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These stories are mysteries. They deal with the mystery of human existence. High seriousness and slapstick are the paradoxical elements of this existence. The region in which these elements blur marks the sphere of the stories.

This is submitted in
the partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

1974

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis is submitted to the committee of
the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina
at Greensboro

NIGHT VISION AND OTHER STORIES
"

by

Robert Ruh
"

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
1974

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April 18, 1974
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NIGHT VISION

The toll booth was narrow; Eric's shoulders almost filled the inside. To provide extra legroom, the sliding window-door was pushed back its length to the back wall of the booth. Eric would have liked to open the metal sliding door in the other side of the booth to provide a crossbreeze; it was an incredibly hot July night. The steel door was open only in the afternoon to allow the impatient dayshifters quick clearance. It was not safe to have it open on the night shift. The unbearable heat seemed to energize the inner city riffraff: muggings and rapings and holdups galore.

At the shift change, Randall, the three-to-eleven man, had shown Eric a piece in the paper concerning a garage attendant who had been murdered. His manner of crinkling and uncrinkling the folded section suggested the importance he attached to the news. After Randall left, Eric read and reread the article. The murdered man had had a wife, thirty-eight, and three daughters--twenty, sixteen, and nine--the survivors. What would they do, he wondered? What were they like? The one-by-two photograph of the man beneath the article gave no clue.

Eric leaned back against the metal door and stretched his long legs outside. He could feel the heat from the door on his shoulder blades. In winter the booth was heated by an electric blower and was welcome shelter from the blustery elements; like a tortoise into his shell, Eric would pull into the booth for refuge. Now he felt limited by it, bound. He scratched at the prickly heat rash on his upper legs and laid

down the crossword puzzle, completed but for a couple of blanks.

The puzzle was part of the night's routine. He had become proficient at passing time. Every night he dialed Parkway 1-7000 to be answered by a pleasing feminine voice, recorded, with information about everything from barometric pressure to the correct time. He imagined she was blonde. There were other recorded messages that could be dialed--religious ones, political and usually two or three on courses that could be enrolled in, devoted usually to self-motivation and selling. On occasion, he would spend several hours of the night dialing out from his list of numbers. When, at five in the morning, he would find the number of the weather girl busy, he tried to assess the circumstances of the other caller.

Eric's chief pride in himself was in his ability to estimate. He liked to guess at the weight or height or length or distance of anything. For a time, after his Army days and a semester stint in college, he held a job at Coney Island as a weight guesser. People came to his concession always in groups. After a few minutes of being prodded and encouraged by the entourage, the fattest or thinnest man or woman would step up next to the scale, ready to be evaluated, while the others stood back elbowing each other and whispering the correct weight among themselves. Within seven pounds either way was not much of a problem for Eric. His greatest pleasure was in watching the long arm of the indicator climb the face of the scale and stop dead on the weight that he had just announced. Perhaps his own lack of weight, one-twenty at five-eleven, somehow persuaded the customers that he would not be able to size them up.

In the toll booth he was protected from the disappointed, loud-mouthed hecklers of Coney Island. Now his customers came in cars. They

drove up and extended their arms out windows half rolled-down; he extended his arm from the booth, took their ticket and money, and, if necessary, extended his arm back out with the change.

On the busiest of nights no more than fifty or sixty cars would pass through and most of those were odd-hour employees. Special-duty nurses and kitchen help came filing in and out at four or five in the morning. Eric would nod or speak quietly back at them as they passed him sitting in his booth. There was an outer tinge of embarrassment between them: something to do with the hour and the strange light of the mercury lamps and the tenuous connection between them.

Eric glanced at his watch: almost two, almost time to read. He fingered the spine of a paperback that lay spread open, face down on the work ledge. A fluorescent tube bracketed above to the metal roof gave off a smoky light--not a very good light for reading. From the booth he could hear occasional disturbances in the streets, sometimes only a block or two away, sometimes far enough that it was impossible to distinguish between a gunshot and a firecracker. He opened the paperback and began to read.

The book was written by a psychologist on the subject of marriage. Since becoming engaged, he had picked up several books of that sort. At twenty-nine he suddenly found himself ready for marriage, and was surprised about this turn in his nature. He had been a bachelor on principle, resolute. But he had not done too badly. She, like him, had had a taste of college, almost a year, and found it lacking, and, like him, decided that work suited her better, and like him, had found employment (Standard Typography), also on a third shift which led to their eventual meeting at a breakfast counter. Still, he wondered. She was

not the sort he imagined he'd marry when he had considered the subject. Orange-red hair was not his cup of tea. She had her faults. She was not very . . . exotic. He remembered at times that she had been the first to speak. When he thought of this he felt vaguely troubled.

Of himself Eric would say, "I figure at almost thirty a man's got to have something more." He repeated this to himself aloud, testing it.

"The man's gone loco," Eric heard a voice say. "Out here talking to himself. A real conversation going." Fred, a hospital security guard, smiled quasi-apologetically. "Didn't mean to shake you up. Good thing I wasn't somebody else. These crepe soles are dandies. Did you hear about Race Street last night?"

Trying to regain his composure, Eric said: "About the attendant, you mean?"

"They just don't have good enough security over there. Here we have good lights, good men. I'd like to see one of them black bastards try us on for size."

"Do you think they would?"

"I have one good reason why they better not," Fred said, patting a black, leather holster.

Fred stopped by the booth on his rounds sometimes and smoked a cigarette with Eric. He was the only person on the third shift whom Eric talked with--or more correctly, whom Eric listened to; Fred did most of the talking. Eric had a fair idea of the man, he thought. He pieced together the many, cigarette-length vignettes. Fred was about thirty-five, had been in the Marines (a leatherneck) for twelve years, finally got fed up with it all--had been married twice, the first wife not-so-good, the second a real peach, a Polynesian girl, met her his last year

on tour, beautiful skin, cool black hair exactly like the pictures of them.

Fred called her from the booth one night and told her he was thinking about her and missed her. He had winked at Eric as he said this. Eric thought he could remember Fred telling him that Lahaitia could neither speak nor understand English. This remembrance momentarily jarred him. Why would he call her if she could not understand him? And at three a.m. But then it was crystal clear: just to hear her voice and to let her hear his. Eric decided it would be necessary to raise the question to Fred.

