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FIVE STORIES

by

Jean F. Atthowe

B. A. University of Utah, 1952


Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS


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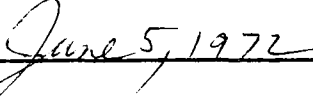
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GOING TO NEW ROCHELLE

She stood poised at the top of the stairway. The old woman, one felt-slippered foot on the next step, she bent low, steadying herself with a hand on the bannister. Peered into the gloomy depths of the entry hall. Although it was past ten, the porch light was still sending yellow cheer down the front steps, tunneling out along the snow-choked walk where its beams picked out the ridges of drifts so that they glowed like the crests of waves in an angry sea. The fat and genial member of the household lares augured well for the family within to the drivers of the few cars which passed, who, unseeing, hunched over their steering wheels peering through frosted windshields with the contorted faces of submarine captains guiding their vessels cautiously through a network of mines.

In spite of the bravado of the gleaming porch light which shielded from public scrutiny the eaves and downstairs windows of the old house with a wall of black shadow, all was not well. It was a nasty night and still Herbert was not home.

Snow had begun to fall that morning out of a slate sky, slowly at first, but soon gathering enough momentum to deposit tufts of white spring-blossom snow

along the black branches of the plum trees in the side yard by the dining room bay window. "I have to go to New Rochelle today," he announced with a forced jauntiness in his voice after he had pushed aside his oatmeal and begun to spread butter very precisely on one half of his carefully divided poppyseed roll. "What!" she had said. "Not there again. You were there just last week. What for? I don't know, Herbert, why you go there when only yesterday they called from Henderson's on Orienta Point wanting to know when you would finish the new wiring there." Herbert placed the silver butterknife across the Japanese bridge on his blue willow china butter plate. He raised the roll, holding it between a thumb and three fingers, and, taking a bite, began to chew steadily. "How will you go?" she said. "You said the car was acting up. And, besides, you shouldn't drive in this weather with your eyes." He had complained lately that sometimes, just as he was crossing an intersection, he would glimpse out of the corner of his left eye a team of horses drawing a wagon forward to make a left turn in front of him. It always gave him a start, he would declare, laughing at the absurdity. But she worried.

Herbert continued to chew his roll, looking straight over her head with his eyelids hooding his eyes, shades pulled down with a closed sign in the window even

though a light from within betrays the presence of a shopkeeper. His faded blue eyes under sharp, craggy brows, which shone when he laughed about the team of horses, reflected righteous annoyance now. He continued chewing. Always chew each bite at least twenty-five times he told the children countless times. Twenty-five times will mix the saliva. The salivary glands, as you must know, excrete juices with digestive qualities which break down the particles of food and prepare them for entry into the blood. . . "You are foolish to go any distance today," she said. "Simply foolish." . . . stream later on after it leaves the stomach. The trouble lies in the fact that you children are too lazy to chew. You depend on your stomachs to do all the work. If you will lay your fork down between bites . . . Her main concern had been that they leave a little food on their plates and not scrape them like little heathens. But with the war and the rationing, she had let that standard pass when the grandchildren came.

The son had been sullen with Herbert, but the daughter had been rebellious. He was gone now, living in Massachusetts with his second wife, but she had come back finally, after two divorces and a sojourn in Greenwich Village, with her children. Just in time, too, for the depression had hit small businesses hard and Herbert

had been in desperate straits. When he had lain in the bed in the master bedroom upstairs that first winter with the phlegm like wet clods of clay closing in his chest and the cold wrapping around his head, his loins, his torso, because there was no more coal to feed the hungry furnace that ruled the cellar, she had sat helpless in the icy kitchen. Herbert did not believe in doctors. She had wiped his eyes with boracic acid and for his stomach she had given him teaspoons of tincture of belladonna diluted in water. Homeopathic medicine was all he would submit to and that he had taught her. And Mama was gone. Beatrice, too. Yes, where was he now. Papa, his warm hands smelling of vanilla beans, he had been the last to go. And Herbert? Upstairs fighting for breath? Oh, Herbert! What will I do! But hush. A thump. On the snowy walk.

Through the window at the top of the stairs the old woman could see that the wind, which, in the early evening, had whipped the snow into swirls of white spray, had died. She slipped quietly down one step, listening. A car trundled by, thumping chains hollowly and she whipped cold fingers to her mouth and pressed her lips against her teeth until the skin felt numb. Herbert! She stifled a whimper which rose in her throat. Herbert! Foolish to go to New Rochelle in weather like this with

the Orienta Point job waiting to be finished.

"The train will do. I'll take the train," he announced, and blotting his mouth with the rayon napkin, he carefully refolded it, gave it a pat and rolled it back into the silver napkin ring with his initials engraved in delicate swirls on its belly. Herbert pushed back his armchair at the head of the table and stood up.

"Sockets. I need some number ten sockets from Sam Lefkiewitz for the Orienta Point job." Lady Gay eased her arthritic joints up from under the dining room table and whapped her plumed and black-spotted tail on the dusty floor. She looked brightly at the oatmeal bowl. Herbert stood at the bay window behind his chair and contemplated the snow.

"Remember when we planted those two plum trees, Bess?" he said. That is a perfect spot for them. Full sun every day that it shines. Well, well. Now the ever-green has grown so tall, they lose maybe an hour's sun in the morning. But that shouldn't hurt. Every spring they're covered with white blossoms shining like bridal veils in the sun. I wonder why they never bear." She sat with the wrists of her old sweater resting on the table's edge looking up at the back of his grey head. "I remember asking Charlie Baldwin about them, when he came to the board of trustees meetings at church before his greenhouse went bust. Charlie, I said, Charlie what

can you do with two plum trees in southern exposure which bloom every year, but then don't bear? No, Herbert had said. No, Elizabeth. I won't have you spending that much time away from your home. His hair was blond then and full and, like the sun, it shone high over her as they came down the steps out of the church foyer into the fresh May Sunday. It was Children's Day and the boy and the girl walked quietly at Herbert's side. The church shone, a bride in white satin, standing against the fresh, sunwashed blue of the sky, in a new coat of paint. That was after the war and it hadn't been painted since. But it was a good job. It lasted longer than the Lutheran's --the Catholic and the Episcopal churches were of stone-- Herbert would say on Sundays, picking the chips of paint by the front doors which many suns and many frosts had loosened. That was because Herbert had insisted that the trustees spend more than they had planned in time and money to scrape and prepare the surface before painting. Do a job well, Herbert would say to the children, if you are going to do it at all.

Well, Henry Legget had said after church that day as they waited to shake hands with Reverend Piper. So Winfield has Elizabeth signed up to sing for his new radio station. Mighty pleased to hear it, Herbert. I always enjoy her voice in the choir solos, he affirmed,

holding her hand in his two. Now, I'll look forward to it with the radio set Herbert fixed for me. No, Elizabeth, Herbert said. It will not do. Your duties right now are here. Well, Charlie asked me what else grew near the trees and when I pruned them and had I checked the soil composition. He mumbled something about soil acidity and root fungus. I don't know. I shoveled in manure all around the holes. I dug them deep and mounded dirt in the center to support the roots. I poured in plenty of water before I covered them with dirt. Charlie spent too much time with books, I think, and not enough with the growing end of things." You stay home with these children, Bess, and give them the Christian rearing that your mother gave you and my mother gave me, Herbert concluded as they sat on the piazza in the wicker rockers waiting for the cook to call them to Sunday dinner.

Her lip trembled and a pink flush surfaced on the clear skin over her high cheek bones. Everyone talks about Elizabeth, that pretty Rogerson girl, her mother had assured her. Seven trunks they had taken with them on the train every summer. Seven trunks went to Lake George where the young men smiled from the wide hotel verandas when she and Beatrice and Cousin Emma walked along the gravel path to the ladies' bath house. Little drops of water, little grains of sand, they sarg and the

girls giggled and two fiery red spots smudged the cheeks of the pretty Rogerson girl. Elizabeth Rogerson has a beautiful soprano voice, Miss Pincheon had said, her voice rising above the crackle of the fire in the sitting room off the main hall of the boarding school. Emma had heard her from the top of the staircase because she had gone back along the front path looking for the white kid gloves she had dropped somewhere between the school and church after morning services. Our singing master hopes to develop her into a coloratura soprano of the first quality, Mr. Rogerson. Mama wasn't there anymore and so she was at boarding school. Beatrice had married that man and lived in Yonkers, leaving only Papa to visit her. He still lived, alone with Pogo, in the big apartment in the Chelsea. "Papa, Papa, let's walk along the river bank under the elms and you can tell me. Tell me. How is Pogo. Does he miss me, Papa. And Mr. Hayes. Well, Miss Bess. Poor Pogo is a stiff old pug now. He's happy just to hobble around the block with Mr. Hayes twice a day and then sleep the rest of the time away in a spot of sun by Mama's old footstool. The sun is always best there. That's why she liked it. It eased the pain. Every evening he walks down the hall with me to the letter drop, though. And now, Papa, Pogo is doing the same thing. But I guess he doesn't embroider. Papa laughed and

squeezed her hand and they both thought of Mama under the elms on the sheltered, shadowy, sun-mosaiced, leaf-edged gravel path and the eyes of each Hudson River wavelet winked back at the spanking white spinnaker clouds and the streaming air and the wind rose then and Herbert took down the main sail and braced his feet against the sides of the small cabin which he had fitted with Philippine mahogany, holding her in the bunk as the water roared outside and tore at the portholes. Moaning. They are all gone. And Herbert? Herbert! The old woman sank to the step on which she had been standing and whimpered silently into her hands.

Rays of light from the front porch filtered through the lace curtains on the front door and reflected on the glass, enhancing the halo around the boy Jesus confounding the temple priests on the wall above the old lady's head. Her grey hair was too long and on the ends were straggly remnants of a permanent. Once she wore it piled and pinned up on top of her head under a wide-brimmed velvet hat. She still had the elbow-length sealskin cape and the muff she wore when she moved to Larchmont after the wedding. Her travelling skirt reached her boots at the ankle as she walked into choir practice at the back of the church. Regarding your skirt lengths, the letter began, you are mistaken in your belief that this town will tolerate such

flagrant and indecorous disregard for modesty. Mend your ways before it is too late. Bess had cried and Herbert had laughed. Well Bess, a poison pen letter like that one only hurts the sender. Remember, blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Besides, these long skirt lengths are foolish and impractical in winter. Wear it and forget it. But she stamped her foot and threw the beaver cape at the wardrobe door. That performance exhibits a lack of discipline, Elizabeth. If others choose to wallow in a sea of intolerance, that is not our concern, but you must be rational. Reason is a gift of God which our family will appreciate by using. He went out that afternoon and bought the two plum trees from Mr. Baldwin, but she stayed home and lowered her skirt hem as far as the material would allow. "Perhaps this spring I'll get a chance to prune them," Herbert said as he turned from the bay window.

He rubbed his hands together briskly and with a jolly, ho-he-ho-voice announced his determination to decamp immediately for New Rochelle. The old woman got up from the table. "But Herbert, how will you carry the packages back? You must be careful of those high train steps when you get on and off. Today they'll be icy and the vestibules are dark. Your eyes." "Nonsense." He wagged his hands up around his ears as if to dismiss a swarm of fruit

flies, collected his scarf, his old tweed coat, his gloves and overshoes and, placing his hat with one swift, experienced swing of his arm to the top of his head, he tramped out the door and down the path to the street.

He tipped his hat as two strange ladies picked their way along the sidewalk through the mounting snow and replaced it on his upright head above his squared shoulders as he disappeared through the swirls of snow behind the yew hedge next door. Foolish to go to New Rochelle, when he could have had the parts sent down by Railway Express or by truck. Foolish. Lady Gay lapped the oatmeal bowl and her tongue was all that could be heard in the silent house. Foolish! The old lady clenched her hands. Foolish! Oh. Herbert. Why aren't you home, she hissed so that it was almost no sound and pressed her bony fists to her teeth and bit her knuckles to keep from crying out a long, anguished wail of fear and woe. "Mom," her daughter had said after supper when she found her sitting on the arm of his chair peering out the front window, "for goodness sake stop fretting. It's only eight o'clock. All the trains are running late. He'll be home." "Oh, do you think so? Do you really think so?" the old lady begged and her tears rose up and flowed down her face and into the hands which gathered them up in the cupped palms, each one and all of them, and

then held them, as if they were so much precious silver, pressed together between her clasped hands. "Oh, if anything has happened to him, I just don't know what I'll do. Margaret," she said solemnly, straightening her back, "I do believe I'd kill myself." "Oh, Mom. Have another cup of tea," Margaret said, throwing her eyes to the ceiling.

Dan stood in the dining room archway watching the old lady on the arm of the chair. His mother sounded more annoyed than sympathetic, suggesting the tea as a mother might offer a crust of zwieback to her teething baby. One day, just before the old lady's seventieth birthday, Margaret found her lying on her bed flat on her back, eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling. Oh, Mom, Margaret had said then, also. Have a cup of tea and you'll feel better. No, Margaret. I mean it. I'd rather die than be seventy. I'd rather die. Margaret had looked at Dan standing in the hall when she left the room, turning her eyes heavenward and with a humorous, hopeless expression, the way she looked when the old lady talked about her audition for the Met and how Gedda Cassazza had applauded--Miss Rogerson, your voice is definitely coloratura with a superb timbre. But no, Herbert had said. It will not do. Dan moved to the piano. He was tall for his age and Margaret did not like him to call her

mother in public. And definitely not when she took him into the tea rooms in New York to have their fortunes told. The reader always saw letters and tall, dark strangers in her cup and in his were bloody signs of misadventure and a short life.

