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This thesis consists of three stories, part of a series of seven stories. The stories were written between September, 1973 and April, 1974.

The primary aim of this thesis was to tell three stories true enough to be interesting. Essentially the three deal with Southern women, their emotions, their control on these emotions. Since all these stories concern the life of one woman, their order of presentation is geared to her age at the time of the particular story.

APPROVAL PAGE

ENVY AND OTHER STORIES

by

Sally van Noppen

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
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Approved by

Fred Chappell  
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thanks to Lloyd Kropp for his help in reading these chapters. Special thanks to Fred Chappell for his fine teaching, encouragement, and advice, for his patience.

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Date of Approval

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I	11
CHAPTER II	23
CHAPTER III	42
CHAPTER IV	61
CHAPTER V	80
CHAPTER VI	99
CHAPTER VII	118
CHAPTER VIII	137
CHAPTER IX	156
CHAPTER X	175
CHAPTER XI	194
CHAPTER XII	213
CHAPTER XIII	232
CHAPTER XIV	251
CHAPTER XV	270
CHAPTER XVI	289
CHAPTER XVII	308
CHAPTER XVIII	327
CHAPTER XIX	346
CHAPTER XX	365
CHAPTER XXI	384
CHAPTER XXII	403
CHAPTER XXIII	422
CHAPTER XXIV	441
CHAPTER XXV	460
CHAPTER XXVI	479
CHAPTER XXVII	498
CHAPTER XXVIII	517
CHAPTER XXIX	536
CHAPTER XXX	555
CHAPTER XXXI	574
CHAPTER XXXII	593
CHAPTER XXXIII	612
CHAPTER XXXIV	631
CHAPTER XXXV	650
CHAPTER XXXVI	669
CHAPTER XXXVII	688
CHAPTER XXXVIII	707
CHAPTER XXXIX	726
CHAPTER XL	745
CHAPTER XLI	764
CHAPTER XLII	783
CHAPTER XLIII	802
CHAPTER XLIV	821
CHAPTER XLV	840
CHAPTER XLVI	859
CHAPTER XLVII	878
CHAPTER XLVIII	897
CHAPTER XLIX	916
CHAPTER L	935

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ENVY . . . . .	1
PRIDE . . . . .	23
ANGER . . . . .	42

could not explain why, when he went into the little room where the Communion wine is kept to get the federal pail for the coffin, there were letters missing from the pail's hem. The initials of Mrs. Lillie Averett, embroidered by her at the time she presented the pail to the church on the occasion of Mr. Averett's death, were gone. There was no doubt that the threads had been cut with scissors and then neatly pulled out. The holes made by the embroidery yarn were still there, plain as day. Nothing else was disturbed, neither the boxes of wafers nor the wine nor the Communion linens. It was fortunate, the Reverend remarked while visiting Sadie Furrington one afternoon, that nothing else was disturbed.

Yes, fortunate, agreed Sadie.

Yes. The congregation sat when the hymn ended. Sadie Furrington considered herself, not the lesson which Mr. Barrett's voice rattled out. Prim. She was prim in her navy blue suit, purchased last season; wearing a navy blue pillbox hat with the dyed peacock feather stuck jauntily in the side. The hat was new too, and there were others. She loved hats, but

## ENVY

Old man Tuttle, the man with the cane who tried to swat the fly at the Christmas Eve service, was the next member of the congregation to die. That was in 1969. Reverend Burt could not explain why, when he went into the little room where the Communion wine is kept to get the funeral pall for the coffin, there were letters missing from the pall's hem. The initials of Mrs. Lillie Averett, embroidered by her at the time she presented the pall to the church on the occasion of Mr. Averett's death, were gone. There was no doubt that the threads had been cut with scissors and then neatly pulled out. The holes made by the embroidery yarn were still there, plain as day. Nothing else was disturbed, neither the boxes of wafers nor the wine nor the Communion linens. It was fortunate, the Reverend remarked while visiting Sadie Purrington one afternoon, that nothing else was disturbed.

Yes, fortunate, agreed Sadie.

Amen. The congregation sat when the hymn ended. Sadie Purrington considered herself, not the lesson which Mr. Burt's voice rattled out. Prim. She was prim in her navy blue suit, purchased last season; wearing a navy blue pillbox hat with one dyed peacock feather stuck jauntily in the side. The hat was new too, and there were others. She loved hats, but so

did Lillie, her sister-in-law who sat across the aisle from her. Today Lillie wore a tailored brown tweed suit, doubtless from the latest import-line. She had all the clothes in this world. To go with the suit Miss Lillie wore the partridge feather hat Sadie wanted to buy just recently. She had tried it on, but it cost thirty-five dollars at the Ideal Dry Goods Shop. She coveted it then, and she coveted it now. Oh, it was lovely: a bowler hat with a wide upturned brim, covered in row after row of overlapping partridge feathers. Admittedly the subtle browns and greys and yellows of the feathers went awfully well with Lillie's suit, but Sadie had a brown suit herself, and a grey dress. That hat would have done nicely for her own needs. If only she could have bought it. Now wasn't that just like Lillie? Buying the fanciest, most expensive hat the Ideal Shop had? Well, that streak had been showing itself in Lillie for fifty-some years. Sadie knew better than to be surprised at it now.

They sat in this church every Sunday, eyeing each other slyly, sizing each other up. Sadie felt that. For herself she looked to the other to see how well she could hold her own. This was the fourth Sunday after Epiphany, as the sign above the day's hymn numbers said. Sadie debated putting her glasses on again to see what the Sermon hymn was, but she hated to give Lillie the satisfaction of seeing her in eyeglasses. She didn't join the congregation in singing any more, but she held the hymn book as she had always done, and



it made her feel better to be on the right page. If she could find a chance when Lillie wasn't looking she'd put her glasses on for one more quick look at the numbers. Lillie did not wear glasses yet. Or, if she did, nobody knew it. Besides, they sat on the front pews, both of them, and there was only a short distance to look. It had been almost the same for years. The church was exactly the same: the same red carpet lining the aisle from front to back; the same six-inch wide oak boards on the floor and the walls, darkened by age; even the same familiar nicked place on the end of Sadie's smoothly worn pew where old man Tuttle tried to swat an invisible fly with his cane on Christmas Eve one year. Everybody tolerated him because they knew he drank too much and was crazy as a bedbug besides. Lillie had no sympathy for him though, because she declared he had borrowed money from Jackson one time and never paid it back. That attitude made Sadie glad they were only related to each other by law and not by blood.

On the very front pew of the Gospel side of the aisle sat Lillie, regal except for those Sundays when she forgot her gloves. Then she fidgeted, twisting her bare hands in her lap. Sadie demurely skipped a row and sat on the next to the front pew on the Epistle side. She thought it was showy to sit on the very front row, but she would not have told Lillie that for a ticket straight to heaven.

Lillie's move to the front row was recent. When Jackson,

Lillie's husband and Sadie's brother, was alive they all three sat on the Epistle side together, their children filling the row behind them. A year before, on the Sunday after Jackson's funeral, Lillie moved across the aisle. If she had not done it Sadie would have quit coming to church rather than sit with Miss Lillie. The funeral had been cause for scandal in the family, because of the way Lillie behaved, but Sadie had seen it coming. The stir in the church caused by the acquisition of two air conditioning units last summer, before Jackson's death, had given Lillie a chance to show her true colors. If Jackson had only known. Sadie wished now she had told him.

Built in 1908, St. Stephen's Church was small, but Sadie liked it that way. She was fond of saying she could remember the first service ever held here, but maybe she only imagined she did. At that time she was eleven years old. Actually it did not matter whether she could remember that first service or not. Her grandchildren believed her when she told them about it. That was the most important thing. Jackson had frequently said he could remember it too, and it was more likely he did since he was five years older than she. Poor Jackson. Sadie used to beg him to come here with her and their mother when their mother had altar-guild duty. Jackson would play hide-and-seek with her while their mother attended to the flowers on the altar and did her part in the polishing of the round brass collection plates. Sadie hid

under pews or behind the lectern at the front while Jackson pretended to have trouble finding her. He was so kind.

Even when they were older they came around here on summer days, often with Jackson's friends. Slipping up the back path, one of the boys would undo the screws which held the lock on the door leading to the little room where the Communion wine was kept. If she was with Jackson alone he would allow her a bit of the wine, but if they were with the others she could only watch while they passed the wine bottle among them, each taking tiny sips and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. She remembered giggling, when she got to drink, at the sweetly burning taste. They were always careful not to disturb the curious little cardboard boxes of Communion wafers, and they pointedly stayed away from the smooth, white Communion linens which lay wrapped in blue tissue paper on a shelf beside the wine bottles, ready for the second Sunday in every month.

