quickly and nearing New Jersey Avenue before I can blink. This is my mother: She says, "One monkey don’t stop no show."

Walker-Jones is a larger, newer school and I immediately like it because of that. But it is not across the street from my mother’s church, her rock, one of her connections to God, and I sense her doubts as she absently rubs her thumb over the back of her hand. We find our way to the crowded auditorium where gray metal chairs are set up in the middle of the room. Along the wall to the left are tables and other chairs. Every chair seems occupied by a child or adult. Somewhere in the room a child is crying, a cry that rises above the buzz-talk of so many people. Strewn about the floor are dozens and dozens of pieces of white paper, and people are walking over them without any thought of picking them up. And seeing this lack of concern, I am all of a sudden afraid.

"Is this where they register for school?" my mother asks a woman at one of the tables.

The woman looks up slowly as if she has heard this question once too often. She nods. She is tiny, almost as small as the girl standing beside her. The woman’s hair is set in a mass of curlers and all of those curlers are made of paper money, here a dollar bill, there a five-dollar bill. The girl’s hair is arrayed in curls, but some of them are beginning to droop and this makes me happy. On the table beside the woman’s pocketbook is a large notebook, worthy of someone in high school, and looking at me looking at the notebook, the girl places her hand possessively on it. In her other hand she holds several pencils with thick crowns of additional erasers.

"These the forms you gotta use?" my mother asks the woman, picking up a few pieces of the paper from the table. "Is this what you have to fill out?"

The woman tells her yes, but that she need fill out only one.

"I see," my mother says, looking about the room. Then: "Would you help me with this form? That is, if you don't mind."

The woman asks my mother what she means.

"This form. Would you mind help in me fill it out?"

The woman still seems not to understand.

"I can’t read it. I don’t know how to read or write, and I’m askin you to help me." My mother looks at me, then looks away. I know almost all of her looks, but this one is brand new to me. "Would you help me, then?"

The woman says Why sure, and suddenly she appears happier, so much more satisfied with everything. She finishes the form for her daughter and my mother and I step aside to wait for her. We find two chairs nearby and sit. My mother is now diseased, according to the girl’s eyes, and until the moment her mother takes her and the
form to the front of the auditorium, the girl never stops looking at my mother. I stare back at her. “Don’t stare,” my mother says to me. “You know better than that.”

Another woman out of the Ebony ads takes the woman’s child away. Now, the woman says upon returning, let’s see what we can do for you two.

My mother answers the questions the woman reads off the form. They start with my last name, and then on to the first and middle names. This is school, I think. This is going to school. My mother slowly enunciates each word of my name. This is my mother: As the questions go on, she takes from her pocketbook document after document, as if they will support my right to attend school, as if she has been saving them up for just this moment. Indeed, she takes out more papers than I have ever seen her do in other places: my birth certificate, my baptismal record, a doctor’s letter concerning my bout with chicken pox, rent receipts, records of immunization, a letter about our public assistance payments, even her marriage license—every single paper that has anything even remotely to do with my five-year-old life. Few of the papers are needed here, but it does not matter and my mother continues to pull out the documents with the purposefulness of a magician pulling out a long string of scarves. She has learned that money is the beginning and end of everything in this world, and when the woman finishes, my mother offers her fifty cents, and the woman accepts it without hesitation. My mother and I are just about the last parent and child in the room.

My mother presents the form to a woman sitting in front of the stage, and the woman looks at it and writes something on a white card, which she gives to my mother. Before long, the woman who has taken the girl with the drooping curls appears from behind us, speaks to the sitting woman, and introduces herself to my mother and me. She’s to be my teacher, she tells my mother. My mother stares.

We go into the hall, where my mother kneels down to me. Her lips are quivering. “I’ll be back to pick you up at twelve o’clock. I don’t want you to go nowhere. You just wait right here. And listen to every word she say.” I touch her lips and press them together. It is an old, old game between us. She puts my hand down at my side, which is not part of the game. She stands and looks a second at the teacher, then she turns and walks away. I see where she has darned one of her socks the night before. Her shoes make loud sounds in the hall. She passes through the doors and I can still hear the loud sounds of her shoes. And even when the teacher turns me toward the classrooms and I hear what must be the singing and talking of all the children in the world, I can still hear my mother’s footsteps above it all.
A beggar was coming down the avenue just as Mr. Parsons emerged from his hotel.

