

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

1973

### Inspecting the outlet tube| poems, a play, and stories

Loujen Kerper

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

#### Recommended Citation

Kerper, Loujen, "Inspecting the outlet tube| poems, a play, and stories" (1973). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2715.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2715>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

INSPECTING THE OUTLET TUBE  
Poems, a Play, and Stories

By

Loujen Bereman Kerper

B.A., University of California, 1964

Presented

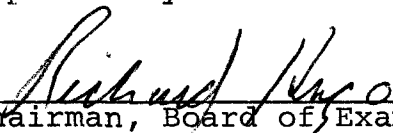
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

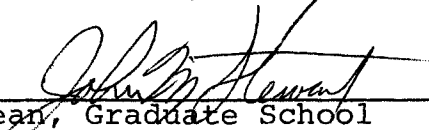
Master of Fine Arts

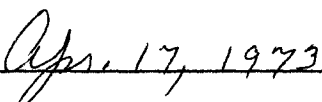
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1973

Approved by:

  
Chairman, Board of Examiners

  
Dean, Graduate School

  
Date

UMI Number: EP34687

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34687

Copyright 2012 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

4-17-73

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of these poems and stories have appeared in publications as follows:

"South Pass," Garret, May, 1966.

"Bank Deposit," Voices International, Fall, 1966.

"A Basket On Her Head," Garret, III, 1968.

"Bucephalus," Garret, March, 1967 and Sage, Spring, 1968.

## CONTENTS

POEMS:	BANK DEPOSIT . . . . .	2
	SOUTH PASS . . . . .	3
	RESPONSE . . . . .	4
	NO TIE TO POLARIS . . . . .	5
	INSPECTING THE OUTLET TUBE . . . . .	6
A PLAY:	PASSPORT . . . . .	8
STORIES:	BUCEPHALUS . . . . .	39
	CHILDREN OF THE DARK . . . . .	55
	A BASKET ON HER HEAD . . . . .	78

## POEMS

## BANK DEPOSIT

This caul, my birthpiece,  
reeks of lock box,  
kept with Wills and Deeds,  
photo albums, Law degrees.  
To reach a numbered metal casket  
stacked in the vault, a guard  
needs signature--two keys.  
Parchment membrane, inked  
by press of words from brittle pens,  
was folded warm. Don't move it.  
Mine or Mother's? What marks  
the place they bury severed arms?  
Folk wives called it sign of luck.  
Palled eyes are clairvoyant  
and the veiled won't drown  
or die in dark. But no nurse told  
what hands unhex my shroud.



## SOUTH PASS

Sister,  
travelling south,  
I find this razor in your shoe  
and keep it. Cactus hides barb  
under bloom pastel.

Slash Mother and Father,  
twice law and lawyers,  
briefing misbehaviors in land  
too bare to root the soil.

We gully rimrock down to washouts.  
Dirt canyons fold with every rain.  
Breasts are vain to countergust the wind  
of open red flat blown empty back  
to a skyline thrust of pinnacles  
that eyes erode to lewd.

Don't you remember?  
Undressing sagebrush dolls,  
we found the lie in artemisia.  
Horse hair matted under blanket  
stole apishamore from dream.  
Lexicon can't soften rock.

Sistering out to Evanston--  
Wyoming wind-drift on the Pass--  
fences buried. And going down  
the endless asphalt line breaks  
talk only code  
to wheels.

## RESPONSE

Men go mad in cylindrical tombs  
designed to isolate against  
dog bark, baby cry, woman wail.  
Run in place twenty minutes.  
Play chess against computer.  
And to remember human other:  
Bach in Brandenbergs, plastic  
boobs cry ouch at finger clutch  
of blip per inch and zap per ounce.

I know them--those astronauts--  
secure in world and wife waiting  
to hear: "One giant step..."  
But what of angle into void?  
No re-entry. A year perhaps,  
all signals "go" but love and voice.  
Even hate, relief from oxygen.

I go mad, wondering: Does urine,  
out the space hatch, orbit?  
And then, frightened of that  
household duty, I pick lint  
from your shirt, puff your pillow,  
and wonder what you will do  
when your inter-office tube  
doesn't answer. Come home.

## NO TIE TO POLARIS

Polaris, the bearing  
 for point of beginning.  
 Job seven two eight two.  
 Three-man crew. Transit  
 time noted and posted  
 in fractions under a name  
 to pay, with zip code.  
 That client will not see the pole  
 or centerline survey typed.  
 He will read the ground stakes.

I read only numbers. Work  
 reduced to bills or payroll  
 carbon ribboned, blacks  
 my view of dirt the firm  
 defines in squares.  
 I post my time to a box,  
 "miscellaneous." No charge.

Time to quit, the sunburned 7282 crew  
 backs in to "truck parking only."  
 The chief checks an angle with a lens.  
 I free from the windshield wiper  
 a grasshopper caught by one leg--  
 beg a theodolite look at the sky.  
 Potent now, my vision zooms  
 up to the northernmost point then down  
 through an instrument in Thailand  
 to dazzle the mongoloid eye  
 of another trapped, triangulated  
 star-gazer. We turn away to let it go,  
 she to her east, I to open west.  
 We still see, though round and blind.

Typewriter covered,  
 I go home sidestepping ants,  
 but not the sidewalk crack  
 that broke my mother's back.  
 Polaris is zero, the apex  
 indifferent. One, two, three,  
 allaria. All magic is mine.

## INSPECTING THE OUTLET TUBE

The tube beneath the earthfill dam  
 flaked tar. Rude water stripped  
 inner black seal off welded steel.  
 No good. Shut valves to bar all  
 acre feet to storage. Our team  
 goes in tailing rope to reach  
 for air. Flash film. Canned  
 light to flick from metal boxes.

Unfamiliar absence in that dark,  
 silent, round. Balance questioned,  
 side seems down. Your hand? Mine.  
 The tunnel now a sluice of time,  
 and I am back to void, not womb,  
 nor warm. Form. Colloidal dust  
 less active than molecular rust.  
 Lie still. This place is known,  
 old, remembered.

Fear once seemed a pace behind;  
 now echo ricocheted to mind  
 in terror of the order "up."  
 Why move toward shape I must  
 define? No matter. I am  
 amoebic slime. (Too short,  
 my rest along the line  
 where I am same as seaweed,  
 my hair a gentle seine to tide  
 for fish who feed my shallow.)

A special plant, volcano height,  
 my lungs are leaves nursing  
 life from clouds. I climb  
 to my brother, that mammalian  
 rat. Our child, a fur barren,  
 suckling bat. Now words.  
 My chance to lie. My choice  
 to name--describe--deny.  
 I sing to a fugue by Bach  
 a poem by Beckett, blink sun,  
 then cry.

I am common.  
 Silversword I will die  
 without the clouds to touch me  
 or hear this wail for the armor  
 of my lost, reptilian tail.

PASSPORT

PASSPORT

THE CHARACTERS: Mahaila Benbow, an applicant  
Ernest J. Samuel, the chief  
Dooley Parker, his assistant  
E. Morris Ansermet, a lawyer  
Sharon Burl, his secretary

THE SET: Four platforms or rectangles, preferably stacked  
and staggered. The chief, highest, a desk and  
a rack of rubber stamps. To his left and lower,  
the lawyer, a desk and a barrier of books. To  
the right of the chief, his assistant, a high  
stool, a counter, preferably a cage-like grill,  
numerous files. To the lawyer's left, and  
lowest, the secretary, a desk, IN-OUT baskets,

and a single flower. In both "outer" offices, stage level, a bare bench for Miss Benbow. She carries a huge cloth sack or bag. If walled rectangles are used, the the signs on the doors should read backwards: "US PASSPORT DIVISION" and "LAWYER."

Dialogue and mannerisms throughout should be stylized--over-stereotypical--but not too exaggerated a farce. It is closer to fantasy.

All are on stage as the curtains open. Miss Benbow is copying from her journal. Sharon is knitting. She stuffs this knitting into a desk drawer whenever Parker or Ansermet enter--not to conceal, just for protocol. Parker is sorting files and the chief is rubber stamping papers at random. Suddenly he pauses over one of the papers, searches among the stamps, finds one in particular, stamps gleefully.

Chief: That'll fix him! (He summons Parker with a buzzer, shuffles papers together. Parker enters with the Benbow file.)

Parker: Yes, sir?

Chief: You mean good morning, sir.

Parker: Yes, sir. Good morning, sir.

Chief: Parker, about your promotion. How long have you been waiting for me to die?

Parker: About five and a half years, sir.

Chief: About! That's what you said yesterday. Can't you be more precise?

Parker: (Checking his watch and using his fingers to count) Five years, four months, three weeks, two days, and one hour, sir--precisely.

Chief: That's better. A real countdown. Have faith, Parker. It could happen any minute. Today could be zero, you know. Meanwhile, business, as usual. (Hands him sheaf of papers) These have had my attention. Now what's up for today.

Parker: Benbow, sir. It's a very interesting case. This Benbow woman--

Chief: The facts, Parker. Just the facts.

Parker: (Selecting from file) Passport Application No. 02894B. Name: Mahaila Benbow. Date of birth: Approximately early 1898.

Chief: Approximately! No, no. That's got to go.

Parker: We're trying, sir.

Chief: Very well, go on.

Parker: Place of birth: Homestead Entry Survey No. 82, Unsurveyed Township 56 North, Range 106 West of the 6th Principal Meridian. Proof of



citizenship: None.

Chief: You can't be serious, Parker. Without proof, this case isn't ready for me. Who's her lawyer?

Parker: Mr. Ansermet, sir.

Chief: He's good. Surely he must have found something in the record. Hospital birth?

Parker: At home, sir. The mother delivered alone.

Chief: Ah, ha. Maternal affidavit?

Parker: Long dead, sir.

Chief: Paternal affidavit?

Parker: Now dead, sir.

Chief: Siblings?

Parker: Two brothers, deceased.

Chief: Neighbors?

Parker: None.

Chief: Schools?

Parker: There's nothing in the record, sir.

Chief: This is impossible. No one nowadays can have an unrecorded existence. You'd better see her lawyer. He must have more details.

Parker: Perhaps, sir, we should just deny her passport.

Chief: Deny her passport? Never. Not from this office, Parker, and not without cause. You know my reputation and my pledge to the committee. The search will be exhaustive and something will turn

up. Now get on with it. Out.

Parker: Very good, sir. (As he exits to his own office, the chief draws from a drawer a huge ledger which he proceeds to work on. Parker deposits sheaf of papers and exits with Benbow file.)

Sharon: (Still knitting) You must have faith in Mr. Ansermet, Miss Benbow. I've been here seven years and in all that time, he's never lost a case. Not one. He's got them all across. And I can understand how much--how very, very much you want to make the trip. Especially at your age. You'll meet people on the boat, all kinds of people--gandy dancers, eye dot painters, poets. Oh, there's no end to the conversations you can have. Beg pardon, Miss Benbow, not you I guess. But the things to see! How you must be eager. All the great churches and cemeteries. You'll have to stay with your tour, of course, but the guides are ever so helpful.

Parker: (Enters with file, ignores Miss Benbow, leans over Sharon's desk. Proprietary.) Good morning, Sharon.

