

GRADUATION  
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Sorryl Hoffer

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ABSTRACT

Sorryl Hoffer

Graduation

A Collection of Short Stories

This collection of short stories has as its unifying idea, the theme of graduation (which is also the title story). The stories concern change and progression in life from a number of focal points-- those of age, emotion, self awareness, and above all the realization of the essential tragicomic nature of human existence. The stories are arranged chronologically; they start with youth and proceed through the various phases of maturity to old age.

Graduation is meant to represent a manner of growing up funny and sad, cynical yet innocent, anguished but not without hope. The characters come from a narrow cross-section of society but are universal in their reactions to the problems of living and loving in a contemporary world.

To  
Frank  
who cared  
and  
Debra, David, and Lisa  
{ who shared

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Acknowledgement is made to Chatelaine in which the story called "Graduation" is about to appear.

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## METABOLISM

"So it must be metabolism, Dr. Moorehead, because / at home he doesn't get enough food to feed a bird. Never mind a bird, I should say a fly even. A premature baby in an incubator eats more than my Edgar. The whole family is fading away, he should be thin." Mrs. Florsheim's fat lady's laugh rising from the once ample regions of her belly now echoed flatly in the doctor's consulting room. She pulled out inches of violet swirled nylon fabric from the region of her waistline to demonstrate a dramatic weight loss. "Thirty pounds in a month, doctor, twenty for my husband, my daughter is thin like a pin, and him—" she waved in

the direction of the examining table-- "My Edgar gained six pounds, so I say it must be metabolism."

Dr. Moorehead drummed perfectly manicured hands on the polished top of his mahogany desk. He glanced at the record card in front of him. "Six pounds, four ounces in twenty-eight days. However, the tests are quite conclusive, Mrs. Florsheim, there is absolutely no evidence of metabolic dysfunction, which can only suggest an inordinate ingestion of foods with an unnecessarily elevated caloric value. Would you not agree?" He removed his glasses and looked inquiringly at Mrs. Florsheim.

She shifted uneasily in her chair and began to sweat profusely. "You mean..."

"Precisely. He eats too much."

"Impossible. Like I said, there's not enough food in the house to feed a bird."

"My dear Mrs. Florsheim, your son is thirteen-- he's quite capable of buying the food which you so carefully deprive him of." He glanced at the boy sitting naked from the waist up on the examining table, the smooth round cheeks, the unblinking eyelids, the layered pillows of fat from upper chest to stomach giving him the appearance of some junior Buddha.

"Edgar, you no doubt spend all your allowance and your spare time on a few extra snacks, am I right?"

Edgar smiled carefully in the direction of his mother.

"He doesn't and he couldn't," she said triumphantly. "A physical impossibility, Dr. Moorehead. Listen how we arrange it and you'll figure it out for yourself. First thing we cut out his allowance. Not a penny! Then we figure out how much time it takes him from one place to another, he shouldn't sneak in for a nibble. It's very scientific. Look here-- I give him exactly twenty minutes to get to school every morning, it's a mile, he comes home for lunch, he shouldn't have to eat in the cafeteria, all that junk, yech! If he needs money for a pencil he has to produce the pencil and the receipt." Mrs. Florsheim leaned forward to the very edge of her seat as though the best was yet to come. "Even his violin lesson is timed-- one hour and fourteen minutes-- seven minutes there, one hour for the lesson, seven minutes back. I watch the clock to the second, like a hawk I am, and for the swimming and exercises at the Y, I drive him myself, personally, and wait outside in the car."

Dr. Moorehead looked startled. He picked up a gold pen from the embossed leather caddy on his desk and drew a series of concentric circles on the blotter. "The regime seems a bit severe for a young man your age, wouldn't you say, Edgar?"



"He's an angel, Doctor," said Mrs. Florsheim, "an absolute angel. You wouldn't believe it, never a word of complaint; he's a pleasure to live with-- I wish I could say the same for my husband, he thinks I'm a regular nut, let the boy be fat and finished with the diet, why should we all suffer, but I'm positive Edgar can do it. Still, it's a month already, he's gained six pounds, something is wrong, it must be metabolism, so maybe you'd send us to a gland doctor, they could try pills."

"If Edgar is willing," said Dr. Moorehead, "I might suggest continuing our present course for another month. Before we consult an endocrinologist (and I am almost convinced of the futility of such an action), I think we might reduce the caloric intake to 1000 per day and be persistently vigilant. What do you say, Edgar?"

The Buddha smile appeared gently and radiantly.

"Sure."

"1000 calories! It's like nothing!" Mrs. Florsheim paled. She turned to her son, "Edgar, could you stand it?"

"Sure, Ma, I don't mind."

"You see what I mean, Dr. Moorehead? An angel!"

The doctor drew interlocking rectangles up and down the sides of his blotter. "You may get dressed, Edgar," he said without looking up from his desk. "I'm sure our combined program of restricted diet and controlled

physical activity is bound to prove efficacious."

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Two weeks later Mrs. Florsheim sat across the desk from Dr. Moorehead. On the examining table, half clothed, sat Edgar, his face a picture of perfect repose.

"Edgar has gained another two pounds," said Dr. Moorehead. "I am both surprised and chagrined. Though I do not share your fears of metabolic disorder, Mrs. Florsheim, I will be prepared to consult with an endocrinologist after another trial week of strict diet."

"So now I'll explain you all about metabolism," said Mrs. Florsheim, pulling her chair up so that it almost touched Dr. Moorehead's desk. "Let me tell you a little story." She sucked in her breath like an opera singer preparing for a long and emotionally charged aria.

"One day last week, just before Edgar is going to school, I hear a funny noise coming from his pockets-- this jingly-jangly sound like bits of metal clinking together. Suddenly a lamp turns on right inside my head, and I know what it is-- the noise. I'm a woman overcome, Dr. Moorehead."

"You mean..." said Dr. Moorehead, looking mystified.

"Just wait," said Mrs. Florsheim, "it's a good thing you're sitting down. Here's what I do. I look quick in my coat pocket-- I left some loose change there the day

before-- maybe a dollar or so-- gone! I could drop dead on the spot. But I pull myself into one piece and I run! Down to the basement-- I have to beat Edgar, "who's about to go to school, you see."

Dr. Moorehead sat perfectly still and waited.

"And I fly like an eagle to the trunk-- the big black one, it was Mr. Florsheim's father's from Russia-- his father, I mean, not the trunk-- so much dust you never saw-- the trunk, not the father. So I open it-- it's the one with old costumes and dress-up stuff the kids still use sometimes for parties-- and I plunge in and come up with-- guess what?" Her eyes challenged Dr. Moorehead, whose mouth fell open exposing exquisite white teeth.

"So you can't guess? I'll tell you. A sari!" cried Mrs. Florsheim. "Orange, yellow and purple, in pure silk-- fantastic material-- then I find a chiffon veil-- sequin-studded in black and silver and--" (she was now practically eyeball to eyeball with Dr. Moorehead, who seemed mesmerized). "my grandmother's old black wig-- she was bald, not orthodox. Faster than the speed of sound I put on the sari, clap the wig on my head and drape the veil over my hair. Then I dash out of the house, but those saris are a pain, they tie you up in the ankles. Anyway I see him just around the corner about to..."

"Who?" asked Dr. Moorehead, barely breathing.

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"My Edgar! Who else? The nerve of that kid-- he lifts a thumb, gives a smile, and in two seconds a gorgeous Cadillac Eldorado stops and they drive off. I grab a cab and follow, careful so as to blend with the scenery, but with an orange and purple sari it's not easy. Where do you think my Edgar goes?"

"To school?" hazarded Dr. Moorehead.

"Not so fast! First the Cadillac stops a block away from the school, Edgar gets out and slips into a restaurant-- you know one of those neighbourhood type places with rubber plants and a spray of spaghetti in the window-- you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean. But..."

"No buts. Just listen to this. Edgar sits down on a stool at the counter, he gives the waitress a smile like it should melt the heart of a Hitler, and he orders breakfast."

"Had he not had his breakfast at home?" asked Dr. Moorehead, his voice a whisper.

"Certainly he had! He ate his half grapefruit, his boiled egg, and his five ounces of skim milk, Of course. I follow the diet to the letter. I even measured..."

"Naturally, Mrs. Florsheim. I know-- go on." An anguished flush covered Dr. Moorehead's cheeks. "You were saying that your son proceeded to order his breakfast."

"And such a breakfast-- two fried eggs, three sausages, two slices toast and as a bonus the waitress, a regular doll-- you could see she's in love with my Edgar-- throws in, for free a blueberry Danish. So Edgar polishes all this off in five minutes flat and then..."

"And then?"

"And then he goes to school. Naturally."

"Oh." Dr. Moorehead looked disappointed. "And you?"

"Me? I go home. Naturally-- the breakfast dishes aren't done even. Well, I do my work, but with a very heavy heart, like the joy has gone out of my day. Next thing I know it's almost three o'clock. Time to spy on my Edgar. I feel like a regular actress. So I fly downstairs to the trunk."

"Back to the trunk?" asked Dr. Moorehead eagerly.

"Of course. Why, you'll ask? For a costume, naturally, but it's getting late so I have to grab helter-skelter-- a cloak here, a hat there, a veil for the face-- I don't know who I am-- maybe Mata Hari, maybe Greta Garbo, I have no time for mirrors. I take off like a jet rocket-- whoosh-- straight to school-- and I wait."

Dr. Moorehead removed a fine monogrammed handkerchief from his breast pocket and swabbed his face which had broken out in a light sweat.

"Now get this-- like James Bond I'm trailing him."

Edgar goes to Miss Roger's house-- the violin teacher. He's on the dot at four, but guess who comes out of the house at four-thirty instead of at five?"

"Not-- surely not..."

"Surely yes. My Edgar! Absolutely! So it's half an hour early and he's paid for half a lesson, so he's five dollars richer. He pockets the money, I see with my own eyes, then he goes down the block to a snack bar and puts away four hot dogs, French fries and a double banana split. After that I'm so heartsick I go home and right to bed. The next day..."

"You mean to say you continued this incredible chase the next day, too?" asked Dr. Moorehead.

"Just in the afternoon. I had to know what was going on at the Y. So the next day at three-thirty I drive him there. Then-- I wait a bit, I go in the building, I have a little chat with the cleaning lady, I go into an empty room, and five minutes later I'm wearing a blue smock, sneakers, a kerchief around my head and I'm pushing a mop."

"Am I correct in assuming..."

"You are 100 per cent correct. Suddenly I'm transformed into a charlady, a very boring job, let me tell you. But I had more on my mind than dust. I push my mop very quickly, such speed they never saw in the Y even on

the basketball floor. I look into the gym-- no Edgar. I mop my way to the swimming pool-- what a shock! It's topless and bottomless this year-- did you know? But why not? The human body is very nicely formed-- the boys all wave and yell at me, but I can't hear what with the water splashing and the whistle blowing-- anyway-- no Edgar. Up the stairs I go, to the cafeteria-- and, guess who I see?"

"Edgar!" cried Dr. Moorehead with a note of pure joy in his voice.

"Correct. And what he's wearing? You can't guess? So I'll tell you. Bandages-- from head to foot. And his arm is in a sling-- not his eating arm, of course."

"But-- but why?" Dr. Moorehead turned towards the examining table and cast a furtive glance up at Edgar who returned the look with a dazzling grin.

Mrs. Florsheim smiled pityingly. "So if you're bandaged you're injured, and if you're injured you can't do gym or swim. So now you see it's not metabolism, Dr. Moorehead, and I didn't want you to think you made any mistakes which is why I'm telling you the whole sad story."

"Well," said the doctor briskly, "you have now presented me with another complication of a problem which I have felt all along to be psychological rather than endocrinological. In my considered opinion..."

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. Florsheim, "now I have to tell you what my Edgar said when I asked him why he did all these terrible things-- lying and cheating and even stealing-- what do you think he said?"

"Ahem," said Dr. Moorehead, "perhaps your son should dress and wait in the outer office."

"Sure," said Edgar smiling benevolently. He stepped down from the examining table. "I guess I'll go home, I have lots of homework to do."

"Would you believe, Dr. Moorehead," continued Mrs. Florsheim, "he said he knew he was wrong, but he did all those things to please me-- a mother should be pleased with a criminal for a son! He said I seemed so anxious about the whole diet business that he just went along with it for my sake. And when I asked him, does he like being fat when everyone's thin, do you know what he said? He said he likes being fat. Can you imagine?"

Dr. Moorehead cleared his throat noisily. "It is my definite belief that a different psychological approach has to be attempted, Mrs. Florsheim. The caloric quantity must be drastically revised upwards-- this will have an immediate beneficial effect and may cut down the extracurricular consumption. Do you follow me?"

"I'm with you 100 per cent," said Mrs. Florsheim, "I'll try anything."



"Furthermore," said Dr. Moorehead, "I cannot urge upon Edgar strongly enough some regular form of exercise."

"My Edgar hates exercise," said Mrs. Florsheim--  
"let's face facts, I shouldn't be made a fool of again."

"I do believe that with thought and effort you might get him to partake in some kind of daily activity-- even walking. Walking is very healthy."

"He hitchhikes to school-- I saw with my own eyes."

"The boy has to be goal oriented," said Dr. Moorehead. "Work out some scheme whereby there is a particular reward at the end of the daily walk. I leave it to your ingenuity."

Mrs. Florsheim stood up. "Thank you, Dr. Moorehead-- I'll think of something."

When Mrs. Florsheim got home she immediately sought out Edgar. Her mind was suddenly clear. He would have to be punished.

She found him in his bedroom doing a geometry construction. His moon-face smile loomed up at her. Already Mrs. Florsheim could feel that inevitable melting tenderness creeping upwards to the region of her heart, a fatally sensitive portion of her anatomy.

Her voice, when she spoke was unnaturally high,  
"You have to be punished, Edgar. I will discuss the punish-

ment with your father later and then tell you what we have decided. Do you understand?"

Edgar nodded cheerfully. "Sure."

"Now the other matter to discuss is exercise. Exercise is an absolute must for your health. You heard the doctor."

Edgar looked intrigued and pained at the same time.

"Like what, Ma?"

Mrs. Florsheim allowed herself a small smug smile.

"Like a dog. Tomorrow I buy a puppy. You'll feed him, you'll take care of him and you'll WALK him! Three, four times a day, he'll need a good walk, maybe even a run. That way you'll eat and stay healthy. Okay?"

"Sure, Ma," said Edgar, "I wouldn't mind a little poodle."

"I had in mind something more like a Great Dane or a Russian wolfhound or one of those real fast types like they use in the dog races-- you know-- it's the name of a bus?"

"Not a greyhound!" said Edgar, staring in awe at his mother as if he had seen some new facet of her character never before revealed.

"That's it," said Mrs. Florsheim placidly. "Tomorrow I'll find out all about greyhounds. Now you do your homework. My mind is made up!"

She went to the telephone in the hall and dialled a number. "This is Mrs. Florsheim-- Edgar's mother. Am I speaking to Dr. Moorehead's secretary, to an answering service, or maybe to a record? A real live person? Good. Would you please cancel all Edgar's next appointments. I'm positively certain. Now if you will connect me with the doctor. Hello, Dr. Moorehead? Mrs. Florsheim here-- Edgar's mother. I had to tell you something, doctor-- in the psychology department you're first class. Also, I'm not so dumb myself. I used my ingenuity like you said, and I came up with a foolproof scheme to get Edgar to exercise. Guess. So if you can't guess, I'll tell you. A dog! Clever? I thought you'd appreciate it. So he'll exercise the dog and he'll get thin. Now I'm going to celebrate with the best meal I've ever eaten in my life-- believe me, doctor, the family needs it. Cherry cheese-cake, smoked meat-- the works-- all thanks to Dr. Moorehead. You were absolutely right about the metabolism. Absolutely. You have just saved a mother. Thank you, Dr. Moorehead."

Upstairs, Edgar finished his math homework and went to the telephone in the hall. He peered down the stairs and listened carefully for a moment. Then he spoke very softly into the receiver. "Hi, Joey-- Edgar-- yeah, listen-- I've great news. I'm getting a dog! Yeah, I know

I'm lucky. A real purebred with a pedigree and everything. Listen-- I know how crazy you are about dogs-- I thought maybe because you've been so great about sharing your recess snack with me I could do you a real favour. How would you like to kind of share this dog with me? Yeah, I'm serious. Honest. Listen-- I'll feed him and he'll sleep over here, but I'll let you walk him. Yep-- I really will. About three times a day. Sure-- four or five if you like. Great. Oh no-- I wouldn't dream of taking money. Not from a friend. Oh no-- well, maybe a buck a week, if you insist, if it'll make you feel better. You're welcome. What kind? A greyhound. No, it's not the bus, it's the dog. Purebred, like I told you. Yeah, see you."

Edgar hung up and settled back in his easy chair. A beatific smile lit up his moon-face; he leaned back and shut his eyes and sniffed with pleasurable anticipation at the bouquet of aromas wafting upstairs from the kitchen.

## THE MIRROR

I caught sight of myself in the hall mirror this morning, one of those sidelong glimpses that takes you completely unawares and sets you thinking for the rest of the day. That sudden encounter with me, Sophy, really had me kind of philosophising for hours, and believe me, it's not the happiest experience, though terribly good for the soul, I guess.

It's this whole business about what you see in a mirror and what's left out that got me. There I was, all fourteen and a half years of me, short, pleasingly plump (well, let's face it-- slightly F-A-T!) long, straggling sort of rat-coloured hair, eyes that have no mystery

about them at all, they're just eyes, and this large blooming pimple sitting redly in the middle of my forehead-- lop-sided too, so it couldn't even pass for a caste mark-- anyway I don't look at all Indian-- just plain adolescent-Jewish-American. I ask you, is it fair? Who's to know about my sparkling intelligence, my insight beyond my years, a head crammed with a muddle of fascinating information, a heart bursting with compassion for the whole race?

I suppose it all goes back to being permanently motherless (my mother died very dramatically in childbirth) and having a perfectly gorgeous father who's consumed by his passion for business and revolting sex-goddess type females. He treats me like some kind of pet spaniel which he lavishes attention on when it's convenient, and disposes of when he's busy. Like now-- he's in Europe on a buying trip and I've been shipped off to Aunt Ethel and Uncle Jack's for the whole summer. Not that I dislike them, they're great in a hearty family manner, I just sort of despise them, they're so utterly bourgeois.

The worst of it is they live in this real suburban town near the beach-- it's not that far from the city, and rather pretty in white picket fence, gracious gardens manner, but still suburbia. With all that means, you know. I won't go into all the clichés about the kind of life, but believe me they're not far wrong in this case.

Like my family. Not Daddy because he's unique and different and marvellous, if somewhat selfish now and then. I mean Aunt Ethel and Uncle Jack.

Aunt Ethel, for instance-- she's awfully kind-- in a bossy sort of way-- good nature fairly oozes from her. I think what bothers me about her is a sneaking horror of looking like that in thirty years-- puffed up on top, waistless and then everything trailing off to these very short skinny little bird legs, and then itty, bitty feet in high heels. And she always wears something sparkling on that pigeon chest, like masses of pearls or beaded sweaters or lots of clanking gold chains.

Aunt Ethel is nice, I really care about her, and I know she's fond of me, but she's awfully dull. The thing is she's very bourgeois, (isn't that a terrific word? I just discovered it). I know I'm bourgeois too and so is Daddy, but at least I'm not a crashing bore, and of course Daddy is terribly charming and causes hearts to pound wherever he goes.

Actually Aunt Ethel is a real power in her own way. She's a female bully and gets everyone to do exactly as she pleases, but manages to come out a martyr all the time. I haven't figured out how she does it, but it always works, especially with Uncle Jack.

You see, Aunt Ethel has two sides to her-- the

stern matriarch who rules the household-- but also a very feminine soul inside the bullying exterior with a real soft heart. She can be sloppy sentimental sometimes-- not often-- but if you hit the right chord she's all mush. I guess it's the Jewish mother in her plus old Mother Earth. Anyhow it's quite a formidable combination.

As for Uncle Jack-- I almost forgot him. There's something wierd about Uncle Jack that I just realized-- it's absolutely supernatural! I guess he's quite a lot older than Aunt Ethel-- maybe five or ten years-- but he's exactly like her! But exactly! He's got that same pigeon shape with the bosom part shifted down to a round protruding stomach, he's the same height and I'll bet-- I could swear-- that he's got the same skinny little legs.

Of course his personality is different. It's almost not there. He mumbles and grumbles and disappears behind his newspaper and agrees with everything Aunt Ethel says. I've visited there at least a dozen times and I really don't think he knows who I am. He sometimes looks up at me from his paper with this puzzled look on his face as if to say-- now who's she? But I like him; he's sweet in a special kind of way.

As for cousin Francesca-- but that brings me back to the mirror and things not being what they seem and all that. Now Francesca, who is Aunt Ethel and Uncle Jack's



one and only, and unfortunately just my age, is a prime example of what I'm trying to work out in my own mind about the whole gross unfairness of judging by externals and so on.

The thing is-- Francesca is completely beautiful and even intelligent looking (though it kills me to say it). Would you believe it possible that a girl whose entire mental and physical energies are devoted to the care and adornment of face and body could look like one of those Renaissance Italian madonnas? It's positively sickening!

She's tall and languid, has thick flowing black hair, and her eyes are deep glowing pools that seem full of the mystery of life, when all she's thinking about the whole time is what shade of eye shadow would suit her best. And she's stupid, I mean really dumb. She only gets promoted because Aunt Ethel yanks her from one private school to the next and they kind of move her along on the basis of her mother's sheer matriarchal force of personality. There's no headmistress that Aunt Ethel can't manipulate-- after all, she's had years of experience with Uncle Jack and Francesca who don't seem to mind at all.

Let's face it, I suppose I'm jealous of Francesca, though I've been trying to put the whole problem on an elevated abstract level. Plain jealous, which is awful, and unworthy. But there it is. Besides there are exten-

uating circumstances. This summer is so boring! Like today! It was one of those rainy, dismal days that makes you want to scream. We couldn't go to the beach, or play tennis, or even indulge in Francesca's favourite occupation-- shopping-- since Aunt Ethel's car is being fixed. So we had a real moochy kind of morning. Aunt Ethel cooked, made about two hundred phone calls and scrapped with Francesca, and I read the same paragraph in a dreary detective story about a dozen times.

I ate twenty carrots and two heads of lettuce before lunch while Francesca consumed half a pizza and a peanut butter sandwich washed down with two cokes. I've gained three pounds since I came here and probably shrunk inches, while Francesca is taller than ever, and divinely willowy. I was so furious with her for looking the way she does that I polished off the other half of the pizza and finished the jar of peanut butter.

The rain continued and by afternoon Francesca and Aunt Ethel were at each other's throats. I had retired to my room to escape the growls and whines and had managed to get past paragraph one of Murder at the Meadows when the door burst open and Francesca stormed in.

She flopped down on my bed without the slightest regard for my privacy, and launched into a bitter attack on her mother. "Mothers are impossible," she said. "She

won't let me put streaks in my hair."

"Streaks in your hair?" I repeated dumbly.

"Honestly Sophy, don't you know what streaks are? Just glimmers of a different colour here and there."

"But Francesca, you've got this gorgeous black hair. What do you want streaks for?"

Francesca pouted, "You sound just like Ma. I'm dying to have auburn streaks. I know it would look great, but she won't let me."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" I mean, I thought she was nuts with all that jet black hair, but it isn't often Francesca defies her mother, and I felt she needed some moral support.

"How can I do it myself?" asked Francesca petulantly. "You have to get it done at the hairdresser. It's very complicated and it costs fortunes and it takes ages."

She sank back languorously on the bed, while I reflected furiously. Then I jumped up, ran to the suitcase in the closet, flung things around and came up with a small brown bottle filled with an evil looking greenish liquid.

"Here!" I said dramatically, waving the bottle aloft. "Sophy saves the day! Francesca desires streaks? She shall have them."

Francesca half sat up and stared blankly at the

bottle. "What's that? What are you talking about?"

"Auburn-glo," I read triumphantly from the label. "Have glorious red lights in your hair at practically no cost in practically no time. Follow easy directions below."

"Where did you get that?" asked Francesca, looking suddenly interested.

"Oh I just happened to have it," I said casually. "I sent away for it-- one of those typical magazine ads-- I have all kinds of junk-- eye makeup and wrinkle remover and things like that. I'm waiting for a bust developer that's supposed to add inches in weeks-- costs four weeks allowance but worth if it it works."

Francesca wasn't listening to me anyway. She has this awful habit of shutting out everything that isn't connected with what concerns her that very second. She had taken the bottle from me and was scanning the directions.

"Sounds awfully difficult," she said in a discouraging tone.

"Nonsense," I said, "I'll figure it out. We'll do it up here in my bathroom. We need absolute privacy." Suddenly the rain didn't look as rainy and the general gloom seemed to lift. "Let's see-- we'll need a lemon, an egg, a few ounces of peroxide and some cotton. Come on."

Francesca jumped up with real speed for her. "Okay," she said and got that animated look that usually only appears at the prospect of a shopping spree. "Let's go! I'll get the peroxide-- there's some in Ma's bathroom, and I'll sneak down for the egg and the lemon."

"Don't let your mother see you," I warned.

"Don't worry. She's on the phone with Aunt Jennie. She's good for at least an hour."

Francesca whipped downstairs while I ran back and forth between my room and the bathroom, which is just across the hall, with supplies-- towels, a plastic sheet nipped out of the linen closet, a small stool for Francesca to sit on, a shower cap which I punched with holes to pull the streaked hair through, kleenex, cotton, a knitting needle, scissors. The bathroom began to resemble a surgery and I felt rather like a doctor must before a particularly difficult operation.

Francesca was back with her stolen goods just about the same time I was ready to start. She looked a bit startled at the condition of the bathroom and when I began to pull on my rubber gloves (purloined from the laundry room) and came towards her with the shower cap and the knitting needle, I thought she was going to pass out.

"Sit down," I said before she could open her mouth to protest. "This won't hurt a bit."

I shoved her onto the stool, ignoring the sound of knocking knees and the sight of her dark eyes dilated with horror. Then I pinned the plastic sheet on, clapped the shower cap on her stupid little head, and with the knitting needle began to pull strands of dark hair through the punched out holes.

"Ouch! That hurts!"

"Shut up! It won't take long. Do you want your mother to hear?"

"But you're killing me! It pulls! Ow!"

"Francesca," I said solemnly, waving the knitting needle in front of her patrician nose, with what I hoped was a hypnotic effect, "do you want to be beautiful--I mean more beautiful? Think of those glorious red lights glowing in your hair in just a little while."

Francesca let this image penetrate her thick skull and shut her eyes in dumb female resignation. "Go ahead," she said through clenched teeth.

I moved quickly and efficiently, stopping every now and then to check with the intricate directions on the bottle. The hair was pulled out through the holes in the shower cap, next came a light application of peroxide, heat applied to the head by a 200 watt bulb held painstakingly over the victim's head by Dr. Sophy Beckman, more peroxide, the egg, lemon, more heat, wash, dry, wash

again-- I was in a fever of fatigue<sup>o</sup> by this time.

"How long is this going to take?" whined Francesca.

"I'm exhausted."

"You're exhausted!" I would have shaken her except that it might have ruined all my efforts. "We're coming to the great moment. The climax!" I held the bottle up. "Now comes the final act."

I uncapped the bottle and a wisp of smoke curled up around the edges of the opening at the top, like the approach of Aladdin's genie. A peculiar smell filled the bathroom-- part rotten eggs, part decaying garbage.

