

THE TENTH YEAR

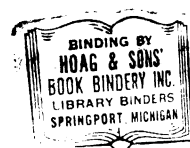
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KAYE KRUGER ZAHORCHAK
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THE TENTH YEAR

By

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A THESIS

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She was assigned to him from the beginning, and each day he waited until he had wheeled his other patients out to the porch before he went to get her.

"Where do you want to go today, Julie?" he would ask. "Do you want to sit on the porch? How about if we go for a walk over to the field. There's butterflies over there, you know."

He always took her to the field and he believed that she enjoyed it, though she still had not spoken.

"You need your coat today," he said, holding it out for her.

She didn't look at him, but he saw that her fingers had loosened their grip on the chair.

"That's it," he said, half pushing and half pulling her limp arms through the sleeves. He buttoned the coat carefully, freeing her hair from beneath the collar before he fastened the last one. Her hair had been beautiful, hanging blonde and straight to her waist, when she had come there. But even on that first day he had seen it changing, until now it was totally white. Her skin had grown pale too, almost transparent. He could trace the blue veins along her temples and the violet-blue shadows under her eyes. The eyes themselves were vacant with the look of old age. She was like a helpless old woman returned to childhood before childhood had barely passed.

"You gotta try," he had explained to her one afternoon while they sat at the edge of the field watching butterflies. "Even butterflies gotta try to get out of their cocoons. They're caterpillars first, you know. They can't fly even, all they can do is crawl. Then they build a shell and crawl in. But after a while they decide to come out, and they come out all beautiful, with wings."

She just kept staring into the weeds and when it was time to go back, he carried her to the wheelchair.

"Those are snow clouds there, I bet," he said as they started across the lawn. "It won't be long until we have to stay in for our afternoons."

Maybe we should've stayed in today, he thought as the wind fluttered the blanket around Julie's legs. He drew it closer around her and tucked the edges under her feet.

"This is all the farther we're going today, Julie," he said. "It's too cold for you to sit on the ground, so we'll just stay here and watch for a while, O.K.?"

He fastened the brake on her chair and sat on the ground beside her. The leaves on the oak had all fallen now except for a few parched brown ones that clung precariously to gnarled branches. Even the weeds that had fascinated him last week with their dried patterns, were brittle, dusty fragments now.

"Let's go," he said suddenly, standing up. "I was wrong. It's too cold to be out today."

She was staring with the same empty gaze that she turned

on all the world, but her hands were poised above the arms of the wheelchair, her fingers distended as if she was reaching for something. He followed her gaze to a tall thistle and to the small white moth that dangled, paper-dry, from its spikes.

"It froze," he told her, "It's not ever gonna fly. It's dead."

"No."

She said it so quietly that at first he was not sure he had heard it. Then slowly her voice rose in pitch and she began to scream.

1.

"I'll have a whiskey sour," I said.

I looked across the table at Peter who was already pushing back his shirt cuffs and settling into his chair.

"You know, Makrianis," the man on my left said to him, "You just might be right about the Opaline solvent. We ran ten washers through on only that sample."

He was a little man, his reddish hair sprouting sparsely from his shiny, round head. His hands were pudgy and soft. They grew from the edges of his shirt cuffs like pale, full peonies. I could not imagine his arms, he had only shapeless grey sleeves.

Peter leaned forward and I watched the whole scene as it froze into place. It was the same scene as last night, only the setting and a few minor characters had altered. Peter was across from me in a dark blue, tuxedo and a navy blue tie. His shirt was white with ruffles. The round little man on my left had been a moustached blonde salesman last night. I thought his name was Carl. Peter told me that I had met him before, but I couldn't remember the circumstances at all if I had. Joe, who had been on my right last night, was Howard tonight. Or it might have been Howard last night who had become Joe tonight. I guess it really doesn't matter though, Peter's managers always know their lines.

Carl's speech had been their cue. In slow motion they moved to assume their positions. Elbows and hands glided

precisely in a ballet through the air, arranging themselves along the table.

"Po-sit-tion Number One!" old Miss Waston had yelled for so many years. "Gracefully, ladies, gracefully!"

Number One: Executives at leisure, yet not without business entirely--ties a bit loosened, posture a bit slouched, a mild gesture with the hand. Their heads pivotted slowly, their mouths melted expectantly into "O"s.

Focus on Peter, the lights dim except around him, his electric green tuxedo begins to glow. His first syllables emerge as a soft drone, building in intensity as his face struggles through its movements, as his lips grimace around his teeth to form words. I could see his tongue twisting within the "O" to turn the noises into words. They came, growing louder and louder, "I, I, I, ...I, I, Know..know..I know, know, I,....

"Excuse me, M'am."

My drink descended, supported by long blazing red, fingernails. Across from me, Peter's descended in similar fashion. He looked up at the waitress and smiled at her. Then he caught my eye and winked. Before I had time for the acknowledging smile though, he had turned back to Carl and moved into the elaborate movements of their conversation. It was like that every time now.

In our old days, the days of our happy games, it hadn't been like that. I could remember the very beginning, the night that the first big customer and his wife had come to

dinner. I made Beef Wellington, step by step out of the New York Times Cookbook. I had even unpacked our wedding silver and the good china. My gown was lime green and flowing to the floor--Sheridan Ltd.'s idea of the perfect hostess gown, a gift from Peter. Dinner had been a total success, like a color glossy out of Modern Homemaker. I was eighteen then, and Peter had gotten the contract to dry clean all of the draperies in Customer's building.

Peter had looked up at me during the second course, and winked. I smiled back, newlywed, happy, and proud of my first success. We continued on through cherry pie and coffee. When Big Customer and wife had gone, satiated, I started to pile the dishes in the kitchen sink. Peter had stopped me on my second trip from the table.

"Not now, Laura," he said.

"They'll be terrible to clean if I leave them."

"I'll do them tomorrow," Peter said pulling me to him.

"Peter," I laughed, "Don't be silly."

He was playing with the fastening at the neck of my dress.

"Peter, not in the living room!"

"Why not?" he said, more than a little drunk.

"Peter....," I started to say.

"Shut up, Laura," he said, kissing me.

We laughed together while we took turns scouring the dishes the next morning. After that it had become almost a ritual. Peter would look up in the middle of mixing drinks, or passing cigarettes, and he would wink. I would smile back

and then we both would continue conversing politely, or playing bridge, or guessing charades. Still, I knew that later, when the guests had gone, or when we had gone, there would be time for just the two of us. It was almost a promise, then.

But now Peter didn't even wait to see if I smiled.

I looked past his shoulder, aimlessly examining the room. This was the first time we had been at Gino's Underground. The drinks were rumored to be excellent, the atmosphere, sensational. Peter decided to try it out with his store manager before they brought their big deals here. So tonight we were paying our own way instead of drinking on his expense account.

Gino's was in a basement. You walked down two flights of stairs, there was no elevator. It was part of the atmosphere, an aura of authenticity that you had to walk.

The air was red down here, as if lit by some massive, unseen hearth. The walls were draped with panels of rich, red velvet, and each table was itself an island of flickering red candle light. The bar was directly behind Peter. I squinted my eyes slightly and the bottles of liquor began to rise out of Peter's head. There were rows of them, exotically shaped, many of them half-empty. They caught in the light, gleaming darkly.

Gino himself was small, dark and balding. He moved along the bar in a mindless ritual, endlessly pouring libations to some unknown god. He carefully sat the drinks on huge trays and they were carried away one by one in an offertory

procession of big breasted women with glittering thighs and high black boots.

They nodded to each other as they passed.

"Agnus Dei," they probably said to each other.

"Amen, Alleluia, I got a ten for a tip," one would reply.

In the old days they would have been virgins. Watching the heavily mascaraed waitress closest to me as she smilingly nestled her tip along the front of her brassiere, I doubted that they were so pure today. The gods change, I thought, and so do their handmaidens.

The god's girls moved carefully--each step a metered length; with each movement there was a shifting of flesh, a melting of one curve into another, and gusts of musky perfume that rolled in waves across the room. They smiled continually, they nodded, they swayed like young fruit trees, lusciously overburdened with well-ripened fruit. They took your money in their soft, red nailed hands, and then they circled back toward the bar. At the counter they stopped to rest, savouring each bosom-heaving breath of their leisure, but still scanning the room with their automated smiles as they watched for their next summons.

I let my eyes close and then she was in the slave market, this Laura, standing silently in her sequinned black stockings and high black boots. Her each breath threatened to burst the seams of her low, clinging, black knit bodice. The others had all gone before her, scared young girls, barely out of finishing school, frightened to stand before the eyes

of the buyers.

The old man motioned her to the platform. He was a dusty old man, shrivelled and brown in a ragged grey burnoose.

"An old one, but a ripe one!" he yelled. "Used only for the occasional pleasure of a middle-aged alcoholic!"

The hot eyes of the crowd fastened on her body. The Laura tossed back her long, blonde hair and met their gaze fully. Her breath was coming heavier now, straining at the buttons of her bodice until at last one of them flew off into the crowd. A cheer rose from the milling buyers and there was a slight squabble over who had reached the button first.

"Have you ever seen such knockers?" yelled the dealer. "This one, she is a jewel! No bids lower than "95.89!"

The bidding started at \$150.00. Laura felt her armpits growing damp and wished again that they had at least allowed her to bathe before they abducted her, or let her bring her deodorant.

"\$185.00!"

"\$186.00!"

The two that were doing most of the bidding looked like twins, one in a striped burnoose and one in plaid. They couldn't have been more than nineteen or so. She hoped that the winner would be young. Already she could tell from the amount of gold coins and jewelry that glinted on the chests in the crowd, that most of the buyers were rich. But most who glittered also had grey beards, and fat stomachs. Laura offered a prayer to any god that would listen. Let him be young this time, she said silently.

"\$500.00."

It was a calm statement, unlike the frantic bidding and upbidding of the twins.

"Sold!" yelled the dealer.

"No fair!" yelled one of the twins. "No fair! He didn't give me a chance! Wait until I get some more money from my uncle. Wait, I tell you! Only five minutes more! Wait!"

He was screaming.

"Shut up, Habib!" said the dealer. "You know your uncle won't give you anymore money."

He turned from yelling at the boy with a gracious smile on his face. The buyer gestured and the old man ran down the ramp to get his check.

"You spell my name Fa-sil," he was saying to the figure in the purple burnoose. "That's F, like in flower, and A...".

Her buyer straightened to hand Fasil his check and Laura saw his face for the first time. He was deeply tanned with dark, almost black eyes. He couldn't have been more than twenty, or twenty-one. As he moved toward her the wind blew his burnoose against him. Through its baggy purple folds, she could see his erection. Another button flew off her bodice. Then she smiled.

"Laura," Peter was saying, "Laura."

I opened my eyes.

"Falling asleep already?"

He said it lightly, but I could hear the criticism in his tone.

"And here we are talking shop," said Carl trying to defend me a little. "We're probably boring you to death, aren't we Laura?"

He reminded me of a cherub, a rosy, fat, and balding cherub, escaped from his fresco for the evening. He spoke as if I were a ten year old, allowed to stay up with the grownups for the first time.

"Not at all," I said carefully, glancing at Peter. "I find it quite...interesting. Of course I don't fully understand all of it. (Smile.) But it is interesting."

I said the word slowly. It was an empty word that could mean whatever anyone wanted it to mean. Interesting. Birds were interesting, gossip columns were interesting, rainbows were interesting.

The dialogue continued, unrehearsed but repeated so many times before that I could almost define where each muscle in my face would be, into which complacent line it would fall as my face settled into its smooth, blank, interesting, mask. Sometimes I have felt it freezing there, icing to marble in its politeness. But I had said the proper thing. They would all smile now and Peter would ask if I wanted another drink.

He would make a big show of calling the waitress and ordering the drink that he knew I would choose. Throughout it all he would beam at me as though he had a lightbulb instead of a brain.

"Laura's roses took first place at the garden show last week, didn't they, Laura?"

"Yes." Smile. Wives of Civic leaders are supposed to grow roses. It's one of the rules.

"That's great," said George, or maybe Howard.

They all turned toward me and smiled in unison, the red light glistening along their teeth. My cheeks were starting to ache from so much smiling.

Peter's next speech would begin shortly. It would be on how great our marriage is, what a good wife I am to him, and how after ten years we are still getting along, great, just great. How was that, all you skeptics? How was that for happiness, for success?" He did it well for a man nearly drunk each time he recited it.

I wished that the waitress would hurry and come so that I could end his speech this time before it even started. They would turn from me like marionettes pulled by their strings, and beam genuinely at the waitress for a while. After two sips of whiskey the conversation would again have turned to the new cleaning solvent, or the tuxedo shop Peter just opened, or anything at all connected with his dry cleaning business that would leave me free to my own thoughts again.

"Would you like another drink, M'am?"

She had materialized at my shoulder and startled by her suddenness, I was wordless.

"She'd like another whiskey sour," said Peter, smiling broadly at this opportunity. "She only drinks whiskey sours."

I settled back into the plush red upholstery and waited for the evening to pass. Sometimes I wondered why Peter still insisted that I come with him. But I knew the answer

before I even finished phrasing the question. It was because of our old days, the days that Peter was still living, the days when I had protested at his being gone so many nights.

"Why can't you meet with them during the day?" I asked.

His face had reddened and then he spoke angrily.

"I do meet with them during the day. What in hell do you think I do all day long?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I don't hear from you at all during the day, and rarely at night. Even when you are home you don't talk much about work."

"Well why don't you ask Ruth? She sees me all day long."

"I don't see why I should have to ask my mother about what my husband does all day."

"Don't call her your mother," he snapped. "You know she doesn't like that."

"She is my mother."

"Look, Laura," he said, "This whole thing is getting blown out of proportion. I realize that I don't spend every minute with you, but I do have a business to run. And we do have to eat, right?"

"I could get a job," I said. "I could work at one of the cleaning stores, or help you in the office."

"No."

"We'd be working together, Peter. It would be fun."

"You don't understand, do you?" he burst out. "I don't go there to 'have fun' all day, Laura. I go there to work, to build the little business my father left me into a business

that makes money! Do you understand that, Laura? That's where all your money comes from, all your rose gardens, all your fancy bathtubs!"

"But I want to get a job..."

"I'd make plenty if you'd just let me alone long enough to do it." "Look," he went on, trying to calm himself, "It just wouldn't look good for the wife of the boss to work. You know what I mean? It looks like we're really scraping."

"But I want to do something."

"You do a lot," he said, patting her hand, "Don't worry about it."

I didn't say anything more. I thought at first that he was leaving but he turned before he got to the door.

"Put a dress on and come with me tonight," he said. "You can listen to the band and have a few drinks while we talk business, and then there'll be some time for just you and me. How's that?"

I probably beamed at him. I still did things like that then.

Peter introduced me to the others, explaining with his wide business smile that I was reluctant to be separated from him. We had only been married a few months. The old woman was won over instantly. She called me "dear" for the rest of the night and accepted all of Peter's suggestions without really listening to him. We talked about weddings, and families.

From Peter's good humor I could tell that I was an advantage. From that time on I was invited along. In fact

at times he forced me to go. I didn't have to say much past the first hour or so, but I did have to smile. It had become ritualized over the years. The script was always the same.

We would stay at Gino's until the bar closed. Peter would be drunk, but he would insist on driving home. If I got drunk enough myself, I wouldn't object. When we made it there he'd tumble into bed without a shower and be asleep the second his head hit the pillow. I would probably watch the luminous clock dial for a few hours and then fall asleep just as sky was beginning to get light. When I woke it would be past ten and Peter would have been at work for an hour.

The waitress sat another whiskey sour in front of me.

"Thank you," she said, tucking Peter's tip into her bra.

I tried to read the time on Peter's watch as he gestured toward Carl. Some nights I could do it, but tonight he was talking too fast and vehemently, so I gave up.

"Excuse me, Peter," I said finally. "Did you happen to notice where the ladies' lounge was when we came in?"

The ladies' room is a legitimate excuse. I never fail to make use of it; some nights, even twice.

"Try to the left of the coat check," Peter was saying.
Smile.

Smile.

It was just beyond the coat check window. The door, nearly eight feet high, was upholstered in the same red leather as the chairs and fastened at intervals with ornate gold studs. The sign was tooled on black leather in scrolled

gilt letters. LADIES. I was disappointed. I had really expected something better. Since the time I married Peter we had been to nearly every bar in the area. Few of them were as lavish as Gino's, but a lot of them had more original labels on their restrooms. At Cat's Night Out they had TOMS stencilled on one door and PUSSIES on the other. The drawings had just missed being obscene, but I had liked it.

I pushed the door open and walked in. Three of the walls were mirrors. I could watch myself approach from three different views.

"Lovely room, isn't it, dear?" said a voice from my left.

I hadn't heard the woman approach. The thick carpet must extend into the inner room where the stalls are too, I decided. That made up somewhat for the disappointment over the sign.

"Yes, it is," I replied.

I took out my comb and began to unpin my hair. The other woman sat down on the bench along the vanity shelf and began to re-enamel her fingernails.

"You've got lovely hair, dear," she said to me. "Is it natural?"

She was watching me in the mirror, her nail brush poised above her pinky finger.

"You mean the color?" I asked.

"Well, all of it, I guess," she said. "It's not a wig, is it?"

"No. All of it's natural, even the color."

"I thought so," she said. "It just doesn't look like

a wig."

There was something odd about her. Aside from her extreme cheerfulness there was something unnatural in her appearance. She was tall for a woman, perhaps six inches taller than myself. I guessed her age at about fifty. She wasn't pretty but she was an attractive woman and though she wore a lot of make-up, it was skillfully applied. She was, as Ruth would phrase it, aging gracefully.

I smiled at her in the mirror.

"Is yours real?" I asked.

"My hair? Well, I'll tell you, dear, it is my own hair, of course, heaven knows I've always had plenty. But the color! Such a mouse-brown drab, dear, I couldn't stand it. And then it started to go grey. Well, that was it. Marian, I said to myself, it's time. Do you like the color?"

"It's very attractive on you," I said.

"I wasn't sure about a reddish tint, you know. But Anton, he's my dresser, he said it would be just the thing. And if you can't trust your dresser, dear, who can you trust?"

Marian patted the curls that trailed carefully along her neck.

"Anton chose the style, too."

"He was right on both decisions," I told her.

"Well, thank you, dear."

Marian seemed genuinely pleased. She turned from the mirror and smiled at the real me instead of at my reflection.

I returned her smile and then twisting my hair into its usual coil, I pinned it back into place. I fixed my collar

where it had curled and slipped my comb into my purse. When I turned to go Marian stopped me.

"I say, dear, could you do me a big favor?"

"What's that?"

I turned toward her and Marian stood up, still holding her fingers spread until the enamel could dry.

"It's just these terrible titties," she said. "I'm not totally finished yet, and I still have to wear these dreadful falsies. They simply won't stay in place and it's absolutely embarrassing to have them sagging like this. Do you think you could help me adjust them?"

My eyes dropped to Marian's breasts and for the first time I noticed that one started about three inches lower than the other. I noticed too, how broad her shoulders were, and how large her hands were, despite their pink tipped fingernails.

"I guess I could," I said.

Marian was watching me closely.

"It's all right if you'd rather not, dear," she said quietly.

My eyes met hers. They were green with wide, dark lashes, like Scarlett O'Hara's, like Vivian Leigh's.

"I'd be happy to," I said finally.

When I left, I walked back down the opposite end of the hall. I saw that the sign on the men's room read, LORDS.

The phone rang at exactly eleven minutes past four, two hours and one minute since we'd left Gin's. I reached for it quickly so that it would not wake Peter.

"Hello?" I said softly.

"Mrs. Makrianis?" His voice was familiar but I couldn't quite place it.

"Yes?"

"I'm really sorry to bother you this late. This is Sergeant Cummings at the precinct seven station."

I remembered him then, a nice cop, maybe fifty or so. He had been one of the first to call about Julie.

"Is it Julie again?"

"Yes, m'am. Our men found her over on Forest Street, throwing eggs at streetlamps."

"Are you holding her?" I asked.

"Oh, no, m'am! That is, we are, but just until someone can come down to the station and get her."

"I see. It'll take me at least half an hour to get downtown," I told him.

"That'd be fine, m'am. Could you bring her some clothes too, Mrs. Makrianis? She says that she lost her own, and she won't wear the ones we give her."

"Did she mention the half frozen Eskimo at all?" I asked.

I was trying hard not to laugh. I hoped he couldn't

sense my smile across the phone.

"Not this time, m'am."

I tried to sigh convincingly.

"I am sorry, Sergeant. I'll be right over to get her."

"We'd appreciate it very much, m'am."