He put his hands on the sides of the baby grand which belonged to his grandmother and fingered the yellowed ivory keys. When he was little, he had never been allowed to play it for fear he would put it out of tune. Yet, he had never heard it played because it needed tuning. The services of piano tuners were dear. He fingered a key which was missing its ivory coating and watched Margaret balance her coffee cup on the arm of the chair and pick up a newspaper. The old lady's face was almost pressed against the black, cold glass with her hands clutching her mouth as if she would stop breathing if she could, the better to catch and sort out any sounds which reached her ear. Her back, hunched and still, almost hid her lowered, grey head. Dan stepped away from the piano. He felt embarrassed. He had no ear at all for music, the old lady often said. Quietly he left the room and collected his jacket and gloves and, returning to the front room, he stood behind his grandmother's stooped back.

The family often laughed about the time he had

called her Granny and she had thrown two pieces of breakfast toast down onto the table. One had landed in the sugar bowl and the second one on Grandfather's plate after he had chuckled and removed the first one from the sugar bowl. What's wrong with granny. It's a good old-fashioned term of endearment, he had said. But, then he had eaten his oatmeal, one measured spoonful, in time and space, at a time silently and with veiled eyes. Dan had been surprised and confused and could not tell who was angry and who was amused. Bessie, she would not tolerate either. So he quietly said, "Gram, I'll walk down to the station and see if I can find him along the way." "That would be nice," his mother said from behind the paper, but the old lady only shuddered and the tears began again to flow over her face.

Outside he could see her shadowy figure shining white on the edges in the black at the periphery of the porch light. Usually, Lady Gay perched where she sat and waited for him to round the hedge on his way home from school. Now the dog ran along the walk, the fall of her soft paws muted by the kind of dry powder which falls in very cold weather, and her tail, almost horizontal to the ground as she padded along, dropped only when she stopped to sniff the ground or the cold night air. Dan stood at the turn in the path and pulled his collar up

around his neck. Lady Gay would be good to have along, in case. She could sniff beneath the snow.

The feathered branches of the evergreen by the house swooshed guiltily, and the black branches of the two plum trees were etched in intricate, Moorish patterns on the snow by the steely moon, now that the cloud covering had moved on with its freight of snow. If Lady Gay found anything, would she stand over it and howl the long, wavering hoots of a timberwolf and, if she did, would they travel, on a clear night like this, out through the barrier reefs of ozone and bounce from the jagged moon and whirl through space in a ceaseless elegy?

In the spring, when Dan had dropped out of confirmation class, his grandfather had understood. Joining the church and making that final commitment with the wine was a serious step. Many members go all through life without a moment's hesitation, accepting the tenants of the church, but Dan would see eventually that doubts and questioning only toughened one's faith in the end. Yes, the grandfather had said, passing a hand over his eyes, I understand your doubts. But for many years, along my path on either side from time to time, I have found evidence of God's works. They surround us, Dan. You'll find them, too, and upon the experience will stand an unshakeable faith. He crossed the quiet street and cut

through the old Halstead property on a trail worn by school kids and dog walkers. Dan had been vaguely annoyed. Surprised that his grandfather was not shocked at Dan's wavering faith, yes, but annoyed that the grandfather was prepared for this turn of Dan's. On swearing, the grandfather based his attack on reason, not decency. Swearing resulted when a person lost faith--faith in the aptitude and vividness of the language. It was either that or ignorance. Obscenity and disrespect, other than for the language and lyrics, he never mentioned. What was right was that which was logical.

The ruts cut by bicycle wheels had become hard ridges honed sharp by the cunning winter frosts and even young Dan had to walk with caution. A person could easily slip and fall on these ruts, Dan thought, and peering along the sides, he rolled his eyes from side to side, sweeping the rivers of snow with the sinewy, grappling ropes and hooks of eye muscles, but they hooked on nothing extraordinary among the remaining stubble from last year's ragweed and golden rod which sighed and played upon themselves like dry crickets in the crushing cold night.

As for the evidences of His works, Dan had searched the paths and trails where last year had taken him. He wanted to ask his grandfather if the bread and wine burned on the way down with a life of its own as did hot cocoa on wintry days, opening fresh passages and

awakening new nerves along the back bone and searing an inner brand of beatitude. He passed under the black and contorted forms of the huge tulip trees which had once framed the old Halstead house. In the white night the fat trunks were writhing boa constrictors and the knots and lumps, old wounds healed over after pruning, were the dinners they were digesting--rats, rabbits, and what have you. In the zoo, keepers shove them alive into the cages. Under their huge, fleshy pink blooms last spring he had come upon the sixth graders, Byron Toaves, Joe Puleo, and Pinky DiRoberto beating up George Snodgrass. Pinky pulled him off his bike and tore his sweater and Joe stepped up and shoved George with the flat of his hand on George's clavicle. And Byron tripped him up as he fell backward and down into the spring mud. Uncle, they all yelled when he was down, say uncle, and the primary kids shuffled from one foot to the other, their workbooks and construction paper artwork clutched to their chests, snuffling and looking bird-eyed at George and embarrassed when Pinky yelled, uncle, you son of a bitch idiot. His eyes were red and frightened when Joe scattered his books and papers and slammed his bike against the ground, breaking a reflector light against a rock. His eyes streamed and his nose ran and, uncle, he cried, uncle! Uncle, he cried for Mrs. McPhee at the

blackboard in arithmetic and uncle for the parsing of Miss Torrence's sentences because . . . Because he had fat lips, a low forehead, a vacant stare, a funny name. But, George could cry uncle.

Along the sides of the path Dan scanned the dark folds of previous snows, but he found no evidence, nor did Lady Gay. No old man, fallen by the wayside, lay under the snow. At the station, Dan held Lady Gay by the collar, as the trains, like fat, black worms, crept up to the platforms--their mean red eyes searching the track for victims--and deposited their droppings before they slid into the white night, slimy, with frost on their backs reflecting under the cold, white moon. No familiar figure tramped down from the vestibules. The conductors got down, paced the asphalt sidings, thumping their gloved fists into their gloved hands and then swung back into the worms and moved on with them across the earth under the cold stars while the pretty Rogerson girl clutched her breast on the stair under Jesus confounding the temple priests.

Surely he'll be home by now by another route, Dan hoped on his way along Railroad Avenue. On the path in front of the house, the faithful porch light picked out Dan's and Lady Gay's footprints, firmly engrafted in the layer of snow that measured faithfully the event

of time in space. Nothing else had crossed it since. Herbert had not come home. In the side yard the plum trees crackled in the cold.

When Dan opened the front door for Lady Gay and saw his grandmother in shadow sitting on the fourth step down from the upstairs landing he said, "He hasn't come home, then?" "No," and her voice was flat and bitter. "What a fool he was to go to New Rochelle today. He's lying somewhere beside the track. They'll find him in the morning." The lacy blotches of black shadows cast by the porch light shining through the curtains widowed her face. "Well?" said Margaret, coming to the top of the stair in her robe and brushing her hair its fifty nightly strokes as she stood on the landing. "No sign of him," Dan said. "Not even at the station," and he headed through the quiet house to make some hot cocoa. As he returned and stood by the newel post wondering how he might pass the old lady on the stair, he heard a sound on the front walk and a shadow loomed progressively larger on the front door window.

She heard it, too, and stood up on the thirteenth step from the bottom, under a large photograph of a pug dog sitting in a chair with light all around him. She descended to the twelfth step, both hands resting on the railing as she leaned forward. "Well, well," said

Herbert as he stepped into the hall. "What are we doing in the dark?" He turned and flipped on the hall light switch and dismissed the lar guarding the front porch. He was no longer needed that night. "Well, where have you been. Dan's been all the way to the station looking for you," Margaret said from the landing. The old lady descended to the eleventh step. "I can't imagine why," he said. "I waited late at Sam's. He had a pair of old pruning shears he wanted to find for me. Then I sat in the New Rochelle station waiting for a train half the night." "Weren't you sitting right by the telephone in the little waiting room on the Stamford side?" Dan said. "Why didn't you call?" "Nonsense," he said emphatically. She descended another step, her face contorted, her eyes wild. "It costs money." "You," she whispered. "You," she shouted clutching the bannister, her presence filling the stairwell. "Damn," she screamed, raising her fists in the air, her voice rising so high it came out in a whisper. "You damn man," she cried in a voice which was not so much a voice as a choking struggle to deliver voice. The intensity of the conflict filled the hallway to overflowing as if the vibrations must, in threnodic rhythms, break through the white spinnaker clouds, on across the barrier reefs, and endlessly on. Margaret

stood still at the top of the stairs and Dan at the foot while Herbert carefully removed his hat and gloves, stomping the remaining snow from his overshoes.

THE HACKBERRY TREE

For three weeks now the packing cartons had stood on the back porch in the shade of a large tree. Excelsior hung limply over the sides in the damp September heat on the day Walter Beckford decided to put them away. Across the rafters under the garage roof. Yes. Where they'll stay free of mould. Before Eileen mentions them again.

Passing into the deep, still shade under the tree, he headed for the garage. "It's a hackberry tree," Buford Fitts had said picking absent-mindedly at its trunk while Walter stood under it before breakfast smoothing his son Billy's hair back out of his eyes.

So. Hackberry. Walter was disappointed. Embarrassed, too, when he first noticed the tree, after the moving van pulled away and he had time to - he had a definite feeling that time was substance at that moment - to feel the town move from the alert at the presence of a foreign body to a stealthy curiosity out there beyond the fence . . . At first he admired the tree with its bayleaf shaped foliage and small berries like orange peppercorns on a graceful framework of boughs. He imagined

that it was a sport connected with those countries he thought of in the days when the sign over the A & P read in gold letters, The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company.

Walter had expected a lot from a mimosa tree, too, when he heard the name, before he saw the object. It conjured a blossom as full blown as an East Indian hibiscus with fleshy petals, orange-red and lavender, and a fragrance as heavy as illicit desire. When he did indeed see one - it stood on the front lawn across the street, "the Mayfield's" Buford told him, "at least what's left of them" - it fulfilled in an unexpected quarter his wildest botanical imaginings. It was the tree's shape, not the prim, fuzzy flower, that was sensual. With its cutwork leaves drooping from boughs spread out horizontally it looked like a huge fringed parasol. No wonder Walter had come upon it before framing ambivalent southern ladies at those moments in bayou and cricket filled novels - he checked them out at the library often for middle aged lady patrons - when the blood runs highest and those singular ladies capitulate on green lawns under mimosa umbrellas in swollen southern nights. But this hackberry standing in our back yard, we are strangers.

Hackberry, then. "Awful buggy," Buford had said,

frowning when his deft fingers scooped a powdery white substance from a crevice in the bark. "These trees attract a lot of disease." Only a nuisance, then. No bracing tea made from its bark cures swamp fever. The leaves not furtively gathered, then, by the McIlhenny's for their Tabasco sauce made from a secret recipe at New Iberia, Louisiana since 1868. All other products merely imitations. Disappointed.

Each morning for three weeks now when Walter left for the library he looked at the hackberry on his way to the garage. Rather he felt its presence, sullen because it had been forced to retreat as lord of the manor and be content with the back yard for its dominion. He felt its leaves, good morning he said, examined its berries, but got nothing out of the exchange.

So this morning he asked Buford about it. Buford has lived here for twenty one years, a typesetter at the Yanceyville Crier since he got mad at his father for turning down his uncle Enoch Fitts' offer to send Buford to medical school. Walter got this from Eileen who got it from his wife, Twila, who became manifest at their back door, the day after they moved in, with a fresh pecan pie. "My husband can't eat them now," she said. "So it's no effort. Just a labor of love when I have someone to make them for." She was bitter and lonely,

Eileen decided, with two children reared and gone and only countless vendettas with Buford's relatives to keep her occupied. So Eileen accepted her three p.m. coffee invitations often. Besides, she could find out about the town that way, she said, the shopping and so on. Too hot to do anything else, anyway, Walter thought. And Twila, having nothing to do except worry about noon dinner for Buford - low cholesterol since his heart attack three years before - was ready to close down operations until breakfast again.

The old father, Eileen reported, said that only Buford among his sons was able to wrestle the plow horses to suit him. Besides, Enoch, the wealthy uncle, couldn't send his own son. In fact, according to Twila, he - everybody called him old Tom - was kept quietly in the house now, since he showed up at the flagpole in the center of Yanceyville at high noon in the wake of a team of mules and standing tall in his longjohns on the wagon seat. Another day she announced grimly that there was a sister - next after Buford - but now she sits all day on a stool in a corner of a room at Tulip County State Hospital. Hasn't spoken since the father took out with a shotgun after Billy Eggerton - they planned secretly to get married - through the peach orchard. Eileen was indignant. He refuses to let anyone in the family visit

her. Certainly Buford would know about this tree in the back yard.

Walter envied Buford's hands that pulled at the leaves and crushed them with a familiarity that Walter used when he drummed his fingers up Billy's rib cage this morning as Billy stood naked to the waist before the washbowl. Buford's blue eyes are as placid as an August sky. Doesn't look rugged enough to contend with a plow, yet he leaned his slight frame against the hackberry with an indifference that would have been called courage had it been a sinister oak in the sacred grove at Upsala. Buford said that mostly water oaks - there, another new one - a gnarled tree standing in green water with drooping, slim-fingered branches and bark as black as a hearse - grew around here until the hackberry choked them out. An interloper itself then, not a notable accomplishment for a tree that suffuses the backyard with arcane intimations.

Walter wondered if Buford had ever lived where all the trees are strangers. He emptied the mover's boxes and piled the excelsior next to the garage. Above him, the tree brooded. John E. Bull and Sons, Greensboro, North Carolina, Moving and Drayage since 1873 stared up at him from an aggressively unblinking red bull's eye as he stamped each box flat with his feet ready to lay on the last one across the exposed beams under the garage roof.

In case there should be another moving day.