He was a blind beggar, carrying the traditional battered cane and thumping his way before him with the cautious, half-furtive effort of the sightless. He was a shaggy, thick-necked fellow; his coat was greasy about the lapels and pockets, and his hand splayed over the cane’s crook with a futile sort of clinging. He wore a black pouch slung over his shoulder. Apparently he had something to sell.

The air was rich with spring, sun was warm and yellowed on the asphalt. Mr. Parsons, standing there in front of his hotel and noting the clack-clack approach of the sightless man, felt a sudden and foolish sort of pity for all blind creatures.

And, thought Mr. Parsons, he was very glad to be alive. A few years ago he had been a little more than a skilled laborer; now he was successful, respected, admired…Insurance…And he had done it alone, unaided struggling beneath handicaps…and he was still young. The blue air of spring, fresh from its memories of windy pools and lush shrubbery, could thrill him with eagerness.

Cigarette Lighters for Sale

Mr. Parsons took a step forward just as the tap-tap-tapping blind man passed him by. Quickly the shabby fellow turned.

“Listen, guv’nor. Just a minute of your time.” Mr. Parson said, “It’s late. I have an appointment. Do you want me to give you something?”

“I ain’t no beggar, guv’nor. You bet I ain’t I got a handy little article here”—he fumbled until he could press a small object into Mr. Parson’s hand—“that I sell. One buck. Best cigarette lighter made.”

Mr. Parsons stood there, somewhat annoyed and embarrassed. He was a handsome figure with his immaculate gray suit and gray hat and Malacca stick. Of course the man with the cigarette lighters could not see him… “But I don’t smoke,” he said.

“Listen, I bet you know plenty people who smoke. Nice little present,” wheedled the man. “And mister, you wouldn’t mind helping a poor guy out?” He clung to Mr. Parson’s sleeve.

Mr. Parsons sighed and felt in his vest pocket. He brought out two half dollars and pressed them into the man’s hand. “Certainly. I’ll help you out. As you say, I can give it to someone. Maybe the elevator boy would—” He hesitated, not wishing to be boorish and inquisitive, even with a blind peddler. “Have you lost your sight entirely?”

A Chemical Explosion Disaster

The shabby man pocketed the two half dollars. “Fourteen years, guv’nor.” Then he added, with an insane sort of pride, “Westbury, sir. I was one of ‘em.”

“Westbury,” repeated Mr. Parsons. “Ah, yes, the chemical explosion…The papers haven’t mentioned it for years. But at the time it was supposed to be one of the greatest disasters in—”
“They’ve all forgot about it.” The fellow shifted his feet wearily. “I tell you, guv’nor, a man who was in it don’t forget about it. Last thing I ever saw was C shop going up in one grand smudge and gas pouring in at all the busted windows.”

Mr. Parsons coughed, but the blind peddler was caught up with the train of his one dramatic reminiscence. And also, he was thinking that there might be more half dollars in Mr. Parson’s pocket.

“Just think about it, guv’nor. There was a hundred and eight people killed, about two hundred injured, and over fifty of them lost their eyes. Blind as bats—” He groped forward until his dirty hand rested against Mr. Parson’s coat. “I tell you sir, there wasn’t nothing worse than that in the war, OK. I would have been well took care of. But I was just a workman, working for what was in it. And I got it. You’re so right I got it, while the capitalists were making their dough! They was insured, don’t worry about that. They—”

“Insured,” repeated his listener. “Yes. That’s what I sell—”

**Blinded by the Accident**

“You want to know how I lost my eyes?” cried the man. “Well, here it is!” His words fell with the bitter and studied drama of a story often told, and told for money. “I was there in C shop, last of all the folks rushing out. Out in the air there was a chance, even with building exploding right and left. A lot of guys made it safe out the door and got away. And just when I was about there, crawling along between those big vats, a guy behind me grabs my leg. He says, ‘Let me past, you—!’ Maybe he was nuts, I dunno. I try to forgive him in my heart, guv’nor. But he was bigger than me. He hauls me back and climbs right over me! Tramples me into the dirt. And he gets out, and I lie there with all that poison gas pouring down on all sides of me, and flame and stuff…” He swallowed—a studied sob—and stood dumbly expectant. He could image the next words: Tough luck, my man, Awfully tough. Now I want to—

“That’s the story, guv’nor.”

The spring wind shrilled past them, damp and quivering.

**An Unexpected Twist**

“Not quite,” said Mr. Parsons.
The blind peddler shivered crazily. “Not quite? What do you mean?”

“The story is true,” Mr. Parsons said, “except that it was the other way round.”