"Yech!" cried Francesca and clapped a hand over her nostrils. "It stinks! You're not going to put that stuff on my head!" She half rose and with the speed of lightning I pushed her back onto the stool with one hand and poured the entire contents onto her head with the other.

As soon as I had done this I realized that the directions on the bottle had urged in large red print that the liquid be diluted with four parts water.

Too late. Francesca's head was now a seething, steaming mass of foul smelling vapours and in moments the whole bathroom was filled with vomituous clouds of smoke.

Francesca leaped off the stool, ran for the door, trailing sheets, towels and lemon peel. I was right behind

her holding my nose and deeply regretting the pizza and peanut butter morning snacks.

We made it to my room choking and gagging. The smell seemed to fill the whole house and pretty soon little puffs of vapour began to filter out of the bathroom into the hall and seep downstairs with grim fatality. The inevitable happened. While Francesca had hysterics on my bed, Aunt Ethel stumbled up the stairs, coughing and retching from the fumes.

She flung open the door and turned sort of yellow at the sight of her daughter who was still covered in towels and plastic, with damp strands of violently orange hair sprouting garishly from the shower cap.

Well, it all got very bad. I can't really describe the whole thing. It was just too ghastly. I mean, how can you blame Aunt Ethel? There lay her once exquisite daughter, now looking like one of Macbeth's witches, and there was I with my scissors and knitting needle and vile bottle, like a modern Frankenstein. And the house stank and it was just the most awful mess.

Aunt Ethel wanted to call the fire department and a doctor and the police and a hairdresser.

Francesca ran to a mirror and had a fresh screaming fit. I could only sympathize with her. The streaks were a most hideous orange, like-- oh like a pumpkin orange-- and



they stood up on end the way a handful of uncooked spaghetti looks-- sort of sprays of the stuff sticking out all over her noble head.

I wanted to bray with horror, but of course I didn't. I did something much worse. I laughed. I just laughed and laughed. I knew it wasn't funny and it was awful and terrible, but I couldn't help it. I stood there like a maniac and laughed some more, and then I just rolled around on the floor and screeched like a mad woman.

I'll skip what happened after that because you can imagine that nothing much good took place the rest of that day. It was all pretty unbearable and I think I would have been sent home on the spot except for Aunt Ethel's stern New England Jewish conscience and sense of family responsibility and all that.

And then I developed a fever that saved the day and I guess Aunt Ethel put the whole escapade down to temporary insanity on my part. Tomorrow Francesca will make a heavily veiled trip to the hairdresser.

We got through the rest of yesterday somehow or other and this morning at eight o'clock Francesca and Aunt Ethel scooted off to the hairdresser. I think they persuaded them to open the place an hour early so no one

would be around to view the damage. Francesca has the soul of a Hollywood movie queen. What gets me is that Aunt Ethel goes along with her whims most of the time. I mean, today's an exceptional occasion, I admit, because this morning by the dawn's early light, Francesca could have passed for a teen-age werewolf. I had this awful urge to die laughing again, but I bit my lip and thought of a million sad things and managed to look suitably guilty.

Aunt Ethel wanted to have the streaks died back to their original glorious black but Francesca whined about a hair cut. To be honest, for once, I think she is right. Nothing but the knife will do anything for those ghastly sprouts of orange straw growing out of Francesca's head. Poor Aunt Ethel looked very subdued at the thought of shearing off her darling's crowning glory and hardly had the heart to scold me. Besides, I stuck the thermometer into hot water this morning until it registered 103 so I've been clapped into bed for the duration of the day.

The morning passed very slowly, and by noon I had run to the window about a hundred times scanning the horizon for the loved ones. By 12:45 I succumbed to moral weakness and was standing in front of the open fridge consuming cold chicken and frothing at the mouth at the sight of an unstarted lemon pie.

A door slammed, female voices filled the air and

I scuttled out of the kitchen, into the hall and up the stairs.

"Sophy! Why are you out of bed?"

"Just going there, Aunt Ethel." I placed a tentative foot on the next step up.

"And without your slippers and bathrobe! Where is your sense? What's wrong with you? You'll get pneumonia or worse!"

"Sorry, Aunt Ethel." I drew the corners of my mouth down and said in a half whisper while staring at the floor, "I-- I was lonesome, Aunt Ethel. I-- I thought I heard you coming and ran down to see if..."

"Oh, dear! It's almost one o'clock. I didn't realize we'd be so long. We went shopping after the hairdresser." Aunt Ethel became as soft and wobbly as custard. As I may have mentioned before, she's got these two sides to her and if you play it right she'll be so good it's embarrassing. And I'm rotten to her sometimes, I really am. When you come to think she's my only living actual relative-- my mother's sister, after all-- why can't I be nicer to her? Which is beside the point, because it was at this moment that Francesca slid into view and I nearly flopped down all the stairs.

She'd had her hair cut all right, but not just cut, sort of sculptured. It was as if Michaelangelo or one of

those Italian masters had been chiseling away at her dumb head all morning. Anyway she looked great and was all smiles. The orange spaghetti had disappeared and her whole head now has this kind of elegant shape.

She smiled graciously at me. "Like it, Sophy?"

I twisted my lips into a polite leer and said, "Great! You look gorgeous, Francesca." I could have killed her.

Aunt Ethel came over and hugged me, "We have you to thank for it, Sophy. Who would believe that Francesca would look so beautiful with short hair?"

I ground my teeth silently and viewed my own drooping mane in the hall mirror. I've been growing it for three years, but in a sudden flash I knew it was all wrong for me.

Francesca came up behind me and examined herself in the mirror with maddening complacency. She always looks at herself head on while I kind of sidle up to my image wondering if I can face myself. There we both were-- beauty and the beast, so to speak, with no one in the wide world to perceive my sterling hidden qualities.

I finally turned away from the sight-- there's just so much self-inflicted pain one can stand-- and Francesca fluttered away to display herself to some adoring friends.

Aunt Ethel appeared from the depths of the kitchen and kind of gave me the old eagle eye. Then she put her

arms around me and held me against her ample maternal bosom. I absolutely blubbered in the most disgusting fashion, I can't imagine why, while Aunt Ethel "there-thered" me, and stroked my head and patted my back as if I were a six month old baby. No doubt the whole scene was appallingly primitive, but could be psychologically explained by my never having had a real mother.

When I had calmed down and wiped my eyes, Aunt Ethel sat me down in the kitchen and presented me with a gargantuan lunch (as if I could eat a morsel!) which is her way of solving all of life's problems. Then she said, "You know, Sophy, beauty is only skin deep. Someday you'll be as beautiful outside as you are inside."

What a bunch of clichés! I almost laughed out loud except I didn't want to hurt Aunt Ethel's feelings-- she really meant well. I began to eat, just to please her, and pretty soon found I was ravenous. Of course Aunt Ethel is a fabulous cook.

And then suddenly I felt good-- I mean really great. Maybe it was the meal, or having had a good cry. Maybe it was because I just had the most marvellous, super, incredibly good idea.

This afternoon under the guise of a restoring nap, I intend to arm myself with scissors and combs and do some hair sculpting on myself. Then we shall see what the mirror

mirror on the wall has to say about the fairest of them  
all. I can't wait.

**COMPULSION**

After Matthew left his father's apartment he took the long way around the park to his own house. That way his brother Peter might have finished practising his bar-mitzvah speech by the time he got there.

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty... he counted the lines in the sidewalk as he walked, being careful to avoid stepping on them. If the total number was uneven, Matthew decided, Peter would be through with the speech. He walked with his head down, concentrating hard on the counting, unaware of the wintry sun breaking through a cloud-studded sky.

Fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five... perhaps saying the numbers right out loud would stop the conversation he had just had with his father from running through his mind, over and over, with the nauseating monotony of a particularly tedious fragment of music.

He shouldn't have gone over to his father's this morning but he had wanted to escape the sound of the endless repetition of Peter's speech. With only three days before the bar-mitzvah, and a hundred guests coming to the house to sneer or marvel at the unorthodox celebration that their mother had devised, Peter was spending every spare minute on the speech.

So Matthew had stood in front of the callboard in the lobby of the apartment that morning and wondered if his father would mind that kind of abrupt visit. He couldn't be sure. But he pushed the button that said M. Hellman without allowing himself to think whether he would be welcome or not. The "M" stood for Michael, though way back it had been Mendel. There weren't many people who called him that now-- just a very old aunt, and one or two boyhood friends who weren't really friends anymore, mere lingering sentimental attachments. His father didn't like being called Mendel, Matthew knew, not that he ever said anything, but there was always a certain grim line along the corners of his mouth and a barely visible muscular



tensing when he heard the childhood name, as if he was trying to shut out a life that wouldn't die entirely.

Matthew had gone up the elevator and gotten off at the penthouse. His father had seemed really glad to see him, almost as if he'd been waiting for him. They wrestled a bit in the roughhouse way that Matthew loved, even though at fifteen he felt he should be growing out of it. But the physical contact with his father was special and he could allow himself to be hugged and have his hair smoothed after they had stopped, without the automatic stiffening that overcame him at his mother's attempted caresses.

If only he had had sense enough to carry on like that-- light and easy-- which was the best way to keep his father in that rare kind of receptive mood. But he had spoiled it. Without even thinking. It had spilled out automatically while his father was pouring them both big glasses of milk and burrowing in the fridge for something to go with the milk.

"Why didn't I have a bar-mitzvah?" Matthew had asked. And then it was too late.

His father had shut the fridge door carefully-- too carefully-- and handed Matthew his milk. "You know how I feel about that kind of numbo, jumbo," he had said in the casual tone that always seemed to Matthew to convey a

peculiar mixture of veiled contempt and irony that he had never learned to cope with. "Besides, I was living at home then-- I think we gave you the option anyway and you refused it-- now it's up to your mother to make these philosophical decisions. I would hardly call this particular superstitious ritual a bar-mitzvah, would you? Seems to me it's a typical example of one of your mother's compromises between her spiritual and social needs."

Matthew had finished his milk in silence. There was nothing to say-- only a quick mumble that he was late and had to help out at home, and a hasty graceless exit with his father's words still haunting him as he counted lines in the sidewalk.

His house loomed up in front of him. Two hundred and twenty-four. He had lost. He saw Peter's teacher's car in the driveway. It was an old Volkswagen. "What a struggle between the moral and the material a Jew has to endure," his father had said when he had first seen the Volkswagen. Matthew hadn't really understood, but he had known by a very slight twist of his father's lower lip, almost a smirk really, that he had said something clever, so he had laughed and now held all Volkswagens in disdain, he wasn't sure why.

Matthew ran quickly up the stairs to avoid his mother who would still be in the kitchen going over the menu with the caterer. The sounds of the speech came clearly

through the closed door of the den.

Although the temple had been rebuilt the priests were absent from their posts because they were not supported economically by the people as were...

Yehuda Daniels, Peter's teacher, would be sitting in the easy chair near the window. Matthew could picture him-- thin, pale, pot-bellied, stooped shoulders. He could hear his father's phrase about the scholarly expansion of the brain at the expense of the physical-- he could see his brother-- short and plump and very fair-- his hair so blonde that it was the wonder and delight of the whole family-- as if it were some miraculous mutation rather than ordinary hair. Peter's reedy voice penetrated the door, its pureness and clarity still unmarked by any traces of adolescent change.

Matthew touched the dark stubble under his chin and on his upper lip-- he had shaved just yesterday morning, but already he could feel the new growth of hair, thick and coarse like his father's. He knew without having to look in a mirror, the exact location and pattern of flaring red pimples on his neck and across the top of his back, and the white pustular eruptions that exploded and receded on his forehead with the regularity of the incoming and outgoing tides.

"They'll go away," said his father occasionally, "I had them too at your age. Ignore the whole business."

"I hope Peter's skin doesn't turn like yours," said his mother, "he has such delicate colouring, it would be a shame."

Matthew went into Peter's bedroom to see if any presents had come in. A gaudily wrapped box lay on the desk. It was large and square and might have contained anything. Matthew picked it up and shook it gently.

"What are you looking for?" His mother had the habit of startling him like that as if she crept up on him deliberately in the hope of catching him out in some mischief. It made him feel as if he didn't belong at home-- as if he were an intruder or barely tolerated guest.

Mostly he felt that way, he guessed, since that time during the crisis of his parents' impending separation when he had cried out to his father, "Why can't I live with you? She's got Peter-- she only loves him anyway. I want to live with you!"

And his father's quick response, "You're better off with your mother; haven't you watched enough TV to know the mother always gets the kids? Besides, you'll be best off with her and Peter. I'll see you-- whenever you want."

His mother took the box away from him. "Leave it alone, you'll break it."

"There's nothing to break-- it doesn't rattle. It's probably a dumb book."

"Peter happens to like books. He doesn't waste his time on television. But that's not the point-- leave the gifts alone-- you're always snooping around his things. I had no idea you were going to turn jealous over this whole thing."

"I'm not jealous," said Matthew hotly and felt his face flush. His pimples always stood out almost purple when he was angry and he willed himself now to calm down.

"You could have had a bar-mitzvah too, you know," said his mother, "if you had really wanted one. We offered it to you, remember?"

"Dad thinks the whole thing is a lot of mumbo-jumbo; listen to that stuff, will you?"

Peter was approaching the climax of the speech: If the Jews had assimilated, the entire course of world history would have taken a different path. There would be no Christianity, nor Mohammedanism...

"It's not a matter of religion, Matthew, you know we're not religious." She placed a hand on his cheek and he shrank back, not wanting to, but not being able to stop himself. His mother sighed and withdrew her hand. "The whole idea of this bar-mitzvah, Matthew, is a kind of celebration-- a recognition of the fact that we're Jews-- and that historically and culturally, thirteen represents a certain symbolic importance in the life of a young man."

We chose this way to mark the occasion."

Peter was winding up for the triumphant ending: The dream imagined by countless generations of oppressed and persecuted Jews has become a reality...

He emerged from the den holding the speech in his hand. Yehuda Daniels followed him, handing Mrs. Hellman the photostated copy.

"You must know all that crap by heart already," said Matthew.

"That would be impossible," said Peter, "it's at least an hour long." He turned to Daniels, "How does it sound?"

Daniels put a hand on Peter's shoulder. I wouldn't want him to touch me, thought Matthew, I couldn't bear it, but Peter doesn't seem to mind, why doesn't he mind?

"It's a fine speech, it will make a big success and it's every bit his own work-- I provided just the guiding hand."

Matthew watched as his mother ruffled Peter's hair and smiled down at him. Her eyes were soft and tender with a special melting quality that was never evoked by anything he did or said.

"Will you have some coffee and some cake, Mr. Daniels?" she asked.

He'll say no, and then have it, thought Matthew turning his attention to the teacher who was stuffing some

books in a worn briefcase.

"Oh no, thank you so much, I have my next lesson in half an hour and quite a long drive-- my car, you know, is not so reliable these days."

"Homemade cake," said Matthew's mother, "and the coffee is all ready."

"How could I refuse then?" said Daniels with a smile and a little bow that Matthew considered deplorably ingratiating.

After his mother and Yehuda Daniels had gone down to the kitchen Matthew followed Peter into his room and sprawled on the bed. "Daniels is a perfect example of the ghetto Jew," he said.

Matthew noted with satisfaction that Peter looked really angry. Unlike Matthew, his face grew pale when he was upset, the blood draining away and leaving his skin a blanched ivory framed by the astonishing yellow hair. "You don't know what you're talking about. He's a great teacher."

"The state of Israel is built on the bones of this type of simpering, over-educated, undernourished, too acquiescent, semi-virile species." They were his father's words and Matthew even managed the casual mocking tone.

Peter kicked his brother in the shins. Matthew grabbed at Peter, missed, and snatched at the gift lying unopened on the desk. He ran out of the room and at the

doorway tossed the gift hard at his brother. It landed on the floor and Matthew heard the distinct cracking noise with grim pleasure. It hadn't been a book after all.

He went into the bathroom between Peter's room and his own and began to wash his hands. A new cake of soap was in the soap dish and he lathered his hands with it, very carefully counting to twenty-five as he did. Then he rinsed his hands, first with hot water, then with cold, and finally with a tepid mixture of the two. It took him a long while to dry them on a particular towel he used just for that purpose because they had to be absolutely free from moisture.

Back in his room Matthew caught sight of himself in the mirror. A new pimple was forming in the cleft in his chin. He stared at in the mirror, then touched it with one finger. It was going to be a big one and would probably be at its worst on the day of the bar-mitzvah. His hand slipped away from his face and travelled down his body in an involuntary gesture. By the time it had reached and gripped the swelling nakedness under his clothing it was too late to stop. He would have to go through the washing three times over, but for the moment it didn't matter.

When the day of the bar-mitzvah arrived the only calm member of the household was Peter himself. He sat



quietly in his bedroom going over his speech as the house heaved and trembled with the turmoil of the impending celebration.

An army of strangers invaded the house. With swift efficiency, folding chairs were set out in neat rows in the living room where Peter would deliver his speech, plates and glassware were being uncrated in the kitchen and Matthew's mother was running from one room to the other, looking excited and distracted and particularly pretty.

Matthew went upstairs to the den to use the phone. As he dialled, the mutter of Peter's speech distracted his thoughts: It is during this time that our people came out from their self-imposed isolation, physically and intellectually.

Thank God he'd never have to listen to the rotten thing after today. He could hear the phone ringing at the other end-- four, five times-- what if he weren't home! He had to be. Make him be.

His father's voice suddenly filled the receiver and Matthew grinned in relief.

"Can I come over, Dad? It's a madhouse here. They're turning the place upside down."

"Not a great idea today, old fellow." His father's words sounded guarded-- there was a subtle texture of tone that Matthew had never heard before.

"Just for a while, Dad-- I have to get out of this place-- I feel like it's going to explode."

"How about giving your mother and brother some help, Matthew. I think you owe it to them this special day."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Would I ever do that?" That was more like it, the words offhand and the underlying irony almost reassuring to Matthew. Perhaps he knew that some of the mockery could be taken at face value in a kind of inverted evaluation of the emotional emphasis his father placed on the most delicate nuances of everyday speech.

"Guess I'll see you tomorrow then," Matthew mumbled and hung up.

He went downstairs and found his mother supervising the young man who was creating an elaborate flower arrangement as the centerpiece for the oval dining table.

"Matthew, I've been calling you, where have you been?" she asked.

"I was speaking to Dad-- why can't Dad come? He's paying for all this stupid crap."

"Is that what you came downstairs to bother me with? I could use some help, not your ridiculous ravings."

"Why is it ridiculous? Why shouldn't Dad come?"

"Because he wouldn't want to, because he thinks the whole thing is nonsense, and you know it, and because it

isn't suitable and you know that too. Now either help out or have the grace not to get me upset today."

Matthew watched the young man extend a circle of feathery greenery around the growing centerpiece. Imagine spending your life doing that, he thought. But what will I do with my life? and a brief flash of panic shot through him and then was gone. He focussed his eyes on the floor, "What would you like me to do?" he asked his mother.

"Move over," she cried pulling him away just in time to prevent his being knocked over by the two men each carrying little tables. "Set the fire in the playroom," she said, "we'll light it just before the guests are due-- a nice big one. And don't touch anything else-- keep out of the men's way. I don't know how everything will ever get done on time."

Matthew went along to the playroom and began to crumple newspapers which he tossed into the open grate. He heard the squeal of brakes and walked across the room to peer outside. Through the large bay window which looked out onto the street he could see two trucks pulling up to their door. The first of them disgorged several men who moved around to the back of the van and began unloading large cartons. "Caterers," said Matthew to himself and stood by the window watching as the array of boxes swelled in mounding heaps on the pavement and was then moved gradually

towards the kitchen entrance. He shifted his eyes to the other truck from which a young man hopped out bearing three varied-shaped packages wrapped in gilt. "More presents." Matthew kicked at the wall in disgust. He returned to the fireplace, selected some kindling and leaned for a moment with his head against the brick wall.

"Aren't you finished doing the fire yet? Why should a simple task take so long?" His mother was in the room with the florist.

Matthew began hastily piling up logs, not in symmetrical layers as he usually did, but any old way, just to be done.

"Do hurry, Matthew, he has to do the flowers for this room-- it's the last one-- and then find some way of helping."

"Like what?"

"Like-- oh, I don't know, whatever you do, keep out of the way-- that shouldn't be too hard."

Matthew flung the last log on, gave the florist what he hoped was a withering look and stalked out of the playroom. He grabbed his duffle coat from the hall closet, bumped into another gift-bearing delivery boy at the front door and was out on the street.

The air was cold today and a damp wind whistled through the bare trees. But Matthew felt nothing but a

relentless inner burning as he ran the three blocks to his father's apartment. He didn't stop to wait for the elevator but took the stairs two at a time. By the tenth floor his heart was pounding in his chest and his legs felt rubbery. But he carried on, slowing down somewhat for the last five floors, his breath catching now and then, but the ache still deep within him.

He rang the bell and waited. He must be home, he must, please God, let his father be home. The door opened after the second ring and he was facing his father, whose face wore an expression of surprise, and something more, but Matthew was too grateful to be there to be much aware of it.

"I had to come over, Dad, I just had to."

His father was standing in the doorway not moving, and that look was still on his face. Matthew saw it now. "I know what you think, Dad, and I did try-- I wanted to be helpful-- I prepared the fire and everything, but the house is full of strangers, it's like a goddam hotel with the food piling up and everything, and Peter's there going over and over that idiot speech and I had to get out. Okay?"

His father put a hand out and rested it lightly on Matthew's shoulder. "I think you'd better go home now, son."

"Aren't you going to let me in? I ran all the way, Dad, aren't you even going to let me sit and talk with

you for a few minutes? You said I could come whenever I wanted, remember? I'm here, Dad-- let me in."

Matthew's father dropped his arm and stood aside. He motioned Matthew in and followed him down the hall and around the ell curve to the living room.

A very pretty blonde woman was sitting in the big armchair by the window. She must be Dad's secretary, was Matthew's first thought, guess he has a new secretary, and then, but it can't be, why would she be here, and then he felt that his legs would really give way under him as if he was being forced to run up the fifteen flights of stairs again.

"That's Inge," said his father, waving in the direction of the armchair, and Matthew could tell by the flippancy of the gesture that his father had recovered his cool and would play it in his usual style.

"Inge's from Munich," he said, "and she comes here quite often between flights. She's an airline stewardess." He sat on the arm of Inge's chair and looked up at his son, seeming to search his face for the reaction.

Matthew had advanced part way into the living room and was trying to look at Inge and not look at her at the same time. He knew that she was the most beautiful woman that he had ever seen and he knew his father must be aware of that too. He looked slightly over her head so that he

wouldn't appear to be staring at her though he wanted to badly, and from this angle of blurred vision he caught a glimpse of the bedroom beyond. He had a fleeting impression of tumbled sheets, his father's pyjamas lying on the floor intertwined with a froth of nightgown: an odour filled his nostrils-- a pungent mixture of perfume and some deep musky scent that made him feel weak with nausea and a profound disgust.

He mustn't vomit, he mustn't. If he concentrated hard he wouldn't. If he could get away from that smell that hung over the room and filled every pore of his body-- he had to get away, then he'd be all right. His legs would move, if he tried really hard, they'd take him far away. Carefully, slowly, he edged backward, his breath now accelerating, coming in short, jerky gasps.

He was out of the apartment with the sound of his father's voice following him and the sensation he must run very fast.

It was only when his legs ached with tiredness that he realized how far he had walked. He looked around him, suddenly aware of the buildings looming on either side of the street. There was the art museum, just beyond was the unfinished twenty storey apartment building, its plate-glass windows marked with large mysterious-looking crosses, and across the broad avenue was the building that housed his

father's office. He looked away quickly and thought that it was time to go home.

Home. Which way is that, he thought bitterly, and then consciously forced himself back in the direction of his mother's house.

He had no idea of how much time had passed until he found himself outside his own house, only now it was beginning to get dark and the cars were turning their headlights on. Suddenly he was cold and hungry and infinitely weary.

His mother was standing in the hall when he opened the door as if she had been waiting for him for a long time. "Where were you? Look at you-- you're a mess! And the guests will be arriving any minute. Where in heaven's name have you been?"

"I-- I took a walk. Sorry."

"Never mind-- go take your bath and change-- no, forget the bath, there's not enough time-- get dressed quickly-- oh-- and light the fire in the playroom first-- and hurry."

Matthew went up the stairs. It was very quiet in the house, the rooms large and empty and expectant. Through the half-open bathroom door he caught a glimpse of Peter brushing his hair. On an impulse Matthew went into Peter's bedroom. The new gifts were piled on the bed, still unopened.



The speech lay waiting neatly on the desk-- both the original manuscript and the photostated copy.

Matthew picked up the speech. He closed his eyes and put his index finger on a random word on the first page. If his finger touched a vowel... he opened his eyes and looked-- it was hard to focus because the room was swaying slightly and he had a singing sensation in his ears-- the letter "U."

Holding both copies of the speech, Matthew walked slowly downstairs. In the living room the rows of chairs filled the room and overflowed into the hall. Candies and nuts lay in small silver dishes on the tables. The house was heavy with the scent of flowers. The odour reminded Matthew of something and he pinched two fingers tightly over his nostrils and ran towards the playroom.

The wood was piled up in the fireplace just as he had left it. The room was empty. Matthew inserted the original copy of the speech and then the photostat between two logs and lit a match. He watched as the flame leaped up and the edges of the paper flared orange and then began to blacken.

His mother came in and put her hand on top of his head. She stroked it gently and he had to bite his lip to keep back the tears. "Thanks, Matthew, that's a lovely fire. Now go upstairs and change."

Matthew ran up to the bathroom. He locked the door and began the complicated ritual of washing his hands. It would take a long while to get them really clean.

## GRADUATION

Bettina sat on the lid of the toilet seat and fingered the gold thread on the embroidery of her Indian dress. Janice had chosen the dress for the party. It was a deep muddy green, a sober, loose-fitting robe that had been buried under a tangle of flame-coloured tropical garments summarily rejected by Janice as being far too showy and vulgar.

But Bettina knew better. The shape and colour of the dress were meant to hide the ever-increasing size of her, the soft mounding bosom, the thickening thighs,

the unseemly girth that at eighteen no longer could be dismissed as baby fat.

She traced the looped pattern of the gold thread that wound its way up to the neck, curved round and re-traced its stencilled Oriental design down the sleeves where it ended abruptly in little quivering green tassels. "The colour was made for you," Janice had said.

But Bettina knew better. The murky green made her skin take on a yellowish cast and caused her pale grey eyes to recede further into her head, so that her nose, flat and wide at the nostrils, seemed to be splayed by invisible fingers across the center of her face.

Bettina sat and listened. If she held her breath for a moment and then concentrated very hard she could practically see through the bathroom door, out onto the upper floor landing and just about into the living room below. She sucked in a mouthful of air and controlled her breathing so that it came in short steady gulps. She closed her eyes, crossed her hands over her upraised knees and listened.

There were perhaps fifty people out there in her father's house, maybe sixty if you included her three stepsisters and the waitresses and the barman.

They stood in little groups in the large living room, fanned out into the dining room where a bar had

been set up, and spilled over into the TV room in the back of the house off the kitchen. Some of them even came up the stairs and poked their noses curiously into the bedrooms as if they had been waiting for just such an opportunity to examine the furniture.

They were older people mostly-- middle-aged friends of Bettina's father, a sprinkling of younger women from Janice's bridge club, a small but incredibly voluble cluster of very small girls and an almost total absence of anyone at all of Bettina's age.