Sweat rolled down the back of his head, gathering in a film under his hairline and the heavy air closed in and stuck to the sweat like fuzz from a cottonwood tree. Billy came out the back door. "I'm going to walk Spook," he said, letting the screen door slam shut with the hand that was not stuffed with fig newtons. Wiping crumbs from his mouth with the back of his wrist, he started down the drive. Spook followed with a sober gait appropriate to their mission to flush some congenial form of life from one of the row of serene houses with lidless eyes that line the block.

Next door Twila began to sweep the terrace, moving her broom in a deliberate rhythm which was first in importance to the few leaves, autumn's first, which she intended to clear. She had the time. Walter stomped another carton flat. Bull. Greensboro. Ever since they crossed the Potomac a day ahead of the moving van, he had felt like a prince who had been changed into a frog and banished to a dank shore from which the former kingdom was curtained by folds of gray mist. Now this hackberry looming over him. Fee Fie Fo . . . Who is this stranger.

I never shuffled through its leaves up to the knees in gutters between school and home. It's gray bark never observed each year with me the infinite summer

celebration. And the times we rode tree branches to the ground, a part of us, there were no hackberrys.

A series of sharp spitting sounds, with a descant of hand-clappings, heaved the sodden air and Onkel Fritz cleared the back fence; claws outspread like eagles' talons grasped for thin air; yellow cat eyes lit with horror. That would be Miss Caroline Weatherall's backyard. The last of her line who were the former residents of the big plantation house behind them now surrounded by the modest houses of such as Walter and Buford. This learned from Twila's last compte rendu.

Already she has used the library three times. One p.m. on Tuesdays, checking in Mrs. William Penn's original recipes and taking out the recipes of some early Virginia housewife and a book on the art of drying flowers. Dark, blue veins stand out from her temples and the puffiness under her eyes mars the light laugh which is supposed to be the silvery peals of gaity which float over the hedge from the garden party next door. "And welcome, Mr. Beckford, to Yanceville. We just love our little library. Out there in the reading room, before the Bass family gave the house to the library board, we used to have card parties.

The sunlight cut down through the cupola windows

high above the entrance hall where the checkout desk stood guard, across the blue veins under the portrait of John Pelham Bass. Behind her, something familiar, rows of the Encyclopedia Britannica emitted from the shadows the warmth of a winter fire in a grate. Not threatening, not restless like this hackberry tree. Ought to move them out into the reading room. Make them more available for reference.

Walter laid to rest the last John E. Bull eye and climbed down past exposed two by fours which nurtured stolid layers of gray veiling which in turn probably housed tenants who, serene in the knowledge of their seniority, observed him with unblinking eyes. The cat, back in his own jungle clearing, reassembled his poise on the back step and Walter hoped that Onkel Fritz and Miss Weatherall could arrive at some territorial entente cordiale without involving the rest of the family. Spook, for example. Buford began setting out lawn chairs on the swept terrace in time for the visit his parents would pay after their weekly trip into town from out Big Cane Creek. Then he took up his pruning shears while Walter considered the pile of excelsior under the outmost fingertips of the spreading hackberry.

That tree now, it doesn't sidle into vision just slightly out of focus as the old trees did that seemed to

have more dimensions, more of the vital principle - branches creaking in sympathy the day Joe Cox and I were caught smoking in the boiler room . . . This tree is a cold fact. Deciduous? Useful? Native? Did such things used to matter?

Walter considered himself a student of nature of very short standing. Fifteen years, maybe. Perhaps not short - almost half his lifetime - but the first half seemed so much longer, stretching back so far, and beyond. How vivid the world became when he first realized that the mass of weeds that had always been a background could be broken down into distinct personalities, each with a full compliment of relations. Vernon McDavid, for example, at library school with his first pair of glasses. The frames rounding each eye gave him an unfamiliar, astonished look. "Why I never knew you could see separate little stones on the ground," he said. But Walter's new respect for the botanical pedigrees of many old friends also caused discomfort, a rift in some old, fraternal relationships.

The grass with the knot on the end which submitted passively to its role of peggun - just fold the end of the stem around the upper stem near the base of the knot and slide - was now related to *polygnum buter-toides*, a species of buckwheat with its own coat of arms,

tribe, genera, and subgenera, each demanding the same serious inspection as the hackberry tree.

Once, when all the days were maple trees, the name was of no consequence, nor whether its leaves were serrate or if its blossoms sported superior ovaries. What signified was the knowing below thought that until its green blossoms clogged gutters and drains, there was no spring, no promise that soon the last pages of textbooks would be conquered. The knowing that the violet beds wilting in hot sunlight house the white moths which ghost twilight under the maples. That mattered. And that in the time of the goldenrod the swing seats at school would receive a fresh coat of paint. That kind of knowing softens the outlines that make this hackberry a sundered, unyielding fact. Then Walter kicked the excelsior pile. Too hot to burn it in the fireplace.

Beyond the hackberry tree he saw Buford's parents walk down the driveway toward the terrace. He, dark and spare with a stoop to his shoulders and a long, dour face, walked purposefully with hands knotted behind his back as he observed to the right and left each stone and stick and leaf blade. Knowing. She moving with gray head erect, pink-faced, at his side, her body advancing in a piece like a rectangular brick. It's the mother,

Walter decided. She kept Buford at the plowing. They stood waiting on the terrace for Twila to run out. Nothing was new to them. Certainly not the hackberry that hid Walter from their view.

Well, yes. Some of the knowing can be acquired. The acacias showering gold over the steps to the library school, remembered from a position of having belonged and then at a time when belonging was freighted with fewer connotations. Simmering gold around events, they were themselves no event. Later, cottonwoods and aspens. Aspens. Freedom in the mountains, leaves nervous with it. But this hackberry tree has all the advantage. Knowing. And I? How can I vote at the polls when the tree at my door is a stranger.

Twila rushed down her back steps. "Come sit down. The pot's all but finished brewing the coffee," she called as she came. And Mother Fitts sat firmly in the sturdiest lawn chair. Buford continued to work with his pruning shears around some strange globose bush with imbricate branches and lancolate leaves. Billy scuffed back up the driveway alone with Spook. His mission a failure.

Before the assembly the ten year old Walter stammered out his assigned Flag Day ritual, for Miss Vernice Brawley, for country. "Breathes there a man with soul as dead, who never . . ." Yes. A man with no

country. Sent into exile. What would Mother Fitts know of it. The men in every age, around the fires, whispering tales of forced exile. Visceral loathing stabs the listeners. How did it go? "Who never to himself has said, this is my own, my native land." My maple trees, my goldenrod. All gone. The certitude, even the pugnacity that enables that hackberry to reach out and dominate. Always, there is at every roadside cafe, the table top of unidentifiable composition - formica, a thermosetting phenolic resin, under F, Encyclopedia Britannica.

On a sunset-reddened windowsill, the city dweller knows, pigeon wings fluttering. In the country, small tracks in the snow, cedar waxwings, searching. This hackberry tree? A knowing that happened long ago - learned by some pre-lapsarian assent antecedent to agreement. Some instinctive self-association . . . Oh, words, Walter, words as numerous as stones.

Now all the days are Eileen with a falling of brown hair above a graceful framework of . . . When she turns from the stove at breakfast with one hand on a hip and pointing with the spatula, watch out.

"What are you doing, Walter shouted up at Billy in the hackberry tree shaking down a hail of bay-shaped leaves and small, orange berries. "If I can get far

enough out on this limb," he said, "I can jump into that pile of packing." "My god, you'll never make it." Billy set his body for the jump. In the background a series of shrieks and handclaps accompanied Onkel Fritz's second return over the back fence. His yellow eyes shone with the horror of the insult.

A MOON OVER THE CHERRY TREE

And, if she dies, what's to become of us. Jud heard his mother say it last night. She sat at the kitchen table rubbing a soup spoon - the one Teddy hadn't used, said he hated chili - polishing the back of it against her sweater sleeve. What will we do then, Kimball. He, under the light, with a shadow mustache under his thick nose, arms curled from the elbows around his coffee cup, silent, sweating.

Jud, patching a bike tire at the back step by the screen door, knowing his parents thought they were alone. But she's so old, he thought. And wrinkled. And she did funny things. Like the time she was supposed to be drying dishes and he and Teddy found her in the basement putting a dirty plate in the washing machine.

But always there in her house, slipper-whispering footsteps over the linoleum. "Well, Juddy, and what's your teacher's name this year." Cutting him a piece of pie after he mowed the lawn for her. She told a joke once. A man went on a trip to the town of Tooele. But, the same day, he left. It was too silly, she said. He tried, for her, to laugh. Her smile cut a half-moon

swath in the silence across the wrinkles. Because she was like the earth. Just there under the basketball court between the curb and the street, holding it all up. Jud decided now, looking up at his grandmother's bedroom window, that's what his parents meant. If she goes it will be as if the whole earth silently slipped away down a hole to China.

Down under his sneakers he felt the root of the cherry tree there that always made the mower howl as if every tooth in its head had been mangled. His sneakers felt clammy. Soaked with the evening dew, the grime between his toes slippery. He didn't like to talk to her, the boy who wouldn't talk to trees, for chrissakes. But he liked her to be. Made his parents seem bigger, too. They needed her. But he wouldn't go up there to the room. Besides, keep Teddy and Rhea and Charlene quiet, they said. And Teddy yelling now. "Juddy, come on. Play giant steps with us." He could barely say it with his two front teeth gone.

And, Kimball's children screeched below. Their willful voices spiralling up through the leaves of the cherry tree dropped with the sharp rat-tat-tat of fire-crackers through the upstairs window. Kimball teetered on his sister Clair's vanity stool shifting his work boots around the reedy legs with a bombadeer's concern

for precision. "Jud! I saw you move." "You're crazy." "I am not, and I said only one umbrella step." "Jesus, those kids should shut up" . . . embarrassed by the noise of his children and more so by the certain feeling that his thought boomed above the scrape of boots -- good intentions alone could not avoid it -- through the quiet room.

Yes, there was exhaustion. Peace after storm. The rasp of boots, god the boots, children's voices, the rustle of each cottonwood leaf on such an August evening suspended as in liquid, came like water skaters across the air drumming at Ida's ears as she sat in Claire's slipper chair by the bed, tense in concentration on the dying of Aunt Mat in the bed. For at such a time it was only proper.

Of the three organic properties, sensibility, irritability and reproduction, Ida felt the second. Outwardly. And so she relented, lifted her eyes, acknowledged in the half light Kimball's hulk balanced on the stool. How long can you stop thought for such a salute. Or hold your breath? Five minutes, Juddy said. I did it today at the pool. Oh, come on Jud, Teddy screamed. You'd be dead. Scram, you kids, Kimball said, kicking off his boot. Take it outside. I'm bushed. Keep it up, in fact, he shouted at the back door through

which they disappeared, and I'll tear up those circus tickets I got. And, since the organism is, in fact, in undivided oneness, the substance of inner and outer being the same, Ida had to relent. Inwardly.

"Listen, Jud. I'm not gonna play because you're always, always cheating." Those kids, Ida thought. Kimball . . . He'll sit here and do nothing . . . just look embarrassed . . . should assert himself. There's Jud. I know he's smoking, and Charlene's bike's had a broken reflector for months. It's a worry when she rides after dark. He does nothing, and he could if he would only . . . now sugar, alcohol's not a sin you know -- moderation, they say, not total abstinence . . . if he would only cut out his drinking.

Inwardly images crowded through the gates, substance that she had carefully erected with her will, as if they were gauze even though Kimball's mother lay withered, unconscious under a fresh, white sheet whose cling revealed an insubstantial frame. So great once, and central. Perhaps greater than hard evidence might dictate.

Nowadays, Freda Howlett was saying only last week, everybody dies in hospital. I tell you Ida, what my father went through . . . She lifted a head of lettuce, trimmed a few bruised leaves and dropped it into

her grocery cart. Giants, Ida thought, are falling in summer breezes. Tubes in his nose, in his stomach. They wouldn't let him go. Finally, when he did, he was all alone. No, no Bertie, that's dirty. She slapped a lettuce leaf out of his hands. It was cruel, worse than they treat animals. Kimball's mother was home at the time cutting corn for Claire to can. Now Claire was downstairs calling the doctor. Would they move her tonight? There Kimball sat waiting for a decision, as usual and impossibly trying to look small. Why doesn't he decide? Why always Claire?

She could never quite yield to the countless petty tyrannies which were, owing to other forces, simply out of her hands. Kimball, for example. Vast and influential in his role as nonentity. Heavy with inaction. Still, it seemed that if she thought long enough, willed strongly enough, - how long can you hold your breath? - Kimball would emerge from the bed clothes one morning decisive, say, energetic, maybe. And people would not die.

When Juddy cried so much the first few months, Ida read books while he lay on his stomach across her knees squirming and sometimes shrieking. There is a great deal of confusion as to what is meant by the term colic; she patted his bottom. Sometimes surgery is

needed; she clutched the saddle of his spine. There must be a cause; a solution. She asked Kimball's mother if she did not think that the way he drew up his knees was just a sure sign of colic. But Aunt Mat just shrugged and straightened Jud's kimono sleeves. All the books say so, Ida said. But Aunt Mat said he'd be alright, finally, that all things come to an end. How about your babies? Well they were all different, sometimes sugar water, sometimes some rice water. How did you know? But Kimball's mother went on folding diapers. Didn't they cry? Aunt Mat smoothed the soft cloth. Jud did a little, but that stopped soon. His father didn't like it. How? Ida thought. Oh, how? and still she folded - ten, eleven, - as serene as an October moon, large and full of what she knew, if, in fact, she did know.

"Come on Jud. You can't quit now that it's my turn." And Ida relented, noticed the soft curtains in the softening light, the missing button, third from the top, on Kimball's shirt, Aunt Mat's stockings stuffed in her black shoes under the chiffonier.

