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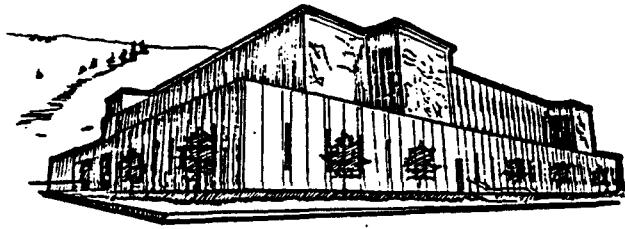
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University of
Montana

SAMPLING:
A CREATIVE COLLECTION

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

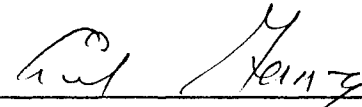
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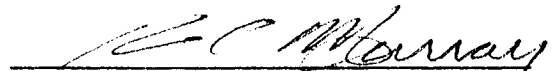
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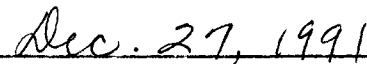
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THE CRANK CALL

A short story

It was New Year's Eve and Jacqueline Short was alone and mad when the phone rang for the second time.

"Hello," she snapped. "Hello." Pause. "Hello." She could hear breathing on the other end. She slammed the receiver down. Another damned crank call. Not Kay begging her to come to her party. Not an old boyfriend who wanted to drop by. Not her parents in Illinois wishing her a happy New Year. Not Richard, certainly, the bastard. She looked at herself in the hall mirror, gathering the collar of her chenille bathrobe tight around her throat. She stuck her tongue out at her image and puffed her cheeks out like a frigate bird. Then she sighed, flopped on the sofa in the living room and angrily flipped through the television channels. Dick Clark's Rockin' New Year's Eve. No thank you. She wasn't looking at merry revellers when she was alone. Professional wrestling? No. Ah, a movie -- Somewhere in Time. That's what she needed -- a sentimental love story. Definitely no. Reruns of the Ann Sothern Show (Kaatie, all the fellows go for Kaatie...) An overweight single woman who always has a date. She threw the remote to

the table, hitting the cat. Piston protested loudly. She wrapped her arms around her legs, considering whether or not to cry, then got up and went to the telephone and dialed.

"Hello, Mom?" Jackie said.

"Hello, dear," her mother answered. "Happy New Year. I haven't got but a moment to talk because your father and I are already late for a party at the community center. His union is giving it."

"I just wanted to talk for a minute, Mom. The meatpackers union can wait another minute. Where's Chris? Practicing her dribbling in the basement?"

"He's already out in the car and you know how he is, but I guess I can spare a minute. Do you know what your little sister is doing this evening? Attending her first New Year's Eve dance. I thought maybe sixteen was a little young, but your father and I like this boy. Mike, his name is. I'm coming! For petesake -- it's Jackie calling long distance! He and Chris have so much in common. They both play basketball. They met at the junior varsity awards dinner when Chris got MVP. Remember I told you? Chris actually looked very pretty all dressed up. We got her gown on sale at Penney's. I talked her into a long one -- her legs are so muscular. Where are you going this evening?"

Jackie groaned under her breath.

"Richard wanted to take me out, Mom. We had a date all planned, but I really don't feel so good. So I called him about nine o'clock and told him that I would rather stay in tonight. I really have a bad headache. And it's really getting worse. I'm congested, too." She coughed. "Maybe I'm coming down with something. And I wouldn't want Richard to catch it. I had a tough week at work," she ended lamely.

"I'm so sorry you're not feeling well, dear. You must get right into bed. I'm sure Robert understands. Oh, your father and that horn. Honestly, I'll call you tomorrow. Eat some soup. You and Robert can plan something another time. Bye." Her mother hung up.

"Richard, Mom, Richard." Jackie sighed as she replaced the receiver. Great, she thought. They're going to a party, Chris is at a dance and here I sit. And to top it off, now I'll have to make up an illness for Mom to follow over the next week. God, Chris in a dress at a dance. The Incredible Hulk in drag.

She dialed Richard's number. It rang once. She changed her mind and hung up quickly. Then the phone rang again. She let it ring three times before she gave into the hope that it might be Richard.

"Hello? Hello?"

There was a pause and then a man's voice said: "You don't know me and I know I'm probably bothering you when you're getting ready to go out and all, but I must ask you, out of the kindness of your heart, to do me a favor."

"Who is this?"

"My name is George Say."

"I don't know any George Say."

"I know, I know. That's what I said. You don't know me and --"

Jackie interrupted him. "Well, as you said, Mr. Say, I'm getting dressed to go out to a party and I really can't talk. My date, my fiance will be here any minute."

"Wait, wait. Just one minute," he pleaded.

"No, really, I --"

"You've been getting crank calls," he said quickly.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Calls where someone's on the line but doesn't say anything."

"I know what a crank call is. Mr. Say, there are laws protecting people from harassment."

"No, no, you don't understand. It wasn't me. It was my son."

"Your son?"

"Bob."

"Well, I certainly think you should give your son a good talking to. Good-bye."

"No, wait. I will. I mean, I would under normal circumstances. But these aren't normal circumstances. That's why I must ask you a favor."

"Mr. Say..."

"You see, he's dying."

"Your son is dying?"

"Yes." He sighed deeply.

"I'm very sorry. That must be terrible for you. But I really don't see what it has to do with me."

"He likes to play with the telephone. He likes to dial numbers and ... I know this must sound ridiculous to you. But it seems harmless enough, especially for a child who's dying. I found you number written here by the phone -- in crayon and all. I figured he might have called you and I wanted to explain."

"Well, it's kind of you to call and clear that up. See that he doesn't do it again and I won't report you. Good-bye."

"No, wait. That's not what I wanted to ask. The favor, I mean."

"Please, I can't tie up this line any longer. My parents are probably trying to reach me to discuss our annual February cruise plans."

"I understand that. It's just that I want your permission for Joe to call you. I mean Bob."

"Who's Joe?"

"Bob, I meant Bob."

"You said Joe."

"It is Joe. And Bob. Joseph Robert. I call him Bob. But his mother calls him Joe. We don't get along. We're separated."

"I see."

"Anyway, I want your permission for Bob -- little Bob -- to call you. It's harmless, as I said. And it seems to give him so much pleasure. The treatments are so hard on him. He's lost all of his hair, he can't eat hardly anything at all. If you could just allow him one of the few pleasures he has left, I would be eternally grateful."

"Let me get this straight. You want my permission for your son to call me and hang up?" she said incredulously.

"Yes."

"No."

"Please. You don't know what it would mean to --"

"No, Mr. Say. I must get off the telephone now. Good-bye." She hung up the receiver, hearing a faint "But --" from Mr. Say before it softly clicked into place.

"God," she muttered. "Are there ever some nuts in this town."

She dialed Richard's number. Two rings. She hung up. Then she dialed Kay's number. She could hear the sounds of a party in full swing when the phone was answered.

"Is Kay there?" Jackie asked.

"What?"

"Is Kay there?"

"Speak up, I can't -- "

"Is Kay there?" she screamed.

"Kay, Kay baby, it's for you."

The receiver clattered as if dropped. Jackie waited. A minute passed.

Then two. Then Kay said hello.

"Kay, it's Jackie."

"What, oh damn, just a minute. Hey shut that door, yeah. Thank you.

Sorry. Who is it?"

"It's Jackie."

"Well, hello. For crying out loud, where are you?" Kay sounded drunk.

"I'm at home."

"When Richard showed up here without you, I thought maybe you were sick or something."

"Richard is there?"

"Not anymore. He left about fifteen minutes ago."

"Oh, well, I just called to tell you that I'm sorry that I'm not at your party. I mean, I can't make it to your party because I've had last minute plan changes. One of the vice-presidents from the home office came in town and asked me out. I'm calling you from the lobby of the Marriott. We're going to

a private party in the penthouse suite."

"That's great." Jackie heard the music and the party noises swell in the background. "I've got to go, sweetie. Tactile charades is gonna start without me. Have a swell time and call me next week."

"Did Richard leave alone?" Jackie asked. But Kay had already hung up.

She walked out to the kitchen, followed closely by Piston, opened the refrigerator door and leaned in. The leftovers of the spaghetti with Ragu sauce she had for dinner were on the top shelf. Also orange juice, milk, cottage cheese, an opened cat food can and three wine coolers.

"Maybe I should have a wine cooler," she said to the cat. "After all, it's New Year's Eve. Whoopee."

She thought about whether getting drunk would make her feel better. She wasn't really hungry but making a sandwich or soup or something would pass the time. She was studying the contents of the pantry when the phone rang again. She ran to the hall to pick it up.

"Oh, please, please, please God, let it be Richard. I wasn't really going to get drunk." She let it ring once more. "Hello?"

"This is George Say again. Don't hang up. Please. I feel certain you must have misunderstood me before. Joe is dying. He's only three years old. All he wants to do is --"

"I understood you perfectly, Mr. Say. Don't call this number again."

"I can't believe you won't do a favor for a dying kid. What kind of monster are you?"

"I'm not a monster. I just don't want to be bothered."

"Bothered! Maybe little Joe doesn't want to be bothered with dying. Maybe he doesn't want to look at his parents' faces every night as we tuck him into bed with tears in our eyes."

"I thought you said you and your wife were separated."

"Oh, that's right, I mentioned that. But she lives near here and she works the late shift -- at Big Bear and she stops by every night on her way to work."

"Why doesn't she have custody?"

"She's an unfit mother. She drinks. Some nights it's all she can do to bag groceries."

"I see."

"So why won't you grant the wish of a dying child?"

"If this is so important to your son, why don't you have him call relatives or friends?"

There was a silence.

"He would recognize the numbers."

"How intelligent of him. How old did you say he was?"

"Three."

"Three years old and he can write telephone numbers in crayon on slips of paper and recognize the numbers of all your friends and relatives?"

"He'll be four soon."

"Mr. Say, I don't believe there is a Joe Bob."

She hung up. What a kook, she thought. She went back to the kitchen. She had left the refrigerator door open and the cat was on the top shelf licking the sauce off the spaghetti.

"Oh damn, damn, damn. Get out of there, Piston. What a pain you are. Bad cat. Bad!"

Piston looked at her leisurely, licked one paw and then hopped to the floor. She put the plate of spaghetti in the sink, then realized that Piston could get it there, too. She was not making a garbage run to the dumpster on New Year's Eve. She opened the cupboard where she kept glasses, put the plate on the middle shelf and closed the door. The phone rang.

Do you believe this? she thought. She marched back to the hall and snatched up the receiver.

"Look, Mr. Say, or whatever your name is, I'm gonna call the cops if you don't leave me alone."

"I'm sorry."

"Good-bye."

"No wait. I'm sorry about all that before. I really am."

"You mean you admit you were lying about your son," she said flatly.

"I don't have a son. I'm not married. I've never been married."

"Then why did you make up such a stupid story?"

He chuckled a little.

"What really happened was that I was calling a friend and I misdialed and got you instead. I liked your voice and I just wanted to talk to you. Now what's so terrible about that?"

"You make up a story about a dying child so you could talk to a complete stranger?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know that was pretty bad. But it was the first think I thought of. I had to keep you on the phone and I thought if you thought I was in trouble you might help."

"It was the first thing you thought of? You're a very sick person."

"No, I'm really not. I've just got an active imagination."

"It was a very cruel thing to do." Jackie sniffed twice. "I lost both my parents and my little sister to cancer. It was horrible. They were all in the hospital at the same time. I had to divide my time between the rooms. Chris went first -- that was my sister. Tiny, frail little Chris. Then Mom and then Daddy..." She let her voice trail off into a soft sob.

"Oh, God -- I'm really sorry. You can't know how sorry I am to have brought up all those painful memories."

"That's okay. You know, I never cried for them. I was just numb after all those weeks at the hospital-- all that hospital food. I stood at that funeral as they lowered three caskets into the cold earth and never shed a tear. It was raining, so nobody noticed. Now, thinking about it, and talking about it like this, I feel as if I can finally cry for them. You may have done me a favor, in a strange way. Now, if you'll excuse me, please. Leave me to my grief."

"Oh sure, of course. I really am sorry."

"I believe you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She gently pushed the receiver cradle button and waited a few seconds. She grinned. Tiny, frail little Chris -- the gorilla. When she let go, she had a dial tone. She dialed Richard's number. Two rings. When the phone was answered, she could hear music in the background.

"Yeah? Hello?" Richard sounded distracted. She lost her nerve and hung up.

The jerk, she thought. Probably picked up somebody at that party. That disgusting Patty Peffly. She was an easy mark.

"God," she muttered. "He could have called me."

The phone rang.

"Please, please," she prayed. "Hello?"

"Hello, it's George. I was thinking that you really shouldn't be alone. I mean it's New Year's Eve and all and I feel responsible because I brought up all those sad thoughts about your family. So, why don't we go out somewhere?"

"I already have a date. I told you that. Besides, I don't know you. You don't even know my name."

"Okay, what's your name?"

"My name is Elise. Elise McKenna."

"Elise McKenna. That's pretty. That sounds familiar."

"It does?"

"Yeah. Wait a minute, I know. Wasn't that the name of a character in that sappy movie. You know, 'Somewhere in Time?' I was just watching that."

"Was it? I wouldn't know. What a coincidence."

"Do you like the movies?"

"Yes, I'm going to the movies tonight."

"I thought you said you were going to a party with your fiancee."

"I am. It's a movie party. You know -- we sit around and watch videotapes of old classics and then we critique them."

"Sounds kind of tame for New Year's Eve. I'm going to a party at the governor's mansion. It's a charity party."

"I read about that. Weren't the tickets awfully expensive?"

"Two hundred dollars a couple. But I figure, what the hey? It's only money and New Year's Eve comes but once a year."