"Invite whoever you want," Janice had said, "it's your party!" "You don't graduate from high school every day," her father had said in the jocular tone he reserved for Bettina on special occasions when he wasn't trying to avoid her altogether. "Invite the whole class." "Not the whole class, dear," Janice had said. "A boarding school is different, don't forget, they couldn't all come from out of town-- just ask your very special friends, I think. They can stay in the house for the week-end."

But Bettina knew better. She hadn't invited anyone at all-- not the friend with whom she had run away from school last year the time they had spent a terrifying week wandering in a drug-laden daze around New York, not the boy to whom she loaned small weekly sums and who repaid her with furtive caresses in the stacks of the

library, not the girl with whom she shared a bedroom and who endured in silence the dream-roused shrieks that shook Bettina's nightly slumbers-- none of these did she invite.

Now the party surged around her and Bettina expelled her breath slowly and deeply and listened again. Someone was approaching the bathroom door.

"Bettina, it's me-- Mrs. Howitzer-- I want to talk to you." Bettina could see her perfectly clearly. She was Janice's best friend and Bettina reserved a special hatred for her, and sometimes a little inexplicable fear that even now penetrated the bathroom door and made Bettina shiver involuntarily.

"It's a beautiful party, dear." The voice, shrill and high, seemed aimed directly at Bettina's eardrums.

She's wearing the black lace dress with the scooped-out neck with her breasts all squeezed together. When she stands near a man she'll put her shoulders back and throw her head at an angle so the wrinkles in her neck won't show. If Daddy passes she'll grab his arm and lean up against him so he can smell her perfume, and when Janice comes by she'll say how marvellous she looks.

"I have a little gift for you-- a little graduation gift. Something special I've been dying to give you."

I thought she'd kill me. I don't think it would

have bothered her at all to have killed me, except for  
the part about being found out. She could have then--  
the last time I was in her house. It will be the last  
time. I didn't do anything to him. Her precious son.  
Her big spoiled precious son. He's older than I am. Big  
booby. I wouldn't have touched him. He just wanted to  
look-- not even to touch-- just to look. She might have  
killed me-- but I screamed. I screamed and screamed.

"Won't you come out, Bettina, dear. Come out  
to your beautiful graduation party. We'll go down the  
stairs together. I'll hold your hand-- like two girl  
friends. You have a beautiful new dress. Janice told  
me-- a beautiful new Indian dress. Green. Your colour."

My dress is green. I hate green. I wanted the  
orange one-- the orange one like fire, but Janice wouldn't  
let me. Janice bought the girls orange T shirts-- three  
alike in three different sizes-- bright orange-- like a  
flame. But Janice wouldn't let me. I once had an orange  
skirt-- orange wool with pleats all around-- Daddy laughed  
and said I looked like a pumpkin in it. I threw it in the  
garbage that night. Janice made me pay for it out of my  
allowance. If I count she'll go away.

Bettina began to count. At thirty-two the foot-  
steps receded and the din of the party swarmed about her  
head. She undid the front opening of her dress, thrust

a hand down between her breasts and pulled out a crumpled cigarette and a match. When she lit the cigarette she inhaled deeply and stared fixedly at the ceiling.

She ignored the first series of tappings at the bathroom door. Her breathing was regular now except for the extra deep inhaling when she pulled on the cigarette. When the tapping became insistent she threw the butt of the cigarette into the toilet and flushed it. She resumed her seat on the lid and listened.

"Bettina. I've come to talk to you."

Bettina almost smiled. It was George Downes, a business associate of her father's, and something about him always brought that tiny disdainful upward curve to her lips.

"Let's have a little friendly chat, Bettina-- the way we used to."

He's got his navy-blue pin stripe suit on-- the one that he thinks makes him look like the president of the bank. Funny-- but he always looks most like a fairy when he thinks he's being especially square. He's got that striped tie on too, probably the vest, and nail polish-- clear nail polish-- and he smells-- one of those lotions the athletes are supposed to wear. Makes him feel real virile, I guess.

"I want to congratulate you on the school thing.



Well done there, Bettina."

It's his voice that's a dead giveaway. The deliberate low pitch of the voice-- a very careful voice, as if he's afraid it will turn into a squeak if he doesn't hold on to each word, I bet he has his hairpiece on. Nobody knows except me. It's a very clever hairpiece-- just a little bit of a thing that I caught him putting on once. I saw him at the upstairs mirror. He thought he was alone. Strange the things people do in front of a mirror when they think they're alone. Like a different person there in the mirror-- almost a woman. He saw me-- he knows.

"I'm planning a marvellous trip, Bettina. To London-- in the fall. I know you're interested in travel. I wanted to tell you about it. They have the most terrific theater there-- open the door, Bettina, let's talk about London-- we could sit right upstairs here in the little den-- no need to go down at all, if you don't want. We'll be together-- just the two of us."

He hates me. He loathes me. He wouldn't sit beside me. He can't stand the smell of me or the look of me or the fact of me. He's all wound up tight like the rubber inside a golf ball, all closed in tight and round and hard-- very smooth and shiny on the outside with his pressed pants and his gleaming shoes and his careful voice and the right words and the right gestures and

always the right clothes. Oh those perfect clothes. Every hour of the day, he covers his tight, hard insides with something new and clean and silky-expensive. He wouldn't sit near me, he'd die sitting near my fat and my pimples and my smell. Go away George, go home to your mother, George. Climb back inside your mother, George. Go away, Go away!

Bettina waited until she was sure he had retreated down the steps before she got off the toilet seat and carefully opened the mirrored medicine chest. She stood in front of the open chest for quite a few minutes as if laboriously committing to memory the complicated contents of each shelf. Then she nodded her head in a slight affirmative motion and sat down once more.

Janice will be next. She'll come tiptoeing up the stairs as if to take me by surprise. But I'll be ready for her. By the smell-- her perfume-- "Joy"-- \$100 an ounce-- it's the most expensive. She has the huge bottle on her dresser-- Daddy bought it for her in Paris ten years ago-- their honeymoon-- after the wedding-- your lucky day, Daddy said, a new mother, Janice said, I'll be a mother to you. I'll never leave you like Mam did. Never. She'll be a real mother to you, she told me-- Mam-- the real one, my Mam said-- she'll be good for you-- steady, not like me-- I couldn't manage it. Here

she is-- "Joy" at \$100 an ounce. Nobody else could keep perfume that long, but she has. There's a dry brown crust on the bottom of the container after ten years, but she still squeezes out a few yellow drops-- plenty of "Joy" left. Janice is thrifty, Janice is careful, Janice is saving, Janice gives out "Joy" by the drop.

"Bettina, sweetie, it's the most fabulous party-- you won't believe the dining-room table when you see it. Like something out of a movie. Daddy took a picture of it. The guests are starving but I wouldn't let anything be touched till you see it. Not a finger-- don't put a finger on the table, I said to Daddy and the girls. I had to slap Anna's hand-- poor little thing-- she can't wait for the cakes, but I said no, it's for Bettina, and I slapped her little fingers."

Her voice is low and soft. She's wearing the new dress-- the one she got after Christmas on sale. It's white-- stark, bare white-- it had two buttons missing at the neck-- she got them to reduce the price more-- less than half price-- she put buttons on herself-- buttons from an old blouse. She's all white with her voice soft and low. When she gets mad, her voice rises, slowly, like a siren winding up.

"There's music in the basement. Your kind of music, Bettina, and your guitar's there waiting for you. I said

you'd play for them later-- maybe-- I didn't promise. I just said maybe-- if you feel like it. They're asking for you, Bettina. It's your party."

Now her voice is rising-- a little higher, a little louder. Pretty soon the muscles in her neck will stand out like thick elastic-- like stretched tight-springing elastic-- ready to snap.

"Bettina. I have to insist on your coming out of there. This party is for you. It's your graduation. Your father has spent hundreds of dollars on this evening. There are fifty guests out there, Bettina-- your guests. I've worked like a fool for this evening. Will you please be reasonable and come on out of there."

When she's excited her voice gets cracked-- like a piece of dry earth split open by an earth tremor-- arid and empty. She's white-- all in white with the two unmatched buttons at the neck of the dress. And underneath-- the brassiere with little pads. Little white foamy pads that push her breasts up. Her breasts are thin and fleshless-- small, hanging, dried up gourds. She pushes them up under the puffy white cups of the brassiere.

"Bettina, I smell something in there. I will not have drugs in this house. Do you have drugs in there? Is that what you learned in that school? I think I smell something. I've warned you! I've given you fair notice!

I cannot have the girls exposed to your lousy, filthy, obscene habits! Get out of there and let me see! Open this door at once! I smell something!"

She smells "Joy" at \$100 an ounce mixed with her own sour smell. Her hands are knots now-- tight curled knots and her forehead is squeezed up into thin lines-- deep lines that will be on her forehead when she's old.

"Bettina, darling. Let's be calm about this. It's just a little party. Come on, sweetie. I'll say you had a headache but you're feeling fine now, and you'll be down in a minute. Okay? I'll go on ahead and say you'll be down soon. All right, Bettina? Just say okay or all right-- just a word-- that's all I'm asking for."

Like a crack in the earth-- getting wider and wider. I could fall right in that crack and never come up.

"Is all this because of the school? I know you blame me about being sent away again but let me tell you, my dear child, that the whole thing is your father's idea-- not mine. So forget the revenge act. I had nothing to do with it. You can't stay at home because your father says no. So you might just as well open up that door and face your guests. Do you hear me, Bettina?"

If I breathe very, very quietly she'll go away. Like this-- just little half breaths. And I won't smoke

any more. If I concentrate hard I won't have to smoke.  
There-- she's turning-- she's going. I'll be all alone.  
I'm not too hungry now. Except I'd like a cigarette.  
But that would bring her back. The smell would bring  
her back. If I don't think about the food, I won't want  
any. After-- I'll eat. When they're gone. There will be  
boxes of food left. I saw the cakes-- big, sweet, oozing  
cakes. They'll be asleep-- and the house will be quiet.  
I'll go into the kitchen then-- alone-- I like to eat  
when I'm alone. If only she doesn't send up Daddy. If  
I don't have another cigarette she won't send up Daddy.  
If I promise not to eat anything tonight after the party  
she won't send up Daddy. If I concentrate very hard. I'd  
name all the things in the medicine cabinet-- the doctor  
said I had a very good memory-- let's see- the toothpaste,  
aspirin, band aids, nose drops, hair shampoo on the bot-  
tom shelf. Then the talcum powder and the package of cot-  
ton-- something in a small package-- something important--  
what was it? I can see it, almost-- it's fuzzy-- some-  
thing important.

"Bettina, Bettina old thing, come on there old girl-- it's a great party, terrific! I just took a picture of the dining-room table before the vultures get at it. We had to practically tie up the girls to keep their hands off it-- especially Anna-- she sure has a

yen for chocolate-- but then you and I do too, don't we? Kind of a family weakness, eh? Let's go, old girl, race you to the dining-room-- last one there is a kangaroo!"

He's sweating. The sweat is dripping from the back of his neck onto his collar. His tie is choking him-- after the next drink he'll loosen his tie and the skin of his neck will be red and wrinkled-- tiny wrinkles like the gizzard of a chicken. Janice chose the tie-- navy and red stripes-- to go with the dark navy suit-- as if he had gone to one of those expensive schools like Mam-- as if he'd had money from way back like Mam, as if he knew which fork to pick up when he went to Mam's house, as if he belonged-- it's all there in that tie that Janice chose-- in that tie that's starting to choke him, that's going to feel damp pretty soon from the sweat spreading from his chest that's just starting to feel sticky.

"You've got a great dress on, Bettina. I haven't had a proper look at it. Let your old man see it-- very exotic and Oriental, I hear. What do you say, Bettina-- let's have a peek at you."

Pretty soon he'll start to cry. He's the only man I know who ever cries. Janice never cries. Janice doesn't even smile. Janice laughs a lot-- a hard, dry laugh-- like her voice-- it makes me think of glass

breaking on rocks when she laughs. But Daddy cries. When  
Daddy cries I feel melting inside-- everything flowing  
together and rushing up to my head as if it had to burst  
out or explode. If he talks about the school, he'll end  
up crying. Please don't talk about the school, Daddy.  
I'll think about the school another time-- tomorrow.

"I suppose you're upset about the school, Bettina. I thought you wanted to go. You never told me till yesterday about staying at home with us. You just changed your mind like that from one day to the next. I had no idea. You never tell me what you're thinking-- how am I supposed to know what to do? It's a great school, Bettina. Janice says it's the best in the country-- a kind of university, really, except without all the exams and homework and all that stuff. If I had had the opportunities you have, Bettina! You'll love it, sweetheart! I know you'll love it when you get there. The doctor said so-- you know what he said. You'll have people to talk to there-- people who understand these things. There will be lots of kids like you-- your age, I mean-- lots of great kids. Okay, sweetheart? Come on out and tell me it's okay."

The tears are in the back of his throat now. He's  
swallowing hard and soon he'll be crying. Don't cry,  
Daddy, please don't cry. Don't talk about the school.



"Bettina, sweetheart, I want you to try the school. Give it a real try-- six months anyway. Staying home with us isn't much of an idea-- there aren't many jobs around now for you, I mean without any special training, and it would be kind of foolish to cut off your education now. Think of high school graduation as just a beginning, not an ending. Besides... besides..."

The tears are running down his face, his nose is getting red and his eyes are all blurry and bloodshot. He's going to say it.

"Besides you can't live with us just now. It would be unwise. Janice said-- the doctor told us-- I've reasoned it out-- it might be disastrous-- like last time-- remember last time."

Remember last time. I don't remember last time. The doctor told me not to keep thinking about last time, so I don't. Most of the time I don't. Except sometimes, I can't help it. I see it in front of me and it won't go away-- the head was so big, such a big head, I couldn't believe a little dog could have such a big head-- the eyes seemed to bulge right out and the tongue rolled around like it was out loose.

"We'll forget the school now, Betts, old thing. Now it's time to celebrate. Come on, sweetheart, let your dad give you a hug and kiss. We'll work things out

tomorrow."

But I didn't touch the tongue-- just the head--  
right off-- I cut the head right off-- it was easy-- with  
the big knife-- the knife Janice bought at her cooking  
class-- a real butcher's knife. Keep it away from the  
girls, she said. That's a very sharp knife, she said. You  
could cut off somebody's head with that knife, she said.

"I love you, Bettina-- just as much as the others.  
 You were the first-- there's always a special place in a  
 father's heart for the first one. We can work it out if  
 we both try."

So much blood from such a little dog. Just a puppy--  
a tiny puppy-- he almost fit into the palm of my hand. I  
didn't know there would be so much blood. The knife was  
sharp. It was easy. Like carving a roast.

"Christ, Bettina-- come on out of there. You've  
 got me blubbering like an infant. This is supposed to be  
 a goddam party. I can't go downstairs like this."

I always wanted a dog. Janice wouldn't ever let  
me have a dog. She's allergic to dogs. I begged for a  
dog but Daddy said Janice can't, Janice has allergies.  
Anna begged for a dog and Janice said maybe a very little  
dog would be okay, I'd get used to a little dog, she said,  
one of those short-haired little dogs, if Anna's that  
anxious maybe I'd get used to it.

"Bettina, I'm going to count to ten and if you don't come out by the time I've finished, I'm walking down the stairs and I'm not coming up here again. Understand? You're on your own after this. Fight it out with Janice and Mam. Pack up tonight and get ready to leave this house. Understand? One-- two-- three..."

I loved that dog. More than Anna did. He was my dog. He knew he was mine. He came to me when I called-- just to me-- I fed him and I brushed him and I walked him. I loved that dog.

"Four-- five-- six..."

The dog loved me. He trusted me. He should have been mine. Anna didn't want me to play with the dog. Anna tried to take the dog away from me. Janice said it was Anna's dog.

"Seven-- eight..."

When I put him on the kitchen table he looked at me with trusting brown eyes. He thought the knife was a toy. He sniffed the knife and then he licked my hand. Afterwards I could still feel the wet on the palm of my hand where he had licked it. The head was so big-- such a big head-- I couldn't believe it.

"Nine-- ten... I'm going, Bettina. I'm leaving. You're on your own now."

I won't cry. I mustn't cry. Daddy cries but I

never cry. Someone's coming. I'm not crying. They mustn't hear me crying..

"I hear you, Bettina. Crybaby, crybaby, big fat crybaby. Afraid to come out-- 'cause you're too fat. Mummy had to buy you two dresses 'cause you're too fat. When you go to that crazy school I'm getting a new dog-- Mummy said-- Mummy promised-- as soon as you go. Come on out, crybaby, come on out, fatty."

Bettina stood up and shuffled to the door of the bathroom. She put her lips against the crack in the door and said slowly and clearly, "I'll be out in a few minutes."

The tears had stopped. With the sleeve of her dress she dried her eyes. She removed a brush from a drawer and pulled it through the tangled knots of hair hanging around her face. Swiftly now she opened the medicine cabinet and moved her hand with one precise movement towards a small blue package on the second shelf beside the cotton. She tore the paper off the razor blade, turned her left hand palm upward and sliced deeply and surely into the blue veins of her wrist. As the blood, dark red and copious, began to pour onto the tiles, she unlocked the bathroom door. That way her father wouldn't have to break it down the next time he came up.

## JOURNEY

The car is heading south along the turnpike, fifty miles an hour maximum speed, right turn for the tunnel going under the river into the city, left turn for the airport and parkway interchange, straight ahead along the turnpike for the road plunging headlong into the humming heartland of the country. Sixteen lanes of traffic north and south, fifty miles an hour maximum speed. The car is caught up in a sweeping, swooping, onward, forward rush of flowing traffic.

He shuts the windows, bars the roar and whizz and hum of moving miles of asphalt, tortuous ribbons of road,

slithering and slipping into the distant horizon, groaning under the burden of trucks and trailers, bursting buses, gasping moving vans, trucks bearing treacherous tanks of volatile gases, trucks carrying fish and fruit and fuel and foodstuffs for an entire nation that is never satiated. There is a house going by-- detached, rootless, surgically sliced, obscenely naked, awaiting consummation at the end of its mysterious journey.

He turns on the radio, switches the dial- left, right, pushes the buttons, watches the needle flicker-- all the way over, backward, forward, till it catches a fragmentary tune, jumps hastily to a deep male voice heavy with gloom and forboding, rushes crazily to snatch at the jingle-jangle of a commercial, roars to the interrupted rhythms of a rock group, slides hopelessly in the confined space among the male, female voices-- whining, screaming, crying, complaining, cajoling, comforting.

Anything will do. Anything at all that will shut out the sound and sight of the vast cities in his path-- the brazenly exposed guts of a swarming populace-- raw, belching factories, the silver sinews of railroad tracks folding and unfolding along a parallel path, the distant presence of a spluttering helicopter, the massive evidence of exhausting, exploding industrial activity that clogs his very pores, enters his nostrils and presses down on

his car moving carefully at fifty miles an hour maximum speed.

Keep the windows shut, the radio loud and mindless, inviolate against an unknown exterior, let the car hurtle alone, encased in its shell, embalmed, confined, enclosed, heedless-- along the turnpike.

Shut things out. One by one.

Business first. Shut out business. That shouldn't be hard when you've been doing the same thing for twenty years. Day after day. Year in, year out. Others come and go. He's stayed. Steady. Loyal. Shut it off at night. Weekends. Holidays. It doesn't turn off as easily lately. Time was his mind could click the lock on the business world till the right moment to turn it open again. Not now. Not easy. He must, though. He will. This trip.

Shut it out. Turn up the windows. Put on the radio. Louder. Relax. This is the trip to relax. Forget things.

Alone with her at last. Everything else is forgotten. She is there with him in this car. Look at her.

Look at her. She is sitting beside him in the front seat. Sixteen, hair reaching down almost to her waist, blonde hair. Curling hair. Nobody in the family is blonde. Nobody in the family has curls. How did she get the blonde hair, the curls? Her mother-- his wife that was-- is dark, sallow, skin almost yellow, meager

colourless hair that hangs straight and lifeless against her narrow head.

Look at her. She is fair as the fairy princess, legendary fair, storybook fair. White of skin, blue of eye, and generous of heart.

He will get to know her on this trip. This lovely, exotic creature is his own flesh and blood. What is behind those wide blue eyes that stare vacantly out at the rush of the rolling road? He will find out. This is the trip to find out.

Keep the windows shut. Cut out the buzz of the road. The mind shuts less easily. He seeks the easy click that locks and unlocks the various compartments in his life.

It will be easier when they escape the car and the highway and the artificial confinement in narrow space. It will be easier when they get to the capital. He will get to know her there.

It doesn't happen in the capital. He leads her, fair and acquiescent, along the broad avenues, through noble buildings, down a maze of historic corridors in splendid white-walled museums. She is indefatigable and courteous, curious and polite, appreciative and satisfied with the simplest object or the most sublime. She remains lovely and remote, a changeling perhaps, since



such perfection could never have passed through the loins of the dark and sallow creature who was briefly his wife.

Shut things out. Business can wait. It has waited these twenty years. Produce the click that will turn it off. It isn't easy. Perhaps it's the noise of the city. Try the country. Relax in the quiet and beauty of nature. It is spring. Look for spring in the country and it will come.

He heads the car south towards the country. It takes long to leave the capital. The capital stays with him for many miles along the crowded, throbbing highways. Will he never reach the country?

Suddenly the city has disappeared. This is the country with the narrowing roads and the thrusting greenery that surrounds him on all sides as he pushes south.

She is sitting there beside him in the front seat and all at once she is part of the landscape of flowering dogwood, sharp yellow forsythia, nameless blossoms in white and pink and lavender that hover over them in the beckoning countryside.

He rolls down the window. He turns off the radio. She is his flesh and blood. An odour lingers about her hair, subtle and evanescent, fleeting as the look she gives him which chills his heart and makes his hands tremble on the steering wheel.

It will come. Give it time. Relax. Lots of time. Days ahead to discover her, her discover him, Show her the splendid estates of the founding fathers of the nation.

He walks, she walks, through houses heavy with history, hoarded gems set in the lush green carpet of sudden spring. He smells, she smells, a mingling of all the swift-scented blossoms that a munificent burst of warmth has strewn in their path. He sees her at his side, a flower among flowers, cool and radiant and impenetrable. She sees... he is totally unaware as to what she might possibly be seeing. A departed glory? A present emptiness? Perhaps. He doesn't know.

Give it time. It will come. Relax. He is sated with the season and the country and the dizzying smells of spring. He turns the car north again. Back to the heat and hum and throb and thump of the turnpike.

He will take her to the biggest city of them all, the city of which she has had but a shifting glimpse on their southward journey. She will be taken in by the city. The city can't fail to touch her-- if not with love, with terror, with wonder. She will turn to him and say it. What? He doesn't know.

Something. Anything. A change will be evident in those depthless blue eyes, the perfect skin, the expression

serene and empty as the vastness of the rushing, crushing continent. It will happen in this biggest of cities.

He lays the city at her feet. She accepts it. She ingests it, swallows the city whole as if she had been digesting cities all her life. The city makes no mark on the white skin, the rose mouth, the eyes blue as the sky's dome.

They are in the car. Almost home, a little further north, the turnpike a distant whining noise in his brain, fifty miles an hour maximum speed. Tomorrow the office. No use shutting it out now. It is almost tomorrow. Another day added onto the twenty years.

He turns down the car window, shuts off the radio, lets his mind dwell, for a moment, on nothing at all. From the car window he sees a poor house, its paint peeling grayly in the dust, a half-ploughed field of stony earth, one tired horse. He feels a cool breeze, smells an odour of dampness; a fine rain slants across the car windows.

She turns to him, her face obscure in the descending darkness. Now she will say it, this time, this moment, with the ardour of spring behind them and the promise of more just a moment in time away. Her lips will be on his cheeks, her body warm and suffused with tenderness. Daddy, it was wonderful being with you, she will say. It was

the best trip I ever had.

She shifts silently in her seat, he hears nothing but the thin thread of rain trickling down the windshield.

Next time. It will happen then. Oh God, please, make it happen next time. He smiles and touches the top of her golden head swiftly, softly. Then he adjusts his foot to the accelerator, fifty miles an hour maximum speed.

## MELISSA

The trouble with being forced into an overlong conversation with a girl like Velma was that it put Mrs. Wainwright in the difficult position of constantly boasting about Melissa.

"If you invite her for seven she'll come at six and stay till midnight," her husband had said that morning. "And I have that business dinner tonight, so don't count on my help."

"Be sure to be home at six," Mrs. Wainwright had urged Melissa before she left for her first lecture in

the morning. "Velma's your guest."

Now it was six-thirty, no sign of Melissa, and Mrs. Wainwright found herself looking desperately at the familiar objects in the room-- the piano, the sofa where Melissa sprawled when she read the paper, the embroidered cushion on the back of the rocking chair, worn with a dark shadow where her head so often rested-- willing her daughter to materialize in one of her accustomed attitudes and relieve her of the nasal droning voice of the unwelcome guest.

"If I pass my math, I'll graduate in June," said Velma, fingering the linked chains of the belt that girded the imaginary indentation of her waistline, "except it's geometry that I don't get; algebra's okay, I had a tutor and I more or less get it, but if they put too much geometry on, I'll flunk. If you don't pass math you can't graduate."

"I don't understand why they make young people take math anymore," said Mrs. Wainwright, "I mean, it's necessary for engineers and architects, and so on, but not absolutely essential in other areas, and so troublesome." Melissa's a mathematical wizard, always top of her class since she was so high. Her grade one teacher recognized it right off-- "You have a very gifted daughter, Mrs. Wainwright," she said. "You have to take special

care of a child with that kind of brain." She really just has that kind of brain-- like a computer-- simply incredible-- it's as if her mind is like that awful belt of Velma's-- a series of neat links, one fitting exactly into the next-- all forming a perfect whole-- rather a good metaphor, that. "What a charming belt, Velma. I see you've lost weight, dear. It suits you."

"No," said Velma, a complacent air on her round face, "I've gained eight pounds this term. I'm on Weight Watchers but it doesn't help at all. You're supposed to weigh everything and eat lots of fish. I hate fish. Besides, I'm just naturally plump."

"What a nuisance this weight business is," said Mrs. Wainwright, and looking absently at the clock wondered vaguely at the semi-paralytic motion of the second hand. "Everyone I know except Melissa seems to have a weight problem." Melissa eats whatever she wants-- cakes and nuts and bread-- and never gains an ounce.

"Melissa's skinny," said Velma, reaching for the nuts.

"Oh no, dear-- slim; there's a difference." Melissa has the litheness of a ballet dancer and the slimness of a sylph. Melissa moves through space like light and air.

I only wish to God she'd move her sylphlike self home right this minute.

"Skinny-- my father says so-- he ought to know, he's a doctor."

"That may be dear, but I think she's just right." Mrs. Wainwright stood up stiffly and tried not to look at the clock. But it caught her at the periphery of her vision with an arrogant display of its motionless arms. Six-thirty-seven. "I'll just go and check the roast."

"I can't eat meat-- you have to have fish three times a week on Weight Watchers. This is my fish night."

"But you hate fish," Mrs. Wainwright said helplessly.

"Well, okay. If that's all you have-- I guess it'll do. Say, where's Melissa?"

Mrs. Wainwright walked to the window and scanned the street as if the urgency of her gaze would produce her daughter. The street was unaccountably deserted. "It's such a nice evening, she must be walking home instead of taking the bus."

"Walking!" An expression of blank incomprehensibility settled on Velma's features.

"Walking is wonderful exercise," said Mrs. Wainwright. Melissa can walk for miles and miles-- she never gets tired. We never walk together anymore, though, because I can't keep up with her. She can dance and run and swim and look as fresh and rested as if she just woke



up from a ten-hour sleep. "Walking would be very good for your weight. Oh... I really must check that roast." She felt suddenly lightheaded as if she had a fever. Dare she hope for a fortuitous chill? "Why don't you amuse yourself? Play the piano."