There was always movement - silence was impracticable - during the dying and after. Let us all pause, Reverend Millhouse said last Memorial Day, bowing his head, on the courthouse steps, and give one minute's silence in homage to these honored dead . . . "Go out,"

Ida said, "for goodness sake and send those kids to the other side of the house." And the tuba player dropped his wallet trying to return it to an inaccessible back pocket, a girl scout restored a drooping sock. There were, of course, the usual coughs, flags tussling with the breeze, stroller jugglings and sparrows scrimmaging among rejected candy wrappers. Then, too, the loud laughter of sunlight distracted. The shouting of fat lilacs. Inconceivable. Silence.

Of course, if we use intravenous feedings, catheters, a pacer, you know. Check her into the Wasatch Memorial. I practice there, Mrs. Bass, Dr. Kcrnwilder told Claire, Kimball, the attending family. He was young. All specialists in geriatrics are young. It's a fine hospital. Efficient staff. You ought to see the beds. Nurses have been straining their backs for centuries and patients have been lying to them instead of moving. That's the thing. Get them moving. Because who could get them out of those high beds? With these beds . . . The doctor folded his arms and shifted his weight to one foot. All you do is touch a button and it is raised or lowered mechanically. He paused, impressed. Wonderful. But, now, Mrs. Bass. We could take your mother in. I don't know. She's so very old. No disease there, really. She's just worn

out. So many vital organs . . . You and the family must make the decision. And of course, he removed his glasses, I'll do whatever the family wishes to the best of my ability. But whatever we do . . . Kimball rose from the vanity stool and stood by the bed. He wanted to focus completely on this woman who had always existed quietly within the circle of his movements, to say for once "This is my mother." I'm afraid it's only a matter of time, Dr. Kornwilder had said.

Well, we can't go on forever. No such thing as a perpetual motion machine. There's always a flaw. The big grindstone in his father's barn. Inevitably it slowed its whirling. Down. Down. Down. Stop. Then he would pedal furiously until its turning blurred with the fuel of his energy. But, then again, stop. A bit of oil. More peddling. It was no use; there was always friction. His father's clock on the dining room wall . . . clunk, clunk, clunk, but gravity insisted . . . even it, once a year . . . Kimball, the voice reared, you get out there, now, each word a ringing blow, and fetch in that water like your ma wants. He saw the sharp eye, the black facial hair. Is that boy dumb or what, Mathilda! A gold watch chain winking in the firelight troubled his eyes.

His mother's breathing was not labored now.

Always a tragic flaw. In spite of the best laid plans. Take hubris, students, Professor Whitsell said, and Kimball always remembered it. Whitsell wrote it on the board. Now, MacBeth was an ordinary man, capable of good. That business with the ghost of Banque, you'll remember. It was an overweening pride that brought him down.

But not Ma. A person is as a person does, she always said. Attila swooped down out of the north, the yellow glint of disease in his eyes, and the Corsican on Elba with a flaw rotting his belly. "To be," Hamlet mused, as Professor Whitsell explained him, in a voice suffused with dramatic qualities never heard on an earthly stage. To be something grand, Kimball thought, his body rising on swells of sun-soaked air. Up. And over Mt. Olympus. Below a hawk split the air, dropping his shadow across the spreadout foothills of the Wasatch. As if he were flying, too, until something tugged at his feet. "You're dumb, Jud. Go back to the beginning. I saw you move."

Kimball looked down and kicked under the bed some dried red clay which had fallen on Claire's rug. He could feel Ida coiled in her shadowy corner. "By god, that Davis Crump has more damn red clay at his ranch." The goddamedest septic tank job Kimball had ever been on.

He rolled his tongue against the roof of his mouth. I'm thirsty, Ida.

They drank cold cider on the little porch of the remodelled garage that was their first home the summer after they were married, while Kimball read passages from Hamlet to her. During most of that summer a series of heat waves held the Salt Lake Valley in a gasping embrace and when Kimball could take time from studying and Ida from the housework she did evenings after working all day as a file clerk for Boyce Lumber Company, they sat in the relative cool outside and watched flickering tongues of heat lightning strike in the mountains. Her quick eyes caught every flash as they did falling stars on the nights they parked, when they were dating, in the canyon. There. Another one. Why didn't they invent wishes for lightening, too? When Kimball told her what Professor Whitsell had said, that Hamlet was one of the great English tragedies, he couldn't help the catch in his voice, especially, too, when he read the monologue about the slings and arrows. I think it's silly, Kimball. If he'd acted like a man, there wouldn't ever have been a tragedy.

She did not know then that she was already pregnant. Jud was born the next March when Kimball expanded his part time job with Wasatch Construction - septic tanks, burial vaults, retaining walls - and Sanitary

Service - tank cleaning, to a full eight hour day.

The first grandchild.

Occasionally now, rattling sounds issued from the cavern that was his mother's mouth. Her head rolled from side to side. Ida stuffed the pillows high on each side to the large head. Well, Kimball, it looks, his mother said when he sat in her kitchen telling her that Ida was expecting Jud, as if you're going to be in the market for a job, hey? She smiled too, he remembered, and talked about getting a baby soaker pattern from someone at church.

In semi-consciousness she washed her crumpled mouth, now unsupported, her false teeth soaking away independently in a dish on the dresser, and loose skin folded and unfolded over her cheeks like a bellows. He wondered if Professor Whitsell would remember him if he dropped by to see him. He was retired now, Kimball heard.

This is my mother, Kimball wanted to think - clearly. But, she's running down, down, down danced one tailed devil that rose from the well of his mind. "Ma," he said. He pawed at her shoulder with a large, graceless hand. He hesitated. No sound answered his shy voice except the evening wind in the cottonwood trees. The flicker of a gold watch chain troubled his

eyes. Get out there, boy, and fetch . . . "I'm going now, Ma," Kimball said.

Ida was alone with her. She tried to revive the anger she felt for his persistent, embarrassed slouch - ridiculous on a man of thirty eight. But, it flared up with the first, false energy of a sulphur match and died away with the fading of Kimball's foot-falls on the stairs. He would not be back, she knew; he would wait for her below. Instead of nursing the acerbity she felt toward his small cowardices, she was relieved that he would stay away.

Below, the children whined at Kimball, but their voices drifted off the other side of the house. Aunt Mat lay deathly still. Now brief periods of troubled breathing competed with the impartial sounds of August which floated through the open window. The heat of life had left with Kimball and the children, leaving the air in the room untroubled. The distant rustling of leaves sounded like the mutterings of a fast moving mountain stream weaving a descant around the low breathing, sometimes labored, which was the struggle of waters in the narrows below where the winter's debris choked a rock-floored cut.

Ida sat on a flat rock above watching the leaves, summer suicides, tumble through the rapids. Below, the

water, arrived and settled, spread out in a disinterested calm. Ida, sweet as apple cider, Kimball sang, throwing in occasional groans to imitate Bing Crosby. Stuffing empty sandwich wrappers in a back pocket, he stood up, tied his fishing line. I'll be about two bends downstream. There's a good hole there. Big and square, stumbling around the bend, but grand. Sh - sh, Ida. Go quietly. Fish jump at the wrinkle of an eyebrow. Easing up to the edge, "Man. Look at them. Two, three pounders. They saw in a deep pool seven trout slithering in slow circles through green water, old water, where upstream movement all but ceased. Moss lined ancient soil along the banks. The green tinge on the backs of the fish turned yellowish when they moved out of the shade of the red-ozier dogwoods that hung over their secluded ritual. Man, Kimbal whispered and they vanished.

In the bed, Kimball's mother moved and rolled her head against the pillows. Her fingers under the sheet searched for a hand hold. Since last evening she had rarely moved. Ida leaned forward feeling for the hand. "Oh," the woman moaned and then mumbled. If her eyes were open, Ida could not know, but she heard the sheets rustle as the fish circled in the liquid evening. "What. What." Did she too see them, feel them brush by the bed, their eyes unmoving as if all

their wisdom consulted inwardly? "What is to become of me?" the mother said. The windows were now great squares of gray, in contrast to the darkening room, across which dark silhouettes glided. Was their circle closing in? She found the hand and held it and the wrist firmly under the sheet with both of hers. "I'm with you, Mother," she said fiercely, near her ear. It was not so much that she knew and loved this old woman. Ida helped in the kitchen every Thanksgiving Day, until Claire moved in with the old lady, and brought each year the cranberry relish and salad. She cut out and framed the children's school pictures for her birthday, and reminded Kimball to stop by and visit her. It was simply that Ida included herself in this final insult.

No sound answered and the stealthy fish were closing in and she wondered how long she could hold out. Ida felt afraid. But something can always be done about it, she screamed. She pulled the stopper and released dishwater that disappeared in a snuffling whirlpool down the drain. Oh, Ida, lay off. Kimball rarely yelled. It's too late is all. Too late. He slammed the screen door when he left. And now his mother was slipping fast away from her. Can it be, she thought, that nothing can be done about this dying woman?

Ida, too, was slipping fast over a horizon . . . Think about the fishing trip, alone with Kimball, up the Big Sand. Just the two of them, between semesters. Think about that. They stayed . . . She fixed her eye on Kimball, tall and rumple-haired, half trotting up with a full day's catch as if to spike the picture on a wall of her mind, but it would not steady. Kimball tilted this way and that, finally disappeared, a leaf scudding down a ditch drain, leaving only the two women and the encircling fish. An occasional silver glint reflected from a cold scale when one floated past a window. They had never before allowed Ida to see them so completely. There are fifty states in the union, seven in New England. Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont . . . Jud's smoking. What will the family say? Ida failed . . . Connecticut, Rhode Island . . . in the cool room the glint of fish . . . Massachusetts . . . This death is certain.

Columbines. When she lifted her eyes from the forbidden sight in the trout pool she saw them to her left and barely discernible under the snowberry bushes and aspen shade. White and shy, unassuming, they returned sometimes . . . The first day Jud left on the school bus . . . the nights when Kimball, finally falling drunk into bed, lay like a stone beside her . . . and

now in the dark room; sometimes the battles are doomed. She patted the poor hand under the sheet. Soon she would go; Kimball would be waiting, now there must be loyalty.

To think that I used to kiss those feet, the old lady said once when Kimball propped them bare on a kitchen chair. Ida remembered that with shock. It was not like his mother to talk about her babies, or herself. Holding Jud, the first grandchild, on her lap, she simply smiled and arranged his christening dress with experienced hands. Did she know that Kimball was starting to drink a lot. Why? Well some people say it's chemistry. If she did, she never showed it.

After Kimball's father was buried in the cemetery near his old ranch on that drizzling March day, half wet snow melting as it fell on the red clay muc, she made coffee for the relatives, hung the children's wet mittens on radiators. Going on. Fumbling with marshmallows in the pantry for the children's cocoa before the out-of-town families began the drive home. Ida kept the picture of Jud on her lap. His first photograph, there were other children, other family pictures. But this one. It made Jud seem very important. A soft picture. Columbines. But, now Jud's smoking. Rhea has a lazy they say at school.

And below, in the driveway, Kimball removed from his toolbox inside the car trunk, a pint of vodka. Not supposed to be able to smell it. Probably two ounces left. He could see Claire on the telephone through the kitchen window. The other windows were dark. So he turned and, stepping under the apple tree, drained the bottle. Hah . . . hah. Shuddering and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Ida would be down soon. He crouched down by Claire's marigolds and, pulling aside some moist dirt, he slipped the bottle into the hole and pushed the dirt over it. Claire won't dig there again until spring. From behind the house Jud appeared out of the darkening evening, scuffing along the drive. Kimball leaned against the car fender and lit a cigarette. Makes a common chimney of your nose his mother said. But she never revealed any other ideas she might have about noses.

Jud sat on a fender, but he was so slight the car barely shuddered. "Where's Charlene and the rest?" his father said. "Oh, she and Rhea are mad, said I'm sneaky or bossy or something. Makes me sick. They took Teddy inside."

So. Jud's smoking, they think. Of the three organic properties, Kimball was sensible . . . to Jud near him in the dark - He's getting so tall, even siding

with his dad sometimes now. Hope he doesn't get hooked on the stuff. Wrecks the lungs. Just above the cherry tree, Kimball spotted the yellow disk of an almost full moon. Venus hung low in the sky. He experienced the crispness of the air, the smell of rotting apples and sour weeds. "Hunting season won't be long coming now, Jud." The new moon and the morning star were young and cheerlessly bright on his way to work each morning. But this older moon rising at the end of the day was fuller, glowing richly, steady and somehow beautifully sad.

Jud grunted. That would be good scrabbling with his father through the red-leafed scrub maple, on the prowl together for deer that he knew his father really didn't want to shoot. Keep your eye steady, Jud, then slip it off the tips of your fingers, not the palms. And, sitting together by Jonas Wheeler's stack of strawberry boxes where they put the aluminum foil pie plate filled with milk to lure out the kitten whose voice had filled the evening with grief - it looked so small for all that noise in his father's hands when it finally came out - his father talked about Jud's language. Save them for the fellows, Jud. Will you? Out of respect for your mother and the girls. He told Jud how she loved him. But she worries. Jud wondered

if he knew the fellows had been smoking. He wondered now how his father felt about the earth slipping quietly down a hole and wiggled his toes in his clammy sneakers as his father folded his arms against the evening chill and leaned back waiting for Ida to come down.

RITES OF PASSAGE

The grave was all wrong. Clara certainly was not going to let her mother be buried there and not facing east alongside Papa. She felt the old panic begin to rise. For it was never easy . . . "What can we do now," she hissed in her sister Angel's ear . . . not knowing about second class trains, whether patent leather may be worn in winter, coming from a ranch out of Aurora.

