

A Rose For Emily

by
William Faulkner

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I

WHEN Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant--a combined gardener and cook--had seen in at least ten years.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps--an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town, dating from that day in 1894 when Colonel Sartoris, the mayor--he who fathered the edict that no Negro woman should appear on the streets without an apron--remitted her taxes, the dispensation dating from the death of her father on into perpetuity. Not that Miss Emily would have accepted charity. Colonel Sartoris invented an involved tale to the effect that Miss Emily's father had loaned money to the town, which the town, as a matter of business, preferred this way of repaying. Only a man of Colonel Sartoris' generation and thought could have invented it, and only a woman could have believed it.

When the next generation, with its more modern ideas, became mayors and aldermen, this arrangement created some little dissatisfaction. On the first of the year they mailed her a tax notice. February came, and there was no reply. They wrote her a formal letter, asking her to call at the sheriff's office at her convenience. A week later the mayor wrote her himself, offering to call or to send his car for her, and received in reply a note on paper of an archaic shape, in a thin, flowing calligraphy in faded ink, to the effect that she no longer went out at all. The tax notice was also enclosed, without comment.

They called a special meeting of the Board of Aldermen. A deputation waited upon her, knocked at the door through which no visitor had passed since she ceased giving china-painting lessons eight or ten years earlier. They were admitted by the old Negro into a dim hall from which a stairway mounted into still more shadow. It smelled of dust and disuse--a close, dank smell. The Negro led them into the parlor. It was furnished in heavy, leather-covered furniture. When the Negro opened the blinds of one window, they could see that the leather was cracked; and when they sat down, a faint dust rose sluggishly about their thighs, spinning with slow motes in the single sun-ray. On a tarnished gilt easel before the fireplace stood a crayon portrait of Miss Emily's father.

They rose when she entered--a small, fat woman in black, with a thin gold chain descending to her waist and vanishing into her belt, leaning on an ebony cane with a tarnished gold head. Her skeleton was small and spare; perhaps that was why what would have been merely plumpness in another was obesity in her. She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue. Her eyes, lost in the fatty ridges of her face, looked like two small pieces of coal pressed into a lump of dough as they moved from one face to another while the visitors stated their errand.

She did not ask them to sit. She just stood in the door and listened quietly until the spokesman came to a stumbling halt. Then they could hear the invisible watch ticking at the end of the gold chain.

Her voice was dry and cold. "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Colonel Sartoris explained it to me. Perhaps one of you can gain access to the city records and satisfy yourselves."

"But we have. We are the city authorities, Miss Emily. Didn't you get a notice from the sheriff, signed by him?"

"I received a paper, yes," Miss Emily said. "Perhaps he considers himself the sheriff . . . I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But there is nothing on the books to show that, you see We must go by the--"

"See Colonel Sartoris. I have no taxes in Jefferson."

"But, Miss Emily--"

"See Colonel Sartoris." (Colonel Sartoris had been dead almost ten years.) "I have no taxes in Jefferson. Tobe!" The Negro appeared. "Show these gentlemen out."

II

So SHE vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell.

That was two years after her father's death and a short time after her sweetheart--the one we believed would marry her --had deserted her. After her father's death she went out very little; after her sweetheart went away, people hardly saw her at all. A few of the ladies had the temerity to call, but were not received, and the only sign of life about the place was the Negro man--a young man then--going in and out with a market basket.

"Just as if a man--any man--could keep a kitchen properly," the ladies said; so they were not surprised when the smell developed. It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons.

A neighbor, a woman, complained to the mayor, Judge Stevens, eighty years old.

"But what will you have me do about it, madam?" he said.

"Why, send her word to stop it," the woman said. "Isn't there a law?"

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Judge Stevens said. "It's probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard. I'll speak to him about it."

The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. "We really must do something about it, Judge. I'd be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we've got to do something." That night the Board of Aldermen met--three graybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

"It's simple enough," he said. "Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don't . . ."

"Dammit, sir," Judge Stevens said, "will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?"

So the next night, after midnight, four men crossed Miss Emily's lawn and slunk about the house like burglars, sniffing along the base of the brickwork and at the cellar openings while one of them performed a regular sowing motion with his hand out of a sack slung from his shoulder. They broke open the cellar door and sprinkled lime there, and in all the outbuildings. As they recrossed the lawn, a window that had been dark was lighted and Miss Emily sat in it, the light behind her, and her upright torso motionless as that of an idol. They crept quietly across the lawn and into the shadow of the locusts that lined the street. After a week or two the smell went away.

That was when people had begun to feel really sorry for her. People in our town, remembering how old lady Wyatt, her great-aunt, had gone completely crazy at last, believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were. None of the young men were quite good enough for Miss Emily and such. We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a sprawled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door. So when she got to be thirty and was still single, we were not pleased exactly, but vindicated; even with insanity in the family she wouldn't have turned down all of her chances if they had really materialized.

When her father died, it got about that the house was all that was left to her; and in a way, people were glad. At last they could pity Miss Emily. Being left alone, and a pauper, she had become humanized. Now she too would know the old thrill and the old despair of a penny more or less.

The day after his death all the ladies prepared to call at the house and offer condolence and aid, as is our custom Miss Emily met them at the door, dressed as usual and with no trace of grief on her face. She told them that her father was not dead. She did that for three days, with the ministers calling on her, and the doctors, trying to persuade her to let them dispose of the body. Just as they were about to resort to law and force, she broke down, and they buried her father quickly.

We did not say she was crazy then. We believed she had to do that. We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will.

III

SHE WAS SICK for a long time. When we saw her again, her hair was cut short, making her look like a girl, with a vague resemblance to those angels in colored church windows--sort of tragic and serene.

The town had just let the contracts for paving the sidewalks, and in the summer after her father's death they began the work. The construction company came with riggers and mules and machinery, and a foreman named Homer Barron, a Yankee--a big, dark, ready man, with a big voice and eyes lighter than his face. The little boys would follow in groups to hear him cuss the riggers, and the riggers singing in time to the rise and fall of picks. Pretty soon he knew everybody in town. Whenever you heard a lot of laughing anywhere about the square, Homer Barron would be in the center of the group. Presently we began to see him and Miss Emily on Sunday afternoons driving in the yellow-wheeled buggy and the matched team of bays from the livery stable.

At first we were glad that Miss Emily would have an interest, because the ladies all said, "Of course a Grierson would not think seriously of a Northerner, a day laborer." But there were still others, older people, who said that even grief could not cause a real lady to forget *noblesse oblige* - -

without calling it *noblesse oblige*. They just said, "Poor Emily. Her kinsfolk should come to her." She had some kin in Alabama; but years ago her father had fallen out with them over the estate of old lady Wyatt, the crazy woman, and there was no communication between the two families. They had not even been represented at the funeral.

And as soon as the old people said, "Poor Emily," the whispering began. "Do you suppose it's really so?" they said to one another. "Of course it is. What else could . . ." This behind their hands; rustling of craned silk and satin behind jalousies closed upon the sun of Sunday afternoon as the thin, swift clop-clop-clop of the matched team passed: "Poor Emily."

She carried her head high enough--even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness. Like when she bought the rat poison, the arsenic. That was over a year after they had begun to say "Poor Emily," and while the two female cousins were visiting her.

"I want some poison," she said to the druggist. She was over thirty then, still a slight woman, though thinner than usual, with cold, haughty black eyes in a face the flesh of which was strained across the temples and about the eyesockets as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look. "I want some poison," she said.

"Yes, Miss Emily. What kind? For rats and such? I'd recom--"

"I want the best you have. I don't care what kind."

The druggist named several. "They'll kill anything up to an elephant. But what you want is--"

"Arsenic," Miss Emily said. "Is that a good one?"

"Is . . . arsenic? Yes, ma'am. But what you want--"

"I want arsenic."

The druggist looked down at her. She looked back at him, erect, her face like a strained flag. "Why, of course," the druggist said. "If that's what you want. But the law requires you to tell what you are going to use it for."

Miss Emily just stared at him, her head tilted back in order to look him eye for eye, until he looked away and went and got the arsenic and wrapped it up. The Negro delivery boy brought her the package; the druggist didn't come back. When she opened the package at home there was written on the box, under the skull and bones: "For rats."

IV

So THE NEXT day we all said, "She will kill herself"; and we said it would be the best thing. When she had first begun to be seen with Homer Barron, we had said, "She will marry him." Then we said, "She will persuade him yet," because Homer himself had remarked--he liked men, and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club--that he was not a marrying man. Later we said, "Poor Emily" behind the jalousies as they passed on Sunday afternoon in the glittering buggy, Miss Emily with her head high and Homer Barron with his hat cocked and a cigar in his teeth, reins and whip in a yellow glove.

Then some of the ladies began to say that it was a disgrace to the town and a bad example to the young people. The men did not want to interfere, but at last the ladies forced the Baptist minister--Miss Emily's people were Episcopal-- to call upon her. He would never divulge what happened during that interview, but he refused to go back again. The next Sunday they again drove about the streets, and the following day the minister's wife wrote to Miss Emily's relations in Alabama.

So she had blood-kin under her roof again and we sat back to watch developments. At first nothing happened. Then we were sure that they were to be married. We learned that Miss Emily had been to the jeweler's and ordered a man's toilet set in silver, with the letters H. B. on each piece. Two days later we learned that she had bought a complete outfit of men's clothing, including a nightshirt, and we said, "They are married." We were really glad. We were glad because the two female cousins were even more Grierson than Miss Emily had ever been.

So we were not surprised when Homer Barron--the streets had been finished some time since--was gone. We were a little disappointed that there was not a public blowing-off, but we believed that he had gone on to prepare for Miss Emily's coming, or to give her a chance to get rid of the cousins. (By that time it was a cabal, and we were all Miss Emily's allies to help circumvent the cousins.) Sure enough, after another week they departed. And, as we had expected all along, within three days Homer Barron was back in town. A neighbor saw the Negro man admit him at the kitchen door at dusk one evening.

And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron. And of Miss Emily for some time. The Negro man went in and out with the market basket, but the front door remained closed. Now and then we would see her at a window for a moment, as the men did that night when they sprinkled the lime, but for almost six months she did not appear on the streets. Then we knew that this was to be expected too; as if that quality of her father which had thwarted her woman's life so many times had been too virulent and too furious to die.

When we next saw Miss Emily, she had grown fat and her hair was turning gray. During the next few years it grew grayer and grayer until it attained an even pepper-and-salt iron-gray, when it ceased turning. Up to the day of her death at seventy-four it was still that vigorous iron-gray, like the hair of an active man.

From that time on her front door remained closed, save for a period of six or seven years, when she was about forty, during which she gave lessons in china-painting. She fitted up a studio in one of the downstairs rooms, where the daughters and granddaughters of Colonel Sartoris' contemporaries were sent to her with the same regularity and in the same spirit that they were sent to church on Sundays with a twenty-five-cent piece for the collection plate. Meanwhile her taxes had been remitted.

Then the newer generation became the backbone and the spirit of the town, and the painting pupils grew up and fell away and did not send their children to her with boxes of color and tedious brushes and pictures cut from the ladies' magazines. The front door closed upon the last one and remained closed for good. When the town got free postal delivery, Miss Emily alone refused to let them fasten the metal numbers above her door and attach a mailbox to it. She would not listen to them.

Daily, monthly, yearly we watched the Negro grow grayer and more stooped, going in and out with the market basket. Each December we sent her a tax notice, which would be returned by the post office a week later, unclaimed. Now and then we would see her in one of the downstairs windows--she had evidently shut up the top floor of the house--like the carven torso of an idol in a niche, looking or not looking at us, we could never tell which. Thus she passed from generation to generation--dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.

And so she died. Fell ill in the house filled with dust and shadows, with only a doddering Negro man to wait on her. We did not even know she was sick; we had long since given up trying to get any information from the Negro

He talked to no one, probably not even to her, for his voice had grown harsh and rusty, as if from disuse.

She died in one of the downstairs rooms, in a heavy walnut bed with a curtain, her gray head propped on a pillow yellow and moldy with age and lack of sunlight.

V

THE NEGRO met the first of the ladies at the front door and let them in, with their hushed, sibilant voices and their quick, curious glances, and then he disappeared. He walked right through the house and out the back and was not seen again.

The two female cousins came at once. They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men --some in their brushed Confederate uniforms--on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years.

Already we knew that there was one room in that region above stairs which no one had seen in forty years, and which would have to be forced. They waited until Miss Emily was decently in the ground before they opened it.

The violence of breaking down the door seemed to fill this room with pervading dust. A thin, acrid pall as of the tomb seemed to lie everywhere upon this room decked and furnished as for a bridal: upon the valance curtains of faded rose color, upon the rose-shaded lights, upon the dressing table, upon the delicate array of crystal and the man's toilet things backed with tarnished silver, silver so tarnished that the monogram was obscured. Among them lay a collar and tie, as if they had just been removed, which, lifted, left upon the surface a pale crescent in the dust. Upon a chair hung the suit, carefully folded; beneath it the two mute shoes and the discarded socks.

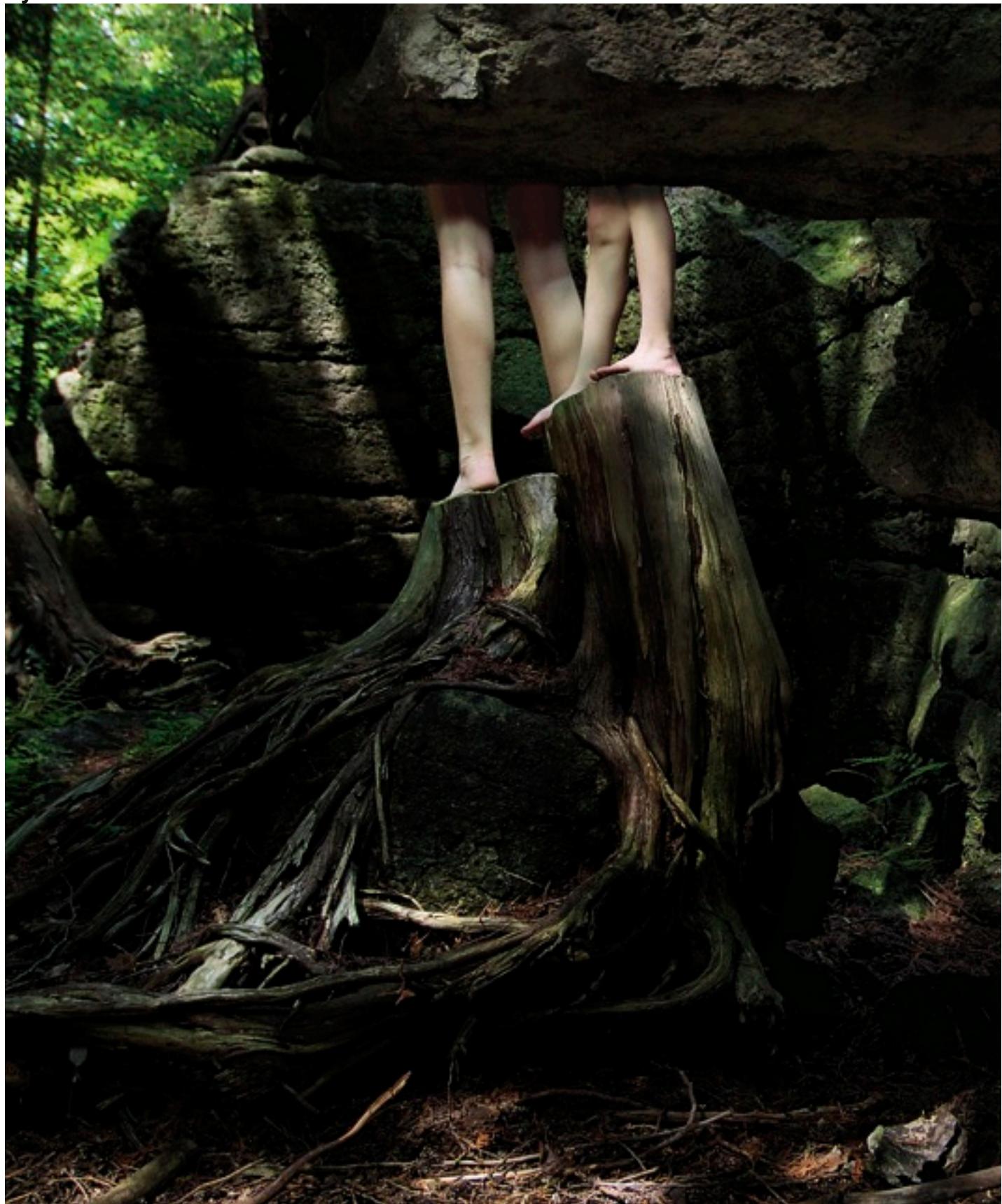
The man himself lay in the bed.