"It's almost 11.30. Why aren't you there?"

"My date had a flat tire."

"Your date is picking you up?"

"No, not really. She, uh, she is on her way back from Pittsburgh. She's a model, a fashion model and she was doing a show in Pittsburgh. For charity. We're both big on charity. And she called and said she had a flat and so she would be really late."

"I see. Why don't you go get her? After all, it's New Year's Eve and she may be stranded somewhere."

"Oh, she said she would call me back if she needed me."

"Well, don't you think you should get off the phone, then? She might be trying to get through."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Well, nice talking to you, Elise. And I'm really sorry about your family."

"My family?"

"Yeah, your mother and father and sister all dying of cancer at the same time."

"Yes, that. Well, thanks."

"What are the odds, do you suppose?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. Well, happy New Year Bye."

"Good-bye."

She walked over to the window and looked out at the parking lot below. It was half-empty and silent. Eleven-thirty on New Year's Eve. Damn.

"And to think I chose my exciting career over marriage," she muttered.

Who could you have married? asked her dark reflection in the window

"Lots of people," she answered. "David." You were fifteen, said the reflection. "Simon." Probably gay. "Ben." Get real -- two dates, max.

"Richard." Oh, Richard? The man who didn't ask you out for New Year's Eve?

"Oh shut up!"

She flounced into the bedroom and sat down at her makeup table. God, she looked terrible. What a way to greet the new year. Suddenly she stood up and went back into the hall, picked up the phone and brought it with her into the bedroom. The cord stretched just far enough so that the phone sat on the floor next to the table. She sat down again, stared into the makeup mirror and tried to picture Madonna's eye makeup in her mind. Picking up a purple eyeshadow crayon, she put deep color on her eyelids. She followed the purple with a bright apple green. She was beginning to look a little ghoulish.

She rubbed some off and applied mascara, then carefully drew a beauty spot high on her cheek. She was filling in her lips with dark red when the phone rang. She reached over and picked it up.

"Hello," she said in a deep, sexy voice.

"Hi, it's me again. My date called and said she definitely can't make it. She got all greasy changing the tire and decided to stay in and wash her hair."

"That's too bad," Jackie answered, studying herself in the mirror

"Yeah, well, I thought I would ask you once more if you'd like to get together. I mean you sound real nice and we could go to a bar or something."

"I thought you had tickets to the governor's mansion."

"Yeah, well, I'm not in the mood anymore for anything that fancy -- you know -- crowded and noisy. I thought maybe we'd go somewhere a little quieter."

"Thank you. But I really can't. My date will be here any minute."

"Oh, c'mon Elise. If you had a date, you'd be gone already. You're alone just like me. One drink at a bar. What have you got to lose?"

"My fiance has been detained, that's all."

"Right, and you're going on a cruise in February with your dead parents."

"What?"

"Your parents, your parents. The ones who died of cancer in a group. I

been thinking about it and you told me the first time I called that you had to get off the phone because you were expecting a call from your parents to discuss plans for a cruise."

"Oh, yes. Well, I was talking about my stepparents."

"How could you have stepparents if both your real parents are dead? A stepparent is the wife or husband of one of your real parents."

"Oh, alright, alright," she shouted. "My parents are alive and well and living in the midwest with my amazon sister. Now will you please get off this line and leave me alone."

"Don't get mad, Elise. I made up a story at first, too. Let's call it even, okay?"

That's right, she thought.

"Wait a minute," she said. "You knew that I had been getting crank calls. And if you knew and your dying son, little Bob or whatever, doesn't exist, then you must have made them."

There was a silence on the other end of the line.

"I," he began. Pause. "Okay. I'm going to come clean. My name isn't George Say. It's Jack. Jack Freidman. George Say was the name of some kid in my third grade class. I don't know why I made the crank calls. Boredom. Loneliness. Who knows? I'm a nice person. I have a good job. I work for the highway department and I have never done anything like this before. Do you

believe me?"

"I don't know. What should I believe you?"

"Because I am telling you the truth, I really am. I work in Building M downtown, and you can check me out, if you want. Anyway, it's New Year's Eve and I was alone and maybe I went a little overboard. I know that's no excuse. But I am truly sorry. I like your voice. That's why I kept calling back. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Okay, Jack. I forgive you."

"That's great. You sound like you might be a little lonely, too. What do you say -- why don't we meet somewhere and have a beer. It might be the best thing that ever happened to either of us."

"No," she said slowly. "I think it would be better if you came here, to my apartment. Then we can talk and get to know each other without having to yell over the noise at a bar."

"Whoa, that sounds nice. I'll be right over. Where do you live?"

"I live at 1237 Hilton Avenue. Apartment 6. It's a security building, so you'll have to ring and I'll buzz you in."

"Great. Number 6. Got it. I'll bring some wine. And, Elise, I won't stay too long. We'll just talk a little while. See how it goes."

"Fine. How long will it take you to get here?"

"I'm across town. Fifteen, twenty minutes. Is that okay?"

"Perfect. Oh, and Jack, ring the bell lots of times, so I'll know it's you. I might be getting dressed or something. You might even want to yell up a few times. My bedroom window is just above the entranceway, two floors. Sometimes the bell doesn't work."

"Okay. I'm looking forward to meeting you, Elise. This is great."

"Bye."

She hung up. Then she picked up the receiver and dialed Richard's number. He answered on the fifth ring.

"Yeah?" He sounded annoyed.

"Richard? Hi, it's me, Jackie. I'm sorry if you've been trying to call me this week. I had to go on a business trip. To Los Angeles. It came up suddenly and I didn't get to tell you before I left and it was such a whirl while I was out there -- you know, meetings and cocktail parties and formal dinners, that I had no time to call. I just got in this evening on a late flight -- God, holiday travel is such a scramble -- and I discovered to my horror that I hadn't left my answering machine on. I figured you must be frantic wondering where I was. But I'm here now. Happy New Year."

"Jackie, I'm kinda busy and --"

"But that's not why I called." She put a note of panic in her voice. "I was really calling because I'm frightened. Something really weird has been happening."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been getting these calls, Richard. Ever since I got home. And even before I left. I never told you because I didn't want to worry you."

"Oh, Jackie, you're always exaggerating. People get those calls all the time. Some asshole's been calling here all evening. They usually mean nothing. Just hang up."

"No, Richard. These calls are different. This guy says he loves me and he's been watching me and he can't get me out of his mind. He says I remind him of his dead sister or mother or something. Keeps calling me Elise and saying she died a horrible death. He calls again and again. He called a few minutes ago and he said he knows where I live and he's coming over here. Now Tonight. I called the police, but I don't want to be alone. Please come over "

"Jackie, I can't come over there now."

" Richard, please. I need you." She made a little whimper in her throat.

"Hold on." She heard a muffled conversation. Then he sighed into the receiver. "Look, Jackie. I'll be there in five minutes. Don't worry. But I can't stay." There was another muffled conversation punctuated by the puff of a door slam. "Okay Jackie. Maybe I can stay a little while. I'll be right there."

"Thank you, Richard. I feel so safe now. Oh, and Richard, just ring twice, so I'll know it's you. I don't want to buzz in some murderer."

"Right. Okay. Bye."

She hung up, then picked up the receiver and dialed the emergency number

"Nine-one-one. Is this an emergency?"

"Hello. Yes, it is an emergency. My name is Jacqueline Short. I live at 1237 Hilton. Number 6. I've been getting some very upsetting phone calls and now this caller says he knows where I live and he's coming over here. I'm very frightened. I think he means it."

"We'll send a patrol car right over, miss. Are you willing to swear out a warrant in the event we apprehend this person?"

"Well of course," Jackie answered indignantly. "Everyone knows you shouldn't make crank calls."

End

BIRTH DAY

An essay

At five o'clock in the morning, a pain in my lower abdomen woke me. I was not really sure what it was, but it seemed like it could be a labor pain. I went to the bathroom, then climbed back into bed and woke my husband, Jay. I was trying to be matter-of-fact, but I felt a little excited. We timed a contraction, then another, but the intervals were irregular. Jay said it would be best for me to try to go back to sleep. He was supposed to go to Charleston that morning and was getting up early, so he soon went back to sleep. I tried to sleep, but all I could manage was laying there staring at the clock wondering if more contractions would come and would they be regular and was this it. Finally I got up and went upstairs to watch TV. I had several more contractions.

Jay got up later on, about seven o'clock or so. We sat together on the loveseat and I told him I thought this might really be labor. In spite of saying that, I did have doubts. All through the morning I kept asking him: "Are these really labor pains? Is this it? It's too early. She's not due until September 23rd." I always figured that the baby would be late, if anything. Several times we tried timing the contractions again, but they were still irregular. I thought maybe I had had other indications that this was real

labor ("bloody show" etc.), but I was not sure.

About nine o'clock, Jay called Carol, his secretary, and told her what was happening and said he would not be into the office for awhile. I ate something. The contractions were uncomfortable. I read my literature from our birth classes through quite a few times. I checked my already-packed bags for the hospital. I called my mother and talked with her for a long time. I was becoming increasingly sure that this was D-day, but at this point, Jay still had a "wait and see" attitude.

I told him he should go on to Charleston because his business there was important and pressing. He had title work to do for his law firm, Hankins and Taylor, and it had to be done that day. In addition, the Grand Jury was convening the next day and he had cases to prepare for that as well. With all the items on his agenda, I did not want to tie up his time with what could be false labor. I told him to go on, that I was alright and that even if this was labor, that it would probably last for hours. I remember his answer to me was: "No, I want to see where this is going." And he never left my side, not even to go to work at the courthouse.

In late morning, I called Dr. Edwards' office. The nurse said that the only way to tell for sure if it was labor was to come in and be examined. We called my mother-in-law, Frances, who was also my back-up birthing coach, and told her that we were going to have me checked and then Jay and I got in

the car and drove to Huntington. I took my suitcase and "goody bag" for the labor, certain that I would not be coming home. Dr. Edwards was not in the office and I saw his partner, Dr. Gilbert. And Dr. Gilbert said that I was not dilated -- not a bit. He said when I was having "real labor," I would know it and not to come to the hospital until I "couldn't stand it any longer." He said I would have the baby soon, but "soon" might be next week. I was disappointed; and actually pretty certain that he was wrong.

Jay and I stopped for root beers at the Frostop. I again tried to convince him to go on to Charleston and do his title work since the doctor had pronounced me not in labor, but he would not. I was secretly pleased that we were spending the day together even if this was not labor, and if it was labor, then I really did not want him to leave me. He decided that we should take a drive. It was a gorgeous day, one of those rare almost-autumn days when the sun is warm, the breeze is cool, the sky is brilliant blue and the leaves on the trees are the rich olive green of fading summer. Jay found byways and country roads that I had never seen before. He took me to Beech Fork Dam. We circled around and went a back way into Huntington. He told me stories about his days at Marshall and about his sister Debby's courtship with her future husband, Luther. We drove around for an hour or two, then headed back to Hamlin. On the way back we saw Jay's father and stepmother, Jay Hugh and Doloris, on the road and we waved and they turned around and

came back to talk. We told them what was happening and promised to keep them informed.

Jay told me to try and take a nap when we got home. I did lay down, but I only slept fitfully for a short time. I kept having to go to the bathroom. The book from our labor class said to eat, but I really did not have an appetite, although I did manage to get down a chocolate milkshake. The book said to take walks and I took a couple of short ones. All afternoon and into the evening, the pains kept getting stronger, but there was no pattern to them. They would come at four minutes, then ten, then six, then fifteen. When they came I would walk around the living room or bend over a chair or grip Jay's hand. We had rented a movie and tried to watch that, but I could not concentrate. Jay told me to relax and tried to get me to breath through the contractions like we had practiced in our birth classes, but I told him: "You breath!" and we gave up on that.

Finally, about two o'clock in the morning, I told Jay I could not stand it any longer and I put in a call to Dr. Edwards. Again I was told the only way to tell about my status was to be checked and he said that if I felt I was in labor, I should go to the hospital. After agonizing over the decision (another drive to Huntington, this time in the middle of the night, maybe for nothing versus having the baby at home), we decided to go to the hospital. I remember that I dressed nicely. Black pull-on straight leg pants, a tan-

colored overblouse I had recently purchased at The Limited, expensive suede flats I got in Missoula. God forbid I should not be well-dressed when I got to the hospital to have this baby.

It was quiet in the empty halls at Cobell-Huntington Hospital when we arrived at about 3:00 a.m. No pink-coated volunteer was staffing the information desk. The gift shop was closed. The lobby waiting area was deserted. But I was already pre-registered as a maternity patient, so we walked right up to the delivery floor, told the nurse on duty who we were and were put in a labor room. We were familiar with the labor rooms because I had had a false alarm several weeks earlier and had been put on the fetal monitor at that time. (I now know that that incident was a gallbladder attack, but I thought it was the baby at the time.) We were in a small private room with an easy chair, one bed, a TV, a bathroom. We had been told in birth class that sometimes women who are having an easy time of it deliver in these rooms and never make it into the delivery room which has more of an operating room atmosphere.

Jay joked with the nurses and I was pretty calm. I got undressed, put on a hospital gown and got into bed. Jay sat in the easy chair. The nurse hooked up a fetal monitor and then examined me, announcing that I was four centimeters dilated. That was welcome news. So I was really in labor and had already gone through a good deal of it at home. We had done things

correctly. We knew from birth class that it's usually preferable to go through the early part of your labor in the comfort of your home. And I could have an epidural at five centimeters, so we got to the hospital at a pretty good time.