After she began organ lessons they came to this place when Jackson was home on holidays from college. She knew three hymns then that she could play on the organ. Beginning with one she would play it through, leading into the next and the next and back to the first, over and over, never stopping, while Jackson, handsome and stern, would read aloud Psalms he liked from the Prayer Book. His voice was resonant. He read softly, with reserve, as though his reading was neither for her nor for himself but for the sound of the

words in the shadowy space of the church.

They were not a religious family. Even after her marriage Sadie went to church more out of habit than because of any special feeling. Charles, her husband, had been a sportsman. He was usually away on Sundays, out hunting or fishing or playing golf. He went broke in the 'twenties, at the time their children were coming into their teens; and he died on a rainy Wednesday morning in December, 1931. For a while she quit going to church, or anywhere, but Jackson came to talk to her saying it was good for the children to take them to church. She really should do it for the children. And she didn't disagree.

Jackson had helped her then, when she had no money, no house of her own. No place for her and her children to live. The bank was to take her house, but her brother prevented it. She did not even know how. Dear Jackson. There had been all that commotion over the air conditioners just at the time he got sick. He had not been able to come back to church either to enjoy the cool, or to know what a tacky thing Lillie had done with his money.

Sadie believed it was all silly. When the two air conditioners were donated to the church no one anticipated the controversy that would arise in deciding where to put them. The unit at the front, to the right of the altar in the chancel, fit nicely. One section of a side window came out easily, making a perfect space. It was a shame there

were no little windows like that at the back of the church. On the rear wall were three high consecutive stained glass windows, narrow and arched at the top. Represented in the thick variegated panes were life sized figures of the Father, the Son and Saint Stephen. They loomed over the congregation with dour authority. Sadie thought the colors pretty, but not magnificent. She most liked the yellow arcs of glass, wide haloes, above the heads of the three. The deep blue draped-ropes of Christ and God were attractive, especially with the early morning sun shining through them. What she disliked was the robe of Saint Stephen. Light green and frosted, it fell in irregular pleats from a big gold button at the shoulder. It reminded her of the opaque green paint used on windows in public bathrooms to assure privacy. Also there was the disagreeable fact that they were all three barefoot, their long toes outlined in startling precision. The tone of their flesh was jaundiced, heightened by the outside light. Surely someone else must have thought so, but not one member of the church was willing to take responsibility for deciding whose feet and legs should be cut off to make a place for the air conditioner. The matter finally reached such complex proportions that a congregational meeting had to be called. After considerable argument nothing could be decided and the people began to get restless. It was hot in the building with only one air conditioner. Absently Sadie watched people's hands waving



the funeral home fans. She moved to be recognized. What this group needed was some common sense.

When the Reverend Burt called on her she sneaked a glance at Lillie to be certain she was listening, and then she rose. Why not, she offered, decide to cut off the legs of Saint Stephen? Naming the church in his memory was enough of an honor, after all. Since none of them had been present when the stained glass windows were ordered in the first place and thus had no special loyalty to them, just why not choose Saint Stephen? An approving murmur stirred the congregation. Across the aisle Sadie saw Lillie make a lame wave of her hand. She wondered if Lillie would say anything. Watching her sister-in-law's hand flutter in the air she felt disgusted by her red finger-nail polish. Fire Engine Red. It reflected the light, shining like spots of blood on the ends of her fingers. Even Sadie's mother, when she was introduced to Jackson's fiancée, said that Lillie Damerson was a natural huzzy. Glaring, she turned to Lillie. The red speckled hand returned to rest in Lillie's lap.

Sadie left the church building then to go home, satisfied with her wise solution to the air conditioning problem. Each day of the following week she drove by the little white church, slowing her car just opposite the stained glass windows so that she could see whether Saint Stephen had yet acquired his new appendage. Each day she was disappointed.

On Saturday of that week she made her trip by the church in the morning. When she saw nothing new she considered telephoning Mr. Burttt to ask why the unit had not been installed, but instead she decided to go by again in the afternoon. She thought she ought to give them a final chance to get it in.

She went home and, watching her weight again, ate a lunch of cottage cheese and peaches. After that she felt unsatisfied. Rather than eat chocolate ice cream, as she was tempted to do, she telephoned Lillie.

"I just called to see how Jackson was getting along."

"He's about the same, Sadie. The doctor was here this morning to change the medicine. He thinks maybe that'll help some." Lillie sounded so elated. For a moment Sadie felt ashamed of herself. The other woman was really glad Jackson was doing well.

"Do you think he feels like having company? I'd like to come and visit him for a minute."

"It'd be better if you'd wait until tomorrow. This new medicine makes him sleepy. Tomorrow would be better."

"All right. Lillie, while I have you on the line, let me ask you, have you heard when they're going to get around to putting that air conditioner in at the church? We'll need it tomorrow. You know, it's hot as Hades today. Or haven't you been able to get out?"

"Mr. Burttt said by today. Don't fret about it, Sadie."

"I'm not fretting, just wondering. When did you talk to Mr. Burttt? Did he come by to visit Jackson?"

"No, I went up to the church to see him. You know, he is certainly a nice man."

"Well, tell Jackson I asked about him. Will you be going to church tomorrow?"

"I'll be there. Are you going?"

Sadie assured Lillie she would be there too. Ending the conversation she wandered around her apartment for a half hour. Instead of lying down for her midafternoon nap she went out to her car, intending to check on the church air conditioner again. Perhaps knowing it was finished, taken care of, would ease her mind and she could nap in peace. Driving slowly down the street she hardly noticed the houses she passed. Though she knew the occupants of almost every one, though they were nearly all either her own friends or friends of her children and grandchildren, they did not concern her now. Thank goodness, she thought, I don't have to pass Miss Lillie's house on the way. That woman leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It was a sinful thought. Sadie felt guilty for the sentiment and decided she must be more charitable.

Even as her mind wound its way around to thinking more kindly of Lillie she was opposite the church building. The resolution in favor of Lillie vanished with what Sadie saw. There was a hole: big, square, and black, cut through the very wall of the white frame church, right beside the haloed



Saint Stephen. As she slowed almost to a stop she watched in horror while a man in blue coveralls, standing under the gaping space, reached up to the hole. Slowly, deliberately, the beige air conditioning unit emerged, sliding through, filling the black space. It was like watching the insertion of a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. The piece fit the space perfectly but it remained the wrong piece. The color was wrong. The tone was wrong. She stared at the man while he steadied and straightened the machine. The ugly thing moved, then stopped, settled into place. Squinting at it for a moment the man brushed his hands on his thighs and went inside the church.

Sadie drove on, past the church, past Laura Ellington's house, past the Baptist parsonage, past Mister Tom Davis' place, not caring about the appearance of any particular building, only being aware that there were only four more houses remaining between her and the two-story colonial home of Lillie and Jackson. She would turn her car around in Mamie Crews' driveway. Mamie wouldn't mind. Then she would go home, take off her girdle, and get into bed. Maybe she would fix a nice glass of iced tea to sip before she slept. No, not tea, that had caffeine and it might keep her awake. Maybe sherry. A drop of sherry.

Back in her own apartment Sadie went into the bathroom, feeling a tightness in her stomach. The girdle must be causing the pressure on her bladder the doctor had warned

her about. Holding onto the towel rod with one hand she began pulling off the girdle with the other. It was a long process. First she undid the zipper. That, especially, made getting in and out of these girdles much easier. She began the easing of one side, then the other side, slowly inching the tightness down her hips, down the unfirm length of her thighs, over the knees, and then, drop. Usually she let the flaccid garment fall to her ankles before she reached to get it. Now she looked down to see the elastic begin to stain darkly, but she was only vaguely aware of the warm wetness of the urine as it ran down her legs and onto the girdle, the floor. She was wetting herself. That common Lillie, that show-off no account. Here she was, Sadie Purrington, wetting herself like a diaper baby because Miss Priss Lillie couldn't leave matters alone. Just had to spend Jackson's money while he was flat in bed taking medicine that made him too sleepy to even know what was going on. Just had to weasel herself into Reverend Burtt's good graces, and Sadie knew it was so, by giving money to pay those people to cut a hole in the very wall of the church. The real reason she paid for that hole cutting, the real reason, Sadie said fiercely to herself as she wiped away her embarrassment with a wet wash cloth, was that she had to get the best of Sadie. She could picture her now, sitting down at home on the royal blue velvet sofa, tapping her foot on that fine authentic oriental carpet with the royal blue

scroll-work that matched the sofa, thinking smugly to herself: I sure foxed old Sadie. Jackson is too sick to fuss at me, and I sure foxed old Sadie.

Umph.