“Other way around?” He croaked unamiably. “Say, guv’nor—“

“I was in C shop,” said Mr. Parsons. “It was the other way around. You were the fellow who hauled back on me and climbed over me. You were bigger than I was, Markwardt.”

The blind man stood for a long time, swallowing hoarsely. He gulped: “Parsons, I thought you—“ And then he screamed fiendishly: “Yes. Maybe so. Maybe so. But I’m blind I’m blind, and you’ve been standing here letting me spout to you, and laughing at me every minute! I’m blind!”

People in the street turned to stare at him.

“You got away, but I’m blind! Do you hear! I’m—”

“Well,” said Mr. Parsons, “don’t make such a row about it Markwardt. So am I.”
Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar old complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything. Her mother had been pretty once too, if you could believe those old snapshots in the album, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Connie.

"Why don't you keep your room clean like your sister? How've you got your hair fixed—what the hell stinks? Hair spray? You don't see your sister using that junk."

Her sister June was twenty-four and still lived at home. She was a secretary in the high school Connie attended, and if that wasn't bad enough—with her in the same building—she was so plain and chunky and steady that Connie had to hear her praised all the time by her mother and her mother's sisters. June did this, June did that, she saved money and helped clean the house and cooked and Connie couldn't do a thing, her mind was all filled with trashy daydreams. Their father was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed. He didn't bother talking much to them, but around his bent head Connie's mother kept picking at her until Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over. "She makes me want to throw up sometimes," she complained to her friends. She had a high, breathless, amused voice that made everything she said sound a little forced, whether it was sincere or not.

There was one good thing: June went places with girl friends of hers, girls who were just as plain and steady as she, and so when Connie wanted to do that her mother had no objections. The father of Connie's best girl friend drove the girls the three miles to town and left them at a shopping plaza so they could walk through the stores or go to a movie, and when he came to pick them up again at eleven he never bothered to ask what they had done.

They must have been familiar sights, walking around the shopping plaza in their shorts and flat ballerina slippers that always scuffed the sidewalk, with charm bracelets jingling on their thin wrists; they would lean together to whisper and laugh secretly if someone passed who amused or interested them. Connie had long dark blond hair that drew anyone's eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home. Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk, which could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head; her
mouth, which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out; her laugh, which was cynical and drawling at home—"Ha, ha, very funny,"—but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet.

Sometimes they did go shopping or to a movie, but sometimes they went across the highway, ducking fast across the busy road, to a drive-in restaurant where older kids hung out. The restaurant was shaped like a big bottle, though squatter than a real bottle, and on its cap was a revolving figure of a grinning boy holding a hamburger aloft. One night in midsummer they ran across, breathless with daring, and right away someone leaned out a car window and invited them over, but it was just a boy from high school they didn't like. It made them feel good to be able to ignore him. They went up through the maze of parked and cruising cars to the bright-lit, fly-infested restaurant, their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed up out of the night to give them what haven and blessing they yearned for. They sat at the counter and crossed their legs at the ankles, their thin shoulders rigid with excitement, and listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the background, like music at a church service; it was something to depend upon.

A boy named Eddie came in to talk with them. He sat backwards on his stool, turning himself jerkily around in semicircles and then stopping and turning back again, and after a while he asked Connie if she would like something to eat. She said she would and so she tapped her friend's arm on her way out—her friend pulled her face up into a brave, droll look—and Connie said she would meet her at eleven, across the way. "I just hate to leave her like that," Connie said earnestly, but the boy said that she wouldn't be alone for long. So they went out to his car, and on the way Connie couldn't help but let her eyes wander over the windshields and faces all around her, her face gleaming with a joy that had nothing to do with Eddie or even this place; it might have been the music. She drew her shoulders up and sucked in her breath with the pure pleasure of being alive, and just at that moment she happened to glance at a face just a few feet from hers. It was a boy with shaggy black hair, in a convertible jalopy painted gold. He stared at her and then his lips widened into a grin. Connie slit her eyes at him and turned away, but she couldn't help glancing back and there he was, still watching her. He wagged a finger and laughed and said, "Gonna get you, baby," and Connie turned away again without Eddie noticing anything.

She spent three hours with him, at the restaurant where they ate hamburgers and drank Cokes in wax cups that were always sweating, and then down an alley a mile or so away, and when he left her off at five to eleven only the movie house was still open at the plaza. Her girl friend was there, talking with a boy. When Connie came up, the two girls smiled at each other and Connie said, "How was the movie?" and the girl said, "You should know." They rode off with the girl's father, sleepy and pleased, and Connie couldn't help but look back at the darkened shopping plaza with its big empty parking lot and its signs that were faded and ghostly now, and over at the drive-in restaurant where cars were still circling tirelessly. She couldn't hear the music at this distance.