Angel, placid as her mother had been, stretched her chin out over her silk jabot to see into the grave, angular and severe in its symmetry. "But Clara, whatever can we do about it now." Since what she wanted to say, that it seemed a nice, proper grave, wouldn't do, she fell silent, leaving the details again to Clara.

The sisters were the first to climb the knoll to the plot, holding their skirts close against the snarl of burrs and tall grasses.

The driver of the hearse, after bringing the sleek limousine to a shivering halt in a deep rut, stood pushing his cap back and sweating openly as he surveyed the desolate scene with the professional eye of a produce hauler at a receiving dock. He had seemed a veritable paladin behind the wheel at the head of the procession as

it made its way with arrogant dignity along the paved road out of town. But the going had become increasingly arduous as it stumbled through ruts and washes in the dirt road up the canyon to the old Aurora cemetery. Now the driver was tired and unnerved.

As dust settled over the line of cars, the mourners in broken ranks--Miss Nida Rombauer, Tom Dilly, LaPreal Houghton, Ruby Johnson, Harriet Muller, ranch and town people--trudged up the slope ahead of the coffin which was born on the sweating shoulders of sons and nephews. Stumbling feet dislodged rocks which rolled down and plopped in the road. Banks of flowers, velvety petals bruised from their wild dance on the coffin as it was jounced up the canyon, rode upon dark-suited shoulders as if on palanquins--fleshy princesses oiled for a feast of pomegranates and grapes.

It was a scene that Clara had feared. For it was not easy. What to do. How to choose the proper fork, when to tip in the Mexico City hotels . . . and the services had gone so well. Tom Dilly's witness and Ruby Johnson's, Relief Society President. "Hortense Prior was a strength, a bulwark, an inspiration to the Relief Society," Ruby said at the podium. "And, a loyal worker for the Kingdom." Now this grave business. It was Clara's first funeral. That is, Clara had never before

been responsible for one. Choosing the speakers, checking to see how the grave would be opened, arranging for her sister Angel to be met at the airport. The diner should always tilt the soup bowl away from him, if he must take the last spoonful of soup.

As Nida Rombauer crested the knoll on her cousin's arm and stood shakily near the grave--she was eighty last summer and not used to cross-countrying on weed choked hillsides--she saw the two women whispering. Nida had hoped that, now Hortense Prior was dead, the struggle would be over and the daughter, Clara, could settle down--unless her style of living was so firmly engrained that habit replaced Hortense as her knowing gadfly. But, Nida now sensed the tension. What was wrong?

The last act, she had hoped, would be the funeral. Clara's choice of speakers--Nida recognized Clara's hand in it--whether by instinct or her usual motives, had been right. Thomas Dilly, Mrs. Johnson. Prominent. Others--Harriet Muller in the back of the room and some of the Graf family--who knew Hortense well might have, with their testimony, deepened the moments set aside by the human community to observe her passing. Though the speakers' witness left Hortense unrecognizable, the wrapping up of a life and the smoothing away of exterior wrinkles was the function of funerals. Yes. And these

flesh pink gladiolus sprays that framed Tom Dilly at the podium. Hortense Prior may not have died splendidly. She may have lived obscurely in the kitchen at church suppers, bent over steaming kettles of chokecherry jelly, and around chicken coops, but she was not to leave the world without her moment. And up to now it had been a smooth crescendo.

To that Clara had devoted all her energies these past several days. It was not until she was settled in the family limousine behind the hearse that she realized that she was tired. Bone weary. And she let herself go limp, beside Angel, with relief as if leeches applied to the bottoms of her feet were draining some bodily presence which pressed against nerve endings, a counterforce to letting go. Such a static feeling was profoundly new. It went deeper than simple relief that the funeral was almost over. Her states of tension had been lifelong; probably begun, Nida's father had once suggested, the first time Hortense lifted her to her placid breast . . . and continued because Hortense would assume that all babies lie on their backs with filmed, water-blue eyes floating dreamily under passive lids. She used to carry Clara, her first baby, lying in the curve of her strong arm, around the store at Aurora while she waited for a sack of wheat to be ground at the mill, touching the dry

goods and the feed. She would jounce her masterfully, as if she were the tenth child, whenever the restless-eyed Clara struggled. Even Nida, then a young girl helping in her father's store, knew that the striving child would be happier looking over the world from her mother's shoulder. Oh, how marvelous it all is, Clara wrote, being here in this wonderful world. Five days in the Louvre, two in the Prado, three in the Pitti. And Venice, a city of dreams. I fear my feet shall fall off and my eyes fall out. "Yes, I guess she is," Hortense said when Nida's mother talked about Clara's summering in Europe. "I'll take five pounds of them lentils," she said to Mr. Rombauer, scratching her chin. "What do you think she'll bring back for you, Mrs. Prior?" "Oh, I don't know, Nida." She snorted a superior scoff. "I've got everything I need. And if I don't, I can always get it here. That's a long way off, I declare. Clara's a mystery. Always goin', like some Indian." "But, Mother, it's not just going," Clara once said, brushing her travel folders on Mexico City from the oak dining table. She was openly annoyed, something she always tried to avoid. Just come once, Mother, with me somewhere, sometime and you'll see. Hortense this once put the darning needle she was threading down on the table. She removed her steel-rimmed glasses and, placing the palms of her hands

over her time and weather-scored cheeks, she massaged her faded eyes and the folds of her skin up and down. "You got all your underthings in order, Clara? I can sew any straps or whatever so's you can be ready. Why would I want to go away from this place I know somewhere where folks don't know me from Adam?" and she pushed the darning egg which rolled in her broad, aproned lap down into the lisle stocking she was mending. "You go, Clara, though I don't know why. I've got everything I want here." Clara brought back a fine Mexican shawl with red and orange roses and poppies embroidered on a field of black which her mother lay over the back of the sofa for a year or so.

It was not easy at first. Not knowing whether the Prado was a fortress or a museum--or, for goodness sake, even the rank of a Spanish officer. Or, if indeed one could pick up an asparagus stalk in Geneva and dip it into the sauce. Now, at her age, planning this funeral was unsettling. Expecially since her mother had never indicated any special wishes.

The Aurora Cemetery, dusty and neglected, Clara knew her mother would choose. She never wanted to leave Aurora in the first place. "Why, Clara, can't you take the other room in the school now that Mrs. Rombauer's retired. The way things stand, they'll have to add onto

the school house and build in all the fancy things you're wanting for your teaching." "I won't leave you out here, Mother, but all my friends are in town, and the concerts at night. If I stay out here, I'll be driving until one or two in the morning. You'd like it. There's church, and lots of your friends--Harriet Muller, Wanda Graf--are in town now." "Well, Lord knows, I miss 'em, but Aurora is my home. When I gave up the ranch, at least I had Aurora." Hortense, thick in body and slow, looked up and out at Aurora through her front window-- Graf's bulldog fitfully dreaming by the single gasoline pump in front of a garage surrounded by stricken farm machinery yawning in a sea of drying nettles and old tires, the false fronted general store, now Sorenson's and Sons, Frank Graf's sleeping pickup before it forming a gestalt which was not only more than the sum of its parts but glazed with a wash of experience which spanned sixty years--with her faded eyes, blank and bewildered for a full minute before she put down her basin of peas and shells and heaved her heaviness up out of the leather-seated rocker. "That bread's been set to raise too long." She walked across the linoleum floor with a ponderous gait which left the outsides of the heels on her shoes run down, phlegmatic and awkward as a giant land tortoise. On the wooden sidewalk outside Sorenson's, formerly Rombauer's,

Ranch Shiply had materialized in a puddle of shimmering heat, spitting over the horse trough which had been gone since the street was widened for automobiles. Funny how old eyes play tricks.

What to do. Does one hear or see an opera?

Clara alone had to find the answers as she moved from the cradle to crawling to toddling and finally running, thirsty and driven as if she sprang into being alone and unguided, except by an inner pressure ticking, on a wasteland of beach above the reach of the tides. And the choice was oblivion or a determined drive out of the sandhills and into the waves beyond.

The Bountiful Library had been a great help. Often Nida Rombauer, who went to work there when she finished library school, set aside the books she knew Clara might like. When Clara came in, rushing, her mouth set and face harried with her purse flapping at a waist which was thickening into the shape of her mother, Nida slipped across the desk *How to Increase Your Word Power*, *The Great Plays of Shakespeare in Prose*, *A Guide to the Opera*, *The New Book of Etiquette*. "She was one of the most active and alert children I taught in the Aurora School," was the judgment of Nida's mother from her position of retirement. "But her mind's gone shallow. Shallow and pushy. There's quiet Lydia

Graf doing more with the ranch children at the Aurora School than ever Clara's selective education does in the Bountiful High School, pushing French through a food mill called pre-college French and insisting on the "basics" for college preparedness. There. I'm just a poor judge of character. I never saw that much in Lydia. Please pass the preserves, Frank, and return the spoon to the compote first." "Look to the family," Frank Rombauer would say, "and all is clear. That girl is so busy fighting the resistance she hasn't time for any of your in-depth business. They didn't read Baudelaire in the trenches, I'll bet you." But the books which helped Clara ride the waves were not much help in the funeral planning. How to maintain her idea of decorum in a balance with what she had to imagine were her mother's wishes, at any time an impossible task, found no guidance in books. And on the way to the cemetery, Clara was pleased. Mrs. Johnson had made her mother seem important and interesting.

Now she stood whispering with Angel and Brother Wilson Pollard who stood over the grave, bible at the ready as he cleared his throat questioningly. Angel was no help. And neither was Ben or Millard, standing back on their heels, hands pocketed, prearranged expressions

of serious attention on their faces. Over the knoll the procession came and she alone had to make a decision.

Nida looked around at the old graves. There were few new ones. The new dead were buried now in Salt Lake City, Reno, Los Angeles, wherever the descendents of these dead had fled out of these hills. Cracked angels simpered over an occasional grave, but most were marked with weathered, gray wood. The words Elizabeth Doolittle, 1890, died at three months, the sweet daughter of Jacob and Mariah struggled against the wind and water, their only visitor a motley lizard sunning itself in the dry Indian summer. She thought of the buckboards which probably hauled these occupants under leaden skies filled with the howl of alarmed quail to these last resting places. A buckboard may not have struggled less audibly than the shiny limousine with its shock absorbers, or staggered less clumsily, but then it would never have pretended to try. Hortense would have felt more at home in it. Many of the inhabitants here would not have been as old as she was when she died and though their last rides may have been in buckboards, Mrs. Prior knew far more about them. She had also outlived the quilting bee, the trimming of lamps, the spring soap-making. Such rites even now might be performed in the environs of Aurora but, to the city people who were burying her, the knowledge

of such ceremonies lurked, along with a primordial past, deep in a collective, if presently uneasy, subconscious.

A picture of the girl Hortense in a buckboard was a memory which died with Mrs. Prior three months after her ninety-third birthday. There had been in the calm, inexorable progress of the girl's maturation, a distinction which called her attention to Nida's mother among the students she faced on her first day in the Aurora school, a momentary, erratic slimming into the lightness and uncertainty of a young starling. It was a brief flurry of disorganization in the symmetry of her sure development, an overnight appearance of a watersprout to threaten the planned balance of a serviceable fruit tree. She was sixteen, long out of Mrs. Rombauer's little school, and on loan by her dour and devout father to the Graf ranch to cook and help a household whose ranks were swollen by a summer haying crew. Her fleeting liveness and summer combined to infect one of the crew and Mrs. Rombauer was pleased to see her almost nimble, and shy, beside Ranch Shibly on a Saturday afternoon outside the store. It was well known that Hortense's father, irate at such a courtship by a heathen drifter, undertook the necessary pruning and Hortense settled into the placid and hardworking woman she remained all her life.

On the hill just above the Prior plot Nida could

see the old granite stone marking the grave of Hortense's parents and she was not surprised to see that a cluster of stinging nettles prospered around it. Until Hortense married, finally at twenty eight, a widowed rancher who, at somewhat less than half a hundred years needed a cook and housekeeper for his almost grown sons, she filled in as emergency helper--canning, tending the sick, cooking, harvesting--for the ranch families around Aurora. Everyone knew her.

That's what Tom Dilly's Aunt LaPreal said when he called her up after Clara Prior had invited him to speak at the funeral. He had called because, after some effort, he could recall but dimly a thick-waisted, lisle-hosed lady who was forever stooped over a copper wash boiler or shelling peas for whomever was around with an appetite with a phlegmatic unconcern for the hawk wings glinting over the south pasture--she never raised her head to see them--or for the new butter molds in Sorensons and Sons windows--Hortense sedulously hauled water, nursed the Dilly children and stocked the root cellar each autumn with the forward movements of an automaton.

"Service" was the title of Thomas A Dilly's little talk at the funeral. "Aunt Tensie" as he called her, causing his Aunt LaPreal's wattles to shake in the back row with wonder at the new-coined endearment, "devoted her

life to the Christian principle of service."

Among other deeds, he remembered and enumerated for the mourners Aunt Tensie's nursing him and his sisters through a stubborn siege of smallpox when they lived on neighboring ranches fifteen miles from this very cemetery. At the podium, after adopting a stance as erect as the sprays of gladiolus blossoms stationed on either side, Mr. Dilly lingered over the memory tenderly, he turned it this way and that as he did the old glass bottles he collected to catch every nuance of light playing on age. His resonant voice informed the gathering of things which no one had previously suspected of Hortense--deeds which, Aunt LaPreal suspected, had passed through a weathering period in nephew Tom's mind and which, in the chambers of memory, having undergone a revising and consolidation process, were rendered artistically larger than life. He told of her fortitude in following the code of service, and courage in the face of disappointment. The latter he illustrated with the occasion of the Dilly children's failure to respond with alacrity to her ministrations and her chicken soup. In fact, he ranged generally over her small share in the effort which produced Thomas A. Dilly, lawyer, Rotarian and after dinner speaker.