"You hear that ambulance come in about an hour ago?" Fred asked. "They had to call me in. Some long-hair took a couple too many pills. Scrawny as hell, but hopped up like that they needed me to handle him. Had to kidney punch him." Fred feigned the punch toward Eric. On reflex, Eric backed away. Fred was not so much bigger than Eric--only a little taller and thicker through the chest--but even standing near one another, Eric gave the impression of being a much smaller man.

"There's a lot of excitement already tonight it seems," Eric said.

"Too much, even for a Saturday. I haven't made a complete round yet. They keep calling me in for this and that. Some nut on the psycho floor got loose and went tearing through the maternity ward flashing his jewels at them."

"What'd you do?"

"What could I do? Had to kidney punch him. Anyhow, I'm more worried about the action on the other side of the garage."

"Beck Street side?"

"Right you are. When it's hot like this those darkies can't sleep. Makes them homesick for the jungle. They pour out of their tenements like roaches."

Beck Street held a mixture of fascination and terror for Eric. From the hospital side, garage level one was subterranean, but there was a gate on that level that opened onto Beck Street. The gate was locked at night; at six Eric had to open it for the morning shift. He approached it always with apprehension--behind it could be a wino, thirsty and broke and armed, or an addict or some menace who belonged in the psycho ward. Yet, as Eric cranked open the metal gate he would experience, just as really, sensations of pleasant vertigo. He rather enjoyed his terror. In the predawn air he calculated that the clanking metal gate could be heard up and down Beck Street.

"Have you heard anything over there tonight?" Fred asked.

"I don't think so; maybe some dogs barking at the whores, not much else."

"Well, don't let that thing on Race Street bother you. We're getting some extra men."

"That's what Randall said. I get the idea he's scared. He's threatening to get a pistol." Eric stepped out of the booth and flicked away his cigarette. Fred took one long, last drag, dropped the butt by his heel and neatly crushed it.

"Not a bad idea, not bad at all. I'll check back in later, boss. Have to get going on my rounds."

"Wish I could go with you." Eric looked in the direction of Beck Street.

"Come along then."

"You know I can't. I have to stay locked up here in this steambath of a booth. Just once I wish they'd let us change jobs. On a night like this . . . to be penned up. You stay here and I'll make your rounds."

"What are you going to do when one of them jumps out from behind a lamp post on you?" Fred asked. A patronizing grin spread across his face.

"Same thing you'd do." Eric clenched his fist as if to deliver a blow. "Kidney punch them."

"You're mighty brave all of a sudden."

"Not brave; just hot, itchy."

"Well, O.K. Mr. Itchy. Got to get."

"Be careful," Eric said.

"Check."

Eric watched Fred leave and went back inside the booth. He turned on the portable radio, fiddled with the knobs and turned it off. The crossword puzzle was finished--four letter word for Persian fairy starting with a p. What kind of bullshit word was that? He hadn't called the weather girl. Why call her? It's hot. Did he need to call her to find that out? Eric took out his penknife and cleaned out some dirt that had found its way underneath his thumbnail. The others were clean.

Eric poured himself a lid of coffee from his thermos. He sat down on the stool and sipped at the steaming coffee. He should have brought iced tea, he thought, with a nice, refreshing wedge of lemon. How many hours a year did he spend in that booth? Forty a week; that's one-sixty a month; that's . . . in ten months--sixteen thousand--no, sixteen hundred, plus. A long time.

He looked at his watch and checked it against the punch clock. A city spider had webbed over the face of the punch clock. The spider was motionless, the size of a black dot which represents a minute. It looked, in fact, like an extra minute squeezed in--a sixty-first minute out of round with the rest, rather conspicuous, indisputably present. Eric brushed through the web with a scrap of rag he found beneath the ledge.

The familiarity of the booth oppressed him. Everything was within an arm's reach. Closeted with him, each object gave off a heat of its own: his book, paper, cigarettes, ashtray, coffee, the smudged glass, the overhead light, the change-drawer, ticket slot, punch clock, pencil-jar, the telephone, waste can, heater, floor, sides, ceiling. He absorbed this heat resentfully. He sweated under his arms and beneath his legs. His chest and back were wet. Around his ankles where his socks bunched he was uncomfortable.

Fred was patrolling Beck Street--while he sat. Same old story. If the Army had come through for him, back when, he believed many things would have been different. When the orders came, he had gotten the cake, it was said. He was to be on the personal staff of some brass in Washington. Some cake. Others had gotten the overseas tours--Germany, Hawaii, Thailand, the Mediterranean--while he stood at attention during official military ceremonies. While Fred was soaking up rum, getting drunk with Lahaitia, he was sitting in the PX, buying up tax-free shots of Kentucky whiskey and watching television.

And, of course, college had been even worse. And then Coney Island. It was clear to Eric that the chain of events which had joined together and placed him on a stool in the toll booth of the parking garage for

Christ's Hospital had begun when his request for overseas duty was overlooked, and from that day forward had arranged themselves unalterably. He picked up his book and began to read.

A driver mashed his brake pedal to the floor; his tires sent out a chest-tightening squall that exploded in the heavy night air. Eric flapped the book down on the work ledge. He kicked the stool out from underneath him and stepped out of the booth, sliding the door shut behind him. He took the ring of keys from his belt, turned a worn, gold key in the outside padlock, tested it, and heeled around toward the upper ramp.

Eric calculated the disturbance to be from the Beck Street area. It was possible that it was only caused by a drunk who had staggered out in front of a car. Or perhaps Fred had somehow been involved. Eric intended to find out.

He circled around, ramp by ramp, inside the garage, up level by level, until he reached tier nine, the top. The top level was without a roof. Eric paused to catch his breath. There were no stars to be seen. Across the city he could see a large revolving sign flashing alternately the time and temperature in hot white numbers. He was glad to be out of the booth.

He walked to a cement retainer wall and looked down upon Beck Street. The street was vacant. It appeared narrow. Perhaps the wino had disappeared into the gray tenement and the driver had gone on, disgusted.

Eric collected some spit in his mouth, leaned over the retainer, spat, and listened. At nearly a hundred feet . . . thirty-two feet per second/per second . . . a shade over two seconds. He could not hear it hit. Below him, he heard the muted buzz of telephone wires which

stretched along the street and appeared to be only a foot or two from it. In the uneven light of the street, the wires appeared disconnected, as if they were supported at either end by space.