I didn't doubt that he would.

"Of course," I said, trying to sound matronly.

Cummings sounded relieved. I replaced the receiver and slipped out of bed, making as little noise as I could.

"Laura," mumbled Peter, "What's the matter, Laura?"

"Nothing," I told him. "Go back to sleep."

"Where are you going?"

"To get Julie."

"Goddam crazy bitch," he muttered. "Where is she this time?"

"The police have her downtown."

"Why the hell don't they call Ruth instead of calling here? She's not our responsibility."

I didn't answer.

"Why doesn't Ruth have her put away?"

It was another scene that repeated itself too often for my liking. I still didn't answer. I found slacks and a shirt for Julie and pulled on my old jeans and a sweater.

"Don't take the Audi," Peter said, turning back into his pillow, "And for chrissake, don't bring her over here."

I backed the Plymouth out of the garage and thought of the first time that I had gone to get Julie. They had called just after two o'clock. It was a Thursday, but Ruth was out

with one of the salesmen from her office. It hadn't been Sergeant Cummings that night, but the officer had been equally at a loss for words to explain, and embarrassed also. Julie had been sitting nude in the middle of a bridge in Bayside with some fantastic tale about a poor Eskimo who had forced her to give him her clothes, she said. She said he had told her that his children were freezing. When they questioned her, she burst into tears.

"I only know what he told me," she wailed. "He was a sad man."

The policeman had gone over and over Julie's story.

"Was he tall or short?" he asked her for the third time.

"I told you, he was medium."

"Fat or thin?"

"Medium."

"How was he dressed?"

"In one of those parka jackets with the fur around the hood."

"Isn't it a little warm tonight to wear one of those?"

"I don't know. I've never worn one," Julie said.

"What was his complexion like?"

"Clear. No zits."

"Fair or dark?"

"Medium. But his eyes were slanted."

"And he was sad?"

"Very sad. Do you think I should file a complaint against him?"

She stayed consistent in all the details of her story.

The officer finally sent her to wait in the outer office.

"Your mother isn't home?"

"She had a date tonight," I told him.

"I see. And your father?"

"They're divorced. Julie and I haven't seen him since we were children."

He was making notations in his report book.

"Julie told me earlier that she talks with her father a lot."

I tried to corroborate Julie's story so far, but this was a direct conflict.

"If she talks to him, he probably doesn't answer," I offered finally.

"I see. Has Julie ever undergone psychiatric treatment?"

"No."

He was writing in his report book again. I looked at the clock. It was already past three.

"How old are you, Laura?"

"Sixteen."

"You go to high school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got classes in the morning, I'll bet."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Laura, I can't turn Julie over to you because you're a minor, so I guess you can leave now. We'll keep Julie here until your mother gets home."

"She may not be back tonight, sir," I said.

"What's this?"

I pushed my hair out of my eyes and tried to look burdened with responsibility, old for my years. I let my eyes get misty like when Julie and I had practiced crying until we could cry whenever we wanted to.

"My mother has a date, sir. She doesn't always get home from a date the same night."

I could see his face harden against Ruth.

"I see," he said.

Ruth would have beaten us both for telling him that, even if it was the truth.

"Julie was supposed to be staying with a friend from school, tonight," I lied. "Usually I can handle her."

He hesitated and then made another notation in his book.

"Laura, you can take Julie home," he said. "But I'd like your mother to call us tomorrow, as soon as she gets home."

I nodded, but even then I had decided not to tell Ruth about it until Saturday.

"Goodnight, sir, and (pause) thank you."

Smile.

Julie was sitting on an high wooden bench dangling her bare feet. She was wrapped in a grey wool blanket. On the opposite end of the bench sat a policewoman. As I came in, Julie looked up at me and I noticed again the emptiness that stared out from her pale blue eyes. It was the first thing that anyone noticed about my sister, those wide, vacant eyes that didn't quite look human. It was never the only thing

that they remembered about her.

"Laurie," she said, "They took my clothes. They took my clothes and then bang bang bang, just like that. Banged me up just fine."

"Who did, Julie?"

"The cops, those dirty filthy pigs."

From behind me I could hear Sergeant Cummings choke.

"Now, Julie, you know that's not true! You know how she is, Mrs. Makrianis."

"Yes, I know," I said.

I looked at Cummings and saw that his face was red almost to the point of being purple.

Smile, but sadly.

"I'm so sorry you had to put up with all of this, Sergeant, and grateful that you did."

"Ah, well...I understand, I guess," he said. "But can't they do anything with her? Not even for her own safety?"

"I'm not crazy," Julie said. "I'm certified sane."

It was true. Doctors had found her mentally disturbed, but not insane. When I told Ruth about the first incident, Julie had rocked back and forth on the sofa, refusing to talk. Ruth had gone to the station for her conference, and as a result Julie had been sent to a psychiatric clinic for the first time. Ruth told me calmly that mental institutions were so disturbing to her she refused ever to be near one and that I had to drive Julie to the clinic. I took her the next week. Since then, Julie had been in and out of therapy. The most recent instance was until only a month ago.

They kept her for six months that time before sending her back to live with Ruth.

Watching my sister as she sat on the bench, I wondered just how "disturbed" Julie really was. She could act normal when she was with me, yet refuse to talk when Ruth entered the room. Or she would shout obscene phrases, which bothered Ruth even more.

Judging her through Ruth's eyes, I saw that she was crazy, but through my own I couldn't judge. I handed her the clothes.

"I can't wear those," said Julie. "They're not mine."

"Then I'll give them to you."

"We do not accept charity," said Julie severely. "We have our pride."

I could hear Ruth saying the same words in the same voice. I tried not to smile.

"Don't you want them?" I asked her.

"I can't have them. I'd have to pay."

"I'll trade them for your blanket," I told her finally.

"Now put them on."

Julie stood up and dropped her blanket to the floor. She stood there, naked and smiling.

"Where is the ladies' room?" she asked. "I need privacy to get dressed."

Cummings was purple again.

"Officer Brown, please escort this young lady down the hall. Quickly, if you please."

"Yes, sir," said the policewoman.

"Don't worry, big balls," Julie told him as he left,

"I'll name the baby after you."

It was nearly 5:30 by the time we left the station. I wasn't exactly sure just where we were going. Peter would be furious if he woke to find her at our place. He would order her to leave, Julie would scream insults back at him and then accuse me of no longer loving her. Love is a strange word to use in dealing with my family. I don't know that any of us could define it through experience.

But in the end, Julie would be gone, leaving Peter and myself to a week or more of silence in that already silent house.

Ruth's apartment could offer nothing better. If I waited until Ruth had gone to work and then dropped Julie off there, Ruth would never know about tonight's incident. But there was a good chance too that Julie would violently oppose being taken to Ruth's.

I glanced over at Julie. She hadn't said anything since we started. She just leaned her head along the glass and watched out the side window. Bright fluorescence from the streetlights overhead flashed along her face, crossing it momentarily with patterned shadows. In my old clothes she could almost have been me seven or eight years ago. Before Peter at any rate. Our hair was the same blonde, Julie's still worn long and free as mine had been then.

Our faces could be the same except for the eyes. There was not peace in those pale blue eyes of Julie's, yet no sense of life either. They were restless, looking from

one thing to another with the same vague expression. It was eerie, almost as if Julie saw things that others looking in the same place could not, as if she listened to conversations that others couldn't hear. Sometimes it unnerved even me.

I looked at my own eyes in the rear view mirror. They looked back at me calmly, dark blue and sensible. There were no hidden things in my eyes, no vague dreams or visions, no voices and no ghosts. I was Mrs. Peter Makrianis, no more, no less. It was a constant role, meant to be satisfying and fulfilling. This was the happy ever after, the end.

The face in the mirror kept watching me. It could have been the face of anyone, I could hardly recognize it as my own.

"Laura!" screamed Julie.

I looked up and saw a tree centered in the windshield. I braked hard, wrenching the wheel to the left with both of my hands. There was a lurch as the front wheels went up over the curbing and then we were smashing broadside through the bushes. The car came to a stop almost entirely across the median. One of the front wheels was already over the curb in the opposite lane.

Somewhere, someone was screaming. I opened my eyes. My forehead was against the steering wheel, my hands still gripped tightly along its sides. I sat up and looked for Julie. She was slumped against the door, her head hung forward, her eyes shut.

"Julie!"

I grabbed at her shoulder.

"Julie, are you O.K.?"

Her eyes opened slowly. She seemed groggy, groping with her eyes to orient herself. She sat up and looked at me, and then slid back down along the seat.

"I'm O.K.," she said, closing her eyes again, and then "My God, Laura."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

Suddenly I, too, had an overwhelming desire just to lay back on the car seat and sleep. The engine was still running. I leaned over and shut it off, then closed my eyes and leaned my head along the back of the seat. My whole body felt tired, I doubted if I could even lift my arms. I let my mind drift, thinking of nothing, just watching the swirls of color that moved slowly across my eyelids. Julie's voice finally brought me back.

"You never could drive worth a shit, Laura."

"I know."

I opened my eyes for the second time. Julie was sitting upright, looking out the window.

"I think we should move the car, Laura," she said conversationally. "Traffic is starting to pick up and we're sort of in the lane."

"What?"

"We have to move the car."

"Of course," I said, trying to get myself together, enough to figure out how to do it.

Julie turned to look out the back window and as I watched,

her face convulsed with laughter.

"We can't go back that way that's for sure," she laughed. "God's balls, Laura! Did you see where we've been?"

I looked around. Behind the car was an erratic trail of broken branches and torn bushes. We had gone through one row of shrubs completely, swerved dramatically to avoid the tree, and ended in the middle of another row of bushes.

I was almost laughing too. It was a landscaping disaster.

"Looks like an elephant went berserk," Julie was saying.

"It's a better job than most," I admitted. "Do you think it's safe to start the car?"

"I don't know," Julie said. "Maybe we should get out and look."

There wasn't any obvious damage except for the right side of the front bumper and some dents and scratches along the fenders. Julie waited beside the car while I started the engine.

"Leave your door open so that I can get you out if it explodes," she called.

"Do you think it will?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

I turned the key carefully and there was no explosion. After a little pumping the car started. Julie motioned me toward the highway and with a terrible grinding noise the back wheels struggled over the curb. Julie jumped in, slamming her door, and we started down the highway, driving very slowly, heading north this time instead of south.

"Where're we going?" Julie asked me after a few miles.

"I don't know."

"How about the shore?"

She pointed to the exit sign. I eased over into the exit lane and we curved off toward the lake. The car was running a little rough, but it didn't seem to have been greatly damaged. All the same, I decided that I had better take it to the garage before Peter got home today. If I paid in cash, I probably wouldn't even have to mention it to him and if I took it to a shop other than our usual mechanics, there was a good chance that he'd never find out.

Peter doesn't make mistakes, and he has no patience with people who do. So we were driving around in the early morning to avoid him. Though I was tired again and felt myself growing more reluctant to drive, we went further. Julie was silent, watching the scenery pass by the side window. There was a sign for the park at the next exit. I turned off and finally we were free of the highway.

I was sitting on the old stone bench, looking out across the pier. Julie sat on the ground in front of me, her head resting on my knees. The sun was barely over the horizon, just an edge, creeping upward, slowly spreading gold across the pink and purple sky. I fingered Julie's hair--it was as gold as the sun.

"It's going to be a good day, Julie."

"Think so?"

"I think so."

"There used to be a lot of them", she said. "You know? When we were kids."

"I know," I said.

"But now you're married."

She paused.

"And I'm crazy," she finished abruptly.

The chill was lifting from the air, I could feel it going in degrees as the sky lightened. I lifted a strand of Julie's hair so that it caught gold in the sun.

"It's the same thing, Julie," I said.

"What?"

Julie looked up at me and I felt old, old as if I were our grandmother, wizened and white haired as I imagined her, rocking wisely in her favorite chair.

"Well, isn't it?" I said.

Julie was looking at me, searching with those pale blue eyes.

"Isn't it?" I repeated.

"Maybe it is," Julie said finally.

She settled back against my knees again. We waited until the sun was in full view and the factory whistle sounded, low and mournful over the bay. In another half hour Peter would be gone to work. Then we could go home.

The weeds were growing up again. Determined little plants, they pushed their way through the black dirt, creeping constantly nearer the petunias. I have often wondered who decided that some flowers are acceptable and that some are weeds; it doesn't seem fair that the sturdiest plants, the plants that would win out if left up to nature, are the plants that man decides must go. They try so hard to live that sometimes I feel guilty for pulling them. But that's what I was doing, on my hands and knees, pulling the weeds in the side garden.

I had planted hybrid petunias in along the side of the house. They were evenly spaced, in uniform rows. Watered well and weeded, I even kept all the brown, shrivelled blossoms picked off. But without me, the weeds would have won.

Beyond the city limits there are fields of flowers, growing wild. Julie and I found them one day. She had exclaimed over them, making me stop my bike too so that we could run through the mud lilies, throwing ourselves into them, and picking a huge bouquet to take home.

Ruth had refused to let us display them on the table. She insisted that we keep them in our bedroom or not at all. I can remember waking slowly on a summer morning, the first

thing visible was sunlight exploding along the orange lilies.

I sat back on my heels and looked at the pile of weeds in front of me. They would all have turned into flowers if I had let them grow. I have considered planting a wildflower garden and I still smile to think what Peter's reaction would be. If I planted it in back where it wasn't too obvious he'd only ridicule me and try verbally to make me turn it under. If I planted them in the front beds though, the beds that border the whole length of the front drive, he'd be out there himself as soon as he realized it, cursing at me and muttering as he shovelled them under. I think the sight of Peter with the shovel might almost be worth the effort that I would spend in planting them.

I started to pull again, this time it was the second bed, the one planted with the deep, velvety purple flowers. I looked up at the sound of a car horn and saw Ruth's powder blue Chrysler pulling into the drive. My gardening was over for the morning.

Ruth was waiting for me in the kitchen. She was wearing a sporty navy blue suit and sensible blue shoes. Here and there was a fashionable touch of red. I had never seen her look anything but perfectly groomed. She left her bedroom in the morning completely dressed, her blonde hair wound smoothly in a coil, her makeup carefully casual.

My own hair was hanging in damp strands along my face. I started to push it back and realized that I still had my gloves on. I pulled them off and brushed the dirt from my

pants.

"Good morning, Mother."

"You're a mess, Laura," she began. "Why don't you and Peter hire one of the youngsters in the neighborhood to take care of the lawn? Certainly Peter makes enough that you can afford to."

Ruth never stopped mentioning that I had done well financially by marrying Peter.

"I guess you could say that they met because of me," Ruth would say, smiling to her business acquaintances who already knew Peter. "Indirectly, though," she would add.

Peter's car had rammed into the back of Ruth's as I waited in the parking lot to pick her up from work. He apologized profusely and offered to settle the costs out of court. He was in a hurry. He said that he had an appointment in a few minutes. I didn't know what to tell him. I'd never been in an accident before, and besides the car was in Ruth's name. I told him that it was my mother's car, and he said he'd call her the next day to talk about it. He gave me his card and asked for Ruth's name and number which he wrote in his notebook.

"And what's your name," he asked. "I can't let the opportunity to meet such a pretty girl, go by."

He was lying. Any mirror can prove I am not pretty, but Peter has a beautiful smile when he uses it. It was turned on full for me that day, and I knew my cheeks were pink.

"I'm Laura," I told him, "Laura Sheridan."

He called the next day and talked to Ruth. She had been angry with me when she saw the damaged bumper, but while she talked to Peter, I noticed that she laughed a lot. She invited him over for dinner to talk about the settlement and I realized that I had finally met someone who could charm my mother.

"He owns a dry cleaners just down from the office," she said when she hung up the phone. "I know who he is."

"Really, you are disgustingly dirty," Ruth was saying.

"I like to get dirty," I told her. "It feels vulgar."

I knew Ruth would grimace at that one, deep in her soul, though never on the visible surface.

"There's a streak of dirt on your nose, Laura," she said.

She was obsessed with filth. I rubbed at my nose with the back of my hand.

"Better?" I asked.

"No," said Ruth.

I wetted a paper towel and dabbed at my nose, trying to see the offensive smudge in the chrome of the coffee pot.

Ruth had been excited when Peter told her that we were getting married. Her cheeks had flushed with excitement and she had actually hugged him.

"You'll be happy, I'm sure," she said to me over his shoulder. "Not like some."

Not like me with that lousy bastard, your father. She didn't really say it in those words, but I knew that the thought was there. My father left on the morning of my eighth birthday. He took his trumpet instead of his briefcase and caught a plane to Jamaica instead of the 8:15 express. On his way out the door he had kissed myself and little Julie. We hadn't seen him since and Ruth had long ago stopped mentioning his name.

"Where's Julie, Laura?"

Ruth wasn't wasting any words today. There was no subtle build-up, none of the sweetness and smiles that she radiated when there were others present. I was just family now, there was no need to be gracious.

"Julie?" I asked carefully. "I don't know. I haven't seen her in a couple of weeks."

"You knew that she left? That she took all her things and left?"

And some of yours too, I'll bet.

"I knew that she was thinking about it," I said. I tried to sound light. "How's my nose now?"

"You encouraged her to leave."

"She's of age, Ruth. She's old enough legally to decide."

"She isn't capable to decide! You know her, Laura! You know the trouble she's had yet you still encourage her toward more!"

Ruth was almost yelling. It was a Ruth that few people ever saw. I should have appreciated such a rare performance.

"Where is she Laura?" The anguished lover, beseeching.

It used to be hard to lie to Ruth. As children we recognized something in her eyes that could see through any attempted lie, something that made us certain we'd suffer for the telling.

"The eye of Shiva," Julie had whispered once. "It's the evil eye, Laura."

But Julie had fallen victim to it's omniscience more times than myself. I looked down at my shoes. There was mud caked all along the soles.

Filth.

"I don't know where she is," I lied deliberately. "Really, Ruth, I don't know."

I didn't know if Ruth believed me or not. It didn't matter anymore though. Somewhere between Ruth's arguments with Julie and my own words with Peter, I had stopped being afraid of my mother.

"Would you like some coffee, Ruth?"

"No thanks, dear, I really have to be going."

She was back together again. Her plaster public mask was hardened into place again.

"You're sure you don't know where she is?"

I nodded.

"Well, good-bye then," Ruth sighed.

She kissed my cheek, a dutiful peck, and let herself out the door.

When the Chrysler was gone from view I turned from the

window and went back to the kitchen and mixed myself a large gin and tonic. Taking it with me, I went upstairs to the bathroom.

There are three bathrooms in the house, this one is just off the master bedroom. There is another leading from the guest room, and the third one is downstairs, near the kitchen. This one is my favorite room in the whole house. Peter had let me decorate it entirely to my own taste. It has old fashioned fixtures, a large rounded white tub that stands on ornate legs with clawed feet, an equally quaint sink, and a European toilet with a long pull suspended from the ceiling that you pull to flush. They had tiled the floor with patterned white tiles. The walls were done in lavender, trimmed with the same white.

I had bought an old cheval mirror at an auction to stand along one wall. Everywhere else possible, I had put plants. They hung trailing green and overflowing from huge pots along the skylight. A large palm stood in one corner, a dragontree in the other.

The room was mine entirely. When it was finished, Peter had declined to use the room.

"I'd be embarrassed to take a piss in the middle of all that," he admitted.

We had laughed over it and then the decorator had fixed the second bathroom to Peter's liking. He never used mine, nor did I use his. All the same, I locked the door behind me.

I sat my drink on the soap stand and started the bath water. It was almost a ritual now. I looked forward to each afternoon when for an hour or so I could submerge myself in the warm, scented water and pretend that Ruth didn't exist, that I had never met Peter, or sometimes that I was not even Laura at all.

I lowered the curtains along the window and taking the matches from the drawer, I lit the tall candle that I kept by the mirror.

My reflection in the mirror was softer now. She slipped the pins from her hair one by one until it hung loose around her shoulders. She smiled at her reflection and slowly began to unbutton her shirt. Her breasts were full and rounded, still firm, still young. She moved her hands along them, gently cupping them in her hands.

Michel had held her like that. She could remember his hands, brown and strong with their calloused palms. She let her hands slide along her stomach to unfasten the zipper, and stepped easily out of the pants, enjoying the smoothness as they slipped along her thighs.

It was the real Laura who looked back at me, naked. It was the real Laura who slipped into the softness of the bath and closed her eyes to remember.

It was in the spring of her senior year that she went to Quebec. There were twenty students altogether, living with French-Canadian families, attempting to master the French language in three months. In June, when the others left, Laura stayed on. Mme. Arnaud invited her to stay for

the summer, to help with the cooking and with the children. Laura settled happily into the routine until halfway through June when Michel Arnaud came home from the university.