For a long while we just stood there, looking down at the profound and fleshless grin. The body had apparently once lain in the attitude of an embrace, but now the long sleep that outlasts love, that conquers even the grimace of love, had cuckoldled him. What was left of him, rotted beneath what was left of the nightshirt, had become inextricable from the bed in which he lay; and upon him and upon the pillow beside him lay that even coating of the patient and biding dust.

Then we noticed that in the second pillow was the indentation of a head. One of us lifted something from it, and leaning forward, that faint and invisible dust dry and acrid in the nostrils, we saw a long strand of iron-gray hair.

DEEP-HOLES

By [Alice Munro](#)



Photograph by Edith Maybin, "Untitled" (2008) / Edwynn Houk Gallery

Sally packed devilled eggs—something she usually hated to take on a picnic, because they were so messy. Ham sandwiches, crab salad, lemon tarts—also a packing problem. Kool-Aid for the boys, a half bottle of Mumm's for herself and Alex. She would have just a sip, because she was still nursing. She had bought plastic champagne glasses for the occasion, but when Alex spotted her handling them he got the real ones—a wedding present—out of the china cabinet. She protested, but he insisted, and took charge of them himself, the wrapping and packing.

"Dad is really a sort of *bourgeois gentilhomme*," Kent would say to Sally a few years later, when he was in his teens and acing everything at school, so sure of becoming some sort of scientist that he could get away with spouting French around the house.

"Don't make fun of your father," Sally said mechanically.

"I'm not. It's just that most geologists seem so grubby."

The picnic was in honor of Alex's publishing his first solo paper, in *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*. They were going to Osler Bluff because it figured largely in his research, and because Sally and the children had never been there.

They drove a couple of miles down a rough country road—having turned off the highway and then off a decent unpaved country road—and found a place for cars to park, with no cars in it at present. A sign was painted on a board and needed retouching: "CAUTION. DEEP-HOLES."

Why the hyphen? Sally thought. But who cares?

The entrance to the woods looked quite ordinary and unthreatening. Sally understood, of course, that these woods were on top of a high bluff, and she expected a daunting lookout somewhere. She did not expect the danger that had to be skirted almost immediately in front of them.

Deep chambers, really, some the size of a coffin, some much bigger than that, like rooms cut out of the rocks. Corridors zigzagging between them, and ferns and mosses growing out of the walls. Not enough greenery, however, to make any sort of cushion over the rubble below. The path went meandering between them, over hard earth and shelves of not quite level rock.

"Oooeee," came the cry of the boys, Kent and Peter, nine and six years old, running ahead.

"No tearing around in here," Alex called. "No stupid showing off, you hear me? You understand? Answer me."

They said O.K., and he proceeded, carrying the picnic basket and apparently believing that no further fatherly warning was necessary. Sally stumbled after him faster than was easy for her, with the diaper bag and the baby, Savanna. She couldn't slow down till she had her sons in sight, saw them trotting along taking sidelong looks into the black crevasses, still making

exaggerated but discreet noises of horror. She was nearly crying with exhaustion and alarm and some familiar sort of seeping rage.

The lookout did not appear until they had followed the dirt-and-rock path for what seemed to her like half a mile, and was probably a quarter mile. Then there was a brightening, an intrusion of sky, and her husband halted ahead. He gave a cry of arrival and display, and the boys hooted with true astonishment. Sally, emerging from the woods, found them lined up on an outcrop above the treetops—above several levels of treetops, as it turned out—with the summer fields spread far below in a shimmer of green and yellow.

As soon as she put Savanna down on her blanket, she began to cry.

“Hungry,” Sally said.

Alex said, “I thought she got her lunch in the car.”

“She did. But she’s hungry again.”

She got Savanna latched on to one side and with her free hand unfastened the picnic basket. This was not how Alex had envisioned things. But he gave a good-humored sigh and retrieved the champagne glasses from their wrappings in his pockets, placing them on their sides on a patch of grass.

“Glug glug. I’m thirsty, too,” Kent said, and Peter immediately imitated him.

“Glug glug. Me, too. Glug glug.”

“Shut up,” Alex said.

Kent said, “Shut up, Peter.”

Alex said to Sally, “What did you bring for them to drink?”

“Kool-Aid, in the blue jug. The plastic glasses are in a napkin on top.”

Of course, Alex believed that Kent had started that nonsense not because he was really thirsty but because he was crudely excited by the sight of Sally’s breast. He thought it was high time that Savanna was transferred to the bottle—she was nearly six months old. And he thought Sally was far too casual about the whole procedure, sometimes going around the kitchen doing things with one hand while the infant guzzled. With Kent sneaking peeks and Peter referring to Mommy’s milk jugs. That came from Kent, Alex said. Kent was a troublemaker and the possessor of a dirty mind.

“Well, I have to do things,” Sally said.

“That’s not one of the things you have to do. You could have her on the bottle tomorrow.”

“I will soon. Not quite tomorrow, but soon.”

But here she is, still letting Savanna and the milk jugs dominate the picnic.

The Kool-Aid is poured, then the champagne. Sally and Alex touch glasses, with Savanna between them. Sally has her sip and wishes she could have more. She smiles at Alex to communicate this wish, and maybe the idea that it would be nice to be alone with him. He drinks his champagne, and, as if her sip and smile were enough to soothe him, he starts in on the picnic. She points out which sandwiches have the mustard he likes and which have the mustard she and Peter like and which are for Kent, who likes no mustard at all.

While this is going on, Kent manages to slip behind her and finish up her champagne. Peter must have seen him do this, but for some peculiar reason he does not tell on him. Sally discovers what has happened some time later and Alex never knows about it at all, because he soon forgets that there was anything left in her glass and packs it neatly away with his own, while telling the boys about dolostone. They listen, presumably, as they gobble up the sandwiches and ignore the devilled eggs and crab salad and grab the tarts.

Dolostone, Alex says, is the thick caprock they can see. Underneath it is shale, clay turned into rock, very fine, fine-grained. Water works through the dolostone and when it gets to the shale it just lies there; it can’t get through the thin layers. So the erosion—that’s the destruction of the dolostone—is caused as the water works its way back to its source, eats a channel back, and the caprock develops vertical joints. Do they know what “vertical” means?

“Up and down,” Kent says lackadaisically.

“Weak vertical joints, and they get to lean out and then they leave crevasses behind them and after millions of years they break off altogether and go tumbling down the slope.”

“I have to go,” Kent says.

“Go where?”

“I have to go pee.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, go.”

“Me, too,” Peter says.

Sally clamps her mouth down on the automatic injunction to be careful. Alex looks at her and approves of the clamping down. They smile faintly at each other.

Savanna has fallen asleep, her lips slack around the nipple. With the boys out of the way, it’s easier to detach her. Sally can burp her and settle her on the blanket, without worrying about an exposed breast. If Alex finds the sight distasteful—she knows he dislikes the whole conjunction of sex and nourishment, his wife’s breasts turned into udders—he can look away, and he does.

As she buttons herself up, there comes a cry, not sharp but lost, diminishing, and Alex is on his feet before she is, running along the path. Then a louder cry getting closer. It’s Peter.

“Kent falled in. Kent falled in.”

His father yells, “I’m coming.”

Sally will always believe that she knew at once—even before she heard Peter’s voice, she knew what had happened. If an accident had happened, it would not be to her six-year-old, who was brave but not inventive, not a showoff. It would be to Kent. She could see exactly how—peeing into a hole, balancing on the rim, teasing Peter, teasing himself.

He was alive. He was lying far down in the rubble at the bottom of the crevasse, but he was moving his arms, struggling to push himself up. Struggling so feebly. One leg caught under him, the other oddly bent.

“Can you carry the baby?” she said to Peter. “Go back to the picnic and put her on the blanket and watch her. That’s my good boy. My good strong boy.”

Alex was on his way into the hole, scrambling down, telling Kent to stay still. Getting down in one piece was just possible. It would be getting Kent out that was hard.

Should she run to the car and see if there was a rope? Tie the rope around a tree trunk? Maybe tie it around Kent’s body so she could lift him when Alex raised him up to her?

There wouldn’t be a rope. Why would there be a rope?

Alex had reached him. He bent and lifted him. Kent gave a beseeching scream of pain. Alex draped him around his shoulders, Kent’s head hanging down on one side and useless legs—one so unnaturally protruding—on the other. He rose, stumbled a couple of steps, and while still hanging on to Kent dropped back down to his knees. He had decided to crawl and was making his way—Sally understood this now—to the rubble that partly filled the far end of the

crevasse. He shouted some order to her without raising his head, and though she could not make out any word she knew what he wanted. She got up off her knees—why was she on her knees?—and pushed through some saplings to that edge of the rim, where the rubble came to within perhaps three feet of the surface. Alex was still crawling along with Kent dangling from him like a shot deer.

She called, “I’m here. I’m here.”

Kent would have to be raised up by his father, pulled to the solid shelf of rock by his mother. He was a skinny boy, who had not yet reached his first spurt of growth, but he seemed as heavy as a bag of cement. Sally’s arms could not do it on the first try. She shifted her position, crouching instead of lying flat on her stomach, and with the full power of her shoulders and chest and with Alex supporting and lifting Kent’s body from beneath they heaved him over. Sally fell back with him in her arms and saw his eyes open, then roll back in his head as he fainted again.

When Alex had clawed his way out, they collected the other children and drove to the Collingwood Hospital. There seemed to be no internal injury. Both legs were broken. One break was clean, as the doctor put it. The other leg was shattered.

“Kids have to be watched every minute in there,” he said sternly to Sally, who had gone into the examining room with Kent while Alex managed Peter and Savanna. “Haven’t they got any warning signs up?”

With Alex, she thought, he would have spoken differently. “That’s the way boys are. Turn your back and they’re tearing around where they shouldn’t be,” he would have said.

Her gratitude—to God, whom she did not believe in, and to Alex, whom she did—was so immense that she resented nothing.

It was necessary for Kent to spend the next six months out of school, strung up for the first few weeks in a rented hospital bed. Sally picked up and turned in his school assignments, which he completed in no time. Then he was encouraged to go ahead with Extra Projects. One of these was “Travels and Explorations—Choose Your Country.”

“I want to pick somewhere nobody else would pick,” he said.

The accident and the convalescence seemed to have changed him. He acted older than his age now, less antic, more serene. And Sally told him something that she had not told to another soul. She told him how she was attracted to remote islands. Not to the Hawaiian Islands or the Canaries or the Hebrides or the Isles of Greece, where everybody wanted to go, but to small or obscure islands that nobody talked about and that were seldom, if ever, visited. Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Chatham Island and Christmas Island and Desolation Island and the Faeroes. She and Kent began to collect every scrap of information they could

find about these places, not allowing themselves to make anything up. And never telling Alex what they were doing.

“He would think we were off our heads,” Sally said.

Desolation Island’s main boast was of a vegetable, of great antiquity, a unique cabbage. They imagined worship ceremonies for it, costumes, and cabbage parades in its honor.

Sally told her son that, before he was born, she had seen footage on television of the inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha disembarking at Heathrow Airport, having all been evacuated, owing to a great volcanic eruption on their island. How strange they had looked, docile and dignified, like creatures from another century. They must have adjusted to England, more or less, but when the volcano quieted down, a couple of years later, they almost all wanted to go home.

When Kent went back to school, things changed, of course, but he still seemed mature for his age, patient with Savanna, who had grown venturesome and stubborn, and with Peter, who always burst into the house as if on a gale of calamity. And he was especially courteous to his father, bringing him the paper that he had rescued from Savanna and carefully refolded, pulling out his chair at dinnertime.

“Honor to the man who saved my life,” he might say, or “Home is the hero.”

He said this rather dramatically, though not at all sarcastically, yet it got on Alex’s nerves. Kent got on his nerves, had done so even before the deep-hole drama.

“Cut that out,” Alex said, and complained privately to Sally.

“He’s saying you must have loved him, because you rescued him.”

“Christ, I’d have rescued anybody.”

“Don’t say that in front of him. Please.”

When Kent got to high school, things with his father improved. He chose to focus on science. He picked the hard sciences, not the soft earth sciences, and even this roused no opposition in Alex. The harder the better.

But after six months at college Kent disappeared. People who knew him a little—there did not seem to be anyone who claimed to be a friend—said that he had talked of going to the West Coast. A letter came, just as his parents were deciding to go to the police. He was working at a Canadian Tire in a suburb just north of Toronto. Alex went to see him there, to order him back to college. But Kent refused, said that he was very happy with his job, and

was making good money, or soon would be, when he got promoted. Then Sally went to see him, without telling Alex, and found him jolly and ten pounds heavier. He said it was the beer. He had friends now.

"It's a phase," she said to Alex when she confessed the visit. "He wants to get a taste of independence."

"He can get a bellyful of it, as far as I'm concerned."

Kent had not said where he was living, and when she made her next visit to Canadian Tire she was told that he had quit. She was embarrassed—she thought she caught a smirk on the face of the employee who told her—and she did not ask where Kent had gone. She assumed he would get in touch, anyway, as soon as he had settled again.

He did write, three years later. His letter was mailed in Needles, California, but he told them not to bother trying to trace him there—he was only passing through. Like Blanche, he said, and Alex said, "Who the hell is Blanche?"

"Just a joke," Sally said. "It doesn't matter."

Kent did not say where he had been or whether he was working or had formed any connections. He did not apologize for leaving his parents without any information for so long, or ask how they were, or how his brother and sister were. Instead, he wrote pages about his own life. Not the practical side of his life but what he believed he should be doing—what he *was* doing—with it.

"It seems so ridiculous to me," he said, "that a person should be expected to lock themselves into a suit of clothes. I mean, like the suit of clothes of an engineer or doctor or geologist, and then the skin grows over it, over the clothes, I mean, and that person can't ever get them off. When we are given a chance to explore the whole world of inner and outer reality and to live in a way that takes in the spiritual and the physical and the whole range of the beautiful and the terrible available to mankind, that is pain as well as joy and turmoil. This way of expressing myself may seem over-blown to you, but one thing I have learned to give up is intellectual pridefulness—"

"He's on drugs," Alex said. "You can tell a mile off. His brain's rotted with drugs."

In the middle of the night he said, "Sex."

Sally was lying beside him, wide awake.

"What about sex?"

"It's what makes you do what he's talking about—become a something-or-other so that you can earn a living. So that you can pay for your steady sex and the consequences. That's not a consideration for him."

Sally said, "My, how romantic."

"Getting down to basics is never very romantic. He's not normal is all I'm trying to say."

Further on in the letter—or the rampage, as Alex called it—Kent said that he had been luckier than most people, in having had what he called his "near-death experience," which had given him perhaps an extra awareness, and he would be forever grateful to his father, who had lifted him back into the world, and to his mother, who had lovingly received him there.

He wrote, "Perhaps in those moments I was reborn."

Alex groaned.

"No. I won't say it."

"Don't," Sally said. "You don't mean it."

"I don't know whether I do or not."

That letter, signed with love, was the last they heard from him.

Peter went into medicine, Savanna into law.