Inside the tenement, lights burned. From his perspective, Eric was just slightly higher than the windows on the top floor. He could look across and see into any room, provided the light was on and the shade was up. Two windows apparently made up an apartment, one unit. He could see two figures sitting close together outside on a fire escape. In the shadows, it was impossible to tell if they were looking back.

Eric walked along the retainer wall, parallel with the tenement. In one room was a vacant baby crib, the only visible piece of furniture. In another, a string-haired white girl was wiping off a kitchen table. In the next room the window shade was drawn but shadows passed behind it. Eric walked along the wall measuring where one apartment ended and another began.

He stopped. Sitting on the edge of an unmade bed was a black woman. She had on a white slip and did not move. Her skin was light brown, very beautiful. White shoulder straps crossed her brown shoulders. She sat motionless as if in a photograph or in a caught frame of a movie. Unconsciously, Eric held his breath. Some uneasiness in himself suggested that he had seen her before. This was impossible, he realized, yet he could not account for the strange energy in his body.

What were her circumstances? Why was she not asleep, and why so still? Had she a husband? A woman so beautiful surely had a husband or at any rate, a lover. He said this to himself, under his breath, as he watched her. She seemed as familiar as a childhood friend though certainly he had never known her as a child.

She rose, turned and moved from the window. Eric could no longer see her. He sidled back and forth behind the wall in order to improve his perspective, but she could not be seen. Her window could be no more than forty, fifty feet at the most from where he stood. The idea of calling out to her occurred to him. And then he remembered the people sitting on the fire escape. That would not do. If there were some way of finding out her telephone number, he thought. Had he known her name?

Eric stretched his arms out on top of the retainer and waited for her to reappear. He would be patient. He spread his hands over the lip of the wall. The wall felt warm and smooth and solid. He rocked against it to test it. It was absurd, he knew, to think that he could budge it, and if he did in fact, he would plunge to the street below. The wall was ten inches thick. He knew this because his hand, fully extended, from the end of his thumb to the tip of his little finger, was exactly ten inches. His fiancée had laughed when he measured off a dresser top in this fashion. She had insisted upon a yard stick.

The black woman reappeared in the other window. Still in her slip, she stood in profile before the window (arranging something, moving something--he could not tell). Her hair had been straightened, it appeared, and was long and black. Even with the heat she looked cool, composed. She had nothing to do with men who spent their summers in dirty undershirts sweating through the holes; or with women who blew down the front of their flimsy blouses and fanned at their breasts.

Eric continued watching. He watched for any movement which might tell him something more--a gesture or a change in posture or a mannerism. From fifty feet it was difficult to tell. It was impossible for him to

make out her facial features. Her brown skin and white slip and straight black hair were all that he could really see.

Directly in front of the window, she extended her brown arm up above her head and then a shade was evenly pulled down. The light in back of the shade went out. He saw her briefly in the next room. Then the shade was drawn and the light was out. Eric leaned against the wall and stared at where her image had appeared.

He turned away slowly and wound his way back down to the booth. Inside the garage, he spiraled down, ramp by ramp, level by level. He turned the key in the lock and entered the booth. In leaving, he had knocked over his stool. He righted it and sat down. It was three-thirty. In four hours he would meet his fiancée for breakfast. He picked up his book and began to read.

THERE ONCE WAS AN AUTHOR FROM DOSIER

When I was in writing school, we had a fellow who was held high in general esteem. I would say that there wasn't anyone who didn't hold him there. His name was Casper Wilcox. It is surprising that Casper never did write anything much, but that did not detract from our veneration toward him. What I mean by "write anything much" is that he never wrote a whole book or story or vignette. Casper's specialty was openers. He could write the best opening sentence of anyone. And that goes for men and women who are writing today, not just those of us who knew him.

I might mention here (parenthetically, as they say) that we went to Dosier Writing Academy which is located in the state of Idaho; "where the sloping plains meet the flatlands," as they say in the brochure they send you when you write. You might expect D.W.A. (Dosier Writing Academy) to be in some tiny, out-of-the-way town. But actually it is only about thirty miles from Boise, although it is out of the way. The name of the town is Dosier.

That's where we all met Casper Wilcox. To be concrete, what I mean by we is John Slade, William Osborne, Vincent Craddock, and the girls, Jannetta Wyler and Rosemary Gray. Of course we all had nom de plumes. Respectively, they go like this: John Slater, William S. OHenry, V. R. Caedmon; and the girls, Jorgia Winslow and Rosemary Gray who made it a point never to change her name.

My plume was/is Hugo Victor which is a take-off on the French author, Victor Hugo who scribed Les Miserables which loosely translated is rendered The Miserable (People). My given name, however, is Ronald Nelson Burton. The cadence of the name does not befit an author; in

fact, some of my fellow peers criticized it professionally as "liltingly boring."

I must set the backdrop for this story. As I have already stated, it takes place in Dosier, Idaho. What I have not mentioned is that it is circa nineteen-forty-ish (the war years) and the whole thing is told, more or less, as a reminiscence from the perspective of now. Although the war does not figure into this tale, I will mention in footnote fashion that all of us men were C.O.'s. Although a popular notion today, then, a C.O. was a very unpopular notion. We did take some consolation in the fact that our teacher was also a C.O., as if his existence somehow helped to entrench ours. (I use the word entrench metaphorically, of course.)

Our teacher's name was Carlyle Simmons. He was one man who very definitely had a knack with words. He could put them together in a way that would make you want to laugh or cry right on the spot. Also, he was an honest man. He admitted to everyone that even though he was our mentor, he could not write as good an opening sentence as Casper Wilcox. And he couldn't either. He told us the truth when he said, "Opening sentences are gifts from the Muses."

Mr. Carlyle Simmons might not stand out in a crowd, lookwise, but to us he was one in a thousand. He had a leonine head. His eyes were feline; his nose, aquiline; his hair, ovine. His voice was kind of bovine, but taking him as a whole, one would be tempted to describe him as equine. The best opener of his went like this: "Jody opened his eyes and was surprised to find it was morning." As I say, Casper out-did him in that department.

Mr. Simmons gave us more advice on writing than one could shake a stick at. Once, I remember, Rosemary Gray was puzzled over how to start her story. She said she could get the second sentence and all the rest but she just could not get that first one.

Mr. Simmons queried, "Rosemary, is this a hypothetical problem or a real one?"

"Oh, a real one, Mr. Simmons," insisted Rosemary.

"I see," said the teacher.

"I have really tried," Rosemary uttered.