The hour or so before I received an epidural was the worst part of the labor, painwise. At one point I grabbed Jay's hand and pleaded with him to "Do something." But soon the nurse said I was close enough to five centimeters and she summoned the anesthesiologist. He put in the epidural. Then there was no pain at all, only numbness in the lower half of my body. The nurse said for Jay and me to try and get some sleep. I remember asking for a blanket for Jay because it was cold in the room. The nurse turned off the lights and it was very dark in the room because there were no windows. I did sleep then. I think Jay did, too. I know that he never left me, except when the anesthesiologist put in the epidural and that was just to wait in the hall for a moment because the nurse suggested it.

Now the time frame gets a little fuzzy. I do not know how long we slept. The shifts changed and new nurses came on. I think Jay brought me a cup of ice and he may have gone for a Coke or something. It seems like the nurses worked on me some and finally a nurse explained about pushing -- position and so forth, but we did not know at that time that I was going to have difficulty pushing the baby out. Dr. Edwards came in and checked me

and told the nurse to have me start pushing. I was given painkiller through the epidural at least twice more. It made me sick at my stomach and several times Jay held a pan while I threw up and washed my face off with a washcloth afterwards. Once I apologized for throwing up and he said not to be silly.

I guess it was around noon when I really started pushing. Jay held one leg and a nurse held the other and I braced against them in a kind of laying-down crouch position. Then they would watch the contraction monitor and when a contraction started I would raise my head and grit my teeth and push for all I was worth. The contractions lasted a little less than a minute. Then I could rest for a couple minutes until the next one came. Everyone said that I was a world-class pusher. At one point the nurse could feel the top of the baby's head.

Finally Dr. Edwards came in and explained that even though I was doing so well at pushing, I was not getting anywhere because I had a tail bone which was J-shaped. It was literally holding the baby in my body. He said I might be able to push the baby out eventually on my own, but it would take hours more. And the tailbone would have to be broken by the baby's head before she could come out. So he recommended that he break the tailbone himself and that would clear the way for the baby to come down the birth canal and out. Dr. Edwards had a room full of patients waiting for him at his

office in Milton and if we delayed any longer, Dr Gilbert would have to deliver. I was exhausted and feeling no pain because of the epidural, and I wanted Dr. Edwards to deliver our baby, so I said okay. I remember he said: "Let's go have a baby."

The nurse called for an orderly to take me to the delivery room. I remember asking if I could keep my glasses on. I was worried that they would take my glasses away from me and then I wouldn't be able to see what was happening. The nurse said I could keep them. Just before they took me out of the labor room, I asked Jay how I looked. I knew that he had washed off most of my makeup. I didn't want to look awful the first time the baby saw me. He said I looked just fine. The orderly came and transferred me onto a guernsey and Jay went to be suited up in a gown and mask. And then they headed me to the delivery room.

As I was rolled down the hallway, I could see other mothers in other rooms. It was busy on the floor -- all the rooms were full and some people had to share labor rooms. I remember thinking that the fact of being taken to the delivery room did not seem quite real. I had been pregnant for what seemed like most of my natural life and that seemed real. The pregnancy was real. I had dealt with morning sickness and food cravings -- I about drove Jay nuts with my penchant for bubble gum. I only chewed each piece for a few minutes and then would spit it out and put in a new piece. I could

go through twenty or thirty pieces in an hour. And chocolate milkshakes. I made huge creamy chocolate milkshakes in the blender with ice cream and frozen yogurt and Hershey's chocolate syrup and lots of cream and milk. It was a wonder that I had not gained fifty pounds instead of the twenty-three I did put on. I had dealt with mood swings and worrying about how I did not "look" pregnant. And then when I finally did get a big belly, poor Jay had to deal with me crying inconsolably about my inability to cut my own toenails. (He did it for me, very good-naturedly.)

And the pregnancy would culminate in labor. That was real. I had prepared for that. That's why we took the birth classes, every Friday night at this same hospital for six weeks. We learned all about what to expect during labor. Jay would be my "coach." We watched films, listened to lectures, examined anatomically correct dolls, participated in breathing and relaxation exercises, and even practiced simulated labor scenerios. We were the most popular couple in the class, thanks to Jay's antics and my brilliant work as his straight man. I had still worried about the labor, of course. "Would it be really painful? Would I be alright? Would the baby be healthy? Would I have the baby in a ditch by the side of the road on the way to the hospital? What if we couldn't even leave for the hospital? What if the car wouldn't start? What if I couldn't get ahold of Jay? If I couldn't get ahold of Jay and tried to get ahold of Frances, what if I couldn't reach her either?

What would Jay tell the baby about me if I died? What if I died and Jay didn't buy the baby a pony like he promised to and I had to come back from the dead to haunt him?" I deviled Jay to death with "what if" scenerios. Labor hadn't gone quite as we planned it. I was pretty difficult to "coach" properly. But together we had made it through.

However, the labor was over and this smiling young man was wheeling me down to a delivery room, for goodness sake. And when I was wheeled out again, I would have a baby. A baby. Not a pregnancy anymore. Of course, I knew intellectually that the pregnancy would end with a baby being born. But until that ride down the hall, the baby and the pregnancy had been one and the same. For nine months I was preoccupied with this small creature inside me. I cried the first time I heard its heartbeat at two months. I marveled over its small hands and feet on the TV screen during the ultrasounds. I rejoiced when I was told that I was going to have a daughter and made Jay pick out a name right then and there. My best friend, Jeanann, and I shopped for hours for just the right crib. I decorated the nursery and felt a warm, grateful glow at all the fuss made over me during my baby shower. As I grew bigger, I felt her move and kick more and more. I felt my internal organs move over to make room for her. My stomach seemed pushed up so far that I could feel the food I ate hit bottom just below my throat. Now had come the moment of separation. A baby would be born-- a person was coming into the world. A

little person that Jay and I had made together. "Let's go have a baby," the doctor said. And as I was rolled through the door of the delivery room, I was thinking that no longer would I be a pregnant woman, I would be a mother.

The delivery room was very bright and it was cold. Jay was there in a gown and a hat and a mask which hid most of his face except for his eyes. They transferred me to a narrow table and put my feet in stirrups and draped me with sheets. There seemed to be lots of people in the room -- Jay, Dr. Edwards, the anesthesiologist, the orderly, several nurses. One student nurse, the one who had been helping me push all morning, stayed past her shift to watch my delivery. The atmosphere was very congenial and happy. Jay stayed by my side near my head and held my hand. I know he spoke with the doctor and probably the nurses and probably said funny things, but I don't recall what they were. I don't remember pushing any more, maybe I did. But I think the baby was just right there waiting to come out. I was feeling just fine. Tired, but alert. A good kind of tired where it felt nice just to lie there. I heard a sort of snapping noise -- almost like a pop -- and Dr. Edwards said he had just broken my tailbone. And then I looked down and I saw a hand. A tiny bluish-red hand reaching up into the air. And in that moment, Mary Cait was real to me. We had a child. Tears came to my eyes and I looked up at Jay. It seemed as though we had just done the most amazing thing in the world. She slipped out in a rush and Dr. Edwards put her

on my stomach and he handed the scissors to Jay and Jay cut the umbilical cord. She was all reddish and slick and she was crying.

Someone asked what time it was and someone answered 1:43. It was 1:43 in the afternoon on a Tuesday, the 18th day of September, 1990 and Jay and Jann Hoke had a new baby daughter named Mary Caitlin.

End

NUCLEAR FAMILY

An essay

In 1962, when I was six years old, Mother began buying extra canned goods when we went to the grocery store. Peas, corn, potatoes, ham. Two cans became ten became fifty, lined neatly along the walls of a storage space under the basement stairs. She saved plastic containers, washing them out and filling them with water. These, too, were placed one by one into the storage space. I followed her downstairs often and watched her arrange blankets, pillows, a portable radio. She hung a can opener on the wall, set a kerosene lantern on a small table and brought down some of my story books and my little brother's puzzle games. I loved this wonderful little room. It was about ten feet deep, six feet wide and just barely high enough for Mother to stand in. My father had to stoop.

"Why are you making a house downstairs?" I asked.

"Because President Kennedy told us to." was the answer.

This was a new idea -- that there was someone who could tell Mother and Daddy what to do. I knew who the president was because I had seen him on television.

"If President Kennedy asked you to stand on your head, would you do it?"

She looked at me solemnly. I fidgeted. Finally she answered:

"Probably."

I laughed at the thought.

I told Maryanne next door that we had a playhouse in the basement because President Kennedy had told us to. She answered, in the lofty manner of fifth graders, that they had one, too -- that everyone did.

At school we practiced "duck-and-cover." My teacher, Mrs. Arvidson, called them civil defense drills. The alarm was different from a fire alarm. It was a whining buzz instead of a bell. When it sounded we filed into the hall, knelt next to the wall and covered our heads with our arms. The drills were fun -- a way to get out of doing work. As we crouched in the hall, my best friend Sharon and I always giggled and whispered that dopey Adam Crandall was looking up the girl's dresses across the hall and giggled some more.

Then one Saturday, our family was outside in the yard. My brother and I were playing "King of the Mountain" on a large rock. The game consisted mainly of pushing each other and yelling: "I'm king of the mountain." "No, I'm king of the mountain." "No you're not -- I'm king of the mountain." I think my parents were weeding Mother's rock garden. It was hot and muggy. Suddenly the sky darkened into strange shades of gray and yellow. There was an eerie silence, even the birds were quiet. I remember Kirk and I stopped pushing

and looked at the funny sky. Then a noise started, a kind of rushing noise like a loud truck or airplane.

My father stood up and shouted to my mother: "Dorothy, Dorothy, this doesn't sound right!" My heart jumped. My father grabbed my brother, lifted him into his arms and ran toward the house. Mother took my hand and followed at a dead run. We went down to the storage room and closed the door behind us. Our dog, Ollie, scratched on the outside, wanting to be let in. My parents did not open the door.

We sat huddled together, breathing heavily for a few moments. Nobody said anything. It was dark in there and crowded. Mother hugged me to her and Kirk started to cry. Then my father groped around, found the radio and turned it on. A news bulletin informed us that a freak tornado had touched down at the far end of the county.

In 1962 I never heard the words "nuclear bomb" or "Cuban missile crisis." If I had heard them, I would not have understood them. I hid my head during drills, helped stack canned food in a crawl space and thought about President Kennedy, but I did not know why. My parents were tense and worried and watched the news together every night, but I did not know why. A dark sky and a sudden wind made my father more scared than I had ever seen him and I was scared, too, but I did not know why.

My father's shout of "Dorothy, Dorothy, this doesn't sound right"

became a family joke. It was used when Kirk and I made lame excuses for being late, when the television was on the blink, when a neighbor's new stereo could be heard down the block. It became a silly thing that he had said once. Always good for a laugh.

End

ASTRALA

A short story

Gedre waited in the hallway of Central under a large sign which read: "A FILIATE'S FIRST DUTY IS TO THE WAR." A long line of filiates moved slowly into the dining hall, waiting to be served their meal. Only a few snatches of slow conversation came to her ears. A strained fatigue permeated the atmosphere and was reflected in each filiate's face. Gedre stretched her sore arms and yawned, wishing Loolet would hurry. Their shift had been over for almost a half hour and Gedre was tired and hungry. Finally her friend emerged from the enormous double doors which led to the assembly where the filiates of Manquer province worked.

"I thought you would never come," Gedre said as they took their place in line.

"I didn't fill my quota," Loolet whispered. "I waited for almost an hour for the assembler unit, but then the shift commander told me to vacate. I tried to trade spots with another filiate on the next shift, but no luck."

"How much were you short?" Gedre whispered back.

"Four couplers. And three yesterday. Mother has missed two shifts already this week because of her illness. We're going to lose accesses. Then

how can we pay for anything? I can't wait to leave Manquer. I know that everything would be better in a larger province."

"Don't say that!" Gedre raised her voice, causing several filiates to turn and stare. "Don't say that," Gedre lowered her voice. "You can't leave. Why would you want to leave? Things will get better at the assembly. When the new machinery comes in, everything will be fine. You'll see."

Loolet shook her head. "What new machinery? Have you seen any new machinery? Has anyone said anything about it? Something strange is going on. Things are going from bad to worse here."

"Nothing is going on," Gedre soothed. "Everything will be fine."

"I want to leave. Approval for my transfer could come any day. It's been five weeks since the prisoners came and started dismantling the assembly. First the old equipment, then the new. Now each day is harder than the one before. How can we reach our quotas and earn accesses if we can't have time on the assemblers?" Loolet's voice rose slightly and three filiates in front of them in line turned and nodded in agreement.

"I'm two over quota for this week. You can have them," Gedre offered, anxiously. "I know. We'll put them on Thayer's sheet. That way the shift commander won't know that your mother has missed another shift."

"Thanks, but it doesn't solve the problem. Anyway, the shift commander would suspect if he saw any assemblies with Mother's name.

She's always sick."

"What is she sick with?" Gedre asked.

"Who knows," Loolet answered. "Everything, nothing. And what does it matter? There's hardly any assembly left. All those prisoners taking everything apart. Not just surplus machines, but necessary equipment. They're moving the whole assembly, I tell you."

"They couldn't be," Gedre said. "It's just an upgrade. It's happened before."

"Not like this," Loolet replied.

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway and they turned to watch a large detail of prisoners march by. A tall young Believer with white-blond hair and an intricate star pattern of scars across his chest stared at them and grinned before a Patroller prodded him on.

"That's him," Loolet said, pointing to the young man as he and the other prisoners marched out the entrance to Central and toward the Holding Compound on the outskirts of the small province. "That's the Believer who's been staring at us. How dark his skin is."

"He was born that way. Some people are," Gedre said.

"No, it's darkened from the sun," Loolet said.

"Impossible."

"No, it's true," Loolet insisted. "The Believers live in the mountains

and the sun breaks through the warcolor haze up there. His skin has been darkened by the sun."

"How could you know that?" Gedre asked.

"I asked a Patroller," Loolet answered.

"You talked with a Patroller?" Gedre gasped. Loolet laughed.