He was sleeping, his back toward her. Sweat lay in beads along his shoulders and she traced it down his back with her finger. A muscle in his shoulder twitched and he turned to face her as she had hoped.

"Laura, it's too hot."

She laughed and shifted so that they were shoulder to shoulder, but not touching.

"Some people just cannot hold a good fuck," she said conversationally. "They just can't wait until it gets dark and the air cools off."

Michel grinned and reached for her without even opening his eyes.

"You enjoyed it," he said.

"Yours is very nice, I must admit."

"Laura!" he said and then they were both laughing. "You say the damnest, you know?"

"Thank you," she said demurely.

"Bitch!" Michel burst out between laughing and gasping for air. "You think you're one up on Sally housewife, don't you?"

"Sally's making tea right now," she said. "She wouldn't dream of being in bed."

"How about under the privet hedge with the gardener?"

"Oh, no! Would she really?"

"She just might," he said, "But it isn't likely. It's not moral if they can see it you know, they have to wait until after dark."

"They?" Laura asked. "Gardeners?"

"No, idiot, Sally and her overweight cronies. They wait until it cools off, too. Only at certain temperatures and at selected times, during the night, only when the moon is right and the stars are left,..."

"Stop," she protested, her shoulders still shaking with laughter. "Michel, you're terrible."

"You're nasty and cruel to poor Sally."

"Never."

"You're nasty and cruel to me."

"Never, never."

"Then stay with me tonight, too," she said.

Michel pushed himself up on his elbow and then sat up. Laura liked to watch his back, to watch how the muscles moved across his shoulders. He had freckles on his shoulders, too. She hadn't known that at first, it wasn't something that you could guess by looking at him clothed.

"I can't stay tonight," he said. "You know that. In fact, the whole family may be back at any second."

"I could meet you somewhere," she offered.

"I am already engaged tonight."

"But with a woman?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "With a woman."

"I see," she said finally.

She started to sit up but he turned and pushed her back against the pillows.

"Smile when you said that," he ordered in mock seriousness.

She made a smile.

"Better than that."

She grimaced this time, pulling on the corners of her mouth with her fingers so that her teeth showed to the gums.

"I never made any promises," he reminded her.

"You never did," she agreed, "And there aren't any rules to this game."

"No rules at all."

He leaned over to kiss her and she pulled him down to her.

"No rules," she reminded him with a grin.

Michel smiled too and eased his hard body along hers.

"My parents will be back by six," he said.

"You've still got a couple of hours."

"I guess I do," he admitted. His hand moved slowly along her thigh, seeking the softness, moving inward. "A couple of hours," he mumbled into her breasts.

"Laura!"

Peter's voice cut through my thoughts. I could hear his footsteps pounding up the stairs and then a rattle as he tried the door.

"Laura, are you in there?"

"I'm bathing," I called back.

"Well listen, I've got to go to Cincinnati for the weekend

and my plane leaves in an hour. We have a chance to open a store there--just cleaning, no tuxs."

"I'll be out in a minute," I called.

"I've got to pack," he said and I could hear his footsteps heading off into the bedroom.

It was only Thursday. That meant Friday, Saturday and Sunday without Peter. I towelled quickly and blew out the candle. My hair was still loose but I decided not to bother pinning it until Peter had gone. When I opened the door he was bent over the bureau drawer, tossing socks in a pile on the bed. He was whistling.

"You're in a good mood."

"A store there could do real well for us," he said.

"Have you seen my blue plaid socks, Laura?"

"Socks are in the second drawer," I told him.

"Is that how it works? Laura, sometimes you still amaze me."

He looked around, smiling and I saw his eyes widen as he caught sight of me.

"You haven't worn your hair like that for a long time," he said.

"I was all set to wash it," I said. "But I figured I'd better come out and kiss you good-bye first."

I leaned over and kissed him lightly. He tasted of whiskey.

"Have a good trip, Peter."

I meant it to be a quick gesture, but he didn't let me go.

"Is that all?"

"What do you mean?"

He was holding me so tightly that it hurt.

"You're my wife, Laura," he said. "Can't you show a little more feeling than that?"

He was more drunk than I thought.

"You're hurting me, Peter," I said.

"I don't care if I break you," he said suddenly, pushing me down to the bed.

His hand was tangled in my hair, pulling my head back so that I had to look at him. His face watched me with a strange expression.

"You hate me, don't you," he said.

"Sometimes," I admitted.

"Now?" he asked.

"No, not now."

It was the truth and he seemed to accept it. He was gentler then, slipping the robe from my shoulders while I unfastened his belt. A few minutes later he was gone, racing to make his plane. I started the water for another bath.

I parked the Audi in the lot at Casey's Drugs on the corner. I could have parked directly in front of the apartment building, but that would involve at least half an hour's time in parallel parking. I probably wouldn't have change for the meter either.

"You're definitely better off in out of the way places," Peter had told me once after I spent nearly an hour trying to get out of a parking space in front of Haven's Department Store.

I leaned over to lock the door and realized that I was following Peter's instructions again, even though he wasn't here. I unlocked the door, then changed my mind again and slammed the lock down once more. I got out and locked the other door as well. Then embarrassed at my own indecision, I hurried across the lot without looking up.

Number sixty-four Stanton Street was a large brick building. Julie was staying with "an exceptional friend" in the number ten apartment. The name on ten's mailbox was Vincente. I started up the worn wooden steps, squeaking a little on each step and actually groaning on the landings. The walls were either dirty green or grey, I couldn't tell for sure in the dim light. The whole place smelled of mildew and rot.

I found number ten on the third floor. The ceilings here were lower, but the hallway was bright from the sunlight streaming through a large oval window. I discovered that

the walls were actually green.

I knocked and waited to hear footsteps behind the door. There were none, and I knocked again. The door was thrown open so suddenly that it startled me and Julie stood there wearing only a man's blue robe.

"Laura!" she cried and threw herself into my arms. "Laura, Come in!" and turning back she yelled, "Arno! Hey, Arno! Laura's here! It's my sister!"

Arno emerged from behind a bead curtain with no little amount of clattering, still carrying a dripping spoon. He had a flowered apron tied around his jeans.

"Hello!" he cried and shook my hand vigorously. "Hello! Do you like omelets?"

I felt obliged to yell also.

"Yes," I said loudly, "I love them!"

"Two minutes more then!" yelled Arno as he ran back to the kitchen. The curtain rattled closed behind him.

"Isn't he marvelous?" said Julie.

"Marvelous," I agreed looking around the apartment.

The whole place was painted bright yellow and trimmed with purple and red enamel. Everywhere I looked there was a painting. They were hung on all the available wall space and were propped two and three canvases deep along the floor. An easel was set up in one corner, the canvas on it, covered.

Julie sat on the rumpled sheets of the unmade sofa bed.

"You like it?"

"I like it," I told her. "Whose paintings?"

"Arno's, of course. He's very good, I think," she said.

"He's doing one of me now, but no one, no one at all can see it yet. Not even me."

"He does a lot of nudes," I noted.

"He's fascinated with the body," Julie said, a little smugly. He really likes mine."

"Does he?"

"He treats me well," she said evenly, watching my eyes.

"Then it's good," I said.

"Yes, it's good."

Arno dashed through the curtain again, this time balancing a platter of omelets in one hand and three glasses in the other.

"Bloody Mary's too!" he announced.

Julie went to find forks and the three of us sat cross-legged on the sofa to eat.

"Do you sell much of your work, Arno?" I asked him.

"Not too many," he said between bites. He shrugged, his fork in mid-air dripping egg and cheese. "I am not too popular yet, you know?"

I nodded, my mouth full of omelet.

"So it goes!" cried Arno.

"So it goes!" chorused Julie, holding up her drink.

"So it goes," I echoed.

I was beginning to get a headache. The yellow and red was beginning to melt into a sickening conglomerate along the wall. I looked out the window to avoid it.

"It's a nice day," I said.

"It's a market day," said Julie. "With these eggs we

have eaten the last of the food. Amen. So it is market day. We never know when it will be, so it's always exciting! True?"

"True!" answered Arno.

They were beginning to sound like parrots in a game of parrot talk.

"Should we?"

"Shouldn't we?"

"Would we?"

"Wouldn't we?"

"Could we?"

"Couldn't we?"

Ha ha ha ha.

Laugh.

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"Let's."

"Would you like to come with us to the market?" asked Julie.

"Could you come with us?" asked Arno. "You could give us a ride in your car."

"I'll give you a ride," I said. "But I don't think I'll go with you. Can you get back?"

"Sure," said Arno. "Usually we take the underground anyway. It's not too far."

"It's far enough," said Julie.

I could see nothing but yellow and purple with violent dashes of red. The omelet began to turn in my stomach and

I shut my eyes.

"Let's go then," I said, trying still to sound cheerful.

Arno grabbed the dishes once more and headed back toward the kitchen. Julie dropped her robe to the floor and quickly pulled on her jeans and a shirt. When Arno returned he had exchanged his apron for a squashy little orange hat.

"Ready!" he cried, opening the door.

"Ready!" echoed Julie.

I had one more glimpse of the yellow and red and then we were in the hall. The stairwell was so dim after the apartment that I had to hold on to the railing until my eyes adjusted. Julie and Arno ran down both flights, shrieking and were waiting for me by the door. Arno made a little bow and opened the door for us. Julie stood aside for me to leave first, and then followed me solemnly, herself followed by Arno.

"Amen," he said as he shut the door.

"The car's in the lot over here."

They followed me across the street and when I had unlocked the doors, I handed my keys to Arno.

"You drive," I told him. "You know the way."

I got in back and Julie and Arno took the front. Arno handled the car well and I settled back against the seat and closed my eyes. After a few minutes the swirling yellow stopped, and I felt it safe to open them again.

We were passing De Mellio's bakery. Its pink and green sign was more faded than I remembered, but it was the same.

"Julie! We aren't going to the Northside market are we?"

"We're going exactly there."

"What other market is there?" asked Arno theatrically.

"It is THE market. And in a genuine, authentic Italian ghetto. What could be better?"

"We used to live around here," I said. "Do you remember, Julie?"

Julie looked down at her feet.

"No," she said. "I don't remember it at all."

She had watched the floor when we left too. Clutching her Raggedy Ann, her tears had dripped along the doll's flowered pinafore.

"Stop that, now, Julie," Ruth said, a trifle too sharply. "Do you hear me? Stop it."

"We're going to like our new home," she continued, "Aren't we, Laura? It's a new apartment and on the third floor so you can ride the elevator up. It'll be a lot of fun, won't it, Laura?"

But I hadn't been able to answer. I felt as if I was choking. The light at the corner by De Mellio's had been red and as I watched the familiar pink and green letters, I knew that it was forever. There would be no old Mr. De Mellio with his hooked nose and white hair to beckon through the shop window on the way home from school, no more pieces of licorice or star shaped cookies to eat before dinner, so that you weren't hungry when it was time.

There was a finality in passing De Mellio's, I remembered.

There was a part of my life that I knew was over then, the part that was chestnut trees, first grade, and my father.

The wooden door to Gino's Underground swung closed heavily behind me. I stopped for a moment, blinded by the sudden darkness and then, gripping the hand I started slowly down the stairs. The pile on the carpet was so thick that I found it difficult to walk on it when I couldn't see where I was going. The lighting at the bottom was still so dim that I couldn't see my feet. I could see the hat-check girl though, framed in her cubicle of light, and an old man in a black uniform, vacuuming the carpet in the glow of light by the ladies' room.

The girl was watching me, her eyes narrow beneath their wire fringle of lashes. She was a blonde version of the same girl that had been there a few weeks ago, visible from the bust up only. She was face, arms and shoulders, casually smoking a cigarette and caught in her square of bright light so that she looked almost unreal. I half expected her to announce that she smoked her brand because she liked them, and then to fade into a football game, or the evening news. Instead she just watched me.

I started to rub my eyes and discovered that I still had my sunglasses on. Feeling foolish, I pulled them off quickly and shoved them into my purse.

I could see her laughing now, behind her eyes, but her mouth smiling only slightly. Her shiny red lipstick vibrated

before she spoke.

"You looking for someone, m'am?" she called. "Or are you just out for an afternoon lay?"

I thought I heard her say it, but I couldn't be sure so I ignored it.

"Where can I find the manager?" I asked.

"Manager isn't in."

"Can you tell me who else I could see, then, to apply for a job?"

There was a subtle change in the girl's expression, like a tiny crack in her mannequin veneer that closed over instantly again.

"We're not hiring," she said. She wasn't laughing anymore.

"There's an ad in the newspaper," I said.

"It's been filled."

"I'd like to see the manager anyway. When will he be in?"

"I told you, we're not hiring," she repeated.

"I still want to know when he'll be in!"

The girl shrugged.

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe not. They don't pay me to know everything. Why do you expect me to know everything? You think I should keep track of everybody's goings and comings? Huh? Just for nothing? Not me, I just keep track of hats and coats. You want your coat checked? No? Then leave me alone lady!"

She slammed the sliding door across her window and I heard it click sharply as she locked it. I looked at it and now that it was shut, I couldn't be sure that it had ever

been open.

Julie was always insisting that people spoke to her in the night, that fat men tried to rape her on the way home from school, that her dog had spoken to her, or an angel, that she was poor and homeless with no clothes to wear. Some of her imaginings were funny. Sometimes I have had to try hard not to laugh as I picked Julie up at the station, nude again and with a new excuse.

The stories were not always so funny to me now.

"I spoke with her," I said aloud.

"Hey, lady."

His hand on my shoulder startled me. I whirled to face him. He was a very old man dressed in a very old custodian's uniform. His eyes were pale blue and watery, the skin around them gathered in hundreds of wrinkle lines.

"Hey, lady," he said again. "You looking for Mr. Angel-glo? Mr. Angel-glo?"

"Is he the manager?"

"He's the boss, lady. He hires and fires, hires and fires."

"Yes," I said, "I'm looking for him. Do you know where he is?"

"Three doors down, that is his office, lady."

"Thank you," I said.

I turned to go but he interrupted me.

"Lady," he said, "Lady, you don't want to work here."

"What?"

"Maybe you need money," he said nodding, "Yes, we all need money, Lady."

He kept nodding as if talking to himself.

"Why shouldn't I work here?" I asked him. "What's the matter with me? First that girl and now you!"

"Her! She is a whore!"

He shook his head again, slowly rocking back and forth.

"We're all whores that work here, Lady," he said softly.

"All of us."

"You said the third door?" I repeated finally.

He nodded.

"All of us," he said again as I left.

"Excuse me," I said pushing the door open. "Is this the manager's office?"

"Yes, it is."

He was a small man impeccably dressed in a navy blue jacket and white pants. He wore white shoes as well and his neck scarf had touches of red. It was fashionable this summer, the red with navy and white. His skin was evenly tanned and smooth. I noticed traces of make-up along his collar and a hint of blue shadow on his eyelids. He was smoking a filter tipped cigar.

"I want to apply for a job," I told him.

His smile was a trifle less cordial. He rummaged through a drawer and emerged with a printed job application.

"Fill this out and bring it back to me. You can sit at the table in the employees' lounge, two doors down."

"Thank you."

Smile.

The lounge was stark. I pulled a folding chair up to

the battered wooden table. Cigarette butts and ashes overflowed onto it from the makeshift pie tin ash trays. The linoleum floor was dirty. Along one wall was a row of lockers. I wished that one of the waitresses would come in and change. I was curious to see what they looked like in street clothes, without their heavy make-up, and without their wired brassieres.

Name.

Address.

AGE.

The other waitresses as I recalled, were younger than myself, nearer to twenty than to thirty. But they might check with my driver's license. I decided not to lie.

Age--twenty-seven, almost twenty-eight.

They wanted to know my high school, my college. Was I married? Could I type? What other machines was I qualified to operate? How did I consider myself qualified? Did I ever have rheumatic fever, surgery, or other? How many words a minute could I type? Would I be willing to take a typing test?

Who knew me and could vouch for me, but was not a relative? How did this person know me since he wasn't a relative? For how long had he known me in this manner? What did he do for a living? Did I ever have pleurisy, rickets, or coldsores? How much does 1765 and 3,987,456 equal? Have I ever taken drugs? Did I plan to in the future? Did I belong to the AA? Have I ever been arrested? How often? Did it result in incarceration for myself or others?

What jobs have I held? Was I fired? Which did I like

better, television or books? Michaelangelo or Dali? If I chose Michaelangelo, please describe who or what he was or is, and why. Did I swear that this was the truth and sign here?

Amen. Praise God. Alleluia.

I took the application back to his office.

"Well, how did it go," he asked, smiling as I returned.

"Fine, I guess."

"Good."

He drawled the word, by his emphasis on it, emphasizing his doubts.

"Laura, is it? Well, let's see. You've never had a job before, Laura?"

"That's right."

"And you've been out of school for over ten years."

"Yes."

"And you've never had a job?"

"That's right."

"I see."

He paused for a moment, reading ahead.

"What did you do between school and now, Laura?"

What did you do, Laura? What did you do? What happened to you?

"I went to Quebec for a summer," I said to all of them, "then I came home and got married."

"Married?" they asked. Married?

"It says so on the application."

"Ah, yes, here it is, item 49, married."

He looked at my left hand. The diamond was nearly a

carat, it had belonged to Peter's mother.

"Children kept you busy, huh?"

"No children."

"No children?"

"That's right," I said.

"And you've never had a job?"

"No job."

"And no children?"

Only the dead ones! I wanted to yell at him. My souvenir from Canada had miscarried a week before my wedding, and Peter's son was stillborn a year later.

"I have a garden," I said.

"I see."

He droned the words automatically while lighting a fresh cigar, and I noticed his make-up again. Even his eyelashes had been darkened. It struck me suddenly that he was like a corpse, desperately painted to hide its inevitable darkening. A cold tingle moved down my back and I wanted to leave. He wasn't finished though.

"Well, ah, Laura, isn't it? Yes, Laura. We really don't have any openings right now for inexperienced help. We like our girls to be familiar with this sort of work before they ever come here. We like them to know that they like this kind of work. Being a cocktail waitress is more than a job here, it's a career. We want our girls to be used to working, to pleasing our customers so that there are never any awkward moments of adjustment, never any situation that might disturb a customer."

He paused for half a second and then plunged right in again. It sounded almost like a recording.

"We don't want girls here who will discover in a week that they don't like waitressing work. And we have a rule here, an age limit of twenty-five. We like a certain age group. Not that you aren't as good, dear. We just have a rule. We like to think that we offer the best to everyone who comes here, a happy establishment with happy customers and happy employees."

I thought of the hat-check girl, happy and polite, under 25. Whores, the old man had said, all of them, whores.

"Thank you for your time," I said politely as Ruth had conditioned me to.

"Of course," he said.

I stood up and started for the door, but his voice stopped me.

"If you don't mind my asking, though, just why did you want this job?"

"I always wanted to be a whore," I told him.

The street was still bright, but it was late afternoon sun now, not the searing white daylight savings sun that had been out at two o'clock. Store owners were rolling back their awnings for the night, and locking their doors. Flocks of short-skirted shopgirls and moustached, plaid jacketed salesmen swarmed into the street, laughing and calling good-byes across the intersection.

They all looked young to me, too young even to be younger brothers and sisters of the people that I went to school with. They separated at the corner, some of the crowd heading toward the municipal parking ramp, and the others moving toward the Brooke Street station for the underground.

I couldn't remember the last time that I had been on the subway. Julie and I used to take it every Saturday when we were in grade school. We paid fifteen cents then to ride around the city all day, eating warm cashews and spraying ourselves with the coin perfume dispensers at each restroom where we stopped. We always came home, sick from too many nuts and reeking of at least ten different scents. We were always late enough, too, that Ruth would be gone for the evening. She would leave a note for us to fix ourselves dinner and not to mess up the apartment, signed dutifully with love. If she was feeling particularly dutiful, she would buy us T.V. dinners or a frozen pizza and two cans of Coke apiece.

It was always late Sunday before Ruth got back, so Julie and I would have plenty of time to clean the debris and air out the cigarette smoke before she returned. Ruth never talked about the men she went out with, and we never asked her about them.

"She's a whore," Julie had whispered when she learned what the word meant. "Whore!"

I turned toward the subway station and was caught up in the pushing crowd. I moved with them, down the stairs, and then pushed my way through them toward the flower shop. These shops beneath the street were always run by old women. They always had chrysanthemums and roses, and only sometimes tulips and daffodils. The shops sold newspapers, too, and coffee or lemonade in plastic cups, and cigarettes. The old women wrapped the flowers in yesterday's news. They were always the same, toothless and smiling with their tight permanented white curls and hairnets.