"You have?" Mr. Simmons doubted.

"I have. I have," said Rosemary seemingly dismayed.

"Rosemary," Mr. Simmons spoke kindly but firmly, "one can not write the second sentence until one has written the first."

Of course, it all came out that Rosemary had not really written a second sentence at all, but had invented the whole business. But what was memorable was the way Mr. Simmons handled it. He did not even try to make her look like a liar. He soothed her when she started to cry: "Now, now, Rosemary, here now, it's ok, don't cry, be brave, hush darling, shhh, wipe your eyes, blink it away . . ."

There are three schools of thought on the subject of backdrops. One holds that since backdrops are in the back, they should be dropped. This was the modern view and still is I suppose. Another says--no backdrop, no focus. And the third is eclectic, This is my belief.

Casper Wilcox was a gourmet of the opening sentence. He would take Balzac's Pere Goriot, first sentence, into his mouth--"Madame Vauquer, whose maiden name was De Conflans, is an elderly woman who for forty

years has kept, in Paris, a family boarding-house situated in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevieve, between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel"--take this in, swill it around, savor it, and pronounce the bouquet par excellence. He pointed out that Flaubert, as good as he was, could not write such a fine opener as this, and would necessarily in time die out.

But Casper Wilcox was no imitator. He did not borrow from the "French School" or the "English Tradition." He was an American and he was Casper Wilcox. He was from the West and he lived near a railway depot.

In time, here's what happened. One author, me, for example, would write a story or a novel. It may have been the best story or novel going and everyone would agree on that point, but everyone would also agree with Casper that the opening lacked a little something. He could take almost any opener and bring it to life. It was almost disheartening at first. But try as we might, we couldn't write an opener which Casper couldn't improve on.

One night, sitting around in seminar, Casper hit on an idea which will keep his name up in lights in our memories for a long time. Why not let him write our openers? We could not believe our ears at first, but when the dust settled, we were looking at each other half-seriously as if to ask, "Could this cockamamie idea really work?" "Why not give it a try," our faces seemed to say.

I'll never forget the first opener Casper wrote for me: "Mile-a-minute Murphy pummeled furiously behind the evasive train, while the amused on-lookers called out to him from behind the open-ended caboose." Appropriately enough, caboose came at the end of the sentence. You

could depend on Casper for something like that every time.

Funnily enough, that story never really got off the ground, as memorable as its beginning was. Bicycle sagas and epic narratives are almost impossibilities in today's world, I found. Tres impossible.

However, Rosemary Gray came up with a beaut of a story entitled "The Scarlet Lady" from the Casper opener: "Her lips were slightly parted, the swelling approaching swollenness." When he wanted, he could be extremely economical and skeleton-like. Casper Wilcox was the craftsman's craftsman. He had that je ne sais quoi quality to whatever he wrote. His opus oozed style.

We all had our preferences, of course, of subject matter which we felt compelled to write on. You can not expect an author just to sit down and crank out Pulitzer caliber material if his subject matter isn't him or her. One needs the mot juste just as much for subjects as for sentences.

And here again we could rely on old C.W. He'd say to us: "I'm your pharmacist; bring in your prescriptions and I'll fill them." So we brought them in. Vincent Craddock (V. C. Caedmon) would come in, say, and say: "Casper, I'm in the market for something a little lyrical-- make it on the dry side of Euphues." Casper would nod. "I need some 'noble savage' to get across the 'man versus nature.'" Casper would again nod.

As you can see this was not any easy bill to fill. After nodding, Casper would turn to his cabinets of elixirs and physics and powdered unicorn horns--and PRESTO--he had abracadabra-ed himself up the floweriest opener you ever put nose to:

"Buds of glistening japonica spewed their essence through the dark nostrils of the brown woman-child whose ungarbed loins quivered against the cruel rush of air spent by the steeltrap jaws of a golden lion whose mane glistened with buds of japonica."

Doesn't that beat all? I mean . . . to get all of that in and still . . . to show the circular nature of nature . . . the way he starts out with the japonica business in the girl's nose and then you finally find out that it is coming from the lion's mane. It still stirs me. And the working of the nature motif: loin and lion . . .

Anyway, the point is that Mr. W. could do this sort of thing time and time again. There was no fluke to it. Anybody could come up smelling of genius one time, but to come up that way every time is something else.

The case of William S. OHenry is interesting. He was the only one of us who could be called a pop author. (I am not sure what he would be called today.) His genre was of the Ten Little Indians variety: whodunits. He once said that the novel which had most influenced his career was The Invincible Dick. (I tell you this only so you will not confuse his artistic aims.)

Here's what Casper did for him. This opener launched a success story for William. The book The Crooked Man got into print. We had not considered William a peer of ours until this happened. We thought of detective stories as vin ordinaire. As far as I know, he still is the only one of us who broke into print and is still regularly breaking into it.

"The Crooked Man: The man felt a cold, blue shaft of steel in his raincoated back; considered, whirled around, hands jujitsuing through

the thick fog, only to discover moments later that the bearer of that firearm was a midget." And from there, William S. was off.

I'll give you one more for instance. I don't want to beat a dead horse into the ground--just give credit its due. Now, this opener Casper didn't write for anybody. (We suspicioned he had written it for himself.) He brought it in one night saying he had a hot one. We passed it around amongst ourselves. The feeling in the room was one of "hot potato, hot potato." Who would be holding the hot potato when the music stopped? We kept passing the potato, passing the potato. V. R. to Rosemary to me to William to Jorgia to . . . Finally, Casper stood up, stuck the potato back in his pocket, and walked out.

Authors can be odd birds and so could Casper. We had not meant to offend Casper by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, after he left, we each said how we had admired that pocketed opener. Each of us said that we really felt unworthy to take it as our own. It would take someone whose gift was greater than ours, we said, to do it justice. Mr. Simmons said we'd never run across a finer one.

(I will now take advantage of my position as author and address you directly:

Ahem, perhaps some reader in the audience will be able to take this opener and put it to good use. More power to you. It should not go to waste.)

The hot potato opener, without anymore fanfare, went like this: "Once upon a time, there lived in the village an old woman whose husband had passed away in the night."

What I have been trying to point out is the almost damnable genius of that boy from the West. If all the sands of this story drop through

your hands, at least hold on to this gritty grain: Casper Wilcox had imagination. Where he came up with what he did was a mystery. Is still a mystery. Has been a mystery since the Casper Wilcox's of this world first set pen to paper or stick to mud.