"They're filiates, too. You're always so scared. The Patroller told me they hunt the Believers in the mountains to the far north and there the sun shines and grass grows and it looks as it did before the War."

"You can't talk about 'before the War,'" Gedre whispered. "Someone will overhear and report you at Conccent." Loolet shrugged, but when she spoke again, it was softly.

"I noticed him looking at us during our break yesterday," Loolet said. "And last week, too. I think he actually wants to speak with us."

"Don't be silly," Gedre said. "We couldn't speak with a Believer. Besides, what could he possibly tell us?"

"Perhaps he could tell us about the world away from this grimy little province. Maybe he could describe what sunshine looks like. Maybe he could tell us how to get there. Maybe he would just say something different from what we hear every day."

"No," said Gedre, shocked. "Anyway, I think you're mistaken. I don't think he wants to speak with us at all. I haven't noticed anything. You're

always imagining things."

"And you imagine nothing," Loolet snapped. "You never do anything differently. How can you live that way? You never look beyond your next shift at the assembly. You're a robot, an RPS. Mindlessly moving along the traversal, never looking left, never looking right, for fear you might see something interesting. You're afraid of change. How can you stand to live day after day, doing the same things, thinking the same things? You're as bad as your mother, talking for twenty years about a soldier who will never come back. As though there was something special about their joining."

"Don't talk about my father. Your father is gone, too."

"That's the difference, right there. My father is gone and I don't mourn and hope he will come home. He's probably dead, anyway. The War killed him."

"You don't know that for sure. You have no word."

"If he's not dead, he's as good as. He's no use to me. It's not like he and my mother were ever together for any length of time. He came to Manquer, they had me and he left. That's the way of it. It's never any different. That's the way it was for your mother, too, if you would just admit it. But no, you have to spin fantasies around a natural act and believe your mother when she says your father will come home -- that they loved each other."

"You're just saying all this because you want to leave and I don't," Gedre said furiously. "But you're not so different from me. I'm not a robot. I could talk to the Believer if I wanted to. But I don't. He's dirty. And he's a prisoner."

"And you might get caught. And your mother might find out. And your filiates might think you were different," Loolet taunted.

"Filiation is the ammunition of strong society," Gedre quoted.

Loolet snorted in disgust. "Quotations from the Filiate Manual. How original."

They moved to the head of the line and accepted their food trays, tapping their respective idenbers into the keyboard at the end of the food counter. Then they found a place to sit in the crowded dining hall. They ate in silence, occasionally looking up angrily at the other. Gedre was having trouble swallowing her food over the lump in her throat. Several filiates passed their table.

"Greetings on Caescence Day," one filiate said softly as she passed.

"Caescence Day," Gedre groaned. "I forgot. I was supposed to go home right after my shift. Ma said she had a surprise for me. To commemorate the anniversary of the War. Great, I have a fight with you and now I'm in trouble at home."

Gedre finished her food hurriedly, glancing occasionally at Loolet and

wishing she would say something and end their disagreement. But when she finally spoke, it was not what Gedre wanted to hear.

"Look," Loolet said. "I wasn't going to tell you this now, but perhaps it's for the best. I have my transfer. I got the papers almost two weeks ago. I can't wait any longer. I won't wait. Not for you or for my mother or for anyone. I'm sorry we argued, but what I said was true. You're never going to leave Manquer and I can't stay. You're frightened of a larger province. But there would be more freedom there. More filiates. Less supervision. It only makes sense."

"No, you can't go," Gedre said softly.

"No one stays in Manquer. You're crazy to want to stay. My orders are for Critis Province in Section Two State. There's a rover transport tonight and I'm leaving tonight. I've just decided."

"Critis is four hundred miles from here. It's nearer to the southern War front. Stay here. It's safe here. The warcolors would never come near Manquer," Gedre pleaded. "Oh, Loolet, you can't leave."

"I have to go," Loolet said, gently.

"At least don't go at night. Why would anyone want to travel at night? Anything might happen."

Loolet squeezed Gedre's hand.

"Poor Gedre. Always afraid. Even of the dark. I'll come say good-bye

before I go." She stood up and walked out of the dining hall.

Gedre walked despondently away from Central along the rubberine traversal which ran all through Manquer, her thoughts on Loolet. A chugging noise behind her made her heart jump, but it was just the RPS. She stepped off the pathway and leaned against a sensor post, waiting for it to pass. Maybe Loolet is right, she thought as she stared at the unweildy vehicle lurching down the traversal. Maybe that's my whole life. If it was not for the chilgray units we make at the assembly, the RPS could not run.

She watched the machine's long lighted tenacles giving off little beeping noises and correcting its direction whenever it veered too close to one of the sensor posts. It was taller than Gedre's head and its topheavy compartment was large enough to carry dozens of packages from the day's Ordering to the filiate dwellings, or two patrollers to the Compound, or seven completed chilgray units to the air terminal to be flown to other provinces. The murky twilight was deepening and abruptly lights on the vehicle's side came on so Gedre could see the name lettered on the side: **ROBOT PROVINCE SERVICE, MANQUER PROVINCE, SECTION ELEVEN STATE.**

Suddenly she thought about the tall Believer and the other prisoners at the Holding Compound. Fraternizing with the prisoners was forbidden. In that moment, Gedre wanted to talk to the Believer more than she had ever

wanted anything in her life.

"I want adventure," she muttered to herself. "I don't want Loolet to go."

Gedre's mother, Steffa, sat in the front room of their dwelling watching the comrather. As its holographic projs moved and posed, its precise voice described the merchandise available for sale during Ordering. It was the patriotic duty of each filiate to spend their hard-earned accesses on state-made goods and Steffa took her duty very seriously. She clutched a small Ordering keyboard with her left hand, her right poised to tap in her idenber if an item aroused her interest. Gedre stood at the open door and watched her mother for a moment.

"The shift ran late, Ma," Gedre said lightly. "Greetings on Calescence Day."

"Where have you been?" Steffa snapped, her eyes never leaving the projs. "You promised you would be here during Ordering today. The RPS has delivered twice already and I had to miss merchandise descriptions while I watched for it." Gedre started toward her room.

"Stay there and watch for the RPS," her mother commanded. "I Ordered something that --"

A fanfare of syntho-music from the machine heralded the appearance

of a woman wearing a short orange tunic. The proj pirouetted several times and waved her arms so the garment swirled around her.

"Oh, look. Look! A tunic. A tunic. They haven't had clothing for three weeks. It may be cloth. It looks like cloth." Steffa frantically tapped at her keyboard.

"Filiates," intoned the machine. "Here we have a tunic of genuine synthon manufactured in Section Nine State's captiol province of Thorred. Notice the styling. So functional, so aggressive. And the color, so reminiscent of our beautiful warcolors which even now light up the -- . Cease Ordering, filiates. All Orders are taken and we have a victor. Rilan Province filiates have won the tunics. The rank of Rilan Province made up their minds quickly and placed their orders. Congratulations. Remember, filiates, a soldier always reacts quickly." The woman in the tunic vanished from the middle of the room. In her place appeared a smiling man holding the next item, a conversion sergtech, which the machine began to describe.

"Rilan Province," Steffa said, disgustedly. "I don't see how I could have tapped in any quicker. Our province rank hasn't won clothing in months. I'll bet Thayer next door isn't even watching. Her and her illnesses. I still have two accesses left on today's Ordering. You and I could have each had a new tunic."

"The RPS is coming, Ma," Gedre announced.

The vehicle shuddered in front of their dwelling and stopped. A telescopic arm from inside unfolded toward her, coming to rest within easy reach. At the end was a metal cage with a keyboard on top. The merchandise was inside. Gedre tapped in her idenber and her mother's and waited, staring at the deepening dull gray of the sky. A few seconds later a syntho-voice said "Thank you, filiate," and the cage door popped open. She took the package and went inside.

Gedre gave her mother the package, studying her face. Steffa's skin was papery white, almost translucent, the same color as Gedre's, although her mother's hair had gone to gray and Gedre's was black. She looked tired. She had worked the night shift at the chilgray assembly and probably had slept only a few hours before Ordering began.

"Ma, did you know that the sun used to be so bright that it would turn people's skin dark?"

"Where did you hear that?" Her mother began working at the wrapping of the package Gedre had handed her.

"Loolet." She pictured the young Believer's dark skin.

"Is that why you were late, because you were with Loolet?" Steffa said, irritably.

"We had to eat. She's leaving, Ma. Leaving Manquer. She got her transfer papers." Gedre paused, watching her mother working at the package.

"Do you suppose that the sun will ever be that bright again?"

"Bright? What are you talking about? The ideas you have. I wanted you here today for a special reason, Gedre, and then you don't come home after your shift. Oh, I must get something to cut this." She got up and disappeared into her room.

"I'm sorry, Ma," Gedre called after her. "I forgot that today was Caescence Day."

Steffa came back in the room, raising the lid of the molded container and squealing in delight at the contents of the package.

"It's the astrala. Oh, it's beautiful," Steffa gushed. She lifted the object and showed it to her daughter

The large opalescent stone was set in a shiny metal ring. As they watched, it slowly changed colors from blue to red to orange, swirling and angry. Glowing. Sending faint flickers of light into the shadowed room. Her mother slipped it onto Gedre's finger.

"It's for you, Gedre. For Caescence Day. That's why I wanted you here today. I wish your father could see you all grown up. I imagine he doesn't look very much like his proj anymore. He's been gone so long." She looked as though she might cry, then brightened and lifted Gedre's hand to study the stone. "Of course, it is part of our duty to the War to send off those we love. Soon he'll come back. Oh, isn't it lovely? And so aggressive,

the way the colors change and swirl. The War's beautiful creation. Do you suppose it came from the enemy? Oh, yes. 'All astralas are enemy astralas.' I looked it up in the Filiate Manuel of Instruction because I wanted to get it right. I learned about them in First Learning, of course. But that's been so long ago. Here, read what it says."

Steffa handed the Filiate Manuel to Gedre and pointed to the passage about astralas.

"See, it's this subheading under 'Warcolors,'" Steffa said.

"Astrala," Gedre read aloud. "Term coined during the First Decade of the War to describe gemstone formed as byproduct of our warcolor detonations on enemy targets. The astrala seems to have organic components. The best are found around attack areas which are heavily populated. The largest ever recorded was six inches in diameter and weighed fifteen ounces. Used as jewelry and for personal adornment, the astrala is usually given on Caescence Day in remembrance of the anniversary of the War."

Gedre closed the manuel and handed it back to Steffa.

"I already knew all that, Ma. It's a beautiful astrala. Aggressive."

"Concent will start at Central in ten minutes," the metallic voice of the comrather announced routinely.

"We must not be late for Concert." Steffa patted Gedre's hand. "My mother gave me an astrala when I was about your age. And so I give you one. The symbol of a true filiate." She rose from her chair and struggled into an outer garment to fend off the chill for the walk to Central. The evening was even colder than usual. Frost rimed the steps of their dwelling and the black surface of the traversal.

"Try to make sure Thayer and Loolet see your astrala, Gedre," Steffa said as they walked. "It's much more aggressive than either of theirs. Thayer was not at the shift again today. Her 'illness.' Sometimes I think she is sadly lacking in filiation."

"I told you Loolet was leaving," Gedre replied.

"Well, she'll have to be at Concert," Steffa answered.

Thayer waved them over to two places she had saved on a bench near the back of the dining hall. The huge room was filled to bursting, with filiates seated on benches and tables, or leaning against the walls if no seats could be found. Twice a month the entire populous of the province crowded into the dining hall to hear messages from their leaders and to learn of the War's progress.

"Greetings on Caescence Day," Thayer said as Gedre and Steffa

squeezed onto the bench beside her.

"Aggression to peace," Steffa said, automatically. Gedre looked around the dining hall for Loolet and finally saw her sitting at the end of a long table, a small black bag on the table in front of her. Thayer followed Gedre's eyes.

"She says she is leaving," Thayer said with a martyred tone. "I told her to go if she must. I would not try to stop her. Just because I have not been working regularly because of my illness is no reason to give up any plans she might have. That's what I told her. She says she's leaving on the transport tonight."

Steffa nudged Gedre, looking down pointedly at the astrala on Gedre's finger. Gedre look back at Loolet. Steffa sighed and grabbed Gedre's hand, shoving it under Thayer's nose. "Look, Thayer, I obtained an astrala for Gedre during Ordering."

"How angry it looks," Thayer said, by way of a compliment. She peered at the astrala. "And almost as large as Loolet's. I did not Order today."

"I thought not," Steffa muttered under her breath. She sounded annoyed, probably by Thayer's comparison of Loolet's astrala. Gedre smiled

in spite of misery.

"What did you say?" Thayer asked.

"Nothing, It's just that our province lost clothing again."

"I heard," Thayer said contritely. "I meant to Order, but I didn't feel well and so I watched a video on advances made because of the War. Did you know that some filiates once thought it good to waste precious State land? Use it for no purpose. The video called it 'parks.'"

"I've heard of parks," Gedre interjected. "Large parcels of land set aside by governments for recreation. Parks were quite common before the War."

Several nearby filiates heard the last remark and turned to look at Gedre disapprovingly. Thayer and Steffa ducked their heads nervously.

"Really, Gedre," Steffa reproached her, as though Gedre had told a joke in bad taste. "One doesn't talk about 'before the War' in a public place. Or anywhere else for that matter. Where are your manners?"

"The War is life," Thayer said positively, as though she had just made up the catch-phrase.

"It has always been and will always be," agreed Steffa enthusiastically, loud enough to be overheard. She had been sanctioned during Conцент, once, years ago, for criticizing the government policy

against marriage. Her left hand had never been the same. A filiate rarely had to be sanctioned twice.

"Sorry," Gedre muttered.