"I don't play," said Velma, "Melissa does."

"So she does." Mrs. Wainwright looked desperately at the piano, which seemed seized with the same utter heaviness as the clock. Melissa plays beautifully. She could have had a concert career if only she had practised more-- all her teachers said so. Why, when I think how she taught herself to play the guitar last year! In a matter of months-- and almost professionally-- all her friends think she's studied the guitar for ages. "And your guitar lessons?" she asked Velma brightly. "Melissa's guitar is upstairs. I know she wouldn't mind if you strummed a tune." She ran to the stairs and was half way to the landing before she heard Velma say, "I gave it up. It seems I'm tone deaf."

Melissa has perfect pitch. You have to be born with perfect pitch. "It's a gift, a real gift, you have a very gifted daughter," her piano teacher told me, but it's not enough; hard work is what makes a real musician and Melissa wasn't willing to do that. We had quite a few little fights about practising, I remember. I always

gave in. Melissa was very stubborn, and made me too upset--  
so I let her have her way. Mrs. Wainwright wiped the sweat off her brow with the back of her hand as she came down the stairs into living room. Perhaps the heat of house had caused the clocks to move so slowly. It was possible, wasn't it? "Very warm in here, isn't it?"

"I'm cold," said Velma and plunged a plump brace-leted hand into the potato chips.

"If you're cold," said Mrs. Wainwright, "I'll just dash upstairs and get you a sweater. You pick up a book and have a good read till I get back."

"I never read," said Velma and loosened the chain belt by one link.

"Young people have so much to do these days," said Mrs. Wainwright, "but Melissa still manages a fair amount of reading." Melissa used to be a regular bookworm, always with her nose in a book. Nowadays she has so many other things on her mind-- boys, and parties, and school, and her guitar-- but she still manages quite a lot of reading. I wouldn't dream of asking her to pitch in with the housework or run a message if she's in the middle of a book-- though sometimes I wonder-- but it's not worth the argument in the long run... "I'll be right back with that sweater, Velma."

Once upstairs Mrs. Wainwright raced to her bedroom

where her husband was dressing for his business dinner.

"Help!"

"That bad?"

"Worse. Impossible! Come down and rescue me."

"I'm terribly sorry, darling. I have to pick Joe up at a quarter to. I must go immediately. Where's Melissa?"

Mrs. Wainwright shrugged. "Late."

"I can't imagine why she invites that dull clod of a girl," said Mr. Wainwright, adjusting his tie.

"She feels sorry for her. Melissa has a very kind heart. She doesn't abandon a friend she's known all her life just because she's fat and boring and no good with boys. You know that. Loyalty-- it's one of Melissa's finest qualities." Sometimes I wonder, though, about all those friends Melissa has. Nobody I know has that many. Perhaps it's not just loyalty, exactly-- more a kind of accepting everything that comes her way-- a coolness almost-- Melissa's very cool. She takes everything as if it's her right, including people.

"Call it loyalty if you like. There has to be some word to describe the reason for all Melissa's friends," said Mr. Wainwright. "I've never figured it out. I think she treats some of them like dirt. Well, see you later, old dear. Enjoy your dinner."

When Mrs. Wainwright reentered the living room

the clock said six-forty-nine and Velma was placing the last peanut in her mouth. "Say, where's Melissa?" she asked.

"She'll be along any moment," said Mrs. Wainwright. "Will you have a drink? Are you allowed a drink? I mean, does your father think it's all right for a girl your age to drink?"

"Oh sure, he doesn't mind," said Velma, blinking pale-lashed lids solemnly.

"Wonderful-- I'll pour us both a sherry," said Mrs. Wainwright with an almost hysterical gallop towards the bar.

"Not for me," said Velma. "I hate sherry. Got any more nuts?"

"Of course-- I have lots of time-- nuts. Excuse me, I'll run along and get them."

She felt herself swaying as she made her way to the kitchen.

When she came back in the living room was it her imagination or had the hands of the clock actually moved backwards? She sank heavily onto the sofa and stared with glazed eyes at Velma, who returned her look with cow-like candour.

"Where's Melissa?" Velma asked.

"Melissa should be along any minute," said Mrs.

Wainwright. This is the last time I will allow myself to be put in this ridiculous position. I said that to Melissa last time but now I mean it. "I will no longer be used by you as a domestic slave for your own selfish, thoughtless purposes. If you want to have everything your own way all the time you will find that you cannot use your mother as an object, a mere thing, for your convenience. I will not have it." I told her that last time-- it's not often I speak up but I did and I was glad. I told her just what I thought and now I definitely mean to repeat it again. That will be the first thing I say to her as soon as I speak to her, I mean business this time.

The room was still with the silence of time enclosed in an infinite vacuum of endless hours. The lamps had not yet been lighted and the shadows hugged the darkened corners and outlined the looming bulk of the furniture.

The gold of Velma's belt shone in the descending dusk. Mrs. Wainwright made herself look away from the belt and up into the vacant eyes. "Melissa goes out a lot," she found herself saying quite unexpectedly. "She has so many friends sometimes I never see her for almost a week at a time."

There was a flicker in Velma's eyes, or was it just the play of light and shadow, Mrs. Wainwright won-

dered. "Melissa was always like that... I suppose."

The phone rang and it was with a heavy reluctance that Mrs. Wainwright rose to answer it.

When Mrs. Wainwright came back to the living room the first thing she did was glance at the clock which was ticking noisily with an almost sing-song rhythm. "My goodness-- seven o'clock already. Melissa will be along in five minutes-- that was her on the phone. She ran into this old friend on the way home and they stopped in for a coffee. You know how time just races ahead when you're with friends. She'll be right home." How marvellous for Melissa to have so many friends wherever she goes. It's a gift-- a real gift!

## STONES

What am I? I walk up the steep incline leading to my parents' home in a Jerusalem suburb where every house is a three-storey pile of pale amber stone. I look at the stone as if for the first time. The stone is golden, bronzed with the patina of age, and the fine sifted sands carried in by the desert chamsin that whips over the city several times a year. The stone is a link with the past, my mother says-- my mother's path-- generation upon generation of Jews going back to the time of the British mandate, back again to the Ottoman Empire, back,

who knows how far. My mother is a sabra, proud, arrogant, black eyes full of knowledge, of a wisdom gleaned from a line of people who created and lived within these stone walls. I notice these stone walls as if for the first time as I toil heavily up the sun-scourged hill to my parents' home.

But where am I? Why am I here? Now I am in another part of the world-- walking, plodding, struggling across roads yellow-gray with a vile mixture of snow and car grease and exhaust fumes and industrial grime and many thousand pairs of boots trampling the once-pure white powder into this sodden mess.

Why am I here where the houses lie vulnerable, never fully prepared for the heavy burden of snow that balances precariously on sloping roofs, obliterates entire window panes, seeps subtly under layers of roof-covering to drip silently within interior walls, hardens on stairs and driveways to a murderous icy glaze that awaits the unsuspecting visitor?

The houses are made of stone, varying shades of gray-- from a pale lispid tone that seems to reflect the snow-laden clouds above, to a heavy charcoal colour that shimmers darkly under an iridescent layer of frost.

Never fully used to the cold I tip my collar up...



My teeth chatter, my fingers and toes are stung with fine needles of pain as I turn up the narrow clearing to my parents' house.

I see the house as if for the first time. My father's house-- his winter house that he inhabits three months each year. He has chosen the winter months to live in a house that belonged to his father and his father's father before. Jews from a Tsar-ridden Russia, they fled to this snow-bound haven a hundred years or more ago, and established the business that now enables my father to live this life divided between two continents.

The business flourishes. With branches in Jerusalem and Montreal, it manages not to stretch itself thin over extended markets or split authority, but on the contrary, blooms with the vitality of an aggressive weed in the parched desert sands.

So does my sister flourish in alien soils. She was born in London, where my mother had followed my father in the early stages of the outcropping of his business ventures. Child without a native home, she is at home everywhere. Having no natural tongue (was it English my mother spoke to her first or Hebrew? She doesn't remember) she is fluent in many tongues. She chatters freely in the language of the moment. She switches from Hebrew to English

to French to Spanish as readily as my mother packs the suitcases for the next journey.

But what of me? Is it that the oldest lives more with the searing losses of the childhood years? I remember the all-pervading pleasures of being an only child for ten years, the deep yet subtle parental bonds broken by the abrupt advent of my sister's birth. I remember with longing the feeling aroused in me by my early homes; the sudden flights then seemed swift adventures that only later came to mean a tearing, rootless emptiness that follows me now wherever I walk.

Why do I turn down the snow-clogged path away from my parents' house? The door is locked, the snow settles in uninterrupted piles on certain architectural obstructions-- a sloping roof, a jutting balcony, the thrusting curve of the dining-room bay window, the ridged outline of the now vacant flower boxes, the sweeps and swirls of the wrought iron staircase railing leading up to the heavy double doors.

The house is empty. This winter my parents are shuttling between London and Rome and Jerusalem. The business has curved in a new direction and my sister will learn Italian in a Roman school while I attend the university in Montreal. The business is a grasping octopus, its tentacles twining around people and places

indiscriminately. It has swallowed up my parents long ago though they do not yet realize it, but it will not have me.

I live in the women's residence in Montreal in a venerable building of deep gray stone. Not the golden shimmer of the Jerusalem stone, but the harsh northern dark slabs that in winter assume a thin, hard icy glaze. Each stone is cut to the exact size and shape and weight of every other stone. The colour is a dead gray, as somber as the late afternoon light that descends upon the city in December and January. My room is up on the third floor, down a narrow empty corridor lined with interminable cubicles of rooms that stretch straight across my line of vision and seem to penetrate my sleep at night.

I think of my sister in the Roman school. She has probably learned Italian by now. She has a flare for languages that she and my mother both share. And for friendship. Wherever my little sister goes she is surrounded by people. Why do some people attract others with an uncanny facility that bears no relationship to their intrinsic worth? I, who am more intelligent, more profound, more generous, more willing to give than my sister will ever be, find myself always on the fringe of whatever group of people I am thrown in with. While she, like a precious gem, gleaned from a pile of worthless stones,

is immediately placed in the shining center of life.

My school work suffers this year. I find it hard to concentrate in the silent box that is my room. I walk often past my parents' house, watch the progress of the snow's accumulation on the roof and balcony, peer inside the windows which reflect only the winter's leaden skies. I cannot work, my books are unread, my papers not handed in. No one will know or care until the end of term. When my parents find out they will come hurrying on the very first plane to take me with them, to take me home.

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Where is my home? Is it here within the golden Jerusalem stones where I pass the next winter? Unexpectedly I pine for the cold and the ice and the gusts of wind-driven snow. My sister, with her army of friends trooping in waves through the apartment, prevents me from doing any serious work. Why am I now a student at the university in this country whose language is an historical imposition on a grab bag of mixed nationalities? My lectures are in Hebrew, my textbooks in English, my head is daily filled with the half-dozen tongues that are commonly spoken in my house.

I am treated as an outsider by both the local inhabitants and the foreigners. This must be the explanation for my almost complete lack of friends. And yet

my sister is a veritable queen with a horde of adoring slaves. I watch her and wonder. I try to learn but there is nothing to learn. It is something within her that she was born with like her dark eyes that are just like our mother's and a terrible vitality that I will never have.

I give up trying and think of the snow that must be falling now at this season on the stone houses in Montreal. I work when I can but it is a faltering attempt and I know already before the term is half over that I will not manage to pass. I cannot think, I cannot study. My parents hope a change will do me good. Cables and letters speed back and forth across the continents, brief messages but heavy with the hope of uncertain possibilities for me.

And so I am once again on a plane heading north and west. The island-studded azure brilliance of the Mediterranean gives way to a thick blanket of cloud pierced here and there by a thrusting peak of the looming Alps. Time and space seem to blend as I watch the ocean merge into the vast frozen expanse of the Canadian land mass. Once more I am captive to a winter that extends and overlaps its nominal boundaries.

The snow is falling in thick wet flakes that settle damply on the windshield of the taxi that is driving me to my new home. Now I wonder about the wisdom of this

flight. Why must I have a new home, I who make changes with such sullen unwillingness?

The house is made of thin, artfully-hewn slabs of sand-coloured stone layered in a pattern that gives the impression of everlasting solidity and great wealth. The house belongs to friends of my parents who have promised to care for me while I apply myself with zeal and endurance to a repetition of my courses at the university. They are an elderly couple whose children are long since married, and they surround me with comforts and advice and an embarrassing amount of freedom.

I behave very badly towards this couple. I am possessed by a terrific and constant desire to disrupt the placidity of their daily lives. The massiveness of the stones is a mockery of the turmoil I create within. I litter the fine white carpets with dirt. I sully the air with a cacophonous screaming of multi-lingual obscenities, I fill the night with the full force of the radio and the television and the records they have provided for my pleasure.

Who is it who has created this constant nightmare, this sudden perversion of calm and order? I behold my own behaviour-- as if apart from the one who is acting out a series of automatic motions. Is this the person I am or have become, or does it represent a further division within an already fragmented unity?

Now I have become fat. I have developed an intense need to eat at all hours of the day and night. I refuse the well-cooked meals provided at the regular hours, and stalk from the table as if nothing pleases me. In my room I hide supplies of cakes and pastries which nourish my ravenous greed and make themselves evident in a puffy complexion and a remarkably increasing fullness.

At night I penetrate the darkened kitchen, brazenly steal cooked chicken, fragrant salami, rich cakes, which I take to my room and feast upon during the long winter nights. The bones and disintegrated debris I deposit under my bed, in the crevices of the easy chair, in a corner of the bathroom.

When will they stop me? When will the cable arrive that will have my parents springing anxiously onto the next jet? Soon, it must be soon because I cannot be certain what I will do next. I stand and watch that other person who is me and who is not me, and I cannot tell.

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The lake is calm today. An inexplicable wave of joy fills me that nothing can dispel. No breeze ruffles the feathery needles of the dense forest of pine trees that ring the lake and stretch backward and beyond to an interminable blur of deep green. A series of small wood-frame cottages dots the clearing at the far end of the

lake where a band of sand provides a beach for sunbathers and swimmers.

The cottage nearest the lake is ours. It is white-painted wood and has been rented by my parents for the entire summer. I swim several times each day and I paddle the canoe aimlessly and effortlessly along the borders of the pine-scented water. I lie in a canvas chair on the tiny balcony overlooking the water and I read or merely look at the shifting patterns of light and shadow as afternoon turns to evening.

My sister is the acknowledged social leader of the tiny summer community and has a new commanding air this season as she rules over her growing kingdom. The lake is calm today. I am happy. Then why am I afraid? The sun is high in the sky and beats mercilessly down on the noontday sunbathers. The water is dotted with the bobbing heads of many people who plunge in and out of the cooling waters.

I sit on the shore and look vaguely at the swimmers. My sister is among them. She, who on land seems to move in a luminiscent circle is now an insignificant blob, a mere speck of nothing. It is rare that she goes in the water, knowing instinctively that her swimming is remarkably poor and that spluttering, gasping and flailing her limbs around, she will present a sorry spectacle to her friends.



But it is hot today; an incandescent heat emanates from the sun, and she has been tempted into the cool lake.

I regard her progress in the distance. She has drifted too far out-- beyond the reach of her friends, beyond the reach of the other swimmers.

I see her arms moving up and down. My muscles tense. I half-rise. The arms seem directed at me-- their waving motion a signal that only I can read. My sister has skinny arms-- thin reeds like the stalks of certain tall flowers. They are twisting and turning in the sun. The sun is glaring. My eyes are blinded by the sun. I see nothing but sky and water and a blankness on the horizon. I sit down again. My legs are weak and I must sit. I cannot possibly rise. My eyes focus once more and now the lake shimmers in a blue and silvery haze as her head jerks sideways in large gasping spasms. Her cries are muffled by the joyful splashings of the vocal multitude of her friends who swim nearer to shore.

I sit on the little muddy stretch of sand by the water's edge and I watch, as if some remote bystander at a contrived pantomime, as the crescent of her skull, the splayed arms, descend at last beneath the still gleaming surface of the water. The feeling of joy is still within me but mixed with a trembling fear.

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What am I? I walk along the narrow path flanked by a profusion of flowering shrubs that extends along the inner perimeter of the thick stone walls. The walls surround me-- heavy, gray stone, tough, enduring, impenetrable as the solid center of pain which resides in the very core of my being.

Why am I captive within these pain-concealing walls of stone? I do not understand. Not yet. I know only the long dreary corridors of the building within-- the box-like cubicle that is my room, the unending solitary hours, the probing, searching eyes of the doctors and nurses who will never know. My parents come sometimes to see me. We sit in mute silence, our eyes pleading, the words frozen upon our lips. I, who am now once again their only child am as lost to them as is my sister.

So do I see now in a nightly waking vision an interminable pile of stones-- the amber stones of Jerusalem, the frost-coated glistening gray bulk of my parents' winter home, stones gray and even, stones rough-hewn and layered, stones stretching upward in an infinite wall which I can never mount.

## BEYOND LOVE

Alan perched on the lone wooden-backed bedroom chair and watched Karen get ready for her visit to the doctor. His shoulders, broad and muscular under the faded college sweatshirt (relic of a burst of enthusiasm in his freshman year), were hunched over and his large hands rested heavily on his knees. He would have liked a cigarette but he was afraid of his hands trembling when he held the match so he just sat quietly and looked at Karen. She put on the new underwear and then the dress that she had unearthed from the back of the closet. Funny how she looked in the dress, he thought; it had been such a long

time since he had seen her in anything but pants. Now the dress gave her the appearance of a complete stranger, as if a woman had wandered into their apartment whom neither of them knew.

His hands began to shake slightly but he didn't think Karen would notice. She was putting lipstick on which she hardly ever wore either. It was a vivid orange-- too bright for her pallid skin-- a mistake, like the dress that was a bold print of brilliant flowers in a large swirling pattern. He hated the change it made in her yet at the same time felt a swift surge of desire that made him forget about his hands and the doctor and everything else.

He caught her around the waist from the back. His hands reached up to her breasts. "Take off the dress," he whispered, "you look stupid in that dress."

"Alan, don't be a baby. You hate the idea of the doctor touching me, don't you? Admit it."

His hands dropped to his sides and his face flushed red. He sat down hard on the bed. He spoke quickly, the words tumbling out in a rush. "I d-d-don't give a damn about the doctor. I just think the dress is dumb and the new bra and the lipstick and the rest of it. You're going to take every d-d-- all those things off and lie there like a stuck pig with your legs apart while he pushes his h-hand right up."

When he was excited the stutter was worse. If he relaxed and thought of what he wanted to say he hardly stuttered at all. People in the lab barely knew about his speech problem. It was only when he was upset, like now with Karen, that his words ran away-- better not to say anything at all-- she only used whatever he said to get her own way. He bit his lip hard and tried not to look at her but inevitably his eyes sought hers.

Karen smoothed down her dress and adjusted the belt. "You're a spoiled child. Mumsy spoiled you rotten. That'll make two babies in the house."

Alan leaned forward abruptly and pulled Karen down on the bed beside him and gripped her arms. He didn't say a word, just pressed his fingers around the pale skin of her upper arms until his own hands ached.

She stared at him in the intense way she had so that her eyes became two needle points of deep penetrating light. He released her arms and spoke as slowly as he could manage. "You know why you're going to the doctor. Tell him about forgetting the pill that night. It was a vulnerable time. Don't forget-- that's important."

Karen stood up. "I know."

"And about--you know-- if-if-f it's necessary... ask him."

She had moved into the small living room. She

turned; "We've been through all that before-- you know how I feel."

"What about me? What about my feelings? Promise you'll ask! He kept his voice low so that the words wouldn't get jumbled.

Her hand was on the door. I don't know," she said faintly and her skin looked grey and dry as if it were stretched taut over her delicate bones.

He could appeal to her in one other way. It might work, he didn't know. He never knew what would touch Karen at any particular time, that was what was so maddening about her-- or perhaps it accounted for a good part of her charm too-- that subtle twist she could give to a word or a smile or a glance that kept him always wondering about her. He said it. "If you don't ask the doctor you'll have to tell Mumsy."

"Tell her yourself. I don't care." When Karen was angry her voice became very soft and deceptively soothing. "Tell her what you like. I'll call you from the doctor's."

She closed the door quietly and he heard her heels clicking down the hall towards the elevator. He took a cigarette out of his pocket and struck the match. His hands were steady now that she was gone. Maybe it would be all right.

He went into the kitchen and took a bottle of milk out of the refrigerator. He had just taken the first quick

gulp when he heard her footsteps returning. He ran to the front door. He knew she would have some wild idea, he could almost hear her say it before she stepped into the apartment.

All he could see of her face was the lipstick-- that awful orange gash that seemed to move independently of the rest of her face as if it were the only feature in actual working order. "Come to the doctor with me, Alan." She said it in a throaty whisper and he knew she was badly frightened.

If he was very calm and careful he could handle her now. "Go-- you'll be late," he said quietly, almost cajolingly. It was the only thing he could think of though he might have known being reasonable with Karen never worked.

She smiled and came into the apartment. She stood with her back against the door and looked up at him. "Why can't we get married, Alan? I want to get married. Let's get married and have babies."

She was still smiling. He wanted to wipe the smile off her face. He wanted to tell her to stop sneering at him and to do what was necessary before it was too late. He wanted to tell her to get out of his life for a while and give him some air and let him think things over. He had a great many things to tell her but all he could manage was an incoherent, incipient, stuttering burst of sounds that erupted from somewhere deep inside of him.

Then she was gone. The door closed behind her and he ran into the living room and grabbed the first thing his hand shot out at-- a table lamp-- and dashed it onto the floor where it lay shattered in a thousand pieces.

The apartment was very quiet after she had finally gone. His hands were still trembling when he opened the desk drawer that held the piles of notes for his thesis and pulled out a folder at random. He fumbled with the cards, forcing himself to focus on them. His thesis-- "Mutations in Four Generations of Inbred Guinea Pigs Resulting from Radium Irradiation"-- was his only real hope of getting away from Karen and Numsy. His happiest hours were those spent in the lab-- or had been-- lately he found his thoughts straying constantly to Karen, wondering about her, thinking... But when the thesis was finished it would surely be different. He would feel free then. He stared at the thick folder of cards and notes-- it was all there-- the research and the neatly tabulated statistics and the tentative results that both he and his thesis director were beginning to get excited about. His original theory was borne out by nearly two years of work that only had to be organized into a coherent form.

If he could just concentrate; that was his problem lately. He looked at his watch and at the papers in front



of him. Karen should be away at least two hours-- time to at least get started on a plan of arranging the shapeless bulk of work. He turned a page and a long black hair quivered across the words, like an uncoiled serpent. No one had such black hair as Karen-- it was black as night, raven black, black as death when it hung in shimmering abundance over her bare white shoulders and breasts, black as intertwined branches in a dark forest when it brushed his arms and chest, twined itself in twisted strands about his neck, brushed against his nose and mouth and eyes in the moments of their lovemaking.

Alan picked up the hair and touched it tentatively. Karen used to wear it in braids-- two shining black plaits that hung almost to her waist. That had been a long time ago-- years-- how many years? He held the hair up to the light and considered... ten years perhaps...

Had he been fifteen that summer? They had walked along the deserted beach early in the morning before breakfast, before anyone from the other cottages was awake.

"I have something to show you," she had said. Her bathing suit was navy with a band of red and white stripes down the middle. She was very thin except for two rounding breasts which he observed slyly when he thought she wasn't looking.

"It's time for breakfast," he had said though he

was aware that it was far too early and that anyway food didn't seem of the slightest importance just then.

Karen had made him stand still as she slipped down the straps of her bathing suit. He didn't want to look at the two small plump breasts, dead white against the tanned neck and arms, but he couldn't stop staring.

"They're growing big," she whispered. "Want to touch? Don't be afraid."

He had backed away and he remembered the feel of the cold water lapping around his ankles as he tried to retreat.

"You're hard," she had said, pressing so close against him that his breath was half taken away, and rubbing her hand up and down his thighs, and upward to the place that was the mysterious center of a constantly recurring exquisite anguish.

"Don't," he had said, but he hadn't moved. "Somebody might see."

"No they won't. There's nobody here. Just us. Come on. It's nice. I'll touch you there. You'll see."

Alan let the hair slip to the floor. He returned to his thesis. It was a good research job, he knew it was. When he had his degree he could get a job almost anywhere--teaching or straight research. He'd already had three tentative offers, all hinging on his degree, of course. He

didn't know which one he would take-- he'd wait and see. What he'd like best would be to go really far away-- Africa, perhaps. His thesis director had casually mentioned to him that there was a possibility of setting up a research lab in one of the countries on the West coast there. He'd like that-- he wouldn't be able to take Karen to a place like Africa-- she hated the heat, was terrified of insects and snakes and crawling things. Mumsy too. Neither of them liked to travel whereas he had always had a yearning to go to the remotest corners of the earth. Especially now. And with a Ph. D. in genetics...When he got his degree. It all depended on that. It was just a dream right now. He had to figure something out about Karen and Mumsy.

Meanwhile Karen was set on finishing her fine arts course at this particular university, he didn't see why-- another would have done as well.

It would be good for him to move away-- by himself-- it had to be that way. The delights of living alone flashed briefly through his mind. But there was Karen. She would never hear of it, not even for a year. And Mumsy-- there was Mumsy too.

He pushed back his chair and strode from the living room to the bedroom and back again. A shirt of Karen's lay on the daybed in the living room, her cigarettes were on the coffee table. She wasn't terribly untidy; it was more

that her presence was felt in every corner of the apartment.

If they had not been thrown together so much... Karen knew him so well-- too well-- his every mood, what he was about to say before he said it, what he was thinking even-- it was almost as if she got right inside him sometimes and made him say and do things that he had no control over. He hated that about her-- that power over him she seemed to possess, that he couldn't quite cope with so that he was never sure if the firmest decision he had determined on would melt and vanish before a look or word of hers. He detested being tied to her that way. Mostly he blamed Numsy for the whole mess-- it was as if Numsy had deliberately willed him to create a situation that was becoming increasingly unbearable.

he had begged to be sent away to school. That must have been after that summer at the beach when he had finally succumbed to the urgency of Karen's persistent desire. And his own. The memory of those first experiences could still make him feel a brief quiver of pain and delight.

His father had died that fall. The snare woven by Karen and Numsy had slowly begun to tighten. His father would have let him go away. He had half-promised it the year before he got so sick.

"You can't go away," Numsy had said after his father's

death. "You're the man in the house now. You're so big and strong, we need you."

He had never asked again. It all seemed so hopeless-- easier to accept the inevitable-- to continue at the neighbourhood school, to enter the local university, to carry on a relationship with Karen that had become a mutually devouring need.

Alan went into the kitchen and finished the glass of milk. He sniffed. The lunch dishes had been washed and put away. There was no food in sight but there was a lingering odour in every room that Karen inhabited, a musky body odour, sweet and pungent and probably discernible only to Alan. He clenched his hands into tight fists and struck the counter top repeatedly, not hard, but with a rhythm that made the dishes in the upper cabinets jangle and shudder.

Soon the phone would ring. But not too soon, he hoped. Meanwhile he could savour the stillness of the apartment, the rare luxury of being by himself in the three small rooms.

The apartment had been his escape-- brief symbol of his determination to be free of the spreading tentacles. It had represented an enormous achievement. The cost had been a wrenching fight with Mussy which had left him emotionally drained but victorious.