Sadie scrubbed hard at the girdle in the bathroom lavatory, holding it under the running faucet. What will that woman do next? Well, should she try to go to church tomorrow or not? It would satisfy Lillie no end if she stayed at home. She regarded the creams lined up on her bathroom shelf. Those containers needed dusting; and the white scatter rug she had been standing on when her accident had taken place would have to be washed. She could do that tomorrow. Things could always stand some tidying up. She needed to throw away the jar of Ponds cold cream she had kept for ages even after she started using Elizabeth Arden. It came in pretty pink jars with the labels on the backs. When she turned the labels to the wall they looked almost like ornaments rather than face cream, body lotion, bath oil. She wore almost no makeup, so there was no eyeshadow remover or foundation cream. The turpentine bottle could use a good cleaning on the outside where it had dripped down the label when she used it. Next to the shining pink containers it looked poor and unuseful, but she did use it, for everything. She swore by turpentine for cuts, scratches, and hangnails. She wondered if Lillie knew about turpentine. It was doubtful. What she ought to feel for Lillie was pity, not

bitterness. After all, Sadie's children had grown up, and married, and had been a credit to her. Lillie's children turned out pretty badly, come to think. One was a homosexual, her only boy. Her daughter was an alcoholic who married a man from New York, and the other, well, she was all right, except she married a store clerk. Jackson gave them all money when they needed it; to Sadie as well. Yet, how could she go to church tomorrow, knowing that everyone would realize her idea had failed in favor of Lillie's hypocritical benevolence? The only thing to do was to forget the mishap in the bathroom; to ignore the dust and stains on her little collection of beauty aids; to put the white rug in the kitchen sink to soak in ammonia water; and to go to church with her new hat on. She'd fight. She could be as tough as Lillie. After the service when people came up to Lillie, as she knew they would, to congratulate her for such a fine contribution, Sadie would be right there with the best of them. She'd act as though nothing had happened; she'd go to visit Jackson tomorrow as she planned; and she would not breathe a word of this to him or anybody. Well, she might tell her daughters about it, but no one else.

Then there was Jackson's funeral. No sooner had the weather cooled off so that Mr. Burtt's voice did not have to contend with the noise of the air conditioners than Jackson died. Sadie had expected it for such a long time that

on the morning Lillie's daughter came to tell her of the death she was not surprised. Visiting him before he died, Sadie had not marked his physical decline, but when she observed Lillie's behavior during the last weeks she knew that Jackson was far from health. She kept buying new things, often sending away in the mail to get them. First she bought a new Chevrolet car; and some expensive clothes which she phoned Sadie to come see; and then she got a purebred Siamese kitten, for which Sadie heard she paid eighty-five dollars. In his younger days Jackson had despised cats. She thanked Judy, the daughter's name was Judy, for coming to tell her of Jackson's death, and she saw her to the door, promising to come down and be with Lillie as soon as she was dressed. Going into her bedroom she got ready with meticulous care, not hurrying but not dawdling either. She put on the girdle, the brassiere, the stockings, her grey dress with her best pearl necklace, and finally black shoes with low heels. Her last preparation would be powdering her face and applying lipstick. Before she did that she set out her black kid gloves and her black handbag. Into the purse went an extra lipstick, a compact with loose powder, her wallet, a handkerchief, a tin of aspirins, and four folded kleenex tissues. Approaching the mirror she lifted the powder puff to her face. As she watched herself, one, then two, then several tears squeezed themselves from the corners of her eyes. Making no sound



she stood looking at herself cry until it was done. She brushed away the wetness and blew her nose. Jackson would expect her to be with Lillie, and she would do that, but there was something else. Somehow there was a thing that she could do herself, for Jackson.

At Lillie's house people came and went all day. Once or twice the new kitten escaped from his place in the kitchen to wander around in the living room, rubbing himself against the mourners. The cat scratched Mamie Crews' ankle and Sadie, sitting at the library desk, heard Lillie laugh about it, scolding the cat in a high, false voice. She waited to hear Lillie promise to replace Mamie's stockings. Lillie's character was always predictable. Sadie stayed through lunch, taking down who sent which food and flowers on a pink note pad Lillie gave her for that purpose. Each page of the pad had Lillie's name printed at the top in navy blue block letters. That irked her, but by two o'clock when Sadie decided to go home for her nap, the flowers she had been receiving for Lillie had given her an idea. She called her sister-in-law aside.

"Lillie, I've been thinking about what I could do for Jackson. I would like to buy the pall for the casket. We don't have to mention in the church bulletin who gave it but I want to do it for him. Does that suit you?"

Lillie's eyes darted about like tiny fires. She looked everywhere but at Sadie. She looked to the door and to the window, then she looked at the desk, the carpet. Finally her gaze rested on a spot by the lightswitch. "I don't think you ought to do that, Sadie. It's too much expense. Let me think about it for a while."

"No, you don't have to think about it. I want to do it. He was my brother and he was good to me. Let me do it." Standing away from Lillie she continued to watch her.

"It's not right, Sadie. In our church the immediate family, the closest ones have always bought the pall. You know that. Now if we had a cloth pall like the big churches do, that would be different. Nobody would have to buy flower palls anymore."

"Well, I have made up my mind to do it. I am just as much in the immediate family as you are, and I can buy it if I want to. Don't you order one from the florist because I'm going down there now and choose it." She left, knowing Lillie would continue to argue with her if she stayed.

The pall Sadie ordered was lovely, she thought. Though yellow chrysanthemums cost more than pink or white carnations, she determined to get the mums. Four feet wide and more than six feet long, the blanket would be handsome. She had no doubt Jackson would have been pleased. The very idea of a cloth pall. Lillie must be out of her mind. They

cost hundreds of dollars for one thing, and for another a cloth pall was too fine for their modest little parish. No one would ever feel comfortable asking to use it for their dead. She wondered where Lillie got that notion anyway. Sadie had seen them in other churches, grander churches, certainly. One she saw had been made of light wool, white with a wide gold satin cross sewn onto it; the other, at her aunt Emma's funeral, was white linen with a Greek cross embroidered on it. The drape of the cloth had appeared almost too elegant: the coffin looked more like a table set for a fancy dinner than an object for mourning. Her pall for Jackson satisfied her, and, having given the florist instructions about when to deliver it for the funeral the next day, she went home to rest.

In bed later Sadie considered Jackson's absence. At least now that he was gone she could give up seeing Lillie without feeling guilty about it. They would have to meet at church on Sunday mornings, but she could avoid her otherwise. It wouldn't matter to her what Lillie did from now on because it was no longer a concern of her family. Let her flaunt herself and her money. Sadie's children looked after her now. They gave her money to live on, and they paid for this nice apartment. She had Social Security too. Her burden was lifted. Lillie would probably wear that black straw hat tomorrow even though it was slightly out of season. She didn't even care. Let her wear it. Why should she pay any attention?



All morning on the day of Jackson's funeral Sadie had intended calling the florist to be sure the pall was ready. She would be billed for it later. Flowers kept arriving at her apartment from old friends who knew she was Jackson's sister, and it kept her too busy to telephone. She was right on time for the funeral, waving to Rayvonne Bennett, the funeral home man, as she went into the church. After the service ended she thought how easy it would have been to have asked about her pall, but then, when it mattered, she had her mind on other things.

Inside Saint Stephen's the usual seating arrangement was altered for funerals. The front pews were ribboned off for family members. Sadie was escorted to a seat on her usual pew, which was inside the ribbons and directly behind Lillie and her children. They sat on her side, since the funeral home had set it up that way. Sitting calmly she glanced shyly around to see if the church was full. It was. She was pleased to see people standing in the back because of the lack of seating space. She faced the front, waiting for the door behind her to squeak, knowing the coffin would be rolled in this time instead of being carried by Jackson's pallbearers. They were too old to try to carry a coffin. Tensing, she began to take off her gloves. There was that tightness in her stomach again and she

needed to move about. It would not do to have another accident like she had had at home that time. At the squeak of the door Sadie almost held her breath. Her glasses. She needed her glasses. Rummaging in her purse without looking down she found them by touch and put them on. She did not want to miss the first sight of her chrysanthemums.

The congregation stood as she turned to her right to see. There was a pall on the coffin, but not her chosen one. It was the type Lillie had mentioned; the gold cross on soft white wool with folds hanging straight and even at the corners. Sadie stared and stared until she realized everyone but her had sat down again. With a bump she sat too, her eyes behind the bifocal lenses staring at the cloudy, white shape. There was something written on the hem of the drape on the side toward her. She had to lean forward to see, ignoring the wide brim of Lillie's black straw hat. "GIVEN TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF JACKSON DUDLEY AVERETT, THIS SEVENTH DAY OF FEBRUARY, 1968," and down below the embroidered letters were three more figures, initials: L.D.A. Why, Lillie must have stayed up all night last night embroidering those letters. How could she have done that? How could she have gotten the pall so quickly? Maybe it came by Air Mail yesterday. Or, Sadie was seeing it more clearly now, maybe it came in the mail long ago, ordered before Jackson died. It was possible Lillie had arranged to get it weeks ago. Giving

no knowledge of it to Sadie, Lillie had allowed her to make a fool of herself. She had allowed Sadie to pay good money for a flower pall that would never be seen. That woman had nerve. Any retribution she got for this offense against Sadie, against Jackson, would be too light.