The lights went down in the dining hall and all conversation ceased. The oversized comrathier suspended from the high ceiling blared out a deafening roar of syntho-music. Then the larger-than-life proj of the Section Eleven State General appeared, the medal, tassels and gold braid hanging from his State uniform reflecting light from an unseen source. Gedre's heart beat faster. She had heard the stories, as had every child in First Learning, about the historic day years ago that this very same general had visited the tiny province of Manquer even though it was located in a remote northern corner of the giant Section Eleven State. Steffa always said that Gedre's father looked like the General, although Gedre could not see the resemblance, not from her father's projs, anyway.

"My filiates of Eleven, it is the patriotic duty of the rank of each province to Order each and every day," the General said majestically, his medals quivering. Thayer glanced at Steffa worriedly. "Ordering fosters competition for the merchandise between provinces and keeps strong our all-important aggression. Hoarding accesses you have earned does not benefit your filiates. As you will see during this Concent, the War news is good.

Enemy kills have been numerous. A battle was joined just outside the southern border of Section Two State."

Gedre looked at Loolet. Critis was in Section Two State. Loolet glanced back, but quickly averted her eyes.

"The beautiful warcolors have produced thousands of astralas." He leaned over slightly as though to pick something up off a table and straightened, holding out a large astrala. It was flat and roundish in shape with four or five short finger-like projections. Several filiates gasped at the size of it. "This glorious specimen was brought to me only hours ago. Notice how aggressively the colors swirl and blend. An outstanding example and one of the larger astralas ever found. Our warcolors are superior to all the weapons which the enemy possesses. Cherish the warcolors and our glorious War. Be dutiful filiates. Aggression to peace." He saluted and faded. A murmur swept the room. Thayer leaned over to Steffa and whispered: "He looks so well." Steffa pursed her lips and did not reply. Thayer always made a point of the fact that she had actually seen the General on his visit to Manquer and Steffa had not.

The comrather cast a spotlight on the floor and the province Supervisor stepped into it.

"And now the First Learning children from Lanstru Province in Section

Four State will recite poems they have written about the War," he announced.

A proj of a small boy in a First Learning uniform walked across the dining hall and stood at attention before beginning to speak. Gedre sighed and slumped her shoulders, looking over again at Loolet, trying to catch her eye. A dozen children recited their work, each rhyming "warcolors" with "our brothers" at least once during the long poems. They spoke of the beauty of the astrala and the beauty of the War. They praised the unity of filiation and the satisfaction of duty to the State. They described hatred for the enemy and denounced the enemy's treachery, although this last was framed in the most general terms for none of the filiates had ever seen the enemy up close or knew anything about them. And as the children spoke in their high, clear voices, the comtrather recreated images behind them of cities and villages, farms and forests, vehicles and distant figures of enemy soldiers -- all lit and consumed by the warcolors' dazzling spectrum.

The poems ended and the room went dark again for a long moment. And then something happened that had never happened at Concent in the small province of Manquer. The High Leader of the Affiliated States, his uniform brilliant with medals and fiery astralas, appeared and regarded the gathering solemnly. Gedre knew at once who he was though she had never seen him

before. His proj had a shimmery, ethereal glow to it, augmented by the fierceness of the astralas. He raised his hands and began to speak and at the sound of his deep voice, Gedre felt as though he spoke only to her and chills ran up her arms.

"My filiates of Manquer Province," the High Leader began, and a wave of excited whispers washed over the hall as the realization grew that he actually speaking to Manquer alone. "As you may have guessed, your chilgrav assembly is needed elsewhere and so is being dismantled. Until this task is completed, all transfers and travel orders are cancelled."

Gedre looked over quickly at Loolet and saw the disappointment in her face.

"Prisoners of the Affiliated States have been brought in to speed this task," the High Leader continued. "These prisoners will not be near you for much longer. Soon the dismantling of your assembly will be complete."

"It's practically disassembled now," Steffa whispered, but Thayer motioned her quiet.

"But you will not then be idle, filiates," the High Leader said. "Manquer Province will still make a contribution to the War."

Another wave of murmuring coursed through the crowd. Steffa leaned over to Thayer and whispered: "You see, I told you a new assembly would be

built."

"Meanwhile," said the High Leader, "some of you must work near the prisoners. Among them are members of the radical sect known as Believers. I warn you now of the dangers of any fraternization."

Gedre's face grew hot. She felt as though the High Leader had read her thoughts. She quickly folded her hands in her lap to hide their trembling, glancing around to see if any of her filiates noticed, but everyone was gazing raptly at the High Leader.

"Do not listen to them," thundered the High Leader. "Shun them. They preach the traitorous blasphemy of escape from our glorious War. Of escape from the duties of each filiate to be aggressive and act only for the good of the rank. They believe that it is possible to escape this world and travel to another where the War does not exist. They believe that such an escape is facilitated by a scar or healing of the flesh and so they cut their bodies. They preach rumors of strange disappearances. They are not to be tolerated. I tell you these things so you will not be beguiled by their strange manner and appearance. There is no truth to their lies.

"Our glorious War demands all our strength and thought. When these Believers are caught, they are segregated from our healthy society so they can not contaminate filiates with their ideas. To complete the dismantling

quickly it was necessary to bring them to Manquer. But never listen to their tales of escape. They are cowards. They are liars!" He paused, breathing heavily. Gedre wondered if her mother could hear her heart pounding.

"Filiates caught fraternizing with the Believers will be impounded and treated as Undesireables. Be warned."

Then the High Leader seem to wait for the impact of his words to be felt, although of course he could not see or hear the filiates to whom he spoke. Finally he smiled benignly and raised one hand as if in benediction.

"Beseech with me, filiates," he boomed. All voices in the hall joined the High Leader's supplication: "May our glorious War continue forever. May we be aggressive in thought and deed. May this aggression bring internal peace. May the beauty of the astrala inspire each filiate to love and reverence for the everlasting conflict." The supplication ended and the High Leader added: "May Manquer province serve the War well." His proj shimmered and faded as the lights came up slowly in the hall.

"Well, I'm sorry that this ruins Loolet's plans," Thayer said. "But I can't say I'm sorry to see her stay here. What with my illness and all, it is hard enough for me to face the day without worrying about my daughter being nearer to the War front. I guess you're glad she's not going, Gedre, although I must say that it wouldn't do you any harm to be a little more aggressive like

Loolet and -- shhh, here she comes.

Loolet looked at the small group and shrugged her shoulders.

"I guess I'll have to wait for awhile."

"That's not so bad," Gedre said. "Didn't you hear the General say that there was a big battle near Section Two State? Critis is right there. You're so much safer here."

"Safer," Loolet said. "I don't want to be 'safer' I want to be away from Manquer. I want something to happen to me."

"Happen to you?" Thayer said. "What do you mean? Things happen to you all the time. You could happen to take care of your ill mother, for instance. Let's go home. I'm on early shift tomorrow, although I'm not sure I can make it. I feel so weak."

As they filed slowly out of Central, Gedre caught Loolet's arm.

"Meet me later, on the traversal toward the Holding Compound," Gedre whispered.

"Why?" Loolet whispered back.

"You said the Believer wanted to speak with us. Let's go find out."

Loolet's eyes widened in surprise.

"You heard what the High Leader said and you're willing to speak with the Believer?" she asked.

"Su-sure," Gedre faltered.

"And you're not afraid? It's dark and a long way to the Compound. And there are Patrollers once we get there."

"It was my idea, wasn't it? I've thought about all that," Gedre said, with more conviction than she felt but wanting Loolet's approval more than ever.

"Okay," Loolet said. "As soon as Mother is asleep, I'll meet you."

In the clammy cold night, they climbed the hill overlooking the Holding Compound, threading their way between boulders and scrubby ground-vege. Skirting rock ledges and overhangs. Finally they arrived at the top, out of breath, holding their sides, and leaning against a rock for support. Below them, lit by searchlights and banks of pole lights, they could see the Holding Compound. A wavery detainbeam encircled the Compound. Large signs, warning filiates away and bearing the signature of the High Leader himself, were posted on the detainbeam supports. Outside the beam, Patrollers moved slowly back and forth in front of the entrance gate, holding prodsticks and watching the prisoners inside. Some sort of activity seemed to be going on in the Compound.

"Do you want to do this?" Loolet whispered when she had caught her

breath.

"I said I did," Gedre whispered back.

They moved cautiously down the hillside, keeping their eyes on the Patrollers. About ten feet from the detainbeam, they stopped and crouched down next to a large rock.

Loolet peeked around the rock and motioned to Gedre to look. The wavery detainbeam was distorted at the bottom. Next to a rocky ditch, the beam did not reach quite to the ground. It was too low to crawl under, but it looked as though they could lay in the ditch and look under the beam, and see and hear the activities going on inside without being seen. Loolet waved Gedre forward, but Gedre was frozen with fear.

"Come on," Loolet hissed.

"They'll see us," Gedre whispered.

"It's dark and there's a fog coming up. We can't come all this way and not at least take a look."

"If the Patrollers can't see us, then neither can the Believer. Didn't we come here to talk with him?"

"It's sure he can't see us if we don't get closer to the beam. I'm going."

Loolet crept forward and disappeared into the ditch. Shaking with excitement and terror, Gedre followed Loolet to the ditch, diving in, and then

cautiously raised her head to look under the detainbeam into the Compound. She was surprised by how many men were among the hundreds of prisoners. In Manquer, the women outnumbered the men by almost twenty to one. She could easily pick out the Believers. Both the men and women had patterns of scars across their arms and chests. The young had only one or two livid markings, but the older ones had intricate criss-crossings linking dozens of white scars. Their long hair, so different from the standard filiate cut, hung free over their shoulders.

Just then they both saw the young Believer who had watched them. He was being led to the center of the Compound by an old man who seemed to be a leader. Raised white scars in whorls and circles covered the old man's body. He carried a large pot of thick chalky liquid which spilled over when he placed it on the ground beside him. A haunting, low-pitched cry from the old man brought the Believers crowding around the two. The leader held up his hands and prayed to the sky.

"We Believe that the warcolors will come, but we will not succumb," he cried. The crowd of Believers chanted softly: "Escape, escape, escape." The old man brought forth a dripping handful of the white liquid and smeared it on the young Believer's chest.

"We Believe that our blood will protect us from the astralas," the

leader prayed. "We must Believe and cut our bodies. We must protect ourselves from the warcolors and the astralas that come afterwards. We must pray and Believe." And the crowd echoed: "Believe, Believe."

"We Believe that escape from the War is possible. We must pray and Believe." And the crowd chanted: "Escape, escape, escape."

Then the leader raised his hands and there was a sudden hush. He seized the young man's wrist and made three slashing movements over his palm. Gedre could not see what instrument the leader used, but when the young man drew back his hand, blood dripped from it. The young Believer slapped his chest with the bloody hand, mixing the liquid and the blood and rubbing the mixture all over his body. Then the crowd erupted into dancing and loud, frenzied songs. And one by one, they cut themselves and their children and smeared the blood on their bodies, mixing it with white liquid as the young man had done. They twirled and undulated in the yellow jumping light reflected off their painted bodies from the infraset and the searchlights and the shimmering detainbeam. The fog grew more dense as the night became colder, but still the Believers danced. Patrollers seemed to be gathering at one end of the Compound and they did not interfere with the ceremony.

"Did you hear what they were saying?" Loolet whispered.

"Something about the astralas. About protecting themselves from the warcolors and the astralas. What do you suppose they're rubbing on themselves?" Gedre whispered back.

"Some kind of paste. It almost looks rubbery. See? And it mixes with the blood. Let's go. You've proved you're not afraid. It's making me sick to my stomach to watch them."

Loolet turned and crawled toward the rocks, but a sudden noise from below her warned that someone was coming. She crouched back into the crevice in the rocks, trying to make herself as small as possible, motioning to Gedre to stay put. Two sets of footsteps. Then more and more. They could see the uniforms of Patrollers as they passed their hiding place.

"That's all of us, then," one said.

"Yes," another answered. "We'd better hurry. It's almost time. The High Leader's rover is just out of range and we are to rendezvous there."

"What about them?" asked the first voice.

"They'll stay put until it's over. It won't take long."

"But won't they change, too?"

"No, that's what all that chanting and cutting and blood is for. They've figured out how to protect themselves. Want to stay with them?" Several laughed as the footsteps broke into a run, moving up the hill.

As the sound died away, Gedre raised her head to look toward the Compound. The Believers still danced and chanted, their bodies covered in reddish-pink goo. But they were no longer guarded. All the Patrollers had retreated up the hill.

"Why are they running away from the Compound?" Gedre asked, after the Patrollers had disappeared from sight. "All the Patrollers, just like that."

A deep rumbling seemed to come from the earth below their feet. Abruptly the Believers stopped dancing and crouched where they were. Loolet suddenly grabbed Gedre's hand and started pulling her up the hill after the Patrollers.

"Run," she cried. "Something is happening. Something awful."

The girls scrambled up the hill, falling and pushing one another. Then came the first spiralling scream overhead. Loolet shoved Gedre toward one of the rock overhangs. The first explosion threw them to the ground, Loolet falling on top of Gedre, knocking the breath from both of them. The sound waves from the blasts ricocheted through their bodies.

The screaming from the sky was almost melodic, starting in the lower ranges and moving up and up in pitch until it was lost to Gedre's ear. Finally there was a momentary lull and she shifted her head just enough to see a

patch of sky. Every detonation was throwing hideously beautiful colors high into the sky. Red, orange, purple, green, yellow. Higher and higher they spewed, only to end in radiant sparks and filaments of luminant dust which shimmered and gleamed as they fell back to earth. The air was thick with delicate gossamer webs of floating, swirling, glowing dust. Each new blast stirred and raised the dust already settling, giving it new color and new pattern. The vivid flares, the whirling, living dust and the musical notes sung by the exploding light spectrum hypnotized with their color and sound. Gedre trembled in awe, mesmerized by the countless explosions and the glittering incandescent veil they produced.

