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THE INHERITANCE

By

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ABSTRACT

THE INHERITANCE

By

Sandra Cecelia Seaton

Using a variety of literary forms, The Inheritance explores the life of African-Americans between World War II and the present. The title of the thesis, "The Inheritance," is also the title of the longest story, a novella which deals with the conflicts of family life. "The Inheritance" and five short stories," "A Kitchen Tale," "The Cleanup Hitter," "The Checker," "Wars," and "Until The Real Thing Comes Along," as well as two vignettes, "Mainbocher" and "Rothstein," are set in the urban North. Fictional portraits of small-town Southern life include the vignette "By the Moon When the Moon Was Up" as well as a longer story, "Night Song." A one-act play, "The Bridge Party," evokes the atmosphere of a women's social club in the black community of a Southern town in the forties. This thesis attempts to affirm the diverse heritage of African-American life; the author feels privileged to be one of the heirs of this inheritance.

To James

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The Inheritance

She never knew him very well. After her plane arrived she wasn't sure who to look for, whether there'd be anybody there at all. Her fingers began to close, then went limp. He was so hard to remember. Like a dream when you wake up suddenly and try to think back. She imagined someone just like she was, tall, slender, with light brown skin. There had been a man at the family church in Columbia with the same last name as her father's. She went to Columbia, where she was born and where he was born and where the man lived, every summer after grade school was out. Whenever she saw the man, he was tall, slender, light brown-skinned; she would look him up and down and try to look through him, inside, where people hide things, hoping that something was buried there and that this time, this summer, he would come up to her, finally, and say "Hi, Flora. I was wondering when you'd get here."

She imagined because dreams satisfied her craving to travel beyond the world she already knew, a world bound by fences there before she even existed. Sometimes they were so high they were impossible to climb over. She had been named

for one of her grandmother's children, one of a set of twins, girls, Flora and Dora. They were born in 1910, four years before Flora's mother, in the South. Nobody teased her about her name, ever. At that time (a phrase Flora had heard so many times--at that time you couldn't or at that time you weren't allowed to) at that time there were no hospitals that you could use.

Soon after the twins were delivered, months early, so small you could rest one of them in the palm of your hand, they were laid a few inches from the bedroom stove, in the hopes of creating a crude incubator. They lived a few weeks, fighting hard the whole time, struggling to cry, to make known their desire to be held and nourished. Especially Flora, she hung on for dear life, days after they had expected her to go. The fences were just there. It didn't have much to do with individual courage. Not like the great dream, some TV show where the superhero rises up against all odds. Oh, there was courage, but it could only take you so far. The fences were just there. Flora was a fighter; she crashed them down whenever she could. Sometimes they flew right back up in her face. And that wasn't a dream. Or a nightmare. Just hard reality. She never expected anything to be handed to her. But wasn't everybody entitled to both parents, a mother and a father?

When she begged, her mother would tell her about one or two incidents, the same ones over and over. Leona would tell her how the two of them drove to Tuskegee to get married and

returned to Columbia the same night for their teaching jobs the next day--no wedding pictures to show, no snapshots of a screwball honeymoon trip. As Leona combed Flora's hair into small braids she would tell her about the day when Flora was a baby, nine months old, that her father, a Kappa, had come by in a car filled with frat brothers (screaming and roaring out one of their latest stomps, whirling up the steep road in a cloud of dust, ten men thrusting up and down, the car so full that it literally shook the ground) to demand the wedding ring he had placed on her finger. Once Flora stopped her, "I thought you all were finished with college?" Leona shook her head. "He was a Kappa. That's something they never give up. That's something for life." Then Flora asked her that time and the five or six other times she told the story, "Did you keep it?"

Her mother would stare coldly, snatching the comb sharply through her hair, another time straightening the blue netting underneath the skirt of her prom dress, another time leaning over her bed covers, and say, "No, I didn't want that ring. That ring meant nothing to me."

Flowered pillows puffed up, an old chenille spread pulled around her, her head resting quietly, she could easily sink into a dream. This time, nothing would stop her. He would come up to her, finally, and say "Hi, Flora. I was wondering when you'd get here."

As she tried to adjust her clothes and hair, a luggage cart wheeled by. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep her balance. A brooch, an old snapshot, a letter from Mike, everything in her purse fell to the floor. The brooch was bordered in gold. The furrows in the engraving were dark with age. On the inside, red and green flecks, shaped into flowers and leaves, adorned a black enamel center. She tried to regain her balance. The trip to Cincinnati had been unsettling. The plane had inched along through turbulence, then circled the airport, arriving an hour after the scheduled time. Now the piano music from the speaker overhead, Eddie Heywood's "Canadian Sunset," was competing with announcements of arrivals and departures. Her fist closed tight around the brooch. When her teacher had given it to her after her last piano lesson she had held it that way, tightly. She stared at the clock; the thing was taking her whole lifetime. She was tired, exhausted. A faint ring continued in an empty phone booth across the way. The crowd had thinned out. The sounds died till there was only the barely perceptible wail of a crying, whining baby.

Whenever she was unsure of herself her mind would wander. Her thoughts would drift back, to another time, when she had the same feelings. That's when things would double up. All the fear would go to one place. She would stop and think about the other time, one time would pile on another, one face, one voice, like another voice, until she was exhausted, smothered, hardly able to breathe. For the second

time in three months she was starting something new. The first time was the Sunday she stood at the door to Mrs. Hessler's rooming house. It was fall semester at the University of Illinois, 1964. She was not immediately shown to her room. They were lined up at the door: Mrs. Hessler, a frail, white-haired woman; Sister Mary Katherine, a Catholic nun studying anthropology, dressed in the traditional black, pressed and starched so often that the cloth had taken on a grey cast; and Sue, a Taiwanese student who chose not to speak. Flora, tired, rested her suitcases against the half-opened door, and stared at the bottom of the nun's habit; she was getting impatient. The three women took up most of the room in the hallway, so much that it was impossible to start up the stairs.

Mrs. H., a 90 year old woman, moved toward Flora, leaning close enough to read her like a newspaper, running her eyes back and forth across Flora's features. "What are you?" She studied the color on Flora's face. "Are you Indian?"

"No."

"Are you Puerto Rican?"

"No." Flora shook her head again.

"Are you foreign Spanish?" The landlady raised one finger.

Flora didn't smile, "No, I'm Negro."

The old woman started to tremble. Flora could feel the tension, the old woman's body giving way.

A pale hand darted out from the folds of the robe and gave support, as Mrs. H. started to speak, "I don't know. I just don't know...We've always been a family here...our own little family." Flora stopped for a minute. It was as if she was relieving the woman of her tension by taking it up herself. It was as if she was starting to fall apart. Flora thought she heard something drop to the floor. Her fingers darted to her neck, closing, then opening . She was still kneeling when she pinned the brooch to her coat. On her feet again, she moved closer to the old woman in the housedress: "You advertised at the dean's office." She raised her voice. "They told me 'there's a room. Better get over there.' They told me to come over. You'll have to call them. You'll have to..."

When she raised her voice again, Sister Mary reached down for a suitcase and announced in a firm tone, "Let's help Flora upstairs with her bags, Mrs. Hessler." The sister gave a bag to Sue and started up the stairs. Mrs. Hessler, who had a daughter in Sister Mary's order, respected the church. She complied with the sister's wishes.

After that first day there were never any confrontations with Mrs. H. She told Flora that she could have the room for the whole year. Of course, it had taken Flora three weeks to find the place at Mrs. Hessler's. When she answered one ad, for a room over a funeral parlor, the owner took one look at her, then ran up the stairs and out of sight. Mrs. Hessler finally decided that Flora went to "a

colored university" and that all her teachers were "colored." At the end of the first semester when a white friend came over to give her a ride home to Chicago, Mrs. Hessler wondered, out loud, whether it was the mailman. Sometimes, after a few days, when Mrs. H. had decided it had been weeks, maybe months, since she'd seen Flora, she would grin shyly and give her a big hug; she would call her "our little girl."

Flora watched as the last of the crowd hurried out of the airport. She heard the phone ring again behind the empty counter. A few summers ago she had flown to New York to see Mike. She had been sure he would be waiting for her. As she entered the terminal he appeared at the gate, holding a large bouquet, tied loosely with a long white ribbon that fell to the floor when he reached for her. This time, tonight, she wondered whether her father would be there to meet her. That's when it always started. When she wasn't sure. That's when things started moving too fast. When there were too many unknowns. If she could get out of that circle it would be all right, she could gather herself, bring her feelings down. If she couldn't, the rush of feeling would start, becoming more powerful as it swept up everything in its path. It would keep going, flying directly at the first person to see her. With the first words she spoke, that big

ball of fear would go flying out.

Flora waited standing next to her suitcases, trying to ignore the music playing overhead. She didn't want to leave and go for a drink or food. She fingered the brooch, the raised surface, the places where the grooves were heavy and old. The slender fastener easily moved back and forth. The phone across the way was ringing again. She remembered the long distance call a month ago.

"Flora," Mrs. Hessler called up, "Flora, long distance." She had imagined that call, their first contact, almost from the first story her mother had told her as she combed and braided her hair. Flora had worked hard to build that story. Some kids like to pretend they are really adopted. They create a play world with made-up parents who eventually, after a long search, will come, finally meet their lost child and go away, forever united. For her, his being the real father she'd never seen was good. Even better were the games she played with him in her mind: the trips they took together, always in summer when the sun was hot overhead; the rivers he rescued her from; the fights he had with every boyfriend who played her along--better than any life that you could actually have.

"Flora, this is your father calling." The words startled her. She didn't answer right away. "We've done a lot of research on you, really checked you out." She wondered if he had married again. He talked for awhile. Asked her how she wanted to make the trip--plane, bus,

train. And he ended "You are our sole heir. Our sole heir."

Had he forgotten? She could hear Leona's voice high and strong. "He was mad...He said you were Wallace Mitchell's child." Flora felt the weight of one of the suitcases. "You were light when you were born, real light, almost white. You had that sandy hair and those limp little curls. I still remember the time he came to see you. You weren't a week old. He took one look, said 'That child's too light, that's not my child.' That's the only time he ever saw you."

"But I'm not that light now. I'm a light brown, not as light as those people who used to pass."

Her mother lowered her eyes and raised her hands, as if to pray. "His mother told him that. She told him you had to be Wallace Mitchell's child. Wallace was real light, had a nice grade of hair. She said that about me and Wallace, even though she knew it was a lie." Leona pulled Flora's braid tighter till the child's hair covered her lap. "Columbia's a small place. She knew me and Wallace courted back in college, at A and I. That's why she picked him out of the bunch. It was a lie and she knew it." The story excited Flora, no matter how often she heard it. Since she'd never seen her father, all she had was the drama, the mystery; it seemed to be about someone else. Each time, like a part she was rehearsing, she wanted to hear the story again. Her mother repeated it over and over, like an echo bouncing, then coming back. "He was all she had. Her only child. She hated him going off, getting married, leaving. It was her

way of getting him back. He'd already gone back home, to his mother's and father's, by the time you were born."

All the stuff with her father started out as fantasy, the way every kid dreams. But she wanted to know more. Her mother had never tried to contact him, to ask him to come and see her. She still remembered a picture of her mother, Leona, wearing a softly draped silk dinner dress, black suede heels, her hand resting on a love-seat. There were flowers in her hair! The picture's edge was jagged. Some of it must have been missing. "Was he in the other half?" When she asked--she would have given anything to know--her mother only shrugged. One day at school after a month at Mrs. Hessler's, she looked up his address in a Cincinnati directory. It was on that day that she realized she didn't need permission. Not from her mother, not from anybody. She had to take the step herself. After she found the number, she ran out of the library and down the quad laughing, a strong, high laugh. She could have done it any time. Still, she was surprised when he answered her letter. But why? It was her own doing. Her mother didn't even know about it. She hadn't helped her. This time Flora had made it happen.

She stood in the lobby of the airport until most of the passsengers had met friends and left. There was a man standing near the coffee machine, wearing an old wool chesterfield, a scarf, a hat that had been worked over and molded into an easy shape. When she tried to read his expression she could only make out what seemed to be a half-

smile or, maybe, a smirk. She clutched the brooch tighter until the color drained from her hand. He didn't move towards her. He kept looking down, the way some people do when they're not sure they want to be recognized. He didn't move until she came close enough to call him by his name. "Father?"

"Father?" she said the words again. "Father." He stepped towards her and slid his arm around her waist. For a minute, she imagined she was at her first prom, dressed in a strapless formal, with three bouffant petticoats all of blue net, one hers, two her best friends'. Slowly, they proceeded out of the lobby and into his car.

On the way home he talked. Fast, clipped, not pausing, outlining the plans for her visit. Tomorrow night, the night before Thanksgiving, they would gather in the formal dining room--a full dress rehearsal for the holiday dinner. That first night, before Flora even unpacked her suitcases, he showed her the room.

"I've got four of these." He opened a polished mahogany cabinet and revealed a set of sterling silver flatware. "I keep one set out. I've got three more I keep locked in the basement." Carefully returning each piece to its case, he tried to ignore the sounds in the next room, a cough, then a scraping noise, a chair being pushed across the floor. "This set's Victorian." He held a knife up to the light and turned it slowly. "A lotta niggers would give anything to get in here and get to this stuff. Someday I'm gonna catalog it.

Sell it to a dealer."

"They're so delicate, like something alive." Flora reached for a small spoon. "If I touched them..." She cringed. Everything was moving so fast. She would never let him sell them. His things should always stay there, in that room. In a place that would never change--that would keep it all untouched.

"This light..." He ran his hand down a sterling floor lamp with a small bell-shaped top and a thin delicate stem that swelled at the floor. "I took it to a dealer, this antique dealer--wanted an appraisal. He couldn't even put a price on it, said he'd never seen a thing like it."

The noises in the next room had stopped. The thin ivory panels that stretched around the dining room looked as if they had been recently pressed and starched. Someone had gone over the room and arranged it in a methodical, particular way. A fragrance, sweet, heavy, hung in the air.

"You haven't seen the worst yet. Wait'll you see the downstairs...we call it Jack Benny's basement." Flora turned to find Marion, her father's wife, standing behind her, holding a dustcloth. "Everybody calls it that. Al's got all that junk piled up. You could lose a big child down there." She stopped to smooth her dark, gray-flecked hair into the chignon at the back of her neck. She was light-skinned, almost Italian-looking, with narrow eyes. She looked a lot like Flora's mother. "I bet Al has five mah-jong sets down there, all that old luggage and stuff."

He cut in. "Old luggage. That's all over near the furnace. That's nothing. My problem is backlog. Pieces that need to go out. You should see all the stuff that needs refinishing. My God..." He wiped his forehead with a folded handkerchief, then turned away from Marion to the mahogany cabinet on the side of the room. "Now, Russell Wright. I collect his everyday dishes. You won't see these, never use them for holidays." He yawned and pulled a gray plate out of another cabinet. "This is Russell Wright." He picked up a large gray bowl. "This is Russell Wright." He picked up a cup and balanced it on top of the bowl and the plate. "And this one, this is Russell Wright. I've got four or five sets of this stuff."

Marion shook her head. "Better to spend time worrying about the Thanksgiving menu than about what we're going to serve it on. Flora, do you have any favorites?"

"I never think much about that stuff...whatever Mother fixes..." Flora shrugged and busied herself examining a large soup bowl.

Marion turned away abruptly and began arranging the chairs. She paused for a minute, as if thinking something over, then left the room.

Before Flora went to bed her father took her down to the basement and showed her a Louis XIV console, some English watercolors and a lot of old mahogany clocks. She asked him about an old photograph on the wall, about three feet square, that seemed almost painted. He pointed to an

old man in the picture. "That's your great-grandfather...Baptist minister...over there, that's my father, your grandfather. He was principal of Macedonia High School. The others--all of them..." He waved his hand across the picture. There were four men and three women. They stared back, stern, deadly serious. Their jaws were stiff and pronounced. "...my father's brothers and sisters. You've seen her. Your great-aunt. She taught you piano."

"Laura?"

He nodded.

Flora felt the small brooch at her neck.

"Laura wore that brooch when I was a little boy." He raised his hand as if to touch it. "I remember that."

Every Saturday, starting on her fifth birthday, her mother walked silently with her to the woman's house. Flora stared at the wall. The woman was young, her face slim, her features chiseled, delicate---like the brooch. Her skin smooth, black, all one tone. Flora looked for traces of the old woman she had known, the smile, the curve of the hairline. Her hair must have been unbraided, then brushed and brushed until it formed the sweep at the top of her head. She wasn't smiling. The row of tiny buttons that stopped at her neck held her face so still that she couldn't have moved. Flora remembered the old woman in the faded housedress with short hair and sweat dripping from her edges. When the piano lesson was over, she had unfastened the small brooch from her housedress and placed it in

Flora's hand.

Her mother never told her much about the old woman, but she always said Miss Laura was the only colored piano teacher in town that was conservatory trained. He looked at her, his voice more serious than it had been before, "They used to ride around Columbia in a wagon, taking pictures." He was thinking about the old times. "Someday, I've got to fix that frame."

While they were in the basement he pulled Flora over to a wicker sofa. He studied her features carefully. "You know Marion's been cleaning this place from top to bottom, planning a big Thanksgiving dinner. All for you. She's really been anxious. I tried to get her to hire somebody--she wouldn't do it. Marion's funny. She won't let just anybody in here. She's really giving you the red carpet."

Flora's mind wandered back to that sweet, heavy fragrance. No, she couldn't think about his wife now. She was too fascinated by antiques, old things. To her all this talk wasn't bragging. The stuff from the 60's was OK, but it didn't have the romance of the other times. At school a lot of her Saturday afternoons were spent at Junior League thrift shops and Salvation Army stores looking for old things--jewelry, pictures, small objects that you could use to imagine how it must have been--the 20's, the 30's, the old movie sets. Why was he like that too? She looked at him admiringly. "This is all the stuff I love. How did you know?"

He ignored her question and kept on. "A lot of niggers would give any-thing to get in here. First I'm gonna have everything catalogued. Then I'm gonna build a high wall around this place and sit on the front porch with two Dobermans and a rifle." He nudged her and threw his head back again, laughing. Then he stopped suddenly, leaned over, her words finally registering. He examined her features, especially her jaw when it slipped a little. "You do? You love it too?" His features softened. He didn't seem that old anymore. She nodded yes.

Marion was tired of traditional Thanksgiving dinners. Instead of turkey, she made baked chicken and served it with buttermilk dumplings, rolled as thin as they would go, then boiled in the broth from the gizzards and served with gravy. They ate cornbread dressing, turnip greens, fresh okra, candied sweet potatoes and hot water bread. When Marion served the greens, she brought out trays filled with a pickle relish called chow-chow, chopped onions, finely minced boiled eggs and pickled beets. For dessert they ate Al's favorite, banana pudding, a baked custard filled with wafers and sliced bananas, then topped with meringue.

The Friday after Thanksgiving the two of them got in his car and hit every thrift store in town. Her mother and her aunt made fun of her for going to "junk stores" (that's what they called them). To find an adult who liked to go thrifting--he even liked to buy old clothes. He joked about his business partner, a prominent doctor, screwing up his

face to show mock scorn. "Barnes, why don't you get yourself some decent clothes?" He whispered in Flora's ear. "You know Walters wears all those Brooks Brothers clothes." He chuckled to himself.

The ease with which he admitted wearing old clothes was a little unsettling at first. Her mother had always told her to be careful about what she wore, that someday she might be rushed to the hospital with no time to change. This fear was a small example of the philosophy of a whole class of a people that had been raised with the idea that you had to look as good or better than "they" did, that you had to spend your ready cash on immediate needs, even though those needs represented a body of things that grew and grew, larger all the time like a monster that ate as it went. Even if you had to go into deep debt and suffer from it, it was worth it, if you could have lovely, elegant things, things that weren't just clean but spotless, things that were new at the beginning of each season, things that looked new always.

Her father was different. He liked things. But they were his own special things that other people wouldn't necessarily value. Oh, there was money in them. His things would sell for a lot, no doubt about that, but there was more. The two of them, she had it all figured out--her father, Al, and Flora herself--they cared about the same things. Sometimes at school, when she should have been studying, she would daydream about searching through bins of

old clothes from the thirties and forties, for jersey pilot blouses, Sidney Heller silk crepe suit blouses and old, double-breasted ladies' chesterfields. In her dream she would discover a Sidney Heller blouse in mint condition, a shade of blue-green so rare that it could only have been silk. The silk Heller blouses with the tuck pleats down the front cost about forty dollars back in 1943. You couldn't even touch that kind of fabric today. Flora was convinced that everything now was being made out of lingerie silk. It wasn't just the crime of cheaper material; she prided herself on knowing the difference. That was important. Once she found a pair of brown shoes engraved "Berluti, Paris," probably from the twenties. High thick heels, clunky and round-toed, the most beautiful fine-grained calfskin. She had shown them to her best friends, the two Pats, and the three of them had wailed and sobbed and held their hands up to the ceiling in a plea to have their feet shrink and be blessed with three identical pairs of shoes. Flora's twelve-year-old sister was the only person who could wear them and she thought they were strange.

While they were driving he played with the dial until he found the classical station.

"You won't believe what happened at this concert at school. This musician, well, sort of a composer, this guy named John Cage."

"A guy in a cage." He smirked and glanced at her suspiciously.

"I saw him! He took this Kleenex and he blew his nose right into the microphone... with a Kleenex! In front of four hundred people...On Sunday afternoon, too. I couldn't believe it."

"Whatever happened to Tschaikovsky?"

"Oh, Pops, this is 'new music.' That stuff is old."

He arched his eyebrows. "Hah hah, aren't we sophisticated."