He rested one hand delicately on the lecturn and leaned forward carefully from the waist, his face

parturient. It was, he thought, a challenge to speak at funerals--to maintain a subdued dignity. At the University of Utah he had studied law and dreamed of the glories which could be reaped in criminal law. William Jennings Bryan was then, as now, his idol. Yes. "Thou shalt not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." A challenge for interpretation. Voice control. A rousing speaker Bryan was with the American flag beside him, but speaking in the presence of a funeral spray . . .

Still, however successful he had been in the firm of Kimball, Slagle, Compton and Dilly, as Bullseye Chairman for the University Alumni Fundraising Committee, as Scout Jamboree rhetorician, criminal law had eluded him. Chances for oratory, the genuine kind, came rarely now.

As he helped Ruby Johnson up the knoll, he felt pleased thinking "Service." Pause. "Service, friends, was Aunt Tensie's second name." How it hovered, the final sentence, over the hushed room, when below he saw the gathering strangely fitful, not centered around the gravesite but standing back, looking at sky, hills, headstones, weeds hesitatingly. "But why can't she lie next to Papa. That's the instructions I gave instead of here at right angles to his middle." He heard Clara say it. Loudly, too.

But he felt the presence of Ruby Johnson breathing heavily close to him, looking up at him intently, at his talcumed profile, expecting?--had been for several seconds while he had been reviewing his little talk. Indeed. Indeed, what had they been talking about. He risked a glance sideways and slightly down. It was fruitless. She had him . . . Was he hiding his confusion? His father would simply have jabbed an elbow in her rib cage and said, "Ya lost me there" but he dared not risk the enormity . . . offguard . . . when he noticed the feather --in fact it threatened to impale his eye . . . in her hat. Pheasant. He laughed. "Unfortunately, Mrs. Johnson, Branson's draw yields as many birds as ever, but I don't get away, busy as I am, often enough to take advantage of the good hunting. I must confess," he said intimately, spreading his arms so that the college seal on his cuff links sparkled in the sun, "here among these memories, I almost forgot our little conversation. My parents, you know, are buried here and . . ." He paused. The confession was coy. Its simplicity was not lost on her he was thinking. "But, Mr. Dilly, what on earth is the commotion. Aren't they going to commence the burial ceremonies?"

It was embarrassing. One had to stand there, perhaps turn away as you have to when you catch someone

having a private telephone conversation and wait without looking obvious. Ruby brushed a smudge of dust from her white glove and looked down at the weeds, discretely checking for runs in her stockings.

Tom Dilly considered his last visit to the cemetery and amazed himself to discover that its occasion was his sister Mary's death five years ago. He must check the myrtle he had ordered planted on the grave. This thought came as he looked around for some sighting . . . Where was the family plot . . . a familiar angel, perhaps. When the Dilly cousins bought plots in Salt Lake City, Mary had been put out. Asserting her aim to be buried right along side her mother, Mary questioned their motives for deserting the family plot. He shuddered, remembering the cold rain, the snow in the foothills, poor old Mrs. Graf, her bent body--children clutching each arm--slogging up the clay slopes greased by the spring thaw.

Her stockings were the three dollar ones--put on new this morning--from the Salt Lake Bon Marche--and there below the left knee--definitely a run starting. How could two generations, at most three, have let affairs come to this. Rotting markers hosting gray crickets. Rusting flower pots on reeling stands. Swarms of insects infesting the weeds. It's just what you'd expect of the woman. That she'd choose to be buried here where people

neglect their dead.

"Hortense was a strength, a bulwark, an inspiration to the Relief Society and a loyal worker for the Kingdom," Ruby said in her little talk. Bulwark was not written in her three by five cards on the podium. It came to her as she spoke and she hoped she had used it correctly. It was just that there was a strength in Mrs. Prior's body when at sixty five she and Clara moved to Bountiful that made her think of bastion, bulwark, rampart as she had heard the words hurled down at her on Sundays since she was a child. She was a tireless worker. And it was all in the body that seemed so much bigger than it actually was even when it showed signs of age--the old lady's hump at the back of the neck falling away to narrow ledges of shoulders under her dresses. When Hortense retired from her post in the kitchen several years ago, Ruby was in a devil of a pickle. She was president of the Relief Society, in charge of the Spring Bake Sale, and responsible for the first of the month, Thursday night suppers. Without Mrs. Prior stationed over the big range in the kitchen, Ruby could not conceive of a single bowl of potato salad reaching the guests.

Mrs. Prior had moved around the black wood stove in the church kitchen, coaxing it along with the same heavy deftness she used to guide cows into their stalls.

Rarely raising her head and never hovering with the others by the door to watch the guests, she remained in the kitchen reducing the pile of dishes inexorably with the patience of an ant. It was so difficult to get anyone to replace Hortense in the kitchen that Ruby was forced to work out a compromise among the ladies who usually signed to be on the hostess committee. Each would work on one course and then hostess the remainder of the event. There arose a salad committee, a condiment committee, a roll committee, and so on to the last round of after dinner mints.

During Hortense's era at the stove, she had not presided. Her permanence was that of a tree, inconspicuous on a wooded hillside until, felled, it leaves a startlingly airy space. She simply was there peeling potatoes, lining up the pies, which were marched from the huge oven's jaws, as unobtrusively as the sun ripens corn, while the kitchen committee bustled around the carrot curls and Ruby fussed with the flowers.

Her name, appearing continually at the bottom of every special program, was a byword to the congregation. Yet, as water in the tap is acknowledged only at the time of a cold snap when it freezes in the pipes, Hortense existed at the corner of one's eye, or through the potato salad at church suppers. Even her death was unspectacular. She didn't suffer. Never had been seriously ill. She

simply went to bed. Curled up within three days dry and brown as an autumn leaf. Ruby regretted that she did not have a moment to visit her or send a bouquet of her chrysanthemums. She watched Tom Dilly surveying the cemetery. He shaded his eyes to see the cliffs above the canyon where the first tongues of red were showing on the high scrub maples. Mrs. Pratt, President of the Relief Society's Western Division loomed large on the walls of her inner eye; foptails gleaming in the sun, the feathers in her hat, purchased in Los Angeles at convention time, dipping smartly in the breeze. She bent from her ample waist, reaching out, releasing breathless little gasps as if she were receiving artificial respiration. "This one, Oh, this one is exquisite! However do you get such large blooms. And look. Not a speck of rust on the leaves. Surely you must use a lot of dairy fertilizer to grow such chrysanthemums."

Ruby remembered too how cleverly Mrs. Pratt worked peregrinations into her opening remarks on that presidential inspection trip. Everyone who heard her felt that Mrs. Pratt was on her way to the national presidency. Ruby's hands trembled over the parfait glasses she was counting in the kitchen and her cheeks, now exciting with the softness of middle age, fermenting, just over the line of ripeness, were flushed. The murmur of lunchers in the

auditorium was the bees in her garden. She loved it all. Now Mrs. Pratt wanted to see her. "Who grew the chrysanthemums in the centerpiece?" Hortense handed her the ice cream scoop. On that very day Ruby stopped saying manure.

Now Ruby, surveying the new stockings, thought of the yellow pompoms that needed disbudding. If the purple spoons aren't tied up soon, they'll come down in the next wind. Time is the problem. Yet how could she have missed the funeral . . . even the run in her stocking. There were few she would have missed. If she ever yielded to the pressures of time and stayed away her conscience surely would not survive. Attendance at burials held a high priority on the list of events to which Ruby felt she must lend the importance of her presence. Should Ruby not appear, a stricken family might find reason to hope for a reversal. At the first odor of grief, she spread the wings of a Fury, as if the insult were hers alone. Once settled in the house of loss, she was transformed strangely into a chastened white moth, her hands fluttering with sympathy. Her condolatory visits became the means by which the ways of the gods to men were justified in the revelation of which Ruby could discover for the bereaved every good reason for the loved one's departure--his age, disabilities,

need for administrative work in a well-ordered beyond, his having "lived a good life"--until it became clear that indeed "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the lord and to sing praises unto . . ." "I can just see your mother up there with all her friends. That," said Ruby to Clara, "punctuating her certainty with a confidential tap on Clara's hand, "is really where she wanted to be."

There. Just by her right foot. A clump of yarrow exquisitely preserved. Ruby glanced over at the dispersing gathering. People struggled through the weeds trying to look inobtrusive, looking at everything except the gravesite where the bereaved family gesticulated, whispered, tapped each other on the chest. And she wondered if she couldn't pick some for her dried flower arrangements this winter.

Clara knew Ruby Johnson only at a distance, mainly because of her church activities, but also because they frequented the same tearooms and concerts. Busy contacting relatives and faced with endless decisions to be made, she had not had a moment to consider just where her mother might presently be until Ruby's visit. Clara had never been sure, even in the past. She had simply hit the beach and headed for open waters, sensing the danger. Often, from the safety of distance she would

slow to a less demanding stroke, tread water and consider the mystery that was her mother. Her mother seemed to have strung out her days, each one round and complete like peas in a pod, until they met in a circle. Now, she would shell no more peas. When Ruby came, Clara sat twitching on the edge of the sofa, nervous as a hen laying her first egg as she waited for Ruby to leave. Her thoughts scurried again through the branches of the family, darting with acquisitive eyes--the categories of friends--Aurora, Bountiful, Salt Lake; that was how she had unearthed Tom Dilly. Would the black patent leathers be appropriate for an October funeral.

Uncertainty wore away the sand beneath her running, losing her footing, heavy body, thick like her mother's, but swifter. Water running against a returning surge down off the rocky shelves uplifted strong rows of white teeth and swirls of roses frothy with petals, fetching and ominous. Clara let the pitcher stand and listened for the sound of sand sipping water in the cactus garden Mrs. Rombauer kept in the school for science study. The water faded away with the quiet whisper of silk--completely absorbed. "You have so much energy, Clara. All outgoing." "I never had such a bother with my sons as this girl, Clara," her father shouted, throwing a towel for his greasy hands down on the oilclothed table. "Clara, what

possessed you to answer that ad and drag that poor young man out here. All the way from Salt Lake City to sell a ten year old farm girl a Dale Carnegie self-improvement course . . . And what were you to pay for it with!"

But, "Leave her be," Hortense said quietly. "I don't understand, but leave the girl be." "I hope, Clara, that I never have to spend another night digging one of your salesmen out of a muddy ditch." "With that energy, you will make an excellent teacher," Mrs. Rombauer said.

But it was all away. Away from the dray and stability of the sandhills beyond the reach of the tide. Church acquaintances. Angel would be the organist. Never use a knife to cut your salad at dinner. The list to be notified was still the major task at hand. "Your mother's absence from the Relief Society activities still leaves a great hole in the ranks," Ruby said. Outgoing President of the Relief Society. An ideal speaker for the services. Ruby, too, is pleased. Graciously overwhelmed by the invitation. The sweet August smell of the haymow in the stuffed loft was certain above the cool, rectangular mirror in the cattle trough, still, reflecting the evening, with only the lazy movement of gnats dipping above it. But, decorum stood first in her notebook on the bedside table in the list of words to be looked up.

"Why not open that grave. Who else could be

buried next to Papa?" Clara turned on her heel and began to stalk the plot as if she were walking a fence line. If, as the funeral home representative said, the diggers had run into a coffin, she was determined to get to the bottom of it. But, the little knot of satisfaction that had gathered under the left lapel of her gabardine suit was now definitely unravelling. She had made a tragic omission--failed to check with the proper authorities. "I will be buried, as is right and natural of course, facing East for Judgment Day, like all good Christians. And when the trumpet sounds and I am called, then I shall turn and beckon to your mother." He said it . . . often in the years before he died, turning to look at Clara and Angel and the boys around the table after talking with Hortense about some funeral--Mr. Graf's mother's or Bert Sorenson's, people buried right here.

But, if the diggers were stopped by an unidentified coffin, who could it be? There is Uncle Enoch's grave and Aunt Mat's beside him and one, two, three--yes all their children are there. "Angel, where is baby William's tomb? I don't see it." And how often Father had said that everyone must sleep facing East.

"Probably Hortence . . .," Tom Dilly was thinking, shading his eyes as they swept in search of pheasants along the foothills. Above a red cliff a turkey hawk

wheeled away the afternoon in lazy circles. "Probably Hortense would have preferred being quietly slipped into the ground. Her burial, as Tom was beginning to think deep in his suppressed subconscious where bits and scraps of incongruous thought float free from any mooring --the strain of the realization pressed against the twelve buttons down his vest--this is the biggest thing that has ever happened to Aunt Tensie.

And yet, she had failed to check it out . . . Papa's beliefs. Perhaps they were not rules. Just his traditions again, mixing her up.

The rest of the mourners joined the tour of grave markers and the scene in the candid fall sunlight took on the aspects of an Easter egg hunt in the tall grasses. Yet, how could she ask anyone now. Ruby Johnson, for instance. Or Bishop Pollard who was raising his gentle, frosted head preparatory to the laying of Hortense Prior to rest. Above his quavering prayers the great argument continued, Clara's voice soaring above all the rest.

Whose was the interfering casket and what was to be done now. Ruby Johnson beat down quickly and plucked just two stalks of yarrow. Tom Dilly's poise, as he waited, was threatened by a panicked hen pheasant that rushed from hiding at his feet. He noted for the future the direction of its flight. But Clara, never

sure, stuck to her guns and a plan was devised whereby Hortense could be given a proper grave site tomorrow. For, how was she to know if this grave was correct and she dared not ask.