Next morning June asked her how the movie was and Connie said, "So-so."

She and that girl and occasionally another girl went out several times a week, and the rest of the time Connie spent around the house—it was summer vacation—getting in her mother's way and thinking, dreaming about the boys she met. But all the boys fell back and dissolved into a single face that was not even a face but an idea, a feeling, mixed up with the urgent insistent pounding of the music and the
humid night air of July. Connie's mother kept dragging her back to the daylight by finding things for her to do or saying suddenly, 'What's this about the Pettinger girl?'

And Connie would say nervously, "Oh, her. That dope." She always drew thick clear lines between herself and such girls, and her mother was simple and kind enough to believe it. Her mother was so simple, Connie thought, that it was maybe cruel to fool her so much. Her mother went scuffling around the house in old bedroom slippers and complained over the telephone to one sister about the other, then the other called up and the two of them complained about the third one. If June's name was mentioned her mother's tone was approving, and if Connie's name was mentioned it was disapproving. This did not really mean she disliked Connie, and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June just because she was prettier, but the two of them kept up a pretense of exasperation, a sense that they were tugging and struggling over something of little value to either of them. Sometimes, over coffee, they were almost friends, but something would come up—some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads—and their faces went hard with contempt.

One Sunday Connie got up at eleven—none of them bothered with church—and washed her hair so that it could dry all day long in the sun. Her parents and sister were going to a barbecue at an aunt's house and Connie said no, she wasn't interested, rolling her eyes to let her mother know just what she thought of it. "Stay home alone then," her mother said sharply. Connie sat out back in a lawn chair and watched them drive away, her father quiet and bald, hunched around so that he could back the car out, her mother with a look that was still angry and not at all softened through the windshield, and in the back seat poor old June, all dressed up as if she didn't know what a barbecue was, with all the running yelling kids and the flies. Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs; and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was, the back yard ran off into weeds and a fence-like line of trees and behind it the sky was perfectly blue and still. The asbestos ranch house that was now three years old startled her—it looked small. She shook her head as if to get awake.

It was too hot. She went inside the house and turned on the radio to drown out the quiet. She sat on the edge of her bed, barefoot, and listened for an hour and a half to a program called XYZ Sunday Jamboree, record after record of hard, fast, shrieking songs she sang along with, interspersed by exclamations from "Bobby King": "An' look here, you girls at Napoleon's—Son and Charley want you to pay real close attention to this song coming up!"

And Connie paid close attention herself, bathed in a glow of slow-pulsed joy that seemed to rise mysteriously out of the music itself and lay languidly about the airless little room, breathed in and breathed out with each gentle rise and fall of her chest.

After a while she heard a car coming up the drive. She sat up at once, startled, because it couldn't be her father so soon. The gravel kept crunching all the way in from the road—the driveway was long—and Connie ran to the window. It was a car she didn't know. It was an open jalopy, painted a bright gold that caught the sunlight opaquely. Her heart began to pound and her fingers snatched at her hair, checking it, and she whispered, "Christ. Christ," wondering how bad she looked. The car came to a stop at the side door and the horn sounded four short taps, as if this were a signal Connie knew.
She went into the kitchen and approached the door slowly, then hung out the screen door, her bare toes curling down off the step. There were two boys in the car and now she recognized the driver: he had shaggy, shabby black hair that looked crazy as a wig and he was grinning at her.

"I ain't late, am I?" he said.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Connie said.

"Toldja I'd be out, didn't I?"

"I don't even know who you are."

She spoke sullenly, careful to show no interest or pleasure, and he spoke in a fast, bright monotone. Connie looked past him to the other boy, taking her time. He had fair brown hair, with a lock that fell onto his forehead. His sideburns gave him a fierce, embarrassed look, but so far he hadn't even bothered to glance at her. Both boys wore sunglasses. The driver's glasses were metallic and mirrored everything in miniature.

"You wanta come for a ride?" he said.

Connie smirked and let her hair fall loose over one shoulder.

"Don'tcha like my car? New paint job," he said. "Hey."

"What?"

"You're cute."

She pretended to fidget, chasing flies away from the door.

"Don'tcha believe me, or what?" he said.

"Look, I don't even know who you are," Connie said in disgust.

"Hey, Ellie's got a radio, see. Mine broke down." He lifted his friend's arm and showed her the little transistor radio the boy was holding, and now Connie began to hear the music. It was the same program that was playing inside the house.