To her own surprise, Sally became interested in geology. One night, in a trusting mood after sex, she told Alex about the islands—though not about her fantasy that Kent was now living on one or another of them. She said that she had forgotten many of the details she used to know, and that she should look all these places up in the encyclopedia, where she had first got her information. Alex said that everything she wanted to know could probably be found on the Internet now. Surely not something so obscure, she said, and he got her out of bed and downstairs, and there in no time, before her eyes, was Tristan da Cunha, a green plate in the South Atlantic Ocean, with information galore. She was shocked and turned away, and Alex, who was disappointed in her, asked why.

"I don't know. Maybe I don't want it so real."

He said that she needed something to do. He had just retired from teaching at the time and was planning to write a book. He needed an assistant and he could not call on graduate students now as he had been able to when he was still on the faculty. (She didn't know if this

was true or not.) She reminded him that she knew nothing about rocks, and he said never mind that, he could use her for scale, in the photographs.

So she became the small figure in black or bright clothing, contrasting with the ribbons of Silurian or Devonian rock or with the gneiss formed by intense compression, folded and deformed by clashes of the North American and the Pacific plates to make the present continent. Gradually she learned to use her eyes and apply her knowledge, till she could stand in an empty suburban street and realize that far beneath her shoes was a crater filled with rubble that had never been seen, because there had been no eyes to see it at its creation or through the long history of its being made and filled and hidden and lost. Alex did such things the honor of knowing about them, and she admired him for that, although she knew enough not to say so. They were good friends in these last years, which she didn't know were their last years. He went into the hospital for an operation, taking his charts and photographs with him, and on the day he was supposed to come home he died.

This was in the summer, and that fall there was a dramatic fire in Toronto. Sally sat in front of her television watching coverage of the fire for a while. It was in a district that she knew, or used to know, in the days when its nineteenth-century buildings were inhabited by hippies, with their tarot cards and beads and paper flowers the size of pumpkins. Later, the vegetarian restaurants had been transformed into expensive bistros and boutiques. Now a block of those nineteenth-century buildings was being wiped out, and the newsman was bemoaning this, speaking of the people who lived in old-fashioned apartments above the shops and had now lost their homes or were being dragged out of harm's way onto the street.

He didn't mention the landlords of the buildings, Sally thought, who were probably getting away with substandard wiring, as well as with epidemics of cockroaches, bedbugs, not to be complained about by the deluded or the fearful poor.

She sometimes felt Alex talking in her head these days, and that was surely what was happening now. She turned off the television.

No more than ten minutes later, the phone rang. It was Savanna.

"Mom. Have you got your TV on? Did you see?"

"You mean the fire? I did have it on, but I turned it off."

"No. Did you see—I'm looking for him right now—I saw him not five minutes ago. . . . Mom, it's Kent. Now I can't find him. But I saw him."

"Is he hurt? I'm turning it on now. Was he hurt?"

"No, he was helping. He was carrying one end of a stretcher. There was a body on it—I don't know if it was dead or just hurt. But Kent. It was him. You could even see him limping. Have you got it on now?"

"Yes."

"O.K. I'll calm down. I bet he went back into the building."

"But surely they wouldn't allow—"

"He could be a doctor, for all we know. Oh, fuck, now they're talking to that same old guy they talked to before—his family owned some business for a hundred years. Let's hang up and just keep our eyes on the screen. He's sure to come in range again."

He didn't. The footage began to repeat itself.

Savanna phoned back. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I know a guy that works on the news. I can get to see that shot again. We have to find out."

Savanna had never known her brother very well—she had been nine when he left—so what was all the fuss about? Had her father's death made her feel the need of family? She should marry soon, Sally thought. She should have children. But she had such a stubborn streak when she set her mind on something. Her father had told her when she was ten years old that she could gnaw an idea to the bone—she ought to be a lawyer. And, from then on, that was what she had said she would be.

It was Kent, and within a week Savanna had found out all about him. No. Change that to found out all he wanted her to know. He had been living in Toronto for years. He had often passed the building where Savanna worked and thought he had spotted her a couple of times on the street. Of course, she wouldn't have recognized him, because he was wearing a kind of robe.

"A Hare Krishna?" Sally said.

"Oh, Mom, if you're a monk it doesn't mean you're a Hare Krishna. Anyway, he's not that now."

"So what is he?"

"He says he lives in the present. So I said, 'Well, don't we all, nowadays,' and he said no, he meant in the *real* present."

"Where we are now," he had said, and Savanna had said, "You mean, in this dump?" Because it was—the coffee shop where he had asked her to meet him was a dump.

"I see it differently," he said, but then he said he had no objection to her way of seeing it, or anybody else's.

"Well, that's big of you," Savanna said, but she made a joke of it and he sort of laughed.

He said that he had seen Alex's obituary in the paper and thought it was well done. He guessed Alex would have liked the reference to his contribution to geology. He had wondered if his own name would appear on the list of relatives, and he was rather surprised that it was there. Had his father told them what names he wanted listed, before he died? he asked.

Savanna had said no—he hadn't been planning on dying anything like so soon. It was the rest of the family who'd had a conference and decided that Kent's name should be included.

"Not Dad," Kent had said. "Well, no."

Then he had asked about Sally.

Sally felt a kind of inflated balloon in her chest.

"What did you say?"

"I said you were O.K., maybe at loose ends a little, you and Dad being so close and you not having much time yet to get used to being alone. Then he said, 'Tell her she can come to see me, if she wants to,' and I said I would ask you."

Sally didn't reply.

"You there, Mom?"

"Did he say when or where?"

"No. I'm supposed to meet him in a week in the same place and tell him what you said. I think he sort of enjoys calling the shots. I thought you'd agree right away."

"Of course I agree. Did he really risk his life in the fire?"

"He won't talk about it. But my information is yes. He's quite well known, as it turns out, in certain parts of town and by certain people."

Sally received a note. This in itself was special, since most people she knew used e-mail or the phone. She was glad he hadn't called. She did not yet trust herself to hear his voice. The note instructed her to leave her car in the subway parking lot at the end of the line and take the subway to a specified station, where he would meet her.

She expected to see him on the other side of the turnstile, but he was not there. Probably he had meant that he would meet her outside. She climbed the steps and emerged into the sunlight and paused, as people hurried and pushed past her. She had a feeling of dismay and embarrassment. Dismay at Kent's apparent absence and embarrassment because she was feeling just what people from her part of the country often felt in neighborhoods like this, though she would never have said what they said. *You'd think you were in the Congo or India or Vietnam.*

On the steps of an old bank building just beyond the subway entrance, several men were sitting or lounging or sleeping. It was no longer a bank, of course, though the bank's name was cut into the stone. She looked at the name rather than at the men, whose slouching or reclining postures were such a contrast to the old purpose of the building and the rush of the crowd coming out of the subway.

"Mom."

One of the men on the steps got up and came toward her in no hurry, with a slight drag of one foot, and she realized that it was Kent and waited for him.

She would almost as soon have run away. But then she saw that not all the men were filthy or hopeless-looking, and that some glanced at her without menace or contempt and even with friendly amusement, now that she had been identified as Kent's mother.

Kent didn't wear a robe. He wore gray pants that were too big for him, a T-shirt with no message on it, and a threadbare jacket. His hair was cut so short you could hardly see the curl. His skin was quite pale, and his thin body made him look older than he was. He was missing some teeth.

He did not embrace her—she did not expect him to—but he put his hand lightly on her back to steer her in the direction he wanted her to go.

"Do you still smoke your pipe?" she said, sniffing the air, and remembering how he had taken up pipe smoking in high school.

"Pipe? Oh. No. It's the smoke from the fire you smell. We don't notice it anymore. I'm afraid it'll get stronger, where we're walking."

"Are we going to go through where it was?"

"No, no. We couldn't, even if we wanted to. They've got it all blocked off. Too dangerous. Some buildings will have to be taken down. Don't worry—it's O.K. where we are. A good block and a half away from the mess."

"Your apartment building?" she said, alert to the "we."

"Sort of. Yes. You'll see."

He spoke gently, readily, yet with an effort, like someone speaking, as a courtesy, in a foreign language. And he stooped a little, to make sure she heard him. The slight labor involved in speaking to her seemed something she was meant to notice. The cost.

As they stepped off a curb he brushed her arm—perhaps he had stumbled a little—and he said, "Excuse me." And she thought he gave a slight shiver.

AIDS. Why had that never occurred to her before?

"No," he said, though she had certainly not spoken aloud. "I'm quite well at present. I'm not H.I.V.-positive or anything like that. I contracted malaria years ago but it's under control. I may be a bit run-down but nothing to worry about. We turn here—we're right on this block."

We.

"I'm not psychic," he said. "I just figured out something that Savanna was trying to get at, and I thought I'd put you at rest. Here we are then."

It was one of those houses whose front doors are only a few steps from the sidewalk.

"I'm celibate, actually," he said, holding open the door. A piece of cardboard was tacked up where one of its glass panes should be.

The floorboards were bare and creaked underfoot. The smell was complicated, all-pervasive. The smoke had got in here, of course, but it was mixed with the odors of ancient cooking, burned coffee, toilets, sickness, decay.

"Though 'celibate' might be the wrong word. That sounds as if it had something to do with will power. I guess I should have said 'neuter.' I don't think of it as an achievement. It isn't."

He was leading her around the stairs and into the kitchen.

And there a gigantic woman stood with her back to them, stirring something on the stove.

Kent said, "Hi, Marnie. This is my mom. Can you say hello to my mom?"

Sally noticed a change in his voice. A relaxation, honesty, perhaps a respectfulness, that was different from the forced lightness he adopted with her.

She said, "Hello, Marnie," and the woman half turned, showing a squeezed doll's face in a loaf of flesh but not focussing her eyes.

"Marnie is our cook this week," Kent said. "Smells O.K., Marnie."

To his mother he said, "We'll go and sit in my sanctum, shall we?" and led the way down a couple of steps and along a back hall. It was hard to move there, because of the stacks of newspapers, flyers, and magazines neatly tied.

"Got to get these out of here," Kent said. "I told Steve this morning. Fire hazard. Jeez, I used to just say that. Now I know what it means."

Jeez. She had been wondering if he belonged to some plainclothes religious order, but if he did he surely wouldn't say that, would he? Of course, it could be an order of some faith other than Christian.

His room was down some more steps, actually in the cellar. There was a cot, a battered old-fashioned desk with cubbyholes, a couple of straight-backed chairs with rungs missing.

"The chairs are perfectly safe," he said. "Nearly all our stuff is scavenged from somewhere, but I draw the line at chairs you can't sit on."

Sally seated herself with a feeling of exhaustion.

"What are you?" she said. "What is it that you do? Is this a halfway house or something like that?"

"No. Not even quarter-way. We take in anybody that comes."

"Even me."

"Even you," he said without smiling. "We aren't supported by anybody but ourselves. We do some recycling with stuff we pick up. Those newspapers. Bottles. We make a bit here and there. And we take turns soliciting the public."

"Asking for charity?"

"Begging," he said.

“On the street?”

“What better place for it? On the street. And we go into some pubs that we have an understanding with, though it is against the law.”

“You do that yourself?”

“I could hardly ask the others to do it if I wouldn’t. That’s something I had to overcome. Just about all of us have something to overcome. It can be shame. Or it can be the concept of ‘mine.’ When somebody drops a ten-dollar bill, or even a loonie, into the hat, that’s when the notion of private ownership kicks in. Whose is it, huh? Ours or—uh—mine? If the answer comes back ‘mine,’ it usually gets spent right away, and we have the person turning up here smelling of booze and saying, ‘I don’t know what’s the matter with me today—I couldn’t get a bite.’ Then they might start to feel bad later and confess. Or not confess, never mind. We see them disappear for days—weeks—then show up back here when the going gets too rough. And sometimes we’ll see them working the street on their own, never letting on that they recognize us. Never coming back. And that’s all right, too. They’re our graduates, you could say. If you believe in the system.”

“Kent—”

“Around here I’m Jonah.”

“Jonah?”

“I just chose it. I thought of Lazarus, but it’s too self-dramatizing. You can call me Kent, if you like.”

“I want to know what’s happened in your life. I mean, not so much these people—”

“These people are my life.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“O.K., it was kind of smart-arse. But this, this is what I’ve been doing for—seven years? Nine years? Nine years.”

She persisted. “Before that?”

“What do I know? Before that? Before that. Man’s days are like grass, eh? Cut down and put into the oven. Listen to me. Soon as I meet you again I start the showing-off. Cut down and put in the oven—I’m not interested in that. I live each day as it happens. Really. You wouldn’t

understand that. I'm not in your world, you're not in mine. You know why I wanted to meet you here today?"

"No. I didn't think of it. I mean, I thought naturally maybe the time had come—"

"Naturally. When I read about my father's death in the paper I thought, Well, where is the money? I thought, Well, she can tell me."

"It went to me," Sally said, with flat disappointment but great self-control. "For the time being. The house as well, if you're interested."

"I thought likely that was it. That's O.K."

"When I die, to Peter and his boys and Savanna."

"Very nice."

"He didn't know if you were alive or dead."

"You think I'm asking for myself? You think I'm that much of an idiot to want the money for myself? But I did make a mistake thinking about how I could use it. Thinking, Family money, sure, I can use that. That's the temptation. Now I'm glad, I'm glad I can't have it."

"I could let—"

"The thing is, though, this place is condemned—"

"I could let you borrow."

"Borrow? We don't borrow around here. We don't use the borrow system around here. Excuse me, I've got to go get hold of my mood. Are you hungry? Would you like some soup?"

"No, thanks."

When he was gone, she thought of running away. If she could locate a back door, a route that didn't go through the kitchen.

But she could not do it. It would mean that she would never see him again. And the back yard of a house like this, built before the days of automobiles, would have no access to the street.

It was half an hour before he came back. He seemed a little surprised or bewildered to find her still there.

“Sorry. I had to settle some business. And then I talked to Marnie. She always calms me down.”

“You wrote a letter to us,” Sally said. “It was the last we heard from you.”

“Oh, don’t remind me.”

“No, it was a good letter. It was a good attempt to explain what you were thinking.”

“Please. Don’t remind me.”

“You were trying to figure out your life—”

“My life, my life, my progress, what all I could discover about my stinking self. The purpose of me. My crap. My spirituality. My intellectuality. There isn’t any inside stuff anymore, Sally. You don’t mind if I call you Sally? It just comes out easier. There is only outside, what you do, every moment of your life. Since I realized this, I’ve been happy.”

“You are? Happy?”

“Sure. I’ve let go of that stupid self stuff. I think, How can I help? And that’s all the thinking that I allow myself.”

“Living in the present?”

“I don’t care if you think I’m banal. I don’t care if you laugh at me.”

“I’m not—”

“I don’t care. Listen. If you think I’m after your money, fine. I *am* after your money. Also, I am after you. Don’t you want a different life? I’m not saying I love you. I don’t use stupid language. Or, I want to save you. You know you can only save yourself. So what is the point? I don’t usually try to get anywhere talking to people. I usually try to avoid personal relationships. I mean I do. I do avoid them.”
Relationships.

“Why are you trying not to smile?” he said. “Because I said ‘relationships’? That’s a cant word? I don’t fuss about my words.”

Sally said, "I was thinking of Jesus. 'Woman, what have I to do with thee?'" "

The look that leaped to his face was almost savage.

"Don't you get tired, Sally? Don't you get tired being clever? I can't go on talking this way, I'm sorry. I've got things to do."

"So have I," Sally said. It was a complete lie. "We'll be—"

"Don't say it. Don't say we'll be in touch."

"Maybe we'll be in touch. Is that any better?"

Sally gets lost, then finds her way. The bank building again, the same or possibly a whole new regiment of loiterers. The subway ride, the car park, the keys, the highway, the traffic. Then the lesser highway, the early sunset, no snow yet, the bare trees, and the darkening fields.

She loves this countryside, this time of year. Must she now think herself unworthy?

The cat is glad to see her. There are a couple of messages from friends on her machine. She heats up a single serving of lasagna. She buys these separated, precooked, and frozen portions now. They are quite good and not too expensive when you think that there's no waste. She sips from a glass of wine during the few-minute wait.

She is shaking with anger. What is she supposed to do, go back to the condemned house and scrub the rotten linoleum and cook up the chicken parts that were thrown out because they're past the best-before date? And be reminded every day of how she falls short of Marnie or any other afflicted creature? All for the privilege of being useful in the life that somebody else—Kent—has chosen?