Slipping off her glasses, Sadie put them back in her purse. There was nothing else here she was interested in seeing.

When the congregation knelt Sadie made a small noise in her throat, trying to clear it, trying to breathe easier. In front of her the brim of the black hat wobbled as Lillie turned in her place to look at Sadie and smile. Sadie paid no attention, fixing her eyes instead on Lillie's hands which rested on the pew back. Just as she had thought. The nails blazed Fire Engine Red. For Jackson's funeral too.

Allowing a week to pass, Sadie went to the church late on a Monday afternoon. Since she could not recall the latch on the Communion room door exactly, she bought two kinds of screwdrivers. She carried them in a paper bag. Her plans allowed fifteen minutes for undoing the latch, but it took her longer than that because the screws were rusty. Her hands shook, working against the strength she needed. In the Communion room she had another problem. A shiny metal latch had been added to the door of the linen storage cabinet. That required her to use the screwdriver again. When she finally opened the cabinet the smells of the clean

linen, the wine, the oily furniture polish soothed her. They were the same smells she remembered from the old days. Reaching for Jackson's pall she stood holding it in her arms, smiling at the thought of her and Jackson sipping the wine sixty years ago. Carefully she spread the hem of the pall out on top of the cabinet. Taking her scissors from her purse Sadie began her task, squinting in the dimness as she leaned down to cut each thread. Snip and pull. Gently. She wanted to jerk at the hated threads signifying Lillie Damerson Averett. She did not dare. Gathering the fluff of the cut threads into a ball, Sadie put that into the paper bag. She folded the pall, replacing it in the cabinet. Screwing the latch back onto the cabinet door was easy, but she could tell she was losing strength by the time she got to the latch on the outside door. It was almost dark when she finished. There was one last thing to do. Driving to the edge of town she stopped at the garbage dump and got out of her car. She threw the paper bag as far as she could, waiting to hear the thumping sound of its landing. She drove home again, content.

## PRIDE

As she finished her breakfast cereal and coffee with two spoons of sugar, Sadie Furrington wrapped her bathrobe more securely over her knees. The weather was getting chillier lately. Today she could go visiting. She could stay at home to do a little baking for some of her grandchildren. They always loved that, even the ones who were married. Either alternative would suit her. Humph, she thought, I'll bet I don't get to do anything today except argue with Opal about that sorry Ben Frank. If she comes up here again moaning and groaning about how much money she's going to lose because of that nigra I might just tell her exactly what I think. Anybody raised in a city like she was cannot expect to know how to manage tenant farmers and the farms they live on. If she'd been brought up here she'd know that folks like Ben Frank need to be told every minute what to do. Need to be told with firmness too. If I had those farms I believe I could do pretty well. If she ever figures out how to do things I'll be surprised.

I can see her down in her apartment now. She'll be getting dressed, making big decisions about what to wear in case today is the day she convinces me to help her go



look for Ben Frank. She'll put on something dark that won't attract attention. Something that won't show dirt. All the time she'll be thinking about her Dry Cleaning bill, as though she needs to worry about money. She'll be completely ready to go out, down to checking three times to be sure she has lipstick and powder in her pocketbook. It kills me the way she keeps snapping open her purse everywhere she goes to check on her little beauty aids. You'd almost think she was afraid her lipstick tube was going to come to life and hop out to run away.

Sadie's telephone rang. Because she moved slowly she did not answer it until the fourth ring. As she said hello she heard Opal's door downstairs slam shut.

Opal Butler tried turning the knob on her door to be sure it was locked. Satisfied, she went briskly up the stairs of her apartment building, opening the door of the apartment above her's without knocking.

"Sadie?" she called to the living room.

"Sit down, Opal. I'm on the telephone."

Opal sat in the Victorian rocking chair next to the window as she always did when she was in Sadie's apartment. Sadie, older than she, said she preferred the other chairs in the room because they were higher, easier to get in and out of. Listening to the hum of Sadie's conversation Opal put on her glasses to look at the framed photographs lined

in an uneven row across the walnut desk top beside her. There were pictures, each taken at high school graduation time, of Sadie's six grandchildren; and there were four pictures of a baby, each one looking a bit older than the next. The baby was Sadie's only great-grandchild. His name was Thomas Leigh and he was two years old. Sadie and Opal had been to his birthday party not more than a month ago. It was there that a conflict had arisen between them over the baby. Opal believed it had been brewing in Sadie for some time, but until it happened she had not thought anything about it.

Thomas Leigh's parents worried about him if Sadie tried to pick him up. They never actually said she was feeble, they just stepped between Sadie and the baby whenever Sadie started to hold him. Sadie was seventy-seven. Who could blame them? Opal was only sixty-five. It was she who brought Thomas cute little rubber toys he could play with in the bathtub, and smart looking baby clothes. Thomas' parents felt more secure about letting Opal pick up the baby. At the birthday party Sadie flared at Opal. They set the cake in front of Thomas, intending to wait until he had admired it before they sliced it. Immediately he stuck both his hands into the chocolate icing, pushing them down into the cake. Laughing, he was delighted with this new game. Opal jumped up to grab the dish towel to wipe him off, while Sadie slid her chair around to Thomas

to clean his hands with her napkin. They both moved before Thomas' own mother could. When Opal tried to help with the towel Sadie pushed her away, slapping at her arm.

"This is my great-grandbaby, Opal. You let me look after him."

Later, as she drove the two of them home Opal turned it over and over in her mind. The child was Sadie's own family, not Opal's. If Sadie, at her age, wanted to be that way about it she wouldn't argue. Yet she enjoyed the baby too. She felt Sadie was being unfair, unreasonable. Now, listening more intently, she heard Sadie ending her telephone conversation.

"I think it was real sweet of you to call me. I'll take my car down to the station tomorrow and have that antifreeze checked. You call me again soon, Tom." The receiver clicked as Opal heard Sadie replace it in its cradle. Sadie came slowly into the room, laughing a low throaty chuckle.

"Hello, Opal. I'll declare, my grandchildren give me so much pleasure sometimes. That was Tom Junior calling to tell me I ought to have my antifreeze checked before the cold weather gets here. Isn't that the nicest thing?"

Opal nodded, slipping her glasses back into her purse.

"What are you so dressed up for? Is this your day to play bridge?"

"No, Sadie. I always play on Wednesdays. You know that." Opal had taken Sadie's place in the club when she



moved to town five years ago. Sadie said she was getting too old to be any good at bridge, and Opal was glad. The women she played bridge with were the first and only friends she had had when she moved here, except for Sadie. She had known of Sadie for a long while through her uncle Richard; had known she was the "nice widow" he kept company with for years. If she had not come to North Carolina in 1962 to nurse him through his final illness he probably would have willed his farms and other property to Sadie. Today Opal felt it might have been better if he had. Then her worries would be Sadie's and she would still be back in Dallas. She would now be retired from working in the most exclusive jewelry store in the city, and she would be spending her time going to luncheons, to teas, to the Symphony. Instead, she was having to think about chasing down slovenly negro men who owed her money.

She watched Sadie sidle to the front of a brown paisley printed wing chair. The Old Lady's gait, Opal thought. All old ladies get it, even if they've never broken any bones. Everything about it shows how afraid they are of falling and breaking something. I suppose it won't be long before I'll have it.

Sadie leaned back to brace herself on the arms of the chair as she lowered herself into it. Opal knew that Sadie held her breath until she got properly seated.

"Whew, now you're not going to play bridge. What is today? Tuesday? Are you planning to go to town?"

"I have on this dress, Sadie, because I was thinking of going to Madison to see if I could find Ben Frank. I hoped I might get you to go with me."

"What reason do you have to think he's in Madison?"

"Thelma told me. I went out to the farm yesterday afternoon and she gave me the name of a poolhall where someone had seen him."

"That's a fine wifely thing to do. How did you get her to tell you? By threatening to evict them?"

"She was glad to tell me, as a matter of fact. She hasn't seen him in almost two weeks herself and he didn't leave her any money. I promised her if I found him and got my money I'd bring her some of it. She has to have groceries for the children."

"So you've made up your mind to go down there?"

"I think so. If I don't go looking for him he's liable to leave the county with my money and I'll never get it back. Then where would I be?"