The silence following the display seemed incongruous, as though the explosions were a natural state and the quiet contrary to them. They lay still for a long time, their arms still clasped around each other.

"What was it?" Gedre finally whispered.

"Warcolors," Loolet answered.

"How do you know?" Gedre said.

"What else could it be?"

They sat up.

"Loolet," Gedre gasped. "You're covered in dust."

Loolet was covered in the gleaming dust from the explosions. Gedre

tried to brush it away with one hand, but her efforts seemed only to rub it into Loolet's skin. The astrala on her finger caught her eye. It glowed and reflected the colors of the dust shaking from Loolet's body.

"There's no dust on you," Loolet said.

"Only on my hand," Gedre answered. "Your body was covering me. And the rocks. Oh, Loolet, we must get back home and wash this away. It's all over you. It's starting to make your skin look odd. Does it hurt?"

"No," Loolet said.

Gedre helped Loolet to her feet. She heard chanting and glanced over her shoulder to the Compound. The Believers were beginning their dance again.

At the summit of the hill, they stopped in horror. Manquer was destroyed. The tiny province had become a smooth glittery desert. Small flashes of warcolors still jumped from some dust-covered heaps which must have been collapsed dwellings. In a few places the dust was only a film over the twisted and melted traversal. But the devastation was complete. No one could be left alive. A permeating burnt odor drifted to their nostrils.

"The enemy doesn't have warcolors," Gedre said. "Isn't that what they told us, Loolet? The enemy doesn't have them."

Loolet slid to the ground.

"Yes, that's what they told us. I feel dizzy. I keep seeing lights and colors."

Gedre sat beside her friend and held her head on her lap.

"Just rest a second," Gedre said. "There's no point in going into the province. It's gone. When you feel better, we'll figure something out. Maybe go to Critis Province, like you wanted to. Our mothers are dead. Everyone is dead. There's only us left. Only us and the Believers."

"And the Patrollers," Loolet said. "Don't forget them. They knew ..."

Loolet fell asleep in mid-sentence.

Gedre came to consciousness, startled, as if awakened from sound sleep, but disoriented. The soothing morning voice of the comrader was not there to rouse her. There was a weight on her and she realized slowly it was her own hand, gone all prickly and dead. She slowly focused on the muddy grayness of the morning sky and found it strange that she could see it through the ceiling of her room. Then she remembered that she was outside and what had happened. She inched her legs together and made an effort to sit up. Loolet's head was still resting on her lap. She rubbed the dust from Loolet's face with her sleeve and raked the fingers of her good hand through her hair. Loolet's face had taken on a decidedly ruddy hue.

"Loolet," Gedre said, shaking her friend. Loolet groaned and slowly opened her eyes. "It's morning. I think we should make a plan. Move off this hill."

"We've got to get away before the Patrollers come back," Loolet said, speaking with difficulty.

"Why?" Gedre asked.

"Don't you see?" Loolet said. "It's the only explanation. This attack on Manquer was planned. It's not an enemy attack. The Patrollers knew and left before it happened. And the Believers knew. They protected themselves somehow before the warcolors came."

"But why would our own side destroy Manquer? It doesn't make sense."

"I don't know." Loolet tried to sit up. "Help me."

Gedre pulled her friend into a sitting position and then helped her stand.

"I can't seem to make my legs work very well," Loolet said.

"Where shall we go?"

"I don't know. Back to the Compound?"

"Where the Believers are? Why?"

"To talk with them. Perhaps they can tell us why Manquer was destroyed."

The girls started up the hill, Loolet leaning heavily on Gedre. But Loolet could not make her legs move and she soon stumbled and fell. It was then that Gedre heard the roar of a rover engine and looked up to see a huge rover filled with Patrollers coming toward them. The High Leader's insignia was emblazoned on the side of the vehicle.

"Oh, Loolet, get up," Gedre begged. "They're coming. Patrollers. They'll see us in another minute."

"You'll have to go without me," Loolet said weakly. "I can't move. My arms, my legs. Everything is so heavy. I can't even see you very well. Can only see the ring on your finger. Glowing."

Gedre looked down at Loolet. Loolet's eyes were closing and her whole body seemed awash in a softly swirling light.

"Gedre, my friend," Loolet whispered. "I think I know what's happening. Go quickly. You can't help me."

The rover was almost upon them. Gedre squeezed Loolet's hand and ran for cover in the giant boulders on the crest of the hill. As she hid herself, she heard the rover engine slow and heard voices calling.

"Here's one, sir," said one voice.

"What's it doing so far from the province?" answered another.

Gedre peered cautiously around the rock and saw that the rover had

stopped not far from where Loolet lay. Several Patrollers jumped from the back of the rover. Then Gedre clapped her hand over her mouth to keep from gasping aloud. The High Leader emerged from inside the rover and knelt beside Loolet. Gedre saw Loolet move her hand a fraction of an inch and heard her make a gurgling noise.

"It's not finished the change yet, Sir," said one of the Patrollers, anxiously.

"No, not quite." The High Leader touched Loolet's hand. His voice was soft and calm. "Can you understand me?" he asked.

Loolet gurgled again.

"High Leader, I've never actually witnessed a transformation of one that's conscious, sir. The ones in Manquer were already changed. And all we've picked up were dead first." The Patroller's voice had an almost hysterical undertone to it.

"Get ahold of yourself, soldier, nothing will happen," the High Leader said in his liquid voice. "The body hardens and begins to glow. That's what the warcolors cause. A holosteric reaction in human cells -- a kind of solidifying of the tissue, but not the anima. Nothing happens to what makes the cells alive. Soon this one will look like any other astrala you have ever seen, except the colors will be more vivid. Always more vivid with the

conscious ones. We don't know why. The farther away from the warcolors explosion, the longer the time for the change. Those in Manquer changed very quickly. Probably in a matter of minutes. Don't you find it fascinating that this one can still understand when it is so nearly finished?"

"Yes, sir," the Patroller answered, doubtfully.

"You are becoming a thing of great beauty," the High Leader said to Loolet softly. Even from a distance, his soothing voice washed over Gedre like a hypnotic lullaby. "You will serve the glorious War as a true filiate. The astralas fuel the warcolors."

Gedre turned his words over in her mind. The warcolors cause the astralas, she thought, remembering her lessons in First Learning. But he said the astralas cause the warcolors. It became a rhythmic chant in her head: warcolors cause astralas cause warcolors cause astralas cause warcolors ...

"Look, sir, it's changing colors," the Patroller said with wonder apparent in his voice.

"Yes, a particularly good specimen. As I said, the conscious ones always are. Let's pick it up, Patroller."

Three Patrollers came forward and lifted Loolet to a standing position. They stripped her clothes off her and Gedre could see that what they held was no longer Loolet. Her legs had fused together, her arms had

adhered to her side. She was glowing, brightly colored and ill-defined, like a stone statue of the vague outline of a person. The colors pulsed angrily and Gedre suddenly felt the struggle of Loolet to escape her prison. To escape the prison that her body had become. And Gedre knew what the astralas were.

"Look at this one," Gedre heard a Patroller say. "Did you ever see colors like that? None of the ones in Manquer were this bright."

"Beautiful," agreed another.

They lifted the astrala that had been Loolet into the rover.

"That's all, then, High Leader," a Patroller reported. "All the astralas from the province are already at the airstrip."

"Take me to the airstrip," the High Leader answered. "Then send transport back for the prisoners at the Compound. Can't have Believers escaping."

"No, sir."

Gedre leaned back in her hiding place. The voices stopped, the rover's engine started. She waited until the noise faded, then hurried toward the Compound, a plan forming in her mind. Escape, the Believers had prayed. Escape from the War. Escape from Manquer as Loolet had wanted to do. She would free the Believers and escape with them. And as Gedre ran, a soft

light caught her eye and she looked down to see that her hand was beginning to glow with a swirling array of lovely colors, reflecting the same colors from the astrala in her ring.

End

DUSTY MONEY

A one-act play

CAST OF CHARACTERS

GEMMA TORRENT, 23, a scheming golddigger.

WAYLAND MITCHELL, 62, an out-of-work actor.

DEEANN TORRENT, 39, Gemma's mother, an alcoholic.

ELEANOR LOCKE, 60, a rich widow.

ALLEN LOCKE, 39, Eleanor's son, Gemma's fiance.

Time: Spring, 1990.

Place: DEEANN'S modest home in the small town of
Greenlee.

Scene One

At rise. GEMMA is seated on the floor in a messy living room, busily digging through a dusty cardboard box. The doorbell rings. SHE hurries to answer it.

GEMMA

Yeah?

WAYLAND

I'm Wayland Mitchell. You called the Third Act Theatre?

GEMMA

You're late. Come on in.

(GEMMA ushers HIM into the living room and moves a box so HE can sit. But HE remains standing at awkward attention, like a bum asking for a handout. HE is wearing a cheap, ill-fitting suit.)

WAYLAND

So, you said on the phone you might have a job. An acting job.

GEMMA

The guy at the theatre said one of the stage hands was in the Korean War. And had some acting experience. That you?

WAYLAND

I served as a medic's assistant in a MASH unit. You know, rolling bandages, serving meals to the wounded. And I been in a few plays.

GEMMA

And you could prove you were in Korea if you had to?

WAYLAND

I guess so. I didn't see any real action, if that's what you mean. But I got discharge papers. Somewhere. What's this all about?

GEMMA

Know anything about prisoner-of-war camps? About daily life there?

WAYLAND

I had a buddy who was in a camp. For seven months. Pretty tough. I remember some of what he told me.

GEMMA

But could you talk about a POW camp as though you were there?

WAYLAND

Yeah, I guess so. If I had to.

(GEMMA leans back and smiles.)

GEMMA

(Almost to HERSELF) You look as though you could use the money, too.

WAYLAND

I ain't been doing so well lately. But I ain't doing anything illegal, if that's what you got in mind.

GEMMA

What about something just a teensy-weensy illegal that isn't exactly against the law. At least not for you.

WAYLAND

What is it?

GEMMA

All you have to do is show up here today with two letters and some other personal effects and tell everybody that you knew a certain man in Korea and he gave you this stuff to give to my grandmother.

WAYLAND

Two letters? What do they say?

GEMMA

One implies that this man was having an affair with my grandmother and the other says that my grandmother is pregnant and that this man is the father.

WAYLAND

Aren't your grandparents gonna be sore about that?

GEMMA

They're dead. My grandfather has been dead for years, I never knew him.
And my grandmother died in a car accident almost six months ago.

WAYLAND

Then why --

GEMMA

Look. Were you ever forced to do something you didn't want to do?

WAYLAND

Sure, I guess.

GEMMA

Do you know who Allen Locke is?

WAYLAND

Locke Gas and Oil?

GEMMA

And Locke Coal Company. Locke Manufacturing. Yeah. That Allen Locke.
Well, I'm engaged to marry him.

WAYLAND

Wow.

GEMMA

Yeah. Only I don't love him, see. He's old and he's boring. But he has something that I don't intend to live without -- money. And if I had money of my own, I wouldn't have to marry the Locke empire. I could do as I pleased.

WAYLAND

So how are you gonna get money of your own?

GEMMA

With your help, Mr. Mitchell. With your help. Here, sit down. Here is my proposition. You help me pull this off and I'll cut you in for twenty-five percent of whatever money I get. That should buy your silence. And the deal is that you disappear afterwards. Relocate. I don't want anyone looking you up to ask questions about you story. Your share

should be more than enough to let you live comfortably somewhere warm and far away. Say Mexico. Or wherever. I don't care. Just don't show up back here in Greenlee.

WAYLAND

What would I have to do, exactly?

GEMMA

Just learn a part. Like in a play. You can do that.

WAYLAND

I guess. How much money are we talking about?

GEMMA

I figure about a million dollars. Your share would be two hundred and fifty thousand. (WAYLAND is visibly impressed) Here. (GEMMA hands HIM a newspaper) That's last week's Greenlee Times. See the story? Here. There are even pictures.

WAYLAND

You mean "Pauline Farrell Dies"?

GEMMA

Yeah.

WAYLAND

Is that your grandmother?

GEMMA

No, no. You're not listening. My grandmother died months ago. This old broad kicked last week.

WAYLAND

So who is she?

GEMMA

She's a rich old lady who died without leaving a will and without any known heirs. See, there's a picture of her. And there's a picture of her only son, Dunstan Farrell. He was a flyer and he died in a prisoner-of-war camp in Korea. The story goes on and on about this Dunstan. How he was a big wheel in this town before he joined the Navy and how the whole town mourned when he was shot down. I guess he was taken to a

POW camp but he died a few weeks later of injuries from when his plane crashed. It even hints here that because there was no body, Mrs. Farrell always thought he might be coming back. That's probably why she never made a will. But what's not in the story is that my grandmother was having a little backstreet affair with old Dunstan before he shipped out.

WAYLAND

How do you know that?

GEMMA

Because I was digging through my grandmother's trunk looking for her wedding dress and I found a letter from Dunstan Farrell written from Korea. Here.

(GEMMA hands WAYLAND an old letter.

HE unfolds it carefully and reads.)

WAYLAND

"Dear Anita, I have been thinking a lot about what happened between us and I have come to regret having been so unfair to you. Here I am going off to war and you might have ruined your future by being with

me. You know what I mean -- b-a-b-y. I know we talked about marriage and being together but I don't think you should count on that. I think you should forget about me except as a happy memory. I hope it's happy. I'll always remember you. And I hope I'll see you when I come home as friends. Yours, Dusty." It doesn't exactly say they were having an affair.

GEMMA

Oh, come on. That's the letter of a man with a guilty conscience who wants to brush off a girl. B-A B-Y. What else could it mean?