He didn't say anything else until he stopped the car in front of his partner's office, concentrating on the music, a piece for unaccompanied piano. Before he got out of the car, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a package of M and M's and pressed them in her hand. "You stay here." Then he motioned to the real estate magazine on the dashboard. She suppressed a smile--candy for his little girl. From the little her mother had told her, she already knew that her father was a real estate dealer. He had a degree in chemistry and half of one in physics. In the forties, he had tried to get jobs in New York, working in labs, but at that time they didn't let blacks in the sciences, so he started selling real estate. He and Walters, a local black M. D., were in business together with a Jewish friend. The business was called Rothstein, Walters and Barnes. He had confessed to Flora, that first night when they were in the basement looking at his collection of things, that he wished it all could have been a different way:

"I should have made a lot more than I did. I used to

have the biggest real estate firm in Cincinnati--52 desks, my own company. But I squandered it all. Hopping the plane back to Frisco to pick up a sports coat. All that kind of stuff. Crazy stuff. I didn't have nobody to work for. " He gazed into her eyes. "I didn't have no reason. Who was I going to leave it to? Who would have cared? Now I'm the third man: Rothstein, Walters and Barnes." She sat up abruptly. Her father was rapping on the window, grinning and laughing. Before he got in the car, he turned and waved to a man standing at an office window.

His mood had changed; he was upbeat, jovial. He nudged her gently. "Let's do some serious thrifting." The two of them, Flora and her father, were the last ones to leave the Salvation Army that day. She walked out hugging a blue porcelain water pitcher, the kind they used to sell with Westinghouse refrigerators. The wind blew hard against her, so she had to hold on tighter. It was as if something was trying to take all this away from her. She held on even tighter. The pitcher was like the one at her grandmother's house. When her grandmother really felt good about somebody she would say, "Seems like I been knowing her all my life." The thought would reach way down, inside. It would say everything about the way a person was, about the way a person dreamed, about the person's feelings, about the person's whole body, the words would pull everything out, everything. That's how Flora felt; the circle was complete.

On the way home Al was yelling out the car window,

calling into the cold air. "I don't know when I've felt like this. You shoulda seen the expression on Walters' face when I pointed to you from the window." He glanced at his own face in the mirror and laughed. "You're mine, you know that?" Flora nodded. "I've been thinking for one. People--giving me $600 deposits on houses...as soon as they change their mind, I let them have it, I let the money go. Right out the window. I'm telling you. That's over. I've found somebody to work for, dammit. I've got a reason." He stuck his head out the window again, "I'm through giving back deposits!"

When they were almost to the house, he stopped the car and pulled over to the side of the road. He told her that he'd noticed things on this trip, trees, a roadside stand, that he'd never noticed before. When he reached over to start the car, he whispered. "I just want to know if you hold it against me...Everything that happened. I know you blame me." He clenched his teeth.

"Blame you? I could never...I've always wanted to see you."

"Always?" he tried to think about the word. "You have?"

"I dreamed about it."

"You thought about me?"

"All the time...Now that I'm here I don't care about any of that other stuff."

"Not even me never coming to see you...?"

"Not about any of it. It's like a dream. You, you're my

father, I never thought it would be like this...so easy. I mean, we know each other so well."

"Not even me not coming when you were a baby?"

"Mother said you came by...right after I was born and..."

He sat up quickly and turned the ignition. "We were young." His mood changed again; he was quiet the rest of the trip.

Later that night, he laughed and recounted one of their stops, pretending to be his partner, Walters. "...he left a patient on the table. Said, 'Barnes, I gotta see this...' So he put on his glasses and looked out the window at the car. Must of looked for five minutes. Then he took them off and stared straight at me, just like this and said, 'That's your daughter, Barnes.' "

Marion shook her head. "You know he couldn't see that far."

Her father laughed and led Flora to the small bathroom off the kitchen. He stood beside the sink and posed in front of the mirror, holding his face next to hers. He moved his jaw to one side, pointed to hers, then announced quickly, "The Barnes jaw. You're my daughter all right." Flora's voice was filled with excitement. "When we look in the mirror, it's like seeing the same thing twice."

Marion shook her head. "You two sure look silly." She shrugged her shoulders. "You don't look the least bit alike to me."

Flora and her father kept taking turns grinning in the mirror. They didn't hear Marion when she left the room.

The next day before they went thrifting Flora wanted to show off one of her "finds" from the Salvation Army, a red and blue robe with chevrons on the sleeves, a buy from the Champaign Junior League. She wore it proudly to breakfast and waited for his comment.

"Superman, huh?" He went back to reading the newspaper.

She looked down. It was an old wool robe from the forties. She knew about capes, Halloween costumes, but she'd never connected the robe with Superman. He had a point. Maybe some kid had ordered it from the back of a magazine so he could be a superhero rising up against all odds. She could do that herself. Later that afternoon when they were ready to go to the Salvation Army again, she wore a black sheath dress, one piece of jewelry at her neck, and black shoes. For a touch of drama, she threw an old coat from the forties over her shoulders, applied green eyeliner and two or three coats of mascara.

When her father saw her, he reached for the folded handkerchief in his pocket and motioned to her eyes. She grinned, leaned against him and pulled a pair of dark glasses from her pocket. "It's OK, Pops. It's cool."

He stared straight at her, then took a long, slow look starting at her black shoes and stockings and working up to her face. "Florodora girl, huh?"

She didn't smile back.

"I've got a cigar box full of jewelry, the kind of stuff you like to wear. It belonged to your grandmother, my mother. You can have it, if I ever find it. I'll give it to you." He picked up the newspaper on the way out the front door, then looked up at her. "You're my daughter, all right."

Hadn't he noticed? She collected all of it: opera beads, Victorian beads, colored glass in pale pinks, yellows, greens, and gun metal; onyx and amber beads with tiny gold roses for connectors; all kinds of jewelry with gold rose connectors--earrings, bracelets, a pink glass bracelet, a twisted rope held together with roses; crystal beads set off by black jet; pharoah pins, Art Deco--mazes of squares and triangles. But the only piece of jewelry she wore now was the brooch.

She made a tight fist inside the pocket of her coat. In 1910, when her grandmother had the twins, the minister at the AME church warned her that people would call the twins the "Florodora girls" after the Broadway show. She remembered travelling back and forth, biking to the Legler Branch every Saturday afternoon. She liked the librarian right away when she led her to the geography section and annnounced, "Florodora is a Philippine island famous for its perfume." On her grandmother's orders, she had never let anyone tease her about her name. She started to smile. Her name was Flora, never anything more. He didn't have the right to call her that, tease her that way without asking.

She could never tell with him, whether he was making fun of her or just commenting, the way he did about his things, the china, the silverware. Still, she smiled and reached for his hand. She didn't hear the soft steps behind her.

"You two going somewhere?"

"We're going to Sallie's, Marion." Flora swung her arm around her father's waist. "The Salvation Army to you, right, Pops?"

"Try 'Father,' " he corrected her with a little laugh, slightly embarassed, " 'Pops' is a little too..."He turned to his wife. "We're going to the Salvation Army."

"That place again." Marion smoothed her hair back until it was tight against her face. "Fine." She left it at that.

That night a friend of her fathers, a fraternity brother named Charlie Henderson, came over and the two of them, her father and Charlie, played old Billie Holiday 78's and reminisced about being at a hotel together.

"Charlie, you remember, after they got through playin' downstairs you went up to your room? It was when I was trying to get one of those jobs in New York." He glanced quickly at Charlie, then lowered his head. "Billie Holiday was stayin' there, had a room right over yours, remember?"

Charlie roared. "They must've been up all night."

"You know that guy that was playin' the piano, medium-brown skin fellow, what was his name? He kept waitin' for her to start singin'. Played the introduction three times. Every time he'd stop and stare right at her. Finally she

looked over at him, said 'Just keep goin' baby, I'll get there.'"

"She really liked to sing behind the beat. Nobody could sing behind the beat like Billie could."

Her father started to pat his foot to the music. He would dig his shoe into the carpet and then stomp down hard. The two men, Charlie and her Dad, were drinking Cutty Sark highballs. Charlie was wearing a red silk tie with a small white Greek monogram. They stomped their feet harder each time they hummed part of the tune, back and forth, hunching down further in their seats, answering each other. After a while Charlie loosened his tie.

Then "Barnes"--that's what Charlie had shouted when he opened the front door--stood up abruptly, straightened his sport coat and spoke out as if reciting a part at school: "And she would stand up like this and straighten her dress. 'Cause you know it was fittin' so tight against her. Like she had to get more breathin' room before she started to sing. Then she would throw those shoulders back like a queen at a coronation and stride right up like this. Watch what I do with the mike." He switched up to the silver lamp in the dining room and held it to one side, mouthing the words to "These Foolish Things."

Charlie held his drink in a toast. "You really needed to have a good time that night, didn't you, Al?"

Flora's father turned to her and winked. "We're giving you a little music lesson--on the house." She grinned and

hummed along, thinking to herself that if she'd been in New York with Mike she could have had a drink too.

"Your Dad's a walking history book, kid." Charlie was reverent. "You really had a rough trip, didn't you, Al?"

"I pounded the pavement all day. I must've gone to fifteen or twenty labs." He held his glasses off to one side. "What was that one man's name? I still remember what he said: 'Barnes, how could we be sure, I mean, how would we know, if we did take you in, that you could do the work on your own?' Charlie, remember how you stayed in the room, typing up all those sheets and letters to leave at the labs? Pressing my extra suit while I was out looking...that was in the daytime, of course." Al laughed. "Sometimes you were trying to have too good a time....Remember...what was her name?

"Ah, Al, don't start that."

"Each of 'em met you in a different corner of the train station."

"Come on, Al." Charlie was trying not to laugh.

"And one time you got their numbers mixed up." They broke into laughter. Then her father stopped short, pointing to the small white monogram on Charlie's tie. "We're talking about loyalty. That's what it's all about. Do for me when nobody else will." He patted Charlie hard on the back. "That's what it's all about, Flora. Charlie used to press my suits and look where it got him. Now he owns enough units to press every suit in New York."

She knew her father had had a life before her. But when she heard the two of them, her dad and Charlie...she felt like a little kid next to them. She didn't understand the stuff about the fraternity, but when they started talking about the shows, the music...they had actually been there.

"I was reading a book the other day, Billie Holiday's autobiography, Lady Sings the Blues. I really didn't think the level of writing matched her contribution as a singer. For a great artist like Billie Holiday." Flora reached for a cigarette.

Her father gave a little smirk. "She's a sophomore."

Flora didn't hear him. Her face was perspiring. "I was shocked...such a weak effort considering her importance as a singer."

When Charlie left to go to the bathroom, her father grabbed her by the arm and pulled her off to a corner. "Take that cigarette out of your mouth. You're not in college." He cut a glance sideways. "This isn't a lecture." He turned away and then back. "You're just like a baby to me." He pulled her closer. "Come on, act like people. You're mine. Don't you know that?"

He stopped talking when he heard Charlie yelling from down the hall, "Brother Barnes, you going to have a canopy when Flora gets married? Walters had a tent for his daughter's wedding...a big tent out in the back yard." Charlie brushes past the two of them on the sofa. He reaches for a silver bucket and drops a few ice cubes in his drink.

"I don't know where mine's gonna get married."

Barnes doesn't smile. "Your daughter giving you trouble again, Charlie?" He turns and looks at Flora, "I wouldn't stand it...not for a minute."

Charlie pours a little more Scotch in his glass.

Barnes jumps up. The two of them start boxing at each other. "Listen, nigger, I thought I told you I was cuttin' back. You think I'm runnin' a free bar around here?" They keep laughing and boxing at each other. "See now, look how you got me talking in front of my daughter. We're not out with the boys, you know." They keep laughing. Barnes turns around to make sure Flora is listening. "Me and Charlie..me and Charlie go way back, Flora. Charlie's a Kappa." Barnes went back to talking about the night at the hotel. He felt sure that Flora didn't understand. About that trip to New York, all he kept talking about was Billie Holiday. He tried to explain.

"After her gig, you know, she went to her room, over me and Charlie's, sang and showed out all night, had the whole band up there." Flora could tell from the way they were laughing and matching eyes that they were holding something back, there was something they wouldn't say in front of her. They just kept laughing and nudging each other till they couldn't stand it any more.

The next night her father took her to a Chinese restaurant. Flora wore a silk crepe pilot blouse. She ordered Moo Goo Gai Pan. He ordered tomato shrimp. The

restaurant was owned by a friend of her father's, and the tomato shrimp was hot and spicy the way black-Chinese restaurants make it. To soothe the peppery taste, they ate plain rice, and washed it all down with large cokes and ice water, then ate vanilla ice cream in glass dishes.

She talked about her college major, English. He talked about his plans for the future. "Some day when I get sick of all that stuff back at the house, I'm gonna sell it and buy some Miles van der Rohe stuff. I'm gonna buy two Barcelona chairs. Move into an apartment and that'll be that."

She looked at him nervously. "Miles van der Rohe?"

"Yeh, sometimes all that old junk gets on my nerves..by the way, we'll have to look into that major...English." He spit out the word.

All Flora could think about was the name he'd just mentioned. "Miles van der Rohe?"

He looked at her and pointed a finger straight up in the air. "Miles...see, I used to be in the army with a guy." He leaned over and whispered "He was white trash and didn't know it." Her father settled back. "He used to say '<u>You</u> probably wouldn't know anything about this, Barnes.' He was always saying stuff like 'you probably never heard of Louis Sullivan or Miles Van Der Rohe,' and '<u>you people</u> this' and '<u>you people</u> that.' " He grimaced and closed his fist around the table knife. "You know what they think, they think we're born a blank and we stay a blank, that's what they think. Anyway, this guy was always calling him Miles. I never said

anything, just listened. Always called him Miles."

Flora held her fingers in front of her face and played a tune. "Miles and Louis."

Her father didn't laugh. "He used to cut his spaghetti with a fork. Thought he knew everything." He stopped eating and watched her for a minute. He dropped his napkin, "You sure looked worried."

Flora was relieved and at the same time a little ashamed. A part of her had been afraid he would stumble, afraid it was really a dream--too good to be true. When the whole family watched the first black newscaster on the Chicago station, you could hear a pin drop. When he finished, no one said a word, but they all looked relieved; he hadn't made any mistakes. She knew her father knew better, knew it all, and she wasn't surprised when they were so much alike. She expected it. She should have known he wouldn't embarass her. She had read stories about twins living apart for years, then meeting and having children with the same names or both being doctors or marrying women who looked just alike. It was as if the two of them were like that.

She finally had something. She tried to imagine all the treasures she had just found cut off to her forever. The dream--then, in a second, everything gone.

A few hours before she left she showed him a stack of old 78's that she'd found in one of his cabinets. There were hundreds of them. Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Andy

Kirk, Pha Terrell-all the singers, musicians, everybody. Flora had a collection herself, about twenty records. Her friends thought it was odd that someone her age knew about the old stuff. At school there was a joke that went around. When Rome was burning everybody was trying to get out of town, but Flora was playing her old 78's, just like Nero, playing and playing away. When she saw the records in the cabinet, she wanted them so much, she ached. She needed them but didn't know how to ask him. She just wanted some of his past. The records--they were a way of finding it. They were the closest thing she had to that part of him that was distant.

He stopped her with his hand and pushed the records away. "Don't take them. They're all I got. Maybe the next time you come."

When she got back to the rooming house that Tuesday, there were two letters on the table near the door. One was from the Dean of Women saying that Mrs. Hessler had decided to have only two roomers next semester. Flora would have to move her things to another place. Her mother had given her advice about having a positive attitude, grace under pressure. The day of her high school graduation, she had forgotten the brooch, but her mother had handed it to her on her way to the stage. Now, fingering its ridges and valleys,

she tried to calm herself. She called the Railway Express about shipping some suitcases to her mother's house in Chicago.

The second letter was from her father, telling her how much he had liked having her there. He had a friend in the sociology department at the city university. He said she could go to grad school there and that it was OK for her to be a lawyer, doctor, or judge.

After she read the sentence, she held up three fingers and counted each choice, mouthing the words, "lawyer, doctor, judge...the sole heir." Her father didn't care about some things, whether he shopped at Brooks or the Salvation Army, but he liked credentials. He was impressed by people who did the right thing at the right time, made a pile and got away clean. He thought you ought to have your name mentioned in all the right places.

He closed the letter with a reference to the New York Times:

> By the way, Rothstein died. Remember, we went to visit him at the hospital. I've got 600 properties to settle. You know the New York Times, in his obituary, they mentioned our company, Rothstein, Walters, and Barnes. Rothstein's part goes to his son. Nothing's changed. I'm enclosing the copy from the Times. Gotta go.
>
> Love,
>
> Father

Listen, talk to somebody about changing your major. English. That's crazy. Who's going to pay to you to do that? Be sure to write Marion. And learn to cook something besides rice.

When her mother called from Chicago, she reminded Flora to send a thank-you note right away. Flora told her not to worry, that she'd taken care of everything. At Thanksgiving she had promised to write her father every day. On December 15, just before she left Champaign-Urbana, she wrote him for the first time:

Hi Everybody,

Just finished my last final! I'm not sure about my plans for Xmas. I'll let you know (when I figure them out myself). Smiles!!!

Love,

Flora

He had told her to be sure to write Marion a separate letter. She hadn't. She finally made plans by phone to see her father over Christmas break after leaving messages with his answering service for two days. She spent the week before Christmas and Christmas day in New York with Mike. She was trying some new things, testing the waters. All she had to do now was keep all the parts moving along. It was easier than she had thought it would be--at least so far.

She wanted to be with her father. She wanted to get to know Marion better, but she wanted to try other things, too. She was young. When she thought of herself, she could make out parts that were like her mother, not just features, ways, but there were other parts that Flora couldn't trace. Something had always been missing.

December 26, as she boarded the plane to Cincinnati, she thought about her father. Before her place was with the old people in Columbia, her family on the West Side of Chicago, now she would be with Mike in New York and with her father too, with them all. She wanted everything to be there, in the same way, when she saw her father again. That's what she expected when she took the cab from the airport in Cincinnati to his house.

She left the suitcases on the steps and ran in without knocking. None of the lights were on at the front of the house. She could feel the cold air coming from the open door behind her. She stumbled over a small desk. There was no welcoming party, no one making it hard to hurry in and resume things. At least there didn't seem to be. The door had opened so easily that she didn't have to force it. When her eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, she saw him waiting there by the stairs. She held out her hand.

"We were expecting you for Christmas Day...where were you?"

She didn't answer. The trip had left her exhausted.

"You sure took your time letting us know. You should've

seen Marion--two weeks--running around, making lists. She bought out the store." He held his glasses off to one side. His voice was stiff. "I asked you where you were?"

She watched the glasses move in his hand. "I have this friend in New York I had to go out and see. I hate Marion going to all that trouble. I should have called sooner...wrote or something. I'm awful about dates...stuff like that." She turned around to look for her suitcases. "You know what a lousy letter writer I am...I always mean to."

"A lousy letter writer, huh?" He put on his glasses again, never changing his expression, as if the case were closed, as if the whole notion was too trivial for comment.

"I guess I'd better go up and unpack." She thought of Sister Mary helping her upstairs, her robe starched so often that the cloth had taken on a grey cast, two perfectly polished shoes, two tiny tips that presented themselves and didn't reflect up--Sister Mary who only left her room for the library or mass. She turned around and walked outside for her suitcases. Her father went with her. She ought to call Mike to let him know the trip went all right, that she was O. K. Her mother had told her to be careful about phone calls. If she called Mike, she had better call collect.

When she got up the next morning she threw on a robe and ran downstairs. She tried to have fun by peeking around the corner, but he glared and shook his head. "I've been up cleaning since eight o'clock. I've got some business to do

tonight. Might have some of these things appraised." He circled the room, holding a dustpan in the air and sweeping at everything. "Watch out." He shoved a cleaning cart out of the way.

Flora backed up and looked around. The silver in the cabinet was freshly polished. The reflection of the metal against the glass was so strong that it hurt her eyes. She turned away.

"I missed Marion last night. Thought I'd say hi."

"If you're looking for her you won't find her. Marion's out grocery shopping. Been up for hours. Friday's her early night." He looked at her over his shoulder. "You'd better shape up, kid."

She yawned and headed toward the kitchen door. Her hair was wrapped tightly with a long, finely patterned scarf. An unbleached cotton kimono trimmed with red and green bands hung loosely at her sides.

"This is Saturday, girl. We've got the whole house to clean."

"Just let me get a little quick energy...some juice."

"Wait a minute." He reached out for her hand and gave her the broom. "We pay our way around here. You know someday you're gonna be taking care of a whole house...you know what I'm talking about?"

Flora turned toward the door and shook her head. "We'll be 50-50."

He laughed. "50-50?"

"Sure." She was too embarassed to look up.

"50-50?"

"You know, sharing everything."

"50-50 with who?"

"You know, the way you and Marion share."

"That's different." He wasn't laughing anymore. "What I do is up to me. It's not your place to comment on adults."

Flora turned toward the door. "Not in there. The kitchen's last. Start in the living room." He was full of energy. "When I was your age, I was out teaching, earning a living...paying my way. You know right now I'm working overtime. I'm not complaining. I'm thinking about your future. You know what I'm trying to say? It's attitude. Cut out that bull you learned at school. Nobody's gonna fall for that. You gotta act like people. You hear me? Like people."

"When I'm at school, it doesn't matter when I get up. If I miss class, I make it up later. I'm always like this after exams. I mean just exhausted."

"Well, it's different here. This is not school."

"I know, I know. But sometimes you have to stay up all night and then take an exam."

"So you think that's something to be tired about. Well, you haven't seen 'tired.' Wait'll you have a house full of kids."

"Anybody can do that. The stuff I have to do is hard. The pressure, I mean."