To make a long story short, the cockamamie idea proved to be the making of all of us. Casper could turn out enough openers to keep each of us going. Soon, we could not keep up with him. We had a regular stockroomful of openers.

Today, even, when the Muse is out to lunch, I think back to old D. W. A. and Casper and all of those openers just waiting to blossom.

BOYS AND MILLIONAIRES

"Get from that t.v. kid," said Hank, sixteen, to his brother, eleven. "I said get!"

Jimmy watched The Millionaire at five o'clock every afternoon and was not about to miss an episode. Usually, Hank would get back from football practice about that time and plop down and watch it also. This afternoon he was very tired and his brother's wiriness irritated him. Practice had been rough; the coach was after blood. Scrimmage at full-speed, no pads, only helmets, not to protect their heads, to ram each other, to knock the wind out of each other so they could get up and go again and again until someone couldn't get up which made them the sheep and those left standing were called the goats and they had been separated from each other.

"Change that station or get ready to get whooped."

"Come on, Hank. This one's about a guy whose wife has this disease, only neither one of them know it, and the doctor, who is really the agent of the millionaire gets them to go on this ship . . ."

"Maybe if I rubbed some of that blond hair off your bony little head," said Hank, holding on display a fist of knuckles.

"Come on Hank. This is a good one." Hank leaned up slowly from the chair. He rotated his shoulders, first one and then the other. The soreness was just starting to set in. "Come on, Hank." Compared even to the leather tackling dummies, Jimmy appeared small and fragile. Hank could hear his brother's voice whining as he approached. Just exactly what it was saying he paid no attention to. What it said could make no difference. He saw his brother's knees carrying him across the room.

Hank followed in leisurely pursuit.

"O.k., alright," said Jimmy.

"No, not now," Hank said, towering above, keeping his voice at an abstract pitch. "I'm going to have to whip you; then maybe you'll learn something." In no hurry, now that it was inevitable, Hank rolled his sleeves to just below the elbow, squeezed his forearm and invited Jimmy, by eyeing past him toward the television, to take in the significance of it all.

"Your problem is that you believe all that crap. You do. You think that there is really some asshole somewhere who goes around making people rich and not trying to get something back."

"I know that they are stories," said Jimmy simply.

"Sure, but you still think it's true. Life's just not that way, kid. It's like if they handed me a ball in a game, say against the Deerfield Trojans, and the Trojans say, 'Come on through Hank my boy; this way please; just continue upfield for a quick six, sir.' I guess you think the Trojans could be talked into doing something as stupid as that, right bright boy?"

"No, I don't. I never said that." Jimmy rocked up from his knees onto his feet. "Just because you're on the team now you think you know everything. It just happens that I know where they got the idea for the show and you don't."

"O. k., where?"

"From a real millionaire. Sure, not all the stories really happened. But some of them did and there was a real millionaire who gave his money away and the reason most people don't know that is because they had to

swear to keep it a secret, just like on the show."

Hank looked angrily down at his brother who was looking up at him just as angrily. This kid must get it straight, he thought. He has to grow up sometime. If it takes a whipping to do it, then let it be.

Hank tightened his jaw and waited for the moment when attack would seem spontaneous. "And just where did you get this little jewel of information, little brother?"

"From the book from the Millionaire Fan Club which happens to be by the real millionaire." Confident with this piece of new evidence, he spread his legs to approximate his brother's stance.

"And you believe it, right?" said Hank, feigning a spit toward Jimmy. "Don't you know that's all rigged for suckers like you who'll send in all their dimes and quarters and dollars they got for their birthday or cutting grass? I don't blame them. If people are that stupid they deserve it. They are up there laughing their asses off at you."

"That's a lie." Jimmy was suddenly white in the face. "A damn lie. They have names and addresses where you can write to people who it happened to. You're just as stupid as the guy who wouldn't take the money because he thought it was all fakey. You're the sucker."

Hank landed a right to the nose. Blood spewed out. He was no longer detached, abstract, or given to teaching. To beat the stubborn little bastard's brains out would be a joy.

Jimmy fell to the floor, covering his nose. When he saw the bright blood on his hands he went berserk, kicking, swinging, screaming, gouging. He caught Hank on the mouth and broke his lip open. "You're

the damn sucker. You'd pass it all up just because . . ."

Hank popped him again, this time to the side of the head. "Just because you beat me up won't change a thing," Jimmy said. Tears were forming under his eyes. Hank said nothing. "It won't change a thing."

Hank pinned Jimmy to the floor, his knees planted into the shoulders, his hands pinning Jimmy's which he stretched out above his head. Hank shifted all his weight to his knees and balanced out over his brother's head to extend the insect arms, to make the shoulders pop and give up that extra inch of arm. Then, there were no moves left to make: Jimmy could not, nor could Hank lest the balance be upset. The brothers lay locked--still. Statues. Violence seemed remote.

"I want you to admit that those stories are not true," Hank said, almost tenderly.

"I already said that they weren't all true."

"Can't you say none of them are true?"

"No." Jimmy licked his lip where blood had trickled down.

"I can make you you know."

Jimmy tried to pull his arms free, but he could not budge them. He kicked his legs but remained pinned. In a concentrated burst of energy Jimmy buckled against Hank, sheer will. And then Hank felt him go limp beneath him. The redness went out of his face; his wrists stopped twisting; his shoulders no longer arched against Hank's knees. He lay still. His eyes looked up at Hank, vacant, gone colorless. Hank gave him a chance to get loose, but he did not move.

Hank said, "It's not that it wouldn't be great. I mean I'd like it if there were a millionaire, too. But there probably isn't, you

know?"

"There might be," said Jimmy.

"We'll never run into him, though."

"No, probably not."

"It would be nice."

"It'd be something alright."

MONTHS OF SUNDAY AFTERNOONS

John Rigsby wheeled into aisle three with his dolly. He handled it as he would a car--with reckless certainty--edging the perfect curb of neatly shelved boxes. Past the paper towels, tissues, napkins; veering to miss some over-hanging paper plates; squealing finally to an abrupt halt before the Kleenex slot. He ripped open the top carton on his dolly, stacked twenty-four boxes of black and red, man-sized Kleenex into two rows of twelve and proceeded down the aisle with his cargo.