He's sick. He's wearing himself out; maybe he's dying. He wouldn't thank her for clean sheets and fresh food. Oh, no. He'd rather die on that cot under a blanket with a burned hole in it.

But a check, she can write some sort of check, not an absurd one. Not too big or too small. He won't help himself with it, of course. He won't stop despising her, of course.

Despising. No. Not the point. Nothing personal.

There is something, anyway, in having got through the day without its being an absolute disaster. It wasn't, was it? She had said "maybe." He hadn't corrected her.

And it was possible, too, that age could become her ally, turning her into somebody she didn't know yet. She has seen that look of old people, now and then—clear-sighted but content, on islands of their own making. ♦

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THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

By Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and PERHAPS—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind)—PERHAPS that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it DOES exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.

So I will let it alone and talk about the house.

The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me

think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.

There is a DELICIOUS garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and coheirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it.

I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a DRAUGHT, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so, I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him, at least, and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.

We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no REASON to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already!

Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able,—to dress and entertain, and order things.

It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!

And yet I CANNOT be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John never was nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wall-paper!

At first he meant to repaper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies.

He said that after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

"You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental."

"Then do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there."

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down to the cellar, if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is an airy and comfortable room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deepshaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well, John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it KNEW what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a playroom they had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

She is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely shaded winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wall-paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn't faded and where the sun is just so—I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are gone and I am tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.

But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!

Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.

I don't feel as if it was worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very

often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps BECAUSE of the wall-paper.

It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed—it is nailed down, I believe—and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I WILL follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the crosslights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap I guess.

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I MUST say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I musn't lose my strength, and has me take cod liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till it tired my head.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper.

If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

Of course I never mention it to them any more—I am too wise, —but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would take me away from here!

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wall-paper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper DID move, and when I came back John was awake.

"What is it, little girl?" he said. "Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before.

"The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!"

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

"And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really dear you are better!"

"Better in body perhaps—" I began, and stopped short, for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling," said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, and lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions—why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window—I always watch for that first long, straight ray—it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a

moon—I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candle light, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no!

The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John.

He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis,—that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times LOOKING AT THE PAPER! And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper—she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was BECAUSE of the wall-paper—he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper—the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not, the smell is here.

It creeps all over the house.

I find it hovering in the dining-room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs.

It gets into my hair.

Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it—there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor, too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like.

It is not bad—at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful, I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me.

It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house—to reach the smell.

But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the COLOR of the paper! A yellow smell.

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed, a long, straight, even SMOOCH, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for. Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern DOES move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.

They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught

creeping by daylight!

I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.

And though I always see her, she MAY be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.

As if I couldn't see through him!

Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it to-day!

We go away to-morrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not ALIVE!

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep downstairs to-night, and take the boat home to-morrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will NOT move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try.

Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to LOOK out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?

But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get ME out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way.

Why there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound!

Now he's crying for an axe.

It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!

"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice, "the key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said—very quietly indeed, "Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I. "The key is down by the front door under a plantain leaf!"

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly, and said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in. He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!

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T. Coraghessan Boyle --Greasy Lake

Greasy Lake It's about a mile down on the dark side of Route 88.—BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were all dangerous characters then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. When we wheeled our parents' whining station wagons out into the street we left a patch of rubber half a block long. We drank gin and grape juice, Tango, Thunderbird, and Bali Hai. We were nineteen. We were bad. We read André Gide and struck elaborate poses to show that we didn't give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.

Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls, street lights giving way to the thin streaming illumination of the headlights, trees crowding the asphalt in a black unbroken wall: that was the way out to Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters. Now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the air force had strafed it. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurruus of frogs and crickets. This was nature.

I was there one night, late, in the company of two dangerous characters. Digby wore a gold star in his right ear and allowed his father to pay his tuition at Cornell; Jeff was thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop proprietor. They were both expert in the social graces, quick with a sneer, able to manage a Ford with lousy shocks over a rutted and gutted blacktop road at eighty-five while rolling a joint as compact as a Tootsie Roll Pop stick. They could lounge against a bank of booming speakers and trade "man"s with the best of them or roll out across the dance floor as if their joints worked on bearings. They were slick and quick and they wore their mirror shades at breakfast and dinner, in the shower, in closets and caves. In short, they were bad.

I drove. Digby pounded the dashboard and shouted along with Toots & the Maytals while Jeff hung his head out the window and streaked the side of my mother's Bel Air with vomit. It was early June, the air soft as a hand on your cheek, the third night of summer vacation. The first two nights we'd been out till dawn, looking for something we never found. On this, the third night, we'd cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in and out of every bar and club we could think of in a twenty-mile radius, stopped twice for bucket chicken and forty-cent hamburgers, debated going to a party at the house of a girl Jeff's sister knew, and

chucked two dozen raw eggs at mailboxes and hitchhikers. It was 2:00 A.M.; the bars were closing. There was nothing to do but take a bottle of lemon-flavored gin up to Greasy Lake.

The taillights of a single car winked at us as we swung into the dirt lot with its tufts of weed and washboard corrugations; '57 Chevy, mint, metallic blue. On the far side of the lot, like the exoskeleton of some gaunt chrome insect, a chopper leaned against its kickstand. And that was it for excitement: some junkie half-wit biker and a car freak pumping his girlfriend. Whatever it was we were looking for, we weren't about to find it at Greasy Lake. Not that night.

But then all of a sudden Digby was fighting for the wheel. "Hey, that's Tony Lovett's car! Hey!" he shouted, while I stabbed at the brake pedal and the Bel Air nosed up to the gleaming bumper of the parked Chevy. Digby leaned on the horn, laughing, and instructed me to put my brights on. I flicked on the brights. This was hilarious. A joke. Tony would experience premature withdrawal and expect to be confronted by grim-looking state troopers with flashlights. We hit the horn, strobed the lights, and then jumped out of the car to press our witty faces to Tony's windows; for all we knew we might even catch a glimpse of some little fox's tit, and then we could slap backs with red-faced Tony, roughhouse a little, and go on to new heights of adventure and daring.

The first mistake, the one that opened the whole floodgate, was losing my grip on the keys. In the excitement, leaping from the car with the gin in one hand and a roach clip in the other, I spilled them in the grass—in the dark, rank, mysterious nighttime grass of Greasy Lake. This was a tactical error, as damaging and irreversible in its way as Westmoreland's decision to dig in at Khe Sanh. I felt it like a jab of intuition, and I stopped there by the open door, peering vaguely into the night that puddled up round my feet.

The second mistake—and this was inextricably bound up with the first—was identifying the car as Tony Lovett's. Even before the very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots ripped out of the driver's door, I began to realize that this chrome blue was much lighter than the robin's-egg of Tony's car, and that Tony's car didn't have rear-mounted speakers. Judging from their expressions, Digby and Jeff were privately groping toward the same inevitable and unsettling conclusion as I was.

In any case, there was no reasoning with this bad greasy character—clearly he was a man of action. The first lusty Rockette kick of his steel-toed boot caught me under the chin, chipped my favorite tooth, and left me sprawled in the dirt. Like a fool, I'd gone down on one knee to comb the stiff hacked grass for the keys, my mind making connections in the most dragged-out, testudineous way, knowing that things had gone wrong, that I was in a lot of trouble, and that the lost ignition key was my grail and my salvation. The three or four succeeding blows were mainly absorbed by my right buttock and the tough piece of bone at the base of my spine.

Meanwhile, Digby vaulted the kissing bumpers and delivered a savage kung-fu blow to the greasy character's collarbone. Digby had just finished a course in martial arts for phys-ed credit and had spent the better part of the past two nights telling us apocryphal tales of Bruce Lee types and of the raw power invested in lightning blows shot from coiled wrists, ankles, and elbows. The greasy character was unimpressed. He merely backed off a step, his face like a Toltec mask, and laid Digby out with a single whistling roundhouse blow . . . but by now Jeff had got into the act, and I was beginning to extricate myself from the dirt, a tinny compound of shock, rage, and impotence wadded in my throat.

Jeff was on the guy's back, biting at his ear. Digby was on the ground, cursing. I went for the tire iron I kept under the driver's seat. I kept it there because bad characters always keep tire irons under the driver's seat, for just such an occasion as this. Never mind that I hadn't been involved in a fight since sixth grade, when a kid with a sleepy eye and two streams of mucus depending from his nostrils hit me in the knee with a Louisville slugger; never mind that I'd touched the tire iron exactly twice before, to change tires: it was there. And I went for it.

I was terrified. Blood was beating in my ears, my hands were shaking, my heart turning over like a dirtbike in the wrong gear. My antagonist was shirtless, and a single cord of muscle flashed across his chest as he bent forward to peel Jeff from his back like a wet overcoat. "Motherfucker," he spat, over and over, and I was aware in that instant that all four of us—Digby, Jeff, and myself included—were chanting "motherfucker, motherfucker," as if it were a battle cry. (What happened next? the detective asks the murderer from beneath the turned-down brim of his porkpie hat. I don't know, the murderer says, something came over me. Exactly.)

Digby poked the flat of his hand in the bad character's face and I came at him like a kamikaze, mindless, raging, stung with humiliation—the whole thing, from the initial boot in the chin to this murderous primal instant involving no more than sixty hyperventilating, gland-flooding seconds—I came at him and brought the tire iron down across his ear. The effect was instantaneous, astonishing. He was a stunt man and this was Hollywood, he was a big grimacing toothy balloon and I was a man with a straight pin. He collapsed. Wet his pants. Went loose in his boots.

A single second, big as a zeppelin, floated by. We were standing over him in a circle, gritting our teeth, jerking our necks, our limbs and hands and feet twitching with glandular discharges. No one said anything. We just stared down at the guy, the car freak, the lover, the bad greasy character laid low. Digby looked at me; so did Jeff. I was still holding the tire iron, a tuft of hair clinging to the crook like dandelion fluff, like down. Rattled, I dropped it in the dirt, already envisioning the headlines, the pitted faces of the police inquisitors, the gleam of handcuffs, clank of bars, the big black shadows rising from the back of the cell . . . when suddenly a raw torn shriek cut through me like all the juice in all the electric chairs in the country.

It was the fox. She was short, barefoot, dressed in panties and a man's shirt. "Animals!" she screamed, running at us with her fists clenched and wisps of blow-dried hair in her face. There was a silver chain round her ankle, and her toenails flashed in the glare of the headlights. I think it was the toenails that did it. Sure, the gin and the cannabis and even the Kentucky Fried may have had a hand in it, but it was the sight of those flaming toes that set us off—the toad emerging from the loaf in Virgin Spring, lipstick smeared on a child: she was already tainted. We were on her like Bergman's deranged brothers—see no evil, hear none, speak none—panting, wheezing, tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh. We were bad characters, and we were scared and hot and three steps over the line—anything could have happened.

It didn't.

Before we could pin her to the hood of the car, our eyes masked with lust and greed and the purest primal badness, a pair of headlights swung into the lot. There we were, dirty, bloody, guilty, dissociated from humanity and civilization, the first of the Urcrimes behind us, the second in progress, shreds of nylon panty and spandex brassiere dangling from our fingers, our flies open, lips licked—there we were, caught in the spotlight. Nailed.

We bolted. First for the car, and then, realizing we had no way of starting it, for the woods. I thought nothing. I thought escape. The headlights came at me like accusing fingers. I was gone.

Ram-bam-bam, across the parking lot, past the chopper and into the feculent undergrowth at the lake's edge, insects flying up in my face, weeds whipping, frogs and snakes and red-eyed turtles splashing off into the night: I was already ankle-deep in muck and tepid water and still going strong. Behind me, the girl's screams rose in intensity, disconsolate, incriminating, the screams of the Sabine women, the Christian martyrs, Anne Frank dragged from the garret. I kept going, pursued by those cries, imagining cops and bloodhounds. The water was up to my knees when I realized what I was doing: I was going to swim for it. Swim the breadth of Greasy Lake and hide myself in the thick clot of woods on the far side. They'd never find me there.

I was breathing in sobs, in gasps. The water lapped at my waist as I looked out over the moon-burnished ripples, the mats of algae that clung to the surface like scabs. Digby and Jeff had vanished. I paused. Listened. The girl was quieter now, screams tapering to sobs, but there were male voices, angry, excited, and the high-pitched ticking of the second car's engine. I waded deeper, stealthy, hunted, the ooze sucking at my sneakers. As I was about to take the plunge—at the very instant I dropped my shoulder for the first slashing stroke—I blundered into something. Something unspeakable, obscene, something soft, wet, moss-grown. A patch of weed? A log? When I reached out to touch it, it gave like a rubber duck, it gave like flesh.

In one of those nasty little epiphanies for which we are prepared by films and TV and childhood visits to the funeral home to ponder the shrunken painted forms of dead grandparents, I understood what it was that bobbed

there so inadmissibly in the dark. Understood, and stumbled back in horror and revulsion, my mind yanked in six different directions (I was nineteen, a mere child, an infant, and here in the space of five minutes I'd struck down one greasy character and blundered into the waterlogged carcass of a second), thinking, The keys, the keys, why did I have to go and lose the keys? I stumbled back, but the muck took hold of my feet—a sneaker snagged, balance lost—and suddenly I was pitching face forward into the buoyant black mass, throwing out my hands in desperation while simultaneously conjuring the image of reeking frogs and muskrats revolving in slicks of their own deliquescent juices. AAAAARRRGGH! I shot from the water like a torpedo, the dead man rotating to expose a mossy beard and eyes cold as the moon. I must have shouted out, thrashing around in the weeds, because the voices behind me suddenly became animated.

"What was that?"

"It's them, it's them: they tried to, tried to . . . rape me!"
Sobs.

A man's voice, flat Midwestern accent. "You sons a bitches, we'll kill you!"

Frogs, crickets. Then another voice, harsh, r-less, Lower East Side: "Motherfucker!" I recognized the verbal virtuosity of the bad greasy character in the engineer boots. Tooth chipped, sneakers gone, coated in mud and slime and worse, crouching breathless in the weeds waiting to have my ass thoroughly and definitively kicked and fresh from the hideous stinking embrace of a three-days-dead-corpse, I suddenly felt a rush of joy and vindication: the son of a bitch was alive! Just as quickly, my bowels turned to ice. "Come on out of there, you pansy motherfuckers!" the bad greasy character was screaming. He shouted curses till he was out of breath.

The crickets started up again, then the frogs. I held my breath. All at once there was a sound in the reeds, a swishing, a splash: thunk-a-thunk. They were throwing rocks. The frogs fell silent. I cradled my head. Swish, swish, thunk-a-thunk. A wedge of feldspar the size of a cue ball glanced off my knee.

I bit my finger. It was then that they turned to the car. I heard a door slam, a curse, and then the sound of the headlights shattering—almost a good-natured sound, celebratory, like corks popping from the necks of bottles. This was succeeded by the dull boomerang of the fenders, metal on metal, and then the icy crash of the windshield. I inched forward, elbows and knees, my belly pressed to the muck, thinking of guerrillas and commandos and *The Naked and the Dead*. I parted the weeds and squinted the length of the parking lot.

The second car—it was a Trans-Am—was still running, its high beams washing the scene in a lurid stagy light. Tire iron flailing, the greasy bad character was laying into the side of my mother's Bel Air like an avenging demon, his shadow riding up the trunks of the trees. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp-whomp. The other two guys—blond types, in fraternity jackets—were helping out with tree branches and skull-sized boulders. One of them was gathering up bottles, rocks, muck, candy wrappers, used condoms, pop-

tops, and other refuse and pitching it through the window on the driver's side. I could see the fox, a white bulb behind the windshield of the '57 Chevy. "Bobbie," she whined over the thumping, "come on." The greasy character paused a moment, took one good swipe at the left taillight, and then heaved the tire iron halfway across the lake. Then he fired up the '57 and was gone.