"You haven't seen 'hard.' " He grimaced.

Sometimes at mother's I sleep the first three days of break."

"Well, this isn't mother's. Look, all you got to do is take care of yourself. Keep yourself neat and clean. No job to worry about. No husband to please. Just get your grades. That's all you got to do."

"You don't know...you can't know...I've had a lot to think about lately."

"You think so, huh? You haven't started the pressure."

"I have too. I know all about that stuff."

"You do?"

"Four exams in one week. That's work. Other stuff too."

"You don't know the meaning of the word 'tired.' "

"Oh, I know about it all right."

"You think you know. You don't know a thing."

Flora shrugged and looked away. She knew better than to give an adult "word for word." She learned that from her mother and her grandmother. She still remembered the time she had given her mother "word for word," argued back and forth. She had had time to realize the full consequences of her behavior, sitting in the dark for what had seemed to be the whole afternoon.

"I was going crazy thinking about you being here for Christmas. I never had a chance like that before. Thinkin' about it day and night. About how I was gonna have things for you. About your future...here. You know someday I'm going to dress you in the finest gown money can buy. Satin,

French lace, hand-sewn, long imported veil, nothing but the best. Half the town'll be there. We'll be drinking champagne out of buckets. I'll fly it all in. Lobster, you name it. But you gotta pull with me. You gotta act like people...Come on, we got the whole house to clean."

Flora looked back at him. She should have dropped the broom right then and cried, the way her mother always cried when she watched the Miss America contest or read a news story to Flora about some movie star dying "after a long battle with illness." Her mother would start crying right away, even if she'd never seen one of the star's movies. Maybe it was easy for her mother to cry. All she had to do was think about the day he took the ring back. Remembering, that's the way the movie stars produced their tears. Flora wondered if he ever remembered the time the frat brothers came by, screaming and roaring out one of their fraternity stomps, stirring up the dust like kids late for a party.

As she walked away, she held the broom at her side as if it was her partner going down the aisle. "Flora, you know what they tell me? Charlie--the boys--they say, 'Barnes, you're stubborn, pig-headed, obstinate.' But I just want you to know, no child of mine's gonna give me any trouble. Not like Charlie's kids do. Charlie's too nice."

Flora was afraid to look back again. She walked over to the front of the record cabinet, the one with the 78's. Taking the broom from her side, she started to sweep, working her way across the room, counting to herself each

time the broom left the floor. Still not satisfied, she turned around and swept the other way again, stopping in front of the record cabinet, then looking over at her father. She imagined she was whirling up a steep road into a cloud of dust, the broom hitting the floor so hard that she could hear the records rattling in the cabinets.

"I'm gonna catalog all those, sell them to a dealer." He watched her face as he talked. "Remember what I told you that day in the car? I said, 'Now, I got a reason.' I never had a reason before. I got plans. But it's up to you how they go. Rothstein's part, it all goes to his son. It's all his now."

Flora swept around the cabinet, dusted the top a little with her hand and continued to sweep her way past the furniture. She came from a family of sweepers, women who enjoyed sweeping hard and well. It was an art. Her mother always swept in the morning, then later during the day and always at night before bedtime. A good sweeper never left anything. You couldn't go back and find a thing.

"When I die I want the ball to keep on rolling. I want everything to be the same. I want things to keep going just like clockwork. That's why you got to act like people."

She wondered which "people" he meant. What people, where? He always knew what he meant, what he wanted. She kept sweeping until she reached an old glass bookcase. Flora and her father, they both loved books. His were old, the Harvard Classics--they were popular in the South. A lot of

people in their home town, Columbia, had them, her godmother, her grandmother; she was used to them. She picked up a book that was almost falling apart.

"A lot of people from Macedonia High used to come over to your grandfather's house to use these books. They'd sit at that very same desk. The one over there in the corner. That was your grandfather's desk. They'd come at night and read by a little kerosene lamp." He laughed and patted her on the head. "Rabelais...you're not ready for that one. You'll have to wait awhile."

Flora wondered why everything had to be his way. She continued to sweep until she was practically out of the room. Harder and harder as she moved along. Harder and harder until the cloud of dust that she had imagined became real. When she finished sweeping, everything was in a little pile near the door.

That night a man wearing a brown suit and thick owlish glasses came to the door carrying a briefcase and a stack of manila folders. Her father and Marion quckly ushered the man into the office and closed the door. About two hours later, her father brought the guest into the living room and introduced him to Flora. "I'd like you to met Mr. Gordon." The man took her hand, held it for awhile and then smiled knowingly. Later her father walked her up to her room, whispering "You're just my little girl." In her room he pleaded, "Can't you see how I feel? We were expecting you for the whole Christmas vacation. Where were you?" She

didn't answer right away. He held her close. She could smell the brandy. "You know you're just like a little baby to me. That's the way I feel. It's just like you're six years old. You know every night I check under your bed just to make sure no robbers are around. I don't care if you're an old woman with gray hair, you'll always be a baby to me. Listen, just give me a little time. Don't get married right away. Just give me one or two years. That's all I'm asking. Then we'll really check them out, do a lot of research. When we find the right one, I'll give you the biggest wedding Cincinnati's ever seen. That's all I want. After that I'll be used to it. Just don't leave me...not right now."

Flora felt exhausted, but it was more than just needing sleep. That was one thing they all had in common, her mother, her grandmother, her aunts, her father. You never really grew up. They made it crystal clear that no matter how old you were, you were always a baby to them. You were always a part of them, an extension, and it was overwhelming. You were property that they had staked out, claimed, not an individual.

"Just don't leave me...not right away."

She pulled the bedspread around her. "You've got Marion here. She'll take care of you."

He smiled a little. "Marion...Marion's grown. She does what she feels like doing. Why, sometimes I find her paychecks in the wastebasket. She even throws away silverware. I have to take it out and wash it."

Her father kept talking for awhile. Flora was half-asleep, dreaming about a vacation to Columbia. A few summers ago, the lady down the street had met her on the way to the store. It was only six in the evening, but Miss Corinne had stopped her, warned her to be back before dark and to straighten her belt. When Flora reminded her that she was in college, Miss Corinne grew angry. "I know how old you are." Then before Flora could get away, the old lady pointed a finger as if casting a spell, "I know how old you are. I was there the day you were born." And then, as if decreeing that Flora would never change, Miss Corinne warned "You'll always be a baby to me."

When he noticed that Flora had gone to sleep, he tucked the covers around her, looked under the bed and in the closet, then left.

On the first trip to Cincinnati they were always going places. This time they hadn't been out of the house together at all. Flora spent the next morning reading at the desk in his office. Just before lunch, he walked in and slammed a long sheet of paper down on the desk. "You're the beneficiary." He folded his hands and waited.

Flora didn't move. "It's too depressing."

He grabbed the paper and held it in front of her face. "Depressing? I have a life insurance policy right here in my hand for <u>one hundred thousand dollars</u>. What do you think I was doing in here last night? We met for over two hours...Marion and that man from Mutual, we set right in

this room. You're the beneficiary and you call that depressing? I'm trying to make something, do something for you. Can't you understand that? All you had to do was keep your mouth shut." He thought about explaining how important it was. But he didn't.

Flora wanted nice things. But she didn't want to be bothered with thinking about where they came from. It tied her down too much. "I know you're just trying to help, but do I have to think about that stuff now?" Right now she couldn't imagine a time when she wouldn't be right where she was. Her mother told her to be careful, not to think that just because she was young that she was invincible.

" 'Thanks, old man, for thinking about me.' Ever hear those words?" He threw the paper down again."You want everything to be fun, buddy-buddy. As long as everything's fun, you're OK. Everything can't be like that. I have to work night and day, just to stay where I am. I got the part with Rothstein and Walters. I got my own buildings on the side. It takes all I got just to keep up." He grabbed his chest hard. "Sometimes it's four in the morning, I catch a nap and keep going. This office--it's my world."

"Just like me at school."

"School, bullshit, I'm talking about the real world. My father wanted me to go to Harvard, Yale, get somewhere. Do you think I listened? I got all my degrees down South, so I could party, have fun." He looked at her. He wanted to make her understand. "You think it's been easy for me?"

She shook her head no.

"You don't see me smile much, do you? Do you?"

She shook her head again.

"You don't know how bad my life is. They walk up and down the street over by the hospital, in nurses' uniforms. The other night one asked me 'What do you want?' I just looked at her, said, 'You know what I want.' "He clenched his fist. "It's been so long since I've had any. I'm a lonely man."

Flora felt small, younger than she was. It was overwhelming. As she looked around, she could feel her body growing smaller and smaller. She didn't know what to do with all the emotion, it was frightening, hard to control. She felt the circle at her neck, the furrows on the engraving. She couldn't take care of him. She drew away. She wanted to close herself up until she was hidden, out of sight. She wanted to fold herself up like the bud in the window box, clinging to something like a pin that stayed fastened.

He held her arm. "You thinking... don't think. See that sofa? You could lay on that sofa with me all day and I wouldn't touch you."

Flora felt ashamed. She could feel the cold air coming in along the cracks. The window was filled with wax begonias, red blooms and bright green leaves. December. She never thought of flowers at that time of year. She touched a bud that was about to open and watched the snow fall past her. She hadn't meant to hurt him. She would explain. "I

don't know how to take care of anybody. I never had to take care of a soul."

She stood up and placed her hands on her father's head. His scalp was shaved so close that when she ran her palms against the coarse ridges, the raised surfaces were hard against the softness of her palms. "I never had to take care of anybody."

He wasn't listening. "Why didn't you come to Cincinnati for Christmas?" His gaze was steady, fixed, his voice cold and deliberate. "You see all that stuff up in your room? The hi-fi. The radio. A brand-new desk...just waiting for you."

"I went to New York." She was testing the waters. "I have a friend...." After all, he'd told her about the things he did when he was young. She remembered the story about New York. The one about the trip with Charlie Henderson. He'd understand. Maybe he already knew. Maybe he'd guessed earlier. "We're close."

He stared dead at her. He twisted his mouth and hurled the word back at her. "What do you mean, close?"

She held her fingers up to the light and showed him a small ring. "You know...we stayed together." She was eager to tell him everything. "Christmas day and the week before Christmas too."

He jumped up and walked over to the mirror. If she had really looked at him, she would have seen the anger, the kind of stare, hard and unyielding, that stops people in their tracks, but she didn't really look. The sounds in the

next room--at first a cough, then a scraping noise, a chair being pushed across the floor--a sudden halt, then nothing.

She didn't see him the rest of the day. Later, she found a note pinned to the refigerator:

Flora, Fix something for dinner. Hamburg in the frig. Set the table. Father

She made a meatloaf with eggs and condensed soup, left the rice on high heat and watched it boil over onto the surface of the stove.

When he came back, Flora was digging the rice out of the pan. "So it's 50-50, huh?"

"I meant sharing, that's all."

He laughed. "Who do you think's gonna fall for that line?"

"That's how everybody does things now."

"Everybody." He eyed her grimly. "Everybody's 50-50, huh? That stuff you learned at school again, the flora and the fauna." He repeated it with no change in his voice, deadpan: "The flora and the fauna, huh?"

Flora kept digging the burnt rice out, scraping as hard as she could. Her eyes were full. When she reached the bottom of the pan, she threw the knife into the sink. "What do you want from me anyway? No matter what I do...it's never enough. Nothing could ever please you." She banged the pan on the side of the wastebasket, then dumped it in the sink.

"What do you want from me, anyway?"

"You seem to be trying to please everybody. Why bother to pay attention to me? I'll just wait in line." He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Is this all the thanks I get for helping you? Look, all you had to do was go to school, get your grades, keep yourself neat, clean. That's all you had to do."

"But what about having fun? Did I ever tell you about this place...?" She laughed and cried at the same time.

"I don't want to hear about that mess. Go see what Marion wants." He stood there watching her as she ran out of the room.

"Flora," Marion was standing near the cabinet of old 78's, "Flora, pick up the phone in the kitchen. It's long distance. It's your mother."

Her mother hadn't helped her find him, hadn't had anything to say about the trip to Cincinnati, but now she was calling her, butting in.

"Flora? I don't like the way you sound."

"Mother, is that all you called me for?" She was irritated with her prying, her asking. Why should she care? She had never wanted them to get together, anyway. She never helps, then, all of a sudden, when everything's already going wrong, then she calls. What was it to her if they didn't get along? "Don't worry about it. Don't worry about it, OK?"

Her father was standing behind her. "You were on the

phone for ten minutes."

"Mother thinks something's wrong."

"You're mother's a nice girl. A nice, sweet girl." He laughed, looking at Flora as he emphasized the "nice girl" part. "Tell her I said to go out and drink a Pepsi. Tell her to go out and have one on me." He laughed again.

That evening she looked for her father. A small light was on in his office. She looked around the room. He did seem to be living there...an electric coffee pot, a large sofa with blankets thrown over the side, file cabinets, sheets of paper scattered everywhere.

A voice from the kitchen. For a minute she thought it was her mother, but it couldn't be. Her mother was in Chicago. She'd never noticed before, but their voices, her mother's and Marion's, were alike. Marion was laughing, talking so loud that Flora could hear every word.

"You should've heard them...Uh huh, girl. She told him everything...You should have seen the expression on his face." Marion lowered her voice and kept talking for a while. "Just like a bull that somebody cornered...Oh, girl. You oughta be shot...Stop it...Girl, you're making my stomach hurt...A hundred thousand...Poor little thing, she didn't know what she was saying...They say a hard head makes a sore behind...Oh girl, you oughta be shot...I'll talk to you later. Gotta go."

Marion was sitting at the kitchen table with her hands folded neatly. Flora knew Marion had been laughing at her,

but she still wanted things to work. "Where's Al, Marion?"

Marion shook her head no. Her hair was drawn so tight that it made her skin seem smooth, ageless.

"I wonder if he'll be back soon. Maybe he's out with some friends."

Marion yawned. "You know him, he's out. He's gone somewhere with Charlie and the boys."

While Flora talked, Marion stirred a bowl of soup. Flora recognized the large soup tureen on the table. Her father had brought it out her first night there. "That's Russell Wright, isn't it?"

Marion pushed the tureen to her side of the table.

Flora was determined. "I wish I could make Al happy, Marion. Everything I do lately. Nothing seems to please him."

Marion listened without answering.

"I wonder what I can do to smooth things over. You know what he likes to eat. I'll fix something or maybe buy a present. That's it." Flora thought for a second, then shook her head. "Al has everything, doesn't he?"

Marion stood up and looked out the window. "Flora, did you see the news truck drive up this morning? I haven't seen the paper all day."

Her father got back late that night. She heard him talking to Marion about his friend Charlie and some night club downtown. When Flora found him in the kitchen, she grabbed him and hugged him tight.

He didn't respond. Instead, he stepped back and held on to her with his arms stretched between them. "As long as you live, I don't want to ever hear about you calling me 'Al.' I don't care how old you are. Do you hear me? Don't you ever call me by my first name." His voice shook as he talked. She thought of the old minister at her grandmother's church and the yellowed photograph of her father's family--his father, his grandfather--and their hard, stern expressions. "As long as you live...if I ever," his voice rang out, "if I ever hear of you calling me that, I don't care where you are, I'll find you."

When she tried to speak, her voice was weak, barely audible. "I might have to go back." He pushed her against the table. The kitchen was small. You couldn't escape, no matter which way you turned. "I might have to go back..." He was so sure of everything he wanted. She knew that if she looked straight at him that he'd have the advantage. "...sooner that I thought."

He didn't answer.

She tried to explain. "I've got classes."

"Soon, huh? Tomorrow, next week? This evening?" His voice was soft, soothing.

"You know. Classes. I have to get back to school."

He jumped back against the stove. Like a lawyer, he had laid a trap. "You told me your classes didn't start till the middle of January."

She looked down. "I'm just not sure. Sometimes you have

to leave early."

"You told me late January."

"I might have to leave sooner." She looked down again. "We'll see."

"So I'm just too mean to live with, huh? Too depressing, huh?" He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Look at me. I said look at me. I used to give back deposits!"

Flora tried to explain. "I was tired of playing games. That was worse, wasn't it?"

He eyed her carefully. "How'd that dress get so wrinkled?" His eyes moved to one spot. "What you been doing in it, huh?" She didn't really know him at all. She just thought she did.

"I showed this to you." She held up her hand. "You know what it means when you give somebody a ring. I wanted you to be the first one to know. I mean, I thought we were so close. I wanted everything closer. No secrets. No nothing. If I'd kept it a secret, it would have been between us. If I'd kept it to myself, thing's wouldn't have stayed the same. I mean I thought we were so close. He doesn't want to get married right away. At least not until after graduation."

He still didn't answer.

"Why can't you understand?" She held the rest back. She was afraid to let go. Afraid that if she did, if she said everything, it would only make things worse.

She reached for a cigar box on the top shelf. "When I

was in the basement this afternoon, I found the box with your mother's jewelry. Remember, you said I could keep it."

He grabbed the box and slammed it down on the table. "All that stays here. And you think this boy's going to want you now? You think he's going to want to marry you now?" He tried to pull the brooch from her dress. "That's not yours. My father's sister would rise up in her grave." He reached for it again, but she moved away.

"Why would he need to marry you? He already knows he doesn't have to marry you. He knew that a long time ago. Why change now?" He glared at the brooch and drove his empty fist into the pocket of his sports coat. "Fool, fool." He said the words till they didn't make any sense. "You're a little fool, a little fool."

When she looked up at the clock, she realized that she'd been sitting there for hours; it was the middle of the night. The kitchen was small. It was the kind people cooked in and left, not the kind people lingered in. She could still feel the heat from the stove. No matter where you sat in the tiny room you could feel the heat; it was overpowering.

A Kitchen Tale

I have been messed with by a lot of hairdressers in my life. I have been controlled, bullied and ruled. It's the truth. I'm not going to get too specific here, but I want you to be aware that my father is a high school principal; I'm from a very important family. For that and other reasons that's all I'd better say right now. Hairdressing--straightening hair--that's something people usually don't talk about. That's why I'm not giving my name. But come hell or high water I've got to get this stuff off my chest.

Miss Estelle, my grandmother's best friend, was the first one. One warm southern day after the rain had come and gone and the fragrance of wet dirt was in the air...or was it the smell of the grass? No, it was the wet dirt--I'll never forget that sweetness. Anyway, that day my grandmother decided to take me down the hill to have Miss Estelle wash my hair. You're probably wondering why a grown woman with all her strength and faculties would take a small child to a friend's to have her hair washed when she was perfectly capable of doing it herself. Miss Estelle was not only my

grandmother's best friend but also a source of power; she had connections. Her brother, Mead, was the biggest bootlegger in town. Because of Miss Estelle's influence in the community, it was only right that my grandmother should bring her first grandchild to this source of strength for a good washing.

The trouble began at Miss Estelle's. When she saw us coming, she ran around back and got this big, chipped enamel dishpan that I'd seen her use for washing turnip greens. She stood me up on the back porch, not saying a word, just working away quiet as a grave digger, soaping up and more soaping, two or three times. Then she filled the big pan full of water and poured the whole thing over my head, over my whole body, not just rinsing my hair, but everything on me. I was soaking wet. My grandmother didn't say a thing. Miss Estelle didn't either, but I screamed and screamed.

Years later, when I took my first-born to my grandmother's house, I asked her if she remembered that day down at Miss Estelle's. She nodded yes.

"Why do you think she did that?" I never had understood. She said she didn't know either.

Yink was the next one. Her real name was Mattie Emma, Mattie Emma Stone. All I know about her was that she was Punk's sister and that her husband had died in a lot of pain. Yink was a beautiful looking woman with long black hair that had probably never been straightened. (Some people thought if a woman was mixed, like Yink, she had a little

haughty side to her, maybe that's why Yink liked to torture so much.)

The beauty shop was in her basement, all bright and lit-up with a small metal oven for hot combs. When my mother put me up on the stool, the light was too close, it blinded my eyes. I turned away. When Yink combed my hair and it hurt I turned back again into the light. They held me down. I turned again; my head hurt and my eyes watered. I twisted and turned for a whole hour. (I once heard about this hairdresser that used nothing but milk and oil to soften the hair but nobody had ever seen her.)

Yink went to the funeral home to do all the bodies; she combed and pressed and curled. When people got together after the funeral to eat chicken, greens, cakes and pies somebody would always praise Yink for her perfect product. She would always reply that it hurt to do a friend. Since this was a small town it hurt her a lot.

From the time I was about six years old until I was about thirteen my mother did my hair. And when I asked her how I looked she'd always say, "If your hair and your feet look good, the rest will fall into place."

When I was about thirteen, about the time we moved up North, I started going to the hairdresser again. Chicago, 1955--all along 16th Street hairdressers were packed in next to barbecue shops. When it was time to go to the hairdresser, my mother gave me enough money to buy a small end of barbecued ribs and some white bread to sop it up; the

beauticians could send for an order to go. You could get french fries in a brown paper sack with ketchup. You could balance an Ebony magazine and a plate of ribs on your lap and get your hair done at the same time. Sometimes when I go to a hairdresser at the mall and there's no smell in the place except those herbal sprays, I long for the aroma of my home street, of ribs and fries.

One day I was sent down to 16th Street and told to find this big tall woman named Miss Delphine. She wore Indian Brown face color and red-orange rouge by Poro and drew her eyebrows in thick black lines. Her shop was called Delphine's House of Beauty. She told me she was trained in 1920 at the Poro Beauty College in Harlem and all about how her shop had been mentioned in Sepia and Jet. Some hairdressers tried to style; some got their reputation for producing clean heads; some were noted for a powerful press, strong enough to make any head of hair shine; some for the advice they gave. Delphine staked her reputation on telling the truth. She looked straight at me:

"Somebody's been burnin' your hair." Miss Delphine bent over me and slammed her hands on her hips, "Somebody's burnin' your hair, girl." She held on to me to keep me from slumping down in the chair.