WAYLAND

Okay, say it proves they were having an affair. You couldn't say that she had his baby from this.

GEMMA

No. That's why you're going to have this letter, too.

(GEMMA hands HIM another letter. WAYLAND unfolds it and reads.)

WAYLAND

"Dear Dusty, I am in trouble and only you can get me out. We have to get married as soon as possible. Can you get a leave to come home? It has to be very soon. I do not want to face my parents alone. I love you and I know that we can make it work between us. Please don't let me down. You said you loved me on that night before you left. A baby could make everything perfect between us. You'll see. Hurry home. All my love, Anita." Where did you find this?

GEMMA

I didn't find it. I wrote it. And I dated it exactly eight months before my mother was born. And six weeks before my grandmother married my grandfather.

WAYLAND

You mean it's a forgery?

GEMMA

Oh, don't be so literal. I found this old stationary of Grandma's and I knew what her handwriting looked like. Mom and I have lived in this crappy shack with Grandma all our lives. I used to forge notes from

Grandma to get me out of going to school. It's a good copy of her handwriting. With the old stationary, no one will ever know the difference. Even my mother won't be able to tell.

WAYLAND

Have you thought of what this will do to your mother?

GEMMA

What do you mean?

WAYLAND

Well, she's the baby, right? I mean, this would say that she was someone else's child. That her father wasn't her father.

GEMMA

Look, my mother had me when she was sixteen years old. She wasn't married to my old man. In fact, she's never been married. And she hasn't led such a pristine life since then, if you catch my drift. It wouldn't be such a shock to her to know that Grandma was just like her.

WAYLAND

So I show up here -- why this afternoon?

GEMMA

Because my mother, my fiance and his mother will be here this afternoon. There will be plenty of witnesses to your performance. You tell them that you were friends with Dunstan Farrell and that his dying wish was for you to give this stuff to his only love, Anita. Look, I went to a surplus shop over the state line and found some Navy flier's wings and a cap and some other junk that a Korean War pilot might have. You deliver all this stuff, and recite your piece about you and your good friend Dusty. You convince everyone that you are for real -- especially Allen and his mother. But then you go away, see, and we're left with the letters and the memorabilia and your story. But not with you. In this two-horse burg, all this and the word of my not-so-future in-laws will hold up in court. And you and I will be sitting pretty.

WAYLAND

I don't know about all this. It doesn't seem right.

GEMMA

Look, what could go wrong? What's the worst that could happen? We get caught. What have they got on you? That you delivered letters? That's not against the law. Besides, I checked up on you. You're not above a little tussle with the law now and then.

WAYLAND

What do you mean?

GEMMA

I got a friend who works in the prosecutor's office. And I had her check up on you, once I got this idea and got your name from the theatre. Petty larceny, grand theft auto, shoplifting. You've been in and out of the county jail for two years now. And they don't know that at that fancy dinner theatre you work at, do they? They might not like it if they found out. Might fire you. But what's the point in dwelling on unpleasanties? Just do me this little favor and you'll have enough money to take it easy. You should be retired. Two hundred thousand dollars can buy a lot of ease.

WAYLAND

You said two hundred fifty thousand.

GEMMA

Whatever. Have we got a deal?

WAYLAND

I guess. Yeah. So what should I do?

GEMMA

Just show up here at three o'clock this afternoon with the letters and all in this box, and a good story about how you were in the POW camp with Dusty Farrell and he gave you this stuff to give to my grandmother

WAYLAND

And how does that help you get money?

GEMMA

Haven't you been listening? God, you're dense. The old lady, Dunstan Farrell's mother, died without a will. No other heirs, it said in the paper. The state is going to get all her cash. So if my grandmother had Dusty's baby, and that baby was my mother, then that makes me

Dunstan Farrell's granddaughter. I'd be the heir, see?

WAYLAND

Why you? Why not your mother?

GEMMA

You let me take care of Mother. She's not too stable and she has a problem with the bottle. That's something else my friend at the prosecutor's office checked for me. I can have Mother committed to the state hospital for "observation" because of "habitual alcoholism." She already has a pretty bad reputation around town for her escapades. This little revelation ought to set her off but good. She gets a little rowdy, she yells, she maybe starts a fight or has a car wreck. And I'll make sure she makes one of her scenes in public. One more arrest on public intoxication should fix her.

WAYLAND

You can have her put away for good?

GEMMA

No, of course not. At least, I don't think so. But for long enough to get the money and get away to someplace nice and warm. Away from this stinking town and Mother and this house and everything.

WAYLAND

Seems like you've got it all thought out.

GEMMA

You bet I have. Ever since Allen proposed to me, I've been racking my brain trying to think of a way out. I mean, I had to accept -- he's so rich. But he's so boring. He starts talking about his business and I get so bored I could scream in his face. And he dresses so stupid -- all those gray suits.

WAYLAND

If he's so old, you'll probably be a rich widow soon.

GEMMA

But that's just the point. He just acts like he's a hundred years old. He's not really old at all. Only thirty-nine. So he's not going to die soon, or anything. I had to have a plan to have the money but no Allen.

I even thought of... Well, I thought of how nice it would be to be rich but not have to put up with him. And then I was rummaging through the attic because Mother was insisting that I find some stupid wedding gown that Grandma wore and I came across this letter from Dunstan Farrell and suddenly it all fell into place.

WAYLAND

Two things. That letter from Dunstan. It was already mailed, right? I mean, your grandmother received it. So how come I have it? I mean, how come this Dusty had it?

GEMMA

Okay, now you're thinking. I'm just going to bet that Grandma didn't show that letter to anyone. Grandma was a proud woman. And that letter is a brush-off if ever I heard one. It's not the kind of a letter you would show around to your friends. So as far as we're concerned, the letter never got mailed. And that's why Dusty had it on him.

WAYLAND

That sounds okay. Second thing, why haven't I shown up until now?

GEMMA

I don't know. Think of something. You were in prison or the foreign service or you misplaced the letters and stuff and just found it again. Anything. That part of the story is up to you. And I don't want to hear it until you tell it this afternoon. Makes it fresh for me. I'll react correctly. Just make it good. Here is a picture of my grandmother taken in 1950. And her old yearbook. Greenlea High School. Here's a picture of Dusty. You can learn lots about him from what's written here. Says they voted him "Class Clown." And see here, he was an athlete and pretty popular with the girls. Valedictorian. The newspaper has quite a bit of information in it, too. This should give you enough so you can convince people that you knew him.

WAYLAND

How do I know I can trust you? To give me the money afterwards?

GEMMA

You've got something on me, don't you? We've got to trust each other. So, we've got a deal?

GEMMA extends HER hand, and after a brief hesitation, WAYLAND takes it and THEY shake hands)

End of Scene One.

Scene Two.

At rise: GEMMA is standing on a stool in the middle of the room wearing a full-length wedding dress. The hem is partially pinned for shortening. GEMMA fidgets. ELEANOR is knelt beside her, busily working on the dress)

GEMMA

I feel like a damned idiot standing on this stool, Mrs. Locke.

(Calling offstage)

Mother, what the hell are you doing?

ELEANOR

Stand still, dear.

GEMMA

Is this going to take much longer? Geez, it's hot. Ouch! Damn it. Be careful. I hate this dowdy dress. But I thought Mother was going to have an attack when I hinted I might not want to wear it. Thank God you didn't have a dress, too. Marybeth Ashton told me that her mother and mother-in-law both had dresses and they both said they would be too hurt if she didn't wear them so she wore one of the horrors to the wedding and the other to the reception. Geez, I might have had to choose between two relics. Ouch!

ELEANOR

Sorry. You moved.

GEMMA

Oh, you know what I mean, Mrs. Locke. I'm simply thrilled to have you for a mother-in-law. But, God, sometimes old people have such corny hangups. It's a dress, for godssakes. Okay, so it's my grandmother's

dress, but I'll be just as married to the guy if I wore what I wanted to wear. All this tradition stuff makes me want to puke. Ouch! Fu --dge.

ELEANOR

Oh dear, did I stick you again?

GEMMA

Yes, you did. Is this ever going to be finished? Where is Mother?

(Yelling) Mother. Mother, what are you doing? (To ELEANOR) I still need to stop by the caterers and the florist and God knows where else. No one else seems to be working on this stupid wedding but me.

(ELEANOR gives GEMMA a look. The door bell rings)

I'll get it. No, I want to get it. I'm so stiff from not moving I can hardly stand it. Let go.

(SHE gets off the stool, grimacing as some pins stick HER and, holding the wedding dress up carelessly, crosses to the front door and opens it)

Yes?

WAYLAND

Excuse me. I'm looking for Anita Deauville.

GEMMA

My mother lives here. DeeAnn Torrent. Is that who you mean? But God knows where she is at this moment. Trekking in the attic. I think you have the wrong house.

WAYLAND

(Checking a piece of paper in HIS hand)

Her married name is Anita Torrent?

GEMMA

Oh. Why yes. Anita Torrent was my grandmother. But she's dead. I mean she died suddenly. About six months ago.

WAYLAND

Oh, gosh. I'm sorry. I'm too late. I wanted to speak to Anita Torrent. I'm a friend of hers. I mean, a friend of a friend.

ELEANOR

Who is it?

GEMMA

A friend of Grandma's. (To WAYLAND) Well, you better come in, I guess. Mother is searching for a veil or something in the attic. She's been up there for ages. Please excuse all the excitement. I'm getting married soon.

WAYLAND

Cleaned up. I mean, dress. Your dress. It's stunning.

GEMMA

(Giving HIM a look)

That isn't the word I would use. This is Mrs. Locke, my mother-in-law -- to-be. What did you want to see my grandmother about, Mister...ah, Mister?

WAYLAND

Wayland Mitchell.

ELEANOR

You look very familiar to me, Mr. Mitchell. Are you from Greenlee?

WAYLAND

No, never been here. We couldn't have possibly met. Unless you have spent time in Alaska. That's where I've been. For years and years. Practically forever.

(HE hunches over and looks around nervously
as ELEANOR studies his face)

ELEANOR

Still, there's something...I'm sorry. I'm being rude.

GEMMA

Yes. So you say you're a friend of my grandmother's, Mr. Mitchell?

WAYLAND

Yes, I knew someone she knew. A friend of a friend, so to speak.

GEMMA

A friend of a friend, how interesting. (Bellowing offstage) MOTHER!

(DEEANN enters. SHE carries a
cathedral-length wedding veil and a
small yellowed white bible)

DEEANN

At last. The veil was right where I thought it might be, but I had a
time finding the bible. You have to carry this bible. Your grandmother
carried it on her wedding day and I always thought I might --

(DEEANN stops when she sees WAYLAND)

GEMMA

Mother, this is Mr. Mitchell. He came to see Grandma.

DEEANN

I am so sorry, Mr. Mitchell. My mother died several months ago.

WAYLAND

Yes, so your daughter has told me. I'm very sorry. She was a lovely woman.

DEEANN

So you were a friend of my mother's?

WAYLAND

No, not exactly a friend, although I feel as though I knew her. I knew a friend of hers and I promised him, well, I promised him something a long time ago.

DEEANN

A friend of hers?

WAYLAND

Yes. Dunstan Farrell.

(ELEANOR reacts)

GEMMA

Who's Dunstan Farrell?

ELEANOR

Dusty Farrell.

GEMMA

You seem to have known him, too, Mrs. Locke.

ELEANOR

It's a small town. Dusty and Anita and I were in the same class at school. I remember him very well.

WAYLAND

He was a buddy of mine. In Korea. And he was an old boyfriend of your grandmother's.

ELEANOR

An old boyfriend of hers?

GEMMA

Well, that's kind of cool. And you knew him during the war, Mr.

Mitchell? Did he talk about Grandma? I never knew anything about this. Did you know, Mother?

DEEANN

No.

WAYLAND

We were in the same prisoner of war camp. I'm sorry, m'am. Maybe I should come back another time. You all seem to be really busy and --

ELEANOR

No, please, sit down and tell us why you've come.

DEEANN

Yes. Please, sit down. Here, Gemma, let me unbutton you. We'll finish hemming this later.

(GEMMA slips off the dress. SHE has
on a camisole and jeans underneath)

WAYLAND

Well, like I said, Dusty and I were at the same POW camp. Dusty was shot down before I was even captured, but they moved the pilots around a lot back then. He came into my camp early in the spring of 1951. I kept a diary. I looked up the date. March 2, 1951. He was in a bad way, they all were. They were rough on those flyboys. Not enough to eat. Never enough for any of us. But Dusty hurt his back when he ditched his plane and he couldn't move around so good. Made it harder for him to hustle for food. We were buddies.

ELEANOR

You knew him well?

WAYLAND

It wasn't hard to know Dusty. He was the life of the party. Cracking jokes. Wisecracks. You know.

ELEANOR

Yes, that was Dusty.

(GEMMA looks at her.)

WAYLAND

Anyway, toward the end, the end of his -- well, the end, he talked about Greenlee a lot and his mother and home. Kid stuff. Memories. You know. But mainly he talked about his girl back home. All the fellows knew about her. He had a picture. I still remember everything about that picture. I musta looked at it a dozen times a day. Showed her in profile sorta, with her hair long. It was against a white background. She had on a blouse with little flowers embroidered around the collar and a sweater.

ELEANOR

A picture of Anita? And he showed it around the camp?

WAYLAND

(Nervously.) Yeah. He did. I don't know what happened to that picture. Suppose one of the guys kept it.

GEMMA

Go on.

WAYLAND

(Jovially) So, you're going to be a bride. You look like your grandmother. Like she did in that picture, I mean. Kept up morale, I'll tell you, him showing that picture around. And you're as pretty as she was.

GEMMA

(Coldly) Thank you. Thank you, very much. But I look like my mother. That's what everyone says.