"Without your money." Sadie smiled. "And that wouldn't be bad for somebody like you. Four farms with all that tobacco allotment on them. You've got more money than you know what to do with now."

"Sadie, don't get started on that today, will you? All the land I've got, Uncle Richard left to me because I was the last family he had."

"If you want to look at it that way it's fine with me."

"What do you mean? It's the only way to look at it. You know that too." Opal felt little frown lines creeping to her forehead.

"All right. I don't begrudge you the money. At least I have my children to fall back on if I have any trouble or sickness."

Opal thought Sadie said that deliberately. "Don't try to get me off the track, Sadie. Tell me if you think I'm doing right to try to find Ben Frank."

"I'm sure that decision isn't up to me. It's your money."

"At least give me an opinion. You've lived around here longer than I have."

"I haven't quite made up my mind. If you don't go out and find him you'll lose the tobacco money he owes you from the sale; but have you thought what he might do to you if you find him and force him to give up the money?"

"If you think he'd come around to harm me I think you're being silly."

"I just mean, think how it will be if you go to that poolhall in Madison and he happens to be there. You're going to be embarrassing him. How do you know he won't get mad and come here sometime to slash your tires, or worse? Don't you ever think about things like that?"

"How can I be embarrassing him? My lord, he owes me the money, plain and simple. To pay it back is his duty, not a privilege."

"Imagine how it will be when you go into that place. If he's there he'll most likely be with a group of men, his friends. Here comes some prissy little white lady demanding he pay her the part of the tobacco money that belongs to her. How would that make you feel?"

"Do you think I'm prissy? I never knew that."

"It was only a manner of speaking, Opal. I didn't mean to be serious."

"I was hoping there'd be two prissy little white ladies going in that poolhall. Please go with me, Sadie. I couldn't stand to go in there alone. People would never get over it."

"At my age I don't care what people think of me. I don't want you to corner that man. He feels safe where he is."

"Sadie, if I promise to be sweet and nice to him, and to give him a chance to pay me at will, would you agree to go with me?"

"When?"

"Today. Now. Let's get it over with."

"Let's at least wait until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is my bridge day. I won't have time tomorrow. I couldn't go until Thursday and by Thursday he could be gone."

"Let's don't go now. We'll wait until after lunch and go then. Will that suit you?"

"All right, Sadie. Can you be ready to go at twelve-thirty?"

"I'll be ready. You think about it some more between now and then. I'm not convinced it's the right thing to do."

In the village of Madison there was one railroad track, not much used now, which cut through the business area. Since the section to the north of the tracks had been developed first, years ago, it consisted of old, mostly wooden frame buildings. On the other side in the southern direction were stores, offices, even a movie theatre, all built of brick or concrete block. There was a freshness to them. They were more pleasing to look at.

Opal and Sadie did not drive through the new section because they came into the town from the north and stopped in front of one particular wooden structure. It had a high, square facade that dated it as probably one of the first such store fronts erected in the town. On either side of the door, facing the street, were large plate glass windows. Stencilled in uniform white letters on one glass was the name: MAC'S BILLIARDS. Switching off the ignition Opal stated flatly, "This must be it."

Turning in her seat Sadie looked out of the car.

"Sewer green, Opal."

Opal looked too.

"I couldn't call that color paint anything but sewer green." Sadie shook her head.

Obviously the building had been renovated in order to make it a poolhall, but it was odd looking. Maybe the wood had not ever been painted before, Sadie couldn't tell, but it apparently had not been primed or scraped before the recent coat of paint was applied. The paint flaked off the building in big patches like aging confetti, littering the sidewalk. It crunched beneath their feet as they walked up to the building. Sadie stopped to peer through the glass, aware of Opal standing beside her.

"What does it look like?" Opal whispered.

"I don't know if we should go in there. I can see five men, or six, it's too dark in there to be sure. Two are playing pool at the back of the room. The others are watching."

"Are they all negroes?"

"As far as I can tell they are."

"We have to do it, Sadie. I can't turn around and go home without trying." Opal's whispering got on Sadie's nerves. She wished she had worn a sweater.

Putting on her glasses Opal leaned up to the glass, shading her eyes with her hand. "I think that's him at the table in the checked shirt."

Sadie saw a figure, what she had guessed to be the



sixth man, step away from the bar to the left of the pool table. He carried something, a can, in his right hand to the man wearing the checked shirt. The man took it, giving him some coins, and raised it to his mouth. When he leaned his head back to drink he saw the two women. They watched his lips move for a moment and then all six men turned toward the window.

"We might as well go in. They've seen us. I think they're drinking beer," Sadie sighed.

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Go on. I'm right behind you." Sadie remained at the window.

When Opal pushed open the door the hinges squeaked. Two of the men moved, going through the door at the back of the room. Thank goodness, Sadie thought, maybe one of them was Ben Frank. Maybe the man in the checked shirt is someone else. The four men who were left did nothing. Two of them, the one who might be Ben Frank and a very fat man stood at the table, while the other two rested against the wall beside the cue rack. One smoked a cigarette, letting it hang from the corner of his mouth.

Opal leaned backwards out the door calling to Sadie to follow. Sadie obeyed. Taking two or three steps into the room she was confused by the darkness. Having come from the glare of an October sun she was almost blinded. She closed her eyes as she felt the close smell of the hot room descend on her. Swaying where she stood she tried

to recall. Yes, chewed cigar ends and stale beer. Funny, she could hardly smell normal odors any more. She stayed by the open door, holding it while she listened to Opal who was beginning her spiel. She heard her call out "Ben Frank" in a voice whose strength surprised Sadie. The sound echoed. None of the men moved. They watched the women. This room is like a cave, Sadie thought, turning around to breathe the air from outside. In a moment she went back in again and closed her eyes for the second time so the darkness behind her eyelids would prepare her for the dark of the room. When she could see she focused on the men.

"Ben Frank," that must be the second time she's spoken, Sadie mumbled to herself. I know I heard her before. Still the man in the checked shirt did not answer. He leaned on his cue stick, silently staring.

Opal turned to Sadie, her face screwed into a series of lines that meant she was going to cry.

"Ben Frank Harriston is who we're looking for." Sadie was astounded to hear herself. "Are any of you Mr. Harriston?"

The fat man stepped forward, tipping an imaginary hat. Frayed black suspenders held up his baggy khaki trousers. "Welcome ladies. Welcome. Mac Suttons the name. Want to ast you why you lookin for Ben Harriston?"

"For personal reasons," Opal snapped. She looked at the man standing by the pooltable. "Aren't you Ben Frank?"



One of the men loitering against the wall stirred, beginning an exaggeratedly casual stroll toward the front door. His fellow raised his head suddenly, as though he had just remembered something important. He followed the first man out.

"See you later, Mac," he said, being careful not to look at the pool player in the checked shirt.

They passed slowly by Sadie, stopping to stand on the sidewalk outside.

"You are Ben Frank, aren't you? I'm sure I recognize you." Opal asked again. She stood with her hands clasped in front of her.

In the glare of the naked lightbulb which hung above his head the man nodded, his chin making a long black bobbing shadow. "Yes'um. That's me."

"I am Opal Butler. Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"What about?"

Sadie was relieved that the pooltable was between them and Ben Frank.

"Would you rather go outside to talk?"

"I ain't got nothin to talk about." He began chalking his cue stick.

"I need to ask you about the money you got from selling the tobacco off my farm." Opal waited. "You did sell the tobacco, didn't you?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders.

"Part of the money you got from the sale belongs to me. Do you have it?"

The fat man began moving around the room. Grabbing two wooden chairs he set them in front of Opal, slapping off the dust, wiping his hand on his trousers.

"Let me get you a chair, here. Man, that sun's hot today ain't it? Unusual hot to be October, ain't it? You think that means we gonna have a mild winter?" Shooting the words at the women he did not glance at Ben Frank who had put his hands in his pockets.

Opal sat immediately, and as quickly stood again. "Where is the money, Ben Frank?"

Sadie heard the men out on the sidewalk giggling.

"What money?"

"Where is my part of the tobacco money, Ben Frank? You know you owe it to me." Opal took one step toward the pooltable.

It's going to come now, Sadie thought. She'll challenge him and he'll run. There is no choice. She said she'd give him a chance.

"Opal?" she called, frowning at Ben Frank.

Opal ignored her and Sadie shook her head, looking at the lone man.

His eyes cut sharply to Opal, then to her, then to the door. Futilely his gaze darted from one to another like a fly buzzing, seeking the light, seeking a way to get

out. Sadie watched his chest moving staccato, in and out beneath the red and white checks of his shirt; watched him draw a breath to speak.

"Got to go out for a minute."