"When you have a lot of hair like you got they burn it on purpose. Here's the thing." She leaned even closer. "It takes too long to straighten it." She grabbed my hair and pushed it towards my face. "They can't make no money on a

head like yours. They burn it on purpose so you won't come back." She stopped to catch a breath. "Why, it takes all day to straighten your hair."

I did have a lot of hair, thick, long hair. She was telling the truth...it was going to be a problem. Some of this stuff I expected. I'd already had my period. At school they passed out this book about it with a picture of a girl combing her hair and putting on lipstick. I had that page memorized. There was this one line about "those special days" and about how you were supposed to be all fixed up. But this hair stuff...I hadn't realized until then how rough things were going to be.

You know by now that I've been bossed a lot by hairdressers. I would do anything they said. That's just the way I was raised. If you want to understand anything about black people you have to understand that we have certain loyalties. When I was a little girl down South there was Rev. Green, the minister; and, let's see, the undertaker and his wife; and after the preacher and the funeral director and the doctor, I almost forgot the doctor, would come the hairdressers.

One of my earliest memories is of this hairdresser telling me "Once a little girl went to sleep in the chair and the hot comb slid right down her back." I already told you that Yink did the bodies at the funeral home. Hairdressers had a say on your hair from your beginning to your end.

Around the spring before my high school graduation, I started to play around a little with my hair. That's when things started to get complicated. Before that my hair was reddish brown, a lovely reddish brown, but for my high school graduation I dyed it jet black. My mother reacted strongly:

"You're carrying this to an extreme. First 4 or 5 hours a day--combing your hair; putting on glop, ruining your natural beauty; now this--you're carrying the whole thing too far, Miss."

I come from a very well-educated family, aristocrats you might say, and the idea of their child with dyed hair was quite a shock. To make matters worse I was mistress of ceremonies at my graduation; they had to stare at it all night.

After that things got a lot worse. I had to depend on hairdressers. They said I needed rinses, conditioners, every time I went it was something else. I was getting in deep. Hairdressers were giving me all this trouble, and I'd never even had a perm. They were starting to lecture me when I was too jittery. One even put my hands in my lap and told me to keep them still and not turn pages while she pressed. They were using all kinds of secret products and formulas and refusing to give any information about the caution labels. To put it bluntly, I was fed up, sick of all the shit. That's when my friend, Bunny, told me about Freddie.

Freddie Stover was the most beautiful thing I have ever

seen. With the exception of two gold teeth, he was that perfect kind of creature that needed no retouching. Whatever he did to set off that perfection was just that, an extra touch. He had piles and piles of hair that he wore puffed on top. He permed it first, did a roller set and comb out. As I have said, he was flawless, but to add to that flawlessness, he wore just a touch of custom-made make-up. If you think this made him look artificial or clown-like, you're all wrong. His skin was naturally cocoa-fudge brown and smooth like those ads for candy bars with the big bowl of chocolate fudge next to an undipped bar. Freddie had just dipped his twice. He looked twice as wonderful.

He usually wore a clean white shirt and dark pants. I can still hear him saying "I am the artist and my face is the canvas. I don't want to detract from it by cluttering the rest of my look."

A small waist accentuated by tight continental pants, all slenderness; he was five feet ten inches in his stocking feet, but he couldn't find any men's shoes his size. That's why he wore I. Miller women's loafers. At one hundred dollars a pair his feet looked better than mine.Don't think I didn't take Freddie seriously; he was definitely in a class by himself.

On the first trip to Freddie's I went with my friend Bunny. I was home from college; summer vacation had just started. Everybody was out, enjoying the weather, showing off their new clothes. Bunny had connections all over the

West Side. She was famous for doing a long interpretive dance in a black leotard to "Ponciana" by Ahmad Jamal with her own soul cha-cha steps added to the jazz beat. And she loved men: rich men, college men, working men but always the young ones. She considered herself to be very gorgeous right down to the fine hair on the nape of her neck, which she liked to stroke and call "baby-fine." Freddie was her hairdresser.

To get to Freddie's shop you had to go around the gangway and downstairs into this dark basement. I'd never seen anything like it. Five or six dryers lined up against each wall and, instead of women, men under them--rows and rows of pants, grey pants, green pants. The smell of fried chicken on a plate over in the corner. A man turns up the light. There's a big jukebox rolling out a sound, now it's Cannonball, then a woman's voice, now it's Dinah Washington, a thin laugh then low talking rolls along with the music and stops and starts when a new face comes or goes--a sharp high scream. I look--a man is wiggling up and down like he's gotta go and all the time staying in one spot. Then he calms down and looks my way. It must be Freddie.

My entrance into the room--a crisp clean look, my best linen A-line dress, sleeveless with a small pin at the neck, little skimmer shoes, a blunt hair cut that hangs to one side; I was affecting the mysterious European look, tres avant-garde, picked up somewhere between <u>Last Year at Marienbad</u> and Monica Vitti. To really perfect this look you

had to take quick tiny little steps, holding your head to one side, hoping that your hair would fall in your eyes so you could brush it back again. The nervous action of the constant walking and pushing your hair to one side created an energy that was sleek and cat-like.

When I wasn't rolling my hair or getting it done, I spent hours in front of the mirror, getting dressed, coordinating scarves, pins, stockings, just to go window shopping on Michigan Avenue. On one trip to Saks a woman in the elevator looked me over and mumbled to a friend, "Must be from out of town," then after reflecting for a minute, "Probably Hawaiian." I was elated. Nobody in our neighborhood had my sense of style.

I set down next to this man reading a copy of Bronze Thrills. I looked again. It was a woman. She had very short hair and was dressed in a man's old suit from the forties. I'd never seen a bulldyke before (that's what we called them in the sixties--a woman who had gone completely over to looking like a man). She was totally out of the mainstream as far as a look was concerned. And she looked like she'd cut you in a minute. I didn't say a word to her. She just sat there and smoldered. She didn't even look at me.

Freddie stood at attention, working up a pimp, his arms stiffened, his fingers pointed out from his sides like he was ready to take off: "The white lady," he jerked an elbow in my direction, "Jackie O." He threw his shoulders back, laughing, shaking his head, as if it was too fantastic to

believe.

I was smiling, beaming at everybody in sight. A girl over in the corner wearing a "Clovers" jacket looked me up and down. I moved closer, figuring she was impressed by my style. She cupped her hands around her mouth and called to a friend, "She think she cute." I turned away quickly.

When it was my turn I sat down in the chair. Freddie rubbed his hands together like somebody getting ready to eat a big dinner. He laughed again and started to go through my hair with a comb. We talked. He kept calling me Jackie O. It must have been my style--the crisp, clean look. I relaxed and motioned to the picture on the wall: "Billie Holiday?"

Freddie squealed, "That picture? I had it commissioned." He pointed with the comb. "One of my home boys told me about this brother out north, somebody named Romar. Anyway, I told the dude I want this special portrait for the wall at my shop, you know, something classy, none of that jive..." Freddie is holding back. "So the dude shows up with this picture...the thing had three or four heads. I almost killed the sucker. Told him if he didn't fix my picture, I was gone call my home boy and get him to break his legs. Anyway, he showed up with that," he pointed to the wall. "Cost me two hundred dollars. When I saw it I nearly broke down and cried, beautiful! I could feel myself churnin'. I told this artist, I said, 'Romar, I live an' breathe for Billie. She's my lady and I have to have her all the time...' So he did it...two hundred dollars."

Lady's picture was perfect over the lit-up juke box with its big city taillights, red, yellow, blue, shooting up the wall, lighting up Lady's face, classic, like those photographs that people touch up with a set of oils and turn into something superreal.

While he was putting the vaseline base on my scalp he yelled to this guy, "Lady's 'What a Little Moonlight Can Do'--play it...In your honor, Jackie O."

I guess he liked my style, the look I'd memorized from going through so many French magazines, Elle, Jardin des Modes. I settled down in the chair. Freddie was giving me my first perm. My mother had been going to hairdressers all her life, and she'd never had a perm. Of course, she went to a lady from church. This was different; I'd never been to a man before. It was exciting--exciting like a blind date, but I was scared. This was really taking a chance. He worked the cream into my hair. Cold at first, then warmer, until it started to burn like hell. It burned until my eyes watered and I yelled "Hurry up. Wash it out."

Freddie wet his lips and shrieked with delight. He liked my frenzy. "Don't worry, you're gonna love it. It's gonna be so nice and it's only five dollars. Everything here's five dollars. The conk's five, the perm's five, the cut's five, the set's five."

While he was rolling my hair, he told me all about his line of custom make-up. He bought all these colors from a company in St. Louis and mixed them up. He made his own

shades.

After he'd adjusted my cape and tied a net over the rollers, he rubbed his hands together and led me to his back room.

"I make my own perm." He pointed to a big tub that smelled like lye. "This one over here is the perm. The other one's the conk."

His special beauty was shining now.

"I'm Mr. Fred, the Mr. Fred. A big company bought me out. They bought the rights to my formula. I got an ad every month in Jet, Sepia, every last one."

He did a twist and a turn. "But I can still make it myself--for my customers." He grabbed the top of my hair. "This would cost you fifty dollars over in Lake Meadows. Girl, this is a deal."

I settled down under the dryer with the latest issue of Jet. Suddenly Freddie goes up to this guy wearing a carefully tied do-rag. Freddie unties the knot at the top of the guy's forehead and throws the do-rag on the floor. He wets the guy's hair. Pointing, Freddie screams and does a little pirouette, going:

"Queen Anne, Queen Anne."

The guy, now known as Queen Anne, wearing his hair soaped into a point, eating fried chicken, a talking, eating head. He offers Freddie some chicken--more music, moving enthusiastic legs that start, stomp and stop. A little make-up, a little eye-liner, drawn in so as not to show, plastic

capes side by side like big wide skirts thrown over heads, guys playing, kids playing till everything was just so. A woman dropping off an order of ribs stands in front of the juke-box, presses the button, looks around and runs off up the stairs, muttering. Laughing, shrieking, squealing. What's a nice girl like me doing in a place like this, wearing a plastic cape with a picture of a poodle painted on the front?

While he combed me out he screamed to the same guy again: "Queen Anne, you lookin' good."

The Queen glares at Freddie, solemn, mumbling something. Freddie continues to bait. While he puts the finishing touches on my style I hear about his other career: "I write for Johnny Chance; the words, just the words to his music: I got copyrights on my songs." He starts to give a sample and gets drowned out by a customer screaming for a towel.

Over the next few months Freddie did my hair over and over again. He rolled, combed and sprayed. I filled him in on the latest fashions from Marie Claire and Elegance. The typical man was only interested in one thing. Our relationship had that spiritual quality so often missing in the run of the mill things that were going on then. I felt cared for and protected. Bunnie's mother didn't share my attitude. She was suspicious:

"Girl, you got a gorgeous head of hair. Don't you let that fool put that conk on your hair. Look at Bunnie's hair.

You can't catch it between two fingers. You'll be bald if you keep goin' to Freddie's. I been tellin' you and Bunny, but you just won't listen. Your heads are hard."

Whenever I went to Freddie's shop we talked a lot; he had opinions on every subject imaginable. One evening after he had finished my set, he invited me up to his place for pizza. We left the shop and cruised around for awhile in his brand new second-owner red 1963 custom Cadillac convertible personalized with white fur upholstery. I was bursting with contradictory feelings. I'd never been to a man's apartment before. My mother had always made it pretty clear that someone from my background, in my position, had to be careful. It was all so new. On the one hand I wanted to be seen by somebody, anybody. On the other hand, being a high school principal's daughter, I hoped to God that I wouldn't be. Frankly at that point I didn't care. Our colors, Freddie's white shirt and my black silk top, complemented the upholstery. Top down, we drove over to his place, our hair blowing in the wind.

Freddie's apartment was over his mother's restaurant, Gladys' Ribs. His only ambition in life was to please Mom, make her proud. There was something about a line of succession. He was her oldest boy. Besides, he didn't want to lose his status as favored son; he liked being close to Mom. A tiny dog, a Chihuahua or poodle or something, met us at the door yipping his head off. Freddie was training him, so there was wall-to-wall newspaper all over the apartment.

Actually it was pretty hard to see the walls. Every inch of the place was crammed with white and gold French provincial furniture, the kind they paint white with a little gold trim, that fleur-de-lys stuff. I immediately started talking to Freddie about real French furniture, the kind in Elle. Not that Freddie needed any ideas from magazines. He had lots of ideas. He was probably way ahead of his time. And he really liked culture. It was just hard to know where Freddie's culture fit in.

We moved into the den. I'd say that Freddie's hi-fi equipment was at least 6 feet tall. I mean I was looking at the biggest, most mammoth collection of high-fi equipment I have ever seen--woofers, tweeters, bangers, bammers. The look was tremendous and the sound...He had a bar in the room too. The whole room, the furniture, the bar, the hi-fi equipment looked as if it had been covered with walnut grain contac paper, no--not really covered with contac paper. It just had that contac paper look.

Yeeieaeeah--Freddie shrieked and tip-toed up and down. I didn't understand it then but screaming was a way of life for him. Ahyeeieaeeah. Freddie's screams--startling the way a fire engine sounds when it comes zooming down the street. I didn't know whether to stay and watch or head for cover. I tried to talk about real French furniture; he wasn't listening.

Before I knew what had happened Freddie was standing there in nothing but his undershirt with his back to me. He

jumped around and there it was. Cocoa fudge and, more than that, long, lean and pointing straight at me. It was the longest one I've ever seen. I never expected Freddie to have anything like that. I was sure this couldn't be happening to me. A high school counselor and friend of the family, who was an expert on family life education, had convinced our whole class that fairies (at least that's what he called them) never had sex with women. That was all I knew about sex. I didn't have anything else to go on. I thought about monks, about priests. He moved closer and closer; he was still pointing.

About two weeks later I got a call from Bunny:

"Girl, you really get deep fast."

I moved the phone away from my ear and checked to see if my mother was still in the room. The coast was clear:

"Hi, Bunny, what's up?" I tried to sound cheerful.

"Girl, I just came from Freddie's and he's talking about you."

I swallowed hard. That night at Freddie's...you never would have guessed he had anything like that in mind. He had told me all about his plans for decorating his apartment. We ate a little pizza. I saw him as a delicate, gentle creature. One minute he was kissing me on the cheek--that was OK, what they call light petting--but before I knew it Freddie had me down on the sofa. His grasp was like steel.

He had a wild look in his eyes, mumbling "My princess, my princess, mother, my mother." I tried every trick in the book to get from under him.

"Freddie..." My pleas were ignored. "You don't know this but I've got VD."

He laughed sarcastically. "A nice girl like you?" He was sure of himself. "I got your number. I know all about you, baby." He pushed me down again. "Nice girls like you don't get that stuff."

I had thought Freddie was a gentleman, a continental type, that he understood the special needs of someone with my sense of style. First the night at the apartment. Now this.

Bunny's voice was shrill with excitement. She could hardly control herself. "He said he wanted to see you. That if you didn't get over to the shop right away he was gonna come and get you. He said you had what he wanted...what he loved."

Bunny was a socialite, but I had always been the star academically. I was on a pedestal as far as the teachers were concerned. This was her chance to take me down a few notches.

"There was this guy over there that went to our high school. He says he graduated with you. Girl, the guy kept saying your name over and over. He just couldn't believe it."

"Bunny, I haven't the slightest idea what you're

talkin' about." She must of been grinning her head off.

"Girl, you'd better go over to Freddie's and take care of business before he heads to your house."

Bunny's cousin drove us over to Freddie's. They waited in the car while I went around the back. When I was almost to the door, I turned around and ran back to the car. I couldn't go in. What if the guy from my high school was still down there, yukkin' it up, listening to Freddie scream about his love? I'd better settle this over the phone.

"Hello, Jackie O." Freddie was mad and baiting.

"Freddie Stover! Please! Stay away from my house!"

"You'd better come over right now or I'm going to tell your mother about her good girl, about all the stuff her good girl did. You know you don't want..."

I had to think fast. "Listen, Freddie, let's think this over. Let's not rush..."

"I ain't rushin', my motha showed me this ring an' she said I can have it when I git married. And we gittin' married." When I put the phone down you couldn't hear a thing. Silence had never been like that.

I don't know what Freddie's mother told him when he asked her for the ring. Maybe his mother was so glad he'd changed that she jumped up and down and screamed for joy. She probably started talking about that succession stuff, about all the little Freddies. But Freddie knew it wasn't really like that. Anyway, he didn't come over that day. But the rest of that summer I was on pins and needles. I was

afraid to leave the house. I really expected to see Freddie, dressed in a white fur-trimmed tuxedo and a purple do-rag, with at least four or five groomsmen, standing right outside my front door. And why shouldn't I have thought so? The look in his eyes that night...the way he mumbled "princess, princess," and that other stuff, over and over. But he never showed. And after a while I stopped worrying.

I didn't see him again until I was on Thanksgiving break; I needed to place an order for some conditioner. He was still serious:

"Here she come. Here come the white lady." He laughed high. "I made my decision. We gonna get married. Freddie and Jackie O! But you got to get two degrees first. One degree ain't enough. I want people to say there go Freddie, he makin' one hundred thousand dollars, and there go Freddie's wife, she makin' fifty thousand." He turned to a woman waiting to get her hair done. "She tuff, ain't she? The white lady baaaad."

When I came back to pick up the conditioner Freddie was in a great mood. He wanted us to go to Stouffer's together at Christmas so he could wear his man's mink, a full-length coat of perfect skins with a matching hat. Those guys like Bill Blass and Oscar de la Renta, Yves St. Laurent and Givenchy--they didn't have a thing on Freddie. Nevertheless, I was obviously in way over my head. That's when I decided to take Freddie's advice, stay in school as long as I could, finsh my bachelor's, then get two or three extra degrees.

After that I got an afro--you know, a natural--you get ight perm and roll it at night. It's just great.

Glossary of Hair Culture

Conk--Cheap perm, usually for men, homemade with pure lye. Anything for five dollars has to be conk. (See "Process.")

Croquignole curls--Lavish curls, popular in the thirties and forties. You wave your hair by starting the curling iron at the end and working toward the scalp.

Curling iron--A metal iron that opens up like a pair of pliers. The old-fashioned way to curl hair. When you put the curls in right they'll last about two weeks. You set it in a little stove instead of plugging it in. If you're at home, you can test it on a piece of newspaper or a ball of hair. If the paper catches fire or the ball smokes, you know it's too hot.

Do-rag--A scarf that a man ties around his perm to keep his hair in shape for special occasions. Nowadays a lot of men are starting to get perms; black men have been getting them for years. (See "Process.")

Edges--The edges of your hair line. Rougher textured because they always "go back" first. (See "Revert.") Hair dressers have to be careful; the edges are hard to hold onto. When they start to straighten the edges, the good ones will announce "Hold still. I'm going to get your edges."

Electric curling irons--Plug-in things that take hours to heat and give you curls that last overnight. Hair stylists use these. (See "Hair stylists.")

"Fuck me" hairstyle--Term I ran across in Ms. (see Ms. November, 1986, p. 68). Preferred by some white women, turns men on. In the past known as the "brazen hussy" look. I think you ask the hair stylist to give you this. You're supposed to smolder or something. It's for hair that can go wild and crazy, do that wind-blown stuff. Of course you have to spray it to make it stay. I don't know anybody with one, but I've seen them at the mall.

Grades of hair--Usage dates from the time black hair was rated on a scale of bad to good, the worst being the coarsest, the best being the straightest.

"Good hair"--needs no straightening. All you have to do is wash it and roll it.

"Mixed"--Some women have two grades of hair, e. g. "coarse" in the back and "good" on the top.

"Baby fine"--needs almost no heat.

"Coarse"--Takes a lot of heat but gives a good press, holds a curl a long time. (See "Kinks.")

Hairdressers--Hairdressers don't worry about getting a comb too hot. They know how to give a "hard" press. They are usually women, but a few are men. Often they have a little shop located off the back of their house. In big cities hairdressers work out of storefronts but keep things pretty laid back. If you're hungry, you can order out.

Hair stylists--women or men who always work out of a licensed shop. They have recent pictures from hairstyling magazines on the wall. You go to a hairdresser, but you "have an appointment" with a hair stylist. Hair stylists use plug-in curling irons that take about two hours to get hot. A friend of mine knew from the time she was nine years old that she wanted to be a hair stylist--not a hairdresser. Way back then she swore she would never allow chicken, ribs, any kind of dinners in her shop.

Hard Press--A look you get when they really straighten your hair. Hard to get nowadays because none of the new people

coming out of the beauty schools know how to give a good press. Most hair stylists today are afraid to use a real hot comb. They're afraid they'll get it too hot. Real hairdressers enjoy their power; they don't worry about using hot combs.

Hold--Keep a press. Antonyms: go back, sweat. (See "Revert.")

Hot comb--Heavy iron combs with wooden handles that can take a lot of heat. Used for straightening hair, not curling. You set a real "hot comb" in a little stove, the same kind they use for curling irons. Experienced hair dressers know how to use just enough grease on the hair and a terry towel to rub the comb clean while they're pressing.

Kinks--Little balls, aka naps, soft to hard depending on the "grade" of hair. (See "Grades of hair.") At one time considered undesirable but now many appreciate their erotic quality. Adjective "kinky."

Kitchen--When your hair reverts or goes back to its natural state, the little "kinks" that line up along the base of your neck. So called because it gets hot in the kitchen, so you sweat. The section of your hair that sweats the most, that's your "kitchen." You can comb your hair down over it, but it's still there. The concept of the "kitchen" is

considered by some to be the basis of the black aesthetic.