Sharon: Hello, Dooley. (Knitting into drawer)

Parker: (Too knowing) How about it? Did you sleep last night? Did you dream about me?

Sharon: Not really, Dooley. After all your personal questions, I was thinking about me, and I stayed up all night looking at my photos. There's one of me naked--

Parker: Quick. Let me see it.

Sharon: Dooley! And in front of Miss Benbow!

Parker: Who?

Sharon: (Making introductions) Miss Benbow, Mr. Parker.  
(Distant acknowledgments)

Parker: (Brisk now) Oh, yes. I've come on the Benbow case. From the chief.

Sharon: (To Miss Benbow) You see? I told you to have faith. Everybody's working on it. (She pushes a button, and a chime rings for Ansermet. He drops his "thinking position" and pushes in reply, a buzzer. Sharon waves Parker in. She titters.) I was only six weeks old. (She takes out knitting.) Mother kept such a careful record.

Parker: (Taking a chair without being asked) The Benbow matter, Mr. Ansermet.

Lawyer: Who?

Parker: The lady in the waiting room. That's who it is. Benbow.

Lawyer: Oh, yes, Benbow. (He taps a very thick file on his desk.) That's the one I'm working on. It

was up today wasn't it? Tell me straight,  
Parker. How'd the chief take it? Angry?  
Impatient? Exasperated?

Parker: Yes. Yes, he is. But mostly he can't believe  
it, and I tell you honestly, Mr. Ansermet.  
Neither can I. There must be something in the  
record.

Lawyer: (Moaning) Oh, I've checked. Blank. All blank.  
So far as the record is concerned this woman  
earns nothing, owes nothing, knows nothing,  
does nothing. I've checked everything. (He  
turns papers in the file.) Court houses.  
Newspapers. School districts. Probates.  
Public opinion polls. Postoffices. Driver's  
license. Hunting license. Fishing license.  
Social security. Income tax. Real estate  
tax. Poll tax. Election ledgers. Jury lists.  
Church rolls. Doctor's records. Telephone  
directories. Census takers. Parking tickets.  
Charge accounts. Bad debts. United fund.  
Library cards. Lotteries. Magazine subscrip-  
tions. Letters to editors. Dear Abby. AND  
bulk rate mailing lists. If they don't have  
her, nobody does.

Parker: I hate to disagree with you, Mr. Ansermet, but

I should imagine that internal revenue was prime.  
How could she survive and not pay taxes?

Lawyer: She's lived all her life in the same spot, so help me. Some ranch up in the mountains. First with her parents, and then with her bachelor brothers. Never earned a dime.

Parker: (Cynical laugh) Then your problem is solved. She can't afford the trip.

Lawyer: Parker, some day you'll learn to quit wising off. Before the last brother died, he gave her a bill of sale for all the livestock. No name on it except his. And not the land, mind you, just the animals. Thousands of them, she says. All those cows and no grass. She can sell. She must sell. Then she'll have nothing but money.

Parker: Facts, Mr. Ansermet. We must have more provable facts. You may have failed, for the first time. Shall I go back to the chief and tell him? Yes, it looks that way. You have on your hands the case of a woman who has never been properly born.

Lawyer: Wait. Don't do that. She's been born all right. I've got one of her notes. Somewhere here. Oh, yes. Listen to this. (He paces, obviously worried.) "Dear Mr. Ansermet. I'm sorry. I've tried, hard, but no matter how I try, I can't

remember being born. My parents spoke of that winter, though. They never forgot. The snow lay deep to the eaves of the house, and the barn was buried to the hoist. The cattle all bunched in the hollows, and they froze to death standing to their stomachs in snow. Father took the count in April. They had saved just one gelded horse, one steer, two hens in the house, and me."

Parker: Quaint. But that's hearsay, obviously hearsay. If she, herself, can't remember and no one can testify, then--.

Lawyer: (Dejected) No, she can't remember. And no one can testify. Even the horse is dead.

Parker: (Half to himself) Well, well. Today may be zero after all.

Lawyer: What's that?

Parker: (Rising) Oh, nothing. I was just thinking out loud. This Benbow woman may get me a promotion. Then I can afford to get married.

Lawyer: That's another thing, Parker. Leave Sharon alone. She wouldn't take you if the world quit spinning. Fair warning.

Parker: It's not your place to warn me, Ansermet. You forget. I've got prospects.

Lawyer: (Spoken, not laughed) Ha! Ha! The chief will have to die or lose one first, and by that time you'll be so old you couldn't lift the ledger. By then, she won't even look at you.

Parker: She looks at me now. (Triumphantly) And I've got this. (He holds up the file--rudely turns to leave)

Lawyer: (Talking to Parker's back) You keep quiet about Miss Benbow, Parker. I'll come up with something yet. I always do. (Parker sneers) Hear me? (He follows Parker to "entry," stands and listens. As Dooley enters her rectangle, Sharon's knitting into drawer.)

Parker: (Smug) Well, Sharon, it looks as though your precious Mr. Ansermet is about to lose one at last. (Laugh) There's nothing in the record. Nothing at all.

Sharon: He'll find something. He always does.

Parker: Not this time, naked baby.

Sharon: Dooley, don't be indecent! (She nods at Miss Benbow who is watching.)

Parker: (Leaning toward her confidentially) You know, Sharon, how much I want to see your--how much I want to see your birth certificate. (He makes it sound lewd. She slaps his face. Lawyer

delighted. Miss Benbow agitated. Parker angry. It seems for a moment that he is going to hit her back.)

Lawyer: (Coming in suddenly) That's enough, Parker. Get out of here.

Parker: (Now straightening) I forgive you, Sharon. I guess I was a bit personal. I--

Lawyer: I said get out of here.

Parker: Yes. I do have to go make my report. (He leaves. During the next interim, timed so that movements don't distract, he will return to his office, write furiously, take the file into the chief.)

Sharon: (Affronted) Thank you, Mr. Ansermet. But I can take care of my own affairs.

Lawyer: I know. But I can't stand to see this Parker person pestering you all the time. He's such a crumb.

Sharon: (Stuffy) Mr. Ansermet, Dooley has prospects.

Lawyer: Prospects, bah!

Sharon: Well, he does. He's almost as good as his chief. And he's the very next in line. But is it true what he says about Miss Benbow? There's nothing in the record?

Lawyer: (Moaning again) Oh, don't remind me. I've got to find something. Everything depends on it.



Sharon: I know it does, Mr. Ansermet. It means so much to her, too. She's been telling me all about herself and--

Lawyer: Telling you?

Sharon: Well, she writes me notes and copies things out of her journal. You can't believe the life she's led! Did you know that she was born with her-- she calls it her affliction? She never even cried. She has never made a sound.

Lawyer: Never cried, eh. Well, it would help us a lot if she had. As it is, I don't know. (Moaning again) And think of the consequences. I won't have a job. I'll have to go back to the--(a shudder)--No, that's too horrible to think about. (Straightens--pompous) Sharon, have faith. I'll think of something. (He goes back to his "room" and assumes thinking position. Sharon takes out her knitting, and Miss Benbow gets up and paces, obviously nervous. Sharon knits and watches awhile.)

Sharon: Don't despair, Miss Benbow. Mr. Ansermet has one of the best brains in the whole world. He'll figure it out. (Miss Benbow ignores her--increased agitation) Come now, Miss Benbow. Remember your courage. Remember the time you--. Miss Benbow,

you're not listening. (Sharon shuffles through papers on her desk.) Here! Here it is in your own words. (She reads and paces with Miss Benbow) "April 23, 1910. David broke out with chicken pox today and Father whipped him. Then he made David go live in the saddle shed and he said only Mother could go near him. I sneaked out with a bowl of soup, but Father caught me on the path. He looked so terrible that I was scared and dropped the soup. He yelled to Mother: 'Lucinda, tell your daughter if she tries to go near that boy again I'll whip her.' So I tried four more times, and every time he caught me, but he never whipped me. I wish he had." So you see, Miss Benbow, you didn't give up then. What courage! (Benbow stops dead still and gives Sharon a look of complete scorn. She goes to her bag and searches for a journal, finds it, finds the right page and hands it to Sharon.)

Sharon: "April 26, 1910. The schoolmaster came to see David today, but Father wouldn't let him in the house, and he told him: 'I have no son named David.' I wanted to scream. I wanted to shout. I could have run out from behind the

clothes curtains where they hid me. But I didn't. David will be lost too. I am Judas."

(Sharon as though about to cry.) Oh, dear. And just because he was sick? (Miss Benbow takes the journal, turns a few more pages, points, and Sharon reads.)

Sharon: "May 20, 1910. Father let David out of the saddle shed today when Mother said all his scabs had fallen off." But, Miss Benbow. How awful it must have been. You poor thing. (She moves to comfort Benbow and at this moment the lawyer hits his desk as noisily as possible and shouts.)

Lawyer: Eureka! I have it. (Miss Benbow returns to bench, Sharon to her desk, knitting into drawer as the lawyer bursts out into anteroom.)

Lawyer: Sharon, I have it!

Sharon: Marvelous, Mr. Ansermet. What is it?

Lawyer: (In declamatory style) Cogito, ergo sum.

Sharon: What?

Lawyer: Cogito, ergo sum. It's Latin. "I think, therefore I am." (He points dramatically at Benbow.) She thinks, therefore she is.

Sharon: Oh, Mr. Ansermet. I think you've been thinking too hard. You need a rest.

Lawyer: You just don't understand, little one. This concept has the whole history of philosophy behind it. It's as good as a hundred briefs.

Sharon: Pardon?

Lawyer: I'm going. I'm going to see the chief.  
(Energetic exit)

Sharon: Goodness. I wonder if he's all right. Well, I guess there's nothing to do but wait. And have faith. (Knitting out, exaggerated resignedness to waiting. Miss Benbow takes up writing again. Lawyer enters Parker's office.)

Lawyer: I'm going to see the chief.

Parker: (Blocking his way) One moment, Mr. Ansermet. I'll see if he's free. (He makes no move.)

Lawyer: Well?

Parker: (In slow motion, reaches for button. Chime sounds in chief's office. He puts down Benbow file which he has been studying. Buzzer response) You may go in.

Lawyer: Hello, Ernest. (Sits. Parker is eavesdropping.)

Chief: Hello, Morris. Good to see you.

Lawyer: Someday, I'm going to choke that weasel in the outer office.

Chief: Yes. Obnoxious, isn't he. I've tried to get them to transfer him, but he doesn't make

mistakes. I'm stuck with him and he's stuck with me.

Lawyer: Ergh!

Chief: Oh, I get some fun out of it. You know what I do, Morris? Every day I make him tell me how long he's been waiting for me to die or make a mistake. (Chuckle) He always remembers. But now, this Benbow business. I've been wanting to talk to you.

Lawyer: (Confident) Yes. I think I've got the answer.

Chief: (Selecting a paper from the file and holding it by the corner) Now this little item, Morris. It worries me. It makes me think you're slipping.

Lawyer: What's that?

Chief: Here you claim for her two passports since she is a double citizen.

Lawyer: Oh, that.

Chief: Well, it's imaginative. Very good in fact. Since the patent was not yet issued on their homestead, she was born on government soil. But really, Morris. Isn't that stretching it a little? Double citizenship!