Blond head nodded at blond head. One said something to the other, too low for me to catch. They were no doubt thinking that in helping to annihilate my mother's car they'd committed a fairly rash act, and thinking too that there were three bad characters connected with that very car watching them from the woods. Perhaps other possibilities occurred to them as well—police, jail cells, justices of the peace, reparations, lawyers, irate parents, fraternal censure. Whatever they were thinking, they suddenly dropped branches, bottles, and rocks and sprang for their car in unison, as if they'd choreographed it. Five seconds. That's all it took. The engine shrieked, the tires squealed, a cloud of dust rose from the rutted lot and then settled back on darkness.

I don't know how long I lay there, the bad breath of decay all around me, my jacket heavy as a bear, the primordial ooze subtly reconstituting itself to accommodate my upper thighs and testicles. My jaws ached, my knee throbbed, my coccyx was on fire. I contemplated suicide, wondered if I'd need bridgework, scraped the recesses of my brain for some sort of excuse to give my parents—a tree had fallen on the car, I was blindsided by a bread truck, hit and run, vandals had got to it while we were playing chess at Digby's. Then I thought of the dead man. He was probably the only person on the planet worse off than I was. I thought about him, fog on the lake, insects chirring eerily, and felt the tug of fear, felt the darkness opening up inside me like a set of jaws. Who was he, I wondered, this victim of time and circumstance bobbing sorrowfully in the lake at my back. The owner of the chopper, no doubt, a bad older character come to this. Shot during a murky drug deal, drowned while drunkenly frolicking in the lake. Another headline. My car was wrecked; he was dead.

When the eastern half of the sky went from black to cobalt and the trees began to separate themselves from the shadows, I pushed myself up from the mud and stepped out into the open. By now the birds had begun to take over for the crickets, and dew lay slick on the leaves. There was a smell in the air, raw and sweet at the same time, the smell of the sun firing buds and opening blossoms. I contemplated the car. It lay there like a wreck along the highway, like a steel sculpture left over from a vanished civilization. Everything was still. This was nature.

I was circling the car, as dazed and bedraggled as the sole survivor of an air blitz, when Digby and Jeff emerged from the trees behind me. Digby's face was crosshatched with smears of dirt; Jeff's jacket was gone and his shirt was torn across the shoulder. They slouched across the lot, looking sheepish, and silently came up beside me to gape at the ravaged automobile. No one said a word. After a while Jeff swung open the driver's door and began to scoop

the broken glass and garbage off the seat. I looked at Digby. He shrugged. "At least they didn't slash the tires," he said.

It was true: the tires were intact. There was no windshield, the headlights were staved in, and the body looked as if it had been sledge-hammered for a quarter a shot at the county fair, but the tires were inflated to regulation pressure. The car was drivable. In silence, all three of us bent to scrape the mud and shattered glass from the interior. I said nothing about the biker. When we were finished, I reached in my pocket for the keys, experienced a nasty stab of recollection, cursed myself, and turned to search the grass. I spotted them almost immediately, no more than five feet from the open door, glinting like jewels in the first tapering shaft of sunlight. There was no reason to get philosophical about it: I eased into the seat and turned the engine over.

It was at that precise moment that the silver Mustang with the flame decals rumbled into the lot. All three of us froze; then Digby and Jeff slid into the car and slammed the door. We watched as the Mustang rocked and bobbed across the ruts and finally jerked to a halt beside the forlorn chopper at the far end of the lot. "Let's go," Digby said. I hesitated, the Bel Air wheezing beneath me. Two girls emerged from the Mustang. Tight jeans, stiletto heels, hair like frozen fur. They bent over the motorcycle, paced back and forth aimlessly, glanced once or twice at us, and then ambled over to where the reeds sprang up in a green fence round the perimeter of the lake. One of them cupped her hands to her mouth. "Al," she called. "Hey, Al!"

"Come on," Digby hissed. "Let's get out of here."

But it was too late. The second girl was picking her way across the lot, unsteady on her heels, looking up at us and then away. She was older—twenty-five or -six—and as she came closer we could see there was something wrong with her: she was stoned or drunk, lurching now and waving her arms for balance. I gripped the steering wheel as if it were the ejection lever of a flaming jet, and Digby spat out my name, twice, terse and impatient.

"Hi," the girl said.

We looked at her like zombies, like war veterans, like deaf-and-dumb pencil peddlers.

She smiled, her lips cracked and dry. "Listen," she said, bending from the waist to look in the window, "you guys seen Al?" Her pupils were pinpoints, her eyes glass. She jerked her neck. "That's his bike over there—Al's. You seen him?"

Al. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to get out of the car and retch, I wanted to go home to my parents' house and crawl into bed. Digby poked me in the ribs. "We haven't seen anybody," I said. The girl seemed to consider this, reaching out a slim veiny arm to brace herself against the car. "No matter," she said, slurring the t's, "he'll turn up." And then, as if she'd just taken stock of the whole scene—the ravaged car and our battered faces, the desolation of the place—she said: "Hey, you guys look like some pretty bad characters—been fightin', huh?" We stared straight ahead, rigid as catatonics. She was fumbling in her pocket and muttering something. Finally she held out a handful of

tablets in glassine wrappers: "Hey, you want to party, you want to do some of these with me and Sarah?"

I just looked at her. I thought I was going to cry. Digby broke the silence. "No, thanks," he said, leaning over me. "Some other time."

I put the car in gear and it inched forward with a groan, shaking off pellets of glass like an old dog shedding water after a bath, heaving over the ruts on its worn springs, creeping toward the highway. There was a sheen of sun on the lake. I looked back. The girl was still standing there, watching us, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched.

SREDNI VASHTAR

Conradin was ten years old, and the doctor had pronounced his professional opinion that the boy would not live another five years. The doctor was silky and effete, and counted for little, but his opinion was endorsed by Mrs. De Ropp, who counted for nearly everything. Mrs. De Ropp was Conradin's cousin and guardian, and in his eyes she represented those three-fifths of the world that are necessary and disagreeable and real; the other two-fifths, in perpetual antagonism to the foregoing, were summed up in himself and his imagination. One of these days Conradin supposed he would succumb to the mastering pressure of wearisome necessary things---such as illnesses and coddling restrictions and drawn-out dulness. Without his imagination, which was rampant under the spur of loneliness, he would have succumbed long ago.

Mrs. De Ropp would never, in her honestest moments, have confessed to herself that she disliked Conradin, though she might have been dimly aware that thwarting him ``for his good'' was a duty which she did not find particularly irksome. Conradin hated her with a desperate sincerity which he was perfectly able to mask. Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian, and from the realm of his imagination she was locked out---an unclean thing, which should find no entrance.

In the dull, cheerless garden, overlooked by so many windows that were ready to open with a message not to do this or that, or a reminder that medicines were due, he found little attraction. The few fruit-trees that it contained were set jealously apart from his plucking, as though they were rare specimens of their kind blooming in an arid waste; it would probably have been difficult to find a market-gardener who would have offered ten shillings for their entire yearly produce. In a forgotten corner, however, almost hidden behind a dismal shrubbery, was a disused tool-shed of respectable proportions, and within its walls Conradin found a haven, something that took on the varying aspects of a playroom and a cathedral. He had peopled it with a legion of familiar phantoms, evoked partly from fragments of history and partly from his own brain, but it also boasted two inmates of flesh and blood. In one corner lived a ragged-plumaged Houdan hen, on which the boy lavished an affection that had scarcely another outlet. Further back in the gloom stood a large hutch, divided into two compartments, one of which was fronted with close iron bars. This was the abode of a large polecat-ferret, which a friendly butcher-boy had once smuggled, cage and all, into its present quarters, in exchange for a long-secreted hoard of small silver. Conradin was dreadfully afraid of the lithe, sharp-fanged beast, but it was his most treasured possession. Its very

presence in the tool-shed was a secret and fearful joy, to be kept scrupulously from the knowledge of the Woman, as he privately dubbed his cousin. And one day, out of Heaven knows what material, he spun the beast a wonderful name, and from that moment it grew into a god and a religion. The Woman indulged in religion once a week at a church near by, and took Conradin with her, but to him the church service was an alien rite in the House of Rimmon. Every Thursday, in the dim and musty silence of the tool-shed, he worshipped with mystic and elaborate ceremonial before the wooden hutch where dwelt Sredni Vashtar, the great ferret. Red flowers in their season and scarlet berries in the winter-time were offered at his shrine, for he was a god who laid some special stress on the fierce impatient side of things, as opposed to the Woman's religion, which, as far as Conradin could observe, went to great lengths in the contrary direction. And on great festivals powdered nutmeg was strewn in front of his hutch, an important feature of the offering being that the nutmeg had to be stolen. These festivals were of irregular occurrence, and were chiefly appointed to celebrate some passing event. On one occasion, when Mrs. De Ropp suffered from acute toothache for three days, Conradin kept up the festival during the entire three days, and almost succeeded in persuading himself that Sredni Vashtar was personally responsible for the toothache. If the malady had lasted for another day the supply of nutmeg would have given out.

The Houdan hen was never drawn into the cult of Sredni Vashtar. Conradin had long ago settled that she was an Anabaptist. He did not pretend to have the remotest knowledge as to what an Anabaptist was, but he privately hoped that it was dashing and not very respectable. Mrs. De Ropp was the ground plan on which he based and detested all respectability.

After a while Conradin's absorption in the tool-shed began to attract the notice of his guardian. "It is not good for him to be pottering down there in all weathers," she promptly decided, and at breakfast one morning she announced that the Houdan hen had been sold and taken away overnight. With her short-sighted eyes she peered at Conradin, waiting for an outbreak of rage and sorrow, which she was ready to rebuke with a flow of excellent precepts and reasoning. But Conradin said nothing: there was nothing to be said. Something perhaps in his white set face gave her a momentary qualm, for at tea that afternoon there was toast on the table, a delicacy which she usually banned on the ground that it was bad for him; also because the making of it "gave trouble," a deadly offence in the middle-class feminine eye.

"I thought you liked toast," she exclaimed, with an injured air, observing that he did not touch it.

"Sometimes," said Conradin.

In the shed that evening there was an innovation in the worship of the hutch-god. Conradin had been wont to chant his praises, tonight he was asked a boon.

"Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar."

The thing was not specified. As Sredni Vashtar was a god he must be supposed to know. And choking back a sob as he looked at that other empty comer, Conradin went back to the world he so hated.

And every night, in the welcome darkness of his bedroom, and every evening in the dusk of the tool-shed, Conradin's bitter litany went up: "Do one thing for me, Sredni Vashtar."

Mrs. De Ropp noticed that the visits to the shed did not cease, and one day she made a further journey of inspection.

"What are you keeping in that locked hutch?" she asked. "I believe it's guinea-pigs. I'll have them all cleared away."

Conradin shut his lips tight, but the Woman ransacked his bedroom till she found the carefully hidden key, and forthwith marched down to the shed to complete her discovery. It was a cold afternoon, and Conradin had been bidden to keep to the house. From the furthest window of the dining-room the door of the shed could just be seen beyond the corner of the shrubbery, and there Conradin stationed himself. He saw the Woman enter, and then he imagined her opening the door of the sacred hutch and peering down with her short-sighted eyes into the thick straw bed where his god lay hidden. Perhaps she would prod at the straw in her clumsy impatience. And Conradin fervently breathed his prayer for the last time. But he knew as he prayed that he did not believe. He knew that the Woman would come out presently with that pursed smile he loathed so well on her face, and that in an hour or two the gardener would carry away his wonderful god, a god no longer, but a simple brown ferret in a hutch. And he knew that the Woman would triumph always as she triumphed now, and that he would grow ever more sickly under her pestering and domineering and superior wisdom, till one day nothing would matter much more with him, and the doctor would be proved right. And in the sting and misery of his defeat, he began to chant loudly and defiantly the hymn of his threatened idol:

Sredni Vashtar went forth, His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white. His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death. Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful.

And then of a sudden he stopped his chanting and drew closer to the window-pane. The door of the shed still stood ajar as it had been left, and

the minutes were slipping by. They were long minutes, but they slipped by nevertheless. He watched the starlings running and flying in little parties across the lawn; he counted them over and over again, with one eye always on that swinging door. A sour-faced maid came in to lay the table for tea, and still Conradin stood and waited and watched. Hope had crept by inches into his heart, and now a look of triumph began to blaze in his eyes that had only known the wistful patience of defeat. Under his breath, with a furtive exultation, he began once again the pæan of victory and devastation. And presently his eyes were rewarded: out through that doorway came a long, low, yellow-and-brown beast, with eyes a-blink at the waning daylight, and dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat. Conradin dropped on his knees. The great polecat-ferret made its way down to a small brook at the foot of the garden, drank for a moment, then crossed a little plank bridge and was lost to sight in the bushes. Such was the passing of Sredni Vashtar.

"Tea is ready," said the sour-faced maid; "where is the mistress?" "She went down to the shed some time ago," said Conradin. And while the maid went to summon her mistress to tea, Conradin fished a toasting-fork out of the sideboard drawer and proceeded to toast himself a piece of bread. And during the toasting of it and the buttering of it with much butter and the slow enjoyment of eating it, Conradin listened to the noises and silences which fell in quick spasms beyond the dining-room door. The loud foolish screaming of the maid, the answering chorus of wondering ejaculations from the kitchen region, the scuttering footsteps and hurried embassies for outside help, and then, after a lull, the scared soggings and the shuffling tread of those who bore a heavy burden into the house.

"Whoever will break it to the poor child? I couldn't for the life of me!" exclaimed a shrill voice. And while they debated the matter among themselves, Conradin made himself another piece of toast.

The Fog Man

He came twice a week, rattling through the development in an army-surplus jeep, laying down a roiling smoke screen that melted the trees into oblivion, flattened hills and swallowed up houses, erased Fords, Chevies and Studebakers as if they were as insubstantial as the air itself, and otherwise transformed the world to our satisfaction. Shrubs became dinosaurs, lampposts giraffes, the blacktop of the streets seethed like the surface of the swamp primeval. Our fathers stood there on their emerald lawns, hoses dripping, and they waved languidly or turned their backs to shoot a sparkling burst at the flower beds or forsythias. We took to our bikes, supercharged with the excitement of it, and we ran just behind him, the fog man, wheeling in and out of the tight billowing clouds like fighter pilots slashing across the sky or Grand Prix racers nosing in for the lead on that final excruciating lap. He gave us nothing except those moments of transfiguration, but we chased him as single-mindedly as we chased the ice-cream man in his tinkling white truck full of Drumsticks and Eskimo Pies, chased him till he'd completed his tour of the six connecting streets of the development— up one side and down the other— and lurched across the highway, trailing smoke, for the next.

And then the smoke settled, clinging to the dewy wet grass, the odor of smoldering briquettes fought over the top of the sweet narcotic smell of it, and we were gone, disseminated, slammed behind identical screen doors, in our identical houses, for the comfort and magic of the TV. My father was there, always there, propped up in his recliner, one hand over his eyes to mask an imaginary glare, the other clutched round his sweating drink. My mother was there too, legs tucked under her on the couch, the newspaper spread in her lap, her drink on the cluttered table beside her.

"The fog man was just here," I would announce. I didn't expect a response, really— it was just something to say. The show on TV was about a smiling family. All the shows were about smiling families. My mother would nod.

One night I appended a question. "He's spraying for bugs, right?" This much I knew, this much had been explained to me, but I wanted confirmation, affirmation, I wanted reason and meaning to illuminate my life.

My father said nothing. My mother looked up. "Mosquitoes."

"Yeah, that's what I thought— but how come there's so many of them then? They bit right through my shirt on the front porch."

My mother tapped at her cigarette, took a sip of her drink. "You can't get them all," she said.

It was at about this time that the local power company opened the world's first atomic power plant at Indian Point. Ten years earlier nuclear fission had been an instrument of war and destruction; now it was safe, manageable; now it would warm our houses and light our lights and power our hi-fis and toasters and dishwashers. The electric company took pains to ensure that the community saw it that way. It was called public relations.