"Bobby King?" she said.

"I listen to him all the time. I think he's great."

"He's kind of great," Connie said reluctantly.

"Listen, that guy's great. He knows where the action is."
Connie blushed a little, because the glasses made it impossible for her to see just what this boy was looking at. She couldn't decide if she liked him or if he was just a jerk, and so she dawdled in the doorway and wouldn't come down or go back inside. She said, "What's all that stuff painted on your car?"

"Can'tcha read it?" He opened the door very carefully, as if he were afraid it might fall off. He slid out just as carefully, planting his feet firmly on the ground, the tiny metallic world in his glasses slowing down like gelatine hardening, and in the midst of it Connie's bright green blouse. "This here is my name, to begin with, he said. ARNOLD FRIEND was written in tar-like black letters on the side, with a drawing of a round, grinning face that reminded Connie of a pumpkin, except it wore sunglasses. "I wanna introduce myself, I'm Arnold Friend and that's my real name and I'm gonna be your friend, honey, and inside the car's Ellie Oscar, he's kinda shy." Ellie brought his transistor radio up to his shoulder and balanced it there. "Now, these numbers are a secret code, honey," Arnold Friend explained. He read off the numbers 33, 19, 17 and raised his eyebrows at her to see what she thought of that, but she didn't think much of it. The left rear fender had been smashed and around it was written, on the gleaming gold background: DONE BY CRAZY WOMAN DRIVER. Connie had to laugh at that. Arnold Friend was pleased at her laughter and looked up at her. "Around the other side's a lot more —you wanta come and see them?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"Don'tcha wanta see what's on the car? Don'tcha wanta go for a ride?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

"I got things to do."

"Like what?"

"Things."

He laughed as if she had said something funny. He slapped his thighs. He was standing in a strange way, leaning back against the car as if he were balancing himself. He wasn't tall, only an inch or so taller than she would be if she came down to him. Connie liked the way he was dressed, which was the way all of them dressed: tight faded jeans stuffed into black, scuffed boots, a belt that pulled his waist in and showed how lean he was, and a white pull-over shirt that was a little soiled and showed the hard small muscles of his arms and shoulders. He looked as if he probably did hard work, lifting and carrying things. Even his neck looked muscular. And his face was a familiar face, somehow: the jaw and chin and
cheeks slightly darkened because he hadn't shaved for a day or two, and the nose long and hawklike, sniffing as if she were a treat he was going to gobble up and it was all a joke.

"Connie, you ain't telling the truth. This is your day set aside for a ride with me and you know it," he said, still laughing. The way he straightened and recovered from his fit of laughing showed that it had been all fake.

"How do you know what my name is?" she said suspiciously.

"It's Connie."

"Maybe and maybe not."

"I know my Connie," he said, wagging his finger. Now she remembered him even better, back at the restaurant, and her cheeks warmed at the thought of how she had sucked in her breath just at the moment she passed him—how she must have looked to him. And he had remembered her. "Ellie and I come out here especially for you," he said. "Ellie can sit in back. How about it?"

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where're we going?"

He looked at her. He took off the sunglasses and she saw how pale the skin around his eyes was, like holes that were not in shadow but instead in light. His eyes were like chips of broken glass that catch the light in an amiable way. He smiled. It was as if the idea of going for a ride somewhere, to someplace, was a new idea to him.

"Just for a ride, Connie sweetheart."

"I never said my name was Connie," she said.

"But I know what it is. I know your name and all about you, lots of things," Arnold Friend said. He had not moved yet but stood still leaning back against the side of his jalopy. "I took a special interest in you, such a pretty girl, and found out all about you—like I know your parents and sister are gone somewheres and I know where and how long they're going to be gone, and I know who you were with last night, and your best girl friend's name is Betty. Right?"

He spoke in a simple lilting voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to a song. His smile assured her that everything was fine. In the car Ellie turned up the volume on his radio and did not bother to look around at them.

"Ellie can sit in the back seat," Arnold Friend said. He indicated his friend with a casual jerk of his chin, as if Ellie did not count and she should not bother with him.
"How'd you find out all that stuff?" Connie said.

"Listen: Betty Schultz and Tony Fitch and Jimmy Pettinger and Nancy Pettinger," he said in a chant. "Raymond Stanley and Bob Hutter—"

"Do you know all those kids?"

"I know everybody."

"Look, you're kidding. You're not from around here."

"Sure."

"But—how come we never saw you before?"

"Sure you saw me before," he said. He looked down at his boots, as if he were a little offended. "You just don't remember."