Lawyer: Maybe that is a little thin. But I tell you this case has been stubborn. I can't tell you how stubborn.

Chief: (Indicating file) Yes. I do know. I have Parker's report.

Lawyer: (Under his breath) The little squealer!

Chief: It's beginning to worry me. The case threatens a premature zero. I'm disappointed in you, Morris.

Lawyer: But I've got it now. I've got just the thing.

Chief: Well, I hope so. I certainly hope so. I'd hate to have the committee ask me to--retire.

Lawyer: (Getting up to declaim) No. This will save us. You know the famous dictum? Cogito, ergo sum?

Chief: (Thinking a minute) Oh, yes. Descartes, wasn't it?

Lawyer: Well? What do you think of it?

Chief: The connection eludes--

Lawyer: Don't you get it? She, Benbow, thinks, therefore she, Benbow, is.

Chief: (Musing) Yes, I see. Yes, indeed.

Lawyer: The logic is infallible. It's just a matter of deduction.

Chief: (Musing on foot) Yes, that might work. (Stops) But that's just part of it, Morris. There is the question of proof that she thinks.

Lawyer: That should be easy. I can get that in no time. (Parker tiptoes away) The woman can't testify

herself, of course. She's mute.

Chief: Mute!

Lawyer: Yes. Didn't I tell you?

Chief: (Low whistle) Well, in that case I'm not sure if she should be representing us over there or not. Someone maimed. Do you suppose it's valid cause for denial?

Lawyer: Mmmmm, doubtful.

Chief: At least we should stamp her "Good only outside the curtain."

Lawyer: But we've got to prove her first.

Chief: You're right. Morris, go to it. Bring me the proof.

Lawyer: Right! (Exit like the charge of the light brigade. He notes that Parker is missing. Miss Benbow hands Sharon a sheet of paper.)

Sharon: "May 12, 1915. A doe and a fawn came down to the spring today. The creek is brown with runoff, but the spring is clean. I think they knew that. Father got the gun from the house and made Carl shoot the doe. David is good, but Carl is the best shot. 'Fresh meat,' Father said, 'but the hide is worthless.' Then he handed the gun to David who shot the fawn. The boys dressed them out, on the hill,

by the spring, and left the guts for the birds to pick. I refused to go for water. But Mother is too weak now. Tomorrow I must go for water." Miss Benbow, how sad, I--

Lawyer: (Barging in, rubbing his hands) Oh, it's going to work. It's going to work. Sharon, all we have to do is prove that she thinks. (He grabs Miss Benbow's arms and "sets her up" so to speak.) Now, Miss Benbow, tell me. What is one plus one? (Quickly she holds up one finger on each hand, but her arms are wide apart.)

Lawyer: Well, yes. But it would be better if you put them closer together. Like this. (He takes her hands and moves the two fingers close together.) Now tell me, what is two plus two? (Miss Benbow drops her arms and there is a long pause. Finally she holds up her index finger and her little finger on each hand.)

Lawyer: Mmmm, yes, it will be much better if we have something written. Now, Miss Benbow, you have your journals. Copy for me something that shows you think. Something profound preferably. Something that really made you think. (Instantly, she scrambles through her journals, finds the right page and hands to lawyer.)



Lawyer: "November 17, 1918. I think Mother is dying."  
Yes, this is very good, Miss Benbow. That's the right way to start out. "I think Mother is dying. She lets me do all the work. Hour after hour, she stands at the window, looking out, seeing something, I thought, that was out there yesterday. Yet today when she turned away from the window, she said, 'There is nothing there.' Thank goodness Father doesn't know." (He lowers journal) I don't know if this will do or not. Perhaps something more-- (But Miss Benbow gestures for him to go on.)  
"November 25, 1918. I think Father knows now." (He interpolates) Yes. Good. Think. "He won't let her serve him at table. Today was a blizzard and Father was inside. Mother tried to iron. But she started looking out the window. I saw the smoke coming up from the ironing board. We all did. Father shouted: 'Lucinda!' And she picked up the iron, then held up the shirt, and there was a burnt-edged, iron-shaped hole in the the middle of my father's back." (Lawyer shakes his head.) No, no, these won't do. We need something more definite, more concrete. We need something like A to B to C. (He indicates

three positions on stage. To Sharon:) You help her work up the example. I'll work on the argument. Now! At it! (He retreats to his room, leaving the two women slightly bewildered. Parker returns to his domain.)

Sharon: Miss Benbow, you go ahead. Do what Mr. Ansermet says. Pick out something--well, pick out the most important thing that ever happened to you. That ought to do it. You start. I've got another idea. (She starts getting various materials from drawer, scissors, etc. Throughout the following, there is alternate action between them. Benbow finding and showing passages, marking them with slips of paper. Sharon cuts and talks. She is making an IBM card. Both are very busy.) They say there's got to be something in the record. We'll just give them something for the record. Oh, yes. That's a good one, Miss Benbow . . . (With paper punch) M-A-H . . . Is it "h-a-l?" (Benbow signifies no.) Oh, that's right, it's "M-a-h-a-i." (A punch, and some quiet punches ending with a triumphant:) Benbow! Yes, the one about the government inspector and the foot and mouth disease. That's good. That explains why your brothers hid you too. Yes. Put that

one in. (She finishes her work and shows it.)  
There! That ought to do it. (Rising) Now you  
just take yours in to Mr. Ansermet while I run  
mine over to Dooley. (Sharon exits, and Miss  
Benbow hesitantly enters Ansermet's rectangle.)

Lawyer: Good, Miss Benbow, let me see what you have.  
(He scans a few of her marked journals.) No.  
No. This "I thought the whole world was full of  
flowers" isn't really a thought you see. In  
fact, it may even seem that you were, that you  
were losing your power of thought, your mind,  
so to speak. We'll strike that. (He ostenta-  
tiously pulls the slip.) What else is there?  
(Hastily) Well, we'll assume there's something.  
In any event, my argument is sound. Come along.  
(They exit.)

Sharon: Hello, Dooley.

Parker: (Exaggerated welcome) Sharon! You've come to  
see me. How delightful!

Sharon: (Coy) Well, yes, Dooley. But actually, I had  
an excuse. I've brought something that just  
came in on the Benbow case.

Parker: Benbow be damned. Come back here. (Indicates  
cage) I'll show you something much more interest-  
ing.

Sharon: Dooley--I've just got a minute, you know.

Parker: (Passionately) That's just what I mean. Seize the moment!

Sharon: I will. (Whipping out card) This is it.

Parker: What is it?

Sharon: Oh, just an IBM card.

Parker: For what?

Sharon: For Miss Benbow?

Parker: Who?

Sharon: With your experience, you can read it. (Shows) Here--here's her identification number, and here the code for Benbow, Mahaila, here the course, here the instructor, I imagine, and this--well, It must be something private of their own--like aptitude or something. It's for a correspondence course in shorthand.

Parker: A correspondence course in shorthand!

Sharon: Yes. It's not much I realize. But you should put it in the file. You know, something for the record. (Enter the lawyer and Miss Benbow.)

Lawyer: Sharon, what are you doing here? Oh, well, that's good. I may need you. Parker, we've come to see the chief.

Parker: (Without delay) Yes, sir. (Chime. Buzzer.)

Lawyer: Come on in, Sharon. Miss Benbow, you better wait

out here. (Sharon, confused and dawdling. Parker still has the card. After they enter chief's office, Parker sneaks out with card. Benbow waits.)

Chief: (Extra warmly) Sharon, my dear girl. Come in. Have a chair. (Gestures gallant)

Lawyer: We've got the proof, Ernest. But I thought you should see it before we submit to the committee. This Benbow woman has kept a record of almost every day of her life--after she learned how to write--and she has selected some important passages. Now here's one--(Hands him open journal.)

Chief: Good, let's see now. "January 12, 1919. I think Mother is different every day. The swelling on her throat is huge, and she can't talk any more. But she doesn't look out the window. She looks at me. Every day, she brushes my hair." (Lowers journal.) Morris, what kind of nonsense is this?

Lawyer: (Hastily turning to another marked page) Maybe one of these other passages, Ernest. I--yes--here's one.

Chief: "May 7, 1919. Mother made it through the winter, but I think she is not herself. She takes me outside, grabs my wrists, and pulls me down to

feel the grass. Today she climbed into the oat bin and heaped the grains into my hands till they trickled through my fingers. She showed me how to peel and eat them. Then she took me to the spring and washed my hair and brushed it this evening by the stove. I reached to feel how smooth it was, but my hair was spotted wet. I turned, and Mother's eyes were red. I envied her, her tears." (After a pause) Morris. (He shakes his head sadly.) I'm sorry, but these won't do. This isn't thinking really. These are--how shall we say--impressions--sensations. And every time she says "I think," she means "I believe" or "I guess." No. They won't accept it. It will never pass.

Sharon: (Extremely agitated) Oh, Mr. Samuel. You can't mean what you say. Miss Benbow thinks about everything that happens to her. Let me see what else she has marked. Yes. Now listen here. "May 22, 1919. Mother is dead. She died this morning while the boys were milking cows. First, I washed her and dressed her and tied a velvet ribbon round her throat. When I tried to smooth the wrinkles from her face, her skin felt wet, so I powdered her with flour. Then I saw some

spots. I had dotted her with tears that fell from my own eyes. Yes. My tears. The boys told Father, but he won't enter the house. We will bury her tomorrow, on the hill, by the spring. Today is the day I am born."

Lawyer: (Awed) The day she was born.

Chief: Oh, Morris, this complicates things! I just don't see how we can proceed on this basis. I-- (Enter Parker, outer office)

Sharon: (Stamping her foot) Oh, you fools! Don't you see how she thought? When she cried, she--  
(Enter Parker, inner office. Announcement style)

Parker: Gentlemen--and Sharon. I assume that you are gathered on the Benbow case, but I have an announcement. I have the word from the committee.

Chief: You went to the committee? Over my head?

Lawyer: You little bastard!

Sharon: But, Dooley. We weren't ready yet.

Parker: Precisely. I could see that you were all just wasting a lot of time and effort and unnecessary worry, so to save you trouble, I saw fit to consult with higher authority. You will thank me in the end. (Groans)

Chief: (Bitter) All right, Parker. Don't keep me in suspense. What did they say?

Parker: Well, sir, the dictum, "cogito, ergo sum," requires an initial--get that, an initial--act of faith. Before the thought, must be the brain, before the brain, must be the body, and for the body, gentlemen--and Sharon--there must be proof. And proof, of course, is a matter of record. (All stunned)

Sharon: (Slow recovery and stammer) But Dooley, the card, the card.

Parker: Sharon, my love, that was clumsy. A phone call or two and--(Snaps his fingers). Naturally, there was mention of prosecuting Ansermet for an attempt at fraud.

Lawyer: What's this?

Sharon: Oh, it doesn't matter, Mr. Ansermet. I confess. But don't just stand there. Can't you do something?

Lawyer: (Helpless) I--I--it looks as though--we're foxed.

Chief: I'm afraid so, Sharon.