Love-letter--A letter that a customer writes to a hair stylist when they've had an argument and the customer is afraid of retribution (getting scorched, fried). See Appendix.

Natural--If you wash short hair, it will ball up into a soft-looking 'fro or afro. If you wash long hair, you have to braid it or get a light perm, then pick it out to get the "natural" look. Women who like straightened hair have to look out for rain or any precipitation, since getting the hair wet causes it to "go back." (See "Revert.") The natural look, on the other hand, signifies a lack of fear of the elements, the rain, the wind, as in "she romped with nature." At its extreme, this attitude can lead to a desire for the wind-blown look. (See "'Fuck-me' hairstyle.") Synonyms: 'fro, afro.

Perm--Chemical preparation for the hair. The "perm" is for women, the "process" for men. Instead of putting in curls, you do the reverse and take them out with a chemical straightener. Perms can cause a burning sensation; you have to use a timer, then wash them out in a hurry. Softer looking than a press. (Say the word "perm"--notice the soft, purring sound.) With a perm you use a cream hair dressing,

with a press you use grease. Many refined people today don't care for the greasy look.

Process--Chemical straightener used on men. A few women have been known to have a "process." (See "Conk.")

Revert--Happens when your hair sweats or gets rained on and loses its straightness. Antonym: "hold."

Scalp-scratching--You use the tip of the comb to loosen your scalp and flake out the dandruff. A special thing done by a spouse, girl friend, boy friend, mother, father, sister or brother. You never ask a hairdresser to scratch your scalp; it takes too long. You only ask somebody you really love, usually on the weekend.

Stocking cap--A night cap worn by men, made by cutting a stocking in half, knotting the end, then pulling it down over the head. A sophisticated "do-rag" suitable for holding a wave or process. Men in the forties wore stocking caps with silk or rayon dressing gowns and calf-high socks held up with suspenders. Get the picture?

Wait, The--Usually 3 or 4 hours. The amount of time you have to wait for some hair dressers or hair stylists.

Walker, Madame C. J.--The greatest name in hairdressing. She

founded a school of hair care in Harlem. Her daughter gave big parties that attracted a lot of the famous artists and writers of the twenties.

Appendix

An example of a "love-letter" I had to write:

Dear_____

I am writing to you to express my pleasure with the service that one of your employees, Ms. _____, has given to me. I have been highly impressed with the personalized and thorough way that Ms. _____ treats each customer. She makes each customer feel that the health of their hair is of the utmost importance. She does this by making a special effort to analyze and treat hair problems. One never feels that she has an "assembly-line" approach. She takes a pride in working with the customer's hair that goes beyond what is expected of her. As a customer, I feel she cares about giving the best results possible.

Sincerely,

_____

Mainbocher

On the plane, Flora sat next to a woman from New York, an assistant for a dress designer named Teale. They struck up a conversation. It was a chance to talk about fashion design, clothes.

The woman, a middle-aged brunette, wore a black dress, big gold hoops, three or four long chains looped around her neck--costume jewelry. While they were waiting for drinks , she fingered a chain and eyed Flora from underneath the brim of a gold corduroy dressmaker's hat. "And who's your favorite designer?"

"Oh, I like a lot of them...Saks, Bonwits, those little shops over on the East Side."

"Of course, dear, we all do, but I asked about designers."

She didn't understand why the woman wanted to wear a gold corduroy hat with gold jewelry, no contrast at all. The black dress was OK. She'd be the last one to disagree with that, but the gold jewelry was all wrong. Earlier, when Teale's assistant had adjusted her hat, Flora had noticed a

thick crease of make-up that ran into her hairline. The woman was relaxed, not on her guard; she never expected to be judged. For Flora, clothes were an easy way of detecting a weakness, an error in taste. It was a kind of war; maybe it wasn't worth all the energy. But whenever she thought they were watching or judging her, she sharpened herself until she was like a little dagger ready to strike. If she could show them up or make them look ridiculous, all the better. After all, didn't they deserve it? Flora smiled regally, "Mainbocher."

"Mainbocher!" The woman grabbed one of her chains, protecting what was rightfully hers. "Mainbocher! Why, you couldn't touch him." She nervously examined Flora's black wool skimmer, the small brooch at her neck, and her khaki men's wear blazer. Flora wondered about the rating she was getting. The assistant was looking at her, eying her from underneath her hat, probably thinking to herself--what could this one possibly know about any of our things? The woman kept talking. "Where are you from?" She had to put Flora in a particular place, straighten the whole thing out.

Flora almost yelled. "The West Side of Chicago."

The woman relaxed, adjusted the brim on her hat and smirked, a half smile.

Flora caught the expression. She laughed, "So is Mainbocher, lady. He's from the West Side of Chicago too."

Sometimes she wondered if making everything a fight was worth it--the need to defend herself, to prove that she was

extremely clean, that she had perfect taste. Sometimes the need would express itself so strongly it would drive them away. But it was a world that she wasn't really a part of anyway, so what did she have to lose? If she insulted them or offended them--they didn't really want her anyway. And it wasn't "them," or "him" or "her," or any one person. It was the idea of "them" that had grown into a thing so large that she had to fight back, always.

Night Song

"John's younger than me by four years. As a youngster he was always getting into trouble. He and my baby brother Charles liked to fight the girls while Mother was gone." She turned away embarassed, hiding a shy smile. Odd, I'd never seen her this way before. She was almost a little girl, the one caught telling a secret; her tone was private, revealing.

"What do you mean, fight the girls?" I wanted more.

"You know, fight," she balled up her fist and punched at her face. "Like this...put a knot on his own sister."

From that moment I was back there with her. Going home could do that--bring the old days to life.

"He liked to throw rocks and accidentally hit us, or he'd have a stick playin' and hit us in the head--anything. He was always gettin into somethin'. When Mother'd get home we'd tell on him and then he'd get a whippin' and we'd cry. After we told on him--you know we didn't want him to get a whippin'--we'd cry harder than he did."

I could just make out my mother's features. It had

cooled off and everything was still except for our voices and the dull, steady sounds of night--it was a sweet time. The dark was full of everything that had been there earlier but now all had settled down as if waiting for her voice and my hopefulness. We'd gone home together that summer, my mother and me, and she was about to leave to go back up North. Since I was a little kid, I had followed my aunts and my mother around trying to get them to talk about the old days. Usually they didn't take the time.

My mother's voice trailed off. I knew I was pushing her. Since early that morning I'd been asking her about her life--when she was young, her college days--about the whole family. She wanted to got to bed; I couldn't blame her, but I wanted to stay on the front porch and hear it all. She was seventy years old; I might not get another chance.

The rest of the family still lived in town, except for my uncle; he was coming in from Detroit the next day. My mother had to leave soon; her church tea was coming up, but she wanted to see her brother first. Usually the family didn't include me when it came to Uncle John. I was a grown woman, thirty-five years old with a child of my own, but when I asked about him my mother moved away, changed the subject. To her I was still a kid, but I knew more about him than she thought. I could remember way back; the presents he sent were tucked away to be opened "when there was time." When I was a little older, around holidays, I watched the mail. On my eighth birthday I was lucky. I played by the

door most of the morning. When the mailman came, I grabbed the package; I knew it was for me. I still remember my mother rushing into the room, frightened by all the noise. I was screaming, jumping up and down--it was the most beautiful coat I had ever seen--dark brown wool, straight, long with a little circle of pale mink around the collar--in my size. My mother looked at the coat, frowning, shaking her head: "All that money." I wondered what she meant, but I didn't care. I was only in the third grade, but I was going to be glamorous. That day all I could think about was my luck. Only Johnny, my Uncle John, could find such a wonderful coat. I closed my eyes. I could see him standing there--the blue serge suit, the silk shirt, the gold cuff links, his fingernails perfectly manicured. His hands were soft to the touch as he held on to me, talking softly, "Sugar, anything you want from Johnny." He was my hero. And now a new coat with a real fur collar. I kissed the air. I kissed myself . I kissed the coat. It was too good to be true. I asked my mother how it looked. She held the coat for a minute then walked away. "That John, always trying to be somethin' he's not, putting on airs."

Nothing wrong with pretending to be something you aren't. At eight I wasn't much to look at. Most of the time, my mother dressed me in cotton Cinderella frocks. On gym days, I wore plaid jumpers. The green in my plaid picked up the green of the sleeves of my cotton gym suit. I wore my hair in pigtails, two braids crossed at the front, glasses,

a toothy grin with a big gap in the middle, and thin, short anklets. They were the only things that would stay up on my legs, thin, long legs that seemed to go on and on.

Back in those days I was an awkward looking kid that was always being chased home; I would've paid any price, worked day and night, to be like everybody else. I was sure that Uncle John had always had it together, even as a child. For me everything was hard work; I figured life was easy for him, like sipping water.

My mother relaxed a little. I guess she'd forgotten about the time. Sitting on the front porch at night was all we did down South. Sometimes an unexpected visitor would stop by, join the group, and sink into the rhythm. Like sitting around a campfire and telling ghost stories, at home children and adults could be the same, put on a mask or reveal something unexpected, be themselves or something altogether different. The stories could go on, trail off, and never end. Tonight it was more urgent. It was just my mother and me. I leaned forward and listened.

"John always did love rocks. I remember that his only weapon in those days was rocks. When he was older, he'd come back from a date you could hear the rocks hittin' the ground--he always had a pocket full of rocks."

"He would go on dates?" I think my mother had forgotten; they didn't even say "date" back then. I tried to imagine Uncle John dressed up with rocks in his pocket. My earliest memories were of smoothness, no wallet showing,

never any bulges. His white handkerchief was always perfectly folded and in its place.

"Yes, and come back with rocks in his pockets. You know he could throw a rock as good as anybody could shoot a gun. When he got in the house, he would empty his pockets full of rocks. It was just before he went to college; he was about seventeen years old."

"Why did he like rocks so much? 'Cause he was just good at throwin' em?"

She didn't answer. She balled up a fist and punched at the air, then pretended to punch at me. I grabbed at her fist and yanked it away, laughing. "Yes, and good at aimin', too. He didn't have no knife or anything. They didn't carry knives around in those days." She balled up her fist again. I thought I felt a little breeze. "That was his weapon. Like some boys now carry sticks and bats around. In Chicago, you never see a kid 'less he's got a bat or a stick to protect himself with. Rocks was John's protection." She was still critical, but she had softened a little.

"John was always a little different. Papa, you know he was a fisherman and a hunter, an expert with a gun. John never liked to fish, didn't hunt either. Charles did. Papa'd always fuss about John. Said he didn't have any sense."

"Why do you think he was so restless?"

"Just didn't like the same things that Papa thought he would. Charles did. Charles fell right in." Her voice was weary.

"Why do you think he was so restless? Why do you think he did all that stuff?"

It was never enough for me to accept things, take them at face value. Sometimes I made things too hard, harder than they needed to be. I wanted to analyze everything.

"Just bad, you mean throwin' rocks and all that? He was always breakin' somebody's window out with rocks. He just liked to throw rocks." She grabbed at the air and aimed at a tree in the yard; she must of been good herself. "He used to pitch at home with the local team. They said he coulda made the major leagues if he'd kept at it, but John didn't keep at anything."

I guess she'd forgotten that blacks didn't play in the major leagues back then. She never gave Uncle John a chance. None of them understood him the way I did.

I thought about the summer I spent in Columbia. I was in the dining room, cutting out the dress for my senior prom. My grandmother had just laundered one of Uncle John's shirts. "You never launder a man's shirts," he shouted at her. "A man's shirt is always dry cleaned, especially if it's silk. I'm sick of this one-horse town. You're ruining my clothes." I knew I could calm him down. "I know how you feel, Uncle John, I'd feel the same way..." My mother snatched me back, as if to say "You stay out of this, little girl." Everybody else could say their piece, but it didn't work for me. They just didn't take me seriously. Anyway, Johnny and I were still as tight as you could get. I was

always the first person he looked for whenever he came to our house in Chicago.

I had turned away from my mother. I was watching the bushes on the side of the house. Uncle John must have hid outside that window to keep from getting whipped. One of those bushes could have been a man hunched over, moving a little. For a minute, I was back there motioning to Uncle John, warning him to lay low. I was startled when my mother started to talk.

"Then he went to college, to Tennessee A. & I. First the oldest daughter, Pauline, she had two years in college, then she came out with an elementary certificate, and she taught and helped me to go to school. Then after I got two years I started workin' and I helped John. " She held out one hand and then the other like she was transferring piece work, then stopped short. "Course John never came out to help anybody. He went three years of college and all he wanted to do was make the first team on the football and make the Kappa fraternity. That was his ambition. He made grade C average just to get by, maybe a B- every once in a while." She paused for a minute, straining to remember, then shook her head. "I don't know what he even majored in. Three years, he had three years."

"But that was a lot of education for a black man to have back then."

She clasped her hands and rubbed them together in a circle. She was hard on Uncle John, expecting too much and

then being disappointed. She was like the rest of our family; churchgoing people, they didn't smoke or drink. Good-hearted, always ready to lend a hand whether they were teaching school or going to a meeting over to the church; they just couldn't understand somebody like Uncle John.

A car sped by and kicked up the dust. The kids raced up and down our hill half the night. It was 10:30; it seemed much later, I guess because most folks went to bed so early at home. We had left the bedroom window open next to the porch. When the phone rang, my mother went inside. She talked for awhile, then came out and sat down.

"That was John on the phone. Said he wasn't feelin' too hot, probably the flu...a bad summer cold. This fellow, one of John's runnin' buddies, he's over there. Says he'll take John by the hospital.....the two of them were playin' checkers, John and his buddy."

I moved closer to my mother. We were sitting together in a pale yellow aluminum swing, the stationary kind. It stretched under the front windows of the house and spanned half the porch. A long time ago an old wooden swing had hung from the ceiling, but it had rotted so bad that Grandpa had to cut it up and use it for kindling.

"He'll be here before you can say Jack Robinson, you know Uncle John."

"I wonder if he's runnin a fever." My mother rubbed her hands together in a circle. "They say those summer colds can work on you...get real bad."

I shook my head and laughed. "All those new drugs they have these days. I wouldn't be surprised if he was up and around in no time. He'll be OK. You know Uncle John."

She nodded.

Our house was still on East End Hill; this was the same porch that Uncle John had dropped rocks on before he went inside. Sometimes when it gets late your mind starts to race. You can surprise yourself by coming up with things you thought you'd forgotten. I remembered something myself: "Uncle John told me about how one time he sassed this white man. He went to a store downtown to buy a hat. I don't know whether he didn't take his hat off or what but he sassed the owner. See the owner called him boy and Uncle John got mad; said 'Don't call me boy. I'm not your son.' So I guess the man got real upset and Grandpa Will had to talk to him. I guess the man said, 'It was a good thing he was your son, Will.' Uncle John always said about that time 'I left Columbia and I didn't come back to the place till my father's funeral.' I know he's so quick-tempered that he couldn't be around that place where he had to--

She cut me off: "Be less than a man."

I nodded. "Was there any resentment because Uncle John didn't help out the others...you know, after he finished school?" I felt foolish even asking. It seemed so easy for her. I had to work at all this stuff. And everybody knew I did, too. She always bragged about raising me by the book; I was "proper." I think that's why I felt different. I'm not

saying I wasn't accepted. They all loved me. They could take people for what they were.

"Resentment? Of course not, he was one of us. They just figured that was John. I'm the one that paid for John's fraternity and all that stuff."

"When he first went to school, it was funny..." She started to get excited. I knew the good part was coming. "Just because he was from a small town, they thought he was country, didn't know anything. So he would get in card games with the boys on the campus, you know, pretend he didn't know nothing, wear old torn clothes, and then when he sit down he'd beat 'em all and they start to callin' him Slick Evans. That was his name all through college, Slick Evans."

"All through life," I added proudly.

When he beat those guys, it wasn't luck either. Just like his name said, he was slick. Being slick means you've got style, the sense to know what to do in a particular situation, and skill, just a natural ability at a certain thing. Maybe it was hard work too. When he was a little boy, he told me once he made a little pool table out of an old wooden box and used tree branches for pool cues. I worked hard at things too but it always showed. Part of Uncle John's magic was that he never showed his hand. I mean you never saw him trying hard at anything. He kept all the work in the background. What you saw was just smooth, like the polish on a dealer's manicure.

My mother was sitting there, her eyes closed, her hands

folded in her lap. I thought she had fallen asleep but then she started to talk again. "After he got out of the Air Force he went to Detroit. I went up there to see him. He carried me to this place called The Peacock, my first bar and cocktail lounge."

I jumped in yelling. "He did? What street was it on?"

She put her fingers to her lips. I couldn't help it. I should have been the one he carried out.

"I don't remember--first one I ever went to. Before I went to Detroit I got a book with all the different names of cocktails so I could appear knowledgeable, you know." Her voice was filled with pride. The Peacock was probably her only bar and cocktail lounge--my mother drinking. "So I sat down at the bar and started to callin' all the names." She closed her eyes and held her head back the way people do when they're chanting a prayer. "Gin Rickey, Rum Cola, Tom Collins." John would say, 'What you want Sis?' I'd call for it. He gave me every one I called for."

I grinned until my gums showed. I'd always wanted to know her secrets, anything private, forbidden. "Every one? You must of been really drunk."

"I was, I called for three. When I got off the stool I couldn't hardly walk. The next morning I got up an' drank some water and got high all over again. John said 'Sis, never drink water after you been high, 'cause it'll bring it right back.' " She was whispering out of respect; there wasn't much Uncle John didn't know.

"So the next two nights before I left he carried me to a cocktail lounge where you sit at tables, not like The Peacock, and the waiter brought my drink. And every time he'd bring one I'd drink it right down like you drinkin' pop. John said, 'You don't do that at these places.' Say, 'You just sip it.' Say, "Every time they see it empty they gone fill it up.' Say, 'You break me doing things like that.' So I learned to sip."

My mother had been a school teacher and a housewife most of her life. I was surprised when she told me she'd had that much to drink. When she came over in Chicago I couldn't get her to have a glass of wine. She didn't even play cards on Sunday. Nobody was the same around Uncle John. I was never left out when Johnny came. He didn't want me to call him Uncle John and I wasn't that skinny little girl. I was the lady on his arm. "Shall we meet later for cocktails? I know a little after-hours spot, Madame." Someday, I'd planned to go to all those places with him. I envied my mother.

"When did Uncle John do all that stuff with you? How old were you?"

"That was back in my third year of teachin'. I was about twenty-three."

Just like those cars going up and down the hill, my mind was racing and I couldn't make it stop. I jumped in screeching; I had forgotten everybody else was asleep. "Remember they used to say he was the best lookin' man in

Detroit?"

She nodded, "That was his reputation. We didn't say that... they said that in Detroit..one of the best lookin' men in Detroit."

"He was gorgeous..." We whispered it together.

The phone rang again. This time I went in and picked it up. When I came out to the porch, my mother was leaning over the side of the swing, her hands covering her face. I poured her a glass of water from the pitcher on the table. "Uncle John's friend called from the hospital. He's been admitted. Said he's resting quietly."

"I'll take a plane out tomorrow night." She sipped slowly. "I've got to go see about him."

People have a soft way of talking at hospitals or when somebody's sick and the family's sitting around, waiting for news. "Remember when he used to come to Chicago, when I was a little girl, I'd get him to talk about all the people he knew." The cool night gathered around us like a piece of cloth, flying, then settling in. "He knew Billie Holiday and Billy Eckstine. He knew all the entertainers that came through town. I remember asking 'Come on, tell me, Uncle John. How well did you know Billie Holiday? Come on, You know you did.' He'd say, 'I knew her just like I know you.' He said that whenever he'd walk into the room, she'd stop whatever she was singing and start to sing 'My Man.' " I gathered my mother in with me.

She sang the first line, " 'Oh my man, I love him so.

He'll never know'...that's how they used to sing it. He was working at a night club. He gambled a lot. He always played pool. Of course, he always won--said there was no such thing as luck. When he went home, you know, to visit, he'd go down and beat everybody in the pool room. He'd always win--could throw a ball. He was a good pitcher--excellent pitcher. He was great--pool, checkers, poker, everything. I remember one night he was visiting from Detroit. You were little then. He got a call to go out to the South Side. Somethin' about this man beatin' everybody he played. He left in a cab wearin' an old overcoat. You should have seen him, it was a beat-up old thing." She laughed. "He didn't come back till the next day."

"He wanted to be his own boss. That's why he lived like he did."

My mother pressed her hands together. "His own man."

"By the time I was in college...you know what he told me?"

She shook her head.

"He said he'd lost all respect for the street. Said his gamblin' days were over."

"In his time that was one of the only ways to make it. That's how they did it...doctors, lawyers, that's how they made their way through school."

"He said the street now...the way it is these days...nothin' but dog eat dog."

"John never did carry a gun, didn't swear, no drugs. He

was clean. Only time he ever got arrested was for bein' at an after-hours place. A fraternity brother of his, a judge, got him out right away."

"Once, he talked about writing a book. He used to say, 'If I wrote everything I knew about Detroit there'd be a contract out on me tomorrow.' "

A gambler, but not the kind that depended on luck, Johnnie always seemed to know what the other guy was thinking. But there was more to him than that. My mother held her hands open, palms up, side by side. "He could recite poetry. He learned poems, long poems...'It Can Be Done,' 'Grey's Elegy,' Emerson. He memorized the Bible...I remember one time when you came home; John was here too. Y'all argued for two hours on some quote, and the quote's right in the Bible. We had to break you up. For two hours. You and John." She shook her head.

"We've always been good buddies." I held up two fingers side by side.

"He wouldn't give in and you wouldn't give in."

