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The Vehicle

CONTENTS

Aunt Ora: <i>Helen Lee</i>	3
Ethnocentrism	7
Fashions: <i>Linda Lyons</i>	7
On Giving Up Auden in Despair: <i>Helen Lee</i>	8
The Vagaries of Compliance: <i>Helen Lee</i>	8
The Storm: <i>Jean Nightingale</i>	9
Sonnet to Subject: <i>Wayne Nelms</i>	9
The Killing of Mr. Kit: <i>Al Brooks</i>	10
Shorts: <i>C.E.S.</i>	16



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The Vehicle

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By Fred L. Miller

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To The Reader

The writer, like the athlete, the musician, or the actor, tries harder when the public eye is upon him. In fact, if it were not for the public eye, there would be no great actors, and few great musicians and athletes. The praise and the blame—the most elemental of rewards and punishments—keep the performer remoulding himself toward greatness.

The writer who is never published is without the benefit of these formative influences. Publication is his public performance.

To permit the creative writer of our area to bring his product before the public, we give him this VEHICLE. We say nothing of its being a means of expression. The writing itself is that. This magazine is his means of exhibit.

We invite manuscripts of all sorts—short stories, articles, poems, fillers, and cartoons. We shall pass our best judgment on what we receive and publish what we like of it. We invite the readers to pass judgment upon us, too, and we shall publish some of the letters in which they do so—if they are kept short.

We shall strive to avoid two kinds of material: that of questionable taste and that provocative of useless controversy.

Acknowledgments

James Garner for preliminary coaching, C. E. "Ted" Schumacher for invaluable technical assistance, Mervin Biel for legal advice and coffee, and Dr. Elmer Brooks for his unselfish effort to help at any time and his rigid adherence to correctness.

Aunt Ora

By Helen Lee

My Aunt Ora was one of those sprightly spinsters whose very goodness was ingrown until it was sometimes almost offensive. You know the kind: they smile upon your very boorishness and say sweetly, "My dear! If only I had your non-chalance!" She was blond and short and round-faced and had looked twenty until she was forty; after that she did up her hair and looked sixty forever after.

She was the only relative I had except my father and she afforded my only chance to go to college; so when I was eighteen I found myself at her home being given a room in the very middle of her large house. It was downstairs, between the sitting room and a bath, and its double-window overlooked a pretty little cemetery on a hillside. In winter it was too hot, standing, as it did, above the great hotwater heater in the basement and being barraged by great jets of hot air from the oversized inlet whose grating looked like a rug beside my bed. But all that I could endure.

What I could not endure was Margaret. She was the third and final member of our household, a fat, near-sighted girl of thirteen. Why Aunt Ora kept her I never found out and chose to believe a rumor told me by the barber one day when he was drunk; that Margaret was the illegitimate offspring of Aunt Ora's brother Frank, drowned in 1955 at Colon. Uncle Frank was known to have brought the child to Aunt Ora's house when she was about ten. In her there were unmistakable vestiges of Uncle Frank's tutelage. She swore, for example, like a mule-driver, and would not desist. Her very terms of endearment were profane, and when she was angry her talk made my flesh creep.

I remonstrated with Margaret at first, swore back at her later, and finally avoided her as much as possible. Aunt Ora, however, breezed on through month after month of gentle reproofs, "Now, Margaret dear, Towser doesn't really deserve to be called a name like that!" and "I don't mind your expressing your anger, dear, but I do object to some of your words. You *must* avoid them."

It was not language, however, that finally ruptured Aunt Ora's reserve. We were about to have dinner one night in

the kitchen, and when I entered I saw Margaret at the cabinet sticking her long tongue into a jam jar and almost reaching the jam.

"For heaven's sake, Margaret!" I said.

Aunt Ora had her back turned, squeezing some whipped cream onto the peach pudding. When she turned around, she was aghast. She grabbed up a great skimming spoon and gave Margaret a smart whack upon the bottom.

"Why, you—you pig!" she stammered. "What a—revolting thing to do!"