Sharon: Oh-oh-oh. (A real wail. She rushes out to the outer room and grabs Miss Benbow's bag.) Let me take these a minute, Miss Benbow. (A slight tussle) Just for a minute. (She rushes back in. Miss Benbow very alarmed. The others behave as though "there's no accounting for female



psychology." Sharon piles journal on top of journal on the desk.)

Sharon: Here. You wanted a record. Here's the record. Years and years of record. Day after day after day of record.

Chief: (Trying to stop her) My dear. My dear. You just don't understand.

Sharon: (Half hysterical) Don't understand!

Chief: Yes. Don't you see? These journals are a private record. What we need is a public record. That's the requirement. (Sharon looks for confirmation at each one in turn. The chief nods solemnly, the lawyer nods contritely, Parker nods decisively and says:)

Parker: They might even be forged.

Sharon: Brutes! All of you! Brutes! You've destroyed all my illusions. All my faith. (To the chief) How I believed in your reputation. (To the lawyer) And what trust I had in you, Mr. Ansermet. (To Parker) And Dooley, I thought you would live up to your prospects. None of it real. You beasts. I can't bear it. (Defeated, but still self-conscious slump)

Lawyer: (Awkward gesture of consolation) Don't take it so hard, Sharon. Think of what it means to

all of us! That is, except for Parker here.

Sharon: No. I can't bear it. I'm quitting, Mr. Ansermet. I'll--I'll get a job as a stewardess on one of the boats. That's what I'll do. (She walks dejectedly to the entry.) Then I'll only have to see the poor souls when they're already through with you. (Another pause, but none of them can think of a move to stop her.) Goodbye. (She exits through Parker's office, so downcast that she does not even notice or acknowledge Miss Benbow's imploring gestures.)

Parker: (Shrugs) Well, there are always other prospects. But why should she want to be a stewardess of all things? (The others ignore him. Sharon enters her own office and "packs" her knitting, personal possessions.)

Chief: Well, Morris, that still leaves us with our problem, doesn't it.?

Lawyer: (A disconsolate shrug)

Parker: Yes, today may be zero of sorts.

Chief: I'm beginning to think that Parker here has been right all along. (Lawyer turns) Yes. This Benbow woman has never been properly born.

Parker: I'm right?

Chief: Absolutely. She's never been properly born.

The application should be withdrawn!

Lawyer: (Getting the point) Ah, yes. Yes, indeed.

The application itself is irregular. (Slaps Parker on his back) Parker, you're a genius.

Chief: (To Parker) You ought to get a raise for this idea.

Parker: I should?

Lawyer: You should. She's never been properly--the application--. Well, I'd better go tell her. (He goes to entry, looks out) That's funny. There's no one here. (He steps out and the others follow him. All look around. Miss Benbow is perfectly obvious. In the other office Sharon is removing the single flower as a last item to take with her.)

Chief: No, there's no one here.

Parker: That's strange. I wonder why she didn't wait.

Lawyer: There's no one here at all.

(Miss Benbow who has been gesturing for attention, now searches under the bench for her missing bag, then remembers they have it.)

CURTAIN

BUCEPHALUS

## BUCEPHALUS

The glass dome of the state capitol building collected dust and grit from the Wyoming wind. Harley felt bad about that. He thought it made a difference to the light inside where the afternoon sun filtered through to the lobby murky and dull. The architecture was pseudo-something, and the support columns reflected the splendors of an ancient nothing. Caesar was centuries dead.

The twentieth question of his six hundred thirty-first interview ticked off Harley's tongue while he let his multi-track mind roam where it wanted to. The answer to his question came loud.

"My name's Alexander, son--Robert F. Alexander. If you was any kind of a reporter, you'd have got that right away."

So call me a no-good reporter and I'll call you a mangy old man, but I won't even spell your name right unless you quit calling me son. Just don't.

Harley struck back. "As I understand it, Mr. Alexander, you've ridden horseback from Cody to Cheyenne in 7 days. But that is almost 400 miles. Don't you think the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals might have something to say about such rough treatment to a horse?"

"Say, you aren't much of a Westerner, are you, son? That's an easy jaunt for a good horse. Back in '87 now, when they ran the big race against them high-steppin' hot bloods . . ."

Listen here, old crust, I'm not only "much of a Westerner," I'm a NATIVE and that means I've heard that story more times than you've told it--too much to have to listen again. Horseflesh!

Turning off the track of his mind that talked silently to people and tuning out the part of his hearing that listened when need be, Harley planned his lead.

"For the past two days, a Cody cowboy has haunted the rotunda of the Capitol building in Cheyenne, awaiting the governor's return from his three-day conference on natural resources . . ."

Alexander had explained that he meant to be first in line when the governor got back, so during office hours he refused to move from the bench where they now sat since he could see the whole lobby, the main entrance, and the door to the governor's reception room. The old man was just about as wise to procedures as the full-sized, slightly moth-eaten stuffed elk in the corner opposite them. For that matter, all the mounted animals looked moth-eaten in the sick yellow light that sifted through the dome. Fit company for this relic of a cowboy.

"Dressed in the traditional denim, boots, and broad-brimmed hat which he has shaped with sugar to a form of his own liking, Mr. Alexander is the epitome of an old western ranch hand."

Lord, how he would like to write in that the man's teeth were loose, lost or tobacco stained; that the black handkerchief tied around his neck looked dirty and grotesque; that he was the epitome of all that was dying and petrifying in the West. But if he tried to write something like that this year, someone on the Jubilee committee would ace him right out of a job. Seventy-five years a state in these United. Good. Celebrate. Proclamate. By edict of the Chambers of Commerce, all traditions are sacrosanct.

" . . . That's the trouble, son. You're forgettin' how it was in the old days. A horse meant everything, even for war, pullin' chariots and all."

The word "chariots" reverberated misplaced. "You were talking about western horseflesh, Mr. Alexander?"

"No. I mean them Greeks."

Maybe he could revise his lead: EDUCATED COWBOY AWAITS GOVERNOR. After all, the old guy had named his horse . . . "Tell me again the name of that horse."

"Bucephalus. B-u-c-e . . . same name as Alexander's horse. You know, Alexander the Great."

Probing, he asked, "Are you familiar with ancient history, Mr. Alexander?"

"Well, now, to be right honest with you, a couple of college girls thought that up. Dudes, you know. It was when I was workin' at Wilder's place on the Wind River. That year they had about . . ."

The story he listened to was about the naming of the horse, long, loquacious and over-embellished, as full of cliches as the story he in turn would write about the cowboy. His editors long ago discovered that he knew the cliches, knew which ones could be written for Westerners, which ones were better left to TV. He could tell at a glance the difference between the rodeo cowboys, drug-store cowboys, movie cowboys and "old time" cowboys. He



got assigned to all the strangers who came to town because he could also penetrate the subtler shades of distinction among the sheep ranchers, the cattle ranchers, the dude ranchers and the oil ranchers. It had taken him years to work away from such interviews, away from the feature stories about the characters and the kooks and the big wheels.

But today I'm stuck with you Alexander since Franz has "editor and publisher" tacked on to his name, which makes him big enough to rap my knuckles with a ruler and just like you think I'm a no-good reporter, he tells me I'm a lousy political analyst all because I wrote that piece about the sentimental hokum involved in the silver dollar issue, but Franz enjoys blasting when he does it himself. This morning he said:

"Tell me, Harley, were you born with those callouses on your mind or did you get them beating your head against a fence post?"

"It was a cash register," I told him. "For a whole year, I was a cash register salesman and that's when I found out that most Wyoming towns stay small because the sales rings show a dollar sign immediately followed by a decimal point. But dollars register the

same, Franz, paper or silver, and somebody ought to keep saying it."

"Flash! Cash register creates a cynic. What you need now is some sentiment."

And that's when he assigned me to you, Alexander, which galls. He gave me you and lecture too: sentiment equals tourists equals dollars equals politics equals my job so I'm supposed to write about the integrity of Western individualism and at the same time make something big out of you, old man, and what the hell are you doing here anyway?

Harley put the question aloud and blunt, just as soon as he could interrupt the monologue about the horse.

Alexander snapped, "Nope! I can't tell you. It's like I said. You got to wait till I've seen the governor."

He slapped his notebook shut. "Mr. Alexander, unless you give up this big mystery and tell me something of your business here, I can hardly consider the story worth a second trip."

"Now don't get huffy, son. This is a big thing and I'll be needin' you. Don't go off mad. How about a drink? It'll be good for what ails you."

"Thanks, but I don't drink." And it wouldn't help what ails me.

"Well, it's gettin' on towards closin' and time to exercise Bucephalus. Mostly I'd like to get out of here. That elk, particular, is gettin' on my nerves." He pointed the toe of his boot at the big elk. "They got him mounted like he was buglin'. It's against nature to keep him standin' there like that, trapped in his own hide, like he might move, but can't. They ought to let him die natural, hair and all. Say, feller, did I tell you I've been sculped?"

"Sculped?" Did he mean scalped?

"Yeah, I been done up in bronze, a bust they called it. There's this art class up home asked me to 'sit' and mostly they just painted me. First I kind of liked it, got meals and all, but they kept talkin' about my 'character' and my 'lines' and 'perservin' the old West' and after a time I got to feelin' like the last of the buffalo or somethin'. But that gal who did the sculpin', her husband is a taxidermist, and she looked at me so keen it set me to thinkin' I tell you."

Alexander stood up, then reached down to rub his knees. To Harley, it was a gesture as familiar as his childhood and he still rubbed his own legs that way when any hard day felt like a long day's ride. But he had not topped a horse since he went to college, clear "east" to Chicago, and the smart alecks yelled at him, "Hey, Wyoming,

do you have to be born on a horse to learn how to walk with a drawl?" Followed by laughter. So he learned how to walk right and talk right and then came home to find out that bowed legs weren't real anyway, but an illusion created by stance and run-over boot heels.

Alexander quit rubbing his knees. He said, "Did you ever notice that two-legged creatures don't walk so good? Fact, most two-leggers need wings or somethin' to help them along."

Harley picked up the cue to keep Alexander from elaborating. "Sure, I know. Others have wheels. I'll trade you a ride for the story."

The cowboy walked away without a word. He held his back straight, as though it too, were stiff-jointed. But his legs drawled. At the door, he turned and came back to Harley. "It's only to the edge of town, Deckman's place, no more than three-four miles. Anyhow, you ought to see Bucephalus. He's a horse like never was."

Harley shook his head. "The story," he demanded. When he got no response, he added, "My car's handy out back."

"OK," Alexander shrugged. "But not for the ride. Like I said, I'll be needin' you."

The old man started talking right away and Harley listened about half as they left the building. One track

of his mind was involved with the mechanics of movement as he opened the car door, sat, aimed his legs at the pedals and by stages became four-wheeled and four-eyed with sun glasses against the late afternoon sun. Alexander lowered the brim of his hat.

The running patter of talk took precedence over the moving car. " . . . And that was my last job. Then this young pip-squeak in the employment office tells me, 'Man, you were born just 30 years too late or 30 years too soon.' Now that's a heck of a thing to say to a guy that's worked like me. One horse or another has broke darn near every bone in my body, but I can't complain. That's part of the trade. Still it's kind of laid me up for diggin' ditches even if I would, which I won't. Son, if there's one thing I've got left, it's pride."