"There you go, dear. Ain't they nice posies? Two dollars and fifty, please."

I paid her and hugged my news-wrapped roses close as I tried to cross over to the car. The cars were filled by then and the doors banged shut before I got there. The train pulled away and I walked down to the bench at the next stop.

My diamond sparkled under the station lights but the light that it reflected was a wierd green instead of the pure fire it should have been.

Why do you want this job, the manager asked.

Whores, said the old man. All of us are whores.

But why do you want this job?

I pulled at my rings, forcing them off my hand, twisting until they came free over my knuckle. I dropped them into my purse just as another train entered the station. It pulled up with a screeching of brakes and a shower of blue sparks.

Bayside. It didn't really matter where I went, since

I'd have to come back anyway, so I took it. I found a seat next to the window and the car started off with a terrific lurch.

As we gained speed, I watched my face reflected in murky yellow light on the window glass. An advertisement for Camel cigarettes passed through my forehead and then flew by. A bearded face was reflected next to mine. He wore heavy black-rimmed glasses and his head bent closely over a book. I tried to see what book it was that he was reading, but it was impossible to tell in the reflection.

The lights were flashing through my face for the next stop, amber and then green. Drink Pepsi, I could read along the station wall. Shelburne Station was exactly like Brooke Street, the vendors, the advertisements, the benches. People pushed to get on the car while others pushed to get off. The young man next to me kept reading. His shirt had something lettered across it, and an emblem in the center. It probably said Trenton College and he was probably reading philosophy. He looked a little as if he could be Jewish with his wild, dark hair and scraggly beard.

Another stop passed by and then we were traveling in darkness for a while. There were no ads in this part of the underground, just an occasional electric green filament lamp, glowing wierdly through the tinted window. Sometimes when we passed close by them, I could see the rough wooden beams that have buttressed the subway for nearly a hundred years. They must be rotting by now, they must have rotted in so

many damp and dank years buried under the ground.

I've seen people rot too when they're buried, standing politely in the dirt. In all appearances they're still holding up their lives, but inside they've rotted through to musty mold. If they rotted and then died of it, it was good because no one would ever know. If they rotted obviously, but silently, it was acceptable. But if they screamed and lamented as they decayed, it was unpleasant for the world to watch, or it was disgusting, or it was insane. You have to smile when you drink Pepsi though your teeth rot to black cores from it.

"Amen!" cried the young man beside me, slamming his book closed.

Not philosophy, but the Bible, I thought.

"An excellent book," he said, his teeth gleaming through an opening in his beard. He held the book up for me to see.

"Women in Love," he told me.

"I've never heard of it."

"Really?" He sounded shocked. "This is one of the greats," he said. "An early bit of kinkiness."

"I've never read it," I told him again.

"You simply have to," he said, jumping out of his seat.

"Is this the Waterford stop?"

I looked out. The station looked the same as all the other stations.

"I guess so," I said.

"I've got to go," he said, grabbing his jacket. "Look, it's only a secondhand paperback. I'll give it to you if you

promise to read it."

He held the book out to me. His eyes were brown, I noticed.

"I'd like to read it," I said, taking the book. "Thank you."

"Sure thing!" he said cheerily.

He turned to go but I stopped him.

"Here," I said and thrust the paperwrapped flowers at him. "I'll trade you. Hurry now, or you'll miss your stop."

He made a dash for the door and leapt to the ground. I watched through the window as he unfolded the newspaper cone and discovered the roses. The car started up again then, and he turned to wave frantically as we started. I waved back and then he was gone into the crowd of faces. He wasn't wearing a college shirt afterall, I had seen. The emblem was a stylized fetus and the slogan said, "Trojans Never Fail".

Bayside was the last stop on the run. I got out holding my copy of Women in Love. There were hardly any people in this station at all. I saw three nuns, moving silently with bowed heads, an old man and his wife, and a young boy with a tennis racket. They all moved quickly away to wherever they were going and I was alone in the station. I walked slowly across it, listening to my own footsteps echoing along the pavement.

"Over forty percent of all muggings occur just after dark in the subway," said Miss Simons' raspy smoker's voice.

Fourth grade.

Fifty percent of all the suicides in this area too, I learned later. I crossed the metal footbridge that rose over the wires and started up the stairs.

It was beginning to get dark. A dusty haze was settling on all the buildings. I could feel the moisture heavy in the air that blew in from across the bay. A fog horn sounded twice and as I watched, all of the street lights lit in unison. I guessed that it must be nearly 9:00; I was getting hungry.

I had watched the sun go down in a perfect circle of red along the water, and watched the trees turn into silhouettes.

And God made the night.

And it was good.

It was still Friday, Friday night--the social event of the working class, the same as any other night to those whose days were always the same. On Friday nights, Peter and I often had dinner with another couple, at their home or at ours. It was always an early night because Peter played golf every Saturday morning at seven. He would miss tomorrow's game, I recalled, and I wondered if he would wake up suddenly and leap out of his hotel bed before he realized that the golf course was at least four hours away, by plane.

Or maybe he didn't wake up alone on his trips. There are hundreds of them waiting in Cincinnati bars too, I knew. Hundreds of whores.

My stomach was rumbling and I decided that I wanted something to eat before I started back. I headed for the lights along the wharf. There was Eddie's Bar and Grill shining

in pink neon just past a bait shop. Beer and wine lettered on cardboard in the opaque window. I kept walking.

Past Eddie's there were only a few shops, closed for the night, and the docks of the marina where a battered old tug and some sailboats were moored. They looked almost like toy boats, bobbing along the dock, their sails furled and shrouded. I could hear the waves splash hollowly against their hulls, then break to rush in under the dock.

"Spare change, lady?"

I hadn't noticed him sitting there on a bench next to the dock. He was blonde, maybe twelve years old, in jeans and a ragged T-shirt. He was smoking a cigarette.

"Got any spare change, lady?" he said again. "Help a brother out?"

"What will you buy with it?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Maybe some hamburgers, lady. Maybe a couple of joints."

"I'll buy you a hamburger," I offered.

"Just the money will be fine."

"I'm going to eat now anyway."

"No, thanks, lady. I'm not hungry just yet."

"Later?"

"I'm fine like I am, lady."

"Sure?"

"Jesus Christ, lady!" he yelled. "All I want is some spare change!"

"I'm sorry," I said finally.

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I put a dollar on the bench next to him and started up the stairway to the main street.

"Hey, lady," he called. "Thanks."

"Sure," I said, turning. "Sure thing, brother. Listen, brother, maybe you can do something for me?"

"Like what?"

I could hear the distrust in his voice again.

"Where around here can I get something to eat, and maybe a Coke?"

"You want a pick up, lady?"

"No," I said, suddenly tired. "I just want to eat."

"There's Nemo's Woman," his voice echoed out from the dark. "She's moored a couple of blocks down. On the old pier, past the coast guard station. Best food around."

"The best food?"

"My cousin owns it. It's a boat."

"Of course," I said. "Thanks, brother."

"Sure thing, lady."

His voice trailed after him into the darkness.

I found it where he told me, an old car ferry painted bright red, her decks strung with bright-colored Chinese lanterns that reflected red, yellow and green along the water. A floodlight on the dock focused on the half nude figure of an oriental mermaid, painted on the hull. She looked part dragon but she was beckoning instead of flaming, inviting her patrons aboard with taloned hands. From where I stood on the dock, I could hear all the lyrics of the song

that was playing on the jukebox inside.

Everyone knew everyone at Nemo's Woman. I sat down at a side booth facing the table where George had just bear-hugged Angie, Karen, Joan, and Miranda, exclaiming loudly over each of them and ending each hug with a kiss. He was demanding to know what they wanted to drink. They were all shouting to be heard over the music.

"A pitcher, George!" the redhead was yelling.

"Only beer? You can't be serious! Not you four!"

They were all about Julie's age, dressed casually in the jeans and denim jackets that seem almost to be a uniform. They were all laughing.

"Just beer, George," the girl said firmly. "Payday isn't until next week."

"One drink on Nemo, then," George insisted.

"We won't turn it down!"

"You know us better than that, George!"

"Three Black Russians and one Something-with-Cream, on the way!" he promised. "Stomachs with ulcers shouldn't drink beer, Karen," he added.

"It's healing," said the girl on the left.

"No drinks but creamy ones, even so!" he called, hurrying off toward the bar.

I took the menu from its pocket and opened it: Beer, wine, and cocktails served always--soup and sandwiches served sometimes,--spaghetti (Nemo's own special recipe) served Sundays only.

"Can I get you something to eat?"

It was George, returning with the drinks and some potato chips.

"A sandwich," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Hang on just a minute while I deliver these."

He gave the girls their drinks and returned with an order pad in his hand.

"We only have tuna and chicken tonight. Both on dark bread."

"Tuna will be fine."

"Anything to drink?"

"Pepsi."

"Not even a beer? And this is Friday night!"

He was smiling at me as if I was one of the regulars.

"Just Pepsi," I said.

He wrote quickly, shoving the pad back in his apron pocket even as he ripped the order off.

"It'll take a couple minutes," he said. "Half of my help quit this week."

He didn't sound angry about it at all, in fact he was still smiling.

"One tuna, on its way!" And he was gone.

For nearly an hour I watched the two girls with short aprons hurrying between the bar and the tables, but neither of them brought my sandwich. I hadn't seen George since he took the order. The room had filled up rapidly. They sat wherever they could find room and a large number of them still crowded into the aisles, jostling one another as they

looked for places to sit.

"Domingo, buddy!"

"Jose!"

Another reunion in front of my table, no less emotional than the first.

"How long, amigo? Ten years?"

"Ten years, Holy Virgin! Too long!"

"Much too long, buddy!"

The rest of their conversation was in Spanish. Ten years, they'd said, ten years. Too long to be apart from a dear friend, too long by far to remain with one who wasn't dear. Ten years without my own name. Ten years smiling.

"I'm really sorry," George said. "It's chicken."

He sat the sandwich and my Pepsi in front of me and rummaged for his order pad.

"Look," he said. "It's late, it's cold and it's not even the right sandwich. I'll just put this one down on Nemo's bill. How's that?"

"I'll pay for it," I told him.

"But the service was so lousy," he insisted. "And the sandwich, you haven't tasted it yet. I mean, it's not bad, it's just not spectacular food, you know?"

"George, who owns this place?" I asked.

"I do," he said slowly, "Why?"

"Do you make any money on it?"

He sighed, rummaging through his pocket again, this time returning with his cigarettes.

"Not always," he said. "We might tonight, though."

He paused to light a cigarette and then sat down across from me in the booth.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "I don't think there's a chair left in the place."

"Are you always this busy?"

"Only on weekends, and then it doesn't start until ten."

"We do some sandwich business at lunch," he added.

"You'd better eat your sandwich before it gets any colder."

He pushed the plate toward me.

"Eat."

I took a bite and surprised myself by finishing the whole sandwich without a break.

"Ah ha!" said George. "You were hungry, weren't you?"

I nodded between sips of cola. It was impossible not to be friendly with George.

"No," George continued as if resuming our conversation, "Sometimes I really enjoy working down here. But then there are days like today, when half of the waitresses quit, the groceries don't get delivered, and the band cancels at the last minute."

"The waitresses quit?"

"I don't pay them enough," he admitted. "I can't afford to."

"George."

It was one of the remaining two waitresses.

"George, the ladies room just overflowed again."

"God damn that bitching pipe," he said calmly. "O.K., Debbie, thanks."

He turned back to me.

"It's been nice talking to you," he said.

"Do you mean that?"

"Sure I mean it," he said, standing up. "Would I say it if I didn't?"

I stopped him as he turned to leave.

"George, do you ever hire waitresses without any job experience?"

"Sometimes," he said. "Why? You need a job?"

"Not the money," I tried to explain, "but I really need a job."

He was watching me with a cautious expression on his face.

"You promise to work at least a month?"

"Yes."

"O.K. C'mon back and I'll get you an apron."

I think he expected that I wouldn't want to start tonight, that I would wait until tomorrow for a full day's work. But I jumped up to follow him. He grinned suddenly and I knew for certain then that there were no whores at Nemo's.

"What's your name anyway?"

"Laura."

"O.K. Laura, you're hired."

I woke slowly, letting my eyes wander across the room, absorbing the brightness of the sunlight as it streamed across

the pale green walls. I had chosen the color in here too, a soft spring green that brought to mind ferns, or new leaves uncurling slowly in the clean morning air. Somewhere I've read that green is a magical color, the color of emeralds, of elf hair and of luck. Perhaps I read it in one of the books of tales that Ruth gave Julie and I to read when we were children.

I didn't want to look at the clock, but I could tell from the sun that it was late. Still I didn't want to move. The arches of my feet ached and the muscles along my calves had stiffened into cramps during the night. My shoulders ached too, and my arms hurt if I even raised them slightly. I knew I'd never be able to lift pitchers of beer this afternoon, but I was going to try.

George told me that I did well last night.

"Two more days and you'll be ready for the Hilton, Laura," he said while slapping a piece of chicken on the bread. I plopped some shredded lettuce on it as I had seen him do before, and he finished with the second piece of bread. A flourish of the slicing knife and it was done.

"Behold the Sandwich, the Flesh of my Chicken, in whom I am well pleased," he intoned.

He handed the plate to me.

"They're eighty-five cents."

"Amen," I said, trying to find the proper column to enter the price in on my check pad.

"Don't forget the tax, Laura."

"Never!"

He put a friendly arm around my shoulders and hugged me briefly.

"You're doing a quality job," he said on his way to the next order.

I thought I heard the mantle clock chiming downstairs, but only for a few gongs. I thought it was about eleven but when I turned the alarm clock over, I saw it was already two. I swung my feet out over the side of the bed and pushed myself up. Even my neck ached. There wouldn't be enough time to shampoo my hair, so I decided to wait and bathe when I got back tonight.

George told me to wear whatever I wanted to work, so I found a comfortable pair of corduroy slacks and a knit shirt. I decided that comfortable shoes were necessary even if I only wore tennis shoes like I had seen Debbie wearing last night. I brushed my hair and tied it back into a ponytail instead of its usual coil. My reflection smiled back at me. She looked younger than I had seen her look for a long time. Younger and happier.

I started down the stairs but stopped halfway. I could smell freshly brewed coffee below me. And cigarettes. The rustling of the New York Times was the only thing missing. He was sitting in his usual chair, the newspaper still folded on the table.

"Good afternoon, Laura," said Peter.

"You're back early," I said.

"I know you're overjoyed to see me," he said sarcastically, "But try to work up some enthusiasm."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been home since yesterday. You had quite a night out, Laura."

I ignored his implication.

"I thought you weren't signing the contract until tomorrow," I said.

"We lost it." He lit another cigarette and exhaled in smoke rings. "Well come here and give me a wifely kiss. Tell me how glad you are that I'm back."

I walked past him into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee. He was watching for me as I came back. I saw again the dark lines under his eyes. He had aged noticeably in the past year, his hair was receding dramatically and he was heavier--still not fat, but in another year he would be that too, I thought. I could almost feel sorry for him. I sat down across from him.

"You've changed lately, Laura," he said, "Changed a lot."

"So have you, Peter. Everyone changes. Life is change."

"Even that. You always have a smart answer now, don't you?"

"I've always had answers," I told him. "You're just hearing them for a change."

He was blowing smoke rings again.

"Where were you last night, Laura?"

"Where were you, Peter?"

He looked past me to the window.

"Ruth tells me that a friend of hers saw you with Julie yesterday. But you told Ruth that you didn't know where she was."

"So you were at Ruth's last night," I said. "All night?"

"I thought you might be there so I stopped by." His voice was sarcastic.

"All night?"

He wouldn't look at me, he just kept staring out of the window, and finally I understood that it was time.

"Just how was my mother?" I asked, "As good as your Cincinnati whores?"

"Better than most!" he snapped, turning from the window. "You should've taken lessons."

My coffee no longer tasted of anything. I set it aside.

Whore, Julie had called her, both of them, whores. But whores aren't for marrying--there are other women for that, softer women who are more easily bent, sheltered women these daughters of whores, who don't know enough to judge men until those men have bent them, too, into whores.

The clock chimed five. I had forgotten all about my job and now I was late. Peter still sat there, looking at the wall. I got my coat from the closet.

"I'm leaving," I said. "I won't be back until late."

He just looked at me.

"What did you do with your rings, Laura?"

I looked down at my left hand where there was a white line from the ten years that I had worn the rings.

"I took them off," I said.

He said nothing more and I left without turning to see whether or not he watched me go.

"I'm late, George."

"And only your second day. The help gets worse day by day," he mourned as he lined up the slices of onion on the chopping board. "What ever happened to fear of the lord and of your employer?"

I tied one of the aprons behind me.

"I'm not afraid of anything," I said.

"Good. Here," he said, handing me the knife, "Cut the onions for a while. We're serving spaghetti."

Nemo's spaghetti was beyond description. I was glad that I didn't like spaghetti to begin with because when I finished it I was sure that I could never eat it again. After half an hour of onions, came almost a whole bulb of garlic, endless peppers, and three gallon cans each of tomatoes, tomato sauce, tomato puree. I had to mix all this and then divide it into three pots on the stove, stirring each one in its turn with a giant wooden spoon while the sauce bubbled and spit. I remembered Shakespeare's Macbeth, though I was one witch to three cauldrons. I leaned over the pot. There were no prophecies in the eddies of oregano, no visions as the peppers sank into the tomatoes only to be spit back up in the next bubble. Not even my own face was reflected. There was only the oozing red tomatoes, churning in their own juices as they coagulated into sauce.

"Hey, don't fall in!" said George behind me.

"I won't," I said, moving away from the stove. "What's that?"

George was half-dragging, half-swinging an immense plastic bag filled with lumpy grey stuff.

"The meat's here," he said. "Harry was so late today, I was afraid we were going to have to open with meatless spaghetti."

"That's meat?"

"Hamburgers," he nodded. "I buy them from the fast food joints that make them up ahead, you know, like Hamburger Heaven and MacDonalds? Instead of dumping the leftovers every night, I have a deal with them so they throw them in the freezer for me. At the end of the week I send someone to pick them up and there you have it. Voila! Nemo's spaghetti."

"You don't feed those to people!" I said, disbelieving. "That's got to be illegal."

"We pick them up after dark."

"You can't do that!"

For the first time, I noticed that George looked tired. I watched his patience struggle across his face and lose.

"I certainly can!" he snapped, "And what's more, you're going to too, just as soon as you finish grinding them up!"

He lifted the grinder from under the sink, slammed it on the counter in front of me and left.

"I'm sorry," I found myself repeating, but there was no one there to hear.

Some still had bits of buns stuck to them with mustard and catsup. At first I tried to pick it off, but after a while I just ground them all up together. A little before five o'clock, Debbie came in, throwing her jacket at the corner rack and tying on her apron all in one easy motion.

"George said to tell you to start the big kettles full of water for the pasta," she said. "They're in the cupboard next to the sink."

"Thanks," I said.

"It's a task, isn't it though?" Debbie said looking for her order pad. "Usually we all do some of it, but since you have to learn..."

She found her pad and started for the door.

"You'll get used to it, Laura. The first week is always the worst."

"Sure," I said.

If I made it through the first week. I hadn't meant to upset George. It's just that I was genuinely shocked by the hamburger recycling. It probably made the situation no better, though, I decided. Being truly revolted is probably a worse reaction than pretending to be revolted. I tried to phrase what I would say to him when the spaghetti was finished, but I couldn't seem to get past the words, "I'm sorry". I had said them so often that now my first reaction to anything was to apologize. After those two words I didn't have anything more to say. For all my years with Peter those words had been enough, but I didn't want to say them now. I wanted to explain to George, not apologize. It should have

been simple enough, but I couldn't find words to begin with.

It turned out that I didn't say anything at all. The booths were filled when I brought the first pot of spaghetti out of the kitchen, and there were more people moving down the aisles to the tables.

"Sit the sauce over here on the counter, Laura," George said. "There's a warming tray and candles somewhere in the backroom."

When we had it all set up I stood behind the counter, huge tongs to grab the spaghetti in one hand, and a soup ladle for the sauce in the other. People formed into a line at one end of the counter and as I watched the line grew down the full length of the room. Debbie gave them their plates when she took their orders, so when they got to me they just waited, plate in hand. I had to catch a slippery bundle of the worm-like pasta with the tongs and somehow get it to each plate intact. A couple of times I just couldn't hang on long enough and the whole tangled mess would fall on the counter. Once a bunch even fell into the sauce, splashing the front of my apron with greasy red-orange droplets.