The paper aisle was his favorite. It was his Tuesday aisle. There were not many dawdlers musing over Lipton teabags and Instant Breakfast, making a general nuisance of themselves. John preferred the shoppers on Tuesday to those on the weekend. They picked up what they wanted and left, leaving him free to go about his own business. Kids were the main shoppers during the week. They came as envoys for their varicose-veined mothers who had run short on milk, bread and crackers. John's own mother would often hand him a small list of necessities along with a crisp sack of sandwiches before he left for school.

John reached the end of the aisle with one carton left. His blue eyes scanned its bold red letters. The aisle was empty. A fuzzy excitement bristled along his thin arms as he slid the carton from the dolly. A year before he had not known about Kotex. Then it was just another paper product. He was still fourteen; his mother drove him to work. It was Ralph, the assistant store manager, who had piqued his imagination.

"What you got there, kid?" Ralph asked. His toothless grin was habitual. When weighing potatoes for elderly women he wore the same expression, and was never more than a couple of ounces off.

John held up the box.

"Know what it is?" asked Ralph, his grin widening.

"Not exactly."

"Man-hole covers."

John joined in with a laugh, and had continued laughing until Ralph's balding head disappeared around the aisle. It was some time later before he understood the joke. By then he had earned his temporary driver's license.

The red letters stood out like an embossed invitation to a secret Masonic ceremony. The package itself was pale blue with delicate, white lettering in arcane script with words like polyethylene and absorbent. John made a mental note to look up the words in his dictionary--just to see. His dictionary had held a world of infinite possibilities since he had found pubic tucked between the ordinary words.

"Hey, Buzzy!"

It was Charlotte Runion and Victoria Long. John tried to cover his embarrassment with anger. No one called him Buzzy anymore. Only Charlotte. He had asked her not to. Charlotte, who had practically grown up with him and who usually wound up in back of him in most of their classes, said it seemed funny not to. She seemed sometimes like a pesky sister.

"Hi Charly; hi Victoria. What are you guys doing here?"

"Oh, we needed a few personal items. You know, like toothpaste and rollers and . . ." The girls turned toward each other, giggling.

"The toothpaste is in four," John said flatly.

"Thanks," said Charlotte, and the girls left giggling down their blouses.

John had been caught off guard. He hadn't heard the girls approaching. But he was surprised that the intruders were Charly and Victoria. He had looked up to find them before him, giggling, almost daily for a week: up from his vegetable soup in the cafeteria; up from tying a basketball shoe in an after-school game; up from a Mademoiselle, another embarrassment, in the library. So, he was no longer surprised.

John had gotten over his childhood crush on Charly years ago. They were friends. Period. The signs were clear enough. At first he had not noticed Victoria because she was with Charly. But when he had looked up from the Mademoiselle, already excited, to see that gentle swell of chest, he felt lifted. He felt that he might love Victoria. Victoria Rigsby. It sounded quite natural. John realized, of course, that courtship preceded marriage. It was not marriage that troubled him, but that awkward interval between in which he must prove himself to her.

John arranged the empty boxes on the dolly. The smaller boxes went inside the larger. If done correctly, they would all fit together.

Just as John had taken the curve and headed up aisle two, he spotted the girls talking with Ralph. Ralph was grinning. Charlotte was shifting her weight from one leg to the other. Victoria was arranging some hair on the back of her neck.

"Come here, Johnny boy, have you seen these young ladies lately? Why they've grown overnight. Their pappies'll be taking watch over them real close." Ralph leaned back on the meatcase watching Victoria pick the yellow pills from her knit top. He stuck his marking pencil behind his ear.

"Oh, really, Mr. Mullenkemp." Charlotte would not call him Ralph. It seemed too funny to her.

John idled up and joined Ralph against the meatcase. Ralph began cutting up a chicken into parts. He worked his knife in and out of the bird as though he thoroughly enjoyed his work, possibly even relished it. John crossed his feet in front of himself. He wanted to say something clever, a little racy, but nothing came to him. "Did you find the toothpaste?"

"Oh, really Buzzy. You're too impossible."

"It's over there." John pointed.

"We know," Charlotte said. John looked toward Victoria. He had not impressed her.

"Victoria's teeth look good without toothpaste."

"That's what I was saying, Johnny," said Ralph. "Them girls is knockouts. Next thing you know we'll have a couple of Miss Americas on our hands. They won't come 'round and visit us anymore." Ralph snapped off the wings from the chicken and wiped some blood on his apron-front.

"Oh yes we will," Victoria said. "We'll still come; we like you."

John could not help admiring Ralph--the way he worked it--so that Victoria had spilled it right out. He wished that he could have thought of something. Instead, he snatched his marking pen from the pocket of his duster and flicked it behind his ear.

"Oh John, you got that black icky stuff all on your cheek," cried Victoria. John took a swipe with his handkerchief and then another. "No, you still didn't get it. Here, let me." Victoria tiptoed against him; her pink tongue supplied saliva to the handkerchief. John wanted her to rub until his face bled.

After the girls left (had he really winked at her) John's heart filled with a sea of love. Everything went soft inside him. He told

Ralph that Victoria kind of got to him. Ralph grinned and nodded his head. John knew Ralph understood. Ralph played dumb sometimes, his front teeth were missing, but he understood about women just as he did about the world in general.

"That young one was playing up to you, sure enough. If she'd got more close, you'd swallowed one. These young ones fill out sooner than used to be. Not that we didn't have some good ones in my day. Betty Norton. That was a good one. Betty used to wax that old Buick of mine. She'd rub it out till her arms ached. I'd tell her when she got done she could rub me. She'd rub that Buick to a hard shine. She wasn't no tramp, now. A tramp doesn't care what she looks like or to who. We'd run that Buick on Sunday afternoons till it would run dry. We'd go squalling down some blacktop road and slam on the brakes any goddam time we felt like it. Once, I was driving, doing about sixty, when all the sudden I got this idea to turn into this goddam field. So I says to Betty, hold onto your pants baby 'cause here we go. What do you think she says to me when we finally come to a stop? She says Ralphie, it's a good thing that . . ."

It was not the first time that John had heard the story. The first time it had seemed like a fairy tale, beyond belief. Truly amazing. But this time he understood. Of course it was true.

His life raced before him, like sixty.

A MODERN INDEX

I have exercised the patience of Jonah.

Let me doctor up my gin and tonic, first. Have a seat.