But before she had spoken three words, Margaret had let out a yelp and gone into her act. She flung the jam jar onto the floor and threw herself at my aunt shrieking. I intervened, and while I held Margaret back, Aunt Ora escaped to the living room, stopping her ears against the filthy torrent of names Margaret shrieked after her. She walked in a frenzied little circle in one corner of the room, saying, "O, dear, oh, dear!"

In the meantime I gathered all Margaret's dark mop of hair into one hand and pushed her head against the wall. She kicked at my shins, too, until I stamped one of her feet deliberately.

"You behave yourself!" I said, and flung her to the floor in the corner.

She shut up, but she got up glowering at me. Then she grabbed up the skimming spoon and clutched it to her bosom with both hands.

"She hit me with this damned thing," she bellowed. "Now I'm going to ram it down her silly old throat—just see if I don't."

"You're going to act like a lady," I said, "or there'll be so many spoon marks on your sitter you can't use it!"

She simmered down, but continued glaring at us. We had dinner, and she ate half the peach pudding.

Later I went to a movie.

When I got home I looked on the hall table to see if Aunt Ora had jotted down any telephone calls I was to return. There was only a note. "I can't stand this child any longer," it read, "I am going" There wasn't even a period.

In the living room I found Margaret sitting on her packed suitcase.

"Take me to the depot," she said. "Your Aunt said you was to send me to the girls' school at Kenton Heights. She made a long-distance call about it."

She said she didn't know where Aunt Ora went. But she doubted it was far.

"Come on," she said. "Take me to the station. You'll find your silly old aunt here when you get back, I betcha."

To send her away seemed so much the right thing to do that I didn't argue. I saw that she had some money in her purse. We could send her more at need. I left her at the ticket window buying her ticket.

She was right about my Aunt Ora too. When I returned from the station I did find her. I had gone into my room to wait for her or her telephone call. I found it too hot, and when I bent down to close the grating over the hot air inlet there she was—thrust far back into the conduit. Shoved down her throat so far that it flattened her neck and protruded only a little way from her mouth was the skimming spoon.

Oddly enough, when I told the police, they said that something was fishy: there is no such place as Kenton Heights. Later they wanted to know what I had done with the money I had taken from the wrecked strong-box in Aunt Ora's bedroom. According to the little account book in it, it had had five hundred dollars in it. Finally they started asking me what I had done with the body of the little girl.

The body of the little girl indeed! Well, I promise them one thing. If and when I ever get out of this prison, I shall bring them the body of the little girl—if I have to scour the earth to find it.

"YOU ARE RUINING YOUR EYES WITH WINE," said the physician to Tucus. Therefore, Tucus took thought what course to follow. He observed, "Sky, land, sea, and all things usually visible I have seen and seen again. And yet many a wine remains to be tasted when the new year brings its many vintages." Then he made his decision and said with firm resolve, "Farewell, eyes, for I have seen enough, but to date enough I have not drunk."—*Saint Thomas More*

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Ethnocentrism

Today we find many who are very special because of membership in a group. They are Americans, or members of the Country Club, or of the Eastern Star, or of a Greek-letter organization. WOW! This very comfortable feeling of being "in" has no special evil attached unless we are joyful about being "in" because someone else is "out."

Grouping, of course, had its origin with the beginning of man. Its purpose was to help one another, to further society by using the group talent to its best end.

Somewhere along the line this end has been sorely neglected. Those of the "in" group now feel their duty is to avoid contact with those poor unfortunates who didn't have the foresight to be born with the attributes necessary for success at parties. This attitude is understandable from groups of the KKK or the Mau-Mau's, but now and then it is visible under the guise of Protection, Courage, or—God forbid—Learning.