The whole trip had been sunny, but the next morning it started to storm like it was never going to stop. My mother had finished packing. We were sitting in the living room trying to plan the program for her church tea in Chicago. The day before we had bought this white linen tablecloth and a big package of paper napkins in rainbow colors. Each woman in the club had to fix up her own table; every year my mother raised the most money and won the prize for the best

looking decorations. You invited people--neighborhood friends, family. They would stop by your table and have a taste of whatever you were serving--thin slices of baked ham, a piece of fried chicken, some potato salad, iced tea or fruit punch. After they had a few sips of this or that, they would leave a small donation. That afternoon we were trying to make this centerpiece from a craft book, a peacock with a folded paper tail in pinks, blues, yellows and greens, rainbow colors. It had a fancy trim, fluted crepe paper, everything, but it was hard to make without the glue and tape showing. Besides, when it's damp outside, nothing holds anyway. My mother was fussing with one of the corners when the phone rang. Her plane was leaving that night; friends had been calling all afternoon. When she came back, she was holding the centerpiece by the corner, but the part she had been trying to glue was dangling off to one side. She walked by me and slumped down in the chair. "John just passed...it was his heart--same thing killed Papa."

He hadn't even been sick. I don't think he ever went to the doctor. I was angry, mad that I let him slip by me.

The rest of the family stayed in Columbia. My mother and her sisters had to plan the service; our funerals were always at home. I volunteered to fly to Detroit to bring the body back and clear the things out of his senior citizen's apartment. Maybe it was my way of making up for all the times I had meant to get together with him and didn't. Now, this was the best I could do. I couldn't help thinking that

it was my last chance to see him, even though I knew he was gone.

I looked around the room. It was all there. His books, his records, all kinds of playing cards, twenty-five decks in all, an old pool cue, pieces of paper--long ones, short ones, all about checkers matches. He used the cards and the pool cue for business, checkers was his hobby; but books, they were his first love. Leafing through I found notes he'd written. Thoughts, sayings, little poems. And there were his clothes--suits, shirts, sweaters, hats, and, of course, beautiful, beautiful coats.

I shipped most of the stuff off to the Salvation Army. A lot of the clothes were new, but I didn't know what to do with them. I kept a few things, some wool tams, a scarf for my child and, for myself, two of his coats--a checked wool garbardine, the other, a soft black cashmere topper, at least forty years old.

When somebody's dead you don't have to care about how they were at the end. You can see at them at their height, their best. You can get them to stand still, so you can look them over. My mother helped me to do that when we talked. To me, he wasn't an old man living alone in a senior citizen's home getting by on monthly government checks. He was Johnny, his white handkerchief always folded and in its place. All the work was in the background. What you saw was smooth, effortless. He never showed his hand. And when he walked

into the room, Lady would stop whatever she was doing and start to sing their song.

When I left Uncle John's apartment, I had to balance a coat and a pool cue in one hand and lock the door with the other. As I turned to look back I could hear Johnnie saying, "Come on Sugar. Turn around. Turn around in that coat. Let them see it on you." Then I would smile, open the coat to show the lining and twirl and twirl.

When the elevator opened on the ground floor, a janitor, a young guy in torn overalls, was trying to push a wooden cleaning cart out the door. The boxes from Uncle John's apartment were lined up against the wall, and a few of them were blocking the way. He mumbled under his breath, then ran toward me shouting, "Johnnie's pool cue. I'll give you twenty dollars for that. It's gotta be lucky."

Johnnie would have laughed at that. He always said he didn't have any use for luck.

Rothstein

He could settle everything in a sentence. When you were with him, you always knew where you were going.

On her first visit to Cincinnati, one day, out of the clear blue sky, he announced that they were going to Rothstein's hospital room for an important conference. On the way over, he bragged about his partner: "The man's always on the job. Everything--under control. The man's working overtime." Rothstein was pale, ill-looking. His bed was competely covered with sheets of paper. All white. That's what she remembered. The yellow-white of the hospital linen, the grey-white of his skin. Her father huddled over the bed for almost an hour, while she watched the old man peer through thick glasses and grope for the sheets of paper.

The Cleanup Hitter

When he heard the noise outside his office door an image flashed; he was back in the second grade, jumping out of bed to the William Tell Overture. This time he straightened his tie, threw all the stuff in the attache case and ran for the door. Pausing, he flipped the lights on and off, tapping and whistling the first few bars and clicking the switch to the beat. Pleased with his cadence, he doubled back, swiveled a chair, then bolted into the corridor, weaving in and out of the five p. m. traffic.

On Friday afternoon between five o'clock and five minutes after five the corridor on the top floor of the agency was a sea of navy blue, dots of floral swimming in paisley print; account execs, secretaries, creative types, all uniformed, running for the elevator at the end of the hall. By 5:30, half the office would be at Butch McGuire's. Jay, the guy who always landed the big soap account, would lead the procession. Atsuko would probably balk and go out for Szechewan, Thai or something. A vision in linen Armani, she ran by waving a dining guide in front of Jack's face.

Ready for the occasion, he passed her a copy of Chicago magazine turned to the ad for Butch's. Marcus, known as the "Ebony Molloy" for the dash of originality he added to his up-scale dressing style, pulled him aside, revealing at the same time two fashion touches, a pair of black suspenders that carefully leaned out of his sport coat and a strikingly conservative pink silk pocket square. Molloy, as wrinkle-free as if he'd just arrived at work, tipped over and whispered, "The brothers are going out South, man."

"At this point in time..." Jack started, then broke off laughing, with a slap to Molloy's butt; he couldn't commit himself right now. Lately he was starting to clamp down, watch what he said. He had overheard his boss and another guy making these inflammatory remarks. Not that he cared what they said, as long as they didn't involve him; nothing was going to keep him from landing that contract, scoring the big win. In an urge to be political, he pressed the flesh, patting, clasping hands and nudging his way on to the elevator and out to the parking ramp. The flourescents were going strong. Light paved the way, changing on the color-coded ramp. A small truck swooshed by with enormous brushes, vacuuming the pavement and spattering his new Italian loafers. Strong pink light. Heaven.

Everybody at work thought that Jack was a self-made man, probably the first in his family to go to college, awed by having his own office, complete with a secretary shared by no more than five other account execs at any one time--

but the personal history was for him to know and the guys at work to find out. Jackson Parker, aka Jack, was used to privacy; he came from a family that kept secrets. Out of a whole city of aunts, uncles, and cousins, only two or three listed their phone numbers. A woman had called him a few years ago trying to get in touch with his aunt, claimed she was a sorority sister, an AKA. He bragged about not giving out the phone number. Besides nobody in the family ever told him much.

Secrets, privacy--it was more than that. It was all a question of appropriateness, office decorum. He was holding on harder than ever, just to maintain an image. Before he could be relaxed, non-threatening. Talk, straddle a chair with a cup of coffee, shoot the bull and still never give anything away. At least till recently.

With his stepped-up effort to watch the office chit-chat, he was leaving work irritable and tense. After watching every word and going all day at that incredible pace, he needed a little bit of heaven, some comfort. Any detour that would relieve the pressure was worth the extra time. He drove about a block from the office and parked at a small brick building, still in the upscale business area.

The sign hung above the door like a big pastel cloud. All-weather material in a luxuriant pastel pink had been quilted and framed. A fan in back of the frame sucked air in and out automatically so that the sign not only moved in the wind but seemed to be reacting discreetly to some gentle,

much-desired pressure. When he looked up and saw it swinging in the breeze, he felt downright celestial as if he had been transported from work to some soothing afterlife. The Satin Connection: Private Massage Quarters for Executives and Professional Men--he liked the private part. He didn't know about the place until Jay had engine trouble outside work and hitched a ride over one day. When Jack dropped Jay off at The Satin Connection, Jack realized then that he had to revise his opinion. He'd always figured places like The Connection were for losers, guys that had to buy what they wanted. After seeing Jay go in, he came to look on massage parlors, the exclusive ones naturally, as professional therapy, not as evidence of weakness. Jay was obviously going places, a winner, the guy was smart, he had the contract with Soap Products Associated.

She was wearing a white turtleneck and leotard skinny pants with an over-sized pale peach cotton jersey slung over her shoulders, her hair styled in a free, moussed-up look. Smooth dusk rose blushed-up skin. His favorite masseuse, a white girl named Minsky, was packing up to go home.

Minsky's father had been the manager of a big burlesque house at the end of State Street. She was born the year the place closed. According to Minsky her father had got down on his hands and knees and begged his wife to name her Minsky, after the famous but ill-fated house of intimate apparel reviews and comedy.

She always sported the newest looks; now it was the

pastel, dusky southwestern shades that were computer-coded so that a city girl could feel Navajo and then plain again. Jack convinced her to stay a few minutes. He could turn beaming and elf-like, a Sammy D. routine, then get more nervous like Jerry L. to plead his case, ending with his legs together like he had to go. The routine always worked. All he had to do was jump in the air, show optimism and grin as hard as he could. Jackson was about 6 feet one, 190 lbs., a muscular guy--no fat. That's why it was easy for him to jump so high. Although he'd been an all-conference guard on his college basketball team, he didn't go on in sports. If you weren't good enough to make it into the pros, the next best thing was a job in sales or PR, so you could capitalize on your popularity. Besides some local recognition he was left with a bad back. He wanted to be the best, number one on the squad, but he always swore up and down that if he ever had a son he'd never play college sports.

She let out a resigned sigh and leaned against the wall, posing directly over the ornately framed sign that explained the house rules at The Satin Connection. The first few minutes of his visit, Jack would brief Minsky about his plans for landing a big soap contract, the kind Jay had. After Jack's dance routine, Minsky would in turn become maternal and caring, just to help him ease down after all the excitement. The women in her family had always been sympathetic.

Minsky grabbed the bamboo screen that was about to

topple and reveal the presence of the night crew sniffing burritos and unwrapping sandwiches on the other side of the partition. The shifts were about to change. Good smells were everywhere. Starved, but making an effort to ignore the noise of the smacking and chewing, she reached in a drawer and pulled out a wrinkled nurse's cap. Revving up, she cocked the white cap to one side and began to gyrate, falling first into a slow rhythm, then churning until she began to run clockwise like a big engine, blowing tiny O's through finely pursed lips. It was a routine they had perfected one day when the humidity was bad and Jack was feeling low.

"I'm a nurse," she chirped. "I wash my hands this way." She made a cheerleading motion. Jack had taught her to think "soap." "I wash my hands that way."

Minsky clasped her hands together almost in desperation. Her hair freed, she began to swing from side to side until it stood up in peaks all over her head. Her hands made big circles in the opposite direction and then back again.

"I wash my hands this way because it's more germ-free." She did a practiced little step and speed-chewed the gum in between verses, stepping back to avoid scraping a polished toenail and at the same time adjusting a stirrup over her foot. She ended triumphantly summing up the slogan for the day. "Germ-free like this. Germ-free like that." All said, she threw up her jersey and fell on Jackson, massaging his

back with great sweeping motions, grunting and moaning till her skinny pants were drawn up over her knees.

Jackson, lulled by the odor of the room's scents, drifted off. Minsky pummeled and mauled. Jack yawned and purred. After a long day at work, he needed to settle down, "now more than ever." As Minsky kneaded, Jack drifted in and out. Weightlessness--no matter how hard he fought--instead of going into limbo, he drifted back and forth. All of a sudden he wasn't at The Satin Connection. He could see the top floor of his office building. Then he was back in college playing guard. Drifting again, he was back at work, explaining the game to one of the guys on his floor--the toughest game, the one his team won in the last three seconds of play.

At the office he liked talking sports. He could be easy-going and non-competitive. Sports was the only way to disagree. Not exactly disagree. It was more like friendly tugging, topped off with an occasional power hand shake; since he was one of the few brothers in the place, the handshake was his way of giving entry into a club, of sharing a private secret, for members only. At least till recently. Then a few things had happened. Some joker had said the wrong thing in a TV interview, something about the absence of black management. People were backing off from easy talk and it irritated the hell out of Jack.

One day at work, while he was sitting on the john, he heard Ed talking to Jay, the guy with a major soap account.

He'd never forget that day. He was sure it was Jay; he could recognize the voice. Ed did most of the talking. He started with a disclaimer. "I've never said this before and I don't want the word to get around." The water at the sink came to a screeching halt. Jack didn't move.

Ed proceeded, "The black people at the baseball games--it's less than one per cent. And I have tried ad campaigns and I have said now come on out. Be a part of this city. Be part of this game. Let's get some things going here. But for some reason and I don't know why and I can't figure it out--nobody's been able to explain it to me--in a city of 50% black there's the attendance at the baseball games of less than 1%. I can't understand that. To me, that bothers me as much as the lack of black management in sports because you go to the ball game..." Jack could hear towels ripping, hands patting. "...it's a happy place to be. It's a good circumstance, a chance to share loyalties. It's a chance to share feelings. It's a chance to get involved. And something in it is really quite good. Not all nights in the ball park are good. The fans get out of hand, but baseball is largely a happy circumstance." Jackson tore up little pieces of paper and dropped them in the toilet. "You're looking for a win. You go with pride, you go with feeling, and I would like to see the black people be more a part of this because I think it could help bring things together. And it just doesn't happen. And I don't see it happening."

Jack knew then, as sure as if he'd pencilled it in on

the calendar, that this was the end of the easy office talk. Now sports would be controversial. They'd expect him to act as a spokesman, to be open but still not make waves, to talk enthusiastically but in the right cliches. All the heavy stuff. It would blow his cover. Jack vacated the stall as rapidly as possible. Ed and Jay were both startled at his sudden appearance. "Jack..." their voices rang out in unison.

"Take care, guys," Jack saluted as he pushed through the double doors.

"Super," yelled Jay, the guy with the major account.

Jack wanted to get out of the office, to drift back. Minsky tried to help but she could feel Jack's rigidity, the knots of tension in his shoulder blades; he was worrying again. Jack was still troubled. Even The Satin Connection couldn't ease the blow from what he knew to be a threat to his very existence. Abruptly, about a half-hour after he had entered the padded door of The Satin Connection, he pulled the sports section out of the attache, yelled "oh no," and ran for his clothes.

By 5:37 he was out the door and on his way. Jackson Parker, aka "Jack," lived in one of the sleek new steel and glass high rises that had cropped up all over the Near North Side of Chicago. Because of the strong demand for luxury housing, his building had been constructed a little faster than usual. The style was derivative--a little Mies Van der Rohe here, a little Richard Meier there. The steel sheeting

looked slightly discolored in the sun and some of the materials rattled when the wind blew too hard.

Rumbling and shaking welcomed him. Home at last. Inside they were still putting on the finishing touches, or so they said. A company was supposed to come in to do the recessed lighting in the lobby for a sweeping display of Chuck Close paintings. Jack held his hand near his face and moved it back and forth in front of the blank lobby wall, as if trying to practice the right attitude for viewing. If his boss Ed or one of the other tenants walked by, he wanted them to see, right away, that he was an art enthusiast, maybe strike up a conversation. They'd all have something to talk about--an ice breaker, a sophisticated version of the weather. "That Jack...what a brain." The possibilities were enormous.

Jack had a private joke; even though his apartment wasn't as big or expensive, it was on the floor above the boss's, not the top floor, but one over Ed's, nevertheless; Jack was up in a cloud. The odor of new plaster was still in the air and the film that covered the walls had drifted down to the carpeting, giving the hallway an ethereal, floating quality. Although the heating ducts at the top of the landing were in place, the covers hadn't been ordered. The molding around his door was separating slightly, but anybody could see his floor was almost finished. That's what Jack told his mother whenever she came over.

The remote control was in its usual place, a silver-

plated dish on the coffee table. Jack picked it up and pointed to the TV set. Then, happily, he slipped out of his navy suit and into the shower, thinking about the day he'd be in first place. He caressed the side of his Euro-style shower massager and turned around as if taking in admiring glances. When he had walked in on his mother's bridge club, she had introduced him as the only member of the family who had one. Spa (Soap Products Associated), the big soap company that everybody was after, shipped some liquid soap samples to the agency for those dispensers on shower walls; Jack got more than his share, just one of the perks that went with his steady climb.

Ed, the company's founder, a guy with a steady eye on the dollar, liked to pat him on the back about all the perks. "I know they're proud of you, Jack." Ed had started with nothing and built a small fortune by never turning down a job. Ed, his wife Barbara Jean, and his wife's mother lived in the largest apartment at 751 On The Drive, Jack's building too. Everybody at 751 had a massager.

With Ed, Jack had all the bases covered. He made a point of honoring Boss' Day, a card, an expensive cigar. According to the experts, the important thing about relationships was to convince people, bosses, co-workers, that you really liked them, that given a world of people you would have gladly chosen only them. That's why he was known as the fastest man on the twelfth floor with a cigarette lighter. One of the brothers at work had sworn that as a

child Ed had been scared by a black dog. Jack wouldn't have gone that far, but it was a documented fact that he and a few other guys were given only certain accounts, big companies with black clienteles. He wouldn't say he hated Ed; hate was too strong a word. Sometimes after work he did get some satisfaction out of taking a whole roll of toilet paper, tearing it up into little pieces and watching as he flushed it down the drain. He enjoyed imagining that it was Ed he was flushing down. Two or three rolls of paper later, he could relax for the evening without any problems.

He turned up the shower, pumped on the dispenser and lathered himself over and over, dipping around muscles and under curves until the soap suds stood in peaks, going all the way up to the top of his head, shaping his hair into a sharp point. Spa--to work with them you had to be the best hitter on the team, the guy who comes on with the bases loaded and hits a home run, not necessarily the guy with the highest average but the power guy. He fashioned his rag into a sloppy oval and watched the water drain.

Sudsing up again, he mouthed the tiny print on the dispenser: Soap Products Associated. The shower was a fortress, the command center for planning his attack. He didn't need the highest average, but he had to drive in the most runs. About an hour later in a rut, the dispenser empty, he shivered as the pores on his skin started to stand like little buds. He settled in for the night, but didn't sleep; he couldn't stop thinking about landing a deal. After

a couple of hours his forehead started to tighten. He went to the john for the third or fourth time, swallowed a couple of Xanax, then went back to bed and sucked in the cold air from the duct. Poised in the position for push-ups he fell on the floor and checked under the bed. He did this again and again, until he had achieved animal tautness. Maintaining the same grace, he jogged around the room checking the doors and windows, making a circle and checking them again. Still agitated, he went back to bed, turned up the radio.

Every night, from 8 p. m. to midnight, Jack listened to Dr. Emile Franck, the phone show psychiatrist, a sincere, experienced man who blasted away at out-moded treatments and listened to callers as if they were paying customers. Jack was amazed at how many folks out there are calling in and talking about washing their hands a little more than they need to. Dr. Franck, a German emigre and descendant of the late composer, recommended Xanax for the problems of the over-worked upwardly mobile set.

He stared at the ceiling; the texturized paint was a last-minute decision. Actually, the contractors had planned to put on a finish layer of plaster, but the occupancy date was coming up fast, so they opted for the swirl effect as a cover. One of the guys from work had laughed when he saw it. Called it a botch job.

Out of bed again, he jogged around the room, smiling, thinking about the big win. He stopped; he could hear a

knocking sound. He looked down, way down. He could hear it under the bed. He wrapped a towel around his waist, ran over to check the door, then back to grab the phone. At three in the morning, it had to be important.

"Hey, Jack, what's the hell's going on? I just got home and my living room ceiling is dripping like crazy. You been runnin' that shower all night again?" It was Ed, his boss.

Jack blew O's into the phone. "I'm looking at the ceiling."

"Not your ceiling, my ceiling...Jack."

Jackson was known to anybody who knew him even slightly as a reliable point man. He was the kind of guy you called in a sticky situation. He could be relied on to find the problem, establish a game plan and pursue the approach until the task was accomplished. That's what was so damned irritating; his boss calling him on a play.

Ed was practically screaming into the phone: "Jack, what we're looking for at this outfit--team players--on the job or off--team players, Jack--a guy that only looks out for number one, a guy that uses up all the water, leaves the shower curtain out, then sleeps on it--goes to sleep, that is." Jack--" Ed's voice was earnest. "Jack--that guy's not sharing." Then, deliberately slow: "He's just not on the team. I guess what I'm trying to say...we're looking for team players...You know I guess it all boils down to one thing. Competence, Jack, competence." Ed yelled the words, as if saying it louder would make the meaning clearer.

Jack used the extra cord on the telephone and walked over for the toilet paper.

Ed continued," A guy's gotta go with the team. And he's got to have the a-bil-it-y to know how to go."

The toilet paper rolled to the floor. Jack stomped on it with his foot and tore off a piece. He remembered that day he was sitting on the john listening to Ed and Jay, Jay of Spa fame; he could still hear them talking.

"Jack, you still there? Let me tell you something. Jack, you're one of the cleanest guys I ever met. Honest to God--I've never had anybody work for me as clean as you...those suits you wear--I never even see a piece of lint--not one thing. It's downright amazing. I'll give you credit for that. You're damned clean Jack, damned clean." Ed proceeded with caution. "I've never said this before and I don't want the word to get around..."

Jack stopped cold.

"Jack, I'm looking for a win and this is the truth--I don't know how to say this but I would like to see you people be a part of that win. You know what I mean? Just a second, I'm coming up there...Barbara Jean's watching the tube...and Jack, one thing, turn off that goddamn water. You got that?"

The pounding started again. This time it was the door. Al was there in a matter of seconds. He ran past Jack and collapsed in the leather recliner. "Barbara Jean's up watching TV." He was out of breath.

"Super, Ed, that's super." Jack stood in one spot, smiling and jogging a little.

"God, I wish that woman would go to bed."

"Super, super--energetic lady." Jack smiled again. "Full of life...vitality."

"No, Jack--neurotic."