The sauce was another trial. A full ladle was too much and the sauce would stream over the side of the plate and cover the customer's hand or drip on his feet. I heard myself apologizing over and over, reaching for a towel to mop up the mess. The line never ended--as soon as there was a gap in the procession of clean plates, the dirty plates would fill the line again starting on their seconds, or thirds. George had warming trays full of pasta in the kitchen. When

mine was getting low he would whisk it away and return in a few seconds with a fresh pan. These later mounds of spaghetti were worst than the first. It had congealed along the bottom of the pan into nearly solid forms. I had to tear the strands apart with the tongs before they would even fit on the plate. But people were eating it, and eating more, and more.

When the line finally dwindled away, it was almost eleven o'clock. Across the entire room people were laughing and talking as they lifted full forks to their mouths. Someone had started the jukebox and a woman's country voice was wailing about the man who had left her, who didn't really love her, now in the end, over, gone. She sounded more angry than sad.

I noticed a girl at the table nearest the counter who was cutting her spaghetti with a knife as if it were a piece of meat instead of winding it around her fork. She was sitting by herself and I felt a little bad that she had to be one of the ones to be served from the bottom of the pan.

"Can I have some more?"

A greasy plate was shoved before me and I looked across to see a face that was getting to be familiar. His chin was covered with dribbles of sauce that he hadn't even bothered to wipe away. This was at least his fifth or sixth plate. I must have hesitated because he seemed to grow impatient.

"C'mon," he said. "It says'all you can eat'!"

"I'm sorry," I said as I had said all night. Even to myself I sounded like a recording. His plate was so smeared

with the remains of his first five meals that it was hard to hold on to. And I still could not bring myself to grab at garbage with my bare hands. I grasped it by the edge with only my thumb and forefinger, balancing the opposite edge of the plate against the pan of sauce.

"Hurry up," he said.

I hadn't finished dipping the sauce when he snatched the plate away from me, knocking the ladle and my hand into the warming pan. The pan slipped from its rack and with a clatter of metal on metal, spilled the greasy tomatoes along the counter and down my legs to the floor. The candle fell on my hand and I slapped at it to put out the flame.

"It's O.K., Laura," said George coming up behind me. "Go in the back and get the mop."

"He knocked my hand into it....," I started.

"I saw," George said. "It's not your fault. Now go and get the mop."

"At least it wasn't a full pan," said Debbie as I passed her.

My hand was starting to throb. I handed George the mop.

"I'm going to get cleaned up," I told him.

"Sure," he said.

My right arm and my shoes had gotten the worst of it, and along the top of my hand the skin was already beginning to raise a blister. I stuck my hand under cold water to relieve the pain a little as well as to clean off the tomatoes. My eyes smarted with tears and I blinked hard to control them.

I couldn't remember a time in my entire life when I had actually cried, but I knew I was very close there in the Employees Only at Nemo's.

There was a knock on the door.

"Hey, Laura," called George, "Do you think you'll be clean enough to carry beer for a while? We've got a constant crowd tonight."

"Sure," I called back, forcing my voice to be steady. "Just give me another five minutes."

"Right!"

I could hear him running off through the kitchen again, probably grabbing glasses and trays as he went. Tonight was a good night for George. He'd make money tonight for sure. I pictured him smiling as he hurried from table to table.

I took off my socks and wiped my shoes as best I could with wet paper towels. From the knees down my slacks were speckled with bits of meat. I wiped at the mess until it sort of blended with the brown of my slacks. Then I switched my apron for a clean one and straightened to look in the mirror. It was cracked in one corner and broken off completely in another. The face that looked back at me was green. Its shape was so distorted, first one huge eye and then a swollen nose, that I could tell nothing from it. I pinned my hair back into place and remembered to shut off the light before I went back to the counter.

"Bring me the last of those pitchers, would you Laura?" called George from across the room. His voice echoed around

the empty tables and chairs. I stopped wiping tables and went to lift the tray. My right hand hurt too much to hold the weight of it so I shifted it along my left arm and used my right for balance. The skin had split along the burn and it was oozing a clear fluid. Its throbbing had already given me a headache. I slid the tray of pitchers on to the counter awkwardly, trying to spare my right hand as much as possible.

"Thanks," said George absently, not even looking up.

He had barely said anything to me since the bit with the old hamburgers.

"George," I said, "George, about the hamburgers--that is, about what I said about them--".

"What?"

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about, Laura?"

"The hamburgers--," I started again, "The spaghetti--."

"Laura," George said, "Just forget about it, O.K.? Why don't you go on home now? It's past time."

He was watching me with a strange expression on his face, not tired as I would have expected, but gentle. I nodded and pushed my hair back out of my eyes. George stopped stacking pitchers.

"What did you do to your hand?"

"The spaghetti...", I started once more, "The spaghetti... it's burned."

George sighed.

"Laura," he said finally, "I really don't think that

you're cut out for this type of work."

"What?"

"You try really hard," he went on, "But you're just not suited to be a waitress."

"Waitress!" I said, "You call chopping onions and grinding stale hamburgers being a waitress? You think I should know everything on only my second day here? How can you say what I'm suited to do! You don't even know me enough to..."

I couldn't finish; I turned away and started to walk blindly. I stumbled into a chair and hit a table but it didn't matter. I just stood there looking at the wall in front of me and crying. Not even in the privacy of my own room, I was crying. George came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders, turning me to face him. My face felt like warm putty, melting off my bones. I couldn't control it any longer. I let my face dissolve while George looked at my hand.

"You should have put something on that," he said. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

I shrugged and tried to smile, but the tears wouldn't stop even though my mind was back together.

"It's O.K.," I tried to say, but the words were broken in the middle by hiccups.

"Let's get out of here," said George suddenly. "I'll drive you over to the hospital and they can put a dressing on it."

"No! It's O.K.," I said.

"Would you rather I took you home?"

"Home?"

I could sense the tears starting in a fresh flood. I shook my head.

"No," I managed to say, "Not home." The thought of Peter and Ruth together in my bed started me laughing through my tears. I laughed and laughed until I cried again, though my eyes had never stopped streaming the whole time.

Finally I was tired, completely and overwhelmingly tired. I didn't care if I had to sleep on the floor of Nemo's, I just had to sleep. I remember George pushing me out the door and somehow my jacket was there too. He helped me into the car and I saw streetlights flash along the windshield. I slept until we got to his apartment.

"Sidney!"

It was a highpitched little shriek followed by a thud as a weight hit my stomach. The thud moved with careful footing along my chest. I opened my eyes and found myself face to face with a cat. The cat stopped when it saw that I was awake and sat calmly on my rib cage. A second face appeared, a child's face, watching me with the same intent expression as the cat. The room wasn't familiar to me, but my jacket was draped over the chair and my spattered shoes were sitting neatly on the floor at the foot of the bed. I remembered the spaghetti then, and my hand, and George. This must be George's bedroom, I realized, and his child? I guessed the child to be a girl.

"Is this Sidney?" I asked her, motioning toward the cat.

She nodded, her eyes solemn and wide, never leaving my face.

"He wakes up awfully early, doesn't he?"

She nodded again and then as if changing her mind, decided to speak after all.

"He wakes me up all the time," she said, stressing her words with child-like importance. "Sometimes he wakes Daddy up too."

"I bet Daddy loves that," I said. The pillow beside me still showed a dent where his head had been, and the wrinkled blankets were slightly warm yet. I hadn't known that George had children. It surprised me somehow, as if it was something I should have known.

"Daddy throws Sidney at the wall sometimes," the little girl said suddenly. She grabbed the cat and lifted him off me as if afraid that I would throw him too. Sidney dangled reluctantly from her arms, offering a few feeble meows as she dragged him off. I pulled the blanket closer and sat up. My hand still throbbed a little and my eyes felt swollen and stiff as if I was catching a cold. I didn't even want to think of what I must look like.

The little girl had moved across the room. She pinned Sidney against the floor and was attempting to dress him in a doll's dress and bonnet.

"Stop it, Sidney," she said calmly as he writhed beneath her grip.

"Jennie, come out here and be quiet."

It was George's voice, speaking softly yet firmly. His voice came from the doorway but I couldn't see him.

Jennie looked up at him and then over at me.

"She's awake," she said, turning back to Sidney.

George's head appeared at the doorway.

"So you are," he said smiling. "How's your hand?"

"Better."

"Good. Paper here yet, Jennie?"

"Yes." She continued to adjust Sidney's bonnet while George looked around the room.

"Where is it?" he finally asked.

"Outside."

He vanished again and came back with the paper under his arm, stooping to kiss the top of Jennie's head on his return.

"Good morning, Jennifer."

"Morning."

George was wearing pajamas now and his pajama legs, visible beneath his robe, were made of the same blue cotton printed with pink rabbits that Jennie was wearing. Neither of them wore slippers.

"This is Laura, Jennie," George said, nodding toward me.

"How do you do," she said politely as if we hadn't spoken at all earlier.

"Hello Jennie."

"And this is Sidney," George said.

"We've met," I told him.

George laughed and straightened.

"I'll bet you have. Look, Laura," he continued, "There's a bathroom and all the etceteras down the hall if you want to indulge, and in the meantime I'll start the coffee. O.K. with you?"

"Fine."

He paused and then smiled broadly.

"Good morning, Laura."

"Good morning," I said.

The bathroom was not at all extraordinary but the shower felt wonderful. I even shampooed my hair, removing every possible scent of spaghetti. I towelled quickly and brushed my hair straight, leaving it hanging free to dry. The smell of coffee was already drifting down the hallway. I hung my towel carefully and started toward the coffee, smiling. There had been only two toothbrushes in the rack, one large and red, the other a child's size with plastic pink rabbits.

George was sitting in the overstuffed green chair facing the television. Jennie was on his lap and both of them had huge bowls of cereal with them.

"It's almost time for Captain Zocko and his Zany Zoo Friends," George said. "Grab yourself a bowl of cornflakes and pull up a chair."

"Or there's Krispies" said Jennie, lifting a spoonful to her ear.

"The coffee's ready too," George called after me.

When I returned Captain Zocko was doing his theme song and Jennie was doling out sections of the newspaper. She

kept the comics for herself and gave George the front section.

"Which do you want?" she asked me.

"The classified section," I told her. "The want ads."

"Want ads?" asked George. "You aren't looking for a new job, are you?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't have to, Laura, unless you want to."

"I don't want to," I admitted, putting the paper aside.

"Good!" George was grinning again. "In that case, would you like to work this afternoon?"

"Are you serious?" I asked him.

"Yep."

"I'll have to change clothes. I'm still spaghetti splattered."

"Sure," he said. "I'll give you a lift to your car."

"H-hush," said Jennie, "It's started!"

I swallowed a mouthful of cereal and picked up the want-ads again.

"Apartments," I answered George's raised eyebrows.

"You can stay here if you like."

"Thanks," I said, smiling at him "I just might."

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They almost made it that day. They would have, but she had decided that they should cut through Pickert's cornfield and they had found Aunt Joleen and Jos Pickert there, lying near naked between the rows of corn, the afternoon sun beating down on the both of them.

"What're you don' here?" Joleen called.

The girl didn't answer. Joleen should have been ashamed, she thought, half-naked in front of her own sister's child.

"We're just takin' ourselves a shortcut," said the boy. "There war'nt no sign sayin' it was private."

Joleen pushed herself up, smoothing her tight cotton skirt down over her hips, twisting at it to straighten the seams. Her blouse was still unbuttoned but she didn't seem to notice. The boy noticed though, and the girl saw that he watched. She followed as he stared at Joleen's breasts moving his eyes along them, looking from where they began, smooth and white beneath the tan V of her neck and following down as they dropped full and heavy, nearly to her waist.

"Where're you goin' with your Pa's good satchel, Ruth Ann?" Joleen said.

"I'm goin' where I please," the girl said loudly, "And Tom is goin' with me."

"Dressed like you was headed for a prayer meetin'," Joleen said. She squinted and started toward the girl.

"What's that you're wearin'?" she screamed. "What's that around your neck?"

The girl had forgotten about the necklace. She pulled at it now, snapping the chain as it broke free of her neck. She threw it at her aunt. Joleen grabbed it out of the dirt.

"That's my ruby necklace! It's my ruby necklace you were stealin'!"

"They ain't real rubies," the girl said.

"They're genuine real, you whoring little bitch! You ain't goin' nowhere, Ruth Ann Mapes! You're goin' right home with me and takin' off that Sunday dress and them shoes!"

"It's my dress and my shoes," she said. "I can wear 'em where I please."

"And where're you two figurin' on goin' where you need your Sunday best and a whole satchel full more? Just what're you plannin' on doin'?"

"It ain't none of your concern," said Tom. "Looks like you got plenty concern of your own."

Joleen looked half back at Jos Pickert who never did bother even to fasten his pants. He lay propped on one elbow snapping at horseflies with Joleen's pink brassiere.

"Cut that out!" she yelled at him. "You're gonna stretch the elastic all out of it, and it ain't more'n two months old. It's my new one, you damn fool, put it down!"

"Let's go, Tom," said the girl, pulling at his arm.

"I said, where're you goin'?" yelled Joleen.

"We're goin' to get married," the girl said, and she

couldn't keep the pride from her voice, even then. Joleen had never been married, for all her nights in the Pickert's barn. She was past twenty now, too, and not likely to be asked. The girl expected that her aunt would be envious, that she would turn toward her with envious eyes, silent. But Joleen laughed, and laughed harshly.

"You ain't never goin' to find a judge who'll marry a twelve year old girl. Especially when she don't look much older than ten!"

"Well we're goin' to go."

"There's gonna be near half a dozen state patrollers out lookin' for you, Tom," said Joleen, smiling. "Just as soon as I tell her Pa."

"Let's go," the girl said again, but Tom turned toward her.

"You really only twelve?" he asked, "You told me you was past fourteen."

"What's it matter how old I am?" she said. "You said we were gettin' married!"

"We ain't gettin' nothin'," he said. "We ain't gettin' nothin' at all."

Peter had left her gift in the top drawer of her bureau, nestled on top of her good black lingerie where she would find it in the morning. The box was small and rectangular with velvety ribbon and a fire red bow. She pictured him putting it there, grinning as he thought of her face when she'd find it. Before she opened the gift, she decided to wear the black underwear that day. It wouldn't be noticeable under her plain navy suit, and perhaps they'd have a couple hours free, after the luncheon.

He picked a plain card, one of those embossed blanks of creamy paper that suit every occasion from weddings to birthdays. Today was her birthday.

"Best of everything, Ruth," he had written, "Happy Birthday."

He scrawled it like a child, and she smiled as she thought of the strange combination of child and of man that he was.

She pulled the ribbon off and lifted the cover slowly. It lay on a bed of red velvet, a gold necklace--three delicate pieces of filagree each with a ruby and two small diamonds. They were linked together with fine gold chain. Her throat tightened as she looked at it, and for a moment, her eyes blurred. You fool, she thought, you beautiful fool, Peter. Not one word about how old she was and he had given her a girl's present, a gift that a bride should own while she was

still as perfect as it was. She blinked hard.

"Don't be an ass," she said. In the mirror her face smiled back at her and she fastened the stones around her neck. It nestled in the hollow of her throat, just where it would nestle at some model's throat in an advertisement.

"It's beautiful," she said aloud, though she knew no one could hear her. "It's beautiful, beautiful!"

Laughing, she whirled around the bedroom in her nightgown. She must look ridiculous for a woman past forty, she thought, but she didn't feel old this birthday. She could have been twenty-five, she could have been twenty. She heard the laughter and knew it was her own, but she laughed again and spun around the bedpost.

Julie was watching her from the doorway.

The laughter died in Ruth's throat and she found herself thinking, please don't spoil it this time, Julie, just this once. But then she was ashamed. She didn't give Julie a chance, she just assumed the worst. Still, Julie hadn't said anything, she just watched. Ruth smiled at her.

"Isn't it beautiful, Julie?" she said. "Peter gave it to me for my birthday."

The wide blue eyes looked at all of Ruth. They moved across all of her body, but came to rest on the necklace each time. Julie walked over and fingered the chain along Ruth's throat. Slowly Ruth felt her grip tighten until the chain ground into the back of her neck.

"Julie, don't..." she started to say, "Don't spoil it

for me."

Julie's eyes turned to hers and again their emptiness frightened her.

"Don't," she repeated, pulling away from Julie's grip.

"You'll burn," said Julie calmly, "You'll burn in hell, you whore!"

She turned and ran from her mother's room.

Ruth checked the back seat of the car before she got in to be sure that Julie wasn't hiding there. She even checked along the parking lot as she left.

Since July, Julie had been increasingly difficult to handle. She left early in that month, about the time that Laura left Peter. Ruth didn't know where either of them was until late August when Julie had been picked up by the police once again. She hadn't been living with Laura as Ruth had thought.

There were therapy sessions after that while Julie denied that she had ever known anyone, much less Ruth or Laura. Then Giani sent her home to live. In the past few weeks though, she'd started staying away again, leaving for days or a week. Unexpectedly she would come home, like this morning, either silent or strangely angry.

Ruth decided not to tell Peter about the latest visit. His car was parked across from her usual spot so she decided to slip into his office for a moment on the way to her own desk. He was alone as she hoped he would be.

"Surprise," she announced.

"Surprise yourself!" he said, turning in his chair to face her. "Well?"

"I love it, Peter!" she said and then she hugged him, office or not.

"Ruth!" he protested.

"I'm sorry." But she thought that he was pleased, nonetheless. She straightened her jacket and tucked in her blouse.

"I'd better get going," she said.

"See you at lunch?"

"Of course, Mr. Makrianis. "We've got work to do during lunch today."

He didn't rise to it, instead he smiled.

"Bitch, bitch," he said, "Give you one little present and you expect all kinds of favors."

"It's perfect, Peter. Really it is."

"Good. You can wear it tonight. I've got tickets for the show at the Rickey Club."

"Business again?"

"No. Strictly birthday. And if you grab me again, Ruth, you can't go."

"I promise," she said solemnly.

"Good. Now send in that frizzled blonde Tate girl on your way out. I've got some things for her to type."

"Yes, sir!"

"Don't be sarcastic, Ruth," he said, "It's not becoming."

Darlene Tate was one of the younger secretaries, those tiny girls, all elbows and knees who spend most of their

days pecking bird-like at typewriters. Yet they are not exactly unattractive with their razored hair and bright patterned clothes. There was a certain boldness, Ruth knew, that men admired in their long, straight legs and their tight plum asses. Darlene was looking in the mirror of her compact, adding another layer to her already blue eyelids.

"Mr. Makrianis would like to see you, Darlene. In his office please."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

She shrugged and put the mirror away. As she stood up she smoothed her thin sweater so that it clung tight along her brassiere and turned to wink at her friend, Jean.

"Hot already this morning," she drawled to Jean.

Ruth went into her own office and started to sort the morning mail. She shut the door deliberately so that she wouldn't be able to see the goings and comings of the outer office. She could finish the correspondence before nine if she hurried.

"That'll be it, Ruth," Peter said. "Can you have it on my desk by ten tomorrow?"

"Certainly."

"A fine job, a pleasure doing business," said Sherman Taller. She gathered her notebooks, the files and pencils as they all stood to leave.

"I'll drive Ruth back," Peter said to his district manager.

Ruth excused herself to use the ladies room and when she returned they were all gone except Peter. It was only quarter of four.

"How about a drink, Ruth?"

"I could use one," she admitted, sliding along the seat beside him. "Too bad secretaries aren't obliged to drink on the job, too."

"You got a free lunch," he protested absently, signalling the waitress. "Whiskey sour, please," he told her.

"I don't like whiskey, Peter."

"What?"

He was flustered for a moment.

"I'd like a martini," she told the girl.

"Sorry," Peter muttered.

"Laura drinks the whiskey," she said.

"I know."

He finished his drink and signalled the girl for another.

"Speaking of Laura," he said conversationally, "She's divorcing me. I heard from her lawyer today."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He shrugged and then smiled deliberately.

"If you don't mind, I don't mind," he said.

"I don't mind."

"Good. Drink your martini and I'll drive you home to change."

"What shall I change into?"

It was a game they played but she liked it. Arthur had

never cared what she wore, he had never commented on her clothes, much less taken time to choose them for her. No one had done that, until Peter.

"Wear something black," Peter said.

"Lace?"

"Definitely lace. A woman is never too old for lace," he added absently.

"Old?"

She hadn't meant to say it. The word lingered in the air between them even after she spoke.

He looked past her for a few minutes before he would meet her eyes.

"Finish your drink and we'll go," he said finally.

It had been Ruth's fifteenth birthday the day she started working for Rosalie Sheridan. A Mr. Johnson had been with Rosalie in the front room when Ruth arrived, and she had to wait until the black girl announced her.