Fashions

By Linda Lyons

Well, gals, it's time to put away your ski sweaters and take off those ungodly colored leggin's and wrap them in moth balls, because spring is just about ready to spring. With the changing seasons there will be the usual controversy about styles, which will leave the gals as usual, breathless, and the guys aghast, also as usual. Hemlines will be worn pretty much the same as they always have been—at the bottom of the dress; and necklines, whether low or lower, are bound to be found somewhere above the waist. As for the middle of the dress, them with tiny waists will belt them and them with no waist at all won't. Shoes and hats are another thing altogether. Since both have developed flowers, buckles, and bows, it's hard to tell which we will walk on and which we will wear on the head. So don't lose your head over fashions and throw last year's items away. Fifty years from now they will be right in vogue.

By the way, for the guys who have just struggled through this mess of femininity, just remember that if you don't understand the daisies, you can't eat the hollyhocks. Like?—Dig?

On Giving Up Auden in Despair

By Helen Lee

Souls of poets dead and gone,
Invest this Age of Kackyphone!
Sit on my shoulder, help me write
My *Preludes by Psychiatrite!*
Give me the carpentry of Quarles,
Sex like Rochester or Charles,
Paranomasiastic skill
Like Thomas Hood's (but first distil).
Far, far aloof, keep me from aims
Of language plain like Truthful James'.
Help me to hide a bit of sense
Beneath entangled gender, tense,
Aves raræ from OED,
A peck of pooh, apocope;
Keep me my blood some Ezra shed
From reading white and writing red;
Make me one of whom notes say,
"Tate reads him here another way,"
Or "Warren holds his usual view:
The man wrote better than he knew."
Of Homer give me but the nod
And I shall live in fame, by God!

The Vagaries of Compliance

By Helen Lee

Oft-disregarded words are these:
"Have your tickets ready, please,"
"Step way back inside the bus,"
"We are the halt—remember us,"
"Please take one," "Cross with the light,"
"Keep off the grass," "Keep to the right,"
"Put garbage here," "Please write in ink,"
"Mail early," "Register!" and "Think!"

Not so are: "Caution: rifle range,"
"Use your credit," "Keep the change,"
"Fill 'er up!" "Damn Menshikov!"
"Drinks on the house," and "Take it off!"

The Storm

By Jean Nightingale

Black, rain-washed hills I see,
Sloping to the pounding sea.
Waves, foam-tipped, rise and stand,
Then crash upon the beaten sand.

Angry, churning, leaden sky,
Howling out a moaning cry.
Forked fingers, heaven sent,
—Thrashing down, destruction bent.

Sonnet To Subject

By Wayne Nelms

At first I thought to write in serious vein,
Of Fate perhaps, that, like the diseased breath
Indrawn, sustains us by its tenuous skein
Of Life and yet contains the germ of Death.
Again, I thought to muse awhile on Love—
But No! Love's Muse in scornful tone spoke then,
"Can *thou* Love's thousand-fingered hand unglove—
Whose myriad forms confound the sagest men?"
Then turned my thoughts to God the highest power,
Who first created perfect man from dust,
And from perfection Her, to grace his bower,
Imperfect woman, prey to Greed and Lust.
All these, I thought fit subjects for the mind
And pen not mine, not mortal, dumb,—not blind.

While driving through a small Indiana town, I notice a sign in a church-yard reading, "When tempted to go wrong turn right." Immediately to the left of this moral reminder progress had intervened and there was a state highway sign instructing, "No right turn."

—Sandra Costello

The Killing of Mr. Kit

By Al Brooks

It was a Saturday in March, and earth's yielding to the coming warmth was forecast by a faint tinge of green under last year's gray grass. A bit of snow, crusted and dirty, persisted in hardened little ridges on the north sides of the houses on Cooper Street. On the lee sides were crocuses and long-furred cats dozing with their backs to the walls. There were the other evidences of renaissance, too—the brighter sky, a couple of wind-tormented robins, and baseballs among the boys in Bigham's big back yard. Everything, thought the Bigham girl, aged seventeen, was futuristic.