WAYLAND

Oh.

ELEANOR

Go on, Mr. Mitchell. About Dusty.

WAYLAND

You mean about what happened in the camp?

ELEANOR

If you knew him, you know how he died. How did he die?

WAYLAND

You want me to just come right out and say it, like that?

ELEANOR

Please.

WAYLAND

Starvation. They fed us in a mass feeding once a day. There was supposed to be a rotation so that everyone had a turn at the best food. But the food got more and more scarce and men got desperate. Dusty couldn't move around very well. His back. We tried. His friends -- the guys from his squadron, me. But none of us was exactly plush. I didn't realize what was going to happen until Hobbes died. He was this scrawny kid from the Bronx. We were always making fun of his accent. He got skinnier and skinnier. Stopped going to meals. Couldn't make it. Said he wasn't hungry. I remember the last day some of us propped him up for roll call. That was in the morning. By noon he was dead. We told the guards and they said we could bury him behind the number four barracks. There was some soft dirt back there and they gave us shovels to dig a grave. I remember one guard told us to leave the hole

open because there'd be others. But we covered him up and said a prayer. Dusty said it. He could quote the Bible chapter and verse. After that, it was just like the guard said. Dysentery killed a lot. I think that's what killed Hobbes, actually. But he was so shy. Just a kid. You know, wouldn't complain or talk about going to the john, I mean --

ELEANOR

I know what you mean.

WAYLAND

It was easy to quit eating if your insides were falling out. And Dusty was no different from a lot of the guys. He just got weaker and weaker and finally he died.

ELEANOR

My God, poor Dusty.

WAYLAND

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just said it like that.

ELEANOR

Perhaps you had better tell me what this is all about. Why do you come here now, Mr Mitchell? After all these years. Dunstan Farrell was buried thirty-seven years ago. There was no body, of course. But there was a funeral I remember it well. His mother put up a stone in the Greenlee cemetery.

WAYLAND

Yes, I saw it. I went over to the cemetery before I came here. It's a nice stone.

ELEANOR

Green marble. She sent all the way to Vermont for green marble. Green was Dusty's favorite color.

WAYLAND

Yeah, it's nice. So, you see, the reason I'm here is that just before he died, Dusty gave me his things to give to Anita. And I said I would deliver them, but I never did and I got to feeling bad about it. I mean, to tell the truth, I forgot about it. I was pretty shell-shocked when I got mustered out. I was in a veteran's hospital for a long while.

ELEANOR

Oh, really, where?

WAYLAND

Where?

ELEANOR

Where was the hospital?

WAYLAND

San Francisco. I mean, San Diego. I meant San Diego. There's a big veteran's hospital there and I was in it for a long time. Several years, in fact.

ELEANOR

And then you went to Alaska?

WAYLAND

Alaska?

ELEANOR

You said you had been in Alaska.

WAYLAND

Oh, yes. I went to Alaska, then. After I got out of the hospital. In 1958.

GEMMA

Really, Mrs. Locke, why are you so interested in all this? He's come here about my grandmother. You seem to be giving the poor man the third degree. Let him talk.

ELEANOR

I'm sorry. Please go on, Mr. Mitchell.

WAYLAND

Anyway, I got this stuff from Dusty and with one thing and another, I forgot about it and I was moving my things into an apartment recently and I found these two letters with some other old stuff. And I remembered then that Dusty had wanted me to give it all to his girl. I

almost threw it all away. It had been so long ago. But then I got to feeling bad, like I said, and I thought I should at least try to see that she got it. Anita. But she's dead, you say, so...

ELEANOR

Letters? For Anita?

WAYLAND

Yeah. One for Anita, and one from her, I think. I guess he must have been carrying the letters on him when he was shot down. Never got a chance to mail the one he had written, I suppose. And then there is a cap and wings and...

ELEANOR

May I see the letters?

(WAYLAND hands ELEANOR the letters)

DEEANN

But, they're Mother's letters.

GEMMA

Yes, Mother should be the one to --

ELEANOR

Don't be silly. Anita and I were very close. And I was a friend of Dusty's.

(ELEANOR opens both letters and scans them.

There's a brief knock at the door and ALLEN
LOCKE enters)

ALLEN

Anybody home? Are bridegrooms welcome?

GEMMA

Come in, dearest. We're right in the middle of a drama. Your mother is reading a letter from an old boyfriend of Grandma's.

ALLEN

What's this?

GEMMA

Allen, this is Mr. Mitchell.

WAYLAND

(Shaking hands with ALLEN)

Wayland Mitchell.

ALLEN

Allen Locke.

GEMMA

Mr. Mitchell has brought a letter for my grandmother that was written by an old boyfriend who died in Korea. He's had it all these years.

ALLEN

An old boyfriend of Anita's?

ELEANOR

Allen, this letter is from Dunstan Farrell.

ALLEN

You're kidding. What does it say?

ELEANOR

It says that Anita was pregnant and that Dusty was the father.

DEEANN

What? That can't be.

(SHE snatches the letters from ELEANOR and
reads them)

It's a joke. A very bad joke. My mother never wrote this. And I never heard of this man, Dunstan Farrell, before in my life. Mother loved my father. (To WAYLAND) I don't know who you are or what you want, but I think you had better leave. It's blackmail, of some kind. He's a blackmailer. That must be it.

(DEEANN pours HERSELF a drink and sits.

ALLEN takes the letters from HER)

GEMMA

Mother, please. Don't be so dramatic. What have we got that a blackmailer would want? I think it's very romantic that Grandma had

a secret love.

DEEANN

She had no secret love! She had my dad and that's all there is to it.

This is all just ridiculous.

GEMMA

Well, you don't have to get all in an uproar about it. What difference does it make now?

DEEANN

What difference? Those letters are saying that my father wasn't my father. And that isn't true. I know it isn't true. I look just like my father. Everyone used to say so. I have his eyes and his coloring. I even have his thumbs. Look. Your grandfather's thumbs right on the end of my fingers. Oh you know what I mean.

ALLEN

Everyone calm down. Let's think this through. Where did you get these letters, Mr. Mitchell?

WAYLAND

Well, like I was telling everybody, me and Dusty were in the same POW camp in Korea. I got all this stuff from him and --

ELEANOR

His story sounded perfectly plausible, Allen.

ALLEN

And you think the letters are genuine?

GEMMA

How would she know?

ELEANOR

The one from Dusty is definitely in his handwriting. I'm not sure, but I think the one from Anita is genuine, too. DeeAnn, is this your mother's handwriting? DeeAnn?

DEEANN

(Dully) It looks like it. But that man was not my father.

WAYLAND

Folks, I think I should be going and leave you to your discussions. I hope I haven't done wrong by coming here, but like I said, I promised old Dusty and I really wanted to...

ALLEN

Just a moment. What is your name again?

WAYLAND

Wayland Mitchell.

ALLEN

And can you prove that you are who you say you are?

WAYLAND

(Taking out HIS wallet)

Sure. I understand. You can't be too careful. This here's my driver's license, and here's my machinist's union card. See, it has a picture, too. Not such a good picture. They never are, are they?

(HE tries to hand HIM the cards)

ALLEN

No, I meant something to prove that you really knew Dunstan Farrell. Everyone in Greenlee knew about Dunstan Farrell's imprisonment and the details of his death. At least, they did at the time. It was big news in such a small town.

GEMMA

It was? How would you know that?

ALLEN

Because I've seen the newspaper clippings and because Mother told me about it.

GEMMA

Why would she do that?

ALLEN

Because Dunstan Farrell is my father.

GEMMA

What?

ELEANOR

Allen!

ALLEN

It has to come out now, Mother, because we have a terrible problem on our hands. It affects my marriage to Gemma.

GEMMA

(Jumping to HER feet)

What are you talking about?

ALLEN

Don't you see? It makes us uncle and niece. Related. We can't marry.

WAYLAND

(Edging toward the door)

I can't stay any longer. I have a bus to catch. It sure was nice meeting you folks. Good-bye now. (WAYLAND exits quickly)

ALLEN

Just a minute, you.

(ALLEN tries to catch up with WAYLAND, but fails. He goes to the telephone and dials, looking out the window as he speaks into the phone)

Yes, State Police? Let me speak with Sergeant Lippincott, please.

Hello, Sam, Allen Locke. There's a man, early sixties, medium build, balding, who has just left my fiance's house driving a tan Chevette, in-state plates. I couldn't make out the numbers, but he's heading straight for the downtown area. On Route 10, yes. Said his name was Wayland Mitchell. I don't know what he's done. But I think there may be some kind of fraud being committed. Okay, if you could just hold him until I can get down there. Yes. No problem. Thanks Sam. (HE hangs up the phone. To ELEANOR) Let me see everything that he brought.

(ELEANOR hands him the letters, the cap and wings and other trinkets. ALLEN studies them for a moment)

Well, the letters could certainly be genuine, especially if you say so, Mother. But this other stuff it could have belonged to my father. Or to anyone. This stuff is pretty common. Mitchell could have purchased it in any military surplus store.

GEMMA

You are Dunstan Farrell's son?

ALLEN

Yes. God, I know that all this must be a shock to you.

GEMMA

How do you know? That you are his son?

ELEANOR

Because I told him. I was pregnant with Allen when Dusty shipped out for Korea. I had known Dusty Farrell all my life. He lived behind the grocery store downtown. That was before they renovated and tore down all those little businesses. His father owned it when we were kids. Farrell's IGA.

His dad died in World War II. At Bataan. That forced march when the Japanese made all those prisoners walk for hundreds of miles. I think that haunted Dusty's poor mother all these years -- how Dusty and his dad died. Two different wars. But both her men died hard. We would talk about Dusty sometimes. I saw her not long before she passed away. She said, "I never wanted Dusty to be a pilot. But there was no stopping him. He was bull-headed, just like his father."

I remember when he came home that last time, he looked so handsome in his uniform. I could hardly tear my eyes away from him. Neither could any of my girlfriends. I remember Anita talking about what a dreamboat he was. I guess he got to a lot of us. Anita never let on. But I didn't either. We got the news that Dusty was shot down and captured and then that he was killed. I married Judd Locke when I was six months pregnant. I'm sure everyone thought the baby was his. Judd loved me and I grew to love him. But it is Dusty Farrell's name on Allen's birth certificate. Anita married a few months before me. I remember because I was in her wedding. And DeeAnn was premature. I guess it's possible that DeeAnn is also Dusty's child.

DEEANN

It's not possible. Don't you think Mother would have told me something

like that? Dad has been dead for years. It couldn't have hurt him. She didn't tell me because it's not true. What about my allergies? And my bloodtype? Dad and I had the same bloodtype. We both had hayfever.

ALLEN

DeeAnn, I know this must be awful for you. But there's something else to consider here. If you are Dusty Farrell's child, then you are entitled to some of the money that Mrs. Farrell left to me.

GEMMA

Left to you? Mrs. Farrell left money to you? But the paper said there was no will.

ALLEN

The paper was correct. There was no will. A letter arrived for me after Mrs. Farrell died. Apparently she decided that she wanted me, as her only grandson, to have her estate, but wanted to protect Mother's good name and my father's memory.

ELEANOR

She always knew that Allen was Dusty's son. I told her on the day we

got the news about Dusty. But she agreed with me that it was best for all concerned that no one else know, except Judd. And Allen, when he was old enough

ALLEN

Mrs. Farrell liquidated her assets and deposited the cash in a joint checking account at the Greenlee Bank. Then she wrote a letter to me to be delivered after her death telling me about the checking account. DeeAnn, it's a sizeable sum. Almost a million dollars.

DEEANN

I don't want it. I don't want any of it. (SHE pours another drink)

GEMMA

Mother!

DEEANN

Gemma, your grandfather was a wonderful man. His name was Clarence Torrent and nothing anyone has to say to me about this Dusty Farrell person will change my mind. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to lie down. I don't feel well. (DEEANN exits)

ALLEN

Mother, I think you and I should go down to the police station and talk to this Mitchell fellow some more.

ELEANOR

Allright.

GEMMA

But, Allen --

ALLEN

Mother, will you wait for me in the car. I need to speak to Gemma for a moment.

(ELEANOR exits)

GEMMA

I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding. That man is probably crazy. He looked crazy to me. I bet he has some cock'n bull story made up to tell. Probably an escaped lunatic.

ALLEN

Gemma. Perhaps it's for the best that all of this has come out now.

GEMMA

What do you mean?

ALLEN

I was having some doubts about our marriage anyway. The age difference, mainly. But I kept telling myself that one reason to marry a woman so much younger than myself was for children. Being an only child, I have always longed for a large family. Now there's some doubt that we could have children together.

GEMMA

You don't mean to say that you believe all that stuff about Dusty Farrell being my mother's father?

ALLEN

I don't know what to believe. But don't you see? Even if there's no proof, I would always wonder, wouldn't you? And so what has

happened today would always be between us. If we had a child who had genetic defects, wouldn't you feel guilty? I would. Perhaps we really are uncle and niece. We'll never really know.

GEMMA

There are blood tests, DNA, something to prove that --

ALLEN

I suppose. But even then there may be doubts. Let's be sensible. You've always struck me as such a sensible, practical girl. It's one of the reasons I was attracted to you. You have a good head for business.

GEMMA

Thanks.

ALLEN

I'd better go. Mother is waiting. I'll call you later and let you know what I found out. Don't be too upset. Things always work out for the best.

GEMMA

Allen, what are you going to do with the money?

ALLEN

Money?

GEMMA

The million dollars that Mrs. Farrell left to you?

ALLEN

Oh, that. Well, I don't need it. I thought I might donate it to charity.

Or maybe establish something in my father's name. Is there an "Old Pilot's Home?" I bet old Dusty would like the sound of that. I'll call you. (ALLEN exits)

GEMMA

Damn.

Curtain.