

The First Warm Night

BY RUSSELL SPEIDEL

"Mildred! Please shut the window. You know I can't stand a breeze on the back of my neck."

Mildred got up from her chair and walked to the window. A tiny puff of air put life into the threadbare curtains for a moment, bringing with it the fragrance of apple blossoms. She drew a deep breath and shut the window. The room was suddenly quiet, stagnant. She became acutely conscious of the ticking of the alarm clock on the mantel, and then of the grotesque array of paper flowers and faded photographs surrounding it.

Deftly she straightened the cushions in the wheelchair. "I'm sorry," she said, "but it's just such a lovely evening, and I thought a little air might freshen things. It's the first warm evening we've had."

Her mother made a noncommittal grunt. A stale, sour smell came from her and gradually permeated the room. Mildred drew away guiltily. She had neglected to bathe her mother again. It really doesn't do any good anyway, she thought, as she retreated to her own room.

The room was quite small. The former tenants had used it as a nursery, and it was painted a bright pink. It startled Mildred every time she entered, but she loved it with a fierceness that she couldn't quite explain.

She shut the door and went quickly to the window on the other side of the room, throwing it open wide. At first she couldn't feel anything, but at last a tiny ball of air crept in, feeling its way timidly, like a new kitten. Mildred took a deep breath, wincing slightly at the vague smell of uncollected garbage in the alley. Then came the sweet, wonderful fragrance of the blossoms again from the park at Twenty-Sixth and Elm.

Mildred turned quickly, her body flushed with an ecstasy she rarely felt. The breeze curled softly around her, and she trembled. As she turned, she caught part of her reflection in the mirror over her dresser. She could also see her big brass bed with the big Raggedy Andy doll sprawled on the pillow, and the water color she had done in high school.

She moved closer to the mirror. Not bad for thirty-five, she thought. Maybe a little too tall, hair kind of stringy . . . I do have pretty eyes, though. Everybody's always told me what pretty eyes I have.

A tear appeared in one of them, slid down her face, and raised a little cloud of dust in the open powder box. She walked back to the window, but the freshness had gone. There was nothing but the smell from the alley. She shut the window with a little cry, almost a moan. Immediately her mother's voice came from the other room.

"Mildred? What are you doing in there?"

Mildred paused. "I'm coming, Mother," she said at last. She came into the room. "I think I'll go for a short walk," she said, anticipating the reaction.

"A walk? Where?"

"Just to the park and back. I won't be gone long."

"The park? But Mildred! Don't you remember what happened to poor Nellie Ross in that park last spring?"

"Yes, I remember," replied Mildred, methodically putting on her coat.

"Her body was so twisted and broken! She must have put up a very brave fight . . . Mildred? Are you listening to me?"

"I'll be back shortly, mother. If you need anything just call Mrs. Kutz downstairs."

"Mildred! Don't leave me alone! You can't leave me." The slam of the door cut off the sentence, but a wail of terror followed Mildred down two flights of stairs and into the front hall. She was running by the time she reached the door. As she stepped outside, spring engulfed her.

She wondered why she had brought her coat. It was really very warm out.

The park at Twenty Sixth and Elm was really very small, planted as it was in the midst of rows of grey houses. Its principal attraction was the two apple trees. In the summer, the apples hardly got a chance to ripen, but in the spring the trees burst with rampant beauty for a few days.

There wasn't a soul in sight. Above the sound of the night creatures, Mildred heard a radio. A dog barked.

Mildred sat on the edge of a park bench, her hands in her lap. She sat for a long time, and the eagerness slid from her face, and her shoulders slumped a little.

"You'd think someone would be out on the first warm night," she said, to no one. An apple blossom dropped into her lap. She looked dumbly at it, then picked it up and pulled it slowly apart. The petals fluttered to the ground.

Nellie was a fool!

She got up, smoothing her dress with her hands, and pulled her coat tightly around her.

The fragrance of the blossoms had disappeared by the time she got home.