She was sitting on the front porch steps, the better to ignore the boys in the back. All of the latter were under sixteen—and so, to her, beneath the age of significance. In a red sweater and jeans, she sat on one step, her feet on the next lower one, her chin on the knees she hugged. Her bright hair was down, and she enjoyed the wind's whipping it about. She felt like March—not vibrant yet, but certainly on the verge of vibrancy. She was wondering if anybody ever named their daughter March. March was splendid. March was fecund. March promised—the future.

Mr. Kit, aged two and neighbor to the Bigham girl, had no future, however. At least that's what his stepmother hoped as she put a soiled blue-and-white toboggan cap on his head and put him out of doors.

"Go on, boy," she said sweetly to him as she set him down on the front step. "Run into the path of a nice, shiny new car. Or wrap the ropes of your little swing around your little neck and hang yourself." She smiled at the Bigham girl, knowing she could not hear, and waved a sleek arm. Then she went back into the house and shut the door.

"She's March, too—Mrs. Day is," said the Bigham girl. "She's pungent, she's wind-whipped, she's—pruned sapling. But you couldn't warm her with a charcoal fire!"

Now the Bigham girl would one day know why she hated Mrs. Day, but Mr. Kit (his name was Christopher, of course, but the Bigham girl had picked up and now used the name the boy's father called him) would never know what name to

give to those rebellious little reactions that clung to him as he sat on the step and slapped one hand in annoyance against the concrete.

His coveralls were dirty. His sweater was moist in one spot where he had spilled fruit juice on it at breakfast. His eye-lashes were a little gummy, for Mrs. Day had not washed his face. And his nose was running a little. That was particularly unfortunate, for Mr. Kit had not yet learned to sniffle.

He had not learned to talk much, either. And he had had no training in being sociable. The Bigham girl briefly suppressed an impulse to call him over (she couldn't understand more than half of what he said), but the indignant little hand, giving its slow, frustrated slaps to the step, somehow wrought upon her.

"Hi, Mr. Kit!" she said. "Why don't you come and talk to me?"

Mr. Kit looked at her disinterestedly and kept slapping the step.

"Come on, sonny," urged the girl. "Let Helen wipe your nose on this soft Kleenex."

This was an order, not a question, so Mr. Kit rose, carefully descended the remaining step, and waddled obediently across the lawn. He stopped before her, not looking at her, and waited for her unpleasant service. She wiped his nose, hugged him briefly with one arm, and pushed him back to look at him. She noticed that his cap was on awry, so she straightened it, pulling it a little farther down so that it concealed more of the uncombed blond hair that needed cutting so badly.

"Oh, Mr. Kit," she complained gently, "why don't you go with your daddy to the barber shop?"

One of her words was wondrously meaningful to him, and some winged joy kindled back of the blue eyes that now fixed, shining, upon her.

"Daddy!" he said. Then a memory saddened him and he added glumly, "Daddy not home."

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"I know," said Helen. "Your daddy goes to work before you're awake, and you're almost ready for bed again when he comes home. You don't see much of your daddy, do you?"

He looked at her morosely, venturing nothing.

"You know," said Helen, cupping Mr. Kit's unresisting hands in her own, "I think you've a very nice daddy. What is your daddy's name?"

"Daddy name daddy." Mr. Kit's voice held the slightest suggestion that the question was silly. He added, as an afterthought, "Me Kit."

Helen laughed.

"Ah, Mr. Kit," she said reproachfully. "You don't even know your daddy's name. His name is David."

"Davie," said Mr. Kit experimentally, not managing the final *d*. Then, in sudden reaffirmation: "Daddy not Davie!"

"David Day!" declared Helen. "And he's twenty-nine years old and one of the best dentists in town, I've heard."

Mr. Kit looked at her as if he expected her to go ahead and simplify it all. But she didn't; she was only half-way talking to him now. The other half she was talking to herself.

"I danced with him at the Carleton a couple of times during Christmas week—and you know what? He's a real tease! A good-looking man, your father!"

One day Helen Bigham would realize why she had talked like this to the toddler who, of course, understood not a whit. But Mr. Kit would not remember this conversation, even until tomorrow.