"I guess I'd remember you," Connie said.

"Yeah?" He looked up at this, beaming. He was pleased. He began to mark time with the music from Ellie's radio, tapping his fists lightly together. Connie looked away from his smile to the car, which was painted so bright it almost hurt her eyes to look at it. She looked at that name, ARNOLD FRIEND. And up at the front fender was an expression that was familiar—MAN THE FLYING SAUCERS. It was an expression kids had used the year before but didn't use this year. She looked at it for a while as if the words meant something to her that she did not yet know.

"What're you thinking about? Huh?" Arnold Friend demanded. "Not worried about your hair blowing around in the car, are you?"

"No."

"Think I maybe can't drive good?"

"How do I know?"

"You're a hard girl to handle. How come?" he said. "Don't you know I'm your friend? Didn't you see me put my sign in the air when you walked by?"

"What sign?"

"My sign." And he drew an X in the air, leaning out toward her. They were maybe ten feet apart. After his hand fell back to his side the X was still in the air, almost visible. Connie let the screen door close and stood perfectly still inside it, listening to the music from her radio and the boy's blend together. She stared at Arnold Friend. He stood there so stiffly relaxed, pretending to be relaxed, with one hand idly on the door handle as if he were keeping himself up that way and had no intention of ever moving
again. She recognized most things about him, the tight jeans that showed his thighs and buttocks and the greasy leather boots and the tight shirt, and even that slippery friendly smile of his, that sleepy dreamy smile that all the boys used to get across ideas they didn't want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the singsong way he talked, slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little melancholy, and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual music behind him. But all these things did not come together.

She said suddenly, "Hey, how old are you?"

His smiled faded. She could see then that he wasn't a kid, he was much older—thirty, maybe more. At this knowledge her heart began to pound faster.

"That's a crazy thing to ask. Can'tcha see I'm your own age?"

"Like hell you are."

"Or maybe a couple years older. I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen?" she said doubtfully.

He grinned to reassure her and lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. His teeth were big and white. He grinned so broadly his eyes became slits and she saw how thick the lashes were, thick and black as if painted with a black tar-like material. Then, abruptly, he seemed to become embarrassed and looked over his shoulder at Ellie. "Him, he's crazy," he said. "Ain't he a riot? He's a nut, a real character." Ellie was still listening to the music. His sunglasses told nothing about what he was thinking. He wore a bright orange shirt unbuttoned halfway to show his chest, which was a pale, bluish chest and not muscular like Arnold Friend's. His shirt collar was turned up all around and the very tips of the collar pointed out past his chin as if they were protecting him. He was pressing the transistor radio up against his ear and sat there in a kind of daze, right in the sun.

"He's kinda strange," Connie said.

"Hey, she says you're kinda strange! Kinda strange!" Arnold Friend cried. He pounded on the car to get Ellie's attention. Ellie turned for the first time and Connie saw with shock that he wasn't a kid either—he had a fair, hairless face, cheeks reddened slightly as if the veins grew too close to the surface of his skin, the face of a forty-year-old baby. Connie felt a wave of dizziness rise in her at this sight and she stared at him as if waiting for something to change the shock of the moment, make it all right again. Ellie's lips kept shaping words, mumbling along with the words blasting in his ear.

"Maybe you two better go away," Connie said faintly.

"What? How come?" Arnold Friend cried. "We come out here to take you for a ride. It's Sunday." He had the voice of the man on the radio now. It was the same voice, Connie thought. "Don'tcha know it's Sunday all day? And honey, no matter who you were with last night, today you're with Arnold Friend and don't you forget it! Maybe you better step out here," he said, and this last was in a different voice. It was a little flatter, as if the heat was finally getting to him.
"No. I got things to do."

"Hey."

"You two better leave."

"We ain't leaving until you come with us."

"Like hell I am—"

"Connie, don't fool around with me. I mean—I mean, don't fool around," he said, shaking his head. He laughed incredulously. He placed his sunglasses on top of his head, carefully, as if he were indeed wearing a wig, and brought the stems down behind his ears. Connie stared at him, another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur standing there against his gold car, and she had the idea that he had driven up the driveway all right but had come from nowhere before that and belonged nowhere and that everything about him and even about the music that was so familiar to her was only half real.

"If my father comes and sees you—"

"He ain't coming. He's at a barbecue."

"How do you know that?"