Just move those catalogs out of your way. I have them scattered everywhere. I'm kind of a catalog nut, lately. I get them from everywhere--some come in the mail, some I order, some I just pick up when I'm out. Thad's always throwing them away. Things, he says, you and your things.

Thad used to look at catalogs with me. We'd point out this and that that caught our eye--a cocktail table, a good set of knives, an insulated hunting jacket. Thad was a hunter. He owned a bound copy of The Gunner's Bible--before he threw it out.

It's been nearly a year now. Julie's service club was holding a bakesale on a Saturday, so it must have been a Friday night. I was making a mocha torte. I wanted her donation to be something more than a chocolate cake or something which got thrown together. If you've been to a bakesale you know what I mean. I was measuring everything carefully, trying to follow the recipe as closely as possible. Pinches and dashes are myths cooked up by liars and bake-off winners. Anyhow, I must have been so involved that I didn't hear Thad come home.

When I turned to set the timer, Thad was there standing under the archway.

"I met Jesus tonight," Thad said.

"And you didn't even have on your good suit," I said.

"I was afraid you'd be this way," Thad said.

"At least your tie matches," I said.

"Jesus has become my Saviour, Renee. My Lord and Saviour."

"That's nice dear. Would you set the timer for me? To fifty-five minutes?" You can't trust many range timers.

"Renee, do you hear me?"

"Just wait until you smell this torte."

Thad was always coming up with ideas. Once, after his bees died, he came up with a plan for unionizing beekeepers--Beekeepers of Ohio. He would see to it that there would be no more shortchanging in the bee industry; no one would ever have to go through the hell he had; bees with colic (he used some professional word) could not be sold to unsuspecting beekeepers.

One other time it was hybrid spinach. He bought a lawn tractor which he had spotted in the Sears' catalog: "Sears' best; big 12 h.p. engine, 4 operating speeds. Turns back-breaking labor into pleasure. \$600. value for \$495." Thad tractored our entire backyard. The two elm trees which originally convinced us to buy the house had to go. Footage equals yield; wasted footage equals wasted yield.

Thad tractored, fertilized from bags that could not be purchased in any store, and put in the plants. The whole idea behind this was this: the hybrid contained every vitamin necessary for sustenance. A family could live healthier for less. It would never again be necessary to eat cholesterol beef, saturated pork, or non-biodegradable tuna. An illustrated book came with the plants detailing over three-hundred healthy recipes. We put away our honey recipes.

I know what you're thinking. You are thinking: lady, your husband is a clown, a figure of fun. Well, he isn't, really. I told you about

the bees and spinach to explain that he can be impractical. He is susceptible to being taken in. I know that; even Thad admits to it. That does not make him a fool in my book. His crazy enthusiasm is only one of the things I love about him.

Imagine, admitting to loving your husband. It isn't done, is it? That a wife loves her husband of sixteen years is the stuff for comedies. Remember "Father Knows Best?" They took pride in their children; they enjoyed themselves; they had their problems; they shared endearments; but never once did they give the impression they loved one another. Love's entanglements were for the kids. The secret, amused looks they shot past the children to each other meant they, thank goodness, had been through it themselves. Now they were parents, ready to see their children through the joke.

Thad's no Robert Young and I'm no Jane Wyatt. Our situation, of course, is funny. Isn't everyone's? Mr. and Mrs. Thaddius Reynolds/
1112 Fontaine Ave./Springdale, Ohio/45246.

But now . . . I could deal with spinach and bees; they were out in the backyard. But how to deal with Jesus? I suggested the other week that we order one of those ceramic birdbaths with Jesus' encircled arms forming the basin. Just as a joke. Thad was disgusted.

When I got up Saturday morning I found a note from Julie on the kitchen counter.

Mom,

The cake looks great. Thanks. Steve & I had a good time last night. The reason I was late is because we stayed for all three features. Daddy's in the attic, pitching. He said to tell you.

Jul

I could hear Thad in the attic as I read. Crash, bang. On his days off, he slept late. It was as much a habit as his before-breakfast cigarette. I trust habits; I did not trust his being in the attic, dismantling it if I could trust my hearing, at eight in the morn.

Climbing the stairs, I made sure not to step on the chalk lines where Thad had been measuring for carpet. Those steps are still uncarpeted. We'd picked out a nice cerise.

"What are you doing, Thad?"

"Setting my house in order," he said serenely.

"What's all that?" I pointed to an anomalous pile which contained shoes, records, a crosslegged Buddha with a jade bellybutton we had received for a wedding present and never displayed, old golf balls, road maps, a guitar . . . so many things . . .

"That represents my attempt to store up treasures on earth. Like the rich man I have built barns to store my goods. I have set my mind on things below--until now. Now I have the peace which passeth understanding."

You've never met Thad. But I will tell you unequivocally that until that morning I had never heard him say any word like passeth, not even in his sleep. Nevertheless, he stood there, the same six-foot frame, blue-eyed and balding, thinish husband of mine and said, unequivocally, passeth. I am probably the only one who can see the tragedy in that.

"What do you intend to do with all this," I said. I wanted to be patient.

"Burn it."

I was incredulous. "Even your Gunner's Bible? You're going to burn everything? Thad, do you think these things are all yours? What

gives you the right?" Finally, I found the right question. "What the blank is going on?"

"I told you Renee, last night."

"You did?"

"I have been born again, washed in the blood of the Lamb, become a babe in Christ."

"Oh, that."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"You don't?"

"Renee, I want to share this joy with you."

"You do?"

"Will you come to the meeting with me tonight? It's the last night in this series of meetings. If I had just gone sooner. . . . The Lord will be there. Rev. Bill Rudd is leading the meetings and he'll bless your heart. Renee, we've been sinners."

"We have?"

"We've been living in darkness. We were born sinners, don't you see. Our lives have been lies, our marriage a lie."

"How so?" This last one had gone deep.

"We say we love each other, right? True love is impossible outside of Christ. We couldn't have really loved each other because we didn't have the love of Christ in us. Don't you see?"

"No, not at all." His equanimity was maddening. "Are you saying we haven't been in love these sixteen years?"

"We've loved each other, yes; but it has been an earthly love, a love of flesh and mind--nothing like the real love which Christ can

bring."

"A second-rate love?"

"You don't understand."

"A pretty good love, but not top-notch."

"Come with me tonight."

"Something like puppy love. The way Julie loves Steve."

"Renee, all I know is that until last night I never knew what real love was. That's all I'm saying."