I didn't know the term then. I was eleven years old, in my first week of my last year of elementary school, and on my way to the power plant in a school bus crammed to the yawning windows with my excitable classmates. This was known as a field trip. The previous year we'd been to a farm in Brewster and the Museum of Natural History in New York. We were starting early this year, but it was all due to the fact of this astonishing new technological force set down amongst us, this revolution in the production of electricity and the streamlining of our lives. We didn't know what to expect.

The bus rumbled and belched fumes. I sat on the hard cracked leatherette seat beside Casper Mendelson and watched the great gray concrete dome rise up out of the clutch of the trees, dominating the point and the placid broad fish-stinking river beyond it. It was impressive, this huge structure inside of which the titanic forces of the universe were pared down to size. Casper said that it could blow up, like the bomb they'd dropped on the Japanese, and that it would take all of Peterskill and Westchester with it. The river would turn to steam and there'd be nothing left but a crater the size of the Grand Canyon and we'd all be melted in our beds. I gaped out the window at the thing, awestruck, the big dome keeping a lid on all that seething complexity, and I was impressed, but I couldn't help thinking of the point's previous incarnation as an amusement park, a place of strung lights, cotton candy and carousels. Now there was this gray dome.

They led us into a little brightly lit building full of colorful exhibits, where we handled things that were meant to be handled, scuffed the gleaming linoleum floors and watched an animated short in which Johnny Atom splits himself in two and saves the world by creating electricity. The whole thing was pretty dull, aside from the dome itself and what Casper had said about it, and within the hour my classmates were filling the place with the roar of a stampede, breaking the handles off things, sobbing, skipping, playing tag and wondering seriously about lunch— which, as it turned out, we were to have back at school, in the cafeteria, after which we were expected to return to our classrooms and discuss what we'd learned on our field trip.

I remember the day for the impression that imposing gray dome made on me, but also because it was the first chance I got to have a look at Maki Duryea, the new girl who'd been assigned to the other sixth-grade section. Maki was black— or not simply black, but black and Oriental both. Her father had been stationed in Osaka during the occupation; her mother was Japanese. I watched her surreptitiously that morning as I sat in the rear of the bus with Casper. She was somewhere in the middle, sitting beside Donna Siprelle, a girl I'd known all my life. All I could make out was the back of her head, but that was enough, that alone was a revelation. Her hair was an absolute, unalloyed, interstellar black, and it disappeared behind the jutting high ridge of the seat back as if it might go on forever. It had hung iron straight when we first climbed aboard the bus that morning, but on the way back it was transformed, a leaping electric snarl that engulfed

the seat and eclipsed the neat little ball of yellow curls that clung to the back of Donna Siprelle's head. "Maki Duryea, Maki Duryea," Casper began to chant, though no one could hear him but me in the pandemonium of that preprandial school bus. Annoyed, I poked him with a savage elbow but he kept it up, louder now, to spite me.

There were no blacks in our school, there were no Asians or Hispanics. Italians, Poles, Jews, Irish, the descendants of the valley's Dutch and English settlers, these we had, these we were, but Maki Duryea was the first black—and the first Asian. Casper's father was Jewish, his mother a Polish Catholic. Casper had the soaring IQ of a genius, but he was odd, skewed in some deep essential way that set him apart from the rest of us. He was the first to masturbate, the first to drink and smoke, though he cared for neither. He caused a panic throughout the school when he turned up missing one day after lunch and was found, after a room-by-room, locker-by-locker search, calmly reading on the fire escape; he burst from his chair at the back of the classroom once and did fifty frantic squat-thrusts in front of the hapless teacher and then blew on his thumb till he passed out. He was my best friend.

He turned to me then, on the bus, and broke off his chant. His eyes were the color of the big concrete dome, his head was shaved to a transparent stubble. "She stinks," he said, grinning wildly, his eyes leaping at my own. "Maki Duryea, Maki Duryea, Maki Duryea"—he took up the chant again before subsiding into giggles. "They don't smell like we do."

My family was Irish. Irish, that's all I knew. A shirt was cotton or it was wool. We were Irish. No one talked about it, there was no exotic language spoken in the house, no ethnic dress or cuisine, we didn't go to church. There was only my grandfather.

He came that year for Thanksgiving, a short big-bellied man with close-cropped white hair and glancing white eyebrows and a trace of something in his speech I hadn't heard before—or if I had it was in some old out-of-focus movie dredged up for the TV screen, nothing I would have remembered. My grandmother came too. She was spindly, emaciated, her skin blistered with shingles, a diabetic who couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds, but there was joy in her and it was infectious. My father, her son, woke up. A festive air took hold of the house.

My grandfather, who years later dressed in a suit for my father's funeral and was mistaken for a banker, had had a heart attack and he wasn't drinking. Or rather, he was strictly enjoined from drinking, and my parents, who drank themselves, drank a lot, drank too much, took pains to secrete the liquor supply. Every bottle was removed from the cabinet, even the odd things that hadn't been touched in years—except by me, when I furtively unscrewed the cap of this or that and took a sniff or touched my tongue tentatively to the cold hard glass aperture—and the beer disappeared from the refrigerator. I didn't know what the big deal was. Liquor was there, a fact of life, it was unpleasant and adults indulged in it as they indulged in any

number of bizarre and unsatisfactory practices. I kicked a football around the rock-hard frozen lawn.

And then one afternoon—it was a day or two before Thanksgiving and my grandparents had been with us a week—I came in off the front lawn, my fingers numb and nose running, and the house was in an uproar. A chair was overturned in the corner, the coffee table was slowly listing over a crippled leg and my grandmother was on the floor, frail, bunched, a bundle of sticks dropped there in a windstorm. My grandfather stood over her, red-faced and raging, while my mother snatched at his elbow like a woman tumbling over the edge of a cliff. My father wasn't home from work yet. I stood there in the doorway, numb from the embrace of the wind, and heard the inarticulate cries of those two women against the oddly inflected roars of that man, and I backed out the door and pulled it closed behind me.

The next day my grandfather, sixty-eight years old and stiff in the knees, walked two miles in twenty-degree weather to Peterskill, to the nearest liquor store. It was dark, suppertime, and we didn't know where he was. "He just went out for a walk," my mother said. Then the phone rang. It was the neighbor two doors down. There was a man passed out in her front yard—somebody said we knew him. Did we?

I spent the next two days—Thanksgiving and the day after—camping in the sorry patch of woods at the end of the development. I wasn't running away, nothing as decisive or extreme as that—I was just camping, that was all. I gnawed cold turkey up there in the woods, lifted congealed stuffing to my mouth with deadened fingers. In the night I lay shivering in my blankets, never colder before or since. We were Irish. I was Irish.

That winter, like all winters in those days, was interminable, locked up in the grip of frozen slush and exhaust-blackened snow. The dead dark hours of school were penance for some crime we hadn't yet committed. The TV went on at three-thirty when we got home from school, and it was still on when we went to bed at nine. I played basketball that winter in a league organized by some of the fathers in the development, and three times a week I walked home from the fungus-infested gym with a crust of frozen sweat in my hair. I grew an inch and a half, I let my crewcut grow out and I began to turn up the collar of my ski jacket. I spent most of my time with Casper, but in spite of him, as the pale abbreviated days wore on, I found myself growing more and more at ease with the idea of Maki Duryea.

She was still foreign, still exotic, still the new kid and worse, much worse, the whole business complicated by the matter of her skin color and her hair and the black unblinking depths of her eyes, but she was there just like the rest of us and after a while it seemed as if she'd always been there. She was in the other section, but I saw her on the playground, in the hallway, saw her waiting on line in the cafeteria with a tray in her hands or struggling up the steps of the school bus in a knit hat and mittens no different from what the other girls wore. I didn't have

much to say to any of the girls really, but I suppose I must have said things to her in passing, and once, coming off the playground late, I found myself wedged up against her on the crowded school bus. And then there was the time the dancing teacher, with a casual flick of her wrist, paired me off with her.

Everything about dancing was excruciating. It was not kickball, it was not basketball or bombardment. The potential for embarrassment was incalculable. We were restless and bored, the gymnasium was overheated against the sleet that rattled at the windows, and the girls, entranced, wore peculiar little smiles as Mrs. Feldman demonstrated the steps. The boys slouched against one adamantine wall, poking one another, shuffling their feet and playing out an elaborate ritual to demonstrate that none of this held the slightest interest for them, for us, though it did, and we were nervous about it despite ourselves. Alone, of all the two classes combined, Casper refused to participate. Mrs. Feldman sent him to the principal's office without so much as a second glance, chose partners arbitrarily for the remainder of the class and started up the ancient phonograph and the arcane scratchy records of songs no one knew and rhythms no one could follow, and before I was fully cognizant of what was happening I found myself clutching Maki Duryea's damp palm in my own while my arm lay like a dead thing across the small of her back. She was wearing a sweater thick enough for Arctic exploration and she was sweating in the choking humid jungle atmosphere of the gymnasium. I could smell her, but despite what Casper had said the heat of her body gave off a luxurious yeasty soporific odor that held me spellbound and upright through the droning eternity of the record.

The dance, the big dance that all this terpsichorean instruction was leading up to, was held on February 29, and Mrs. Feldman, in an evil twist of fate, decided to honor custom and have the girls invite the boys as their partners. We did perspective drawing in art class—great lopsided vistas of buildings and avenues dwindling in the distance—while the girls made up the invitations with strips of ribbon, construction paper and paste. My mind was on basketball, ice fishing, the distant trembling vision of spring and summer and liberation from Mrs. Feldman, the gym and the cafeteria and all the rest, and I was surprised, though I shouldn't have been, when Maki's invitation arrived. I didn't want to go. My mother insisted. My father said nothing.

And then the telephone began to ring. My mother answered each call with quiet determination, immovable, unshakable, whispering into the phone, doodling on a pad, lifting the drink or a cigarette to her lips. I don't know what she said exactly, but she was talking to the other mothers, the mothers of sons who hadn't been invited to the dance by Maki Duryea, and she was explaining to them precisely how and why she could and would allow her son to go to the dance with a Negro. In later years, as the civil-rights movement arose and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King fell and the ghettos burned, she never had much to say

about it, but I could feel her passion then, on the telephone, in the cool insistent rasp of her voice.

I went to the dance with Maki Duryea. She wore a stiff organdy dress with short sleeves that left her looking awkward and underdressed and I wore a tie and sportcoat and arranged my hair for the occasion. I held her and I danced with her, though I didn't want to, though I snapped at her when she asked if I wanted a brownie and a cup of punch, though I looked with envy and longing to the streamer-draped corner where Casper alternately leered at me and punched Billy Bartro in the shoulder; I danced with her, but that was it, that was as far as I could go, and I didn't care if the snow was black and the dome blew off the reactor and Johnny Atom came and melted us all in our sleep.

It was a late spring and we tried to force it by inaugurating baseball season while the snow still lingered atop the dead yellow grass and the frozen dirt beneath it. We dug out balls and mitts and stood in the street in T-shirts, gooseflesh on our arms, shoulders quaking, a nimbus of crystallized breath suspended over our heads. Casper didn't play ball—foot, hand, base or basket—and he stood hunched in his jacket, palming a cigarette and watching us out of his mocking gray eyes. I caught cold and then flu and stayed in bed a week. On the first of April I went trout fishing, a ritual of spring, but the day was gloomy and lowering, with a stiff wind and temperatures in the twenties. I cast a baited hook till my arm lost all sensation. The trout might as well have been extinct.

Since the time of the dance I'd had nothing to do with Maki Duryea. I wouldn't even look at her. If she'd suddenly exploded in flames on the playground or swelled up to the size of a dirigible I wouldn't have known. I'd taken a steady stream of abuse over the dance episode, and I was angry and embarrassed. For a full month afterward I was the object of an accelerated program of ear snapping and head knuckling, the target of spitballs and wads of lined notebook paper with crude hearts scrawled across their rumpled interiors, but we were innocent then, and no one used the epithets we would later learn, the language of hate and exclusion. They turned on me because I had taken Maki Duryea to the dance—or rather, because I had allowed her to take me—and because she was different and their parents disapproved in a way they couldn't yet define. I resented her for it, and I resented my mother too.

And so, when the rumors first began to surface, I took a kind of guilty satisfaction in them. There had been trouble at Maki's house. Vandals—and the very term gave me a perverse thrill—vandals had spray-painted racial slurs on the glistening black surface of their macadam driveway. My mother was incensed. She took her drink and her cigarettes and huddled over the phone. She even formed a committee of two with Casper's mother (who was one of the few who hadn't phoned over the dance invitation), and they met a time or two in Casper's living room to drink a clear liquid in high-stemmed glasses, tap their cigarettes over ashtrays

and lament the sad state of the community, the development, the town, the country, the world itself.

While our mothers were wringing their hands and buzzing at one another in their rasping secretive voices, Casper took me aside and showed me a copy of the local newspaper, flung on the lawn not five minutes earlier by Morty Solomon as he weaved up the street on his bicycle. I didn't read newspapers. I didn't read books. I didn't read anything. Casper forced it into my hands and there it was, the rumor made concrete: VANDALS STRIKE AGAIN. This time, a cross had been burned on the Duryea lawn. I looked up at Casper in amazement. I wanted to ask him what that meant, a cross—a cross was religious, wasn't it, and this didn't have anything to do with religion, did it?—but I felt insecure in my confusion and I held back.

"You know what we ought to do?" he said, watching me closely.

I was thinking of Maki Duryea, of her hair and her placid eyes, thinking of the leaping flames and the spray paint in the driveway. "What?"

"We ought to egg them."

"But—" I was going to ask how we could egg them if we didn't know who did it, but then I caught the startling perverse drift of what he was suggesting and in my astonishment I blurted, "But why?" He shrugged, ducked his head, scuffed a foot on the carpet. We were in the hallway, by the telephone stand. I heard my mother's voice from the room beyond, though the door was closed and she was talking in a whisper. The voice of Casper's mother came right back at her in raspy collusion. Casper just stared at the closed door as if to say, There, there's your answer.

After a moment he said, "What's the matter—you afraid?"

I was twelve now, twelve and a half. How could anyone at that age admit to fear?

"No," I said. "I'm not afraid."

The Duryea house lay outside the confines of the development. It was a rental house, two stories over a double garage in need of paint and shingles, and it sat on a steep rutted dirt road half a mile away. There were no streetlights along that unfinished road and the trees overhung it so that the deepest shadows grew deeper still beneath them. It was a warm, slick, humid night at the end of May, the sort of night that surprises you with its richness and intensity, smells heightened, sounds muffled, lights blurred to indistinction. When we left Casper's it was drizzling.

Casper bought the eggs, two dozen, at the corner store out on the highway. His parents were rich—rich compared to mine, at any rate—and he always seemed to have money. The storekeeper was a tragic-looking man with purple rings of puffed flesh beneath his eyes and a spill of gut that was like an avalanche under the smeared white front of his apron. Casper slipped two cigars into his pocket while I distracted the man with a question about the chocolate milk—did it come in a smaller size?

As we started up the dirt road, eggs in hand, Casper was strangely silent. When a dog barked from the driveway of a

darkened house he clutched my arm, and a moment later, when a car turned into the street, he pulled me into the bushes and crouched there, breathing hard, till the headlights faded away. "Maki Duryea," he whispered, chanting it as he'd chanted it a hundred times before, "Maki Duryea, Maki Duryea." My heart was hammering. I didn't want to do this. I didn't know why I was doing it, didn't yet realize that the whole purpose of the exercise was to invert our parents' values, trash them, grind them into the dirt, and that all ethical considerations were null in the face of that ancient imperative. I was a freedom fighter. The eggs were hand grenades. I clutched them to my chest.

We hid ourselves in the wild tangle of shrubs gone to seed outside the house and watched the steady pale lighted windows for movement. My hair hung limp with the drizzle. Casper squatted over his ankles and fingered his box of eggs. I could barely make him out. At one point a figure passed in front of the window—I saw the hair, the mat of it, the sheen—and it might have been Maki, but I wasn't sure. It could have been her mother. Or her sister or aunt or grandmother—it could have been anybody. Finally, when I was as tired of crouching there in the bushes as I've ever been tired of being anywhere, even the dentist's, the lights flicked off. Or no, they didn't just flick off—they exploded in darkness and the black torrent of the night rushed in to engulf the house.