"Aunt Tillie's. Right now they're uh—they're drinking. Sitting around," he said vaguely, squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Tillie's back yard. Then the vision seemed to get clear and he nodded energetically. "Yeah. Sitting around. There's your sister in a blue dress, huh? And high heels, the poor sad bitch—nothing like you, sweetheart! And your mother's helping some fat woman with the corn, they're cleaning the corn—husking the corn—"

"What fat woman?" Connie cried.

"How do I know what fat woman, I don't know every goddamn fat woman in the world!" Arnold Friend laughed.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Hornsby . . . . Who invited her?" Connie said. She felt a little lightheaded. Her breath was coming quickly.

"She's too fat. I don't like them fat. I like them the way you are, honey," he said, smiling sleepily at her. They stared at each other for a while through the screen door. He said softly, "Now, what you're going to do is this: you're going to come out that door. You're going to sit up front with me and Ellie's going to sit in the back, the hell with Ellie, right? This isn't Ellie's date. You're my date. I'm your lover, honey."

"What? You're crazy—"
"Yes, I'm your lover. You don't know what that is but you will," he said. "I know that too. I know all about you. But look: it's real nice and you couldn't ask for nobody better than me, or more polite. I always keep my word. I'll tell you how it is, I'm always nice at first, the first time. I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me."

"Shut up! You're crazy!" Connie said. She backed away from the door. She put her hands up against her ears as if she'd heard something terrible, something not meant for her. "People don't talk like that, you're crazy," she muttered. Her heart was almost too big now for her chest and its pumping made sweat break out all over her. She looked out to see Arnold Friend pause and then take a step toward the porch, lurching. He almost fell. But, like a clever drunken man, he managed to catch his balance. He wobbled in his high boots and grabbed hold of one of the porch posts.

"Honey?" he said. "You still listening?"

"Get the hell out of here!"

"Be nice, honey. Listen."

"I'm going to call the police—"

He wobbled again and out of the side of his mouth came a fast spat curse, an aside not meant for her to hear. But even this "Christ!" sounded forced. Then he began to smile again. She watched this smile come, awkward as if he were smiling from inside a mask. His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat.

"Honey—? Listen, here's how it is. I always tell the truth and I promise you this: I ain't coming in that house after you."

"You better not! I'm going to call the police if you—if you don't—"

"Honey," he said, talking right through her voice, "honey, I m not coming in there but you are coming out here. You know why?"

She was panting. The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her. The kitchen window had never had a curtain, after three years, and there were dishes in the sink for her to do—probably—and if you ran your hand across the table you'd probably feel something sticky there.

"You listening, honey? Hey?" "—going to call the police—"

"Soon as you touch the phone I don't need to keep my promise and can come inside. You won't want that."
She rushed forward and tried to lock the door. Her fingers were shaking. "But why lock it," Arnold Friend said gently, talking right into her face. "It's just a screen door. It's just nothing," One of his boots was at a strange angle, as if his foot wasn't in it. It pointed out to the left, bent at the ankle. "I mean, anybody can break through a screen door and glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all, and specially Arnold Friend. If the place got lit up with a fire, honey, you'd come runnin' out into my arms, right into my arms an' safe at home—like you knew I was your lover and'd stopped fooling around. I don't mind a nice shy girl but I don't like no fooling around." Part of those words were spoken with a slight rhythmic lilt, and Connie somehow recognized them—the echo of a song from last year, about a girl rushing into her boy friend's arms and coming home again—

Connie stood barefoot on the linoleum floor, staring at him. "What do you want?" she whispered.

"I want you," he said.

"What?"

"Seen you that night and thought, that's the one, yes sir. I never needed to look anymore."

"But my father's coming back. He's coming to get me. I had to wash my hair first—" She spoke in a dry, rapid voice, hardly raising it for him to hear.

"No, your daddy is not coming and yes, you had to wash your hair and you washed it for me. It's nice and shining and all for me. I thank you sweetheart," he said with a mock bow, but again he almost lost his balance. Evidently his feet did not go all the way down; the boots must have been stuffed with something so that he would seem taller. Connie stared out at him and behind him at Ellie in the car, who seemed to be looking off toward Connie's right, into nothing. This Ellie said, pulling the words out of the air one after another as if he were just discovering them, "You want me to pull out the phone?"

"Shut your mouth and keep it shut," Arnold Friend said, his face red from bending over or maybe from embarrassment because Connie had seen his boots. "This ain't none of your business."

"What—what are you doing? What do you want?" Connie said. "If I call the police they'll get you, they'll arrest you—"

"Promise was not to come in unless you touch that phone, and I'll keep that promise," he said. He resumed his erect position and tried to force his shoulders back. He sounded like a hero in a movie, declaring something important. But he spoke too loudly and it was as if he were speaking to someone behind Connie. "I ain't made plans for coming in that house where I don't belong but just for you to come out to me, the way you should. Don't you know who I am?"