Nida watched the coffin returned down the slope with a few sprays of flowers. The rest lay rejected by the open grave. "But perhaps it's baby William's coffin that is in the way." It was a mystery, Clara thought. Nida shuddered as she and one other observer, the hawk stiffened with interest and sideslipped downward to take a closer look . . . watched Hortense Prior leave the scene in the dusty hearse which lumbered down the canyon. A great trail of dust rose behind the hearse and spread into great wings in the air currents. The last act was to be the funeral she had told herself.

And tonight Clara would find out what was right. How could she have let this detail slip. There must be a book about it, she thought and wished that Nida Rombauer were still at the Bountiful Library.

A SLIGHT FUZZ OF GREEN

Margaret and Emerson only went to Sara Hanson's cocktail party because it was a fund raiser. No-host cocktails for the victims of the Biafran civil war. It was at an inconvenient time. Four to seven on Saturday afternoon, and afterwards no place to go except back home.

Margaret was trying out a bright-colored outfit, just on the outer edge of fashion, so after Emerson purchased their drinks at the bar in Sara's family room she, feeling conspicuous, stayed in the background on the patio. Sara was standing by a row of fiery red azaleas with a martini cupped in one hand and berating the chairman of the County Democratic Central Committee for what some Nigerian Military governor--he was in charge of quelling the rebellion and rebuilding the province--said in the paper. "We will manage, he said," she said. "Imagine. He said that nature has a way of putting things right, would you believe. Thinks he's already making good progress."

Two men at the center of the group on the patio, one tall and greying, the other shorter and wiry, were trying to come to terms on Israel's six-day war with

Egypt. "It's a holy war," the short one argued. "It's different." A lot of the guests Margaret didn't recognize. People who had for one reason come together like the many bits of glass in a child's kaleidoscope symmetrically arranged on the patio around the problem. One slight turn of perspective and tomorrow an entirely new arrangement would appear.

She found Emerson inside with a group seated around Sara's coffee table. Mrs. Alonzo Bass sat on the sofa next to him. "Birth control," she said. "Without it Nigeria and Biafra can never settle their differences and we'll go on with this slaughter." Across from her, Father O'Donohue shook his head vigorously, Mrs. Bass pressed on. "I understand that economic conditions have forced the men to give up polygamy. They can only support one wife. Before, each wife slept alone until her child was at least two. Now, with one wife, she's pregnant all the time and everyone's in poor health and overcrowded.

Polygamy, a form of birth control? Margaret moved with her bright colors out from the mantel and sat down next to Father O'Donohue. He was expressing incredulity at the symbol on one drug company's label of Andromache breaking her chains. "Why," he asked whirling on Margaret with a fierce stare. "What chains?"

She was transfixed. He rolled his highball glass between two flattened palms and ruminated mysteriously about evidence gathered in countless confessionals proving a widespread misuse of sex in marriage. Then, pulling up short, remembering where he was, he leaned back and folding his big arms across his chest he shook his head. "These Nigerians. I don't know. It's a puzzle, this lapse of men into something less than your standard go-getter." Then, leaning forward with a brightening face, he tapped Emerson's knee with a stubby forefinger. "Now you take the natives around Lake Titicaca." And Margaret learned by his own confession that Father O'Donohue had been helpless among them. Reversing the downward drift of that Inca remnant was an assignment that for two years completely stymied him. That Father O'Donohue was ineffectual, considering his six feet plus and chest which, under a strong face and energetic black eyes, stretched the fibers of his black broadcloth to their tensile limit, required some acknowledgment on his part for Margaret to believe.

"Finally," he said, "we got to thinking that the best solution was to march a battalion of U. S. Marines through their villages." "What would that do?" Emerson said. He twisted the napkin tighter around his highball glass. Mrs. Bass had already registered her disapproval

by leaving. Father O'Donohue looked embarrassed. That was when Margaret suddenly remembered Terry O'Keefe. Like a cartoon character's thoughts, he floated in a puff of steam which seemed to have forced its way out through the remote vents of a long inactive volcano somewhere back of her eyes.

Father O'Donohue crossed his knees with such vigor that Margaret expected to hear his clerical skirts strain at the seams. "These are the descendents of the fabulous Incas, we used to say. And theirs was a culture that perhaps exceeded all Europe's at the time of the Spanish conquests. Have you seen their city of the sun?" Emerson shook his head. "Marvellous," said Father O'Donohue. He drained his scotch and water and set it down meticulously on Sara Hanson's leather-topped coffee table. "What in God's name happened to them. The terracing for crops, the sophisticated road systems are in ruins and the people barely subsist and watch the local administrators divert U. S. funds into their own pockets. We simply could not build a spark of get-up-and-go in them. The answer then, you've got to admit--he seemed both coy and serious--is new blood."

Yes. Terry would do. She pictured him now, straining in the high thin air creeping, as subtly as green grass captures ruins, over the girls, knitting

together the broken genes as calcium knits bone.

Again he lay sprawled in a lawn chair with little beads of perspiration beginning to collect between the dark hairs on his chest. She recognized the blue, Celtic simplicity in his eyes clearly as if a dozen years had not intervened since she last thought of him. A glint there as of clear water running over stones betrayed with a fresh immediacy the lightness of tongue of . . . Or perhaps it was not the tongue so much as it was the wrists, the eyelids. And her wondering was an old wondering, vividly restored as if time were a curtain whose cord one had only to touch to cancel it and let in the sharpness of morning. Why did her mind unwillingly dredge up Joe Mercer and Teddy Hennes torturing the turtle they brought up from the mud flats and laid out in its blood on the sidewalk where she was playing. Joe sniggered as he carried it by a stick shoved up its anus. The heavy body, its shell eighteen inches long, bore in silence the aimless cruelty and Margaret her revulsion until Mr. Hayworth, waving his rake and breathing hard, crossed the street. He stood in his old man's sweater buttoned up to the V over his breastbone and shouted everything she wished she had said, but now she couldn't remember the words or what happened next. Since that scene returned she had tried to grope beyond the

revulsion. Having failed and, since she could not put down the memory, whenever she felt herself slipping into that vortex of maggots and blood pocketed like an oil deposit beneath the surface tension, she tried the old method of casting for agreeable thoughts.

Emerson had not liked Terry, had made no attempt to know him. "I don't know Margaret why you spend your waking hours out there on that balcony with him. What could you possibly be doing." Margaret protested that she was lonely and Terry was a lot of fun. "Fun. What's fun about sitting all day out there with him," Emerson would say, packing his briefcase to leave. What was fun about it. She thought of summers spent on the beach, between sand-heat and sun-heat, enveloped in music from the Hit Parade. It was difficult to say. And October nights, not ready to go home after the movie, walking with some boy along the cold sidewalks, over wet leaves, and ending up in the diner with fingers too cold to undo the coat buttons. What was fun exactly. Or spring evenings slouched in a group in front of Mort's drugstore after being ejected again for reading the comic books and not spending money--putting off going home to finish your homework, counting the cars that went by with only one headlight burning. The pleasure wasn't pinpointable like the coda in the second movement of the symphony you heard

last night. It was in not doing anything exactly. But Emerson was suspicious.

Margaret met Terry in Wiesbaden after a long and harsh winter had finally relinquished the land and spring hung heavy in the air. The winter she and Emerson had spent quietly in a buccolic English village in Berkshire occasionally sharing a bottle of Guinness stout in Billy Akenside's kitchen and sometimes losing several pounds sterling to the terrifying Lady Cogswell in a game of bridge at Ayleford Brakes. But mostly Margaret remained alone, a camp follower after a brief plunge into married life, while Emerson pursued an occupation that consisted of being away from home and lost down the rabbit warrens of major U. S. military installations in search of clues to improving efficiency. The problem appeared to entail a search for a dyspeptic Minotaur somewhere deep under the pile of flotsam which made up those installations. It was a futile task, Margaret suspected, but he was young and buoyant with his new degree and his fresh appointment to the obscure office of some abstruse sub-committee of a congressional commission on government spending.

Sometimes Margaret noted his presence that winter, and later in their small quarters in Wiesbaden, under stacks of black and navy blue bound books citing improved practices in double entry bookkeeping. Emerson would

look up during these sightings from reams of red and blue grated papers and exhibit distinct exasperation. So she fought the remoteness of Britons and their villages and later Wiesbaden's noise and confusion alone with books on eastern philosophies. That the eternal principle of life works silently and seemingly without effort just as spring comes around every year seemed reasonable to her. Finding that repose in a muddy world was as simple as lying still long enough for it to become clear so tantalized her that she returned with renewed nervous energy to making gallons of applesauce from the yield by her English cottage door. How to liberate herself from a worry-cluttered mind consumed her mental energies. Where to begin? And every day at four p. m. precisely, through long shadows that contested the weak winter sun and fingered the lanes of Waltham St. Lawrence, watching Mrs. Odby's ladies amble back to their barn freighting their day's achievement, she wondered. In the fingers? Mornings at eight Glendora Poor drove past in a two wheeled pony cart, the last in Berkshire, Billy Akenside said. "Feeble-minded," he said. Her parents owned The Bell. But, according to Billy, local opinion held that Mr. Odby was the father. Or the toes?

It was a puzzle, this lapse of man into something less than your average go-getter. Father O'Donohue seemed

to think it wasn't even natural. "The gardener," Mrs. Ives had said the previous autumn, "you simply cannot rely on. He's an independent sort and sometimes surly. All we can get these days."

"And you've no idea," puffed Mrs. Neville Whitehall as she put down her cup at the Ives' Sunday afternoon tea, "what socialism is creeping into our village. Just the other day, while my maid was dressing my hair, she was going on about that fellow from Slough. What is his name? The one who is forever agitating. Working men's rights. Classless society. Simpkins? Mortimer Simpkins. A dreary man." She closed her eyes as she swallowed hard and raised her eyebrows up to her hennaed hairline. "Now, if you can imagine, she's talking about guaranteed annual incomes for the poor and free nurseries for the children of working mothers." She brushed a crumb from her purple lap. "Of course, I didn't say what I thought. Would you? To the Maid? But you can imagine what I thought."

"It's all nonsense," said Margaret's future landlady as she dropped a sugar cube into Margaret's tea. Emerson sat on the edge of his chair with a pigmy tea sandwich and a standard butter knife on his plate hoping he would not soon have to decide what to do with them. "You will keep the daily?" Mrs. Ives said. She

handed Margaret the refilled tea cup. Her tentative renters nodded. Of course, Margaret thought. How simple. "A house can become a frightful mess in six months," she said. "And I detest coming back to mud coating the scullery and a cinder pocked set of fire irons. It took me the better part of summer to clear up after last winter's tenant. A dreadful man. An artist. You may have use of the china or I can have it locked away, but I really must insist that you keep the daily on." Emerson cut his minute sandwich neatly in halves with the knife. So, the daily is not the London Times. Mrs. Whitehall turned to her mold-colored son, a Harley Street physician. "And so you were at Ascot, Charles?" Mrs. Ives watched Emerson dividing his sandwich. "She's a reliable woman, Mrs. Hester. But she has such a litter of children. Eleven, I think. Her husband is not much, but he never comes around. She's a bit of a fool, but dependable. Knows our routine. The brass and the fire irons must be polished every morning." Margaret made a mental note to coat them with vaseline and store them away. "Her last child is still in a pram, but that shouldn't bother. She never brings the nuisance in." "Indeed, she does not," Mr. Ives roused himself to say. He removed his pipe from between his soft, Halloween cooky lips and pressed his fingertips together as if he

would soon say yassah and tap a toe in the benches.

"She parks it in the service yard under the kitchen window." "My horse came in, Mother," Charles Whitehall said, "but the day was not nearly so rare as the Epsom Downs affair last week when we went to view the horses before race time and Laday Otteline was kicked in the paddock in the leg."

They were reaching agreement as to the keeping of the daily, the use of the dishes, and the duration of the lease, when Lady Cogswell, Mrs. Ives' mother, arrived in a September gust which she ushered into the drawing room along with her Welsh corgi--not a Cardigan but a Pembroke Welsh corgi with a short tail, according to Billy Akensides. Same breed as the Queen's. The corgi worked his way over the delicate martini carpet--it was Owen Glendower marching into the very throneroom of Britain--and among the antique legs, sentient and otherwise, scattered around the sitting room with such possessiveness in his springy, vindictive body that Margaret feared he would leave some boundary markers along the way. Emerson extended a new tenant's ingratiating hand and received for his pains a sharp nip on the little finger.

With the supplementation of Lady Cogswell, the conversation turned completely to the upcoming races at

Newmarket, leaving Emerson to fold the injured pinky under his larger, comforting fingers and lock his jaws in a smile. Through the bow window of the sitting room dahlias blazed and roses unfolded, peace roses in gold-pinks and Frau Druski's in serene whites, with an all-pervading blandness as if heads had never rolled at the Tower, as if Runnymede had never been anything but a lush green meadow, as if V2 rockets were still airy elements in a mad brain. As if . . .

It was a puzzle, this mysterious lapse. You could see it in Charles Whitehall's veiled eyes, his spiritless body leaning for support against the white molding of the chimney piece at his Mother's cocktail party. Holding a tepid martini in his unsupported hand, he chatted desultorily, even dilatorily, with Lofton Buxton, whose acquaintance he had just made and whose occupation involved service with the British diplomatic corps.

His home base was Whitehall, the physician and Margaret learned as Mr. Harley addressed the ceiling and then his cocktail and occasionally one of them when he leveled a detached, looking-beyond-them glance. The two had discovered a mutual interest in racing and the British thoroughbred horse. Whitehall had shaken his gloomy head when Buxton mourned the drain of good stock to the Americans. "It is ghastly," he said, "when one

thinks of American money buying off all our best blood lines." He riffled a toothpicked olive through his drink with a disinterested thumb and index finger and looked out over the sea of cocktails and velvet with the wintry eyes of an Inca remnant.