Casper rose to his feet. I heard him fumbling with his cardboard carton of eggs. We didn't speak—speech would have been superfluous. I rose too. My eggs, palpable, smooth, fit the palm of my hand as if they'd been designed for it. I raised my arm—baseball, football, basketball—and Casper stirred beside me. The familiar motion, the rush of air: I will never forget the sound of that first egg loosing itself against the front of the house, a wetness there, a softness, the birth of something. No weapon, but a weapon all the same.

The summer sustained me. Hot, unfettered, endless. On the first day of vacation I perched in an apple tree at the end of the cul-de-sac that bordered the development and contemplated the expanse of time and pleasure before me, and then it was fall and I was in junior high. Maki Duryea had moved. I'd heard as much from Casper, and one afternoon, at the end of summer, I hiked up that long rutted dirt road to investigate. The house stood empty. I climbed the ridge behind it to peer in through the naked windows and make sure. Bare floors stretched to bare walls.

And then, in the confusion of the big parking lot at the junior high where fifty buses deposited the graduates of a dozen elementary schools, where I felt lost and out of place and shackled in a plaid long-sleeved shirt new that morning from the plastic wrapping, I saw her. She sprang down from another bus in a cascade of churning legs and arms and anxious faces, a bookbag slung over one shoulder, hair ironed to her waist. I couldn't move. She looked up then and saw me and she smiled. Then she was gone.

That night, as I slapped a hard black ball against the side of the house, thinking nothing, I caught a faint electrifying whiff of a forgotten scent on the air, and there he was, the

fog man, rattling by the house in his open jeep. My bike lay waiting at the curb and my first impulse was to leap for it, but I held off. There was something different here, something I couldn't quite place at first. And then I saw what it was: the fog man was wearing a mask, a gas mask, the sort of thing you saw in war movies. He'd collected the usual escort of knee-pumping neighborhood kids by the time he'd made his second pass down the street in front of our house, and I'd moved to the curb now to study this phenomenon, this subtle alteration in the texture of things. He looked different in the mask, sinister somehow, and his eyes seemed to glitter.

The fog obliterated the houses across from me, the wheeling children vanished, the low black roiling clouds melted toward me across the perfect sweep of the lawn. And then, before I knew what I was doing, I was on my bike with the rest of them, chasing the fog man through the mist, chasing him as if my life depended on it. (1989) Boyle, T.C. (1999-11-01). T.C. Boyle Stories (pp. 436-438). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition.

"The Pedestrian" (1951)

by Ray Bradbury

To enter out into that silence that was the city at eight o'clock of a misty evening in November, to put your feet upon that buckling concrete walk, to step over grassy seams and make your way, hands in pockets, through the silences, that was what Mr. Leonard Mead most dearly loved to do. He would stand upon the corner of an intersection and peer down long moonlit avenues of sidewalk in four directions, deciding which way to go, but it really made no difference; he was alone in this world of A.D. 2053, or as good as alone, and with a final decision made, a path selected, he would stride off, sending patterns of frosty air before him like the smoke of a cigar.

Sometimes he would walk for hours and miles and return only at midnight to his house. And on his way he would see the cottages and homes with their dark windows, and it was not unequal to walking through a graveyard where only the faintest glimmers of firefly light appeared in flickers behind the windows. Sudden gray phantoms seemed to manifest upon inner room walls where a curtain was still undrawn against the night, or there were whisperings and murmurs where a window in a tomb-like building was still open.

Mr. Leonard Mead would pause, cock his head, listen, look, and march on, his feet making no noise on the lumpy walk. For long ago he had wisely changed to sneakers when strolling at night, because the dogs in intermittent squads would parallel his journey with barkings if he wore hard heels, and lights might click on and faces appear and an entire street be startled by the passing of a lone figure, himself, in the early November evening.

On this particular evening he began his journey in a westerly direction, toward the hidden sea. There was a good crystal frost in the air; it cut the nose and made the lungs blaze like a Christmas tree inside; you could feel the cold light going on and off, all the branches filled with invisible snow. He listened to the faint push of his soft shoes through autumn leaves with satisfaction, and whistled a cold quiet whistle between his teeth, occasionally picking up a leaf as he passed, examining its skeletal pattern in the infrequent lamplights as he went on, smelling its rusty smell.

"Hello, in there," he whispered to every house on every side as he moved. "What's up tonight on Channel 4, Channel 7, Channel 9? Where are the cowboys rushing, and do I see the United States Cavalry over the next hill to the rescue?"

The street was silent and long and empty, with only his shadow moving like the shadow of a hawk in midcountry. If he closed his eyes and stood very still, frozen, he could imagine himself upon the

center of a plain, a wintry, windless Arizona desert with no house in a thousand miles, and only dry river beds, the streets, for company.

"What is it now?" he asked the houses, noticing his wrist watch. "Eight-thirty P.M.? Time for a dozen assorted murders? A quiz? A revue? A comedian falling off the stage?"

Was that a murmur of laughter from within a moon-white house? He hesitated, but went on when nothing more happened. He stumbled over a particularly uneven section of sidewalk. The cement was vanishing under flowers and grass. In ten years of walking by night or day, for thousands of miles, he had never met another person walking, not once in all that time.

He came to a cloverleaf intersection which stood silent where two main highways crossed the town. During the day it was a thunderous surge of cars, the gas stations open, a great insect rustling and a ceaseless jockeying for position as the scarab-beetles, a faint incense puttering from their exhausts, skimmed homeward to the far directions. But now these highways, too, were like streams in a dry season, all stone and bed and moon radiance.

He turned back on a side street, circling around toward his home. He was within a block of his destination when the lone car turned a corner quite suddenly and flashed a fierce white cone of light upon him. He stood entranced, not unlike a night moth, stunned by the illumination, and then drawn toward it.

A metallic voice called to him:
"Stand still. Stay where you are! Don't move!"

He halted.
"Put up your hands!"
"But—" he said.
"Your hands up! Or we'll Shoot!"
The police, of course, but what a rare, incredible thing; in a city of three million, there was only one police car left, wasn't that correct? Ever since a year ago, 2052, the election year, the force had been cut down from three cars to one. Crime was ebbing; there was no need now for the police, save for this one lone car wandering and wandering the empty streets.

"Your name?" said the police car in a metallic whisper. He couldn't see the men in it for the bright light in his eyes.

"Leonard Mead," he said.
"Speak up!"
"Leonard Mead!"
"Business or profession?"
"I guess you'd call me a writer."
"No profession," said the police car, as if

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talking to itself. The light held him fixed, like a museum specimen, needle thrust through chest.

"You might say that," said Mr. Mead. He hadn't written in years. Magazines and books didn't sell any more. Everything went on in the tomblike houses at night now, he thought, continuing his fancy. The tombs, ill-lit by television light, where the people sat like the dead, the gray or multicolored lights touching their faces, but never really touching them.

"No profession," said the phonograph voice, hissing. "What are you doing out?"

"Walking," said Leonard Mead.

"Walking!"

"Just walking," he said simply, but his face felt cold.

"Walking, just walking, walking?"

"Yes, sir."

"Walking where? For what?"

"Walking for air. Walking to see."

"Your address?"

"Eleven South Saint James Street."

"And there is air in your house, you have an air conditioner, Mr. Mead?"

"Yes."

"And you have a viewing screen in your house to see with?"

"No."

"No?" There was a crackling quiet that in itself was an accusation.

"Are you married, Mr. Mead?"

"No."

"Not married," said the police voice behind the fiery beam. The moon was high and clear among the stars and the houses were gray and silent.

"Nobody wanted me," said Leonard Mead with a smile.

"Don't speak unless you're spoken to!"

Leonard Mead waited in the cold night.

"Just walking, Mr. Mead?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't explained for what purpose."

"I explained; for air, and to see, and just to walk."

"Have you done this often?"

"Every night for years."

The police car sat in the center of the street with its radio throat faintly humming.

"Well, Mr. Mead," it said.

"Is that all?" he asked politely.

"Yes," said the voice. "Here." There was a sigh, a pop. The back door of the police car sprang wide. "Get in."

"Wait a minute, I haven't done anything!"

"Get in."

"I protest!"

"Mr. Mead."

He walked like a man suddenly drunk. As he passed the front window of the car he looked in. As he had expected, there was no one in the front seat, no one in the car at all.

"Get in."

He put his hand to the door and peered into the back seat, which was a little cell, a little black jail with bars. It smelled of riveted steel. It smelled of harsh antiseptic; it smelled too clean and hard and metallic. There was nothing soft there.

"Now if you had a wife to give you an alibi," said the iron voice. "But-"

"Where are you taking me?"

The car hesitated, or rather gave a faint whirring click, as if information, somewhere, was dropping card by punch-slotted card under electric eyes. "To the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies."

He got in. The door shut with a soft thud. The police car rolled through the night avenues, flashing its dim lights ahead.

They passed one house on one street a moment later, one house in an entire city of houses that were dark, but this one particular house had all of its electric lights brightly lit, every window a loud yellow illumination, square and warm in the cool darkness.

"That's my house," said Leonard Mead.

No one answered him.

The car moved down the empty river-bed streets and off away, leaving the empty streets with the empty side-walks, and no sound and no motion all the rest of the chill November night.

Bradbury, Ray (1920-), is an American author best known for his fantasy stories and science fiction. Bradbury's best writing effectively combines a lively imagination with a poetic style.

Collections of Bradbury's stories include The Martian Chronicles (1950), The Illustrated Man (1951), The October Country (1955), I Sing the Body Electric! (1969), Quicker Than the Eye (1996), and One More for the Road (2002). His novel Fahrenheit 451 (1953) describes a society that bans the ownership of books. His other novels include Dandelion Wine (1957), a poetic story of a boy's summer in an Illinois town in 1928; and Something Wicked This Way Comes (1962), a suspenseful fantasy about a black magic carnival that comes to a small Midwestern town. He has also written poetry, screenplays, and stage plays.

The Necklace

BY Guy de Maupassant

She was one of those pretty and charming girls born, as though fate had blundered over her, into a family of artisans. She had no marriage portion, no expectations, no means of getting known, understood, loved, and wedded by a man of wealth and distinction; and she let herself be married off to a little clerk in the Ministry of Education. Her tastes were simple because she had never been able to afford any other, but she was as unhappy as though she had married beneath her; for women have no caste or class, their beauty, grace, and charm serving them for birth or family, their natural delicacy, their instinctive elegance, their nimbleness of wit, are their only mark of rank, and put the slum girl on a level with the highest lady in the land.

She suffered endlessly, feeling herself born for every delicacy and luxury. She suffered from the poorness of her house, from its mean walls, worn chairs, and ugly curtains. All these things, of which other women of her class would not even have been aware, tormented and insulted her. The sight of the little Breton girl who came to do the work in her little house aroused heart-broken regrets and hopeless dreams in her mind. She imagined silent antechambers, heavy with Oriental tapestries, lit by torches in lofty bronze sockets, with two tall footmen in knee-breeches sleeping in large arm-chairs, overcome by the heavy warmth of the stove. She imagined vast saloons hung with antique silks, exquisite pieces of furniture supporting priceless ornaments, and small, charming, perfumed rooms, created just for little parties of intimate friends, men who were famous and sought after, whose homage roused every other woman's envious longings.

When she sat down for dinner at the round table covered with a three-days-old cloth, opposite her husband, who took the cover off the soup-tureen, exclaiming delightedly: "Aha! Scotch broth! What could be better?" she imagined delicate meals, gleaming silver, tapestries peopling the walls with folk of a past age and strange birds in faery forests; she imagined delicate food served in marvellous dishes, murmured gallantries, listened to with an inscrutable smile as one trifled with the rosy flesh of trout or wings of asparagus chicken.

She had no clothes, no jewels, nothing. And these were the only things she loved; she felt that she was made for them. She had longed so eagerly to charm, to be desired, to be wildly attractive and sought after.

She had a rich friend, an old school friend whom she refused to visit, because she suffered so keenly when she returned home. She would weep whole days, with grief, regret, despair, and misery.

*

One evening her husband came home with an exultant air, holding a large envelope in his hand.

"Here's something for you," he said.

Swiftly she tore the paper and drew out a printed card on which were these words:

"The Minister of Education and Madame Ramponneau request the pleasure of the company of Monsieur and Madame Loisel at the Ministry on the evening of Monday, January the 18th."

Instead of being delighted, as her husband hoped, she flung the invitation petulantly across the table, murmuring:

"What do you want me to do with this?"

"Why, darling, I thought you'd be pleased. You never go out, and this is a great occasion. I had tremendous trouble to get it. Every one wants one; it's very select, and very few go to the clerks. You'll see all the really big people there."

She looked at him out of furious eyes, and said impatiently: "And what do you suppose I am to wear at such an affair?"

He had not thought about it; he stammered:

"Why, the dress you go to the theatre in. It looks very nice, to me . . ."

He stopped, stupefied and utterly at a loss when he saw that his wife was beginning to cry. Two large tears ran slowly down from the corners of her eyes towards the corners of her mouth.

"What's the matter with you? What's the matter with you?" he faltered.

But with a violent effort she overcame her grief and replied in a calm voice, wiping her wet cheeks:

"Nothing. Only I haven't a dress and so I can't go to this party. Give your invitation to some friend of yours whose wife will be turned out better than I shall."

He was heart-broken.

"Look here, Mathilde," he persisted. "What would be the cost of a suitable dress, which you could use on other occasions as well, something very simple?"

She thought for several seconds, reckoning up prices and also wondering for how large a sum she could ask without bringing upon herself an immediate refusal and an exclamation of horror from the careful-minded clerk.

At last she replied with some hesitation:

"I don't know exactly, but I think I could do it on four hundred francs."

He grew slightly pale, for this was exactly the amount he had been saving for a gun, intending to get a little shooting next summer on the plain of Nanterre with some friends who went lark-shooting there on Sundays.

Nevertheless he said: "Very well. I'll give you four hundred francs. But try and get a really nice dress with the money."

The day of the party drew near, and Madame Loisel seemed sad, uneasy and anxious. Her dress was ready, however. One evening her husband said to her:

"What's the matter with you? You've been very odd for the last three days."

"I'm utterly miserable at not having any jewels, not a single stone, to wear," she replied. "I shall look absolutely no one. I would almost rather not go to the party."

"Wear flowers," he said. "They're very smart at this time of the year. For ten francs you could get two or three gorgeous roses."

She was not convinced.

"No . . . there's nothing so humiliating as looking poor in the middle of a lot of rich women."

"How stupid you are!" exclaimed her husband. "Go and see Madame Forestier and ask her to lend you some jewels. You know her quite well enough for that."

She uttered a cry of delight.

"That's true. I never thought of it."

Next day she went to see her friend and told her her trouble.

Madame Forestier went to her dressing-table, took up a large box, brought it to Madame Loisel, opened it, and said:

"Choose, my dear."

First she saw some bracelets, then a pearl necklace, then a Venetian cross in gold and gems, of exquisite workmanship. She tried the effect of the jewels before the mirror, hesitating, unable to make up her mind to leave them, to give them up. She kept on asking:

"Haven't you anything else?"

"Yes. Look for yourself. I don't know what you would like best."

Suddenly she discovered, in a black satin case, a superb diamond necklace; her heart began to beat covetously. Her hands trembled as she lifted it. She fastened it round her neck, upon her high dress, and remained in ecstasy at sight of herself.

Then, with hesitation, she asked in anguish:

"Could you lend me this, just this alone?"

"Yes, of course."

She flung herself on her friend's breast, embraced her frenziedly, and went away with her treasure. The day of the party arrived. Madame Loisel was a success. She was the prettiest woman present, elegant, graceful, smiling, and quite above herself with happiness. All the men stared at her, inquired her name, and asked to be introduced to her. All the Under-Secretaries of State were eager to waltz with her. The Minister noticed her.

She danced madly, ecstatically, drunk with pleasure, with no thought for anything, in the triumph of her beauty, in the pride of her success, in a cloud of happiness made up of this universal homage and admiration, of the desires she had aroused, of the completeness of a victory so dear to her feminine heart.