Was it hardly a year ago that he had left home, signed the lease and then broken the news to Mumsy?

"I'm moving out, I've got to get away."

"You're the man in the house now, Alan. We need you."

"I'll still be here-- just a few blocks away, I'll see you often."

"You can't afford it, Alan. Your education comes first. You mustn't throw away all your father's money on something that's completely unnecessary."

"It's my money. Dad left it to me. I need to do this."

"You must hate me, Alan."

"Oh God, Mumsy, not that stuff again. I'm going a couple of blocks away-- four, to be exact-- I'll see you lots, okay? Can't you let me do something I want for a change?"

"And Karen-- what will Karen say?"

"Karen won't mind. Karen will understand."

It had seemed easy to explain it to Karen. Too easy; he should have realized that. She had looked up at him with her eyes blank and expressionless, just a hint of a smile on her lips. She had said nothing at all, not a word, just the smile, and her skin white, almost translucent, and her hair a cloud of feathery black framing the empty face.

He had talked too much, because she remained silent.

"There's no other woman, Karen. Just you. The apartment is nice. I'll be able to study there. I need to be alone. It isn't far. Just a short walk. I'll see you just as often as before. There's nobody else. I swear-- there's nobody else."

She finally spoke. One sentence. He remembered how it had sounded, the words uttered in a barely audible monotone, but having the effect of heavy stones hurled directly at a vulnerable spot somewhere around his eyes, so that even now when he thought of it he blinked and put up a hand to his head as if to ward off the blow. "There never will be anybody else," she had said. Then she turned and walked out and he didn't remember what happened next but he must have run after her and wept and explained it all over again.

After that everything went with an amazing ease-- the move and leaving Mumsy and feeling free of Karen. He was alive and real as if he had never been sure until then if he was an extension of Mumsy and Karen or a person on his own. He could do things exactly as he pleased-- eat when he felt like it, sleep in the daytime, play his records at night, be concerned only about his own selfish, unique needs.

It had been too easy. Suddenly she was there. "I've come. Get my bags. They're downstairs."

She wouldn't get away with it-- not this time-- he had been determined. He had pushed her with a violent thrust of his hand that sent her reeling backwards. Then he had rushed into the apartment, run across the living room to the window and slammed his fist right through the glass. He still had scars across the top of his left hand.

And that was it. He had been alone. For a while. Till the next afternoon when he came home from the lab. She was in the bedroom, leaning over a half-unpacked suitcase. When she looked up at him she was smiling-- a little cool smile that made his hands tremble and stifled the sounds crowding his throat.

"I got the key from the superintendent," she said and went back to her unpacking.

She was there and it was as if he had known it would be this way. The apartment was full of her within moments-- her odour, a long black hair in the bathroom sink, a transparent scarf fallen on the rug near the night table.

Soon the phone would ring. Then he would know. It was hard to wait, yet he hoped the phone would not ring for a long time. He sat rigid on the edge of a kitchen chair and stared at his hands.

"You should have been an athlete," his father had said, "or a pianist with those hands."

"Your hands are only good for breaking things,"



his mother had said. How often she said it. "A great boy like you has to learn to handle his body. Sit with your hands behind your back," she said, "then they won't move where they don't belong. That will make you sick. Don't you know it can make you crazy? Only nasty people do that. Put your hands behind your back. Don't let me catch you doing that or I'll tell your father..."

"Your hands are for touching me," Karen said. "You can touch me all over at once. No one else has such big hands. I never saw such hands. Touch me-- here and here-- you can reach everywhere."

Karen would be in the waiting room of the doctor's office, a magazine open but unread on her lap. The other women in the anteroom would be older, softer, their bellies proudly distended with a burden that for them must mean a prideful joy. When the nurse called her name Karen would march erectly into the examining room, her face stiff and pale, the eyes contemptuously vacant.

Before the phone rang Alan knew what the results of the examination were to be. He had known before Karen left, he had known as he watched her put on the too-bright lipstick and the vivid dress. He knew now with a certainty that provided him with a cushion against the shock when the phone finally did ring and he heard her voice.

"I'm coming home now."

"Did you ask him?"

"We've been through that. I told you how I feel."

"It's impossible, Karen. Go back and ask him."

"I'm coming home now."

He pushed the phone away and went over to the window to watch for her. He would recognize her from the distance by her swinging black hair and the brilliant flashes of colour on her dress.

His hands had a queer itching swollen feeling. He knew that when she opened the door and came into the room he would stretch his hands to their full measure and place them firmly around her white neck.

Then he would squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until there was not a breath of life in her body or in that briefly flowering womb that carried the evidence of the terrible passion between brother and sister.

## SABBATICAL

He was an old family friend who usually was at perfect ease in the Jasons' carefully muddled living room. Now he paced up and down the rectangular room, touched the keys of the piano, examined Maria's latest watercolour (children-- all her pictures were of children), finally settled with a sigh on the edge of an armchair and stared moodily at the waning fire.

His name was Richard Landis and he was a psychology professor at a city near enough to make frequent visits to the place he still privately thought of as home.

He looked at Maria and Adrian sitting side by side

on the sofa, Maria's hand lightly resting on her husband's shoulder; he thought of their two small children, now asleep upstairs, who called him Uncle Richard; he perceived in the flames that suddenly flashed orange before a final descent into glowing embers, the warming tendrils of love and trust and friendship.

And he wondered. He wondered. Soon Adrian would shake off the languid arm that still stroked the back of his neck, would walk over to the bar opposite the piano and pour scotch and soda for the two men in the proportion that best pleased Richard. And Maria would extend arms and legs, then curl up into a compact crescent on the corner of the sofa and ask about Roberta.

How's Roberta? she would say. Or-- how come you didn't bring Roberta? Or perhaps a statement like-- I guess Roberta was too tired to come. At which point Adrian might lift his eyes from the task of putting exactly three ice cubes in each glass and say with a deferential twinkle in Richard's direction that living with one's mother-in-law was an exhausting business even for the shortest period of time.

"Most of my colleagues spend their sabbaticals in travelling," said Richard, accepting his drink from Adrian. "I don't know what possessed me to come back here. It seemed like a good idea. I thought it would do

Roberta good to return to family, old friends-- roots. You know."

Roberta had refused to consider a year of roaming around Europe, drifting like gypsies as she described it, dragging the kids with them as if a lost year of school was meaningless. She had urged this return, pressed it on him with all her considerable powers that had finally overcome his deepest fears. If she wanted it that much, surely it would be all right.

Now Adrian would ask about the apartment and he would have to tell them of the unavoidable delay.

"The landlord made a mistake in the lease," he said with a forced laugh. "Can you believe that the idiot marked November instead of October and the other tenants are taking advantage of a purely clerical error!"

Maria would reach across and squeeze his hand and say how fortunate it was that his mother had kept the large house, all those bedrooms, how terrific that they all got on so well.

Why had Roberta hated his mother, (so hopeful, so inoffensive, so giving with an instinctive sensitivity) from the first moment of their marriage? It was beyond discussion now, another area to be carefully avoided.

He could see Roberta huddled in the big bed, her eyes fixed on the door-- waiting, waiting for his return.

She counted on him with a childlike faith, seeing in him someone with an infallible ability to solve, to soothe, to alleviate every injury.

I'm so glad that Roberta's health has decidedly improved. Adrian would say it. Perhaps Maria.

Three years without a symptom, Richard thought. There is no definite prognosis, Dr. Klugman had said. We can't make promises.

No promises. Roberta lay huddled in a corner of the oversize bed and waited. She waited there in the house of his mother whom she hated with an unreasonable, unyielding fervour. Sleepless she lay, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, or on a point of light shining through a crack in the Venetian blinds. He slept himself, the past week, with an uneasy, fitful sleep that forced his eyes open every hour to seek out hers-- open and empty, waiting for just that mute and unresolved contact.

Sleepless and fatigued. The overwhelming lassitude had come a week prior to their departure so that Richard had finished the packing, tended to the children, rushed back and forth to the university, accomplished a hundred details while Roberta sat watching in a corner of the denuded living room, or lay at night on the edge of the bed and looked for sleep that did not come.

The fire was almost out. Richard sprang up with

a sudden abrupt motion and stood over Adrian and Maria.

"Roberta isn't that well again, she doesn't sleep and the dizziness is back, all the old symptoms..."

They said what was expected of them. How sad. We thought she was permanently cured. What can we do to help?

"I have a favour to ask of you."

Anything. Anything we can do. Maria said it. Adrian said it.

"It's rather a large favour."

The larger the better. We're such old friends. Ask us. Please. Maria edged closer to Adrian on the sofa and her firmly fleshed arm hooked around his shoulder, her fingers delicately tracing a series of concentric circles about his ear.

We could have been in Greece, thought Richard, another compartment of his mind automatically selecting an appropriate phrasing of the next sentences. The children were young enough to withstand a lost year of formal schooling. Here in the place he still considered home, the towering maple tree in his mother's garden was already a blaze of reds and oranges. He might have awakened the very next morning to a sun-flecked sea, a sky as vast and blue as the depthless orbs of Roberta's eyes. She lay there now on the spare room bed, nerves taut as stretched wire, waiting for him.

"It's been a strain, these past few weeks-- decisions, packing, all the things involved in a move of this kind. And now the final straw-- no apartment for another month. You know Roberta, how sensitive she is." He looked directly at Maria whose eyes were fixed on his even as the contours of her body, supple as the restless motion of the sea, seemed to blend with Adrian's solid frame.

She knew; she felt for Roberta-- oh how that woman had suffered! Adrian nodded in sympathy and echoed Maria's words. How could they help?

In Greece at this season they might still swim. Richard could picture the cottage they would have rented. It stood high on a rock-studded promontory plunging abruptly to a frothing sea. Roberta would fatten and flourish in the long golden hours on the beach by the sea. We can't make promises, Dr. Klugman had said.

"Roberta needs to get away from the family situation. Just for a while. My mother-- oh they get along famously, but..."

They immediately acknowledged it. His mother was a wonderful woman-- a maternal marvel.

"But Roberta has a great need to be alone at this time. Away from me most of all, perhaps." He laughed dryly. "She doesn't sleep. She isn't eating much either. And the



headaches-- it worries me."

Why didn't Roberta pay them a visit? They would love to have her. The children adored Aunt Roberta. Let her come for as long as she liked. Till the apartment was ready. Nothing simpler.

Who said it? Maria or Adrian? Richard wasn't sure. He smiled with relief. The Greek cottage faded swiftly and the thought flashed through his mind that it was good, oh it might be good to be really home. Just a few points to clarify, in all fairness. He didn't want to impose a burden on such dear friends.

"If you would nag Roberta about eating, absolutely bully her like tyrants. She thinks she can live on air these days. She'll take it from you far better than she does from me."

They would stand over her like a Mrs. Portney. No dessert until you finish your meat and vegetables. Just as with the children. Clean your plate or no television. Oh Maria would put up with no nonsense.

"And when you all go out somewhere-- please let me make it understood that you're to lead your life as if Roberta wasn't there at all-- she mustn't hinder you in the slightest-- or I can't consider your incredible hospitality... But when you go out, if you'll just call me and I'll come right over and keep her company."

Of course. But isn't a bit of solitude just what Roberta needs now? Maria knew all about the feminine requirements for just the proper amount of privacy. Adrian regarded her with what seemed to be infinite respect.

"Yes, of course. But I don't like to leave her entirely alone. Not now. Her nerves. She likes to feel someone's presence-- not even in the same room-- just somewhere in the house."

She must not be left alone during these periods, Dr. Klugman had stated categorically. But that was three years ago. Three years without a symptom.

Maria looked at Adrian and moved towards the center of the sofa. She understood. Count on her.

Was her smile too bright and her reassurances tinged with doubt, Richard wondered. No matter. He had done it. He could return to Roberta and tell her that she need no longer stay in the same house with his mother; he had found a haven.

Would she have lain sleepless and hollow-eyed in the bedroom of the sea-swept Greek cottage, or in the bedrooms of the shifting series of European cities that Richard had variously envisaged? He didn't know. No promises, Dr. Klugman had said.

He had done what he could. At least he thought he had. God knows he had tried. What more could anyone expect

of him? Under the circumstances. One more thing, and then his conscience was clear. The pills-- just the subject of the pills.

Nothing could be more straightforward than the pills. One before each meal and the red capsule at bedtime. To help her sleep. "If you'll be the guardian of the pills," he said, forcing himself to look directly at Maria, and keeping his voice as casual as possible. "Roberta's such a scatterbrain, you know her, I'm afraid she'll forget the pills entirely if someone doesn't take care of them for her." He thought his tone had just the right shade of light amusement at this small temperamental vagary of his wife.

They seemed to find this odd, the little business about the pills. Surely Roberta would resent it, Maria thought. As if she were not to be trusted, was Adrian's opinion.

"Well frankly, I don't entirely trust her," said Richard, striding towards the large window which looked out onto the now darkened garden, a huddle of sinister shapes and shadows, relieved only by a quivering burst of light, the reflection of the last glimmering embers from the dying fire. "This sleeping business is no joke. It wears her down. Imagine the temptation of a neat little bottle of red capsules if you'd been sleepless for nights

and nights."

Was the quick look exchanged between Maria and Richard one of shock or sympathy or shared complicity?

In the sudden silence that descended on the room Richard could hear the waves crashing against the cliff on top of which teetered in precarious imbalance the Greek cottage, repository of his hopeless dream.

In his mother's house Roberta lay waiting, waiting for Richard to take her away, waiting for sleep that never came.

Warm soft lips were pressed against his cheek. Maria's. Poor Roberta. They hadn't realized. Those other illnesses. They didn't guess. How sad! What a burden for Richard to carry all by himself! All these years. What were friends for if not to help? Talk things over. They would care for Roberta as their very own, as if she were their dearest possession like-- why like one of the children.

The children. One question. She must ask. Maria looked pleadingly at Richard. It was a hard thing to say, but as a mother... now was the time to be frank... could Roberta be trusted with the children?

The fire was now completely out. No spark gleamed from the charred stumps. Richard shook his head back and forth, almost mechanically. "Oh no-- oh no. No. Roberta--

she wouldn't. She's not-- she wouldn't-- well-- hurt anything. Never. It's all against herself." He paused and looked into the dead fireplace because he knew now that it was better not to explain and he could do nothing but go. "She wouldn't hurt anything," he repeated softly, "just maybe herself."

He stood up and made for the door. Maria and Adrian, their hands seeking each other's, followed him. They smiled, little stiff smiles that affected him more than their silence. He put on his coat quickly and opened the door. "Good-night," he said, and felt the damp night air surge into his lungs.

He drove with the window of the car by the driver's seat rolled down as if the cold air rushing in might clear his head of the crowding images.

He shivered but he left the window open, knowing that he must adjust to the damp and the cold, the guilt and the shame of having a wife who hardly slept.

## SPRING IN CHINA

"And do you really think I'm justified in taking this trip?"

It must have been the tenth time that Andrew Hart had asked Beryl this question. In that form or another. Sometimes it went, "Will you be sure to give her the pills every day?" or, "I know it's a damned nuisance for you, but it's absolutely essential-- do you mind?" or, "I feel I'm using you-- because of us-- is that very terrible?"

On the last day the questions became more urgent: "If she-- if-- you know-- she might get very bad-- then

what will you do? Can you handle it? I'll be over 10,000 miles away-- if anything happened... Can I really justify this whole trip?"

Beryl's answers would vary, with the unvarying factor being the note of confidence and reassurance. Yes, he should go, most definitely; yes, she would give Marge the pills faithfully, twice every day; no, it was no trouble at all, they were practically neighbours, what could be simpler? Yes, there was every reason for the trip; on the contrary, no reason to stay home and play nursemaid. How could one possibly pose as a China expert without ever having seen the country? Being born there didn't count. Now was the time to go and take advantage of this sudden marvellously unexpected invitation. Ridiculous to pass it up when she was here to help out and poke her nose in at odd hours to make sure everything went smoothly.

Now they were at the airport, Andrew fussing over last minute details, his face thin and tinged with an almost yellowish pallor in the harsh glare of the artificial lighting. A button was missing from his raincoat, Beryl noticed with a melancholy awareness of insignificant details. Marge wasn't yet well enough to start on even this trivial household task. Beryl suddenly felt terribly overdressed, though her navy suit was almost severe in the

simplicity of its cut; perhaps it was the missing button that proclaimed the impossibility of anything more permanent between them than these snatched and guilt-ridden moments. She was overdressed, her hair was too tidy, her feet always expensively shod-- hopeless to foresee the day when she could ever truly possess this man with a button missing from his raincoat.

He was talking about the pills again. Orange pills and red pills. It seemed there was a fatal difference between the two.

"The orange ones are the tranquilizers. It's all marked down but I can't help being a nag about it. It's so damnably important. One after breakfast and one after dinner. And the red capsule is the sleeping pill-- you can put that together with the last tranquilizer. There's no danger of her taking that till just before bedtime. She's anxious enough to have a good sleep, God knows."

"Don't worry," Beryl said automatically. "It couldn't be simpler."

"Simple but a nuisance. I hate your having to do it. But there's no one else."

"If you would only tell the children... Don't misunderstand me, darling, I don't mind-- it's nothing to me at all to run over and distribute pills, but I disagree so completely about your keeping all this from them."



"I'm aware of your feelings about that," said Andrew sharply. "I don't want to discuss it."

"Very well." There was nothing more to say, and Beryl felt cold and hard and suddenly almost as alone as on that night when she had left her husband of five years and found herself suddenly severed of any emotional ties and self-isolated in the two-room apartment that had seemed so cosy and welcoming when she had first rented it.

The flight was called, there was a scramble of people towards the gate and now Andrew's arms were around her, he was kissing her and then he was looking at her with those dark eyes that never failed to penetrate something deep and vulnerable and absolutely vital within her.

"I'll write," he said finally, "and you cable-- if necessary. Promise to cable if you're the slightest bit worried."

So she promised. But it wouldn't be necessary, she thought on the drive back. She could handle Marge; she understood her pretty well. And she more or less knew what to expect of the disease itself. Marge wasn't likely to have another bout for months, maybe years if they were lucky. That was the nature of the illness. Cyclical, Andrew had explained to her when he had first told her the whole story.

Cyclical. Beryl laughed bitterly as she swung the car onto the highway leading back into the city. I could be a bloody psychiatrist instead of a schoolteacher. I know all the symptoms-- the first creeping signs-- a slight carelessness in dress, a growing reluctance to get out of bed at the usual hour in the morning, an increasing indifference to the problems of the children, loss of appetite, inability to get to sleep, and then suddenly (and it never failed to be a shock, Beryl reflected) the disease in its full-blown state. And then followed the horror of watching Marge's every movement without seeming to, of hiding the pills and the sharp objects, of struggling against the half-fear, half-hope that next time she might really succeed and God, maybe it would be better for everyone, of trying to thrust oneself in her mind and be always one step ahead, of forever attempting to sympathize and understand, yet at the same time not being able to stop thinking-- she's spoiled rotten, what she needs is a good shaking, look how many lives she's ruining.

Beryl drove the car into the garage, wedged it carefully in the too-narrow space and walked up the three flights of stairs to her apartment. The very thought of the elevator gave her a sense of being unable to breathe, and when she entered her own flat she leaned against the

hall door, placed her right hand over her heart and inhaled deeply. All at once she was overwhelmingly tired-- too exhausted to eat though she had had no dinner at all.

The stillness and small perfection of her own home helped. The momentary magic of being surrounded by her books, a few really good watercolours, a fresh flowering plant, an aura created by soft colours and well-chosen fabrics, again eased her pain and almost compensated for the gnawing feeling of aloneness.

She got into a steaming bath, lay there and began to think involuntarily of Marge and her illness. It was impossible to separate the disease and the guilt, her own guilt-- Andrew's was something else again. That was his problem; Beryl understood it but was unable to cope with anything more than her own involvement-- the tearing feeling at her heart when she saw the ravaged face of Marge at her most tormented moments and felt the full impact of her own role.

"How can we do this to her?" she had said to Andrew that first time after the tumultuous emotional wave had given way to more sober considerations. "It could kill her."

"No," he had said sadly. "It's cyclical-- it comes and goes like the seasons, like the spring rains. It is seasonal, in fact. Her time is usually late summer-- some-

times every two summers. There's as little logic in it as in the whims of a spoiled child-- very little relation to external circumstance, so don't you get guilt-ridden. That's my department."

"But if she found out? I can't believe it wouldn't be disastrous for her condition."

"She will never find out. We'll take every precaution to spare her that. Leave that to me. And remember, if it will do anything for all those useless feelings of guilt, that I would have left home at a certain point if I didn't have you to keep me sane. So you see, my darling nitwit, that you're actually in the position of holding the family together. Think of it that way."

She tried to think of it that way. It worked-- sometimes. Occasionally she wondered what would happen to them if Marge were ever cured. It would be marvellous, she told herself, and then was forced to admit that it would be catastrophic for them. Once she had timidly broached the subject to Andrew.

"Really cured?" His dark eyes clouded over, and he shook his head almost brutally. "The prognosis is lousy. She can't even take the anti-depressants because they leave her with rotten side-effects. So you take your pick between the down phase and the up phase. Plus the time in between when you're anxiously waiting for the signs of

approaching disaster to appear. And they come-- oh, do they ever! I don't know which period is worse-- the deep depression when she's more of a vegetable than a human being, when I have to drag her out of bed at noon and comb her hair and actually spoon-feed her and yes, even wash her, or the high period when she's a demon of uncanny energy, yelling, dancing, spitting, shrieking sudden obscenities at me, frightening the kids (who, I'm convinced, are too young to really understand), impossible to take among friends, dangerous to the point of... oh God--" he had held his head in his hands in a gesture of self pity which Beryl had rarely seen him indulge in. "Let's not think of it," he had said finally, "that way lies creeping insanity for everyone. Let's just consider you and me. That's much nicer."

"You and me." That was what Beryl did concentrate on over the next few days. It wasn't easy though, what with having to see Marge twice every day to give her the pills. The mail hadn't started coming yet either, though Beryl knew that Andrew would write frequently. He had promised, but China was far, very far-- another world. Did they have stamps there, and envelopes, and postmen who made the daily rounds, and airplanes that traversed vast oceans and continents to span the gap between separated lives?

How could Andrew possibly spare the time to even think about her, Beryl wondered, as she rang the bell of the Hart's house about three days after Andrew's departure. Andrew was immersed in the subtle unfolding of living history, and she, Beryl, was standing on the doorstep of his home, playing the loving family friend.

Marge answered the door. She had had her hair done. Her dress was neat, almost fashionable. When she smiled it was without that fatal glitter in the eyes that presaged dangers to come. She placed her hand on Beryl's arm and drew her in. The hand didn't tremble, and her fingers held the sleeve of Beryl's dress without the clawing grasp that sometimes made her think of a frightened feline predator ready to attack.

"Come in, have dinner with us, Beryl. Yes, do-- I mean it. I cooked. The whole meal. Yes, I insist. I did it all myself. I wrote Andrew the whole menu; he'd be so pleased with me, and a special dessert, his favourite rice pudding with whipped cream, if he could only see it, and I had my hair done, see?" She whirled around. "Andrew loves it this way, I wish he could see it. You'll stay? Good. I'll tell the kids to put another place on. Shelley, set another-- no, I'll do it myself. I'm full of energy today. I haven't stopped since the morning and I could go on and on-- it must be the weather-- spring does that

to me-- come in, Beryl. For God's sake, don't stand there like a lump."

Beryl came in. Rather Marge pulled her in, literally thrust her into a chair in the living room, poured her a drink, presented her with a tray of carefully arranged hors d'oeuvres, chattered incessantly.

She's better, Beryl thought. Thank God-- hectic, but not unreasonable. She took a sip of her drink. It was strong, and a warm smooth glow hit her suddenly in the pit of the stomach and radiated outward, flowing through her body and filling her with an aura of quite undeserved well-being. Everything was going to be fine. She could relax.

Marge's conversational flood washed around her. Bits of it penetrated the curtain-like haze that seemed to envelop Beryl and create a momentary feeling of suspended reality.

"I'm planning it for Andrew. I owe it to him. Poor thing. He'll never believe it. I won't even tell you. It's time I did something like that. No, don't ask-- it's a surprise-- a complete surprise. I just hinted about it to Andrew. In his letters-- when he writes..."

Beryl roused herself. Her head was swimming. She sat up and reached for an olive. "Have you had a letter yet?" she asked carefully, her eyes on the olive as if it

was a new creation of the evolutionary process.

"No, not yet. Have you?"

Beryl dropped the olive on her lap and looked sharply at Marge who returned the look with a bland smile.

"No, of course not," said Beryl, "I don't expect a letter-- a postcard if I'm lucky."

"Andrew writes me every day when he's away," said Marge. "I expect the letters will all come in a bunch one of these days. He's very faithful that way. You have to be lucky with husbands, Beryl. Look at the two of us-- you have all the looks and the brains and the rest of it, and I have the husband and the kids and the big house. You ought to get married again, Beryl, you need a man. I can't wait for Andrew to come back-- I'm planning this fantastic surprise for him, did I tell you? But it's a secret, I wrote him about it-- just that there would be a surprise, not what it was. I wonder if he received my letters yet. I haven't heard from him. China, you know, the mysterious Orient, and communism-- they say the bureaucracy is worse there than in the old days, but I'll hear soon. The letters will probably all come in a bunch. Come on, Beryl, drink up. It's all a matter of luck."

The letter came two days later. Time and space dissolved, were incorporated into that tissue thin slice of paper that had taken almost ten days to reach her.



Beryl put the letter in her purse. She took it to school with her. She read it over at least a dozen times by the end of the day. Her step was quite lighthearted as she mounted the stairs to the Hart's house. It was cloudy out with a heavy accumulation of gathering storm clouds, but Beryl only noticed that the daffodils that Andrew had planted last fall were pushing up.

The door opened. It was Shelley. She was fifteen, tall and serious, with a broad face like her mother, but her father's expressive dark eyes.

"Hi, come on in. Mum's out."

"Out? But where?" Beryl looked up at the sky. "It's going to rain any minute. Where could she have gone?"

"Shopping. She's on a wild shopping spree. I got two new pair of pants and a sweater. Come see."

A shopping spree. Beryl didn't like the sound of it. Or could it be a good sign? She wasn't sure. Normally Andrew did that-- did just about all the family shopping, including the grocery purchases when Marge was really ill. He even brought home clothes for Marge when he could no longer stand the sight of her slopping around in a soiled housecoat. If only he would give his daughters an inkling of their mother's condition-- Shelley, at least. She was so sensible. Surely she would understand and be sympathetic. It would make life so much easier; Beryl hated the endless

subterfuge. But Andrew was adamant, fiercely protective of Marge in a totally misguided way, Beryl thought.

"How's your mother?" asked Beryl cautiously.

"Great," said Shelley leading Beryl towards her room. "Terrific. She had her hair done again this morning. Look at what she bought me. I can't remember when we last shopped together. It was fun. We had lunch too. Sit down, I'll put on the pants with the sweater."

Beryl slipped into the bathroom off the main bedroom. Her hands were trembling as she set the day's pills out in the little plastic containers. If Marge were to suddenly get better... A complete cure. But it was impossible. Cyclical. The disease was cyclical. Probably incurable. Marge must be having a remission.

Beryl opened her purse and took the letter out. It was already frayed at the edges. She read it over silently, though she knew the contents almost by heart. She looked in the mirror. Her hair was beginning to grey, just at the temples in barely discernible silvering threads. She plucked one out and looked at herself critically. Her skin was white, and her nose seemed suddenly sharp and almost predatory. Her eyes were her best feature-- deep blue and fringed with a curtain of black lashes that gave her at rare moments, a look of languorous abandon.