Opal raised her hand, but he was gone through the door at the back marked TOILET. It closed with a sharp click.

Sadie had done it. It was her fault. In trying to tell him not to give in she had made him think there was no choice. He had misunderstood.

The three were quiet. Sadie did not look around when she heard the men outside walk away.

"Is there a door to the outside back there?" Opal asked Mac.

"Yes'um. You reckon he'll run from you?"

"I don't really know. Maybe you could stop him. Will you go and see if he's still there?"

Mac did not move. "How much money he owe you? Other folks been here looking for him, you know. You ladies are the first to catch him. Guess he was fooled, two ladies like you comin in."

"Yes, well... Sadie what do you think about his going back there to...".

Sadie had disappeared.

Sadie stood on the sidewalk next to the car, staring

blankly at the street. When Ben Frank's figure emerged from behind a Used Furniture store building two blocks away, she watched it dully. He did not run, but he moved fast, the checks of his red and white shirt blurring as he got farther away. Opal doesn't know that it's my fault he got scared off, she reasoned. I can just go back in there as if nothing out of the way has happened and tell her it's time to go home. I didn't mean to do it. Things happen that way all the time.

When she looked back in the poolhall Mac was sitting in the chair he had set out for her. Opal was listening to him.

"...when she put on that frown I believe that told him it was time for him to go. Now it ain't none of my business. I'm just tellin you what I saw, is all."

He saw Sadie and moved clumsily out of the chair.

"Thank you. I'm sorry to have disturbed you." Opal nodded to the man. "Let's go, Sadie."

The only sounds Sadie could hear when they got back into the car were the doors slamming. For almost twenty minutes Opal drove while neither of them said a word. Sadie began to stroke her dress, smoothing it across her thighs.

"There's a little drive-in restaurant up here on the right. I surely would like to have a coca-cola. Wouldn't you like one?" She peeked out of the corners of her eyes

at Opal.

"No, I don't want one. I'll stop for you."

"Oh, don't stop for me. I'll wait until I get home."

She noted Opal's hands clenched around the steering wheel. Her knuckles were white, and her arms looked stiff.

Opal was already turning in at the restaurant. Theirs was the only car. She edged up to one of the serving trays secured under a microphone in the section marked CURB SERVICE. Rolling down her window she reached to press the button on the speaker. The machine sputtered stale static until a tired voice came over the channel. "No curb service between one and five." Without replying to the voice Opal turned to Sadie, waiting.

Sadie tried to laugh. "I guess I'll have to go in there, then." She managed a sound like a giggle, but it rang false to her, high and giddy like a foolish young girl. She opened her door. "As long as I'm going are you sure there's nothing you want?"

"No, thank you." Opal kept her eyes on Sadie. "There's nothing I want."

I ought to leave her, Opal thought as she watched Sadie's almost creeping walk. It would serve her right for the way she acted. She'd get home all right. If she couldn't get some of her old friends from this dinky little town to bring her back she could always call one of her children to come after her. They would come too. Now if I got stranded

here, why, who could I call? Sadie's children? I don't believe they'd come for me. I'd have to get a taxi or a bus. This town doesn't even have taxis. She looked toward the restaurant door as Sadie, a paper cup in her hand, began her walk back to the car. Umph, Opal thought, these people certainly ought to clear away the litter in this parking lot. I never saw so much trash in my life. Sadie moved toward her, looking at Opal instead of at where she stepped. I should tell her to be careful. She's going to step on that box there in a minute if she doesn't look out. Opal leaned out the window, intent on warning Sadie. Sadie had already stepped on the box. With her right foot she unintentionally shoved it in front of her left foot. The left foot could not avoid it. She began to weave. Opal opened her door to go toward Sadie, afraid now to call out for fear of startling her more. Sadie pitched forward, the coca-cola spilling in an arc onto the pavement. She fell back, landing on the ground.

"Sadie, are you all right?" Opal hurried toward her. "Don't move. Stay where you are for a minute." Opal squatted beside her. "Can you tell me if you hurt anywhere?"

Sadie shook her head.

"Don't try to talk. You got the wind knocked out of you."

Sadie nodded again, her lips moving soundlessly as she sat holding the empty paper cup.



"I'm going inside to get somebody to help. Can you sit here and be still until I come back?"

Sadie smiled.

"I'll come right back. Don't worry."

Who would have thought it, Sadie mused. She set down the cup beside her on the asphalt. Who would have thought a sore bottom, maybe even a broken hip, Lord I hope not, would be what it took to bring that woman around? I didn't intend to do what I did. I'm not mean. Who would have thought it?

Sitting with her legs stuck out in front of her she laughed the low, throaty laugh of an old woman, proud to hear her voice.

## ANGER

She thought she would like to cut teeth again. One tooth would suffice for a while, just long enough for the memory of it to come back fully. Cutting teeth, she remembered, was the wonderful rubbing of the tongue against a gum: the gum full and almost bursting, mature and whole in its single coming. She recalled the marvelous knowing that the tooth was on its way. There was the involuntary creeping of the tongue to inspect and test the tender wet place, slick and fevered with its own knowledge of what was to be. It would be soothing to cut a tooth, full of promise...almost like having babies. She knew about that too but she did not want that again, only teeth. Having two children had convinced her that babies were much too much trouble. It was unpleasant. Still, sometimes her daughters pleased her. Emily made her happier than Julie, but maybe that was because she saw more of her; and it was wrong to compare one child to another anyway. They weren't even children anymore. Still, no more babies. She would wish only for teeth. That was wiser. She lay back on the pillows. One of her grandchildren had a child. Preposterous. What concerned her was that the baby, the great-grandchild, had eight teeth. She had stuck her finger in the child's mouth to feel them, counting when no one was watching her.

That had been a feat. Usually they didn't leave her alone with the baby for an instant. She was smarter than they imagined.

She warned them all about having children. She warned them but they didn't listen. Having children hurt, she could recall that. The way they cried was tiring, and there were all those diapers to change. Nobody listened to her any longer. They used to listen, when she was younger. Then her children had let her lift the babies. Yes, they had. But everyone thought she was too weak now to pick up babies. She never even got to hold them. When she asked to have the baby brought to hold while she was sitting down they refused her. They said babies were fragile things and she might drop them on their heads. If that was so she wondered why they let her lift things other than babies, like the groceries she had to carry from her car to her second floor apartment. They didn't seem so worried about her ability to manage with those things of her own. She had baby-sat for those grandchildren too. Kept them for weeks at a time while her children and their husbands had gone off for a rest or away for meetings, conventions. She was a widow from the time her own children were very young and she was always at their disposal. They didn't need her now. Once they had, but they thought they saw her uselessness. Recently they made their plans so she would no longer be bothered with them.

When she was younger she had her Insurance Agency to keep her occupied when she wanted to be occupied. They had taken that right in stride. "Mama can just slow down on her little Business while she keeps the children for us next week. She needs a change." She had heard them say that more than once. It wasn't much of a business, she was realistic enough to admit it, but it kept her from begging a living from them. They should have been grateful.

Well, all she asked for was to cut a couple of teeth and that couldn't hurt anyone but maybe herself. It couldn't be any more painful than those pinching dentures she despised. Real teeth would not click together when she spoke. Just once more, she was making it into a prayer, just once more, Oh Lord, please let me know how it feels. Let me remember knowing that place where the new tooth is coming through. I am seventy-nine years old, Lord, and I will be eighty in May. Please let me just once more cut some teeth, one tooth...

She slept. It was three o'clock. Time for her afternoon nap.

When Sadie Purrington woke again the late afternoon sun was dazzling. Without opening her eyes she rubbed her hands lightly over the white sheet that covered her. Now her sheets were always sent out to the laundry and returned to her nicely pressed. Feeling the sheet she thought how

smooth it was. How cool and smooth. Each Thursday she took the paper wrapped package from the delivery man. As soon as she paid him she returned to her room with the bundle. Setting it on her high bed she ripped the paper off, always in the same way. First she tore it across the width, pulling both edges away from each other; then she tore it lengthwise. With the clean linens uncovered she leaned down, it wasn't far because the bed was high, and she rubbed her cheek back and forth against the freshly ironed sheets and pillow cases, smelling the mildly scorched odor of hot rooms and searing pressing irons. It seemed just a bit evil somehow to do it. She often considered how in the world she would explain to anyone who happened to see her at that moment what she was doing. The feeling was easy to shrug off because she knew everyone excused things like this in old people. The sheet that covered her today was like satin. She could imagine the satin of the coffin-lining she would have. It would be white, of course. This was what it would be like: light and airy and smooth. Well, she thought, they haven't gotten rid of me yet.