"It's the new girl from Mrs. Bucks' service, Miss Rosalie," the girl drawled. "Shall I take her to the sittin' room?"

"That will be fine, Ellen," the voice answered, softly but with each word carefully enunciated.

"Yes ma'm," said the girl, and it was done. Ruth found that everything around Rosalie Sheridan's home was done with the same combination of politeness and efficiency. Even Rosalie's gentlemen came and went without the slightest ripple in the household routine.

"Take care drivin' home now," Ruth heard from the hallway

and the next instant she was confronted with Rosalie's smile.

"Hello, honey," she said. "I'm Rosalie. You're the new girl?"

"Yes ma'm, I'm Ruth Ann Mapes."

"Ruth Ann?" There was distain in her tone.

"Yes ma'm."

"Do you mind if I just call you Ruth?"

"That's fine."

"Good. You may call me Rosalie," she said. "Being called Mrs. Sheridan just makes me feel plain old. I might have a grown son, but I still don't think of myself as old. Would you say that I looked old?"

"Oh no, ma'm!"

"Never refer to a lady as old," Rosalie was saying absently, "A lady is never old."

"Yes ma'm," Ruth said, not knowing what else to say.

"You'll have to clean rooms," Rosalie said abruptly. "And run occasional errands for me. Did Mrs. Bucks explain that?"

"No ma'm."

"Do you think you'd mind doing things like that?"

"Oh no, ma'm. It'd be just fine. I cleaned rooms at the Ace Hotel for this year past."

"The Ace? Aren't you a little young for the Ace?" There was a sharp edge on her voice and Ruth felt her face flushing red.

"I cleaned rooms after checkout," she said.

"Of course, dear," Rosalie said, charming once again as if she had changed masks. "Come along now and Ellen will

show you to your room."

Peter was quiet the whole way to the apartment. He seemed preoccupied with the traffic and Ruth didn't disturb him, though she knew she should tell him that Julie had been back. She didn't want to start it again though.

"She's irrational," Peter would say, "How can you expect to deal with an irrational mind? Face it, Ruth. Julie can't take care of herself and you can't spend all your time chasing after her. It would be the best thing for her if you sent her to a sanitarium."

"I can't afford that, Peter. You know I can't."

"What about the state home?" he would insist. "They have to take her at the state hospital."

"They take the insane at the state hospital. Julie is not insane."

"They take others too," he insisted until she had refused even to talk anymore. They hadn't talked about it since the middle of the summer, but Ruth knew that if Julie met them at the apartment door, the whole discussion would begin again, more vehement than ever.

"Peter," she said suddenly, "Julie was home this morning."

"Is she still there?"

"I don't know. She was gone before I left. I left a key for her though."

"How many times..." started Peter.

"I know," she said sharply.

"But it is dangerous, Ruth. Do you want to come home some night and find your room full of her friends, howling dopers, literally crawling, shooting up in your living room?"

"Julie's not like that."

"Julie maybe, but what about her friends? What if she brings them along? Or maybe just gives them the key? I wouldn't trust her with a key, Ruth. I'd change the lock."

"It's still her home," Ruth said.

"Shit!" Peter exploded. "It's your home, Ruth, yours. You don't have to put up with her crap. She's of legal age and sound mind, or so they insist...".

"Peter, please," she stopped him. "She probably won't be there, but if she is, please don't antagonize her. For my sake."

He turned into the parking lot and eased the car into her space.

"All right," he agreed pulling the key from the ignition. "I still think you're taking a big risk though."

At first it didn't seem that anyone was there. The apartment was dark, the curtains drawn just as she had left them in the morning.

"All that debate for nothing," she told him as she reached for the light switch. But she saw that she was wrong. Julie was sitting in the arm chair facing the door, staring at them. Ruth found it somehow disturbing to think that she must have been there in the dark for hours, waiting until she came home.

Perhaps thinking about me for hours, Ruth thought, or perhaps not thinking at all. She couldn't judge what went on in Julie's mind anymore, or if anything coherent went on at all. Ruth saw that Peter was watching her own movements and she knew that he would no longer believe her when she denied that she was frightened by Julie. Julie seemed in a good mood now, though, a changling face from the morning.

"Hello, Mother."

Ruth tried to sound natural.

"Hello Julie," she said. "This is a surprise."

"Yes. Yes it is a surprise. But it's your birthday, Ruth. Birthdays are for surprises, aren't they?"

Julie pointed to the table and for the first time Ruth noticed a huge arrangement of red roses. She crossed the room to look at them and Julie followed her. She wanted to ask Julie where she had gotten them but Julie was smiling still and she leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek.

"Happy birthday," she said.

"Thank you," Ruth managed.

"Dinner's at seven, Ruth," Peter reminded her.

"Of course," she said. "I'd better change."

It took her only a few minutes. Rosalie had taught her promptness.

"A lady should always be ready in her basics," she said. "It's the basics, Ruth, the basics that count the most."

Julie was watching television when she came out. Peter stood across the room from her, looking out of the window. Probably they hadn't spoken to each other, she thought. But

perhaps that was just as well.

"Peter, could you fasten my necklace?" Ruth asked.

"With pleasure."

He made an elaborate little bow and Julie smiled. Ruth blessed him silently for not making a scene. He stood back to observe the total effect and he nodded his head.

"It is perfect for you," he said. "I thought it would be."

"Thank you," she said lightly. "Are we ready now?"

"No," Julie said. "You need a flower."

She broke a rose out of the arrangement and brought it to Ruth.

"Everyone needs flowers for a special occasion."

"True," Peter agreed.

She pinned the rose on her mother's coat and then patted her shoulder. It was an old ritual they had gone through when the girls were young.

"Have a good time," Julie said.

"Don't wait up," Ruth told her.

Julie locked the door behind them and Ruth took Peter's arm as they started down the stairs. There was one star out already, the evening star caught low in the branches of a willow tree.

The girls were waiting inside the floor. Ruth could tell that they were all listening even though they pretended to be busy. They all know we came in an hour late, together, she thought. She smiled a little at Darlene Tate, whose eyes followed her from beneath heavy blue lids.

"You had a phone call from the police department," Darlene said loudly as soon as Ruth sat down at her desk. "They said they tried to reach you last night and they want you to call back right away."

Then she waited. Both cubicles of typists turned slightly in their swivel chairs, waiting.

"Use my office, Ruth," said Peter, "I've got to check on things downstairs."

Ruth slipped her purse into her desk drawer and went toward Peter's office to make the call. The disappointment that followed her was almost audible. There was a private line on his phone, one line that did not light up on all the office extensions--one line that no one could listen in on.

"This is Ruth Sheridan," she said, "I have a message to call this number."

After twenty years as a secretary her voice responded automatically on a call like this, but her knuckles were white along the receiver.

"Are you Julie Sheridan's mother?"

"Yes." She knew it had to be about Julie, everytime she knew but hoped that she was wrong. They'll call me from the morgue one time, she thought, and even now, she shuddered.

"There was a little problem last night, Mrs. Sheridan, and we brought your daughter into the station. We'd appreciate it if you could come down to the station this morning, Ma'm." The voice droned nasally, reciting its lines for the hundreth time.

"You know about Julie's history?" Ruth asked.

"Oh, yes, Ma'm. That's why we'd like you to come down. To discuss her problem."

Ruth knew she had lost again.

"It'll take an hour or so," she told him.

Julie had been to the clinic enough times that the receptionist recognized her as they came in.

"Hello there, Julie," she said cheerfully. "We haven't seen you for a while!"

Julie didn't answer her and the Nurse turned to Ruth.

"Mrs. Sheridan? Would you fill out these forms for us please? I'll take Julie back to see Dr. Giani."

They were the same forms that she'd filled out each time the police sent Julie to the clinic, and each time they still asked that she fill them out again. Maybe they think Julie's name will change, or her birthday, Ruth mused. But more likely they compared her answers about Julie with her previous answers. They're probably comparing discrepancies, she

thought. There were questions about their home, the address, how many live there, was it an apartment? If she read all of them closely, Ruth knew she should be able to figure out the exact questions they were asking her, and the answers that she was giving. They acted so innocent, these psychologists, so subtle while they tried to map your private life--they would never ask her outright if she liked Julie, they only asked her to fill out forms. Ruth couldn't remember what she had written on the forms last time so she filled them out hurriedly, writing in the spaces half of the time instead of printing.

"That's fine," said the receptionist looking over it. "You can wait in the lounge at the end of the hall if you like. Dr. Giani will let you know when he's through."

"Do you know how long it'll be?" Ruth asked.

The nurse shook her head smiling the whole time.

"I really can't tell you," she said with the same smooth cheerfulness that had greeted Julie.

Ruth followed the hallway where the nurse had gestured to the lounge. It was a small room but made to seem larger by a wall of mirrors. Though it was stylishly decorated with glass-topped tables and a leather couch, Ruth had never felt comfortable in it. She decided it was the mirrors that bothered her and she wondered if they were two way mirrors, like the double purpose questionnaire. She tried not to look at them and poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot on the counter. There was no one else in the room, hers was the only image reflected in the mirror. She chose an old Newsweek from the

rack and settled back on the couch. She leafed through it a couple of times and then just started reading. It was an article about sex changes and their increase in popularity.

"I've been so much happier," they quoted one 'woman' as saying.

My God, I hope so, Ruth thought. You don't do something that drastic without being sure. It crossed her mind that they must counsel those types here at the clinic too, the misfits who know who they are, as well as those who don't, like Julie. What do they tell them to do, she wondered, what do they tell them to do with their lives? Her father had thought that he knew how lives should be run--when he was hungry he demanded his meal, when he was too drunk to stand, he expected that they put him to bed.

Even Peter, after Laura, still felt that he knew better than most.

"I've told you what you have to do, Ruth," he had said again and again, "You know she won't let you help her and you surely know that she needs help. She needs someone else, Ruth."

"I've taken her to the clinic."

"She needs more than that, She needs full-time care."

"I've given her what care I could," she said. "I've tried with both of them."

"You were never meant to be a mother, Ruth," he said laughing, "You're just not the mothering kind."

"Will you please leave now!" she said.

"It's the truth, Ruth. You know it is. You don't give

a damn about being a mother."

"Get out," she told him then. "Get the hell out and take Laura with you!"

"So I can take care of her now, instead of you? You raised two fine girls, Ruth. Two screaming neurotics. Are they all such neurotics, the daughters of whores? Or just yours?"

"Get out!"

"It won't change anything now. They're still the same and so are you."

"You knew what she was like when you married her," Ruth said. She was screaming. "Do you know anything at all?" "Do you know anything at all about being mother and father all at once? I didn't ask to be stuck raising them by myself, I didn't ask Arthur to walk out! He left us with nothing, did you know that? He took the money out of the savings and all the cash around the house as well. Why don't you tell me what a good father he was, Peter? Tell me how much better he would be than me! Tell me what a failure I am Peter!"

He didn't say anything after that, but he stayed that night.

"Hello, Mrs. Sheridan."

Dr. Giani's voice broke into her thoughts, elaborately formal as ever, each word carefully enunciated. Thin and balding, he always looked the same. He had worked with Julie since the beginning of her therapy sessions and he knew Ruth well enough by now to call her by her first name. But he persisted in first addressing her formally. Ruth couldn't

think of any possible information that this gave him about her, but it was obviously part of some scheme.

"So it's you this time instead of Laura," he was saying.

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"Does it make a difference?" she asked.

"No," he said slowly, "Does it make a difference to you if you answer the question?"

He spoke as smoothly as ever, smiling while he waited for her to condemn herself. They had been through the same conversation before--Julie needs more attention, more affection, more than Ruth gave her, more of Ruth's time.

"Of course not."

"Then why did you bring Julie this time instead of having Laura bring her?"

"The police called me this time instead of Laura."

"Do you feel that they should have called your daughter rather than you?"

Ruth could feel herself getting angry, even though she knew that Giani provoked her deliberately.

"I doubt that they could reach her," she snapped. "Laura doesn't tell people where she lives these days."

"Is that so?" Giani said mildly, looking down at his clipboard. "Has Julie been having any problems at home lately?"

"Not that I've noticed," Ruth said, trying to keep her voice as calm as his.

"You work all day."

"That's right." He had succeeded once again. Ruth stood up and reached for her coat. "As a matter of fact, I have to go back to work," she said shortly.

"I'm going to keep her here for a few days," he went on, "To see if she'll talk about last night. Is that all right with you?"

"Fine," Ruth said. She pulled her coat on and pushed past him to the door.

"Don't you want to say good-bye to your daughter, Mrs. Sheridan?"

"No, I don't!" The door swung shut violently behind her.

Julie was in the hallway, though, sitting at the desk, beside the receptionist. She looked up as Ruth came into the hall, and Ruth found herself slowing as she neared the desk.

"Dr. Giani says he wants you to stay for a while," Ruth said. "That's O.K., isn't it?"

Julie nodded but her eyes never left Ruth.

"Will you pick me up?" Julie asked. Ruth was reminded of when they were small girls, both Laura and Julie, waiting for the bus to camp.

"Will you pick us up, Ruth?" Julie asked. Her voice had quivered and for the first time, Ruth had realized that she was near tears.

"I'll be there at the end of the week," she had promised. She promised again now.

"Tell them to call me when you're ready," she said.

Behind her she could hear Dr. Giani's footsteps. She leaned across the desk and patted Julie's shoulder.

"I'll see you," she said and without looking back, she walked out of the clinic. Her hands were still shaking when she tried to start the car.

Gramma Lolly was crazy. They never knew if she was really their grandmother but one day in the summer, Ma had gone to fetch her and from then on the old lady stayed with them. She brought her rocking chair with her, tied on the top of Joleen's old Buick and some dresses packed in an old grocery box. She never once spoke the whole time that she lived with them, but every day Ma fixed her a bowl of farina for breakfast, braided her hair onto the top of her head, and led her out to the porch where her rocking chair was. Gramma Lolly spent the day there—everyday the same, just rocking back and forth until Ma came to fetch her for dinner. She never seemed to notice them, she always looked ahead at something that wasn't there.

"You children leave that poor lady alone now, you hear me?" Ma would call from the house. "You just cut out your tricks on her!"

"We're only funning with her, Ma," Lyle would protest, "We ain't hurting her none."

"I wonder what she's seein'," said Ruth Ann.

"Maybe she's got some of them x-ray eyes," Lyle suggested.

"But what's she seein'?"

"Dunno. Maybe she's lookin' at the neighbor's kitchen, or watchin' Lucy Connors there in her bedroom!"

Lyle laughed at that one.

"Whew! That Lucy sure has 'em!"

"You got a filthy mind, Lyle," she told him.

"Well, since you know what I'm talking about, you do too!"

"I do not!"

"Do too!" he insisted.

She raised her hand to slap him but he saw it and ran past her to the other side of the old lady's chair.

"Can't get me now!" he laughed.

"Wanna bet?"

She stepped off the porch and picked up a rock from the dirt. Lyle ducked behind the high back of the rocker.

"You better not," he warned, "You'll hit Gramma Lolly!"

"She ain't gonna tell no one if I do," she said. "Besides, I'm gonna hit you, not her."

"Ha! You ain't gonna hit nothing!"

"Ha yourself!"

She threw the stone and it went well over both of their heads and landed beyond the porch. Lyle ducked when she threw it, letting go of Gramma Lolly's chair so suddenly that it rocked violently and for a minute she thought that the old lady would fall. She bounced against the back of the chair, her white braid flapping against the top of her head, but her expression never changed. Lyle started to laugh again and when the chair stopped, he started it rocking again, first slow, then faster and faster until the old lady tilted at an impossible angle. She laughed with him and then their mother's voice from inside the house stopped them.

"I told you two to leave her alone!"

"We ain't hurting her," Lyle said, "She likes it."

"She don't know what she likes," their mother said. "Now you get away from that porch an' find somethin' to do, before I find you somethin' to do!"

Gramma Lolly stayed with them for almost three years, then one day in the fall they came home from school and found her laying on the porch, tipped out of her chair, dead. Their Ma and Aunt Joleen had a funeral for her, and later that fall their Pa came home to stay.

A key rattled in the lock. She looked up and saw that it was Peter, silhouetted in the light from the hall.

"My God, Ruth!" he said, flipping on the light, "What in hell are you doing?"

"I must have fallen asleep," she lied.

Peter laughed, turning on the lamps as he made his way over to her. He patted the top of her head as he passed and settled back into the chair across from her.

"You look like one of your daughters, sitting in the dark and rocking in that chair."

He was laughing again and when he got up to fix himself a drink he stumbled over the coffee table. Ruth realized that he was drunk.

"Martini or Manhattan?" he asked her.

"Martini. How was your meeting with Arnold Chemicals this afternoon?"

"Fine," he said. "We now have an account with them and ten thousand pounds of the newest cleaning solvent on the market.

He made an elaborate bow.

"Thanks to me, of course."

"Of course. How was your steno?" she asked.

"She did O.K. Not like you though, of course." He went through the bow again. "I took that Doreen, Darlette, whatever

her name is--the one with the hacked off blonde hair and those absurd earrings. She's a decent steno, though, Ruth. But she drinks these frothy pink things in the little stemmed glasses, and she ordered one at lunch too. You should have seen their faces! Pink drinks instead of scotch! It was crazy! She didn't miss a word, though. They had to admit it, not one word."

He shook his head, still grinning as he handed Ruth her drink.

"Speaking of crazy things, where's crazy Julie?"

"Julie is not crazy," she corrected him rather sharply.

"Not yet, maybe. But she's sure gettin' there fast! Even you have to admit that!"

"You're pretty drunk, aren't you, Peter?"

"Why?" he asked. "Do I sound it?"

"Yes."

He sighed.

"Well, you know Ruth, I am. I think maybe I'm very drunk. Completely very drunk. And I'm not sorry about it, and I'm not going to be."

"I'm not asking you to be sorry," she said.

"Good! A man's entitled to his liquor, you know. His liquor, his whores, and his own profitable business to buy them all with!"

"I think you need some coffee," Ruth said.

"I think you need a drink," he said.

In the morning he was awake before her. She could hear

him in the shower and the smell of fresh coffee was throughout the apartment. She poured herself a cup and waited for him in the kitchen. Peter didn't say anything before he poured his coffee, but he did manage a wry smile.

"Good morning," Ruth said as he sat down.

"No sarcasm, please."

"Did you find the aspirin?"

He nodded and although they finished their coffee in silence, Ruth struggled to keep from smiling. Peter sat his cup aside and reached in his pocket for a cigarette.

"You can stop laughing, now," he said. "I know it was my own fault."

"Was it those silly pink drinks that are so crazy?"

She couldn't resist asking and then they were both laughing. It was one of the things that had drawn her to him in the beginning, the laughter. They seemed to laugh together so often, and it had been so long before that since she felt even like smiling.

"More coffee?" she asked when they calmed down.

"I probably could have used more last night," said Peter, handing her his cup.

"I did suggest it," Ruth said.

"Really? I don't remember."

"I'm not surprised," she said.

"Let's forget about it, O.K.? That was yesterday."

"O.K.," she agreed.

"Is Julie still asleep?"

"She's at the clinic. Giani wants to keep her for a week."

She hadn't really wanted to talk about Julie with him, but when he asked so suddenly, she'd automatically told him.

"Well there's a week of peace, and of profit for someone. How much do they make off each of patients' visits to the clinic? I'll bet the institution gets a commission for each one admitted, not to mention the physician's fees for treatment."

"Do you really think Dr. Giani is taking advantage of me, Peter?"

"Hell, yes!"

"You honestly think that?"

"Look Ruth," he said more calmly, "Giani's been seeing Julie for over six years and if anything, she's worse than ever."

"She still can't seem to deal with the world--either she's irrationally angry about something she's made up in her head, or she's off stripping naked in public and defacing public buildings. And getting arrested, or she would if the cops didn't know her by now. What are you going to do when they don't let her off anymore, Ruth? Laura isn't around to bail her out anymore, and you can't make excuses for her forever."

"At times she's better," Ruth insisted.

"Sure she is," he said, "Like the other night when she was so friendly, even to me, before we went out. But what about after that? Face it Ruth. You're going to have to find someone who will help her, if that's possible. Or else

you'll have to find someone to take care of her."

"I've paid for her therapy. I've paid a lot."

"They'd take her at the state hospitals."

"What do you mean?"

"If she's declared incompetent and has no funds of her own, the state has to assume responsibility for her."

"Do you mean having her declared insane?"

Peter didn't answer.

"Julie is not insane," she said.

"She's not normal either," Peter said.

They went to Smithfield in the afternoon. Peter didn't tell her where they were going, only that he wanted to visit a friend.