"Beryl, what are you doing?" Shelley was knocking

at the door. "I've got them on."

"Coming-- just combing my hair." Beryl flushed deeply and unlocked the door. She slipped her arm through Shelley's and smiled brightly. "They fit you beautifully. And the colour! Your father will love them."

Beryl got home just before the rain started, a real downpour. After dinner she sat down at her desk with twenty-five compositions. By ten o'clock she had corrected them all, with her usual conscientious comments though there was no great rush to finish all at once. They had been handed in only yesterday, but she had wanted to forcibly push away a train of thought that was becoming insidiously dangerous.

She stood up and stretched. She would watch a movie on TV-- let it be the most mediocre film imaginable-- the more insipid the better-- even an idiotic detective story or a resurrected soap opera-- as long as it took her mind off the present moment. Then, before bed, she would write Andrew a long letter. A letter. She sat down abruptly, her knees suddenly weak. A letter. Andrew's letter. Where was it? It was in her head. Every word of it was engraved on her mind. But where was the actual piece of paper?

Beryl laughed. Of course. Her purse. The black leather purse she used for school every day. On her bureau.

In the bedroom. She ran to her room, snatched open the purse, fumbled through the contents, but the interior was as neat and well-kept as Beryl's shoes and her apartment and her clothing. The purse was entirely free of clutter. The letter was not there.

The feeling of panic passed quickly. It gave way to an increasing lethargy, a creeping fatigue. Her limbs were heavy and aching as if she was suffering from a severe flu. The back of her eyes burned and she became aware of the intensity of the outside storm. It was thundering now, low rumbles of increasing volume as the center of the disturbance approached.

Beryl stood up. She had to hold on to the back of a chair for support. She knew what she had to do.

Methodically Beryl pulled on rain boots and covered her head with a plastic kerchief. The rain engulfed the car in a flood of water as she emerged from the garage. Even the windshield wipers were ineffective against the deluge of water. Perhaps it had been foolish to drive for only two blocks but the thought of walking the short distance to Marge's in this weather seemed inconceivable.

The letter could still be on the counter beside the sink in Marge's bathroom. Could be. Not very likely though. Marge would have been sure to have seen it the moment she went into the bathroom. Had it been folded or

open? Beryl didn't remember. Her head ached with the strain of trying to figure out Marge's hypothetical actions. She would have opened the bathroom door, seen the letter, perhaps tossed it into the waste basket as a piece of useless paper. That was the most Beryl could hope for. The reality was more likely that Marge had seen the letter, recognized Andrew's handwriting, and immediately read the whole thing.

And then what? The letter had been an unusual outpouring of emotions: Andrew, who was normally so contained, who divided his life into neat compartments, with the harsh facts of his situation always a shadowy presence in their relationship, had suddenly dropped all pretenses and had expressed his feelings for Beryl more freely than he had ever allowed himself to in their most intimate moments. Worse, he had been more than explicit about the pain of his daily burden in caring for Marge.

What would Marge do? Beryl dashed out of the car with the rain sweeping down on her, dripping onto her face from the overhanging roof of the porch as she raced up the steps.

She rang the bell. It was one of those endless chiming devices. She heard it echo through the house. There was a lull in the storm and a sudden stillness as she waited. Perhaps it would be all right. After all, the

normal reaction to the sight of a letter not addressed to oneself would be to return it to its owner, unread.

The normal reaction. But Marge wasn't normal. Not all the time. The door opened simultaneously with a violent resumption of the storm as if the interval of calm had given it renewed strength. Shelley was in front of her, dressed in a long flowered nightgown looking sleepy.

"Hi, I got frightened when I heard the bell. It's so creepy outside. Especially with Daddy away."

"I'm sorry," said Beryl, shaking her coat in the vestibule. "I woke you, I forgot it was so late. I..." She realized all at once that she hadn't even had the presence of mind to formulate a reasonable excuse. "I--I tried to phone but something is wrong with my line. It must be the storm. I wanted to find out how your mother was. I mean-- she was out all day and I wanted to make sure she got home. I couldn't get to sleep until I found out."

She was babbling, she knew, but she was beyond caring. "How is your mother? She's home, I hope?"

"Oh sure, she came in at about five with an arm-load of stuff. I got another sweater and she bought herself enough clothes to last the year. Daddy's always at her about clothes and her looks and things like that. He really cares about all that."

"Can I see her?" asked Beryl, breathing a little more evenly. Perhaps it would be all right after all.

"She's asleep," said Shelley. "She fell asleep right after she came in-- she had a bath and then just went to bed-- didn't even answer when we called her for dinner. I didn't try and wake her. I guess all that shopping exhausted her."

"Then I certainly won't disturb her," said Beryl. "I'll go now, I'm very tired myself."

"Oh, wait a minute," said Shelley, "she gave me a message for you. It was just after she came out of her bath, she called down from her room and said to be sure to tell you."

"Yes?" Beryl could hear the rain beating against the window panes of the living room. A vein in her forehead had suddenly begun to throb.

"She said that you're to write Daddy and tell him to expect a terrific surprise."

That sounds reassuring, thought Beryl. Perhaps it would be best if she just let Marge sleep. Her own apartment now seemed immensely attractive-- warm and sheltered from the driving rain and the buzz of other people's problems, other people's lives.

Beryl half-turned toward the front door, then stopped. She would just tiptoe upstairs and see if the

letter was still near the sink, where she had probably left it. More likely than not Marge had been in such a state of fatigue from the shopping trip she hadn't even noticed it. Marge was the world's worst housekeeper. She could live surrounded by litter-- the house would have been a regular pigsty if not for Andrew's fastidious picking up after her.

"Perhaps I'll creep up and have a look at her," said Beryl. "I promised your father, you know."

"She won't even hear you," said Shelley, "you know how Mum sleeps-- like the world has gone right past her, Daddy says."

"Did she take a sleeping pill tonight?" asked Beryl.

"Which one is that? Mum has so many pills."

"It's a long, thin red capsule," said Beryl.

"Oh, those. I guess so. She has a whole bottle of them."

"No dear, she couldn't. You're confusing it with another kind." Shelley, of course was unaware that Marge was not to be trusted with the sleeping pills.

"No, I'm not. She keeps them in her top drawer-- under a pile of underwear. I saw them once-- two whole bottles-- red capsules-- just like you said-- thin, and



bright red."

What time would it be in China now? Was it spring there too, the rain pouring down on the reviving land, Beryl wondered as she slowly climbed the stairs to Marge's bedroom. She should be hurrying while there might still be time, but her feet moved ponderously, at their own inexorable pace, up the narrow staircase. And as she approached the silent room, Beryl was already phrasing the cable to Andrew in her mind.

**THE BRIEFCASE**

Laura lay in bed and watched the newborn spring light infiltrate the slats of the Venetian blinds, fill her bedroom with shifting bars of sun and shade that flickered across the austerity of the Scandinavian desk, the single night table, the uncluttered bureau. The pain in her head had receded to a remembered throb as she forced herself out of bed a half hour early.

She must hurry. This morning she couldn't be late for the library. Not that Mrs. Rother would say anything-- after twenty years-- no, it must be twenty-one by now--

one had the privilege of being late occasionally. But if she came in after nine-thirty she might miss Professor Fowler, who usually appeared early on Thursday mornings to pick up books for his afternoon seminar.

David Fowler, David Fowler-- the name reverberated through her skull like a pounding replacement for the headache itself. If she could only move a little faster. It was always like this after one of her migraines, the feeling that the rhythm of her whole body had slowed down to a different tempo, making each action take on the dimensions of an almost insurmountable obstacle.

It felt like weeks, instead of only two days since she had been physically near him, aware of his presence (he, though, seemed scarcely more conscious of hers than of the black briefcase he always carried with him-- perhaps even less, because he appeared to have a particular attachment to that briefcase).

She must force herself to leave the house soon but she didn't dare forego breakfast-- Dr. Maurice had been very firm about that. She made her way to the kitchen which was at the end of a long, narrow hall just opposite her mother's bedroom. The hall was obscure now, the series of rooms giving off it faced the wall of the neighbouring house and was doomed to darkness except for a brief burst of light around noon when the sun was high enough to

penetrate the space between the two houses.

Laura had wanted to move after her father died. But her mother clung to her house and her clutter of possessions-- rooms filled with the languishing souvenirs of a life arrested in time.

Her mother's door was still closed and Laura tiptoed past it. Perhaps her luck would hold and she might escape the house before her mother awakened. Not likely though-- Mrs. Hope, in spite of her eighty years, had the hearing of the variest jungle animal.

"Is that you, Laura?"

Laura stood perfectly still, scarcely breathing as if she could will her mother back to sleep by the immobility of her own posture. It was a useless attempt.

"What are you up to? Not going out, eh? No use pushing yourself, you're not nineteen anymore."

A door creaked open. Laura's mother padded slowly into the kitchen, her flannelette nightgown exposing several inches of blue-veined, parchment-colour legs terminating in the knobby-toed feet of the very old.

"You're not going to work today, not after the way you felt yesterday!"

"I'm fine, Mother. Put on some slippers. The floors are cold." It was a litany to which they both knew the responses.

"Well, Mrs. Rother will be glad to see you back for sure," said Laura's mother. "Another day and the whole place would fall apart. You should have been head of that library-- not her!"

"Mrs. Rother is quite capable of running the library, Mother. She manages very nicely."

"Sure, because she has Laura Hope, spinster slave, at her beck and call. If you had that Master's degree..."

"But I don't, Mother; she does," said Laura with barely controlled bitterness in her voice.

"You could have. I never stopped you. I was ready to give you all the money you needed."

"Daddy was sick that year I had enrolled in graduate school, remember? It would have been impossible, what with running to the hospital every day for almost six months. You never objected to my being out of school that year."

"There were other years," her mother reminded her.

"And I wasn't well the next year. I was emotionally exhausted and in no condition for studying."

"You had a nervous breakdown," said Laura's mother sharply. "Emotional exhaustion! There's no such thing! Too attached to your father-- that was your trouble. And you've never been the same since, if you ask me."

"Mother! Nobody's asking you!" Laura flushed and the unaccustomed colour momentarily threw into relief the

blueness of her eyes, the small pinched nose and the square, almost jutting jaw that was the only pronounced feature in the otherwise flattened bone structure of her narrow face.

Laura's mother squinted at her daughter. "I think you should stay home today. You look a mess to me."

"I'm going to work, Mother. I'm all right. I'll just go and get dressed before breakfast."

Laura turned and went back in her room, closing the door firmly behind her. She stood in front of her open closet, swaying slightly. Her eye was caught by a silk scarf hanging on a hook. It was an original foulard by Chanel, bought last winter in a moment of extraordinary self-indulgence. She knew that the colours, shades of pale rose and lavender, softened the contour of her jaw and hid the thinness of her too long neck. Laura reached for the scarf; she had never worn it to the library; it would occasion endless comment from her mother, hardly worth the pleasure of showing it off to the rest of the staff, the feel of the silk sliding back and forth across her neck.

Her hand drooped slightly, hung in mid-air. A feeling of pressure in her head grew, a sensation of bodily invasion occupying and pushing against the outer edges of all her sensory organs. And all this while Laura knew that she was incapable of shaking off the image of

David Fowler. His tall, somewhat stooped figure, a ready upward curve to surprisingly full lips that were the focal point in his long, high-cheekboned aesthete's face intruded upon her awareness more often than she liked to admit.

It was in early fall of this past year that David Fowler had first presented himself to Mrs. Rother as a newcomer to the university. He had accepted the chairmanship of the History Department, had made known his needs with a curious combination of diffidence and command that left Mrs. Rother completely charmed. It was she who had unearthed the vital facts about Professor Fowler-- late forties, wife died of leukemia three years before, two teen-age daughters, one in high school, one a university student with her own apartment near the campus, total dedication to his children and the memory of his wife.

All this Mrs. Rother culled from a pipeline of information flowing vigorously towards the main desk of the library. It was to this desk that David Fowler brought his frequent offerings of flowers. He had bought a house with a flourishing garden, he hadn't any idea about flowers, let the library staff arrange them as they pleased.

She went to the kitchen and managed to swallow some coffee and half a piece of toast. Her mother crept up behind her in the predatory way that was uniquely hers.

Her nearsighted eyes focussed on Laura and seemed to perceive some remarkable aberration. She pounced. "You're wearing your Chanel scarf! And the navy dress-- it's your concert dress!" Her eyes, watery blue, embedded in wrinkle-wreathed hollows, held Laura accusingly. "Why are you all dressed up?"

"I thought it looked..." Laura's hands moved uncertainly upwards, touched the region of her throat. "Do you think I should change?" she asked.

"There's no time," said her mother quickly, and there was a triumphant note in her cracked voice. "Better hurry."

She must hurry. On Thursdays David Fowler never lingered in the library because of his seminar. When Laura pushed open the outer apartment door she felt the shock of sunlight on her face like an unexpected gift. It dazzled and confused her so that, for a moment, she stood motionless on the threshold of the building.

But she must hurry. The warmth of the sun on her back as she rushed to catch the bus reminded her of something-- sun pouring through an expanse of glass...

It had been on the previous Monday at Dr. Maurice's office-- he had just moved to a new building, starkly glass-fronted and designed to catch the light at every possible angle. He had been the Hope's family doctor for years, but



it was Laura's first visit to his new quarters. She had brought her mother to investigate recurrent stomach pains and a loss of weight that had been troubling her for some weeks.

The examination had been lengthy. After it was over Dr. Maurice beckoned Laura into his own room. He shut the door. "Sit down, Laura. I'm afraid I may have some bad news for you. Nothing definite as yet, but I want to prepare you."

"It's serious?" Laura's voice sounded flat.

"Possibly-- I don't like the symptoms, especially the weight loss. Of course we'll have to have X-rays, but I'm worried. It could be a simple ulcer, though I tend to doubt it."

"Then you think it's a malignancy," said Laura softly.

"I think it may be. I could be very wrong. I hope so. Your mother is a grand old lady, Laura. I've known her for a long time, but she's not young any more. Still strong minded, though, isn't she?"

"Very," said Laura, and had to suppress a wild desire to laugh hysterically.

"Bit of a tyrant too, I wouldn't doubt. Well, we'll have those X-rays done tomorrow and we'll know the results soon enough. Remember-- she's over eighty, and she's lived

a full life."

She has lived a full life, thought Laura, on the way home, and mine is just about to begin. I'll move out of the apartment immediately after-- after... I'll get something modern and bright-- lots and lots of windows-- and I'll travel-- I've never been anywhere-- and I'll be able to have friends over-- meet people-- it will be different-- I'll feel free, really-- perhaps even David Fowler will...

"I guess Dr. Maurice gave you some pretty good news," her mother said. "You look pleased as punch."

"Wonderful news," said Laura, and looking at the creased, worried face of her mother, felt instant remorse and a sudden pronounced throbbing in her right temple.

The migraine had started that very night and it had been one of the most severe Laura had ever suffered.

When she arrived at the library Laura immediately noticed a large bowl overflowing with daffodils which stood in the center of the main circulation desk.

"Nice, aren't they?" asked Mrs. Rother. "Professor Fowler just brought them in-- arafuls. Headache better? You sounded quite ghastly on the phone yesterday." She reached over and squeezed Laura's hand. "Oh, I love your scarf-- gorgeous! Too bad you missed Professor Fowler--

he just walked out about five minutes ago. I think you've made a conquest; he sounded very concerned when he heard you were ill-- asked about you every day."

Laura quickly bent her head over the flowers. A wave of dizziness almost overcame her. She hunched her shoulders slightly and the movement resembled a careless shrug.

"Poor man," went on Mrs. Rother cheerfully, "he needs a wife. We had him and his girls over for dinner last night and he ate more than my sons, if you can believe that. It was a sight, all of us gorging ourselves. Lucky for him so many of the staff invite him out. He said he's never seen such a place for hospitality."

Laura's head jerked upwards. She stared fixedly at Mrs. Rother. The room began to rock slowly, then turned in a slow circular motion.

"Are you all right, Laura?" Mrs. Rother grabbed her by the shoulders. "You're dead white; here, sit down."

The blood returned slowly to her head, the swaying furniture in the library settled into fixed positions, only the flowers-- yellow, distorted amorphous shapes assumed a monstrous grandeur in the orbit of Laura's eyes.

"I'm fine." She smiled tentatively. "Just a slight dizziness; no, thank you, I won't go home. I'll be perfectly all right in a moment."

The day passed somehow. By afternoon the light-headed feeling was replaced by a strange euphoria. "We had him over for dinner last night." Mrs. Rother's casual words formed a central theme around which Laura's reveries were woven. "We had him over for dinner last night"-- just like that, so matter of fact, but then, Mrs. Rother was matter of fact-- fat Mrs. Rother with her fat, jolly husband and her two over-sized sons, Mrs. Rother whom Laura had always despised and yet at the same time had secretly envied.

By the middle of the day Laura had mentally planned a dozen dinners for David Fowler and had as quickly dismissed the idea as being hopelessly beyond her.

At five, just as she was about to leave, there was a phone call for her. It was Dr. Maurice. "Hello Laura, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I just got the tests back and I wanted to tell you about them immediately."

"Yes?" Laura's voice was unnaturally loud.

"Great news, Laura! She's fine! It's a stomach ulcer-- should respond to diet. I'm just delighted. I'm very fond of that old mother of yours and I know how you must feel."

"And the ulcer?" asked Laura, "is there absolutely no danger in that?"

"Absolutely none," Dr. Maurice said heartily. "She'll

probably live another twenty years."

Laura hung up and put one hand to her neck. It encountered the silken gloss of the scarf. She rubbed her hand back and forth across the material for a moment. The touch of the silk was soothing, and for a while she sat there, very quietly, stroking the silk with a back and forward motion and staring woodenly at the phone as if it had been the means of conveying to her something so complicated that only this brief immobility would allow the information to penetrate her understanding. And then abruptly she dropped her hand from the scarf, stood up, and felt her mind clear with a startling lucidity that made everything seem absolutely inevitable.

She would wait no longer. She would ask David Fowler for dinner.

The main difficulty for her was the matter of the invitation. How would she go about it? A telephone call or a written invitation? No, a face to face encounter would be best. The sooner the better before she lost courage. She would find the right moment-- there would be a sign of some sort.

Three days went by. David Fowler came in with a young girl who Laura at once realized must be his daughter. She saw a resemblance in the long head, in the structure of the upper face, in the shape of the lips. They talked

earnestly together, the young glowing head leaning against the fading blondeness of the father.

Laura was touched. The relationship seemed pure and simple, just what she had imagined it would be. When he came to the desk to have his books stamped he smiled at her with special warmth and she could feel his smile mirrored in her own face, in the instant flush that covered the pallor of her cheeks.

"You're looking very well," he said. "It must be the spring weather."

"It's my favourite season," said Laura, "everything bursting with life."

"Well, in my case, it's bursting with work." He held up his bulging briefcase and smiled ruefully. "I got a little more than I bargained for when I took on the chairmanship of the department-- administrative chores, which I frankly detest, graduate students at crucial stages of their research, and my own book, which is trying to get written in between."

"That sounds like too much for any man," said Laura. "I think some relaxation might do you good. I was going to suggest..."

"Ten to four!" David Fowler stared at his watch in evident disbelief. "I'll be late again. I have to dash." He stuffed his books into the briefcase, turned away hur-

riedly and had left the library with his daughter before Laura could finish her sentence.

She must ask him, but now Laura became more than ever convinced that she had to choose a propitious day-- there must be some sign, however trivial.

The sign came the very next day, and it was clear and unmistakable. It happened at the end of the day. The library was almost empty of students. Laura prepared to leave, tired and discouraged. David Fowler had been in early in the afternoon. He had barely smiled, had taken a handful of journals and several reference books; he had an unusual air of harassment that stifled a sudden impulse on Laura's part to ask him and be done with it.

Wandering down the long central aisle of the reading room she gathered a few books left on the tables. When she leaned over a chair to pick up a fallen sweater her eye was caught by a large clumsy object half hidden under the table. It was a briefcase laden with books and papers. Some student would be worrying about it right now, grateful to get it back intact. Laura scrutinized the briefcase; it was black leather, good quality but well worn. On the lower right hand corner were the initials, D.F. Her fingers traced the outline of the initials with a lingering motion. She laughed out loud. Here was her sign. Laura cradled the briefcase in her arms and stroked the soft leather with

her fingertips.

The main desk was deserted at this moment as Laura with her burdened arms traversed the short distance from the reading room. She walked purposefully as if she had known this was how it would be.

Behind the desk was a series of drawers, wide and deep, used by the staff for their personal possessions. Laura's was the very bottom one, distinguished from the others by its larger size and the fact that it had a lock which had been installed by Laura herself a few years ago. She removed her purse and placed the briefcase in the drawer. It fit perfectly as if the drawer had been made to its exact specifications. Laura turned the key in the lock.

Already she could see the morning scene. It unfolded before her in a preordained pattern. David Fowler would be in the library very early, he might even be there before she arrived herself; he would be distraught, concern would accentuate the radiating nest of lines around the corners of his eyes. She would listen to his story, caring but calm, sympathetic but apart, till with one large gesture she would produce the briefcase. Then-- what more perfect moment for the invitation!

The morning came, cool and clear and expectant. Laura left the house very early. For once she avoided.



her mother who unaccountably slept on as Laura crept out of the house. Surely this too was a sign.

He was there when she arrived. He stood at the empty desk, waiting, his face long and haggard. When he saw her he smiled, but it was a mockery of warmth from his fleshy lips that now seemed lifeless and attenuated.

Before she had even removed her coat he began to speak. His voice sounded distorted, the words tumbled out in a torrent of disconnected phrases; "I'm afraid I've done something terribly stupid. I know I tend to be absent-minded, but this is beyond anything. My briefcase-- black-- but still very good-- has my initials on the corner-- I'm sure I had it in the car with me last night, but when I got home it wasn't there-- searched the car and the house-- everything's upside down. Priceless-- not the briefcase," he laughed, a jarring noise that shot through Laura who stood in front of him holding her coat. "Priceless amount of work, I mean. I've got months of my own research there, and that's the least of it-- the thing that has me worried sick is the thesis-- a doctoral dissertation-- original copy-- due to get his degree in fall-- absolutely irreplaceable."

He leaned forward and took Laura's hand clasping it in a painful grip. "Perhaps I left it here." His face was next to hers, she could feel his breath, smell his

odour, see a tiny scar above his right eyebrow that she had never noticed before.

At her right temple a vein throbbled fitfully. He released his hold on her hand abruptly. "Sorry, I must be hurting you-- I didn't sleep all night. I hoped I had left the briefcase at Aline's. When I phoned her and she said no, I thought of the library-- it's the only other possibility."

"Aline?" Laura had the key in her hand and was already bending to open the drawer. The name was a discord. Then her face cleared. "Oh, you mean your daughter. Is she the one who has her own apartment?"

"Aline? Oh no, she's my fiancée; it's been rather a well kept secret up to now. I must introduce her to everyone here, but she's been a bit shy about the whole thing-- you see, she's very young and I..." He sighed and then went on quickly, "she's been in the library with me a few times-- you may have noticed her, though perhaps not, since even Mrs. Rother isn't aware of her existence. Aline is starting a Master's in Political Science. We're to be married in June."

Laura took a hanger from the rack at the side of the desk and hung up her coat carefully. The pulsating in her right temple became more insistent and was accompanied by a sweeping sensation of nausea.

Laura looked directly into David Fowler's eyes as she said, "I'm afraid you haven't left your briefcase in the library. You see, I was the last one out yesterday and would have been sure to have seen it. All that work gone! What a pity!"

### THE ITALIAN LESSON

Evelyn Delfuss had started taking Italian lessons about a month after her husband left home to live with another woman. At first she had thought that the nightmare that her life had become would engulf her completely so that the dark waves of misery from which she surfaced every morning, limp and more exhausted than when she had gone to bed, would finally suck her last breath away. But two teen-age daughters to support on the modest sum of money she was forced to accept from her husband each month made her decide to take a secretarial job with a large insurance company. The work was boring but surprisingly well paid. When she got home in the evening there was dinner to prepare, homework to supervise, and a

minimum of housework to be done. Somehow she was surviving.

The worst of it became the persistent questioning of Ann, the older girl, who was obsessed with the notion that it was Evelyn's fault that the marriage had disintegrated, and that she had been unable, through some personal failure, to hang on to her husband. Ann was ruthless and inquisitorial, she missed her father desperately, she hated yet somehow admired the other woman, and seemed to feel a growing contempt for her mother which she expressed in a new sneering manner, in repeated acts of petty disobedience, in continuing nagging questions.

Partly to escape this new source of anxiety, and partly because Linda Matthews, her dearest friend and only recipient of some of Evelyn's deepest confidences urged it upon her as a way to expand her horizons and meet other people, Evelyn decided to take Italian lessons. She had always been good at languages in school, and had been told she had a natural ear. She had always loved the sound of the language which to her was the embodiment of music and romantic scenery.

At first everything about the lessons was a great disappointment. They were held in the classroom of an ancient high school, a yellowing brick building whose drab corridors were painted a livid green in a dismal

attempt at cheering up the interior. There were fifteen in the class, all female, all younger than Evelyn except for one white haired woman who sat in the first row and who was so much older than everyone else that she somehow didn't count at all. The result was that Evelyn felt a great gulf between herself and the rest of the class, the gulf that she lately experienced when she walked on the street and observed young couples arm in arm, or when her daughters' friends came to the house and made stilted conversation with her till she released them by leaving the room.

Even the teacher was young, probably not more than twenty-five, and this somehow seemed to her the greatest betrayal of all. She arrived home that winter evening after the first lesson, tired and thoroughly depressed. If she hadn't already paid a good deal for the course she would probably not have attended another lecture.

Ann was still up when she came home, her hair washed and hanging loose in a fine redspun cloud that framed her elfin face.

"How was it?" she asked in surprisingly agreeable tones. "Say something in Italian."

"Buona sera," said Evelyn, "that's good evening. Actually we didn't have a real lesson tonight, just for-

malities and a few phrases."

"What's the teacher like?"

"Young, like everyone else. Italian, I guess, though his English is almost perfect, just a trace of an accent. The only remarkable thing about him is his name."

"Which is?"

"You won't believe it." A broad grin briefly lit up Evelyn's face and threw into relief the deep brown of her eyes and the delicately chiselled nose which were her best features. "It's Romeo-- Romeo Palucci."

"Romeo! You're kidding! You've got to be! Romeo!" Ann seized two cushions from the sofa and danced around the room, her hair whipping above her head as she spun, like a fiery halo. "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Outside on the balcony perhaps? Under the bed? By the cemetery gates at midnight?"

She flopped down on the carpet and smiled up at her mother, a smile as free from rancour and suspicion as Evelyn had seen in months. "What's he look like? No, wait, I'll tell you. He's terribly short, about five feet two, has oily black hair, beady little eyes, and he wears pointy yellow shoes and a shiny blue suit. How's that?"

"All wrong," said Evelyn, and yielding to impulse, sat down on the floor beside Ann and buried her head

briefly in the mass of hair that smelled vaguely of lemon and soap and some indefinable bitter-sweet spice. "He's exactly the opposite-- quite tall, longish golden hair that curls over his forehead, very blue eyes, skin that is sort of tawny-- as for his clothes, I don't remember quite what he was wearing, but he's certainly the most impeccably dressed young man I've ever seen.

"Well, he sounds perfectly yummy-- unbelievably poetic-- and with that name..." Ann stood up. "I do believe you're in love with him already."

"My dear child," said Evelyn, and she laughed bitterly at the thought, "he's in his late twenties and I'm a good ten years older than that."