"You're crazy," she whispered. She backed away from the door but did not want to go into another part of the house, as if this would give him permission to come through the door. "What do you . . . you're crazy, you. . . ."

"Huh? What're you saying, honey?"
Her eyes darted everywhere in the kitchen. She could not remember what it was, this room.

"This is how it is, honey: you come out and we'll drive away, have a nice ride. But if you don't come out we're gonna wait till your people come home and then they're all going to get it."

"You want that telephone pulled out?" Ellie said. He held the radio away from his ear and grimaced, as if without the radio the air was too much for him.

"I toldja shut up, Ellie," Arnold Friend said, "you're deaf, get a hearing aid, right? Fix yourself up. This little girl's no trouble and's gonna be nice to me, so Ellie keep to yourself, this ain't your date right? Don't hem in on me, don't hog, don't crush, don't bird dog, don't trail me," he said in a rapid, meaningless voice, as if he were running through all the expressions he'd learned but was no longer sure which of them was in style, then rushing on to new ones, making them up with his eyes closed. "Don't crawl under my fence, don't squeeze in my chipmonk hole, don't sniff my glue, suck my popsicle, keep your own greasy fingers on yourself!" He shaded his eyes and peered in at Connie, who was backed against the kitchen table. "Don't mind him, honey, he's just a creep. He's a dope. Right? I'm the boy for you, and like I said, you come out here nice like a lady and give me your hand, and nobody else gets hurt, I mean, your nice old bald-headed daddy and your mummy and your sister in her high heels. Because listen: why bring them in this?"

"Leave me alone," Connie whispered.

"Hey, you know that old woman down the road, the one with the chickens and stuff—you know her?"

"She's dead!"

"Dead? What? You know her?" Arnold Friend said.

"She's dead—"

"Don't you like her?"

"She's dead—she's—she isn't here any more—"

But don't you like her, I mean, you got something against her? Some grudge or something?" Then his voice dipped as if he were conscious of a rudeness. He touched the sunglasses perched up on top of his head as if to make sure they were still there. "Now, you be a good girl."

'What are you going to do?"

"Just two things, or maybe three," Arnold Friend said. "But I promise it won't last long and you'll like me the way you get to like people you're close to. You will. It's all over for you here, so come on out. You don't want your people in any trouble, do you?"
She turned and bumped against a chair or something, hurting her leg, but she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend was stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house.

After a while she could hear again. She was sitting on the floor with her wet back against the wall.

Arnold Friend was saying from the door, "That's a good girl. Put the phone back."

She kicked the phone away from her.

"No, honey. Pick it up. Put it back right."

She picked it up and put it back. The dial tone stopped.

"That's a good girl. Now, you come outside."

She was hollow with what had been fear but what was now just an emptiness. All that screaming had blasted it out of her. She sat, one leg cramped under her, and deep inside her brain was something like a pinpoint of light that kept going and would not let her relax. She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet.

Arnold Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?"

She thought, I have got to think. I have got to know what to do.

"We'll go out to a nice field, out in the country here where it smells so nice and it's sunny," Arnold Friend said. "I'll have my arms tight around you so you won't need to try to get away and I'll show you what love is like, what it does. The hell with this house! It looks solid all right," he said. He ran a fingernail down the screen and the noise did not make Connie shiver, as it would have the day before. "Now, put your hand on your heart, honey. Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better. Be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?—and get away before her people come back?"

She felt her pounding heart. Her hand seemed to enclose it. She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either.

"You don't want them to get hurt," Arnold Friend went on. "Now, get up, honey. Get up all by yourself."
She stood.

"Now, turn this way. That's right. Come over here to me.—Ellie, put that away, didn't I tell you? You dope. You miserable creepy dope," Arnold Friend said. His words were not angry but only part of an incantation. The incantation was kindly. "Now come out through the kitchen to me, honey, and let's see a smile, try it, you're a brave, sweet little girl and now they're eating corn and hot dogs cooked to bursting over an outdoor fire, and they don't know one thing about you and never did and honey, you're better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you."

Connie felt the linoleum under her feet; it was cool. She brushed her hair back out of her eyes. Arnold Friend let go of the post tentatively and opened his arms for her, his elbows pointing in toward each other and his wrists limp, to show that this was an embarrassed embrace and a little mocking, he didn't want to make her self-conscious.

She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited.

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Connie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it.