"It'll be a nice drive, Ruth," he said. "Want to go?"

"Sure," she said, "Should I pack sandwiches? We can make a day of it."

"Pastrami," Peter said. "Pastrami would be perfect."

So they stopped at the Deli first, and then headed out the highway toward the south. They passed through farmland for almost half an hour when Peter turned off onto a smaller road. It wasn't until they went through the arched stone gateway, and Ruth saw the sign for the hospital, that she realized where they were.

"Now don't get angry, Ruth," Peter said before she had a chance to say anything.

"I told you I didn't want to talk about this anymore," she said.

"We're not going to talk," he said. "We're going to look. Besides, Alan Caine is a friend of mine."

The gates hadn't been locked, in fact they were wide open and unguarded. Smithfield looked more like the farm that it had once been, than the hospital that it was now. The old red brick house still towered at the top of the drive, flanked by twin maples. The trees were beginning to turn color already, she noticed. She hadn't realized how nearly over the summer was--they'd all be yellow and orange in a few weeks, and in a few weeks after that, bare.

There were more buildings further back from the road, but some of these looked as old as the farmhouse, too. One of them was new though, a light brick trimmed in aqua paint. It reminded Ruth a little of the building where she had gone to elementary school. The windows on this building were covered with mesh-work, but no where could Ruth see bars or locks. Here and there, in fact, people sat out in the yard--in wheelchairs or on the painted wooden benches. As they parked by the house a girl in a bright pink uniform wheeled an old man onto the porch.

Alan Caine was a small man with a tight mass of blonde curls and so many freckles that his face seemed almost disfigured. Ruth had met him before in Peter's office and when he spoke she remembered his high voice and the way he constantly cleared his throat. He was smiling now as he rose, his pale eyes wide with pleasure behind their thick lenses.

"Peter!" said Caine, extending his hand. "This is a surprise!"

They shook hands and Ruth told herself that she had judged him harshly.

"I'll bet he has warts!" Darlene had whispered when he was in the office, and a giggle had made the rounds before they went back to their typing. Ruth had found him physically repulsive too. She hoped that he couldn't sense it now, and she tried to smile at him.

"We've just come to look around a bit, Alan," Peter was saying. "Ruth has all kinds of antiquated ideas about what goes on in a state hospital."

"Whips and chains, eh?" Caine said to her. "Not anymore, Ruth. We gave them up about a hundred years ago. Before my time, in fact."

They were both smiling at her, and in spite of her uneasiness, Ruth felt better.

"Come here, Ruth," said Alan Caine gesturing toward the window. "Come and see how we torture our patients."

It was like an autumn picnic scene. The window faced the backyard of the house, a whole field of grass and trees, just beginning to turn gold. There were people everywhere, some on benches, some in wheelchairs along the walk, and throughout it all, a scattering of pink uniforms. The sky was clear and blue above them.

"Most of our patients are geriatrics," Caine was saying. "People who've simply grown too old to take care of themselves."

If they have no one to take care of them, the state takes care of them. Sometimes the social workers find them, living alone usually. Sometimes starving or injured, or sick. They all end up here. We clean them, feed them. If they're able to walk we let them go where they want on the grounds. We don't have any fences here--there's only the gate at the front and even that fence doesn't enclose the property."

"What about the young ones," she asked him. "What about the ones who can walk further?"

"We watch them, of course. They're always supervised, Ruth."

He had seemed ready for her question. Ruth looked toward Peter, who hadn't said anything. He looked away and she wondered just how much he had told Caine. Perhaps Caine already knew about Julie, she thought. It would be easy to have all the right answers if you knew the questions in advance.

Caine was pointing to the new building, the one that looked like a school.

"We do have mesh grates on those windows," he said. "But it's to protect the patients, not us. Some of the younger patients are there--a lot of them are drug cases, either on permanent trips, or totally catatonic. There's a couple floors of the true nuts too," he said, smiling at his choice of words. "Of course they have to be watched all the time."

"What do they do?" Ruth asked.

"They can be violent," Caine admitted, "Toward themselves or others. We have therapy sessions with them. Sometimes

they improve--occasionally enough to live in another complex, but not usually. Usually they just stay there."

"What does it take to get someone committed here?" Peter asked, after a moment.

Ruth whirled to look at him. He was leaning against Caine's desk, lighting a cigarette. He didn't look at her. Caine was chuckling.

"Such a bald statement, Peter! We usually refer to 'admitting' our patients, not 'committing' them. The state courts decide who is to be admitted," he explained. "After the competency hearing, it takes no time at all before we get them here."

"You don't examine them here?"

"Not for admittance," said Alan Caine.

"But could you?" Peter persisted. "Are you qualified to judge a person's sanity?"

"I can give a professional opinion," said Caine. "But the final decision is up to the court psychiatrists."

"Could you give me your professional opinion on someone?" Peter was saying, "I'd pay you..."

"Excuse me!"

The room seemed stifling to her. Ruth pushed her way past Alan Caine and out of the room. Sunlight was streaming at the doorway. She went onto the porch and leaned against the stonebacked bench. She didn't look at anything for a while, but slowly her attention started to focus on the old man across from her. He was in a wheelchair, his knees

covered by a green blanket. His mouth moved up and down as if he was speaking to someone, but he didn't say anything. He didn't even seem to notice that she was there. As Ruth watched him his mouth began to smack faster until he was shaking all over, and then he began to cry, quiet and whimpering like a baby, saliva drooling in fine streams from the corners of his mouth.

They're just old people, Alan Caine had said. But they weren't even that anymore. They were just whining, toothless babies who couldn't even control their own spit. This is what happens when you outlive your time, she thought, or when you get old without someone who cares, when you don't even have someone to lead you to your rocking chair.

The old man moaned and Ruth shut her eyes, expecting that next she would hear him gasping, his throat rattling for its last breath. Her hands were digging into her palms, and though she knew that it hurt, she couldn't stop.

"Well now, Tim, what's the problem, dearie? Feeling lonesome? Or have you wet yourself there?"

She'd come silently onto the porch in those sterile, silent white shoes. She looked young to Ruth--too young to be a nurse. But she was wearing one of the hot pink uniforms that marked the state employees, and she didn't seem at all upset by the old man's wailing.

"It'll be fine," she told him. "Come on, let's go change your clothes for some dry ones. She wheeled him away, pulling him backwards into the building.

It seemed colder now. And darker. Puffy grey and white clouds pushed in a steady stream across the sun, patterning the field with their shadows. The trees, gold in the sunlight, were brown in the shade. Alan Caine said that none of the patients ever went beyond the hospital grounds, none of them ever walked as far as the woods. But Ruth knew that Julie could walk that far, even someone her own age could walk that far. Ruth wondered if anyone had ever walked away from Smithfield, and whether they sent anyone after them if they did. They might just let them go until they starve in the woods-- or murder someone on the road. But the crazy ones have mesh on the windows, she remembered. They weren't really crazy at Smithfield, Alan Caine said, just sick, just old, just crying as they looked at nothing.

"Ruth?"

It was Peter's voice behind her, cautious, almost apologetic. She didn't turn until she felt his hand on her shoulder.

"I want to go home," she told him. "I want to go home now."

Ruth didn't hear anything from Giani or the clinic until Thursday, when she got the bills. Together they were over eight hundred dollars.

"Don't pay it," Peter said. "If you refuse her bills then she'll either have to be held accountable for them herself, or judged incompetent. Since everyone knows she's nuts, they'll be no problem!"

"I can't keep paying these!" Ruth said.

"I told you, you don't have to!" Peter yelled, reaching for the bottle of scotch on the counter. "You want another drink?"

"Only a little," she insisted, "I think we've already had a lot."

"We haven't had that much," he said. "Besides it's the beginning of my divorce! We have to celebrate that!"

"Divorces aren't for celebrating," Ruth said, but Peter wasn't listening.

"We have to celebrate the fact that the whole office knows!" he said. "Let's have another toast! A toast to Laura, your lovely bitch of a daughter, who had a copy of the divorce papers sent to my office! Not even to me, but to the office in general! So everyone could read them!"

"Divorces aren't for celebrating," Ruth said again.

"They should have posted it on the bulletin board in the

lounge! Or maybe had everyone initial it to be sure they read it!" He was yelling but Ruth didn't feel like answering.

"Maybe I should resign," Peter said, burping, "or fire everyone. Shit, every tight-assed bitch in that office is going to be blabbering about it."

"So what?" Ruth said. "You're still their boss."

"They'll be laughing their damn asses off."

"So what?" she said again, but louder this time. "So what? Does that make a difference to you?"

"Yes it makes a difference!"

"What difference? Maybe they won't flirt much with you anymore? What difference do those stupid girls make anyway?"

"They make a lot." His voice was sullen.

"Maybe they won't wiggle their asses for you anymore?"

"Maybe they won't screw with me on coffee breaks anymore!"

"They don't do that," she said.

"Oh, don't they?"

"No!" She meant to say it confidently but her voice caught a little. "They don't do that!" she said again, loudly.

"If you say they don't then I guess they don't, right Ruth? You always know goddam everything, so I guess you know who they screw."

"Shut up!" she said.

"You have daughters their age, don't you Ruth? You've raised daughters, so you know all about young girls--and you raised such great daughters, too! A frigid bitch and a lunatic."

"I didn't ask to raise them," Ruth said. "I didn't ask

to be anyone's mother."

"Well you're not," Peter snapped. "You aren't a mother to anybody!"

"Get out!" she told him. "You don't know anything about being a mother!"

"Some mother you are, Ruth! Making the moves on me before the wedding reception was even over. I mean, Jesus, you couldn't even give me a chance to get tired of her!"

"Shut up!" She was screaming now and she didn't even care.

"You're the one who was so anxious that Laura and I get married. You're the one who picked the date and the place in such a big hurry, not me, not Laura. It was all your big production, you wanted us to get married in such a goddam hurry. And for what? So you could screw me and keep it in the family? Jesus, Ruth, that's a hell of a reason!"

"That's not true!" she said.

"Of course it is. What logic, Ruth!"

"Shut up!" she told him. "You don't even know what you're talking about!"

"I was there. I know how it happened."

"Do you? Then you know that Laura was two months pregnant when you married her."

"She was not!" he said. "She couldn't have been."

"Think about it, Peter. Why else did she decide to marry you in such a hurry?"

"You're lying!" he said.

Ruth found herself suddenly tired.

"It doesn't matter now, anyway," she said.

"You pimped me!" he yelled at her. "You pimped me into marrying her."

"Peter, for god's sake..."

With a sudden motion he threw his glass at her. It hit her cheek and fell smashing on the corner of the table. Her eyes burned full of whiskey and she could hear someone in the background screaming. She woke up once after that and she was on her bed, still dressed but her clothes and hair were stiff in places, and sticky. Peter was sleeping beside her with his mouth open. His breath was foul. Ruth remembered that she pulled off her shoes, but when she woke again it was morning, and she was ill. Peter was gone and sunlight was streaming through the uncurtained windows. It hurt her eyes to look at it. She tried to block it out with the blanket, but still it was too bright.

"Oh God," she said aloud as she sat up. When she stood the room spun out of focus but she made it to the window and pulled the drapes. After that she ran for the bathroom and was sick again. When it was over she leaned back against the cool tiles and shut her eyes, but the pounding in her head hadn't stopped. It had been like that one time before that Ruth could remember--the only other time in her life when she had been sick from drinking. Arthur had been sick then too and he was trying to hold his own head as well as hers while she vomitted endlessly in Rosalie's lavender toilet

bowl.

"Getting drunk wasn't such a good idea," he said.

Ruth just moaned and buried her face in a towel.

"Shh!" Arthur cautioned her, "For god's sake don't wake Rosalie!"

"I want to die," she said into the towel, "Just let me die."

She could hear him being sick after that and she pulled the towel over her ears to block the sound. She was laying on the bathroom floor, her back pressed against the tub. After a few minutes, Arthur pulled himself over beside her and stretched out as much as he could.

"Look Ruth," he said. "Everything will be fine. I'll think of something."

"You thought of the bar," she said from beneath her towel.

"Sorry."

He was quiet for a long time and Ruth was almost relaxed enough to sleep.

"We can always get married," Arthur said.

"Married?"

"Yeah," he said. "Why not?"

"I don't want to get married," she said. "Not like this!"

"Well you can't undo what's done," Arthur said.

"We almost made it," Ruth said slowly. "We should have. It's been a whole summer, and next week you'd be back in Maryland. We should have made it through the summer."

"Well we didn't. So what are you going to do, put the

baby up for adoption?"

"I don't know."

"Rosalie will fire you, you know that."

"It's her grandchild!"

"All the more reason. You're going to have to decide, Ruth."

"I want to sleep," she had told him. "I just want to sleep."

She slept for a while there on the floor and then Arthur helped her into her bedroom. Rosalie was at the club by then so they both slept through the afternoon. It was dusk by the time they awoke, and by then Ruth had decided to marry him.

Ruth opened her eyes, surprised to find that it was still morning. She felt better, but hesitated to move. It was the sight of her bed that finally did it--the thought of sinking back into a pillow, closing her eyes for hours. She pulled herself to her feet and shut her eyes, moving toward where she knew the bed should be. She lay back against the pillows, trying not to be sick again and after a while, she slept.

Arthur was crawling up the steps toward her, reaching for the bannister in slow motion, but each time his hand would slip.

"Aren't you going to hold my head?" he moaned. "Aren't you going to help me?"

The baby leaned over Ruth's shoulder to look down at him.

"He's drunk," she said in Julie's voice.

"You can't talk yet," Ruth said. "How can you be talking?"

But she wouldn't say anything after that even when Ruth told her to. She just watched her mother and laughed.

"You all think it's funny," Arthur said. "But wait until you're in the same position. It won't be so funny then. It won't be funny!"

"I'm not laughing," Ruth said.

"Well make them stop!"

Ruth looked down and saw that Laura was beside her too. She was about five then--she was wearing a gingham dress that Ruth bought for her to wear to the kindergarten picnic. Laura was laughing and pointing her finger at him.

"Make them stop!" he told her. "Can't you even control your own children?"

"They aren't mine," she kept insisting. "They aren't mine! I don't want them!"

"Get them out of here then," he said, starting toward her again. "Get them out of here before I throw all of you out!"

"It's my house," Ruth said. "You can't throw me out of my own house."

"I'll throw you where I please!"

He was standing now and moving toward them, grinning, but not friendly.

"Stop it, Arthur," she said. Then she realized it was Peter. Laura was screaming. The sound vibrated along the stairs and rose again to surround them.

"Stop," Ruth kept telling them. "Stop!"

It was the phone and it didn't stop. Ruth reached for it when she finally realized what it was, and Giani's voice rolled out at her.

"I tried at your office, but they told me you weren't in. They were concerned that you hadn't called," he said. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm ill today," Ruth said.

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

"A touch of the flu," she lied.

"I see. Do you think you'll be well enough to pick Julie up tomorrow? I'm releasing her."

Julie was waiting at the reception desk, exactly where Ruth left her the week before. The receptionist looked up from her desk, smiling automatically as Ruth came in.

"Good Morning, Mrs. Sheridan! I guess you can go now, Julie!"

"Are you ready?" Ruth asked Julie.

She nodded and walked out to the car ahead of Ruth. She didn't say good-bye to the nurse, in spite of the woman's cheery attempts at conversation, and Ruth almost smiled. She probably talks non-stop whether anyone is there or not, she thought. She should be a patient instead of the nurse.

"How was last week?" Ruth asked Julie when they were in the car.

She shrugged.

"It was O.K.," she said, and turned to watch out of the

side window.

"There isn't much food at home," Ruth said, trying again. "Do you want to stop for groceries on the way home? You can pick out some things that you'd like."

"Anything's fine," Julie said without turning from the window.

But when she parked in the lot at Orpal's, Julie got out too, and went into the store with her. She checked the numbers on all the grocery carts and finally pushed three of them aside to get to the number she wanted.

"Is it really that important?" asked Ruth.

"It's seventy-two," she said. "I always choose seventy-two."

Ruth couldn't tell if Julie was being serious or not, but she gave no outward signs of being amused and started pushing the cart toward the first aisle.

"It means we have to buy seventy-two items, or they won't let us out."

She smiled at Ruth over her shoulder, and Ruth relaxed a little.

"Of course," she said, playing the game.

Despite her game, Julie seemed to be in a somewhat stable mood. She was more animated in the store than she had been in the car, but she was not over-excited as Ruth had seen her many times before. It didn't look like she was shop-lifting, either. Ruth tried to watch her as they moved from aisle to aisle, but as far as she could tell, everything that Julie took off the shelf was in the cart. She stacked it neatly

in the cart, re-arranging from time to time.

"The big things have to go on the bottom," she told Ruth.
"It won't be right, otherwise."

She took the beef roast that Ruth had put in the cart and moved it to the other end, under a box of crackers. Julie chose things at random, Ruth noticed. She paid no attention to what Ruth picked up and chose another bunch of broccoli, just after Ruth put some in the cart. Ruth didn't say anything about it and they went on to the canned goods. Julie chose anchovies there, and a can of pumpkin. Ruth remembered that Julie used to beg her for pumpkin pie when she was little.

"Do you want to get the rest of the ingredients and make a pie?" she asked.

Julie didn't answer. She turned to look at Ruth, then shrugged and took the pumpkin out of the cart.

"I didn't mean that you couldn't have it," Ruth said, but Julie put it back on the shelf anyway, and pushed the cart further down the aisle. Ruth picked up the pumpkin again and when they got to the checkout line she put it on the counter with the rest of the things. Julie must have seen it, but she didn't say anything.

They made it home without any further incidents and Julie went into her bedroom at once.

"I'm really tired," she told Ruth. "I think I'll sleep."

Ruth checked on her during the afternoon, but she was really sleeping. The afternoon went slowly. Ruth read for a while and then started the roast for dinner, even though

it was only four o'clock. We can eat early, she thought, we didn't have lunch. Then she remembered the pumpkin.

Try, Dr. Giani had told her, you've got to try to be friends with Julie.

"I'll try," she said aloud. "You won't say I didn't try."

She couldn't find the recipe book at first, but it was in the back of the cupboard, buried behind the popcorn popper that she no longer used. The book fell open to Sunshine Cake and Ruth saw that it was marked by a birthday card. The card was addressed to Laura and she recognized Arthur's writing.

"Happy Birthday, Laura," he had written, "I'm sorry that I can't be here tonight to tell you in person but I hope you'll understand. I've got a present for you too. It's not new, but I think you'll like it. I've left it upstairs on my dresser. Have your mother help you reach it. Love always, Dad."

He left her his harmonica. Laura made Ruth go up and find it as soon as the children had all gone.

"Can't we get it in the morning?" Ruth asked her.

"But I want it!" Laura wailed. "Why doesn't he come home and give it to me?"

"I'll give it to you," Ruth said then. "Maybe he'll be home in the morning."

But he wasn't, and he wasn't home the day after, or the day after that. Laura watched for him every night, that week, and the week after as well. She didn't play the harmonica, she just sat in a chair by the window, holding it and

watching for her father.

"Where did he go?" she asked Ruth every night.

"I don't know. Come on, now. It's time for dinner."

"But when will he be back?"

"Laura, I told you I don't know! Now come and eat dinner."

But she wouldn't eat. She pushed at her food with her spoon until Ruth was through feeding Julie and then asked to leave. She took the harmonica with her everywhere she went and she played it in the evenings as she sat by the window--the same two mournful notes, every night until Ruth couldn't stand it.

"Put that damned thing away!" she snapped. "And get away from the window. Don't you understand that he's gone?"

Laura ran to her room and though Ruth felt badly, she couldn't force herself to follow the child. She heard the harmonica again and Ruth let her finish this time. But when Laura had fallen asleep, she took it from her and hid it in the top drawer of her bureau. The child never said anything about it, and eventually she stopped looking for it.

Ruth replaced the card in the cookbook and turned to the section on pastry. There were three versions of pumpkin pie and she couldn't remember which one it was that she used to make.

"It doesn't matter, I guess," she said.

Ruth pulled out into the stream of morning traffic and headed toward the office. She missed her turn at Fourth Street and as she eased her way over to the next exit, she knew that she didn't want to go in today. They'd have talked about it all by now, the divorce, the fact that Laura sent a copy of the papers to the office, and her own name linked with Peter's. Her absence on Friday would have been noted too--she hadn't called in sick as she should have.