Helen Bigham giggled.

"And one thing more, Mr. Kit. I suspect your nice daddy's—oversexed! Or he wouldn't have got married again so soon after your mother died! There, amn't I shameless, though?"

The telephone rang inside, calling the shameless one away. "I hope," she said as she retreated, "that you'll have a nice time with your daddy when he comes home."

"Daddy!" Mr. Kit exclaimed and chuckled. "Daddy come home!"

And with the very thought of it his day moved into another gear. He gave a little jump or two, then ran in a circle before Helen's vacated seat, and fell goofily on the grass, shut his eyes against the sun, kicked his heels against the ground, and chanted joyously, "Daddy come home, daddy come home."

And for an hour the lion of March was in him. He found Poochie near his own doorstep and sat upon his head. Then he slapped Poochie with mock anger across the nose and said, "Brat!" and used a bad word that would have set Helen to giggling nervously had she heard it. Finally he pulled Poochie's ears until Poochie whined with agony. But Poochie did not bite. He sought refuge under a lilac bush.

After that Mr. Kit made a small pile of dead grass before his own door. When he grew hungry he hovered near the bell, but he did not ask to be let in. The mail man came and said, "Hi, Mr. Kit," and Mr. Kit said, "Hi, mail man." Mrs. Day came out and took the mail in, ignoring him.

Anne Day had, she told herself, quite enough to do without him. There was her own baby, seven months old, squalling about nothing in the crib half the time it seemed. There was her mother upstairs, insisting that she was an invalid and keeping to her room in the sheer delight of having at last accomplished total dependency. An old woman, she was, full of complaints which she enjoyed making because there was at last someone in the house who tolerated them—a young man, a polite man, a man who made a great deal of money and dispensed it rather generously.

A man, thought Mrs. Day, as she went to clean the downstairs bathroom, who would find them out some day: find out nothing startling, but yet something fatal in its way: find out that neither she nor her mother was capable of more than a sham devotion to any other whomsoever; that the lives they had led before he accepted them had been naked, striving, strident ones, in which graciousness served only to kindle envy's sting. Beauty she had, mostly in her red hair and white skin, but warmth she had never had. Still she could simulate it well enough that a man, recently widowed and lonely beyond tolerance, might mistake for affection—affec-

tion of another coinage than what he had known, to be sure—but not counterfeit.

And so she felt, that March morning, that she had better hurry. She could not tell what David Day had seen in her already. There had been those brief studying gazes when she had been unable to suppress petty impatiences, had ejaculated some coarseness, had snapped back at her mother, had failed to console Mr. Kit when he had hurt himself.

Thus, as her husband perceived her little by little as she was, she permitted herself to behave more and more as she always had. When she was alone, she would sometimes stand in the doorway between two rooms and look at both of them—the immaculate walls, the handsome expensive furniture, the lovely carpets (she didn't even know enough to tell people what kind they were! Now a dress, a perfume, a drink at the bar—these were other matters). What counted most was in these rooms—in the piano, though she couldn't bring it out; in the books in the bookcases, though she had no intention of reading them; in the view from her window of a broad, shady street of comfortable old two-story houses—a street to which she often felt alien. To these, because they had been so much to her for too long and could therefore never be less—she must cling. It was not that her happiness was built upon these things. These things *were* her happiness, or rather the achievement which was as near to happiness as she could get. She was ready to be blunt; she thought in blunt terms.

Now was the time—while the beneficiary of David Day's bigger insurance policies was Mr. Kit and the contingent beneficiary was her own son. (Had she been cleverer, she thought, she could have found a better way. But never mind.) Day would give her a house even if he sent her away, she was sure. If, however, her son became Day's sole heir—what could touch her then? She could not possibly be in want again.

(To be Continued)

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I set my green light on a hill
For wayward sheep to find
And found that I must call them still
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Testament

C. E. S.

Line my silly casket
With any shade of blue,
And I'll remember April
Till the worms break through.

Evensong

C. E. S.

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