What have you got to be proud about, old fossil? To use a phrase you might use, you're dragging a dead horse. Where's the pride in that?

"Social security, now there's a different thing. Last few years I've paid in a little and I get a little. Not much, but I figure I get by. Trouble is, the towns are shuttin' me out. Used to always be a barn or shack out to the edge of town someplace where a feller could

live and keep a horse, but now they're tearin' them down and buildin' these new subdivisions with fancy names. 'Highland Manor' built on horse shit."

Yeah, but it works the other way too. The towns still have the annual fat calf sale on the corner by the bank. And when the sale is over, the manure looks out of place on the pavement.

"So I figured I'd show everybody the West's not dead yet and me in particular, I'm not ready to die. That's when I planned this ride."

Harley listened. He risked slowing the car.

"I'll ride Bucephalus," he said, "all the way to Hollywood."

The railroad tracks thumped the wheels into the springs, but Alexander was not diverted. He looked around, as if to check for eavesdroppers and spoke in a ludicrous stage whisper. "I'll carry respects," he said, "from the governor of the great state of Wyoming to the King of the Cowboys!"

You sick old man. You can't mean that. That'll bust everything up.

Harley braked to a dusty halt in front of the stable, and turned in the seat. "Alexander," he said, "you're an S.O.B." He called him that, and he didn't smile.

But the old man didn't narrow his eyes and play the Virginian either. He grinned. He grinned so slyly that Harley wanted to sock him.

"You said you had pride," Harley sneered, "but you're a sell-out." He reached over and flicked his fingers at the Bull Durham tobacco tag hanging from Alexander's pocket. "That's costume, man. You got to roll your own and turn down tailor-mades because it's part of the act. You got to open the fence gates and talk about the good old days when the West was wide open, but you know damn well you were just a baby when the West was already a closed corporation. Quit dreaming, Alexander. It's a lousy bit part and you ought to know it."

The edge of Alexander's grin was tight. Softly, he asked, "What's eatin' you, son? You pickin' for a fight?"

That cuts it, cowboy. Don't call me son. "No fight, old man." Why should I care? "Now come on," he said, "let's see this fabulous horse." He wondered why his hand shook on the door handle. In Hollywood there would be no rapt audience of college girls, just ridicule for every broken-mended bone the old guy had. So let them laugh. No one ought to believe in his own shams.

He slapped his hand on the hot fender and shouted to stop Alexander from walking ahead. "You're nutty

about this Hollywood thing. You just can't do it!"

"I can't, huh. Why not?"

"Your type . . . just shouldn't. That makes it worse." How can I say it, old man? We need to keep something half real. Even the mountains are getting to look just like the post cards. "It's a double sell-out."

"You figure to write the story like that?"

"I might," he lied. Franz would expect an image of the noble Alexander riding off to conquer Persia, chin high, eyes front to the rising sun. No irony. No pathos.

The cowboy worked his mouth to spit, accurately, less than an inch from Harley's shoe. Then he looked up with that same lopsided grin. He said, "That's easy to learn if you practice, son." He headed toward the barn.

Harley kicked the dirt to cover the wet spot on the ground, but that just sent up a puff of dust to taste dry in his mouth. He wanted something cool to drink.

The stable was double-lined with stalls, obscuring Bucephalus behind wooden slats and shadows. Alexander walked easily into the middle lane, but detoured into the saddle shed. Harley did not follow. He responded to the beckoning finger of Enoch Deckman who stood by the corral grooming a chestnut mare.

"You know that character, Harley?"

"Sort of."



"Is he good for board bill?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no."

Enoch brushed the mare's neck, holding her head low by knotting his fingers into her mane and pulling hard. "I'm hoping 'no,'" he said. "I'd sure like to slap a lien on that horse."

"He's really something, huh?"

Enoch's whistle was tribute. "The old coot says no one else can ride him, but I've heard that from better bull slingers than him." Enoch brushed, but both watched Alexander pile his saddle gear by the front door. "That horse won't even let me touch him," Enoch said.

Harley tried to gauge the man's expression, but it was too mixed to measure right. Rodeo bull riders out to pasture maybe shouldn't own stables. "I'll back the board bill," he told Enoch. Then he turned his back to the old man and the mare and coldly walked away.

"No more tips for you, Harley," Enoch called after him.

Alexander waved him over. "Say, feller," he asked "would you like to ride him? Would you like to ride Bucephalus?"

He reminded Harley of the kid in the empty lot who drew a line in the dirt and taunted him, I dare you to cross that line, I dare you, I double dare you, smarty.

"I'm no kid, Alexander. I'm a practical man, and my insurance company would consider that willful negligence."

Alexander looked at Harley, then down to the cinch he worked on, pulling the strands straight and picking off the matted black horse hair.

"I'd be a fool even to try, wouldn't I, man?"

The cowboy plucked at the cinch, silently watching Harley.

Once, Harley had eyed himself that way. Naked by the mirror at midnight, he took stock of his length and breadth, wondering if the gist of him could ever measure up to the shape of things to come. "I've taken my share of risks, Alexander."

Slowly, Alexander folded the cinch over the saddle horn. He mumbled, "That's OK, son," so softly that Harley could barely hear. "I didn't figure you to really ride him. I just wanted to see if you wanted to, I guess."

Old man, where do you get the nerve to pity me. At least my body isn't stiff from broken bones. And if you expect me to hang around and watch you high on top of your big, black prancer, you can think again.

Alexander nodded toward the darkness of the stalls. "He needs exercise," he said, "so I'll be thankin' you now for the lift and all. That was right nice of you--"

busy feller like you. And you won't let me down on that story now, will you, son."

The smirk was there. The old guy knew what kind of story he would write.

They shook hands briefly and Harley kicked at the dust as he walked back to his car. He watched the cowboy disappear down the long line of stalls, then quickly he backed the car around. He couldn't stand to see Alexander, tall and straight-backed on the horse he hadn't even wanted to ride. On the way home he would stop and get something cool to drink.

"Damn sell-out," he muttered to himself.

CHILDREN OF THE DARK

## CHILDREN OF THE DARK

"Tolleez-lone-lee. Tolleez-lone-leeee."

It was a singsong chant, picked up, echoed, and amplified the way sounds are in summer air, just at sunset. Down the block, or maybe the next block, boys' voices had been keening, "Fifteen--fourteen--yoouuur point." That was keeping score on some game. But when the chant changed to the solo, high, whining, "Tolleez-lone-lee," Mildred Crandall leaned forward in her patio chair to listen.

She reached over and tapped her husband on the knee. "George," she whispered. "That's Eddie doing that again."

"Doing what?" he asked too loud for Mildred.

She shook off his words with a wave of one hand and pointed to her ear with the other.

George listened and heard. "So it isn't my fault," he said still loud.

"But it's scary almost. And if we can hear it, Tolly can hear it! See, she's over there right now doing something with her grass."

George leaned forward too, and half-whispered too. "Now get this, Mildred. All I said that night was that I wished to hell Tolly wasn't so lonely. And if Eddie made a song out of that it isn't my fault."

"He's your son. You should be able to control him."

George sighed.

"And you drank too much that night to remember what you said. I'll bet you said it a dozen times. Tolly's lonely. Tolly's lonely. No wonder Eddie picked it up. Give a nine-year-old something to imitate and he'll do it. You should be more careful."

George sighed again. He had argued his case, and lost, many times before.

"Whatever can she be thinking. She might even try to do something." Mildred stood up. "I better go take out the garbage."

That's how it happened that Mildred Crandall was first to discover that Tolly MacIntyre had finally taken up an "interest." Mildred reported it around town with her own logic. "Well, after all," she said, "we're so close! Garbage barrel to garbage can, so to speak. And I think I've really played a part in helping her get over the ruins of her divorce. She was desperately lonely."

A few listeners remembered some of Mildred's other phrases: "No wonder Mac ran around on her. Tolly is much too sharp in tongue and bone," or "Tolly is really too handsome in her long-boned way." But Mildred's case most everybody understood. Tolly was the mystery. So they didn't mind taking time to sort out the facts.

Actually, Mildred had crossed the alley between their garbage cans, and looked at Tolly who was down on her hands and knees grubbing about in the grass. "Are you digging dandelions?" she called extra loudly.

Tolly looked up and waved. Her hand held a knife, not a trowel. Then she went back to her work with her nose down to the level of the grass and her rear end sticking up in the air. Mildred could see that Cliff Spencer, next door, had put down his newspaper to watch the whole scene from his dining room window, a sliding glass door panel. He kept it closed most of the time to keep out the bugs.

Mildred looked again at Tolly's rear end, crossed over, and pulled her up by the arm. "Tolly," she said, "Cliff's watching you."

Tolly shrugged and wiped her knife blade clean on her jeans, then slipped the knife into her basket. "Let them watch me for a change," she said. "I'm tired of their meal-time movie."

"Movie?"

Tolly nodded her head toward the plate-glass screen.

Deb Spencer was swabbing the table with a wet rag. Cliff lifted the newspaper. At the right time, he lifted his elbows. His lips moved. Their heads turned, and all four of them waved and smiled across fifteen feet of grass.

Mildred tugged at Tolly's basket. "Whether they watch you or not, you shouldn't go messing around with those horrid old tadstools. They're poison!"

Tolly laughed. "You mean toadstools, not tadstools, Mildred. But it's OK. These are perfectly good mushrooms. Quite clean. Edible. Tasty even."

"Don't tell me you actually eat them?"

For answer, Tolly broke half a cap from one of her fragile white mushrooms, put it unwashed into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed, and "mm'd." Mildred almost got sick to her stomach watching. She backed away, caught her heel on a water sprinkler, and nearly fell.



"Oh, for pity's sake, Mildred. It's perfectly safe." Then she explained why, keeping her neighbor from going home to her George and her dinner dishes for over an hour. Tolly explained about gills, stems, death cups, the unusual "Destroying Angels," which only made Mildred more afraid of the disgusting little things. How could eating them be safe?

But as she told Deb Spencer the next day, "You know, I'm always one to give the devil his due, and I must say that Tolly has picked up. She's filling out. She's bright, cheerful, talkative even." She ticked those traits off with her fingers, which left her thumb free to pound out the fact that the "old" Tolly "had hardly said two words to anyone for months."

Deb nodded slowly as she sipped her coffee. Tolly had indeed seemed more alive during that evening talk on the lawn. Deb had watched them. Outlined in the summer twilight, they seemed flat, like big paper dolls. But they moved. And she remembered thinking: "Tolly is one to talk with her head, not her hands."

Mildred said, "Tolly sort of went through stages, didn't she? Remember that awful period right after the divorce when all she did was clean house? George started making cracks about what a mess our house was all the time, and we ended up fighting about it. You know what I told him?

I told him that if he hadn't insisted on fathering five children, our place could be neat as a funeral home too."

Deb made no comment. She thought her own two children more than enough. Tolly never had any.

Mildred said, "I wonder if it was Tolly or Mac that's sterile. They had twenty years to figure it out, but it's funny -- neither one of them ever said anything about it. You know, I doubt that Tolly could have raised kids right anyway when she can't even grow flowers."