"Just the other day I was having lunch at my club with a fellow I knew from my old regiment. He's just finished a thousand page treatise on the British thoroughbred. You've no idea, he said, what a tradition we are losing with the passage of our best horses into American hands. The situation, he assured me, is tenuous. He had a time trying to think of a title for his book until he finished reading Winston Churchill's history of England and then it came to him. Why not the History of the British Thoroughbred? "A rousing title." "I'd say," said Whitehall. "But what will happen to those magnificent beasts in the United States. All those centuries of breeding?" Buxton sipped his martini delicately. "I should imagine," he said in a lacklustre voice, "that they will end up padded and helmeted and looking as much like creatures from Mars as do their football players in some new and brutal contest of sheer force and dimension in Madison Square Garden." The men, one looking at the ceiling, the other the floor, faded into silence.

Buxton absently traced his salt and pepper eyebrows with his little finger and Whitehall fussed with the knot in his tie. "He was a classmate of mine at Harrow and later he served with me in Egypt. Started his work on the British thoroughbred there," Buxton said. "Egypt? You were stationed there also?" They served in the same regiment, they discovered. Not quite during overlapping years. "I was near Alexandria," Buxton said. He rolled his eyes upward. "Beastly hot." "Yes. Debilitating," said Whitehall. "And the people." "Yes. and the flies," said the other, sighing. "They were a dirty lot. You could see them sitting in the gutter in the hot afternoons so lazy they didn't even brush the flies away from their eyes." "You noticed that, too?" said Whitehall with a lassitude that threatened to erupt into a yawn. "It's a puzzle."

"Of course I talk to the gardener sometimes," Mrs. Whitehall said leaning against an antique prayer chair by the hall door. She handed Lt. Colonel Whitly of Bear's Copse one of her Queen Elizabeth roses, an errant November guest. "Heaven knows, my blood is blue, but I'll take tea out to him in the garden and chat about things, don't you know." However, Billy Akensides said, when he brought Margaret another peck of Gravenstein apples, "people round abouts don't know much about

Mrs. Whitehall." He leaned against the kitchen sink. "She came here ten years ago with her husband. He was a barrister with offices in London. Dead now, but Mrs. Prine at The Bell says the Mrs. used to be an actress. That sort. Of course, she'll never say." And, of course she never did. Considering Father O'Donohues theory, Margaret wondered now why such a crossing of blood, hers and the barrister's, had not generated a livlier son.

But then--after a bleak Berkshire winter--Wiesbaden. A chartreuse opacity tinting the bare linden trees. Bratwurst and mustard smells. Along the residential streets forsythia hazing the bombed out severity of stately shells with a vacuity that rivalled their inner emptinesses. Houseless cellars choking under ten year old rubble, disappearing under the same expanding, catholic green that was confidently settled around the seven-story, star-fish shaped building where Margaret and Emerson were to stay. It dominated the Wiesbaden landscape. Home to bachelor officers of the United States' peacekeeping force.

Below the windows the cafeteria rattled, delivery trucks clanked and the thump of swinging doors which served the peacekeepers faithfully around the clock reverberated up through the floor. Parties of the foot

stomping, dormitory variety referred pain throughout the gigantic starfish from one Saturday night to the next and infinitely beyond, registering nerve damage within certain of its cells. In Margaret's gray and overstuffed room with the books she brought from England the thought that one who finds peace must be strong of body, clear of mind and sharp of sight and hearing set her pacing. That he does not clutter up his mind with worries and is flexible in his adjustment to external conditions sent her out of the room and fumbling through the entrails of the racked monster. Through a door--now she couldn't remember where--she burst out or was it in upon silence. A balcony stretched across many windows between two remote tentacles. Below it, acres of green surrounded young saplings springing with sanguine energy away from their supporting poles. Windows, jewelled by sunlight, reflected none of the hypertension that afflicted the monster.

From the farthest corner of the otherwise empty terrace--in the sunniest, most sheltered spot--Terry waved from his lawn chair. Waved and whistled when she returned in shorts with the ceremonial towels to the warmth of sand-heat and sun-heat and the Hit Parade. Offered her his beach chair but she took the floor, brushing aside the fine dusting of pollen that had filtered

into that remote corner. And it was quiet except for a kinesthetic knowledge of the swell and stretch of spring up there and out there.

And what was fun about the five days each week they spent on that secluded terrace when Terry was free to join the celebration, hopping with his suntan lotion through the window of his privileged rooms onto the terrace to lie belly up, a spent lion sunning on the African veldt. Nights he turned into an air force captain and disappeared into the labyrinth of military operations to tinker with his government's peacekeeping or war making machine. Whichever it was was not Terry's concern. Spinning fuzz into thin lines of procedure and spools of cause and effect would interrupt his daylight celebrations of the five major and the many minor senses.

"And what in God's name do you do out there," Emerson shouted. Out along the cold sidewalks, shuffling through the wet leaves. It was difficult to say.

Then there was this hurricane that blew in from Galveston when I was stationed in Texas. We battened everything we could down for the big blow and then we waited it out. It didn't quit for three days. That's a lot of beer. The worst night the storm took the corrugated sidings off quonset huts. Sent them whistling sideways, waist high. Could have sliced a man in two.

I was in one of the huts with a bunch of guys. The wind blew so hard that it pushed a big heavy safe that stood against one end wall inches out into the room. We'd all get in front and push it back. We figured it was the only thing that was holding up the whole building. About the twentieth time we were pushing, one fellow, a tall guy from Louisiana--used to this kind of thing--looks up and drawls out kind of slow--"I don't know why we're bustin' our guts on this thing when the roof's clean off. We all looked up. It was.

More suntan lotion on the knees, on the bridge of the nose, counting the cars go by with one headlight burning.

Ethiopia. A godforsaken piece of nowhere was what it was. We had nothing but warm beer, a landing strip and then desert that stretched from here to Boston. And the women . . . Adjusting the body to match perfectly the angle of the spring sunlight. They get better looking though, the longer you stayed. But you couldn't touch 'em. No ma'am. It was bad enough--the heat and living with a lot of sex-starved guys. But even worse was the flies. We could always tell the guys who had been a year. Didn't bother to brush the flies from their eyes.

He never talked much about the air force. His burdens as a career officer he bore as lightly, however

loyally, as he might a fly on his nose in the face of his more serious responsibilities. On the terrace, under the steady sun, the Stars and Stripes bloomed in black and white. Forever is omitted from the masthead, only spring vying successfully for that title, forever winging seeds, catholic in its choice of furrows, absorbing old blood stains in a green forgetfulness. Terry pondered Steve Canyon's latest involvement. Worried that Steve might get hooked, because marriage . . . Well, girls. Terry couldn't stay away from it. Every time he was with a girl it was so great, right away he'd start thinking about the next time. Said with neither boast nor embarrassment. Only wonderingly that his zest was such a windfall.

Rarely was he morose. A few times when he had to take Saturday night duty for someone who was sick and he had to miss out on a bierstube run. "Touch," Margaret would say. "You're just not your own man in the Air Force." "I don't know about that. It's the breaks," he would say, checking the sun's angle.

The window of his special quarters--he knew the housing officer--one day, he brought the results of a strafing expedition. "Heard of a new bierstube to check out next Saturday," he said one day. The Schwarzeschiff by the river in the Lowenstrasse. It has one of those

heavy German oom-pah-pah bands that everyone has to goose step to . . . but the strafing's supposed to be good. A lot of German girls--secretaries and all for the Air Force--are supposed to hang out there." She was a quiet girl with a slight limp and classic features which, when she looked at Margaret, revealed that she resented her--as if Margaret's presence turned the BOZ into enemy territory and her into a spoil of war. Terry she seemed to like with a certain hopelessness and while he was solicitous--offering her the lawn chair, suntan oil, some potato chips he's brought out--his gaze sometimes drifted out over the lawn with its saplings, over the distant buildings, his nose tilted up, catching the wind.

"She was a nice girl. I think she likes you," Margaret said. "Who, Lotte? Well I liked her." Adjusting the legs of the chair. Straightening the towel. Scratching his bare chest, the closest he came to squirming when he wanted to duck a subject. "She's a funny girl. Can't figure her out. She even wanted me to lay my mother's picture flat. Your mother, she said. Wondered if it didn't bother me, too." Throwing out his hands. I mean, I love my mother, but who thinks about her at times like that.

"My mother tells everyone that I call her my best girl. She never says it in front of me and she doesn't

know that I know she says it. I just leave it at that." Shrugging his brown shoulders. "I think my father used to say it about his mother and now that he's gone, it comforts her and it doesn't hurt." He only pretended to think his mother was maudlin, Margaret thought, secretly he loved her for it. In his dresser drawer he had put away a rosary blessed by the Pope. A friend picked it up for him in Rome in February, and he was saving it for a surprise to give her when she flew to Wiesbaden in the summer. He had already sent her the tickets. One for her and one for his youngest sister, Mary. He talked about Mary between accounts of summers as a busboy on Martha's Vineyard and the Red Sox' home field when he was in school. But, his sister wouldn't be coming in the summer. She had a job in an ice cream parlor in Boston after school and during summer vacation. So he was going to give the cashmere sweater set he picked up for her to his mother to take back and be content remembering the time he took the two of them, when Mary was twelve, to New York and he couldn't keep her in nickels for the Automat.

On several days when the mid-afternoon sun blazed with a summer intensity, Terry raised his head suddenly. "Say why don't we take a run down to the Lowenstrasse. I'll buy you a beer and you can check out that bierstube."

"No. That leads to all kinds of complications." "Oh, well," and he sighed. "That's the breaks."

"What can you possibly be doing all day out there in the sun," Emerson said and slammed his briefcase shut. But as spring grew greener, he talked less to Margaret and, hauling his briefcase to the door, would say goodbye and ask casually if she were going to add a little more to her tan. So Margaret went only once with Terry away from the terrace and that was to help his friend try out a new system at the roulette tables in the Wiesbaden casino. Each of the three were to watch what numbers came up at a certain table, but Terry grew restless, made frequent trips to the bar, lounged from table to table assessing the women patrons like a customer flipping through magazines at a newsstand.

When Margaret said goodbye to Terry in June, he broke out the last bottle of beer left from a recent Munich weekend. He was still laughing about the return trip along the autobahn when he and his friend Dave kept passing and repassing a girl driving a Jaguar convertible. Finally, they stopped in Baden Baden and bought a dozen red roses. After that, every time they passed her, Terry leaned out his window and tossed a rose into her lap. They all ended up having dinner in Darmstadt together. The beer was rich and sparkled gold in the

glasses Terry brought out. The sides were sweating in the heat. Next week Terry's mother was due. Margaret shook his hand. "It's been fun, Terry." In the diner with fingers so cold you couldn't unbutton your coat. "Sharing this private Riviera with you." "As I keep saying, I wish it could have been more." "I still would like to take you out to the Schwarzeshif for a beer." "I know you would. We'll make it in some other life."

She had been tempted. It was as if he had just been born at dawn--sprung from Hera's head--fully grown. Seeing the world with him and through his eyes would have been seeing for the first time, as if all time and being had just happened and there were no eons past and no wounds, only teeming beginnings. Everything Terry said or thought was a first occurrence on the new earth and if ever he ceased to be--if he ever thought of it--then, of course, everything would cease, having lost its reason for being. "Goodbye Terry. And good luck." Keep your nose to the wind, she wanted to add. Instead, she said, "And don't forget to brush the flies from your eyes."

Father O'Donohue excused himself as he got up to find the hostess. He had to rush off to an awards banquet for the St. Ignatius High School basketball team. "They're celebrating a sixteen and zero season." He left Emerson still laughing at some of Father O'Donohue's stories about

his days as a history teacher at a boys' school in Alamogordo, New Mexico. As for his Titicaca solution, Margaret was finally suspicious, really. Spring had fuzzed the stark lines of the winter-gnawed, barren branches, the spun-out, fine-lined twigs of reason-honed understanding of cause and effect within the hopeless Father O'Donohue with the buoyant, bland, and catholic green of new vegetation. The shot of a new generation, directly into the vein, heals old infections and the persistent wounds that help us remember old failures.

Mrs. Bass helped Father O'Donohue find his coat in the hall closet, but she was obviously finding it difficult to be pleasant. Margaret wondered where Terry was now. If he wasn't perhaps remodelling a garage here in the Santa Clara valley, too, into a family room. Fireplace, extra closets for skis, basketball equipment. All that. He probably could have adjusted--of course he could have--to the number of offspring he must certainly have fathered. Sending off the yearly photo of the children in front of their Christmas stockings to his mother in Boston along with a new, pop-up toaster with the electronic device that lowers the bread automatically. Still, like Father O'Donohue, she would like him best forever young and in the air force,

stationed at a place like Lake Titicaca and sniffing the wind.

Father O'Donohue left with the short, wiry man. He waved to Emerson as he opened the door and Margaret distinctly remembered that as they drove out of Wiesbaden, headed for a summer of burrowing through the warrens of other installations, lindens lined streets kept cool by the mature leaves of summer. Behind them, almost hidden by leaves, rows of town houses edged the avenues with graceful facades scrolled and grilled with a baroque energy. Often they passed a house still boarded up and bomb blackened, but they were difficult to see through the trees.

Sara Hanson was jubilant. She was counting the money while Mrs. Bass patrolled the front door thanking the guests who were leaving. It looked like the committee had made a hundred and fifty dollars clear. Protein was what the kids needed. Some should be flown back to the states for plastic surgery and so on.

On the way out of Wiesbaden, fat children and ducks waddled in the parks across green lawns and under luxuriant chestnuts. Later on, summer dust would screen the shiny leaves with a fine, dulling layer and the green

blades would be singed by the sun and lawn mowers.
But, while they were there, Wiesbaden was beautiful--
fresh and new--and Margaret almost forgot, too.