Propping herself up on the pillows in her bed she looked around her room, noting the lack of starch in the light organdy curtains at her windows that made them billow out like round balloons in the late breeze. It was April and she thought of the years when she had lived in her house. What a good house it had been. This time of year she



would be waiting anxiously for her jonquil and hyacinth bulbs to bloom. She always watched for them. Pacing around the dew-wet yard in the early mornings while her coffee perked on the stove, she examined the ground near trees and along the borders where she knew the flowers were planted. The bulbs always bloomed beautifully. Emily teased her that they were afraid not to bloom. "Mama," she would say, "nothing will stay underground in this yard if you want it to come up. You're too mean to let it." The air was pure on those mornings. She missed them now, the times when the day sounds had not yet changed into themselves. Things had been quiet and calm then. She had some hyacinths in those days exactly the color of the pink down-comfort that covered her feet today. Julie had given it to her at Christmas one year. Last year was it? Julie hadn't mentioned the color but she noticed it right away, as soon as she opened the box. Maybe Julie had been too young to remember the color of those flowers, or probably she merely forgot the likeness. Had it been last Christmas anyway? Well, it was difficult to remember years clearly. It didn't matter in any case. Wasn't that what made her tired before her nap...?

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed she stepped onto the footstool. Her inclination was to stomp it with her foot but she was aware of how brittle her bones were and she kept herself from doing it. The same footstool had



been positioned in front of the fireplace at her house for forty-some years. The children played "horsie" on it and it served often for an extra seat. Now she didn't have a house, only this apartment, and some days she didn't feel steady enough to step the distance from the bed to the floor. The stool was worn out. She reasoned that it was not damaging to put her feet on the top. The yarns woven so carefully into the stylized needlepoint covering it had almost disappeared, leaving gaunt soiled strands to make up the design. It needed replacing. She wouldn't stomp it today. She had to get up in a hurry. Julie was coming. Julie, silly Julie, who asked her the last time she visited why she didn't get rid of that high old bed and buy a new one that was lower. Julie, her younger daughter: the more beautiful of the two. A woman still lovely at fifty. Sadie's own face softened in the memory. That straight nose and the high, delicate cheekbones, all set off by vital, dark skin. Those were traits from her husband and not from her. The slight grey color in Julie's hair was from him also. Her own hair, and Emily's, was grey by the time they were forty. Emily did look more like her, but perhaps they both had some of her traits. Julie was the one who only came to see her when she was lonely, or when she needed something. Sadie knew that they all thought she was the foolish one, letting her children take advantage of her, but she knew her daughters well and she felt how they needed her. Yes,

she felt it. Perhaps she should not have let them depend on her. She wondered if she should not, especially in Julie's instance. It seemed she had tried to discourage it forever. Remembering times when she had been too harsh with both of them she resolved to sort it all out in her mind, but not now. There wasn't time.

Still sitting on the edge of her bed she looked down to realize she was stroking the scar on her thumb again. It was a nervous habit she had. The scar, at the base of the thumbnail on her left hand, was rather pretty: a raised triangle rounded to a hump in the center. The occasion on which she had gotten the scar was hazy now. Her husband had just died at the time and she was having difficulty managing the children by herself. Because his death was sudden, Julie and Emily could not accept it totally. When they asked to sleep in the same room at night she allowed it, knowing they would squabble and fight with one another. They were pre-school age. Predictably, they often fought and cried after they went to bed, calling for her to come and mediate. It was hard on her nerves. After weeks of it she gave them an ultimatum. If they insisted on not behaving she would separate them again. That worked for a while. One night they began a loud fuss and she got up to spank them. When she left their room they were both in bed sulking and sniffing, but she thought she had calmed them. Turning out the light she did not close the door, and to be

sure they would stay quiet she stood just outside in the dark hall. Her hand rested on the doorframe. Suddenly she heard a bed spring squeak, and she recognized the padding sound of bare feet on the floor. Before she could move, the door slammed. Her thumb was caught in it. She did not cry out, but it was very painful. As soon as she was able she pushed open the door again. When she turned on the light Julie stood in the center of the room, crying. She knew she had been unwise in spanking her daughter as fiercely as she did, but she was angry and hurting. Julie, denying that she had done it, kept accusing her sister.

Julie was supposed to be driving up for supper with her. Sadie smiled and stepped carefully from the footstool to the floor. Lifting her girdle off the back of a chair where she had left it, she recalled that last visit of her younger daughter. After Julie observed that a new bed would be good for her mother she continued to lecture, going on about how crazy a girdle was for a woman of Sadie's age. Glancing at the empty rocking chair in one corner of her bedroom Sadie could see Julie sitting there; could almost smell the inexpensive perfume. There was no doubt it was a strong scent because Sadie couldn't detect weak odors any more. Not a bad smell either, possibly lilacs, but not really suited to what Julie thought of herself. Gardenias and roses for her. She wished for expensive things. Sadie had told her that she should consider carefully before marrying a man going into the ministry because she would never be

able to have anything that was not entirely modest. Julie had bitterly answered that she was shocked to hear her mother say such a thing. That was long ago. Recently they entered into that same kind of discussion. "Mama, you just astound me. You get up in the morning, every morning, and put on that girdle and a bra, and stockings too; even high heels sometimes. Then, as if that wern't enough you hurry downtown like you did twenty years ago, like you had actual business down there. Now you know that everything you want can be delivered to you by any delivery boy in town. You do too much for a woman as old as you are. I'm telling you this for your own good, Mama. I know what it's like to get old. You don't listen to anybody, do you? Everything you do is a hazard to your health. Did you know it? You're going to fall someday stepping into that girdle." Sadie stared at the empty chair. She could not be sure it did not rock slightly as though Julie sat there.

"Lord have mercy, Julie," she had answered her that day, "I'm not giving up to old age yet, as they say. I like my girdle and I like my high bed. Both of them keep me from getting the backache. That was my bed when Charles and I got married. Haven't I told you that before? I know I have. Besides, I don't think I ought to give you any more furniture right now. Didn't I give you that chest that used to be in my front hall at the house? Here, zip my dress. I don't struggle with these zippers when I don't have to."

As she zipped the dress Julie's tone changed. She didn't become indignant about the bed, which told Sadie that to have it had been her plan all along. She hoped Julie was ashamed.

Julia Purrington Wiley, Julie to her family, felt annoyed that she had committed herself to dinner with her mother. All day she had dreaded the hour's drive to Sadie's house. She had no real duties any more: no job, no family to occupy her. Still, she resented the way in which she allowed herself to promise her time away. She kept busy with tennis, and her garden, and some occasional sewing for herself. Finding a job now that she was alone had no appeal for her. It seemed so common. 'Public Work' as her mother would call it. She was trying to ration the insurance money from her husband's death to make it last as long as it would. When it was gone, well, she'd think about that when the time came.

Now that she was finally on her way to Sadie's house she forgot how troublesome the idea of the drive had been, and she thought instead of the party she had not gone to the night before. The invitation had been from a socially prominent couple she and her husband had known through his church. While Jonathan was alive they were frequently invited to parties by these people, and in the year since his death the couple had continued to include her when they



entertained. She thought it was considerate of them. She appreciated their thinking of her. She never went. There was a pattern she began to follow when the invitations were offered her. The wife, always the wife, would call and tell her about the party, and Julie inevitably accepted. The first part of her preparation then would be to read. Before Jon's death she did not even read the newspapers. It was unnecessary because she could always fill the conversational voids at parties with accounts of his work. He was highly respected. Now that she was on her own she tried to keep up with current news, subscribing to Time, Newsweek, the local papers, and the National Observer. It was necessary to read them all so she would have a rounded view of things. It would not do for her to seem prejudiced, not Jon's wife. Then came the other planning: what she would wear, whether she would spend the money to have her hair done or fix it herself, whether she should drive or call to ask friends to give her a ride to the party. When the day came she would lose her nerve. It embarrassed her to have to telephone and give her regrets but she could not help herself.

It was not as though she did not understand the implications of the way she felt. She had taken psychology courses. Even if she had not she knew that her feeling was what her friends would have jokingly referred to as a "hang-up". Thinking of "hang-ups" reminded her that she wanted to smoke. In reaching across the dash panel to take a cigarette



out of the glove compartment she turned the car slightly to the right. The road she was on had just been resurfaced so the shoulder was low, dropping off steeply. The wheels on the right side of the car slipped over the edge, catching there. When she angrily wrenched the steering wheel to pull back onto the highway the tires could not raise over the edge. The impact of her motion caused the car to tip lazily toward the right side. Suspended there on only two wheels she was helpless and utterly frightened. She forgot what she should do. She raised her hands to her forehead and then jerked them down to the steering wheel in disbelief. What was she doing? Coming farther off the road the car bumped back to the ground. Mashing the brake pedal she began pumping it up and down with her foot. Gravel pelted the underside of her car, at first rapidly and then slower. The car began to respond to her efforts to slow it. When she finally stopped she pushed the lever to PARK. Resting her head against the steering wheel she closed her eyes. Jittering, her legs were alive with tension. As she sat back again she noticed her hands were still wound around the wheel, white showing at the knuckles. She breathed deeply in and out.