Jack stopped short. He'd agreed to the wrong thing. He switched bases, echoing the boss: "I know what you mean. Neurotic..neurotic."

"That's right--neurotic." Ed was cynical. "Energetic, that's one thing--neurotic, that's something else. It's like sleeping with an alarm clock."

"Ed, you don't quit." Jack broke out laughing, shaking his head. "What a guy."

"Jack, I wanna let you in on something." Ed's tone was soft, confidential. "Jack, you know where I was tonight?"

"Let me have it, Ed. Where were you?"

"I'm gonna let you in on something...

"Right on."

"I was at the game."

"That's super, Ed, just super."

"And do you know what, Jack?" Ed counted his fingers. "I bet you I didn't see three black faces in the whole place."

Jack froze. The stakes were high. He'd have to be careful here. A slip-up would be costly. "I guess I'd like to say I have the answers, Al."

"I've tried ad campaigns, personally invited people."

"My problem, Ed," Jack shakes his head and tries to look presidential." I know where you're coming from...I can see both sides...but in this business, Ed, we have to play it straight down the middle."

Ed isn't listening. "I've said, Come out...be a part of this game."

"My problem..I just think too much."

"And for some reason...I don't understand it. In a city of 50% there's less than 1% coming to the games."

"I hear you, Ed. I hear you. That's why I'm always in the middle. Smack dab in the middle."

Ed jumped up abruptly, screaming, dancing around. "Where in the hell are these people? What are they doing at night?"

"I know what you're saying, Ed, and it irritates the hell out of me..."

"I wanna know what they're doing?"

Jack remembers the sound of the toilet flushing.

"I'm just plain bummed out, Jack." Ed shook his head and stared at the floor. "And this water comes dripping down on my ceiling. What's the world coming to. I mean, shit. What the hell is going on around here?"

I'd like to say I have the answer, Ed, but the truth is there isn't one."

Ed nods. "Jack, I've given this a lot of thought. And I see a way you can help this agency--maybe the whole country.

I'm talking about major stuff here, son."

Jack starts humming to himself: "I'm number one. I'm number one."

"I know you've been waiting for this, Jack."

"I've been wanting that account for a long time, Ed.

"There comes a time in each and every man's life."

"Spa...that's my baby..."

"When he gives birth to a new idea, when the germ is there right in front of him..."

"...a power hitter, that's what you're looking for, a guy that comes on with the bases loaded and slams one out of the park. Right, Ed?"

"That's right, Jack...the most dangerous hitter on the team." Ed waved a hand at the wall. "Look at it, Jack. Imagine this..." Ed motioned him over. "Get down here with me, Jack." Ed slapped his thigh and pulled Jack down on his knees beside him. The two of them kneeled together and stared up at the blank wall. "Imagine it...a video presentation." Ed waved his hands, gesturing wildly. "A public service campaign. Of course you'll do it <u>pro bono</u>. <u>Pro bono</u>--that's the heart and soul of this agency. Look at it, Jack. I can see it now. 'Bring 'em back alive!' You bring your people out to the park, Jack. I'm going to give you all the ammunition. I want you to mount the strongest campaign this agency's ever seen. I want billboards, TV spots...Mom, the flag. ..look at the 'board." Ed's hands moved slowly across the air. "Uncle Sam wants you at the

park...what an idea...you can turn this country around, Jack...it's a grand-slam, a real winner."

The Checker

Most stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. That's part of the slogging, the donkeywork. This story only has a beginning. I know what you're thinking, but please stay with me.

Pleasure, desire--this is what I'm after. In the sixth grade I listened to my gym teacher, Miss Steele, tell Mrs. Taylor's sub, (Mrs. Taylor was the school secretary) that you couldn't really tell by looking at a man or a woman whether they were good at it, that sometimes the ugliest peoople made the best sex. It had nothing to do with looks, she said. It was something like magic, kind of a mysterious thing that some people just had.

I didn't have it, and furthermore I didn't understand people who did. For a kid on the outside, all this was hard to grasp, out of reach. Even though Wavolene and Florence, two girls in my class, had pointed out that the gym teacher had a shape like a coca-cola bottle (a dead give-away for experience), the stuff I heard Miss Steele tell the sub was pretty strange coming from a gym teacher. Earlier that year

in the p. e. class, they had taken anybody who had raised their hand into the gym office just to explain why nice girls didn't listen to blues on the radio. I didn't raise my hand. I knew how the other kids worked; they wanted something shocking--like that movie The Moon is Blue--stuff to talk about on the playground; I was too shy. Not like Wavolene and Florence, they were bragging to the teachers about hearing "Work With Me Annie" on Al Benson's blues show. I listened to Al Benson too (when my mother was at the store), but I'd never tell. I'm a big observer of juicy situations as long as I can watch from the sidelines. Gratification, spontaneity--I have been told that these things are necessary. I should be able to let it happen--have the experience--and not worry about whether it's perfect. I'm not a kid anymore. These days I want to be surprised when I come--freely and energetically.

Like I said, I've been told that spontaneity is the key, but for my mother, preparation was all important, more important than whatever followed. My mother's warning--her general instructions: "Before you do anything, always go to the bathroom!" On my mother's knee the bathroom became the most important room in my life. The castle--the throne room--the splendid place where all my dreams were put on hold. The golden foyer--the warm loving repository, home of a million good starts, all since stashed; they never materialized. You see, after the sitting and the straining, there wasn't any joy left.

On my mother's knee, I learned the value of labor. Toil, sweat--my livelihood, my occupation. For some women, the earliest picture, the one they sketch over and over again to show the great care and loving that was given to them, is the one about the perfect white organdy dress, or the pink linen with fine European embroidery, or the sheerest summer sun-dress with slips of satin woven along the top. Mine was organdy. And you remember you didn't climb trees. You sat there in that dress watching everybody else play and as soon as she (I mean Mom) saw a spot on it, (and I don't mean this to be anti-mother. I'd do the same thing if I had little ones) she whisked it off and put you in another picture perfect number. But before you changed, you assembled the tools of your trade; you washed your hands with soap.

In the South I always felt clean. As a small child the smell of lime and disinfectant blessed the outhouse. The slop jar was rimless, sharp and cold, and thus perfect. Then Grandpa's indoor plumbing arrived, the awareness of a seat, the invitation to do more than come and go; the bathroom became a sanctuary for contemplating, thinking about the world.

Segregation came with a manual: never leave the house without "trying" first. It was part of the preparation, a precaution, insurance in case you couldn't find a place to go.

When I was in grammar school, we moved up North; indoor

toilets were everywhere, black people and white people all using the same ones. The second part of my mother's warning was the truth about what you can catch from toilet seats. Her adage: "Always put paper down on the seat." A young boss, a woman that I believe to be a whore, in the traditional sense, told me once, emphatically, that you could never catch anything from a toilet seat. I knew then what she was, and I imagined her spreading with great abandon her large pink drooping cheeks onto the toilet seat with a great deal of that national treasure hanging over the sides. I took pride in the number of times I had carefully placed toilet paper all around the rim, like a princess about to position myself on a throne. In my dreams I can see myself patiently rimming the seat, weaving it all around until every spot is shielded.

Let me just say that I'm a single working woman living at home, with some very definite thoughts about the world of the flesh, even though I haven't had much actual experience. During infancy and childhood I was pampered, protected--no chance to whimper, even the smallest cry was answered. As a young woman, although I've waged political wars, sounded the battle cry more than once, I've never come face to face with sex or pleasure. In spite of this handicap, my thirst to know has led to truth; my intuition has flowered. I've been right more than once about "the good life." I predict that in years to come elegantly coiffed hostesses will be proud to accept packets of disposable

toilet seat liners as house gifts from thoughtful weekend guests.

Weekend get-aways--I've tried countless times to plan one...I know about preparation first hand. Call it a grind, in my profession you can't put an hour limit on being tidy. Preparation, ritual, it's my art. I'd broadcast it, tell anybody I know: I've been late for things all my life. These days I stand over the bathroom sink, the organdy dress packed away, wearing a pair of faded men's pajama bottoms and a top that doesn't match, but I wash my hands over and over again. If I check a calendar, I can actually point out dates, times, years. That June I planned to leave on time to march with Martin Luther King. On Tuesday the fifth of one year I would have had my first date with Harvey W., a doctor's scion. Mr. Flowers, an elderly gentleman and my first boss, promised to give me a promotion if I was there by seven-thirty a. m. on a certain Friday with my own work apron. Oh yes, when I was voted by the teachers as "class smartest," I missed a chance to go downtown to meet a Newberry Award winner.

You say "Try a new line of work, break the cycle--she's always starting, never getting places." If I could quit, stop all the planning, just let go...I thought about a way of getting high, of having a good time without getting ready first, of gliding into everything, without the ritual, straight to the dance. I knew a way I could perform as smoothly as a soloist. A little coke-- and I'd be on this

stage like John Bubbles, you know, from Cabin in the Sky, tapping and so on, slim, sophisticated John B., taking you and me, easy here, easy there, on a cloud. Just a second, let's stop this shit right now. I didn't do drugs, they're just another start--that's all, just another start.

Not that I haven't had a fantasy life. I'm not bragging when I say that I've had some pleasant dreams. Louie H., a boy in my high school Spanish class, was an expert with his hands, a real craftsman (I don't mean Hambone, either). He wore an old pair of gardening gloves in the winter and one year, just before Christmas break, he removed his glove, raised his third finger in a triumphant wiggle and screamed, "I wear this glove for protection. This is the finger I use."

For the next few months I imagined myself on Roosevelt Road in the back of the Gold Theatre with Louie H. In my dream, Louie had gone there on Tuesday morning and broken the partitions between all the seats in the back row of the Gold, so that we could be comfortable and away from the crowd. He even issued an order in front of a high school assembly that those were our seats. Louie, who was later shot during a scrimmage between the Chaplains and the Vicelords; Mr. Flowers, my boss at the drugstore; and a teacher, Mr. Plachota--I tried to pick the most unlikely people for my fantasies. The more unlikely--the more passion they aroused; the homelier--the better; the more authoritarian, the stricter the disciplinarian--the more my

secret needs were aroused.

It started with this stuff about sensuality. When my gym teacher, Miss Steele, told the school secretary (the sub) that sometimes the ugliest people made the best sex, that it had nothing to do with looks, I didn't understand till years later what she meant. But if I really stick to the stopping and starting, I have to pick the most unlikely people for my fantasies--my profession demands it. Just another start, that's all I really want. Because I care so much, sometimes maybe too much, I have made a real effort to cultivate sensuality, the clean scent of an expensive fragrance--studied, tested, laboratory-proven, yet intoxicating and carefree; a week's salary, but I can write it off as a job-related expense. Spurred on by a love affair with the clean and the pure, a simple occupation has risen to the level of art; I now give the same care I always gave to my hands to everything, checking as I go along to make sure that everything is in order. This doctor I used to work for up at Columbia, you know, around Morningside Heights, was a cynic about the whole thing. Dr. M.--a guy who wore windowpane checked sports coats, red, white and blue (school colors, no doubt) straight brown hair, close-cropped and slicked back, and spit-shined brogans, said "Show me a pair of clean hands and I'll show you a cure for cancer."

I want you to know that I work like a detective, an unrelenting master. My dilemma--am I looking for a sense of order or is all this a strategy to get to the broken down

seats in the back row of the Gold? I am a smart dick, not just an ordinary working Jane. I have a rhythm, a bump and grind, that begins, rises, reaches a plateau and stays there until I go off tired, weak until the next challenge. Sometimes my mother yells: "Come away from there, you know the door's locked." But the hard work has got me dulled: I can't be sure. Although she used to be the last word on everything, these days I have a scientific thirst for knowledge that keeps me working on the truth about ordinary events. If I really don't know, how can anyone know for me?

The other day at the doctor's office, I ripped out a questionnaire from a woman's professional magazine, checking first to make sure that the coast was clear. I might get a job any day now as a higher-up. A few of the questions keep going around and around in my mind; lately I've had to do a lot of soul-searching. One question: "How do you feel about race?"

I could have been a Jew; after all, race, all that kind of stuff, it's just an accident of birth; the main thing, when you track people down, they have to take precautions. They start looking behind their shoulder to see who's there. They'll look behind the same door over and over, checking just to make sure. I could have been a camp survivor. The cesspool that ran past the barracks, like in Shoah, years later I could have looked outside my apartment door about the same time every night to see if it was still running there. I would, of course, look and look again until my eyes

ached and my vision blurred, hoping to see what was really there. Starting again and again but never getting any farther. I could have been a Jew, an Armenian, an Italian. But I'm not.

I'm black. Hey, don't tune me out! This stuff could happen to anybody. In the 60's I was a Panther. I was there. After the raid on the apartment (blood was everywhere; they counted ninety-seven bullet holes in the front door)--every night for the next year I lay huddled on my mother's sofa, like an actress before the first curtain; I thought they were still after me. The first call: my grand performance, jumping up, running to the window to check for unmarked cop cars; about every ten minutes until I was so tired I could only sit by the phone, waiting for a friend to call, so I could listen for the phone tap. I knew the bullet went through my leg. I knew that the twisted skin that stretched over my hand like a piece of cellophane was permanent. The rest was like a dream that began again and again, then stopped short, leaving me confused and waiting. (Like I said, race, all that kind of stuff, it's just an accident, but there's something I'm going to get off my chest. What happened to them--it's always some kind of universal tragedy. And we're just runnin' around like a bunch of natives, dropping babies, birthing at will. So that's not thinky enough for you, huh? All right, so we didn't come up with the theory of relativity. Score one. "Well, I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' no babies." I don't give a damn

about some guy's id or his ego.)

The next question: "Do you have friends at work?" My old boss, a black man, became an instant friend when he said to me one day, as we were leaving the office: "Try that door for me. I'm not sure I locked it!" Then he went from door to door all around the suite of offices, turning every knob. My feelings soared like the rush of joy on the first day of spring.

Contact was made another time when an even older boss, a Jewish fellow, was standing at the end of the hall. As I closed the door to my office I looked down the hall and saw him closing his. We slammed the doors shut, an automatic locking system, then checked simultaneously four or five times, starting a rhythm together.

A crucial question: "Does anyone respect my skill?" A few poeple on the job have noticed my concern with minutia. For a few minutes before I go home for the day, I want to be alone, so I can take care of intimate details, fix and refix until I feel good enough to leave. Sometimes after I make sure all is well and I turn to say a last goodbye, I notice a funny grin from a co-worker. I counter by playing their game, covering myself by reciting seemingly casual phrases: "Have a nice day" I cry--knowing that I have a day of work ahead of me.

"Enjoy your evening" I follow up. My evening--what evening? Or my conversation breaker--"Isn't this a beautiful day?" Sometimes I'm almost down the stairs and I go back for one

brief glimpse, hiding my passion with a final and triumphant "Have a nice afternoon."

Another question: "Are you organized in your personal life?" Although I'm tidy at work, at home I live in a state of chaos--papers piled high, sacks of posters from Al Benson blues shows, yesterday's lunch, even a pair of old garden gloves. In spite of a proper middle-class upbringing, my appearance is always a little unkempt: sagging panty hose with long runs up the sides, torn nails that don't get smoothed. You could say I have a game plan, but the steady business of checking everything out doesn't leave much time for ordinary things. To say I am a procrastinator is to belittle my sense of purpose. You drag me down to the level of a snivelling little hobbyist. I have great plans that will emerge someday.

My profession: I'm a checker--nothing but the best. No, I don't mean I work at a grocery store. I have an office job, but that's not my profession. Caution is what I'm known for in the trade. Caution or better <u>pre</u>caution. Before I leave the scene, before I go to bed at night, I check things carefully, like an understudy waiting for a chance to perform. I memorize positions. I try to recall whole pictures of things. Ordinary things--you see, I am a student of the mundane. Inside or outside. Public or private. I'm a checker.

What was the position of the lock? Did I bolt the door before I got into bed? Were all the knobs on the stove

pointing to OFF? I looked so many times. I should be able to remember. If I turn out the light and stand there in the dark, would a red light tell me if it was ON? Would I even know, if I saw it?

I'll be standing in a public john, a place I hate but can't bear to leave. In front of me a large mirror, covering the whole wall. I look straight at it. I turn to go away. What did I write? Nothing. I look again. Did I take a tube of bright red lipstick out of my purse and write on the mirror--FUCK YOUUUUUUUUU..... (YOU KNOW WHO I MEAN)? No. I've been brought up not to make a scene. I never have taken that final step. I never will. Once I almost took my fist and rammed it hard on that whistle-clean surface. Don't ask me whether I ever will. That's not the point, but I started to. I have reached the heights of precision. I can tell you how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. I have checked and re-checked so many times that you'd get dizzy watching. If you don't believe me, follow me and see how far you get. You'll be very surprised.

By The Moon When The Moon Was Up

"Of course when John got a little older, he still was bad, but he wasn't as brave as he thought. One night he went somewhere--I don't know whether to see a girl or not--but he had to pass through a cornfield. In those days we didn't have lights on the streets, so it was dark. The only light we had was by the moon when the moon was up. So in this place near by there was a man that had a farm, and he had a mule that was blind. Of course John didn't know that. So when he cut through the cornfield the blind mule couldn't see him and he couldn't see the mule. So he thought it was someone attackin' him. So he picked up a stick or somethin and started to beatin' the mule, but the mule kept on comin' toward him. So the next mornin', someone said that somebody had injured the man's mule and, come to find out, it was John's doing, what he thought was somebody after him wodden't nothin but the blind mule."

Uncle John was used to going out. I couldn't imagine him caught by surprise, not at night. "So what happened? Did he get in any trouble or anything.?" I was waiting for more.

"Mother didn't bother the boys too much. It was the girls she used to be so strict on. In those days they didn't think the boys could get in trouble. They didn't watch the boys at all then like they do the boys now."

"So the next day was everybody talkin' about it?"

"No, nobody knew but us, that he was the one who did it."

"But how did you find out?"

"Well, someone said it..."

"You mean they came by and told you?"

"No, someone said it, you know...in a small town everybody knows what goes on."

"He came home and told you though?" I was still trying to get it straight.

"No, he didn't tell us a thing." Her voice went high. "Listen...the next morning we heard that somebody had hurt this man's old mule." It made sense to her. "Right over there where Uncle Leon used to live. Called it Putty Hill."

"What do they say now?"

"Crestview, they call it Crestview. They've built it up. Over there as you go straight down Seventh Street--straight down East End Street. All the way out there. It wasn't built up then."

I looked over that way. I could tell that was all I was going to get. How did they know in the first place? I'd heard lots of these family stories. Whenever I asked for more, they'd give me the runaround. For her it was easy,

something you understood if you had been brought up in a small town. There were things that went on at night when nobody seemed to be around that everybody knew about anyway. It made me feel different, cut-off.

Wars

The snow seemed to stretch for miles around. Grey snow from city dirt. It was snow you didn't want to touch. When she moved into the neighborhood, the streets were tree-lined. But when houses were abandoned or torn down, the trees didn't make any sense. The quiet around her, the sound of the wind, the snow and the sameness of building after building made everything grey and dull. Two stray dogs ran past and into a burned-out building up ahead. Eager, she ran after them, pulling a metal shopping cart behind her, a heavy book and an empty milk bottle, sliding back and forth, rattling around together in the cart. A year ago a fire had gutted the place, but the icy glaze on the wood and the stone made things seem vibrant and alive. She could ignore the snow and sameness; instead of the wind she heard the whispers of family life, men, women and children, rehearsing their stories behind the walls. Out of breath, she walked up to the building, past black wood, crinkled like pieces from the evening gown her doll wore. Like a collector searching, she wanted to examine the wood, but her mother had been

adamant; she worked hard to keep her clean: "Cross over to the other side. Stay away. Anything could fall from that house."

Last Thursday when she was standing in front of the building trying to look inside, her mother's landlady was watching her from across the street. Mrs. Henderson guarded the neighborhood; it was her territory. When she got home, her mother already knew she'd been at the building.

At least two or three times a week she went that way to the store; today she was already loaded down. After she passed the old building, she buried herself in a thick, heavy book that she'd been trying to finish for weeks. Pulling the shopping cart behind her, she tried to hold the book and turn the pages with the same hand. Sometimes she couldn't read at home. He said she had too much free time: "What's that you got there?"

A quiet chamber, cave-like, the heavy snow could soften things, drown out noise. At first she didn't hear the footsteps behind her. The voice startled her. It was sudden, shrill. "You going the wrong way to the store." She kept reading. The snow fell into the spine of the book, making a small valley. When she got home he'd have chores, dishes for her to do, cleaning, dusting. Her eyes flew back and forth across the page.

"Go on. Turn around." The voice was strong: "Go on back to the store before somebody comes looking for you." A lady that she recognized from the church choir was whispering in

her ear.

Freezing for a second, then starting up again, she threw the book in the cart and hurried back to Stan and Bill's.

It was a small neighborhood store, sandwiched between rows of houses. No one would have ever expected it to be there. Almost all the other stores were churches by now--Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Sanctified. According to her mother, no A. M. E. church would ever meet in a storefront. Sanctified wasn't even respectable. They used saxophones and drums in the house of the Lord and encouraged young people to shake and go wild.

She was christened Almyra for her mother's mother, and as far as she was concerned that was her name. Still, everybody called her Myra except for her relatives down South and a few old people in the neighborhood. On the cold Northern day, she walked up to the store, pulling the cart, stepping military style, past a solitary tree, not bothering to notice the ice near the door. She slipped a little, then caught herself. She had walked all the way pulling the cart with one hand and holding the open book with the other. Still in a trance, she pushed the door open to Stan and Bill's. On tiptoes she could barely make out the top of Stan's white grocer's cap; a big man wearing a heavy winter coat took up the whole counter.