She left about four o'clock in the morning. Since midnight her husband had been dozing in a deserted little room, in company with three other men whose wives were having a good time. He threw over her shoulders the garments he had brought for them to go home in, modest everyday clothes, whose poverty clashed with the beauty of the ball-dress. She was conscious of this and was anxious to hurry away, so that she should not be noticed by the other women putting on their costly furs.

Loisel restrained her.

"Wait a little. You'll catch cold in the open. I'm going to fetch a cab."

But she did not listen to him and rapidly descended the staircase. When they were out in the street they could not find a cab; they began to look for one, shouting at the drivers whom they saw passing in the distance.

They walked down towards the Seine, desperate and shivering. At last they found on the quay one of those old nightprowling carriages which are only to be seen in Paris after dark, as though they were ashamed of their shabbiness in the daylight.

It brought them to their door in the Rue des Martyrs, and sadly they walked up to their own apartment. It was the end, for her. As for him, he was thinking that he must be at the office at ten.

She took off the garments in which she had wrapped her shoulders, so as to see herself in all her glory before the mirror. But suddenly she uttered a cry. The necklace was no longer round her neck!

"What's the matter with you?" asked her husband, already half undressed.

She turned towards him in the utmost distress.

"I . . . I . . . I've no longer got Madame Forestier's necklace. . . ."

He started with astonishment.

"What! . . . Impossible!"

They searched in the folds of her dress, in the folds of the coat, in the pockets, everywhere. They could not find it.

"Are you sure that you still had it on when you came away from the ball?" he asked.

"Yes, I touched it in the hall at the Ministry."

"But if you had lost it in the street, we should have heard it fall."

"Yes. Probably we should. Did you take the number of the cab?"

"No. You didn't notice it, did you?"

"No."

They stared at one another, dumbfounded. At last Loisel put on his clothes again.

"I'll go over all the ground we walked," he said, "and see if I can't find it."

And he went out. She remained in her evening clothes, lacking strength to get into bed, huddled on a chair, without volition or power of thought.

Her husband returned about seven. He had found nothing.

He went to the police station, to the newspapers, to offer a reward, to the cab companies, everywhere that a ray of hope impelled him.

She waited all day long, in the same state of bewilderment at this fearful catastrophe.

Loisel came home at night, his face lined and pale; he had discovered nothing.

"You must write to your friend," he said, "and tell her that you've broken the clasp of her necklace and are getting it mended. That will give us time to look about us."

She wrote at his dictation.

*

By the end of a week they had lost all hope.

Loisel, who had aged five years, declared:

"We must see about replacing the diamonds."

Next day they took the box which had held the necklace and went to the jewellers whose name was inside. He consulted his books.

"It was not I who sold this necklace, Madame; I must have merely supplied the clasp."

Then they went from jeweller to jeweller, searching for another necklace like the first, consulting their memories, both ill with remorse and anguish of mind.

In a shop at the Palais-Royal they found a string of diamonds which seemed to them exactly like the one they were looking for. It was worth forty thousand francs. They were allowed to have it for thirty-six thousand.

They begged the jeweller not to sell it for three days. And they arranged matters on the understanding that it would be taken back for thirty-four thousand francs, if the first one were found before the end of February.

Loisel possessed eighteen thousand francs left to him by his father. He intended to borrow the rest.

He did borrow it, getting a thousand from one man, five hundred from another, five louis here, three louis there. He gave notes of hand, entered into ruinous agreements, did business with usurers and the whole tribe of money-lenders. He mortgaged the whole remaining years of his existence, risked his signature without even knowing if he could honour it, and, appalled at the agonising face of the future, at the black misery about to fall upon him, at the prospect of every possible physical privation and moral torture, he went to get the new necklace and put down upon the jeweller's counter thirty-six thousand francs.

When Madame Loisel took back the necklace to Madame Forestier, the latter said to her in a chilly voice:
"You ought to have brought it back sooner; I might have needed it."

She did not, as her friend had feared, open the case. If she had noticed the substitution, what would she have thought? What would she have said? Would she not have taken her for a thief?

*

Madame Loisel came to know the ghastly life of abject poverty. From the very first she played her part heroically. This fearful debt must be paid off. She would pay it. The servant was dismissed. They changed their flat; they took a garret under the roof.

She came to know the heavy work of the house, the hateful duties of the kitchen. She washed the plates, wearing out her pink nails on the coarse pottery and the bottoms of pans. She washed the dirty linen, the shirts and dishcloths, and hung them out to dry on a string; every morning she took the dustbin down into the street and carried up the water, stopping on each landing to get her breath. And, clad like a poor woman, she went to the fruiterer, to the grocer, to the butcher, a basket on her arm, haggling, insulted, fighting for every wretched halfpenny of her money.

Every month notes had to be paid off, others renewed, time gained.

Her husband worked in the evenings at putting straight a merchant's accounts, and often at night he did copying at twopence-halfpenny a page.

And this life lasted ten years.

At the end of ten years everything was paid off, everything, the usurer's charges and the accumulation of superimposed interest.

Madame Loisel looked old now. She had become like all the other strong, hard, coarse women of poor households. Her hair was badly done, her skirts were awry, her hands were red. She spoke in a shrill voice, and the water slopped all over the floor when she scrubbed it. But sometimes, when her husband was at the office, she sat down by the window and thought of that evening long ago, of the ball at which she had been so beautiful and so much admired.

What would have happened if she had never lost those jewels. Who knows? Who knows? How strange life is, how fickle! How little is needed to ruin or to save!

One Sunday, as she had gone for a walk along the Champs-Elysees to freshen herself after the labours of the week, she caught sight suddenly of a woman who was taking a child out for a walk. It was Madame Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still attractive.

Madame Loisel was conscious of some emotion. Should she speak to her? Yes, certainly. And now that she had paid, she would tell her all. Why not?

She went up to her. "Good morning, Jeanne."

The other did not recognise her, and was surprised at being thus familiarly addressed by a poor woman. "But . . . Madame . . ." she stammered. "I don't know . . . you must be making a mistake."

"No . . . I am Mathilde Loisel."

Her friend uttered a cry. "Oh! . . . my poor Mathilde, how you have changed! . . ."

"Yes, I've had some hard times since I saw you last; and many sorrows . . . and all on your account."

"On my account! . . . How was that?"

"You remember the diamond necklace you lent me for the ball at the Ministry?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, I lost it."

"How could you? Why, you brought it back."

"I brought you another one just like it. And for the last ten years we have been paying for it. You realise it wasn't easy for us; we had no money. . . . Well, it's paid for at last, and I'm glad indeed."

Madame Forestier had halted. "You say you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?"

"Yes. You hadn't noticed it? They were very much alike." And she smiled in proud and innocent happiness.

Madame Forestier, deeply moved, took her two hands. "Oh, my poor Mathilde! But mine was imitation. It was worth at the very most five hundred francs! . . ."

Signs and Symbols

Vladimir Nabokov

I

For the fourth time in as many years they were confronted with the problem of what birthday present to bring a young man who was incurably deranged in his mind. He had no desires. Man-made objects were to him either hives of evil, vibrant with a malignant activity that he alone could perceive, or gross comforts for which no use could be found in his abstract world. After eliminating a number of articles that might offend him or frighten him (anything in the gadget line for instance was taboo), his parents chose a dainty and innocent trifle: a basket with ten different fruit jellies in ten little jars.

At the time of his birth they had been married already for a long time; a score of years had elapsed, and now they were quite old. Her drab gray hair was done anyhow. She wore cheap black dresses. Unlike other women of her age (such as Mrs. Sol, their next-door neighbor, whose face was all pink and mauve with paint and whose hat was a cluster of brookside flowers), she presented a naked white countenance to the fault-finding light of spring days. Her husband, who in the old country had been a fairly successful businessman, was now wholly dependent on his brother Isaac, a real American of almost forty years standing. They seldom saw him and had nicknamed him "the Prince."

That Friday everything went wrong. The underground train lost its life current between two stations, and for a quarter of an hour one could hear nothing but the dutiful beating of one's heart and the rustling of newspapers. The bus they had to take next kept them waiting for ages; and when it did come, it was crammed with garrulous high-school children. It was raining hard as they walked up the brown path leading to the sanitarium. There they waited again; and instead of their boy shuffling into the room as he usually did (his poor face blotched with acne, ill-shaven, sullen, and confused), a nurse they knew, and did not care for, appeared at last and brightly explained that he had again attempted to take his life. He was all right, she said, but a visit might disturb him. The place was so miserably understaffed, and things got mislaid or mixed up so easily, that they decided not to leave their present in the office but to bring it to him next time they came.

She waited for her husband to open his umbrella and then took his arm. He kept clearing his throat in a special resonant way he had when he was upset. They reached the bus-stop shelter on the other side of the street and he closed his umbrella. A few feet away, under a swaying and dripping tree, a tiny half-dead unfledged bird was helplessly twitching in a puddle.

During the long ride to the subway station, she and her husband did not exchange a word; and every time she glanced at his old hands (swollen veins, brown-spotted skin), clasped and twitching upon the handle of his umbrella, she felt the mounting pressure of tears. As she looked around trying to hook her mind onto something, it gave her a kind of soft shock, a mixture of compassion and wonder, to notice that one of the passengers, a girl with dark hair and grubby red toenails, was weeping on the shoulder

of an older woman. Whom did that woman resemble? She resembled Rebecca Borisovna, whose daughter had married one of the Soloveichik - in Minsk, years ago.

The last time he had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor's words, a masterpiece of inventiveness; he would have succeeded, had not an envious fellow patient thought he was learning to fly - and stopped him. What he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape.

The system of his delusions had been the subject of an elaborate paper in a scientific monthly, but long before that she and her husband had puzzled it out for themselves. "Referential mania," Herman Brink had called it. In these very rare cases the patient imagines that everything happening around him is a veiled reference to his personality and existence. He excludes real people from the conspiracy - because he considers himself to be so much more intelligent than other men. Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the staring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains or sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages which he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme. Some of the spies are detached observers, such are glass surfaces and still pools; others, such as coats in store windows, are prejudiced witnesses, lynchers at heart; others again (running water, storms) are hysterical to the point of insanity, have a distorted opinion of him and grotesquely misinterpret his actions. He must be always on his guard and devote every minute and module of life to the decoding of the undulation of things. The very air he exhales is indexed and filed away. If only the interest he provokes were limited to his immediate surroundings - but alas it is not! With distance the rents of wild scandal increase in volume and volubility. The silhouettes of his blood corpuscles, magnified a million times, flit over vast plains; and still farther, great mountains of unbearable solidity and height sum up in terms of granite and groaning firs the ultimate truth of his being.

II

When they emerged from the thunder and foul air of the subway, the last dregs of the day were mixed with the street lights. She wanted to buy some fish for supper, so she handed him the basket of jelly jars, telling him to go home. He walked up to the third landing and then remembered he had given her his keys earlier in the day.

In silence he sat down on the steps and in silence rose when some ten minutes later she came, heavily trudging upstairs, wanly smiling, shaking her head in depreciation of her silliness. They entered their two-room flat and he at once went to the mirror. Straining the corners of his mouth apart by means of his thumbs, with a horrible masklike grimace, he removed his new hopelessly uncomfortable dental plate and severed the long tusks of saliva connecting him to it. He read his Russian-language newspaper while she laid the table. Still reading, he ate the pale victuals that needed no teeth. She knew his moods and was also silent.

When he had gone to bed, she remained in the living room with her pack of soiled cards and her old albums. Across the narrow yard where the rain

tinkled in the dark against some battered ash cans, windows were blandly alight and in one of them a blacktrousered man with his bare elbows raised could be seen lying supine on a untidy bed. She pulled the blind down and examined the photographs. As a baby he looked more surprised than most babies. From a fold in the album, a German maid they had had in Leipzig and her fat-faced fiance fell out. Minsk, the Revolution, Leipzig, Berlin, Leipzig, a slanting house front badly out of focus. Four years old, in a park: moodily, shyly, with puckered forehead, looking away from an eager squirrel as he would from any other stranger. Aunt Rosa, a fussy, angular, wild-eyed old lady, who had lived in a tremulous world of bad news, bankruptcies, train accidents, cancerous growths--until the Germans put her to death, together with all the people she had worried about. Age six - that was when he drew wonderful birds with human hands and feet, and suffered from insomnia like a grown-up man. His cousin, now a famous chess player. He again, aged about eight, already difficult to understand, afraid of the wallpaper in the passage, afraid of a certain picture in a book which merely showed an idyllic landscape with rocks on a hillside and an old cart wheel hanging from the branch of a leafless tree. Aged ten: the year they left Europe. The shame, the pity, the humiliating difficulties, the ugly, vicious, backward children he was with in that special school. And then came a time in his life, coinciding with a long convalescence after pneumonia, when those little phobias of his which his parents had stubbornly regarded as the eccentricities of a prodigiously gifted child hardened as it were into a dense tangle of logically interacting illusions, making him totally inaccessible to normal minds.

This, and much more, she accepted - for after all living did mean accepting the loss of one joy after another, not even joys in her case - mere possibilities of improvement. She thought of the endless waves of pain that for some reason or other she and her husband had to endure; of the invisible giants hurting her boy in some unimaginable fashion; of the incalculable amount of tenderness contained in the world; of the fate of this tenderness, which is either crushed, or wasted, or transformed into madness; of neglected children humming to themselves in unswept corners; of beautiful weeds that cannot hide from the farmer and helplessly have to watch the shadow of his simian stoop leave mangled flowers in its wake, as the monstrous darkness approaches.

III

It was past midnight when from the living room she heard her husband moan; and presently he staggered in, wearing over his nightgown the old overcoat with astrakhan collar which he much preferred to the nice blue bathrobe he had.

"I can't sleep," he cried.

"Why," she asked, "why can't you sleep? You were tired."

"I can't sleep because I am dying," he said and lay down on the couch.

"Is it your stomach? Do you want me to call Dr. Solov?"

"No doctors, no doctors," he moaned, "To the devil with doctors! We must get him out of there quick. Otherwise we'll be responsible. Responsible!" he repeated and hurled himself into a sitting position, both feet on the

floor, thumping his forehead with his clenched fist.

"All right," she said quietly, "we shall bring him home tomorrow morning."

"I would like some tea," said her husband and retired to the bathroom.

Bending with difficulty, she retrieved some playing cards and a photograph or two that had slipped from the couch to the floor: knave of hearts, nine of spades, ace of spades, Elsa and her bestial beau. He returned in high spirits, saying in a loud voice:

"I have it all figured out. We will give him the bedroom. Each of us will spend part of the night near him and the other part on this couch. By turns. We will have the doctor see him at least twice a week. It does not matter what the Prince says. He won't have to say much anyway because it will come out cheaper."

The telephone rang. It was an unusual hour for their telephone to ring. His left slipper had come off and he groped for it with his heel and toe as he stood in the middle of the room, and childishly, toothlessly, gaped at his wife. Having more English than he did, it was she who attended to calls.

"Can I speak to Charlie," said a girl's dull little voice.

"What number you want? No. That is not the right number."

The receiver was gently cradled. Her hand went to her old tired heart.

He smiled a quick smile and immediately resumed his excited monologue. They would fetch him as soon as it was day. Knives would have to be kept in a locked drawer. Even at his worst he presented no danger to other people.

The telephone rang a second time. The same toneless anxious young voice asked for Charlie.

"You have the incorrect number. I will tell you what you are doing: you are turning the letter O instead of the zero."

They sat down to their unexpected festive midnight tea. The birthday present stood on the table. He sipped noisily; his face was flushed; every now and then he imparted a circular motion to his raised glass so as to make the sugar dissolve more thoroughly. The vein on the side of his bald head where there was a large birthmark stood out conspicuously and, although he had shaved that morning, a silvery bristle showed on his chin. While she poured him another glass of tea, he put on his spectacles and re-examined with pleasure the luminous yellow, green, red little jars. His clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent labels: apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He had got to crab apple, when the telephone rang again.