She was talking about Tolly's struggle over the last summer's garden. When her petunias refused to bloom, Mildred and Sarah Cook came to the rescue, though they reported with horror what Tolly said one day in July: "If I water them, you'd think the damn things would grow out of gratitude." By August her garden was blighted by aphids, and the tomato plants, too close together, choked each other out from the sun. She acknowledged her defeat from the green things with a rueful wave of her hand. "I have a black thumb," she said.

After that, everyone worked hard to help Tolly find an outlet. Bridge, bowling, basket weaving, ceramics, needlework. At everything she seemed to be particularly inept, and she lost interest too easily.

One night, Cliff Spencer stood for a long time looking out his sliding glass door towards Tolly sitting

listless in a lawn chair. Then he turned and said to his wife: "The trouble with Tolly MacIntyre is that she needs a man."

(And Deb told Tolly months later: "When he said that, I felt like jabbing a crochet hook into his pompous gut. Damn! As though a man could solve all the problems a woman might ever have.")

But at the time, she said nothing in response to Cliff and nothing to Tolly either because Tolly wasn't trying to hide her boredom. She turned down too many invitations. Then people quit extending them. She didn't even go to Crandalls' big party where the host got drunk and kept repeating "Tolly's lonely," which started all the backyard and bedroom arguments about just how lonely she was and about just what ought to be done about that.

(And Tolly told Deb later: "Everybody talked to me then, and looked at me, as though I had my diaphragm size engraved on my forehead. I should have left this town right after Mac left.")

So Mildred's news about Tolly's mushrooms--two whole years after the divorce--was the most interesting item of the summer. Mildred talked much, often, and steadily about Tolly and her mushrooms. Naturally, soon, people started to talk to Tolly about Tolly and her mushrooms. It was such a relief that she finally had a normal "interest" (well,

more or less normal.) She gave a talk at the museum to a group of girl scouts. She showed slides at the Lion's Club dinner. And she was the hit of one Rotary lunch when she produced some mushrooms which, she said, would turn one purple if taken with alcohol.

Tolly was fair-skinned and no longer too bony--assets said to have influenced the sudden general interest in mushrooms. Anyway, her face took on color when she talked about them, explaining why, in the folklore, they were called "children of the dark."

"Mushrooms are the children, the fruit or offspring of a mysterious parent body not visible like trees and plants. And unlike a tree or a plant, they don't need sunlight to grow and reproduce. They often appear, seemingly unexplained, in moist places that are dark, secret, or hidden. So to the primitive mind, mushrooms were magical, spawned by the spittle of witches and elves, explained by myth."

Few would have thought Tolly could be so knowledgeable, but some did not like her use of technical terms, nor the lecturing tone in her talks.

"The irrational fear of mushrooms is called mycophobia. There is no need for that. We know now that fungi grow in a sensible dark. Without chlorophyll, they need no energy from the sun, and they perform an

indispensable life function consuming waste from the soil--plant and animal waste. Without them," she said dramatically, "we'd all be buried under the dead weight of our own organic garbage."

Repeatedly she stressed learning to let knowledge replace fear. So when Sarah Cook's husband got violently sick from a Helvella he thought was a Morel, Tolly did not sympathize. She stormed into the out-patient hospital room, ignored Sarah and the nurse, and spoke to the fat, moaning man under the wrinkled sheet. "I told you that identification must be positive," she said. "Had it been an Amanita, you'd be dying right now instead of just sore from getting your stomach pumped."

He was all right in a few days, but interest in mushrooms declined very fast, and there were even some who blamed Tolly for the episode. Sarah Cook was heard to say at bridge club: "The trouble with Tolly MacIntyre is that she doesn't mind her own business." Tolly gave no more talks, but a few women still came to Tolly's house for mushroom advice. Deb, Rowena, Colleen, most often.

Deb liked these smaller groups better. The privacy. The seriousness. And their study put together things she had liked so well her two years in college. Lab and language. Tolly acquired a microscope, and they all learned in earnest--slicing, sectioning, sampling. From

the field they gathered everything, even the vile Phallus Impudicus, so aptly named for its shape and "stinkhorn" smell. But many were brilliantly colored, textured like velvet. Others were translucent, evanescent, and haunting. They sought mushrooms with intriguing names like the elusive Gypsy or the Elf's Saddle, and one afternoon they found a log covered with the jelly fungus called Witch's Butter.

Tolly made them learn the scientific nomenclature as well. They even considered organizing as a formal group since affiliates of the national association could get regular bulletins about methods of preserving specimens with strychnine, new species discovered, and so on.

Cliff Spencer lectured Deb about the hazards of strychnine and other acids they were using, but Deb told him they knew what they were doing. "Our staining compounds are no more toxic than laundry bleach. And I still use that every day," she said.

Then Colleen's husband wrote a letter to The Tribune making fun of their night field trip in search of a phosphorescent species commonly called the Jack-O-Lantern.

He wrote, in part: "The cult of mycology has lured some of the good wives of the town into the woods at night, supposedly to find mushrooms that not only grow in the dark, but also glow in the dark. Such antics should be left to the children."

Colleen didn't speak to her husband for awhile, but Deb was amused at his attitude. He was a bit like Cliff, who came thundering in the back door one night and said, "You girls have gone off the deep end on this thing. Every time I look at you, you're working on mushrooms. I've just been over to Tolly's, and you know what she's got all over her kitchen table? Worms, little white worms. Mushroom worms."

"They're not worms," Deb said. "They're insect larvae."

"Forgive me," he retorted. "That does make a difference."

"Must you be so stuffy about it?"

"I'm not!" he said stuffily. "You all act so snobby about it."

In spite of such husband discontent, they started to meet twice a week while the abundant fall mushrooms lasted. And they dreaded the first killing frost.

One day the doorbell rang in the middle of a study session, and Tolly answered the door to find Mildred on the stoop. "Just thought I'd drop in to see how you girls were doing," she called loudly as she more or less forced her way into the room. Tolly left her standing there and walked calmly back to the head of the work table. Mildred chatted on for about five minutes, then

suddenly blurted out her point. "I want to join the club," she said.

"This isn't a club," Tolly replied. "It's a scientific discipline." She bent down over the microscope again. There was an awkward silence, and Deb was irritated because Rowena fidgeted and creaked her chair. It sounded as loud as a screech.

Finally, Mildred spoke. She argued her keen interest in fungi (mispronounced,) but no one believed her. They all knew how she really felt about the "horrid old tadstools." Then again no one said anything. They all knew Mildred couldn't stand silence, yet she had never before shut up and let a silence be. It was incredible.

"Oh, you've all turned so rude!" Mildred screeched. "What's happening here? What's happening?" She came directly over to the table. "I suppose you think I don't know what you're always doing in here with all these despicable things. I know. I've read about them. What's this?" She squashed a section of Lactarius with her thumb. "One of those kinds that gives you hallucinations? Or this?" She mangled another mushroom. "Is that one of your aphrodisiacs? Oh, I've read about the drugs you can get out of these. You can't kid me."

Mildred jerked open the door and let it wham against the wall when she left. For a moment they all looked at



each other quietly. Then Tolly shrugged and picked up the specimens Mildred had ruined. Deb smiled. Wryly she said, "Perhaps we should have slipped her one to calm her down." Rowena laughed. Then they went right on with their work.

The next day, Tolly caught a little boy hacking away with a Scout knife at her Pleurotus Ostreatus. She was furious. It was a beautiful display of shelf upon shelf of that fast spreading woody fungus. Since it grew on a convenient stump, in her own back yard, she had been measuring its daily growth. Now the whole project was ruined. The boy was Mildred's son, Eddie.

Tolly went into a real funk. She refused all comfort about the Pleurotus and was edgy and sharp with everyone. To make matters worse, within a few days the boy Eddie took seriously ill with a malady the doctor diagnosed as food poisoning. Mildred described his symptoms to everybody, stressing how pathetic he looked, nine years old, but small for his age and hardly able to hold up the hollows. Children waste away so quickly when they are sick. He looked a mere shadow in the big hospital bed. "It wouldn't surprise me but what Tolly poisoned him on purpose," Mildred said. And she said it again and again.

On the third day, when Eddie lapsed into a coma, the whole neighborhood went on watch. Waiting was difficult

because no one knew what to think. The doctor sent Mildred home to rest. The screens were down, storm windows up, and doors closed against the hard freeze forecast for the night, so the street was extra quiet when Mildred started wailing. She ran out of the house without a sweater even. "Stop Tolly," she called. "Stop Tolleeeee."

She ran, in her slippers, wailing all the way around the half block to Tolly's front door. George ran after her. Then their oldest boy. Sarah Cook followed them up the street. And Cliff and Deb Spencer got there just as Tolly opened her door.

There was a terrible scene. Mildred yelled, "You're doing it! You're killing him." Cliff was trying to hold her wrists, but not succeeding, so Tolly ended up scratched, her face extra pale under the livid red marks. George elbowed Cliff aside so he could get to his wife and slap her hard. And Mildred then, retching sobs, huddled on the floor with her arms wrapped around her stomach. Half the neighborhood was looking on.

They finally got Mildred away, home, and sedated. Cliff told Deb to go on home. He would stay with Tolly awhile. "She needs strength now," he said.

Deb, uncertain about what Tolly needed, if anything, went home. And Cliff came home soon, wondering too. "I can't figure her out," he said. "She just laughed at me

when I told her not to worry. Mildred's so damn superstitious, you know. And the sun went down blood red tonight. That's supposed to mean death within twenty-four hours. At least that's what George said. Well, what he actually said was something like 'Murder mad between sun and sun!' That kind of hogwash."

"So you told Tolly all about it?"

"Sure. It explains Mildred, and Tolly already saw the sun and knew about the forest fires up north that made the haze. No harm. I guess she's OK if she can laugh about it."

The next day was Saturday, and the reports were close to hourly. Eddie was still in a coma. Mildred was better. It was disclosed that the boy had been seen on the street eating, but no one knew what he was eating. Possibly green apples. But most apples were ripe. Mildred said he never ate apples because of the braces on his teeth. The doctor said there was no reason to suspect foul play. Tolly said nothing.

The evidence was so contradictory and emotional that a few of the more rational formed an unofficial committee to ask Tolly point blank for a few explanations, but she refused to let the delegation into her house. When Charlie Cook heard about that, he said, "The trouble with Tolly MacIntyre is that nobody knows what she's really

thinking."

That afternoon, a group of boys went walking slowly down the street, right in the middle of the street. There were four on each side of what looked like a surf board supported on their shoulders. And that, in turn, was loaded with a pile of old apples, banana peels, rotten oranges, carrot tops. The boys looked like miniature men, all dressed up in their suits, white shirts, and clip-on ties. When they got to Tolly's house, they lowered the board solemnly, then started throwing the vegetables on her lawn.

Like everyone else in the block, Cliff and Deb watched from the window. Cliff said, "This is ridiculous. It's got to be stopped before someone gets hurt. Deb, you're probably the best one to reason with Tolly. You better go on over."

Deb telephoned first. Tolly answered with: "Whoever this is, quit calling. I'm having this line disconnected." Deb identified herself as un-anonymous and planning to come next door, which she started to do, but as she stepped out her own front door, she saw Charlie Cook sauntering over to talk to the boys. Deb sat on the stoop and waited.