Ann looked her mother up and down in a way that made Evelyn feel she was being mentally and physically measured. "You're in pretty good shape for your age. Well-preserved. Your figure is good, and even if you couldn't hang on to daddy, you might still manage to find a lover."

She gave her mother a cold, hard look, tossed the cushions in the direction of the sofa and disappeared into her bedroom.

It took about six weeks, in fact, for Evelyn to



fall thoroughly in love with Romeo. It was an unspoken love-- a sensation felt deep within her, shared, she felt sure, by him, that needed only the right gesture, the appropriate place, the sudden spark to ignite a mutual passion. She analysed her own emotions constantly, she who had become so careful and calculating in her relationships, and who had forced herself to understand her husband's sudden attraction for his new woman: now she stood apart from herself, deflected, as it were, as a terrified onlooker watches a brakeless car skidding inexorably down a steep incline and is powerless to stop impending disaster.

Sometimes the symptoms were amusing, and Evelyn, the observer, could only marvel at her own behaviour. She bought new clothes, things she could ill afford, that in addition to their too high cost were, she knew instinctively, just a shade too young for her. And yet they suited her wonderfully well, her body had never felt so supple, her step so quick, with a slight spring in it, her carriage so erect and sure. Her skin, normally sallow, took on a clear healthy tone that accentuated the illusion of depth and intensity in her dark eyes.

And she was jealous! Shamelessly jealous of all the young girls she saw, not only in the Italian class, but even in the street. She seemed surrounded by youth and beauty wherever she went and she felt hopelessly

drawn to these young people and envious at the same time.

Her husband, Gerard, noticed a change in her. He came to take the girls out to dinner on a Tuesday this particular week, the night of her class. Normally he came regularly on Thursdays, avoided the shadow of Evelyn's ill-concealed hostility cast over the apartment as soon as he appeared, like the self-protective spray certain animals secrete at the approach of the enemy. Evelyn was too aloof to harangue, too civilized to withdraw into silence-- she chose her only natural weapon-- an austere, practical coldness that congealed her sensibilities and enabled her somehow to surmount the renewed anguish she felt each time she saw Gerard.

On this Tuesday Evelyn was hurrying to her class, had almost forgotten Gerard's impending arrival, more concerned with the effect created by a new hairdo which exposed her small ears, and revealed a still unlined white throat.

She came out of her bedroom to find Gerard in the hall, standing between Karen, the younger girl, and Ann, a quick smile on his face, the look of badly suppressed guilt and bravado that he donned as his own particular protective armour for his weekly encounter with Evelyn.

"Oh, you're here! Is it Tuesday or Thursday, or am I losing my mind?" Evelyn giggled and the sound was

as strange to her as it was to the others.

The smile left Gerard's face and was replaced by a look of total bewilderment. He stared at his wife, seemed taken aback and then, as if recovering lost ground, the smile returned. "It's Tuesday, remember? I told you it would have to be Tuesday this week-- I'm going out of town tomorrow for a few days. I won't be seeing the girls till week after next."

Evelyn picked up her notebook and her Italian grammar.

"Oh, I see. A business trip?"

"Ah-- well-- sort of combined business and a little holiday, I have to see someone in New York and once I'm there I may take in a few plays."

"It's a holiday, Mother," said Ann coolly. "Don't let Daddy kid you. They're going to do the town, him and his Brenda-- a second honeymoon."

"Ann! That's enough," said Gerard sharply. "I told you it was a business trip. If Brenda comes with me that's nothing to do with you."

"Never mind, Gerard," said Evelyn softly. She shrugged her shoulders and giggled again. "Why not? Now I have to run. A rivederci."

It was only when she was outside and felt the stab of air so cold it made her gasp for breath, that

the old sharp pain entered her body like the stinging sensation of tiny pointed needles.

Their own honeymoon had been spent in New York, and the second honeymoon fifteen years after that too-- a vain attempt to recapture the flowering of their love that had taken root and sprouted in the unnatural soil of the ruthless skyscrapers and indifferent multitudes of the largest American city. It was not long after their return from that second fruitless voyage that Gerard had met Brenda, and the very name, New York, was inextricably linked in Evelyn's mind with the collapse of her marriage.

She half-ran the last two blocks, because of the cold, because she was late, because the motion sent the blood coursing through her body, finally blotted out the looming images of towering buildings, dim-lit hotels and restaurants, cool marble hallways of museums, multi-dimensional configurations of glittering store fronts, a melange of black and white faces, crayon yellow taxicabs, all jumbled crazily in her head.

By the time she reached the school Evelyn felt warm and somewhat calmer. The class had already started when she opened the door, bringing with her for a fleeting instant a mixture of the cold air still clinging to her coat and the glow she carried within her body and wore in the deep rose of her cheeks. She slipped

into her usual seat, murmured a "sorry," and smiled at Romeo, who paused in the middle of a grammatical explanation. He stood with chalk-covered fingers hovering over the blackboard and seemed taken aback, as if by an unexpected intrusion. Finally he said, "Va bene, Evelyn?"

"Si, molto bene." She took off her coat, opened her book and glanced up to catch Romeo still looking at her, a twisted strand of gold-brown hair falling over his forehead. He turned back abruptly to the blackboard, as if with an effort, and continued to explain verb tenses.

He was absurdly good-looking. It was almost indecent, as was his air of extreme youth and health. His well-cut clothes, which he wore with great ease, seemed an extension of the perfectly knit liness of his body and the incisive clarity of the bony structure of his head and neck. What was most surprising to Evelyn, and somehow touched her deepest sensibilities, was her observation that Romeo appeared to be as kind as he was beautiful. The combination was at once shocking and alluring. Even-tempered, gentle, and always agreeable, never impatient with the endless stupidities he encountered in the class, he demonstrated each week a surprising modesty in one so young. Evelyn always thought of him as being essentially innocent though she was aware at the same time of his aura of social sophistication and cul-

tivated' tastes.

Later when the class had almost emptied and Evelyn was buttoning her coat against the winter night, Romeo approached her. "Perhaps you should stay behind a moment so that I might explain to you the augmentatives and diminutives. You came in just after I had finished. It is very simple but quite important. Your husband will permit you to be several minutes late?"

"I don't require my husband's permission," said Evelyn calmly, though she could feel her heart racing in her chest. "We no longer live together."

"Ah!" He paused imperceptibly and then carried on smoothly as if Evelyn had merely told him that she preferred winter to summer or apples to pears. "Instead of a word expressing size or quality, as the English 'very,' the Italians use a suffix which may be added to a noun, adjective, or adverb. For example, the commonest ending is "issimo." Thus "largo" -- wide-- becomes "larghissimo"-- "bene"-- well-- is "benissimo"-- very well-- or to give a feminine example, referring to a beautiful woman-- "Una bella donna"-- one would say "una donna bellissima." Do you understand?" He looked straight at her, the blue of his eyes so intense she felt a sudden sharp sensation of pain. And with the pain that penetrated her body and manifested itself in a barely controlled tremor of her hands,

a catching of the breath as if there were an insufficiency of oxygen in the room, she felt an intense awareness, a sudden gladness that she had no longer thought herself capable of.

"I understand," she said, and then quickly, "that's very simple, isn't it? Now I must hurry home. My daughters will be waiting for me."

"Do you like Italian food?" asked Romeo as if brushing away the sudden introduction of Evelyn's children.

"Yes, of course. I adore it, though I've never attempted to cook much beyond spaghetti."

"Then perhaps you will permit me to introduce you to some of our lesser known but far more interesting specialties. There is a wonderful new restaurant in town, quite undiscovered as yet."

"I--I-- yes, that sounds very nice." Evelyn wondered if that prim little mincing statement could possibly have emerged from herself. A blare of trumpets or a great clanging of cathedral bells would have seemed more appropriate. She looked around the classroom as if half expecting to perceive a fat, naked Cupid perched on Romeo's shoulders, arrow in hand. But all she saw was the drab classroom, the pencil-scarred desks, the green metallic wastebasket in the corner filled with orange peel and the crumpled scatterings of the day students, and when she

permitted her gaze to focus on Romeo all that was blotted out in the wonderful Mediterranean blue of his eyes.

"Sometime this weekend then, if I may call you?" He had a trick of asking the question by the inflection of his voice rather than the phrasing of the words. "I cannot now tell you whether Friday or Saturday because of the impending arrival of my brother from Rome. When he comes I am never sure if he stays one day or one week. Then we are caught up with many family visits, dinners, parties. But I would so like you to meet him-- we could all have dinner. I want you to be acquainted with my family. I have told them of you."

"It sounds wonderful," said Evelyn wistfully, whose own family was confined to an aunt in Detroit and a sister of Gerard's whom she detested. "There's nothing like a big family that's close-- so much warmth."

"Yes, we do not lack warmth-- too much, sometimes. We are very lucky-- we have a happy relationship, but it can be very boring too-- all these obligations."

"Oh, never boring!" said Evelyn, and she had a sudden clear picture of them all-- mother, father, sisters, brothers, Romeo, the youngest--all perfect physical specimens, sitting around a baronial dining table groaning with food, a centerpiece of purple grapes, the purple repeated in the colour of the wine in long-stemmed goblets at each



place.

"So that I will telephone you after the arrival of my brother," said Romeo, opening the door for Evelyn, "probably on the Friday or the next day. I may?"

"Yes, you may. I would like that."

"In that case, I say buona sera-- addio."

Evelyn wondered during the next few days whether she could possibly be a manic-depressive, or if the symptoms she experienced might be a manifestation of delayed adolescence.

The days between her last Italian class and the onset of the week-end were what she thought of as the "manic" phase. The time was passed in a cloud of day-dreaming at the office, where by some miracle she got through work each day without having been fired for sheer incompetence. In the late afternoons she shopped before the closing of the stores. Evelyn was searching for the perfect dress. It must be neither too formal nor too casual, wildly flattering, without being obviously seductive, and not outrageously expensive.

She found the dress on Thursday evening and spent about twenty-four hours of perfect happiness until the depression set in.

That phase started on late Friday afternoon, about

the earliest time that she felt Romeo might phone. It had been a long while since she had been telephone-bound: not since Evelyn had been a teen-ager had she felt paralyzed by the whims of the small instrument that now sat innocently on her bedside table. Immobilized by its stony silence, jerked aloft by its sudden piercing ring like a puppet on a string controlled by invisible agents, Evelyn spent the evening in a state close to panic. The phone did ring-- constantly, mostly for Karen and Ann, who had the kind of profound friendships which required instant communication of the smallest minutae in their hourly lives. One final call came at ten-thirty. It was Linda Matthews.

"Hi, what are you doing?" Linda's tone implied a readiness to spend an entire evening in idle chatter.

"Nothing much-- just ready to have my bath and get to bed."

"How are the girls?"

"Fine, just fine." Evelyn smothered an urge to bang the receiver down, and made a supreme effort to sound friendly. "How's your family?"

"Great. Come for lunch tomorrow?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Linda, I can't. It's one of those mad days. Saturday, you know how it is when you work-- all the chores get left for Saturday."

"Mmm, I know." (She didn't, spending all her time in puttering around the house and in cooking elaborate experimental dishes for her husband and three voracious sons.)

"Meet me for lunch on Monday, then?"

"All right-- on Monday. Is there anything special?"

"Well-- there is something..."

"We'll talk about it at lunch," said Evelyn hastily.

"I must dash, Linda, my bath water is about to overflow.

Till Monday."

By Saturday afternoon, with still no call from Romeo, Evelyn was thoroughly depressed and bad-tempered. It was unbearable to stay home, and impossible for her to tear herself away for even a moment. Never had the apartment seemed so confining, so devoid of attraction; never had Karen and Ann been so grating on the nerves, each girl entertaining a shifting battery of friends who wandered at ease from kitchen to living room to bedrooms, encased in a travelling cacophony of sound emitted from transistor radios, and record players, and mobile electronic devices that seemed to be an integral part of the teen-age anatomy.

And how they ate! Evelyn, who had always pressed hospitality on her children's friends, perhaps because she herself had come from a rigid anti-social household

where entertaining was confined to a ritual holiday schedule, was suddenly nauseatingly overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of food consumed in her house that Saturday.

The phone remained mercilessly silent all that day, the only people besides Romeo who might have called presumably being right there in the apartment.

By mid-Sunday afternoon Evelyn had recovered somewhat. At three o'clock she dressed to go out for a walk. The late-day sun was still glittering on a fresh snowfall, and she decided she would no longer be a slave to the telephone.

"You are a fool," she said pleasantly to her image in the mirror, and decided she was still a very good-looking woman. The clinging pale lemon sweater and the bold checked slacks which she would have hesitated to wear but several months past now seemed perfectly suitable.

The walk revived her spirits. The cold, sharp air brought the colour back to her cheeks and made her feel alive once more. When she got back Ann was sprawled on the living room floor reading a novel.

"Anyone phone?" Evelyn asked, though she had been determined not to.

"Mm."

"Does that mean yes?"

"Mm hum," Ann said and turned a page.

Evelyn resisted an impulse to throttle her daughter.

"May I ask who?" she asked carefully.

"Just Signor Romeo Palucci," Ann said, stifling a yawn, but glancing up quickly at her mother.

Evelyn hung her coat up in the closet and waited. With Ann it was best to wait.

"He left a message," said Ann finally. "I love the way he speaks English-- it's so-- so marvelous-- every word sounds important."

"And the message?" asked Evelyn, making it seem an afterthought.

"He's sorry about not phoning sooner, but he was unavoidably detained by family affairs, and he will speak to you about it at a later time. Now he must ring off since he is going to the airport to say the farewells to his brother." Ann grinned. "How's that? It's verbatim, including the accent."

"So he doesn't want me to phone him?" Evelyn couldn't help asking.

"Obviously not, Mummy-- he's saying the farewells."

Evelyn went into her room and shut the door quietly. She sat on the edge of her bed and felt quite blank for a few moments, as if the cold of the winter afternoon had made her numb, and prevented her from thinking coherently.

Outside the wind had risen and the sun had disappeared behind rapidly moving layers of clouds which began to release a light scattering of snowflakes. They drifted aimlessly down on the streets below, melting before they touched the pavement.

The anger only came during the night; it hit in a great wave, penetrating Evelyn's dreams and finally preventing her from further sleep after the grey light of morning. By the time she dragged herself out of bed to make breakfast, she was as exhausted as if she was in the recuperative stages of a debilitating disease.

One thing though-- her mind was clear-- as if a mist under which she had lived for quite a while had suddenly lifted. It was a relief, even though the ache was still there as a muted throb, and she knew she had been saved from something foolish and possibly harmful. With the sudden awareness of the brink to which her wayward emotions had nearly led her, came a series of painful images of Gerard, as if the wound, just slowly being covered over by layers of protective membranes of new tissues, had been suddenly and brutally ripped open.

Evelyn was totally unable to push away these thoughts from the conscious level of her imagination. She saw her husband and Brenda in New York, in all the places consecrated by herself and Gerard when they had

first been married, and had created for themselves a series of little shrines as a touchstone for perfect happiness-- their hotel, their theatre, their restaurants, their very own museum-- now being violated and trampled upon.

The violence of this new suffering so overwhelmed Evelyn that she barely staggered through her Monday morning work at the office. When she saw Linda waiting by the large doors in the downstairs lobby at lunch time she realized with a sickening jolt that she did have an appointment with her, and forced a smile of welcome.

"Hi, you look tired."

"I am, a bit," Evelyn said, "I don't know why, though. I didn't do much this week-end."

"Me neither, except eat." Linda looked from her own ample proportions to Evelyn's trim figure. "It isn't fair-- I gained weight and you lost. You look marvelous, Evelyn-- very seductive for an old lady with two teenage daughters. Here--" she steered her into the neighbouring doorway that led through a crimson-carpeted bar into a small dining room. There were about twenty tables covered with red and white checkered cloths, decorated with chianti bottles from which tallow-covered candles sprouted crookedly. The restaurant was presided over by one sour-faced waiter and a gloomy looking waitress.

"It's Italian-corny," said Linda, "but the lasagna is great, and you can practise your Italian. Besides, it's quiet, so no one will hear what we're saying."

Evelyn allowed this last remark to pass over her, sat down at a table against the wall and studied the menu.

"I'll just have the minestrone," she said.

"No, you won't," said Linda, "this is my treat and you'll have antipasto, minestrone, the lasagna, a salad, plus a bottle of chianti-- without a candle in it. The works. Maybe a spumoni to finish it all off."

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "Why the grand banquet? What are you celebrating?"

"I'm not, you are," said Linda. "Here, waiter-- we'll start with two sherries, please."

"You've gone entirely mad. You know a drink at lunch puts me out for the rest of the day. I have to go back to work, Linda."

"Do you good to take an afternoon off anyway," said Linda. "Besides, that office has been run by hundreds of drunken agents for years. Now--" she leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I have news for you, my dear."

Evelyn felt a great churning in her stomach as in the far off days in school when she had been called upon to respond to a question for which she was totally unpre-



pared.

The drinks were presented by the morose waiter who wrote their orders on a little pad with the air of someone about to record all the human follies of the world. He disappeared and Evelyn took a quick sip of sherry, feeling an instantaneous comfort as the warmth descended. "What news?" she asked in what she hoped was a reasonably calm voice-- for suddenly she knew.

"Gerard has left Brenda."

Yes, that was it, that uncanny flash of certainty before Linda had actually said the words.

"He called me on Friday, in the late afternoon..."

Just at about the time she had been waiting to hear from Romeo.

"He said he had to see me, and fifteen minutes later he was at the house. He wants to come back, Evelyn; I had to restrain the man from picking up the phone then and there and calling you."

It was another person she had been desperately willing to call her-- perhaps at the very same moment.

"They never even got to New York at all. The whole trip was Brenda's idea, not Gerard's-- a kind of patchwork thing-- she was willing to do anything to hang on-- he decided at the last minute that he couldn't go through with it."

So New York was inviolate, just when she had visited upon it the desecration of Brenda's incursion.

"He really needs you, Evelyn-- wants to make a new start-- said the whole Brenda thing was a kind of madness."

A madness! She saw the figure of Romeo as clearly as if he was in the room sitting opposite her in the very seat occupied by Linda. He was laughing and his face was in shadow, the subdued light from the candle illuminating in momentary flickers the azure of his eyes and the golden gleam of the top of his head as he leaned towards her.

"You may think it strange that he came to me first, but we're such old friends, you know-- Gerard and I-- real pals, and he feels quite frightened of you-- so-- so guilty."

Guilty in action, or in thought-- there wasn't much difference really, was there?

"So he asked me if he could call you-- after I prepared the way-- which is what I'm trying to do now. May he?"

May he? May who? Evelyn looked across the table and saw the candle casting its mottled light over the face of Linda. Their food came-- two steaming bowls of minestrone and a dish of fragrant grated cheese, ceremoniously served by the waiter who allowed himself a brief baring of gold-filled disastrous teeth. Evelyn must

have nodded because Linda was pumping her hand and raising a brimming glass of Chianti in her direction.

"Cheers then, or whatever the Italian equivalent is. He'll call you Wednesday, around dinner. He had to go away on business for two days. I think he wanted to give you time to think. I just know everything is going to be great. It's up to you now."

Up to her—just as it had been up to her to hang on to Gerard in the dying days of their time together, as if she had forced him out instead of clinging desperately when she knew nothing would stop his going; up to her to keep a semblance of a home for herself and the girls; up to her to make a grab at personal happiness in the devilish form of an innocently beautiful young man. If it had all been up to her, would she be here now listening to Linda's confused babble, feeling alternate waves of complete despair and utter bliss?

When Evelyn went home she cried-- tears that welled up from deep within her and flowed over her face like a cleansing rain drowning the last snows of winter. Then she slept for hours, heard vaguely Karen and Ann's homecoming, the clatter of dishes as they prepared their own dinner, the stillness in the house and street below as night descended.

On Tuesday morning she woke up feeling miraculously

at peace with herself for the first time in weeks. By mid-afternoon she had decided not to go to her Italian class. What use was Italian to her? It was a romantic luxury that her practical mind now rejected.

After dinner she said to Ann, "Let's finish the dishes quickly and go to a movie."

"What about your Italian lesson, Mummy?" Karen asked.

"I'll skip it. I'm not in the mood. Besides, what's the point? I can never learn much in a once a week class."

"Mummy's insulted because Romeo didn't take her to dinner," said Ann from the kitchen, her ears attuned to any conversation going on in an astonishingly wide radius, "so she wants to pay him back."

"Nonsense, Ann," laughed Evelyn, and she suddenly realized that the increasing bitterness of Ann's innuendoes was probably directly related to the absence of her father. "In any case, he's much too young for me. I'll have to find an older man."

"Daddy's age is just right," said Karen, and then put her hand up to her mouth and searched her mother's face as if for immediate recognition of a vast indiscretion.

"That's right," said Evelyn, "Daddy's age is just perfect for me. Let's clear up and get ready."

"Romeo will think you're sulking," said Ann, appearing from the kitchen, "and anyway, you're always telling us that you should never leave something unfinished, even if it gets to be a bore. Right?"

"You're right," said Evelyn, sighing. "I'll go-- trapped by my own weapons-- but I assure you, this will be the first and last Italian course I'll suffer through."

"How come?" asked Ann. "I thought you were crazy about your Italian lessons?"

"Oh, I like them," said Evelyn, "but I'm not making the progress I expected. It's hard to concentrate at the end of a day, you know. But you're right-- I will go."

When Evelyn arrived in school she was surprised to meet Romeo just outside the classroom, almost as if he had been lying in wait for her. From the hallways Evelyn could see other members of their group converging on the class.

Romeo leaned towards her. He spoke in a whisper, "I must explain to you, you will understand, I hope-- these family things become hopelessly entangled-- tomorrow evening, we will go out, yes?"

Evelyn felt an overpowering desire to run, but her legs were immobilised and her body was totally unresponsive to her will. She managed to shake her head and say, "No, I think it's better that I don't."

Two students were approaching. Romeo pulled open the door, and as Evelyn entered the classroom he said very softly, "Yes, yes, I insist. I will phone you tomorrow-- at six." Then he added something in Italian, something only partially comprehended by Evelyn, but which she absorbed as a clear statement of his urgent desire.

And so she knew, with a helplessness that was infuriating, that she would be as powerless to refuse him as Gerard must have been when he went off with Brenda. She would await Romeo's phone call, she knew, with the same intensity that had been with her all the previous week-end and which she thought she could never again experience. The pain and the fierce joy that accompanied it-- these would be her self-imposed companions.

Well, if she was to be a wicked woman, she might as well enjoy it. Time enough to feel guilty later. She succeeded over the next day in renewing that lost feeling of anticipated bliss that reached its height when she arrived home after work on Wednesday to await Romeo's call.

But waiting was so hard? Evelyn decided to try and relax in a long, hot bath.

As she luxuriated in the steaming, perfumed water, idly examined her own long-limbed torso, distorted into a sensual pattern of rippling rose and ivory, she found herself thinking about Gerard. Poor Gerard, he would be

mortally disappointed-- no-- hurt was more accurate. His pride would be wounded, the disappointment and pain would come later. Let him too experience the cutting bitterness of deep loss.

Her own body, as she glanced down at it now with an almost objective tenderness, was still very good-- well-preserved, as Ann would say. She was slim and firm, no thanks to diet or exercise-- just luck-- one had to be a little lucky in something, if it was only in a pair of shapely legs, a still solidly moulded bosom, and a long, elegant neck.

Gerard now-- his physical presence came to her in a series of visual flashes-- the bulge of his stomach when he sat down-- he wasn't fat, just flaccid in a loosening of his abdominal muscles, though he had nobly firm buttocks-- the way his breath came in quick wheezing gasps as a certain prelude to the arousing of his sexual desire, so that Evelyn always felt a terrible urge to giggle-- the excessive hairiness of his chest, which as he held her close in the moments of their heightened passion caused Evelyn an exquisite tension of pleasure and disgust...

A phone rang. It seemed very far away and Evelyn sank deeper into the water till just her head emerged from the clouds of vapour like the blossom of a stemless flower cut off from its natural completeness.

Now she pictured Romeo's golden head, his curls lightly brushing the hollow between her collar bones... Gerald used underarm deodorant-- it had a sweet cloying odour that lingered on the pillows and on his body even after he had showered.

The phone rang again, but now Evelyn was thinking of Gerard in the evenings. He liked a substantial bedtime snack-- spicy salamis, sharp cheeses, washed down with a large glass of foaming beer, all of which he consumed as he perched in his underwear on the edge of their bed, watching one of his favourite TV talk shows. He was strangely alive and vital as the night wore on, full of boisterous talk and hopeful plans, which he rattled on about to a semi-dormant Evelyn. When sleep finally overtook him it was sudden and violent, so that Evelyn had to put him to bed where he would emit instantaneous rumbling snorts like an engine which responds miraculously to the touch of the start button.

Evelyn tried to picture Romeo asleep, but she was unable to. She saw him as always awake, the brilliant blue of his eyes never covered by the protective eyelids of repose, his arched neck, which sustained the weight of his perfectly proportioned head, always in a vertical position; the fluidity of the movements of his whole body was completely unsuited to repose.



The bathroom had become a tropical hothouse, an equatorial sanctuary into which Evelyn had removed herself from the external world. Reluctantly, she emerged from the bathtub. It was time.

Enveloped in a woolly cherry-coloured bathrobe, Evelyn stepped into the living room. Inexplicably Ann and Karen were holding hands and dancing in circles around the room. Ann was laughing, her head flung back, the laughs disintegrating into a series of little hiccupping giggles every now and then.

Ann hasn't giggled in months, Evelyn thought. Karen's face was red with excitement. She had no talent for dissimulation. They stopped abruptly when they saw Evelyn. Ann came over and hugged her. "You look gorgeous, Mummy-- like a flower-- like a long stemmed rose."

"What's going on, girls?" asked Evelyn. "It's a madhouse!"

"Daddy called, Daddy called!" cried Ann. She began to jump up and down as if some physical motion was necessary to underline the importance of her announcement.

"He may come back!" Karen blurted out. "If you want him. He said it! He said it!"

"Idiot! You're not supposed to tell her that!" Ann said, but she smiled at Karen, who had clapped her

hand to her mouth and looked as if the laughter might turn to tears.

"Never mind, stupid, Mummy will know soon enough." She turned to her mother. "Daddy wants you to call him. He has something he wants to talk to you about."

"Make him come back! Make him come back!" Karen suddenly began to sob.

Evelyn looked at Ann whose face had become white and almost immobile except for a tautness about the mouth, as if it took all her control to prevent her lips from quivering. Ann made a step or two away from Evelyn; she stopped, then abruptly ran and flung herself in her mother's arms.

Evelyn held Ann closely against her and stroked the glowing red hair. Gerard's hair, what remained of it, had streaks of auburn in a certain light. He must have been red-headed as a child. Funny, I always meant to ask him, and never did, Evelyn thought irrelevantly.

She sat down on the sofa, dragged Ann on one side of her and Karen on the other, rested a youthful head on each of her shoulders. Karen was the first to bob up.

"There was another phone call, Mummy. I almost forgot."

"Romeo," said Ann, "bee-yoo-tiful Romeo. Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Rom-on-on-eee-oooo!"

"He asked you to call him," said Karen, "the number's

beside the phone in your room."

Evelyn stood up and walked slowly toward her bedroom. She half-turned, and caught sight of Ann staring after her. It was a firm clear look, unclouded by fear or mistrust.