I do not remember how the conversation ended or why or who ended it. What I remember is gradually noticing that I was staring at Thad's Gunner's Bible. It jutted out from where he had chucked it. One cover was wedged beneath the Buddha figurine. The book was humped open, its pages crinkled.

Particles of attic air dropped on and around it. I retrieved it from the pile. It had a thick musky smell. Thad was gone. The cover was goldish and monogrammed--T. I. R. I felt like crying (usually I never cry) and placed the book back into the pile.

Excuse me, I had to refreshen my drink.

On the way to the meeting, no one smoked. I never had. Years ago I had quit badgering Thad to stop. Suddenly he had. We did not talk much, but did smile, a married smile, at each other. The radio was tuned to a new "Christian" station--featuring scriptural music. He would have to change where the push buttons were pushed in, he said.

Although we made every light, I felt as if we had been running yellow lights all evening. A feeling of not-green, not-red, but red-any-split-second. There is that instant when you can go for neither

the brake nor the gas. Being the passenger must have made it worse.

"Did you see that chuckle in the paper today?" I asked.

"I don't think so."

"About the policeman and the lady?"

"No."

--"Officer: 'Didn't you see that red light, lady?'"

--"Lady: 'Yes officer, but it was just starting to turn pink when I started through.'"

"Oh, yes," Thad smiled, "I did see that one."

"They've been corny lately."

"They're supposed to be."

"Who do you suppose writes those things?" I asked.

"They're in joke books I imagine," he said.

After the meeting ended we walked back to the car. We sat in our seats looking directly forward through the windshield as we pulled back onto the highway. We continued looking straight ahead.

After a while, I said, "Thad, you're not really going to get rid of all that stuff, are you."

"Is that all the impression the service made on you?" His voice was edged.

"I thought it was o.k."

"It wasn't a movie; what do you mean--okay?"

"With all that hand-clapping it might as well have been." My voice rose to meet his.

"Did you even listen to what was being said?"

"By whom? That red-faced, gravel-throat up front? 'In G-zus name--in G-zus love--in G-zus grace--a-man and aman.'"

"So you didn't even listen?"

"Yes, I did. Did you listen to me? No. I asked you if you still intended to throw everything out. And what'd you say? You can't even answer a question."

"Yes," he said.

We drove home, eyes unblinkingly forward. Never have red lights appeared so red. Stopped, I could smell them burning.

You know, this is the seventies, it's not the turn of the century. Thad has contractor friends who play handball. Bill Maines plays handball seven days a week. Betty complains to me--Bill shows me his callused hands and thinks that'll make up for his never being home. I tell her--Thad's always visiting shut-ins and the sick in the hospital. He's never home either.

And Betty eats wheat-germ. She's a health-food specialist. She can be quite convincing.

I mean, who do you know who is just discovering religion? Julie's friends call him the Latter Day Jesus Freak. I have heard them. Julie asked me to ask Thad not to leave his tracts lying around when she is to have friends over. Once, she asked him herself.

I mean, I think handball and wheat-germ are over-done by a lot of people today. The same with, say, astrology or dieting. But the difference is that people are doing these things. Betty gives up an indulgent smile after a while, as if to say--Oh well, what can you do? She understands her problem. Hers is a national problem--like mental illness.

But ours is different. And I don't mean to imply that I fear not having the "proper" problem. We still have friends. We still borrow

a cup of sugar or milk from the Waverly's nextdoor and vice-versa. Their Terry has not stopped cutting our grass. But forget all that. Bake-sales are last on my list until something gives here.

Out of tonic, had to use soda.

What are Thad and I going to do? We've been over it and over it. Thad used to come home from work with Hello Stranger, which way to the grub? How are the womenfolk today? Now it's Buried up to your nose in catalogs, hunh? Where is our daughter? Not--where is Julie, Renee? but where is Our Daughter? I could scream.

Things have gotten twisted somehow. Here I sit. Me and Mr. Gin. Newlyweds. Mr. and Mrs. Gin/1112 Fontaine Ave./Springdale, Ohio/45246. Their half-pint daughter is out doing heaven-knows-what. Mr. and Mrs. T. I. Gin are pleased to announce the engagement of their daughter, Julie Gin, to Steve. He is a very nice boy, not at all like many of the boys today. He says yes mam and no sir and does not mumble. There will be no reception immediately following the service because Thad detests liquor and will not stand for it. In fact, Thad wishes to announce that he will be unable to walk his daughter down the aisle as he must visit the sick in the hospital who are going to die and go to hell at any second and it is his duty of love to minister to them as best he can and show them the one and only road to heaven; so, if Mr. Gin wouldn't mind too much would he do the honors.

P.S.: Besides, Thad hates Lutheran churches. And even though he will not be able to attend, he will not allow His Daughter to browse through any catalogs of bridal gowns, rest assured. The Gunner's Bible says so. In the chapter on shot-gun weddings: "And the aisle cloth

shall be of cerise, and it shall be taken from the dwelling of the bride. And she shall carry a mocha torte as her bouquet and her veil shall be of honey and her gown of spinach and her train. And between her thighs shall be found a traffic signal whose hue shall change with the seasons of life."

P.P.S.: No gifts please. I will lend Julie all she needs. Pages and pages of thin, cut stemware, wineglasses, crystal decanters, punch bowls with dipper handles fragile as eggshells. And pages of cosmetics--jars of blue, yellow, cream, gold, fashioned in all shapes. She will have everything--soft woolen blankets, the best luggage, carved time-pieces; she will have new furniture everyday, new appliances, new foods, everything; pages of zippered handbags in leather, fur-collared coats, diamonds if she wishes in rings, pendants, bracelets; musical instruments, cheeses the world over, stationery, vases, chocolates, shoes.

Little nightcap.

When Thad gets home tonight I want to try to get things straightened out. I don't know exactly what I'll say. Before, I have scolded. I have given ultimatums. Me or Jesus, Thad. Take your pick. I have been cool, unruffable. Music's music, listen to anything you desire. I have been enraged. I'll burn those damn tracts if you don't get them out of here! I have been interested. Explain that part again, Thad.

Right now I have an order into the Book Guild for one of their features. They sent me a catalog of special-rate books. While thumbing through it, one caught my eye--Husbands--For Wives Only. The note beneath the book recommended it as especially good for the middle years. I suppose that's what we're in. What can it hurt? I am sure it is no miracle book--but what can it hurt?