Not being quite sure she could resume driving she sat there for a long time, breathing and thinking. When she tried to think of other things she was not successful. Being alone like this was what she hated; being forced into self-reliance.

What I need is a husband who could do all these things I cannot do, she thought. When she lit a cigarette the red eye of the car lighter stared accusingly at her from her hand. Had Jonathan been alive he would have been driving. Such a frightening thing would not have happened, or if it had it would have been his responsibility.

She thought about her friends, woman friends, who praised her for the way in which she got along by herself. They would not understand how it was until it happened to them. Wanting to cry, she wished it on them, the well-wishers. Let them suffer as she did. Teeth clenched tightly she felt the need to move, to hit something or scream. When she regained herself she started the engine, and thinking that even the company of her mother was better than nothing, began driving again.

Tying an apron around her waist Sadie decided to ask Julie to set the table when she got there. She felt her part in the dinner was the actual preparing of the food. She thought that was enough for her to do. They were having baked chicken, canned green beans, instant mashed potatoes, and a chocolate cake she had made that morning. She'd let Julie wash the dishes when they were through too. Julie wouldn't want to, but Sadie would ask her and she would not refuse. Personally, Sadie hated to cook. Hated to cook everything but desserts. For many years she had been

making cakes, custards, pies, cookies, and everything else she could think of that was sweet, for her grandchildren. To be perfectly honest she loved the things as much as the children did, or had. Now they all were so sensitive of weight that it wasn't as much fun as it had once been. What she liked were pastries, but if none of the young ones was expected she often ate ice cream, bought in pints. Some nights, if no one asked her to dinner and if she was hungry, she would eat a whole pint right from the carton. It was harder for her to do now than it had been in the past. She hated to admit it, but eating that much food at one time gave her severe indigestion. She kept resolving she would quit doing it, but Julie was right. She was stubborn. At night after one of these ice cream sprees she would lie in her bed, stretched out stiffly in the dark, waiting to feel the captive air inside her rise into her throat. Then she would belch, loud echoing belches that terrified her with their intensity. In the morning when Emily called to see how she was, she would have to tell her she had had a bad night. Perhaps that was how she would die. An overdose of ice cream.

The squeaking of the oven door as she opened it to check on the baking chicken drowned the sound of Julie's entry. When her daughter spoke from the kitchen door Sadie dropped the fork she was holding. She nearly lost her balance.

"Mama, I just... gosh, I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, you didn't, Julie. Come in." Sadie regained her composure by bending down for the fork. "I didn't hear you come in. How are you?"

"I'm all right. Something smells good. What are you cooking?" She glanced at the bare table. "You didn't expect me?"

"Yes, yes I did. Let's sit down and have some sherry. Then you can tell me the news before you set the table."

"That sounds fine to me. I had the most terrible thing happen on the way here. I want to tell you about it."

"Go sit down. I'll be there in a minute."

Sitting with Sadie, Julie felt more at ease. She crossed her legs primly at the knees as she held her wine glass. The lines in her mother's face seemed less severe tonight. Julie considered it was because her mother was glad to have her here. She sighed deeply.

"What is it you're cooking, did you say? Beef?" Julie turned toward the chair where Sadie sat.

"No, chicken." She was thinking of Julie as a child with knobby knees and bobbed hair. "Do you remember that down-comfort you gave me for Christmas once?"

"Yes. You still have it?" Julie sipped her sherry.

"Oh, yes. I use it all the time. I was wondering if it isn't the same color as some flowers I used to have in the yard at the house. You remember? Hyacinths? You helped me plant them?"

Julie was puzzled. "I don't think so. Could they have been planted after I went away to school? They must have been. Maybe Emily helped you. I don't recall."

"I'm surprised you don't. They were a hybrid type and we planted them to have in the house at Easter time. We must have planted fifty or sixty bulbs all along that wooden fence at the side of the yard." Sadie's stare lingered on Julie's face.

"Mama, I know I would remember. It wasn't me."

Mama, I know I would remember, Sadie mocked to herself. She was beginning to stand. First she placed both feet together in front of her and, leaning forward from the waist, she used the heels of her hands to push herself up out of the chair. Some of the wine spilled from the glass she held. She seemed not to notice it, though Julie could see the places where it wet her hand and made a dark stain on the upholstery. Mama must feel the wetness, she thought.

"I want to see about supper," Sadie almost whispered as she moved toward the kitchen.

Julie knew she should get a towel and sponge up the sherry, but she remained seated. Damned hyacinths. Damned old hyacinths. Mama was always trying to trick her like this. Trying to make her feel guilty about something in childhood, something she had or had not done. There was that time after Daddy died when she and Emily had begged to sleep together in the big bedroom. Daddy was the only



one who cared about her anyway. Mama had hurt her badly the night that Emily slammed the door on Mama's thumb. Her bed was nearer the door and she knew Mama had not left but she couldn't tell Emily. She feared Mama's coming back in to spank them again. She lay frozen in her bed while her goody-goody sister had prissed over to fling that door shut, running back to jump under her covers. Julie had gotten up then to say it, to tell Emily that Mama was outside in the hall. Neither of them knew that Mama had been hurt. Oh, she had tried. She could remember crying and saying No, Mama, I didn't do it. Don't spank me, Mama. I didn't do it. Mama had made a mistake.

Julie caught herself. If she had not been so rattled by the near accident on the way here she would not have thought of it at all. Anyway, the table needed setting. She rose to do it, stopping on her way into the kitchen to pour a little more sherry for herself. As she lifted the cold silver flatware out of the drawer she thought of Emily.

"Mama, how is Emily? I don't hear from her often."

"Fine. Just fine. I went up there for supper last night. Little Sadie and the baby were there but the baby was already asleep." She paused to lift the chicken out of the oven. "Do you know that baby has eight teeth?"

There it was again, Julie thought, putting out forks and knives. Emily is always having her for dinner and I'm the one who causes trouble by coming here to dinner. It's



not my fault I don't live up the street from Mama. Emily just never got out into the world. She chose to stay in this little town, spending her life on the children and Mama. Nobody forced her to do it.

"How are the children?"

"What?" Sadie spoke sharply, startled again.

"I said, how are Emily's children?"

"Didn't I just tell you that little Sadie and the baby were at Emily's when I was last night? Don't you listen?"

"Yes, I forgot. They're fine then?"

"Yes, yes. Now finish with the table so we can eat. I don't want to spend your whole visit arguing. I don't see you often enough for that. Tell me about the party at the Wright's last night."

They sat down.

"I didn't go. Mama, what do you mean by 'arguing'? We've hardly said anything since I've been here. I was going to tell you about the awful wreck I almost had on the way here tonight."

"I want to hear about the party first. It's so good for you to be finally getting out again. I am glad for you." Sadie took a bite of the chicken from her plate. When she found she could not swallow it she knew there was something wrong. Unable to get her breath she got up from her place intending to go into her room. She needed to cough. It would be rude to display herself at the table. This had

happened before. She must not panic. Moving swiftly she passed through the living room into her own room. I wasn't ready, she thought. I wasn't ready at all. The colors began to stream behind her eyes. First there was the pink of the flowers, then the white of the sheets and finally black. Nothing.

Hearing the thump of Sadie's fall, Julie felt annoyed. She had been warning her all along. Even before she walked out of the kitchen and through the living room into her mother's room, she knew Sadie was dead. Looking at the body there on the floor she was not bothered, but she could not touch it. She stood in the doorway and watched the limp form lying next to the high bed. The mouth was closed; the eyes were closed. It looked so final. She thought of the dinner going to waste. She wondered if she dared wrap up her plate to take home with her to eat later. She would be hungry. But now.

What should she do? Call Emily. That seemed good. Yes, that was the thing to do. Turning her back on Sadie's body she tried to think more clearly. Watching the unmoving form made her nervous. She picked up the telephone and looked at the cord. It would reach. Taking the phone out into the hall she closed the door. Call Emily and tell her. Tell her what? Well, she's gone Emily. Mama could have made things right. She was tricky, you know? Getting us mixed up like that. I'd like for you to see to things.

I'll be around, but you look after it. It's fair. There is one thing though. I'd like to have Mama's high bed. It was her marriage bed. Her's and Daddy's. You don't want it do you? I can wait until you get here to go home if you'll hurry. Being here is not good for me. I'll just go outside and sit in my car until you come. Please don't be long.