They didn't talk loud. Charlie gave something to each one of the boys. They picked up their board and

walked, still solemnly, on down the street. Charlie went up to Tolly's and knocked.

"Are you in there, Tolly?" he called.

No answer.

"Come on, now, Tolly, I think you're in there."

Silence.

"Well, I spoke to them boys." Pause. "They don't mean you no harm." Pause. "Just a game, you know. I gave 'em some old firecrackers. Told 'em to go play somewheres else." He looked at Deb, shrugged the fat on his shoulders, then walked away.

When Deb went over, Tolly let her in right away. Tolly asked, "How come they were all dressed up? No funeral today is there?"

Deb said no.

Tolly said she had been working, but the microscope light was off, and the specimens on the table were dry and withered. They sat in their working chairs. For a long time, they were silent. Tolly kept looking behind her.

Deb asked, "What's back there, Tolly?"

"Nothing," Tolly said. "I keep thinking about George. I have the feeling he left something here last night."

Deb was puzzled.

"Anyway, Deb, why do you suppose he hit her so hard?"

"She was hysterical."

"I know. But why so hard? Back and forth, back and forth."

"Maybe he was tired of being patient, gentle George."

"Could be. But that doesn't bother me as much as how I felt about me--later--after I went to bed. The things I've done, none of them are wicked. But I felt bad, like a witch. Poison inside. I almost convinced myself that I really did do something to that boy, so today I really ought to get trash on my lawn."

"No you shouldn't." Then after a minute Deb asked, "What do you think you have done?"

"I don't want to be afraid, but I am." Tolly mused. "Hysteria. That's from the Greek word for womb. They thought women's tears and screaming came from suffering in the womb. Maybe that's my problem, not Mildred's. Or is it George's?"

Deb couldn't respond. About mushrooms Tolly was so precise, about herself so vague. She had come to "reason" with Tolly, but what should she argue? That Tolly should quit being afraid? Explain herself? Behave as expected? Give unction to Eddie? She was uncomfortable now with her mission.

She said she had to cook dinner, but she was still mulling that conversation as she carried home the mushrooms Tolly gave her. ("Here, Deb, you take these. I don't feel like eating.") And Cliff asked, "Who did you see on your way back home?"

"No one."

"Well, you looked behind you twice."

"Did I?" Nor did she say anything more about it all through dinner and the rest of the evening. She did not cook the mushrooms.

The fire sirens woke them in the middle of the night. Then the truck sirens came closer and louder right to the house next door. Everybody put coats on over bathrobes to rush out into the street and watch the fire. Cliff was horrified. He worked like a mad man and even singed his hair trying to get close enough to see about Tolly. Mildred Crandall, shrill and eager, cried, "Is she in there? Is she there?" And a man's voice cut across: "Mildred, for Christ's sake, be decent, and shut up!" But Mildred had simply voiced the question in everybody's mind.

The house burned so hot that for awhile they feared for the whole neighborhood. Women in curlers darted in and out of the crowd, and the circling, blinking red beacons on the fire trucks made a kaleidoscope of lawns littered with possessions to be saved. Golf bags, cribs,

Early American rocking chairs. In the eerie red light, Deb identified Sarah Cook struggling with the huge stuffed elephant they had brought home from the fair.

Through it all, Deb refused to move from her vantage point at the window, though frequently her view was obscured as they sprayed water over the side of her own house to keep it from catching too. But the danger passed. The crowd dwindled. Movement was slower, more orderly, and Cliff stood for a long time with a little clutch of men gathered by the patrol car. When he came in, he announced: "The fire chief got in from the other side. There was no one in the bedroom, and no sign of a bo---." He stopped. "There are no remains." Deb almost laughed at "remains" of all things. Cliff showered, then joined her in the dining room. She was still looking next door.

"They say it was arson," he said behind her, "so I guess that lets Mildred out."

"Why?" she asked, bouncing the question off the glass.

"Ah, ha. You don't know," he answered. "Fire is just not a woman's weapon, like poison is."

Deb wished she had such easy answers to her own big questions, the ones she really cared about.

The phone rang shrill, and Cliff reported to Deb the news about Eddie Crandall, no longer in a coma, but now delirious. From his mumbling all they caught was something



about the city dump. He was going to live, they said.

Cliff said, "I'm going back to bed. It's safe enough now. Besides, they've posted a guard to make sure the rest of us don't get burned. That could flare up again."

Deb sniffed. Her own house smelled full of old smoke, and she kept checking to see if Tolly's fire had spread.

"I don't feel like sleeping," she said, and she stayed up all night trying to sort things out. She watched the guard's shadow take different shapes from the street light down the block, then from the embers glowing still through Tolly's windows. After awhile, he gave up his slow circle of the house and went to sleep with his back resting against the side of Tolly's concrete steps.

The next day at noon, they heard about Tolly. She had disrupted the morning routine at the police station when she barged in with her suitcase and demanded information about the burning of her house. A rookie named Kinkade said that maybe she set the fire herself. She turned to him calmly (she had raged at the Chief) and said: "I thought of that, you know. I considered doing it for them to get the whole thing over and done with. But I decided my fears were irrational, my imagination out of control. It was better just to leave for the night.

"What's she talking about?" Kinkade asked his Chief.

"Christ, don't ask me," he was told. "It's a waste of time to try to figure out a woman."

Tolly snorted and left to see her insurance agent.

When Deb heard about that scene (the police dispatcher was Colleen's niece), she knew she had figured things right. That morning after the fire, still wondering where Tolly was, she had taken from the refrigerator the mushrooms Tolly had given her. She looked them over carefully in the good light from the sliding glass door. They were Boletes, firm fleshed and free of the pinholes that indicate the presence of "worms." She cut away the parts that were bruised. And then, quite sure of herself, she scrambled them with eggs for breakfast.

A BASKET ON HER HEAD

## A BASKET ON HER HEAD

"Shredded wheat!" she said, jamming a fork into the platter of scrambled eggs.

Her husband spooned another mouthful of soggy cereal. Milk dripped from the spoon he raised to a point half way between the bowl and his chin. His shoulders were hunched about-to-take-a-bite. Beth silently counted the pose to three. Then he lowered the spoon and his shoulders, and he looked at her. He said very quietly and very gently, "Beth, no one ever heard of soy sauce and cinnamon in scrambled eggs."

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and chanted to herself. Marshmallows, cocker spaniels, cellulose sponges,

foam pillows, peach brandy, and wet wool socks. After that she excused herself and started the day all over again in the bathroom. She carefully creamed from her face all the make-up but recently applied. Then she washed her face with hot water and soap, scrubbing hard. Cosmeticians said she should not do that. Never hot water. Use only lukewarm. Pat dry. She used a towel.

Joe was dressed for work when he opened the bathroom door. His voice was behind her, but his face was in front of her in the medicine cabinet mirror.

"What's the matter, honey?" he asked. "You look sick again. Feel all right?"

"I feel fine."

"Sure?"

"Positive!"

"I could stay home."

"I feel fine." She turned toward him and smiled, hoping that made her look healthier. "Besides," she said, "I can get extra rest today. No lunch. The boys have gone on a school field trip."

Good. A light kiss and mumbled goodbye. Still smiling, she followed him as he collected his brief case and left. From the kitchen window, she saw him talking to Wilma-next-door. Joe nodded toward the house. Wilma leaned on the fence and nodded at Joe. When Joe drove off in his

car, Wilma waved him goodbye, then looked once more at the house and shook her head.

Beth thought it a pasteboard pantomime. Their movements were too staccato, their gestures too ordinary. And anyway (she smiled a real smile for herself), Wilma really does look like a figure made from toothpicks. Her hair is thread with knotted ends. If I were directing, I would untie the ends.

The thought did not hold. Her neighbor had too much skin. She was five feet eight inches tall, read a book a week, had no children, drank her coffee black, and once had confessed that her middle name was Minerva. She ought to be fat, Beth thought. She ought to be bloated from my confessions. Red Velvet Swing! Wilma as prosecuting attorney. I can see her in a white wig.

Great book, wasn't it, Beth. Think of it! That bitch on the witness stand ruining her dead lover with her tales of orgy. And no one could stop her, you know. The whole point at law was: Had she told those same tales to her husband. It was motive, see. Facts didn't matter. It was her story that counted. Terrible thing. Awful!

Beth stirred the grounds at the bottom of her cup. I don't mean about the murder, Wilma. I mean didn't you ever think about things like that, about red velvet swings

and sex with mirrors above the bed? Don't you wonder . . .

Good God, yes. Awful. How could anyone be so crude? Sick actually.

I suppose so. Yes. Crude.

Beth turned from the window. Hickory clock, I've got time, she thought. I can take my share today.

Very slowly she cleared the kitchen table, sometimes taking no more than one cereal bowl in a single trip. She held the bowl cupped in her hands, feeling its roundness. With delicate precision, she placed it on the counter so that the moment of contact could not be heard. The silverware she held high over the sink, then let all of it drop with a satisfying clatter.

She added soap to the silverware, ran hot water into the sink, and thought again of the cosmeticians. They wore rubber gloves. She plunged her bare hands into the water and swished.

There was a light tap on the door. Without waiting for answer, Wilma came in saying, "Hello, anybody home? Hi, what's new?"

Beth did not look up from her silver. She stiffened her back against the familiar patter of good intentions. Silence. Silence.

Wilma was silent, watching a moment, then she asked, "Dishwasher broken?"

"No," she replied. "I just felt like doing them by hand."

"Well, you must really be sick. Joe said you weren't feeling well this morning."

"I feel fine!" That sounded too intense. She softened her tone. "Wilma, if you don't mind, I don't feel like visiting today."

"Well, you sound like something's bothering you, and it'd do you good to get it off your chest. It does me."

"Wilma, you may be right. So I'll tell you." Wet hands. Toss her an old one. "Twelve times three hundred sixty-five equals--oh, I forget now, but before I went to the coast I figured it out exactly counting leap years, and it added up to about four thousand bowls of shredded wheat."

"So, don't be childish. Let him eat the same thing for breakfast 'til doomsday if he wants. Why make it an issue now for pity's sake?"

Because I hate it! "Doctor Sam said I should add spice to life. You heard him, you were here." Soaked in milk and soggy. That's the way he likes everything.

Wilma's big mouth looked like an open oven. "Spice. But not in his eggs. That's a cruel joke, Beth. Really cruel."



"Is it, Wilma? Is it so cruel?" Why do I echo? "I thought he'd find it funny, maybe laugh a little, and try one bite for the sake of the joke. Once he tap-danced on a table for a five dollar dare, remember?"

"But that was ages ago, simply ages ago. And before you--well, you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean." Broke down. Why not say it? Mommy, I heard Mrs. Wright tell Mr. Bays that you got broke somewhere. Do you get to wear a cast? No, Ronnie, I won't wear a cast. Go away Wilma. Finally Wilma went away.

Beth spent another hour at the sink, using the water to push away her own worry about their concern so that it wouldn't ruin her whole full day. She put the dishes away and shut the cupboard doors, feeling the metal cool and aqua against the palms of her hands. She could not remember if her cabinets were aluminum or steel. Anyway, they were like liquid, but not wet. She mouthed the word "aluminum." It was more fluid than steel.