Worst of all though, would be facing Peter. The eyes would all be watching her when she faced him. He hadn't called or stopped by since Thursday and Ruth knew that the nausea rising in her stomach was fear. But she knew, too, that she'd have to see him. She could tell how things were once she saw him, and she would know how to coax him back into good humor. At least she had always known how before. But this time they'd said a lot. Too much, she thought, but they had both been drunk. You both said the truth, though, a voice in her head added. She knew that she had to see him, that she wanted to--but not now, not in front of the whole office, not with twenty pairs of eyes watching.

Her hands were shaking as she turned into the parking lot. She looked for Peter's Audi but it wasn't in its usual space and she didn't see it anywhere in the lot. When she got upstairs she found that the door to his office was closed and

the lights off. The outer office was filled though, and she noticed a lull in the steady rhythm of the typewriters when she entered the room.

"Is Mr. Makrianis in, Janice?" she asked the girl at the front desk.

"He's ill," she said. "He left ill on Friday afternoon and he's not back yet. He said it was a touch of the flu."

"The flu seems to be hitting everyone," Ruth said. "I was down with it myself on Friday."

"We wondered where you were," Janice said. "You didn't call in."

"I was too sick even to call," Ruth said.

"Well, I hope you're feeling better. Everything is piling up and we're still short some people. Darlene is out with the flu today."

Ruth felt a little guilty about starting the flu epidemic, and it would be an epidemic, now, she knew. One by one they would all decide to come down with it for a day or two. It was like that with any disease that could possibly be contagious. After two people called in sick, the others would declare themselves ill and collect a few days of sick pay. Usually she was irritated by their game, but today she was almost relieved. If they were counting each others' sick days and preparing for their own, they'd spend less time talking about her. The excitement about Peter's divorce might even die during such a week, and Ruth hoped that it would.

She spent the day sorting through the piles of mail that had accumulated in her basket and catching up on correspondence. No one from the outer office came in at all, and because Peter was not in, the phone calls were dealt with briefly. Ruth waited until half past five to leave so that the office would be empty. I made it through the first day, she thought as she shut off the last of the lights, but she knew that it was a lie. She hadn't made it through anything today. Julie had been easy to deal with and she hadn't had to face Peter yet.

"You're a liar," she said aloud and her voice echoed the whole length of the corridor. The tapping of her heels was loud along the tiles, punctuated by the occasional hisses and clangs of the steam cleaners as they cooled. Ruth walked down the two flights of stairs and she felt it again, the cold feeling that came with being alone. Perhaps he'll call tonight, she thought.

The door to her apartment was unlocked and as Ruth pushed it open, the odor of cinnamon surrounded her. Julie sat in the armchair, Ruth's five-branched silver candlebra burning in full force on the table beside her.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "I've always wanted to see it lighted."

"Be careful that the wax doesn't drip on the table," Ruth told her. She went into the bedroom to change. When she came out the lights were on and Julie was in the kitchen, beating eggs with a wire whip.

"I decided to make omelets, but I didn't want to start them until you got home. It's O.K. to have omelets for dinner, isn't it? I mean, other people have them for dinner, don't they?"

"It'll be fine," Ruth said. "Do you know how to make them?"

She said it without thinking and for a moment she thought Julie was angry at her question.

"I've made them before," she said turning her back to Ruth. "My friend taught me, he can make twenty different kinds of omelets."

"Do I know him, Julie?"

"Of course not. He's Italian," she went on. "And he's an artist. He did my portrait, you know. It's going to be in a gallery."

"A gallery?"

"I might get paid for it. Models make good money, you know. Maybe five thousand dollars, maybe six. I could go to Africa with it. They don't wear clothes there, you know. It's very hot in Africa."

The stories, there are always the stories, Ruth remembered. No matter how many hours of therapy she paid for, no matter how long Julie stayed in the clinic, there were always her stories. When she was small, Ruth had punished her for lying, but it hadn't stopped the stories. When she was in high school Dr. Giani explained them.

"They aren't stories to Julie," he said. "To Julie

they're real. Perhaps she invents them at first, but by the time she's told it to someone else, she believes it herself."

There had been an eskimo, Ruth remembered, a Texan, a talking spider, a shoe salesman. She made up stories too, where the people were real--she lied to policemen about her age, she told them that her mother was dead, that her father gave her whatever it was that she was caught stealing. Sometimes it seemed to Ruth that Julie knew she was lying, that she told the stories to escape punishment for things that she knew she shouldn't do, and that she was laughing at all of them, the doctors, the policemen, and particularly at Ruth herself.

She had learned somewhere to make omelets though. Ruth was surprised as she watched Julie swirl the egg into the pan with professional motions. When she slipped it onto the plate it was puffed, light golden, and perfect. She covered it to keep it warm and started on the second pair of eggs.

"Those look really good, Julie," Ruth said. "I remember when you used to scorch scrambled eggs."

"Scrambled eggs aren't an art," Julie said curtly. But then she smiled.

Ruth got two glasses from the cupboard and then started for the silverware when the phone rang. Her hands closed around the forks that she was holding and it rang again.

"Do you want me to get it?" Julie asked.

"No," she said slowly. "No, I'll get it myself."

She went into her bedroom to answer it on the extension there, but let it ring twice more before she picked it up. It wasn't Peter.

"May I speak with Julie?" asked a woman's voice. There was loud music and voices in the background, but Ruth thought that the voice was familiar.

"Laura?" she asked.

"I want to talk to Julie, not to Laura."

Julie was watching her from the doorway, still holding the omelet pan. Ruth held the phone out to her.

"You can start without me," Julie told her. "They aren't very good if they're cold."

"Was that Laura?" Ruth asked when she returned.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Julie shrugged.

"You don't have to believe me," she said getting up from the table. She didn't finish her omelet. "Excuse me, I'm tired," she said.

She went into her bedroom and closed the door. Every night since she had come home this time she did the same thing. Ruth wasn't sure if she slept, but she laid there in the dark for the rest of the night.

Ruth tried to read for a while, but nothing held her interest for very long. She found herself glancing over to the phone until she lost her place in the book again. If she called him, she would be making the first move--

and it would be better to see him in person, she thought. She started to dial his number but halfway through it she hung up. She poured herself a drink and finished it in two swallows. Then she poured another. Never drink alone, it was one of the rules.

"You'll be sorry if you drink alone," Arthur told her as he lifted the glass out of her hand.

"What if there's no one to drink with me?"

"Find someone," he said, "Even a stranger."

"That's a ridiculous superstition," she said, reaching for her glass again. "Give it back."

"Find someone to drink with you."

"I don't know anyone in this awful town!" she said. "And you're never here!"

"I'm here now."

He sat her glass on the counter and poured one for himself.

"You're very frustrating at times, Arthur."

"No one's perfect, Ruth," he said. "Someday you'll discover that you aren't either."

She dialed Peter's number and let it ring fifteen times before she hung up.

"Damn you," she said.

She waited until she finished the bottle and then she went to see him. Julie was asleep by then, but even so Ruth tried to leave quietly. She smiled when she pulled up in front of his house, Peter's Audi was in the drive and there

was a lamp on in the living room. She could see the faint glow that it made against the curtains. I chose those curtains, she smiled, and she knew that once she saw him everything would be made right again. Peter was stubborn, but she had always been able to break him down in the end. Ruth let herself in with the key he had given her after Laura left.

They were on the sofa, sprawled across its length. Their clothes were scattered and a fifth of scotch had tipped out onto the carpet. Peter saw her first, poised above the girl, laughing, his smile froze on his face, then hardened into anger.

"Get out!" he said. "Get out of here!"

Ruth saw the girl then, her careful blue eyelids melting a little at the corners, her cheeks flushed beyond the pink of her rouge. Darlene was smiling at her and pulling at Peter with her thin, white arms.

"Go to hell," she said to Ruth and she pushed herself deliberately along the length of his body, circling him with her legs, catching at his mouth with her tongue.

Ruth ran. She didn't remember leaving the house but she knew that she vomitted somewhere on the lawn. Arthur's voice laughed at her as she stumbled to the car and somewhere inside Ruth's head, Julie's eyes watched her, wide and pale, with their strange emptiness.

In the morning Ruth drove Julie to her weekly session at the clinic, but she didn't go on to work. She called the office when she got back to the apartment.

"I'm afraid I've still got the flu," she told Janice.

"I shouldn't have come back yesterday."

"Well, take care of yourself," the girl said.

"I'll try to make it in by the end of the week," Ruth lied.

There wasn't anything to do at home. Ruth noticed with a wry smile that the apartment was immaculate, there wasn't even any dust to dust. Usually she was proud of the way it looked, but today it reminded her of the clinic. She stayed there until eleven o'clock. She wasn't sure just when Julie would be back, but somehow she didn't want Julie to know that she hadn't gone to work.

Cosini's was a small neighborhood bar where there was no chance of running into anyone that she knew. She ordered a grilled cheese for lunch and planned to stay for only a drink or two, but she was still there, hidden in the corner booth at five o'clock. She waited until quarter past before she left so that she wouldn't get home too early.

"How was work?" Julie asked when Ruth came in.

"Just fine," Ruth lied.

She went to bed when Julie did that night and the room spun around her. For a moment she thought that she was going to be sick and she damned herself. But the next day she did the same thing.

On Friday Cosini's began to get crowded by three. They were mostly factory workers, Ruth thought, heavy men in rough, dirty clothes. The jukebox played, constant and loud after they arrived, and Ruth noticed more than one looking toward

her booth. She left early and decided to tell Julie that she'd finished work a little ahead of time.

At first Ruth thought that Julie wasn't home. The door to the apartment was still locked and there was no sign of anybody in the living room. Ruth went to the bedroom to change. As she pushed the door open she saw Julie, bent over her vanity table.

"What are you doing?" Ruth asked her.

Julie jumped and straightened.

"I want to borrow something," she said quickly, "I need to borrow some earrings."

"Earrings? For what?"

"It's tonight, tonight is the gallery, my picture, I need them, I need them tonight." She was half turned away from Ruth, her movements quick and jerking. "My friend, he called," she was saying, "My friend..."

Ruth remembered the story then--the Italian artist it had been that time. She knew that it did no good to deny Julie's stories, so she tried to reason with her in a different way.

"You know you can't go, Julie," she said. "Dr. Giani told you about it. You can't go anywhere this week, you have to stay with me."

"No!" she said. "I have to go!"

"I'm responsible for you and I tell you, you can't go."

"I'll be back tonight," Julie said. "I promise I'll come back."

"That's not the point," Ruth insisted. "I said you can't

go!"

"I can go!"

Julie screamed the words and as she whirled to face her, Ruth saw what her hair had hidden before. Peter's necklace glittered darkly in the curtained room. It was half-obsured by the collar on Julie's shirt.

"Where did you get that?" Ruth asked. She tried to keep her voice calm, but it rose in spite of her efforts. Julie's hand rose automatically to cover the necklace and she began to back away from Ruth, her pale eyes, wide.

"You took it out of my drawer, didn't you! You broke into my drawer and you took it!"

"No!" Julie said, and again, "No!"

"Take that necklace off!" Ruth told her. "Take it off now!"

Julie had reached the wall. She flattened her back against it, still protecting the necklace with her hand.

"Give it to me," Ruth said, reaching out as she stepped closer.

Julie tried to wrench away and Ruth caught at the necklace, snapping the fine chain so that it fell to the floor. Ruth only meant to get the necklace back but somehow she was hitting Julie, slapping her across the face and then shaking her until the girl's head snapped back and forth, banging against the wall.

"It's mine! Do you hear me?" Ruth told her. "The necklace is mine!"

Ruth was still shaking Julie when the girl went limp. Her shoulders slipped out from beneath Ruth's grasp and she flopped over to the floor with a thud. She moaned a little as she lay there.

"Julie!" Ruth said loudly, "Stop it, Julie. You aren't hurt."

Ruth thought that she said something, but before she could get close enough to understand, Julie's voice had risen, high pitched and constant into an even scream.

"I didn't hurt you," Ruth insisted. "Now get up, Julie!" But her own voice broke on the last word, and she could feel the coldness moving through her.

"Get up, now," she said again.

She tried to lift Julie by the shoulder but as soon as she touched her, the girl shrieked louder and her shoulders began to jerk convulsively.

Ruth ran to the phone and dialed for an ambulance.

She had given them Giani's name when she called and he walked into the emergency room shortly after they arrived at the hospital.

"What happened?" he asked Ruth, as he moved toward Julie's stretcher.

The intern had sedated Julie before moving her to the ambulance so that she lay calmly now, childlike as she slept. There was a small cut on her lip and Ruth could see the flesh on her right cheek, already beginning to darken into

a bruise.

"I don't know what happened," she told Giani slowly.

"I came home from work and I found her there, screaming."

"She was alone?"

Ruth nodded. "Is she all right?" she asked.

"She's got some bruises," Giani said, straightening. "We won't know about the rest until the sedation wears off. You might as well go on home, Mrs. Sheridan. Julie won't be awake until morning."

"I'd like to stay," Ruth said.

"There's no need for it," he told her. "You can't do anything more for her tonight."

"But I want to," Ruth insisted.

Giani shrugged.

"There's a visitor's lounge down the hall. You can stay there if you feel you have to."

"She's my daughter," Ruth said and Giani turned to look at her.

"Since when?" he asked. He motioned to the orderly and then followed Julie's stretcher through the double doors.

By noon Giani had the admission forms ready for her to sign.

"There are several private hospitals in the area," he said, "Or if you feel you can't afford that, she'll be sent to Smithfield State Hospital."

"Smithfield?"

"What does it take to get someone committed here?" Peter had asked.

"Admitted, not committed," Alan Caine was laughing.

"But Julie isn't crazy," Ruth had insisted.

"Come here, Mrs. Sheridan, and I'll show you what Julie is," Giani said. She followed him down the corridor and waited while he unlocked a series of heavy mesh doors. The door to Julie's room was unlocked, but she was strapped into the bed. She was no longer screaming, just moaning and hitting her head against the pillow in spite of her bindings. Saliva trickled along one corner of her mouth to her chin.

"We can't take care of her here anymore," Giani was saying.

"Help her," Ruth interrupted, "Can't you help her?"

"I'm sorry," he told her, "Not this time."

Ruth leaned back into the curve of the rocking chair. It was dark now. She'd watched the light fading along the wall. There wasn't a sun to go down today, just grey that slowly turned to blue, and then black.

I'm tired, she thought, surprised a little that she hadn't noticed before. She knew that she should sleep, but she rocked instead, watching the shadows sometimes, and sometimes watching nothing at all. Julie's portrait was across the room from her, propped against a chair. Ruth knew that it was yellow and purple and red, though now she could barely distinguish the outline of the canvas.

This afternoon the colors were swimming, swirling in a pulsating river that threatened to drown her. She tried to avoid it, to look out the window, to watch the floor, but everywhere it was bright, like sunlight magnified into floodlights. It was blinding. Optics had something to do with it as well, the intensity of the colors he had chosen. She had shut her eyes until the colors stopped spinning and her stomach calmed, then she tried again.

Julie's face was orange on one side, striped through the cheek with glaring pink and green. One eye looked out, pale and empty blue from its deep-set socket. Her breasts were the focal point of the whole picture. Exaggerated in their fullness, they writhed with yellow and purple lines,

swelling grotesquely to cherry red nipples. A curling stream of the red trickled from one of them down to her navel.

There was blood at Smithfield. Two orderlies were scrubbing the stones of the patio, hosing the red into rivers of pink while somewhere on the third floor, an old woman was screaming. Ruth hadn't expected blood--Giani hadn't told her that there had been blood. When he called this time, she never thought to be afraid.

"Julie's made a lot of progress," he had told her the day before.

"She jumped off the roof," he told her that day, and Ruth had gone to Smithfield, but not to visit.

"A shower of blood," she heard one of the nurses telling another. "My God, I've never seen anything so awful."

"Yes," Alan Caine said, "She hit one of the lightening rods as she fell. It severed her arm."

And an old man stopped her on the stairs with a claw-like hand.

"She flew to heaven," he said. "She had white wings and she flew to God."

"There'll be an investigation, of course," said Alan Caine. "I'm sorry, Ruth, so sorry."

The young artist had said he was sorry, too, when he gave her the painting. That was only this morning, Ruth discovered, it's still the same day as this morning.

By mid-morning it had started to snow, tiny flakes that

barely hit the ground before they melted. But they would come back, she knew, again and again, until the streets were covered with them and they turned sooty black as semi-trucks and buses ran over them. It wasn't like that in the South. It was December when they buried Joleen's baby, Ruth remembered. The air had been cold, but there hadn't been any snow, not like this morning when the air was white.

Her casket had just been released and a chunk of dirt tossed after it. The priest stood beside the grave intoning his endless litany of prayers and everyone watched downwards as the dais slipped lower and lower into the ground. An old woman beside Ruth crossed herself, her wrinkled hands quivering with her voice in the prayer. Ruth didn't know her. Laura was standing on the other side of the grave with Julie's artist. Ruth couldn't remember his name, but she saw that he was crying. He wept silently, tears streaming along his cheeks without at all distorting his face. He didn't seem to know that he was crying. Laura's expression was calm and Ruth knew that it must mirror her own face.

The Mapes family had never been ones to cry. Joleen had been dry-eyed, though solemn when they buried her little boy, even though Jos Pickert had wept like a baby.

"Shut up your snivelin'," Pa had bellowed out at him, "A child born in sin don't deserve to live!"

"Jackson Mapes, you leave this place, right now!" the preacher said. "We come to pay respects to this innocent child who never asked to be born, in a sinning way or not."

Now, you either pay your respects or get on out of here. This here's a Christian burial."

Ma never cried either, not even as her cheeks flushed red with shame as Pa dragged her out of the cemetery. And she didn't cry later in the afternoon when he threw his empty whiskey bottle at her and twisted her arm so hard that after it broke, it would break again easily, and never really heal. Ruth watched him from the doorway, and Lyle had seen too, but neither of them cried. After that Lyle would cry in his sleep sometimes and Ma would come in quietly, careful not to wake Pa, and she'd hold him and rock him. But even then, Ruth never cried.

The priest closed his book and after a comforting hand on Ruth's shoulder, he left. The others, each in their turn, stopped for a word with her before leaving. Her mouth hurt from the smiling, but she talked with each of them, nodding as they patted her hand. Laura and the artist turned away without saying anything, and started up the hill toward the road. They were nearly there when Ruth saw Peter moving unsteadily toward them, slipping on the wet grass as he worked his way down the hill. While she watched, he caught his heel on a small grave marker and nearly tripped. He righted himself and even where Ruth stood, she could hear him cursing.

"Hello Laura!" he called loudly.

He stumbled again and almost fell at her feet. Ruth had expected him at the funeral, though she had been glad that he wasn't there. It was the sort of thing that Peter would do,

attend funerals when he thought it was expected of him. She saw now why he hadn't been there. He pulled himself up, trying to brush the mud off his elbow and smeared it down the length of his sleeve.

"How've you been, Laura?"

His words were slurred but his voice carried. Ruth couldn't tell what she said to him but he nodded.

"This your new boyfriend?" he asked her, jerking an arm toward the young man. "This your hot new bed-partner?"

Laura didn't say anything and Ruth started toward them. Peter was pumping the man's hand.

"How're you doing, man?" Peter was mumbling, "I'm her husband, you know, her last big..."

"Ex-husband, Peter," Laura said.

"Ex-husband," he echoed and then Ruth was beside him.

"Hello Laura," she said.

Peter turned toward her.

"I'm late," he said. "I tried, Ruth, but I'm too late for the funeral."

"You're drunk, Peter,"

Ruth's voice sounded harsh, even to herself.

"A little," he said, his voice cracking. Ruth didn't look at him.

"You remember Arno, Ruth," Laura said, "Julie's friend."

"Of course," she said, smiling one more time. "I'd forgotten your name though, I'm afraid."

"That's O.K.," he said. He was crying again.

"Arno's taken Julie's picture out of the gallery," Laura said. "He wants you to have it."

Ruth noticed again how much Laura looked like Julie, especially now, with her hair hanging free to her waist. It was almost uncomfortable to look at her, to meet her eyes, blue as Julie's had been.

"Julie modeled for Arno last summer," Laura said.

"Yes, she told me," Ruth lied.

"Did she?"

Laura was watching her with a careful expression, waiting for her response. What is it you want me to say, Ruth asked silently, what answer am I supposed to give you? Arno finally broke the silence.

"I brought the painting with me," he said. "I'll put it in your car if you like."

Ruth nodded.

"Thank you," she managed to say.

Laura went with him to the car and Ruth followed a little behind. She had never been able to answer them, she knew, either of them--she had never been able to figure out which answers they were asking for. Arno slid the painting into the back seat and opened the door for her.

"I'm sorry," he said, as Ruth drove away.

"I'm sorry, too," Ruth said now, as she rocked back and forth in the darkness.

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