She passed the open door of the bathroom and from the room, still misted from the steaming waters which had settled as a faint opaque vapour on the transparent surfaces of the mirrored walls, rose an odour of the perfumed oil which she had dissolved in the bath water. And with that evanescent fragrance rose again a swift kaleidoscope of images, superimposed one upon the other like those subliminal messages flashed upon a screen which reach and influence the subconscious, rather than being apprehended by a deliberate mental effort. Gerard was there and Romeo, Evelyn herself, Karen, and then that confident disembodied stare of Ann which seemed to try and impose itself upon the other disappearing exposures.

Evelyn sat down on her bed, her head bowed, touched the telephone with one hand. My life is there in my hand, she thought, and then-- how ridiculous and melodramatic, and then-- but it is, it is.

The room was very quiet. The girls in the living room seemed to be aware of the necessity for not interfering at this moment. They were waiting, and the sense of

their vigil penetrated the bedroom and caused Evelyn's fingers, curved around the receiver of the phone, to tremble. She had never felt quite such a sensation of solitude in her life, even in the days after Gerard had first left.

It's up to you, she thought, a phrase that was vaguely reminiscent, and being unable to place in exact context had a slightly sinister connotation. It's up to you...

Evelyn raised her head. She lifted the telephone receiver with a steady hand. Then she dialed a number.

## A SENSE OF HUMOUR

They were two women as alike in their appearance, education and manner of living as it would be possible to find. Both were approaching forty, neither had any pretensions to looks or style, each had three children, one dog, and a well-kept home in the same suburb.

It was the pattern of their marriages that set them apart. Martha and Don Revere's orderly equilibrium provided a counterbalance to the violent upheavals in Alison Tanner's life caused by her husband's seeming inability to resist the charms of a series of all too-

willing mistresses.

The two women, Alison and Martha, had the habit of taking an afternoon walk along the quiet shaded streets around their homes. The walk had evolved first as a necessary outing when the children were babies, had continued as an excuse to exercise the dogs, and now had become an important part of their lives as Martha's weekly visit to her aging mother or Alison's unwillingness to accept the fact that Gerry would probably continue to commit adultery as surely as the leaves turned colour and fell to the ground each autumn.

And as it happens when two women are such great friends, a great many confidences were divulged. Mostly they were on the part of Alison, who of course had the imposed role of injured wife and who by temperament had an almost compulsive need to talk of her problems. Martha, as luck would have it, was the perfect foil for her friend. Her role was that of listener, of trusted recipient of dangerous secrets, of judicious administrator of reasoned advice.

Alison credited Martha with keeping the marriage together and her family intact. If Martha felt an abuse or an imbalance in the relationship, the placid acceptance with which she received the most lurid details of marital indiscretions belied that possibility.

For a long while now Martha had been urging upon Alison a change in behaviour, a new attitude to Gerry's extra-marital adventures, a tacit acceptance of his wanderings and an equal freedom on her own part. It was time for Alison to see other men, to feel liberated from a sexual relationship that was unfairly weighted, to forget her part as injured woman and again feel the rush and flow of life that only an intimate friendship could give. Why not? The years were passing, she still had physical attractions and desires, soon it would be too late.

This became a new theme for their walks, a topic to be analysed and examined and endlessly discussed. At first, Alison rejected the idea out of hand. It was unthinkable; what of the children if they found out, she couldn't, not that she was rigid in her sexual morality, not at all, no one was more liberal in her general outlook on life, but it was not for her, they wouldn't discuss it any more.

But Martha was persuasive, she worried the topic like a dog its well-chewed bone, she attacked it from all angles until the subject was now almost a ritual accompaniment to their walks. Alison listened, she argued, she agreed theoretically; perhaps, someday, if Gerry continued his present course of behaviour, if she ever had the opportunity before she was too old, not very likely though...

As they walked, each had an almost instinctive foreknowledge of what the other would say, how she would react, perhaps the very phrases she would use. And this was an essential part of the pattern, too, like playing out a game where all the moves are preordained, but which nonetheless has a continued sustaining fascination for both parties.

They walked, on this bright October afternoon, with the leaves above a sheltering panoply of gold and russet and burnt amber. They took the hilly route, up the winding streets lined with the rigid houses of the rich, the dogs off the leashes rushing on ahead of them to chase the scattering foliage.

"I know what you'll say," said Alison, unbuttoning the jacket of her tweed suit as she puffed up the hill, "but this time it's different. Oh, I know he's always come back, but there's something about this woman, something unusual that scares me."

"Do you know her?" asked Martha gently, pushing a lock of greying brown hair out of her eyes.

"No, of course not-- you know Gerry-- whatever his faults, he tries to be discreet. But there's an urgency about his actions this time-- I know all the signs-- an impatience to be out of the house and away from us-- Oh, I feel like telling him to get out once and for all!"



"Don't do that, Alison," said Martha in the quiet tone that she knew would calm her friend. "Don't ruin the children's lives, and your own. He'll come back to you. He always has."

"Yes, but this woman... she must be something very extraordinary-- exquisite and brilliant and young and..."

"Do you know her?" repeated Martha, sharply this time.

"No, but I can imagine how she must be to attract Gerry." Alison stopped walking, turned so as to block Martha's path and confronted her. "Look at me, Martha, have a good look at me. Grey-brown mousy hair," she said pulling at her head, "too much bosom and sagging at that," pounding on her ample chest, "too short legs, too wide hips, an over-fondness for pastry, a lack of conversational sparkle and a general dullness. I'm a dull woman, Martha, let's face it-- I'm a bloody bore."

Martha began to laugh. A chuckle turned into a deep belly laugh and then into a rumbling, gasping, wheezing noise that had Martha struggling for breath and spilling unchecked tears.

Alison stiffened. "I don't see what's so funny." When her feelings were hurt her face set in little narrow discontented ridges that made her look like a disapproving virgin at an unwilling orgy.

"That's it-- exactly-- you don't see-- that's just

it. Alison, you've described me, too. That's me with the mousy hair and the big bosom and the wide hips and the dull conversation-- the whole thing. I should be insulted. But I'm not-- oh, it's too funny," and she swallowed a convulsive giggle in an obvious attempt to control another laughing fit.

"But it's not true," said Alison, gripping Martha's hands in hers. "Not at all! You and Don-- you're so lucky, you two-- you're special-- I don't know how you do it. Tell me your secret, Martha, or is it just luck?"

"No, my dear, I suppose it's not luck," said Martha slowly. "I have no particular talents, you know that. It must be terribly clear to everyone. But maybe I do have one-- perhaps an important one..." She paused and Alison looked hopefully at her friend as if she was about to have the secrets of the universe divulged.

"It's my zany sense of humour," said Martha. "I can't help it, but I always manage to see the funny side of things, even potentially tragic things. Irony, I guess you'd call it. Sometimes I wish I didn't have it. It offends some people. But mostly I think it's a great asset in life."

Alison was silent for a moment, then, "I suppose so. I seem to have lost that-- a long time ago. I've done all the other things. You know, the things they tell you

to in the magazines. Oh, all that drivel they write about keeping a husband, making a man happy. I'm a great listener-- I listen till my ears ache-- I'm a pretty good cook, I'm economical, the house is neat, and the kids are well-brought up, and I walk the dog and have my mother-in-law to dinner and never say no in bed. But a sense of humour?" Alison shook her head. "No, I lost that after mistress number two."

"Try it," said Martha lightly, "get it back. You can if you try. And hang on to Gerry, he's a good man."

They walked on in silence for a while, then gradually began to talk of other things, but there was a tension between them, a feeling of something left unsaid that only came out when they stood on the flagstone path in front of Martha's house.

"I really envy you!" burst out Alison. She had never expressed that feeling before, that pent-up emotion close to resentment of some valued possession that someone very close has, that is almost within reach but can never be attained for oneself. "Oh, I may sound jealous. Perhaps I am. But I do envy you your home and your-- your faithful husband. It sounds awful, I know, but it's true."

"Don't, Alison, you can't afford to look at things that way," said Martha. "Remember what I said to you-- a husband is a very handy thing to have, and don't forget

about looking on the light side. Try. And think about yourself too. Don't let Gerry have it all his own way."

"Yes, well, I'll go home now to a houseful of lovers and cultivate my sense of humour and my frustrated sex life all at the same time," said Alison. "It will be a new me-- a million laughs next time we walk." She managed a wry smile. "Thanks, Martha, you always help. And I'm not being ironic, though I should work on that too. You did help. Goodbye, old dear."

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The house was very quiet that November afternoon with that exceptional stillness that seems to grip empty houses that are normally full of people leading busy, noisy lives. Martha walked slowly upstairs after her customary afternoon walk with Alison. The children would be late today-- they were having their piano lessons and they waited for each other so that they could travel home together on the bus. How fortunate that they were close in age and got on so well, Martha thought as she popped the casserole in the oven and put some potatoes in to bake. The table was already set for four-- Don had said in the morning that he had a business dinner-- and there was plenty of time for a bath.

As the hot water tumbled into the bath Martha considered the advice she constantly gave Alison. Poor Alison.

A sense of humour was going to be hard to acquire under the circumstances, if one did not have a particular kind of temperament.

Like me, thought Martha, as she slipped out of her heavy tweed skirt and turtle neck sweater and neatly deposited her underwear down the laundry chute. Like me. The phrase repeated itself in her mind when she eased herself into the bath and brought a faint sparkle to her eyes.

Plenty of time to soak in the hot, soothing water. The children had a long bus ride and Don had a business dinner.

Don's business dinner. Martha laughed out loud-- a hooting sound that echoed strangely in the humid bathroom. Don's business dinners, at least one a week, coincided almost perfectly with his visits to his mistress of the moment, Martha had discovered several years ago.

The bath water was just the right temperature. The heat covered Martha's body like a giant comforting blanket. You're a lucky woman, she thought. Just don't lose that exquisite sense of the ironic. She began to laugh again, but quietly this time, a faint inner murmur that evidenced itself by the slightest curve of the lips, hardly a smile at all.

It was getting late. Martha stepped hastily out of

the bath. Outside, the autumn light had faded and the sky was a sombre grey-black. Already the street lamps were on, their amber discs of light barely penetrating the November dusk.

She must make the phone call before the children arrived. Martha dialled a number, cradling the phone between her neck and her shoulder. Although the house was still empty she spoke as softly as if the children and Don were beside her straining to catch every word.

"Hello Gerry. Yes, darling, I can. After dinner. No, Don won't be home till late. Yes, of course I do, darling. Same place. See you later."

She glanced down at the book on the night table. She had promised to bring it along for Alison when they took their walk that afternoon and she had forgotten. Poor Alison had nothing much to do these evenings except read her favourite mysteries. There was still time to dash over with it. She chuckled as she thought to herself, it's the least I can do.

Martha grabbed a jacket downstairs and hurried along the street towards Alison's house. As she approached, she noticed a car in the driveway-- not Gerry's-- but it was familiar, very familiar. She stopped, the book clutched in her right hand as if she must hang on to something, no matter how small, for support.

Martha turned slowly and moved mechanically back to her own house. And as she walked she considered in a series of jumbled and incoherent thoughts why Don's car would be parked in Alison's driveway: she can't-- they can't-- impossible-- Alison never would-- it's against her whole character-- but she has begun to change-- I noticed lately-- but it's not likely-- she's fat and she's grey-haired-- but so am I-- look at me-- look at Gerry and me-- oh, it's crazy-- Alison's not the type-- still, the most unlikely types do the most unlikely things-- like me-- look at me.

Martha mounted the steps to her house and went inside. She went to the dining-room window and scanned the darkened streets for the returning children. Then she began to laugh. How nice that I've kept my sense of humour, thought Martha and she laughed even harder than ever.

### A GIFT OF FISH

The whole story was perfectly clear in Lewis Marks' mind until the doorbell rang. That would be Julia now, coming to relieve the housekeeper who had gone out for the evening, and again the cloud of confusion that obscured any hope of articulating or even thinking lucidly, descended upon him before she had even crossed the apartment threshold.

Julia was in the living room with her quick firm step, had stooped to kiss her father on the cheek and again he marvelled that this darkly beautiful woman, so unlike her poor dead mother in appearance and intelligence



or indeed himself in any temperamental aspect, could actually be his.

As she walked around the small rooms checking the contents of the refrigerator, feeling the soil of the plants, appraising with a cool eye the housekeeper's efforts, he toyed with the idea of not telling her anything at all. That would be best, he decided; just let the evening pass as a hundred others had, with the television a comfortable background blur, and Julia with her sewing basket beside her on the big couch and the last cup of tea and the two crackers at about ten o'clock.

That would be best. He knew it. But when Julia had just begun her precise mending and had asked him, hardly looking up from her work, "What kind of a day have you had, Daddy?" he found the story tumbling out.

"Vincent came today. You wouldn't believe it, Julia. I've known that man for forty years and I wouldn't have thought him capable of what he did today. Your father was treated like a common criminal, Julia-- worse. I had no one to defend me. He came with the account books, and the cheque receipts-- you know how careful I am, my name in the community is a byword for honesty, you're aware of that, Julia, I'm respected in this town, your mother used to say I was too honest. Lewis Marks, she said, you'd be a rich man if you weren't so honest. And there was Vincent,

my best friend, I gave him his start, where would he be today without me, I ask you. A common criminal, Julia. He took everything away-- the books and the receipts and my own cheque book."

Julia put the sewing down. "Have you been confusing the accounts lately, Daddy? Remember, it happened once before."

"Anyone could have made that kind of mistake. I would have caught it myself when I went to the office next."

"But you can't handle a business that way, Daddy, even a small investment account," said Julia and ran a strand of black thread through the fine opening of a needle with a single gesture, "and Vincent is very meticulous-- did you cash a cheque from the business instead of your personal account? Did you do that again?"

"A man is entitled to make mistakes. He treated me like a thief. He would have hit me."

"How much was the cheque for?"

"I think he might have hit me if I wasn't fifteen years older. He used to respect me-- Vincent Mantle-- I gave him his start forty years ago and today he would have hit me."

"How much?"

"Three thousand dollars. That's nothing to a man

like Vincent. He was dirt poor when I got him going, and today he would have hit me if I hadn't written him a cheque immediately."

He could see Vincent standing in front of him in the narrow office he had rented after he sold his business ten years ago. The two scarred wooden desks stood facing each other, almost filling the tiny room, barely leaving enough space for the dull green metallic filing cabinet in the corner and the old swivel chair that he had salvaged from the mass of furniture he had half-sold, half-given away just after his retirement.

Vincent's desk was uncluttered, indeed rarely used; Lewis Marks' was a jumble of elastics, erasers, unopened envelopes, a golf trophy dated twenty years back, a calendar opened at the previous month, a row of pictures of his late wife and Julia and the children.

Vincent had stood beside his own desk drumming impatient fingers on the open account books. He was a small, square man, overweight, yet with an appearance of immense solidity, fair haired and ruddy complexioned, so that he looked years younger than his actual age.

Now the eyes seemed unusually blue against his heightened colour. They reminded Lewis suddenly of the blue of Julia's eyes which always appeared more vivid when she was in one of her rare passions.

Vincent was like that, too-- his whole body seemed to vibrate with anger though his voice was low and cool.

"You realize what you've done, don't you? I presume it was a mistake."

Lewis backed away as if Vincent was moving in on him though he had not taken a step. He grasped the edge of his desk and held on. "It's nothing, Vincent, I was confused, you know how it is, I get mixed up sometimes. Remember last month-- I made a personal deposit in the business account for a few hundred dollars. You didn't complain then. I fixed it up the next day."

"Fix this up now," said Vincent. He handed Lewis the cheque book and a pen.

"I didn't want to write him the cheque then and there," said Lewis, turning to his daughter who had picked up her sewing again. "It was humiliating. He was treating me no better than a petty embezzler. He..."

"But you owed the business account three thousand, didn't you?" asked Julia, staring at her father out of blue eyes that suddenly made him think of clear icy waters. Vincent's eyes could be full of fire, but Julia was ice, Julia was made of ice. How could his daughter be so unlike him when he was a mass of tenderness and volatile sensibilities?

"I would have paid him the next day. I recognized

my obligation. I said it then and there. Forty years ago he came to me-- he was dirt poor, humble-- he was humble then-- I saw something, though. I was always a good judge of men, I built up the business that way, an instinct, your mother called it. Lewis Marks, you know people, she used to say, if it's one thing you know it's people-- if your mother was alive he would never have treated me that way. He respected her."

"But you owed him the three thousand dollars. Why not pay it back right away?"

"I was going to, but he got me mad. I don't often get mad, but he accused me of-- of something else-- the pills." Now he wished he hadn't said that because Julia would immediately grab at the chance to scold him again. But the memory was too strong.

"Write the cheque now. I have to go. I'm leaving on a fishing trip." Vincent had shoved him into his chair, which had spun crazily sideways from the sudden impact of Lewis' weight.

"It was a mistake-- I was mixed up."

"You're always mixed up because you're a bloody drug addict."

He had tried to muster all his dignity but it was hard with Vincent standing over him, forcing the pen into his hand. "I may take the occasional sleeping pill

and maybe the pain killer the doctor says I can have for my arthritis, but I don't think that constitutes being a drug addict."

"Sleeping pills, pain killers, tranquilizers, aspirins, codeine-- you're a walking pharmacy-- it's a wonder your brain works at all. Your daughter ought to take all the damn pills away from you."

"I think I should take care of the pills for you again, Daddy. You're probably taking too many."

He shouldn't have told her. He spoke in a tone that he hoped carried authority and finality: "I can manage them myself."

"I doubt it. It worries me. I think you take those pills in anticipation of pain."

She would never understand about the pains, the awful dragging agony in his legs and back that only a couple of the yellow pills would relieve. And the not sleeping-- hours of trying to go without a pill -- shifting from his bed to the big sofa in the living room and back to bed and then the hot milk with a dash of cognac and still the endless, sleepless tossing. And finally a sleeping pill-- one, maybe two, that brought welcome oblivion. I shouldn't have talked about the pills, he thought. He couldn't stand it if Julia took away the pills and doled them out sparingly to his housekeeper, the two of them

remorseless guardians of his pain. That was the worst of it, being treated like a child by his own daughter. Bad enough that the housekeeper handled him as if he was a cross somewhere between a doddering idiot and an irresponsible ten year old.

"We'll see about the pills," said Julia, "we'll talk about it later."

He breathed easier. He would have a respite-- time to hide some here and there-- he had places that Julia and the housekeeper had never discovered-- he smiled at the thought.

Julia was on a new track. It was another tender subject and made the smile fade immediately. "Why don't you give the accounting books over to Vincent?" she said, as if these were ordinary words and not each one weighted with a heavy foreboding. "He's all set up to handle everything. I could speak to him about it."

"I'll never give him the satisfaction."

After he had forcibly signed the cheque which Vincent had thrust under his nose he had sat in his swivel chair feeling too weak and trembling in the legs to dare rise.

Vincent had pocketed the cheque and picked up the ledgers. There were two of them-- massive rectangular books covered in grey buckram, the spines and the corners reinforced with steel plates. Vincent was a short man,

getting on in years now, but he lifted the ledgers effortlessly, tucking one under each arm as if the added weight was nothing at all to a man of his age and size.

"I'll take these with me for now. It would be much better, Lewis, if you let me handle them in future. I won't charge you a cent for it and then you won't need this office. It's a needless expense."

Lewis had found his voice but what had seemed so logical before turned into an old man's whine. "Forty years ago I gave you your start, Vincent, you were a nothing, and you owe it all to me-- your position and your fortune and the way the community looks up to you. I even put you up for the fishing club, remember? Do you think because of a simple mistake that anyone could make that you can deprive me..."

But he was gone with the books under his arms and the cheque in his pocket. The door clicked behind him as Lewis heard his heels receding down the hall towards the elevator. He had looked around at the office with its two desks and his treasured family photographs and wondered what he would do each morning if he couldn't look forward to the few hours he spent every day in this room.

"You should give up the office," said Julia, "it's a waste of money. Vincent would be glad to do it. And besides that," she put down her sewing and looked at him in



a way that made his heart surge tightly in his chest, "besides, I think we should discuss the general handling of your personal business."

There-- it had come. She had said it. He should never have told her anything at all this evening. Better to let it pass like so many other evenings, the two of them almost silent with only the ritual phrases about the children and his own health and the nightly tea. But the words had slipped out, as if they had a life of their own and now she was in an area that made his legs ache with the coming night's misery and the words could not be taken away. He would cut her short and make her aware she was not to tamper with things that were inviolable to him.

"Never," he said in a tight voice, but his hands were trembling and he plunged them deep into the pockets of his old brown cardigan so that she wouldn't notice.

"Better get somebody to handle your personal affairs," Vincent had said after Lewis had signed the cheque. "I'll take care of our mutual investments, but if you have any common sense left you'll be asking your accountant to take over for you. Or Julia. She has a good head. Watch it, Lewis, you're cracking up. You don't want to throw it all away at this point, do you? I'm only doing it for your own good because we're old friends, you know. Don't take it hard, that's my way. It will be better for us both in

the long run-- you'll see."

Better for us both! Who's he kidding! He's hard as they come, he'd do anything for a buck, step all over me after forty years. It'll be better for him, not for me, he's not fooling me, he just threw that in to soften me up a bit, treating me like a child, just like all the others, as if he can get around me the way he does that weak-kneed son-in-law who's scared of his own shadow after a couple of years in business with Vincent.

"I'll have the accountant straighten up the books and send you the statement when he's finished. That way everything will be in order. Let me make life nice and easy for you," Vincent had said.

He makes me laugh-- talking about making life nice for anyone when I think how he won't even let his own daughter's husband manage his own department in peace. It's George this and George that until the guy is practically going crazy with contradictory orders-- he's a damn slave to that man. George is not entirely without business sense, might have done nicely left to his own devices or under some other boss, but he didn't stand a chance with Vincent-- steam-rolled into the business, swallowed whole and that's the end of it. Wouldn't even let him into the fishing club, said he didn't like the outdoors, just didn't want to give him any feeling of being a man, if you ask me.

That's a while back, don't know why I keep thinking of George.

"I could help you out with your own affairs, Daddy," said Julia, "it would be so simple. Or ask the accountant if you prefer. But somebody. It hurts me to see you make embarrassing mistakes."

"Anyone can make mistakes," said Lewis. But only that morning he had spent an hour looking for his glasses and then he thought of the rent for the apartment he had forgotten to pay till the middle of the month-- he had always prided himself on putting the cheque in the mail on the first of every new month...

"Time to relax," said Julia, getting up to make the tea. It was exactly ten o'clock.

Relaxing meant doing just about nothing at all.

I didn't hink it would be like this when I sold the business, thought Lewis as he listened to the sounds of Julia's preparations in the kitchen. You'll never get a better price, they had told him. Take it easy, Daddy, you can have the little investment business with Vincent to keep you nicely occupied. Now you can take it easy, his wife had said. Relaxing had turned out to be the sleepless nights and the numbing days and the hours and hours of stretched-out emptiness that lay ahead of him every new day. If they took away his affairs with Vincent and the

personal accounts and if Julia got on to the pills again...

"Get your accountant to take over, or Julia," Vincent had repeated as he walked off with the accounting books under his arms. "I'm going fishing."

Julia brought in the tea and put the tray down on the table beside the sofa. He could tell by the deliberate way she looked at him that she had a new line of attack ready. "I think you should forgive Vincent, Daddy. I'm not excusing what he did, but you know he had reason to be provoked. And at your age there aren't many friends left. You have to face that. Forgive and forget."

"Never!" His right hand emerged from his pocket and slapped down hard on the table, barely missing the scalding teapot. He didn't care if Julia saw the trembling or not.

"Drink your tea, Daddy, you'll forget the whole thing by morning."

"Go home, go home-- I don't want you here."

She stood up, packed her sewing away and kissed her father on the cheek. "Remember about forgiving," she said and moved towards the door. Her face had been poised briefly beside his when she kissed him and he had been aware of the eyes, coldly blue with no spark of understanding or forgiveness in them.

Julia phoned the next day and the one after that.

She came as usual twice a week to relieve the housekeeper. They did not discuss Vincent Mantle or the accountant or the pills. Julia sewed on the big couch and Lewis tried to concentrate on the television. At ten o'clock they had tea and crackers.

During the second week Vincent phoned. Fortunately the housekeeper had taken the call. Lewis had half-risen from his chair to answer the phone but he had found the strength to sit back again and tell the housekeeper in a good loud voice that he would not speak to Mr. Mantle. The revived anger at Vincent and satisfaction with his own action had sustained him for a good hour until lunch.

Vincent did not call again that week. Lewis got dressed every day to go for a walk since the weather was quite fine, but he didn't go out because he was afraid he might miss a phone call. He would not speak to Vincent directly, but perhaps he might relay some message through the housekeeper.

It occurred to him to write Vincent a letter expressing certain feelings that he found impossible to actually speak, but he couldn't trust the steadiness of his hand and the words he was looking for did not come.

When Julia came next it was on the tip of his tongue several times to ask for her help. This evening she was knitting, a soft rose-coloured sweater for the

ten year old; it sat in a shapeless bundle on her lap and seemed to soften and blur the sharp contours of her features.

It was hard to put it into words. Help me, Julia, I can't live alone. I know what Vincent is, I helped make him into this harsh, unfeeling man, but I need him. No-- it was no good. He couldn't ask. He could only watch the neat clicking of the needles and the rose strands of wool being absorbed into the growing heap on her lap.

When the door bell rang Lewis sat and waited. Julia put down the knitting and moved in her deliberate way to press the buzzer. In a few minutes she let in Vincent.

He was carrying a damp-looking paper bag. Tonight he seemed thinner, less solid, as if the two-weeks absence had attenuated the memory and existence of his massive solidity. He looked like that on the hunting trip we took thirty years ago, thought Lewis, Vincent's first introduction to camping in the woods. He had worn that same expression then, questioning, absorbing a new experience, almost vulnerable.

"I brought you some fish," said Vincent, handing Julia his coat, and brandishing the paper bag. "It was a great trip. I'm going to cook them for you right now. No, don't argue, Julia, I know he ate-- never mind the hour-- I couldn't get away till now-- George is ill, I had to go

to the hospital."

Lewis nodded, but he found nothing to say. He was thinking very hard-- the fight and the confrontation in the office-- that was a long while back, It was difficult even to remember why he had been that angry.

Vincent and Julia went into the kitchen. Lewis followed them and stood in the doorway watching, Vincent was always familiar and easy in any kitchen in a matter of minutes. He rolled up his shirt sleeves and put an apron on. "My son-in-law had a heart attack," he said as he deftly seasoned the fish, "quite a bad one-- intensive care unit, the works. I always thought my daughter would be better off without that lump that I've been supporting for twenty years but now I know differently. Funny how that kind of thing can change your whole perspective. Thought I had it all figured out a long while back, but I guess you can never be sure about anything in this world. Except fish. Now here's some real fish."

As Lewis waited while the fish were being cooked he thought about poor George lying there in the hospital, maybe dying, one never knew, in spite of all the modern equipment they had these days. Vincent would do everything humanly possible for George-- round-the-clock nurses, full salary while he convalesced-- he would say that about him, he was generous to his family as long as they knew

where it came from. But why not? That wasn't so terrible was it? he was a self-made man, forty years ago he had been nothing at all, he remembered him then, he had given him his start, but one could never be sure about anything in this world. Maybe when George got better Vincent would even see about getting him into the fishing club.

In a while the smell of frying fish filled the apartment and Lewis became aware that he had eaten hardly any dinner tonight, or the past few nights, for that matter, and that he was ravenously hungry.

Julia set the little table in the kitchen just for two and sat again on the living room sofa with her knitting. When Lewis cut into the pink-fleshed, golden-skinned fish he could not even recall why it was he had wanted Julia's help.