The cupboard next to the stove held a basket for serving rolls. The cupboard was dark. If she did not dare carry the basket on her head like the woman in the picture, at least she could set it out on the table. The sun might warm the reeds. Silly idea. What are baskets made of? Rushes, straw? She took down the basket and examined it. This one seemed to be made from twigs that were once supple

enough to weave, but she didn't know. She had never attended those basket weaving classes at the Center. Wilma did, and she had given her the basket. After that, Wilma took up ceramics and gave her ashtrays.

She put the basket in the middle of the table and thought of house-beautiful. There should be fruit in the basket. Well, why not? But she had only some bananas that were getting a little black. No. Black bananas should be topped with a small tag that read, "Special today. 12¢ lb." Basket, be empty.

On second thought, why not buy it fruit? She took her cashmere sweater and went outside. Mohair itched. The smell of burning leaves was early. The trees weren't naked yet. Whoever was burning leaves had an early fall from a sick tree. Get Doctor Sam. Nothing wrong with her that a good rest won't cure. Walk. She passed her car, giving it an elaborate cavalier bow. Wilma peered from her big living room window. Beth waved and smiled at her, and then impishly turned back to the car and gave it a curtsy instead.

The day was a montage of color, yellows blended with rusts, browns with reds, reminding her of the feathers of pheasants, then of pheasants cooked, mellowed with wine. Red velvet wine. Spring is wait. Autumn is now. Air is articulate. It touched her skin vibrant with the feel of

jets. She rolled her head way back and searched the sky until she saw them, high, white, translucent. She saluted them for being there trailing smoke. Burning leaves.

At the store she bought staples and also fruit, ripe, but not overripe. By the time she got home, her arms ached from carrying the bulky sacks clutched against her chest, and she relished the tingling relief when she put the sacks on the kitchen table. Of course, there were other ways to carry things. The basket was on the table.

She hesitated. Was it outside the rule? Cruel jokes. Joe and Richard laughed at the funny presents she brought home from vacation. Ronnie, disappointed. Mommy, you didn't bring me a starfish. Joe teased: That's right, by gosh, son. And what about seashells? You used to be the greatest collector of all time. Here you are all unpacked and not a single seashell. Yeah, Mom, why not? Richard kicked Ronnie. Shut up, stupid. Nothing wrong with her that a good rest won't cure.

She picked up the basket and examined it again, then quickly raised her arms and balanced it on her head. When she moved, it fell noisily to the floor and rolled on its side in a half boomerang circle to the other side of the kitchen. It took a long time before the basket lay still. For a longer time yet, she could hear the clock ticking. Idiot, she said to herself. It's electric.

Joe in unironed pajamas had said, well, what else did you do at the beach besides not collect seashells? Oh, I collected, she told him, but every day I threw them in the water when the tide was out and looked the next day to see if the same shells came in.

He laughed. I'll bet that was a losing game, he said. You can't tell one from another unless you mark them or something. What else did you do?

Sam said walk. I walked. Last week there was a great moon. And fog. At the edge of the sand I took off my shoes and walked barefoot on the beach for miles and miles.

At night?! He started to sputter, and his attempt at control was so visible that Beth imagined the conversation, Doctor Sam to Joe. Joe, be gentle. The light touch. Ease her back to routine. She let Joe struggle without a word of help. Then he let out one word. Risky! he said.

Oh, it was perfectly safe, she replied. I always hid my shoes under a big piece of driftwood so I'd know right where to find them again. He stared at her, but she did not let a smile turn it into a joke until after he switched off the overhead light and stumbled toward the bed in the dark. She could have turned on the bed lamp, but she didn't. He fumbled under the covers and patted her gently on the hip. Goodnight, honey. I'm glad you had a good

rest.

Cured. Cruel joke. She lay awake remembering seashells, the heaps and piles she collected for a day. Then restless, lying on the sand, she started to arrange them. Circles, triangles, parallelograms, pentagons. Starfish. One day she cleaned her section of sand and built a whale with feet and gills. Her back peeled from that. Then she made tiny patterns at intervals of fifty feet along the tide line. She leaned over to place a final blue shell, and he grabbed her wrist and squeezed until the pain made her fingers spread. The shell dropped out of place.

She twisted to see him. He was ugly, and he yelled at her. Shouted. You stop that, hear? You stop that! Then he walked away, slowly, simply, as though nothing at all had happened.

Indian! she yelled at his back. Indian! she screamed.

He didn't fish smelt at night with the others. And he walked the beach without net or bag or probe. She avoided him, built beach fires, climbed the rocky Heads, found new coves. Her anger was gone before the marks turned blue on her arm.

She turned over and pushed her knees into the triangle Joe made with his legs pulled up whenever he lay

on his side. He was asleep. She tugged up his pajama top and curled around his back. Half asleep, he made love to her like old dreams, but he wouldn't turn on the light. And the next evening when he lit the barbecue, she had taken three deep breaths of hickory, and he said to her sharply, Must you do that?

Must I do that? Do I breathe in more than my fair share? No one will know, she thought. Then she retrieved the basket and balanced it on her head once more.

At first when she moved, she was as awkward as sacks full of groceries, and she could not reclaim her teen talent at carrying books on her head. But soon she walked the length of the kitchen, stiffly, yes, but without dropping the basket. She felt lost whenever the basket fell. Occasionally she interrupted herself to do her housework, but she practiced again and again until she discovered the particular fluid motion that maintained not only balance, but also grace. She could create special feelings in the back of her neck and in her shoulders according to chosen moods. She carried the basket languidly, then sensually, then with exaggerated dignity and pride. She tried the basket heavy with fruit and found that the weight did not change the basic stance.

Late in the afternoon when the sun fell through the window in patterns of leaves, Joe came back to the house

with Doctor Sam. Sam had his bag with him. She did not move to greet them in the hallway. Instead she stood still and silent at the far end of the living room twisting her dust cloth. She wanted to run. They came straight toward her. Solicitous, kindly, frightening men.

"How are you, Beth?" asked Doctor Sam.

"What's the matter, Beth?" Joe demanded.

"I feel fine." She was glad the basket was in the kitchen just then.

"Wilma called the office. She said you seemed withdrawn this morning. And you didn't answer the phone. She wanted to know why you were walking around the house with a basket on your head!"

"Oh," she said lamely, dodging away from them. No grace now. Her shoulders were stiff and tight. And she wanted to shut off Sam, her real Uncle Sam, who made his sister's children call him Doctor Sam, respect his license, Doctor Sam, always, never Uncle. Lectures. She still felt eight around him. Candy in his office. Red hots. Then the needle. Be a big girl; don't cry. Shut up, Sam.

"I had hoped," he said, "that your vacation would cure these spells. Joe worries you know, perhaps unduly, but not without reason. Frankly Beth, the oddities of your behavior justify action . . ."

"Oddity?" she said. "Oddity? Don't be silly. Wilma

just got the wrong idea. You both have the wrong idea. I just got the notion from a magazine, Travel. There was this picture--well, here. Let me show you." She threw her dust rag on the couch and rummaged in the end table drawer. She found the picture and held it up. "Look," she said, "I cut it out of Travel." The paper was getting somewhat wrinkled, but not wrinkled enough to mar the outlines of the woman with the basket on her head, barefoot, with child in hand, dusky skinned on a dusty road. Latin.

"May I see the picture, Beth?" Doctor Sam asked gently, beckoning to her as he would to an eight-year-old.

At first she did not move. Don't goof! Silence. Doctor Sam beckoned again, so she handed him the clipping. He held the diagonal ends and turned it to the light of the window. X-ray. Joe looked at it over Sam's shoulder, bobbing back and forth as Sam changed the angle of view. Puzzle. Beth was tempted to smile. Her shoulders eased.

Joe broke the grouping first, whirling toward her. "Oh, Beth, must you? I suppose you plan to start walking barefoot all over town with a basket on your head."

She shook her head. "No, no!" she said, "it's just that . . ."

"Better let me handle this, Joe," Doctor Sam interposed. "Now, Beth," he said as he took her hand and led



her to sit on the couch, "I understand perfectly why this picture appeals to you. Travel makes the primitive seem charming, feminine, and lovely."

This was introduction. He had worked it before. Next would come surgical words, intolerably clean, impeccably dirty. Let him talk. Humor him.

He said, "But in actuality of course, those people live in very unsanitary conditions. Reality is probably more like body sores under her skirt. So it's phony to imitate . . ."

"Oh, stop!" she cried. "Shut up right now!" Her voice trebled in pitch. Ladies are never shrill.

"She's overwrought," said Sam to Joe. "We can't let hysteria--yes. Beth, before we continue this discussion, you should take a tranquilizer. Will you do that for me?"

She jumped up to yell no, not those things again. Stop. "Yes," she said. "I probably need one because if you don't quit coddling me, I think I'll scream." She smiled. "Not literally, of course. Give me the pill." She thrust out her hand for it. Sam unwrapped cellophane and gave it to her. She started for the bathroom. She would drop it in the toilet.

Joe grabbed both her arms and pushed her, not quite gently, back down on the couch. "You rest, honey! I'll get you some water."

OK, OK. The pills never hurt, but they stole her strength and fogged her mind. Why couldn't they let her be? "Sam," she said. "Now all in the world I was doing was practicing the good old girls' school walk. You know, stomach in, head up." Joe came back with water, and she took the pill hastily. She wasn't good at telling lies, and she wanted to keep up the momentum. She mentioned an article she had read. A woman looks as young as her carriage. And a basket, of course, because one wouldn't want to drop the dictionary or the Bible. She spun it out and did rather well, she thought. Now they'll leave.

"Sam!" she said. "My head is spinning."

The looks cast between them, their cool, withdrawn silence, made her suspicious. Pantomime. Cruel joke. "You bastards," she muttered. "That was a damn dirty trick." She tried to remember the old phrase as she leaned her head on the back of the couch. A mickey. That was it. They had slipped her a mickey.

Joe smiled tenderly at her and reached for her hand. "Now don't you worry, honey. Don't you worry."

She pulled her hand away. His face was enormous. "Mickey Mouse," she said thickly. The Indian never smiled. She quit arranging shells, but he ignored her every day. Then she started throwing shells in the water at low tide, looking the next day to see if the same ones came in.

Nuts to you, Indian. She lay on the beach and wondered what the waves did to the shells. Pound them or pull them. Some fragile ones survived. Undertow. No current to China.

Joe said solemnly from the bottom of the sea, "I'll get her to bed, Sam."

Oh, no you won't, she yelled. You stop that, hear? But she knew she hadn't even said it out loud. She tried desperately. Nothing but tears came out. It would keep. The outrage inside her was sanded clean like the seashell she found again the second day. She was certain. They're already marked, Joe. Lobed edge, jagged nick on one side, blue inside, and it tasted like salt. She could feel the long tears warm on her cheek. The Indian knew. He had seen her when she kissed the blue side, then let it drop in a flooding wave. She walked her triumph tall and straight right up to his driftwood chair. He stood up and gave her a deep bow, then he hoisted to his shoulder a huge basket full of purple glass balls. She watched him walk the tide line--smaller and smaller and smaller until he disappeared around the Head. She put her tongue to her lip and held on to the taste of tears.