"Thank you and come again." Stan always had a word or two for his customers. As Myra passed the counter, he

reached for her arm, squeezing it hard. "Who goes there?" he thundered, blank-faced. "Friend or foe?"

Myra started to salute. "Crossing the border, sir." Stan leaned down and pretended to examine the book carefully. "Now girlie, did you check the Pope's list? Hope it's not one of those books...did he say it was okay? The Pope I mean." She tried to catch herself but she couldn't hold it any longer; her face swooshed into a big grin.

"Better watch out. They banned Confidential." He was still pretending to be serious.

Giggling, she tucked the book under her arm and tried to lean against the counter, her eyes moving quickly around the room. "Milk, a loaf of bread," her eyes still moving. When the heavy copy of Gone With the Wind fell to the floor, Stan covered his mouth and stared up at the ceiling. Whistling and moving his feet, he turned away.

She had watched "The 64,000 Dollar Question" and could spell every word. The spelling champ was twelve too. Furthermore, he had announced, to the amazement of Hal March and the entire audience, that he had read all of Gone With the Wind three times. That night she'd sat there spelling every word that came up until Daddy Boyd turned to her and shouted, "Shut up. I'm tryna hear the contestants."

Stan would be more interested. "School goin' OK.?" He wiped his fingers hard on the apron, then made his eyes go thin, detective style.

"School?" she was still looking around to see who else

was there. "I'm editor of The Pennygram," she declared proudly. "The Pennygram of William Penn Penitentiary."

"That's what we called it too...editor? Not bad. Not bad at all. My boy used to do that." He stopped short, adjusting his white apron. "Before we moved to the North Side, that is. So, little lady, what's it gonna be?"

She chanted her list and raced to the back of the store to look for the butcher and his wife. Bill was in charge of the meat. His wife, Vi, kept the books and made sure all the best customers were pleased. Bill was all right; he was careful about your order--even if you only wanted enough pork to salt up some dried beans.

"Guess what, Bill? We're duckwalking."

"Duckwalking?" Bill leaned against the side of the meat counter. He cocked his head and shrewdly examined the pair of skinny legs. "Who's 'we?'"

"Me...me and my baby sister. We're doing it for Ike. I taught her. We get down on the floor every night and go 'I like Ike, I like Ike.' We do this duckwalk. I know Ike's gonna win. That Stevenson's an egghead." The Ike thing was a bombshell, a chance to be the center of attention.

Bill nudged his wife and pointed to the thick book on the floor. "Now we won't talk about that, will we?" Myra turned and grinned. She liked being around adults. Sometimes the kids at school made fun of her when she stood up to recite. With adults she had a chance to brag about things, show her knowledge.

Bill mumbled to Vi, pointing to Myra's legs. "Ike, Schmike." He grabbed Myra by the shoulder and put his head down right next to hers: "You know we charge Republicans extra tax."

Vi's hands flew up in the air. She patted them wildly, stopped for a minute, then, reflecting, placed them to one side of her face. "Look at her, Bill." She tugged hard on her husband's sleeve. "They keep her so clean, don't they?" She pointed to the girl's clothes. "They really keep her up."

Bill nodded, "A fine colored family."

Myra looked at her clothes--starched white blouse, buttons and tiny rows of trim, red/yellow plaid jumper tucked into snow pants. Her brown wool coat hung open at her sides, beat down, smoothed out by the strong wind. Her coarse, heavy hair had been carefully parted into four sections, two long braids at the back, one at the top, jutting out stiffly to one side of her face, and a part straight across her forehead, for bangs, turned under in one big curl. Her mother gave her orders every day about staying out of things. Cleaned, pressed, just like always--she shrugged. What was the big deal?

Trying to play magician, Bill pulled an egg from under the counter. "Me, Bill, says my egg's the winner." He reached for Myra's hand and set the egg on her palm. All three, Bill, Vi and Myra, laughed at the same time. Once last summer Bill had stuck a quarter in her shirt pocket for

straight A's.

The aisle was narrow. After Myra wrapped her change in the receipt, she tried to hold onto it and maneuver the cart past a display and out the door. Going to Stan and Bill's and announcing her political knowledge was the thing to do even if they didn't always agree with her. It was a small store, one large room with food stacked everywhere. Big walls of food and slabs of meat, fresh and red and dull. Boxed in. But the people there always listened.

Those old guys were just about the only white shopowners left from the crowd that was there when they moved into the neighborhood. In a gangway one afternoon, a Jewish friend, Nedra, told her the truth about "the colored." "My mother," said Nedra, "told me that when they move in you have to leave or your house won't be worth much."

On the way back she passed the old building again. If she looked through a crack, she could see shadows at first, then men with long flowing beards wearing black hats, women in loose-fitting overcoats, shivering, huddled together in a corner, as if waiting for some warmth, small children, sleeping next to piles of trash. Once Myra was sure she saw a bride, cool and gauzed, in a long white gown of pieces sewn like falling ice. She seemed to step out of nowhere, dresden-like, confused for a moment, then, cautiously turning to find a man, the groom, the two of them walking grimly towards a charred door. When Myra looked through the

crack she felt guilty, a feeling, something inside her that she resisted. To stop the feeling, she pressed her legs together.

When she wasn't too caught up in her own world, too eager to look inside, she checked first to make sure Mrs. Henderson wasn't watching. Today she was much bolder. She looked through the big crack in the wood right away. She couldn't see the shadows, nothing that made a snowbank seem to move. She watched a bird dart back and forth, tracing the air. She listened to whirring sounds. She could see the stray dogs sniff the ground and cough into the cold air. She put her lips to the hole and yelled. No one answered.

Sometimes she hated looking around in the winter. She didn't mind the snow; it was just all the garbage thrown in it. She kept stepping where stray dogs had been. The snow oozed with everything; it was full. Nobody seemed to care in the winter.

After Myra crossed the street, she looked to the right. Mrs. Henderson was walking towards her, carrying her maid's uniform in an old shopping bag. She worked for a lady in Skokie, who hid the mop so Mrs. Henderson would have to get down on her hands and knees to scrub the floor. They thought you cleaned it better that way.

After the landlady had found Myra there three times last week, she had told her "I better not catch you over by that old building...you and your investigating...somethin'll jump out of there and bite you...and you know, Miss Almyra,

if you think you can go runnin', 'Help, police!' don't think it. This ain't no TV show, honey." She tugged her braid gently. "You won't see the law round here. Leastways when you want them."

Myra raised her hand in the landlady's direction, then lowered it quickly. The snow could be an adversary. It hid things --not necessarily when you wanted it to. It was unbending. You couldn't control it. Nothing grew out of it--no fragrant herbs, no dandelions. It was its own thing. She didn't hear the coins when they fell in the snow.

When her Aunt Nell, her mother's sister, came up from the South, she brought fresh herbs from her garden and potted them up for the windows. On cold days Myra liked to sit near the herbs and watch her breath on the cold glass. Her aunt called one herb "asifidity," and when she was in a determined mood, she would tie it up in a bag and put it around Myra's neck to keep away colds. Mrs. Henderson, her mother, her stepfather--they were all from the same town. She thought of Mrs. Henderson taking an old spoon, digging around the roots, giving them air, and of Nell breaking off bits along the stem. Her niece liked the strong odor; it was a reminder that growing things--like people--could survive.

Nell always had something to say about Daddy Boyd. Out of the whole neighborhood, black and Jewish, Lester Boyd and Myra's mother Aline were the only Republicans, black Republicans at that. Her aunt, Nell, who had never been very fond of Daddy Boyd, said she knew from the day she found out

he was a Republican that Daddy Boyd was nothing but trouble. Conversations about him started with mumbling. The last time Nell came Myra heard her say. "...that ol' round-headed bastard." That fact of anatomy and a few other things, like his refusal to go to church one Sunday with Nell and Mrs. Henderson, made Lester Boyd intolerable to her aunt.

She lifted the large glass bottle of milk and put it in the refrigerator. Then, walking sideways, she edged her way into the living room, and carefully shoved her book into the corner behind the chair. Daddy Boyd was home.

Daddy Boyd was a short, stocky man, who needed to pace and talk. Always restless, tonight he was more agitated than usual. He was standing next to her mother Aline: "This oughta teach you not to buy that junk--The Daily News--look, they got a picture of Stevenson right on the front page. You oughta know by know the Tribune is the only decent paper in town; they put guys like that on the back where they belong."

Daddy B. expected the worst; any Democrat was under suspicion. Although he had strong opinions on just about everything, he had few hobbies. One of his favorite pastimes was reflecting on politics and historical theories, long winter nights in his favorite chair explaining the causes of World War II or revealing Roosevelt's hidden agenda with "the Reds."

Myra was relieved. When Daddy B. talked, you had to listen. Daddy B. was Aline's political mentor; she listened

quietly to his ideas and accepted his choice for candidate. Maybe in all the commotion her mother had forgotten Mrs. Henderson's news. After all, this time she had hurried home from the store. A victory. She was off the hook.

Some people in the neighborhood thought Daddy B. had a grudge against the government; that he was waging some kind of battle, a private crusade. She heard Mrs. H. explaining to the lady next door that a lot of Daddy Boyd's frustration was tied to the problem at the post office. Mrs. Henderson, who liked to make creole gumbo and sometimes, if you begged, big skillets of pepper steak, was always willing to talk. If there was a little pepper steak left, she would invite Myra to stay awhile in the dining room crowded with pots and pots of mothers-in-law tongues and philodendrums to talk and eat. Mrs. Henderson, who fixed white cakes from scratch and colored the frosting light green, had thought a lot about Daddy Boyd. One afternoon when Myra was sitting upstairs, finishing a plate of pepper steak, the landlady confided "A man can't study and study and try and try and never get anywhere. It's got to work on him some way." She explained to Myra that every year, if you worked at the p. o., you had to be tested to see if you knew the towns in your district. You practiced and practiced, hoping that if you scored high enough on the test you wouldn't have to take it again. She told Myra that Daddy B. had taken the test for fifteen years and, although he wasn't at the bottom, he had never scored high enough. Mrs. Henderson understood his job; her husband

worked at the post office too.

Myra knew that Daddy B. kept a big box divided into 96 sections at the back of the house. He had made up a postal sorting system, just like the one downtown. All winter he practiced for the test, throwing the cards into the slots. Mother always said, "Don't bother Daddy B. when he's throwing the mail."

Walking sideways again, Myra edged over to the chair and handed Daddy B. the receipt and the change. He examined them. Slowly, without turning around, he crumpled the receipt in his hand. "You're short," he said, "...you're short."

She moved nearer to the chair.

"Fifteen cents." He held out his hand. "You're fifteen cents short." When he came in at night he looked for trouble--anything out of place.

"I must've dropped it."

"Dropped it?" He could smell weakness.

"That's right, I remember now. I was over there by that..." She could feel her mother moving behind her.

He grabbed her arm. "Those damn Jews. I knew they were gonna try this sooner or later. They ain't gonna pull this shit on me."

"Just a second. I know I had it. I..." She searched her pockets. "Maybe it's in here...Stan and Bill--they always..."

He jumped in. "Don't give me any lip." He struck her

with the back of his hand. "They cheated you, you little dummy."

Her mother was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "That's enough, Lester."

She felt her mouth and wiped the blood away. "I'll go back. I know it was a mistake. I'llll..." He pushed her down again. She should have counted the change.

The thing with Jews was always going on between her and Daddy Boyd. It was after their first "talk" about them that the rules started. She headed for her room remembering the rules:

1. No slamming doors.

2. Bedroom door open at all times unless getting dressed.

3. All reading and other non-essential activity can take place only in the TV room with the rest of the family. Lights off in bedroom unless getting dressed. (Or maybe that was really rule 2.)

4. A week's advance notice to leave the house, unless going to school, even for choir practice at church.

For Myra to accept that Daddy Boyd was mean to her out of spite or out of sickness was too hard. It meant that she was part of a nightmare. But she wasn't screaming. So it wasn't a nightmare. But there had to be a reason and since he was in charge, she was the reason. It didn't mean she was brave, either. To be brave you have to choose. She was just there. There wasn't any other place for her to be.

She remembered the night she had stayed up to watch Danny Thomas. Television shows, specifically Gunsmoke and old war movies, (John Wayne, if he happened to be on) or baseball--the Chicago White Sox--were the only things that got Daddy Boyd off the subject of Jews. It was a half hour past her bedtime. Danny Thomas makes an entrance and the music starts. Daddy B. comes in. "I told you I don't want to see no kikes on TV." Mother, quietly, "It's only a show." Myra: "He's not a Jew--he 's Lebanese." Daddy B. slams the doors shut on the TV. "They're all the same," he says. Mother, quietly: I"m watching it too, Daddy B." The TV stayed off the rest of that evening.

In the summer when Myra went down South to visit, she listened for hours in the next room while her mother's older sister, Nell, and Nell's friends talked about her mother and Daddy B. According to her Aunt Nell, Aline was a good girl; she had always been a good girl. She and Daddy B. had been brought up in the same town. Aline's family was respected by just about everybody. Long after Aline and Nell's father had died, people in the town talked about his honesty, his courage. Whenever anyone mentioned his name, it was in hushed tones, with a respect only given to a fallen dignitary. Daddy B.'s family, on the other hand, was known for being a little odd, not quite right. Only one or two families in the town were given that title. In a small Southern town, they were the ones that didn't say hello when they saw you on the street unless they knew you. Nell would

never say much about them, just shake her head and look down. Once Myra had heard them all whispering about Daddy B.'s father and his "particular" ways, about how he would sweep the dirt outside his own front door the way some people clean the steps and the walkway.

Nell didn't finish high school; she was proud that her sister had gone to college to be a school teacher. After Aline divorced her first husband, she knew that to keep her job she had to live a proper life. In her time divorced, single women were not allowed to teach. That's when she got to know Daddy B. better. When Nell said Aline was good, what she really meant was that she had never been around anybody really bad. If she happened to meet anybody really bad, she wouldn't know what to do with them.

After Aline and Daddy B. had been married for awhile, she found out about his sudden fits of temper, but she felt that she still had to stay with him; she needed a man in her life. Aline's sister wondered why Aline didn't stand up to Daddy B. the way she would have. After all, Aline had only one child; she could have left. But Aline just couldn't see having two divorces.

As Nell said, her sister was good; when Myra was young, Aline enjoyed the fairy tales she read at night as much as Myra. It was easier to pretend that everything was just fine. Nell called her "nice-nasty." That meant she got really upset about things like the right fork or a wrinkle in a dress, but she could have really bad things happen and

not bat an eye.

Myra enjoyed the trips down South. In the evening when it was almost dark, she would sneak out of the house and run down the hill to the tent meeting at the Sanctified Church. If she lifted a flap in the tent, she could watch a man called Big Sam play the saxophone. When she listened to Sam play, she could feel something warm and irresistible. She wasn't sure if it was right. Nell had told her not to go down the hill to hear the Sanctified.

Nell had told her once, "Almyra--girl, you were born old." When she thought about it, she had to agree. Myra lived in a play world sometimes, but she had studied the real world. She knew it word for word. She could never remember playing with other kids, people her own age. Nell had names for everybody she met--Miss Princess, Miss Proper, Little Busybody--they were all Nell's names for her. Sometimes when she sat upstairs in Mrs. Henderson's living room, with everything painted green, light green, sometimes called bathroom green, sometimes called Mrs. Henderson green, Mrs. Henderson would tell her how especially lucky she was that Daddy B. had put a roof over her head, emphasizing the "especially" because, of course, he wasn't really her father. "Not many men would do that," she would always add.

They hadn't talked about Jews for weeks. Then she listened to a teacher at school talk to the class about being a prisoner in a death camp. The teacher raised her

sleeve and showed some numbers tattooed on her arm. Myra was sure now; she was going to show Daddy B. that it really had happened, that concentration camps did exist. She stayed at the library looking for facts. Of course Daddy B. had his own facts. His family had always been rovers, travelers for one reason or another. His mother, Billie, was the first to bring him news of overseas. As a little boy he had listened intently to her stories. Billie left the South after a few years of college and found a job in a migrant camp near Hollywood picking grapes. Later, when World War I broke out, about the time Daddy B. was five years old, she went to Italy with the YMCA people and stayed there long enough to see Mussolini march to Rome in 1922. The people in town always complained that Billie wasn't around nearly enough when he was growing up, always traveling. Daddy B. was raised by his aunts.

His war library was at the back of the house--a set of books with Il Duce's picture on each cover sent by Billie when she was abroad, a khaki green scrapbook of World War II porno, with wacs and waves in all kinds of positions, and a bunch of little books in plain covers. The first time Myra saw him tuck the big book into the bottom of a dresser drawer she waited until he'd left the house to dig it out. When she opened it she found a big blond woman smiling fiercely, wearing no clothes. The woman, who appeared in a series of photos, was completely flat. Myra stared for a long time trying to figure out what had happened to the

woman's behind. She didn't like the little books in the plain covers, eight-pagers, mini-features about famous people like Dagwood, about Dagwood's long hose-like penis, a mean penis that would go all the way through Blondie and come out the other end with Blondie still smiling; the rest of his scrapbook she'd seen on the bathroom walls at school. She found a poem at the end that was the best part. It went: "So sit on the sand and do it by hand/ and buy bonds with the money you save."

When she looked at the war book the next time, she felt something in her body that she didn't like. A slightly warm feeling, the same feeling she had when she looked in the old burned-out building, or peeked through the flap to watch Sam play his saxophone, the same one that she had to fight the first time she went to the library and looked at the pictures from the camps. It made her feel guilty; fighting, she closed herself up to that feeling.

Their next confrontation began with his confiding "You know Hitler had a black army. Not too many people know that." When he left to go to the bathroom, she stood up and announced, "If he did, they were on their way to the camps with everybody else." When he came back, she showed him the library books on the table. "Look, Daddy B....It's horrible. Pictures from the camps. People piled up like dead animals. Look at that big ditch over there." She paused, and then added triumphantly, "The army took these."

He sighed, then repeated mechanically. Was it even

necessary to say it? "How many times do I have to tell you there was no such thing as the camps?" His eyes opened wide. No matter how long she stared at them, she couldn't see anything there, just emptiness.

"Books lie. All that garbage you read. Nothing but dreamin', dreamin' lies. Don't you know that? Don't you know they can do anything to pictures? Pictures don't mean nothin'." His voice tightened. "There was no such thing as concentration camps." The words came out like big rocks striking the air.

Mother, softly, "He was fine until he came back from the war."

Another time he'd been more charitable, admitting that there had been a problem, adding that it was O. K. what "the people over there" did to the Jews; they were messing up the economy.

Daddy Boyd was actually a very clean man. He carefully scrubbed his washrag after each use, making the practice of changing the washrag once a week totally unnecessary. Furthermore, he worked weekends at the race track and brought home a stack of small white towels, neatly folded.

If he liked, he could make any rule. The guy in charge never gives the accused reason to think otherwise. The guy in charge shows no weakness--no guilt. If he does, then both of them would have known--they would have been in it together. The guy in charge would have lost his power. It was like a bad grade at school. The last thing you think

about is the teacher making a mistake. If she does, it doesn't matter. And if you got mad and you had to leave school and sit in an alley somewhere, nobody would care anyway. You'd just end up getting hurt later.

More rules:

1. All food--everything must be finished. Once she had stuffed so much food in her mouth that she threw up before she could get to the toilet.

2. No lotion anywhere on your body; it grows hair.

3. Don't run when you're touched.

In the spring, Daddy B. decided he needed help once a week with the laundry. When it was time, they went, as he had ordered, down in the dark, in the basement. He set up the tubs for the rinsing, one for the first rinse, the one next to it for the bluing. Daddy B. had been a staff sergeant in the Army Air Corps; he had an exact way of doing things; he expected perfection.

He pushed her nearer the tub. "Hold the clothes down close." He tried to soften his voice. "Or you'll spill it over the side."

Myra stiffened her shoulders and pushed her hands down in the water. He moved over quickly, standing close so that his body almost touched hers. His voice was casual. "Relax, I won't bite." Except for the sound of his hard breathing, everything was still.

She dropped a white shirt into the bluing; it floated off cool and free.

He tried again, touching her shoulder lightly. Her fright had made her stiff, kept her away. "Relax, relax" he laughed, as if he had just heard a funny joke, one nobody else knew.

Myra took a long breath and felt the water again. She never said a word. Looking out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pick it up from the windowsill and put it down again. He flipped the pages, pretending surprise, as if he was looking at something new.

They stayed down there for about an hour. She transferred the clothes from the rinse water to the bluing, then handed them to him for hanging on the line. Out of the corner of one eye she had watched him move the eight-pager from windowsill to the table and back, maybe ten times, hoping she'd pick it up. The whole time she was down there, she didn't say a word. Battle-ready, she never moved from her station. It was the one about Dagwood; she had recognized the cover right away.

Her aunt always said cleverness wasn't Daddy B.'s strong suit. Every night before she went to bed Mother always reminded her if she forgot: "Kiss Daddy Boyd good night."

"Good night, Daddy Boyd," she would chant.

Sometimes when her mother wasn't looking he would grab her and try to hold her tight. Once she told her mother, "Daddy B. tried to kiss me when his pants were unzipped." Her mother's gaze was fixed: "Oh, I'm sure he didn't mean

anything by that."

One Thursday when it was very hot, Daddy Boyd started choking her. After Mother ran down the street screaming, Myra locked herself in the bathroom, pounding on the walls, yelling, "I hate you, I hate you," as loud as she could. When she came out, the landlady, Mrs. H., and her husband were standing in the doorway, talking quietly to her stepfather. After they left, Daddy Boyd told Myra not to ever get smart with him again.

Later that same afternoon, after it had cooled off, Myra left the neighborhood and went to a new store, Mrs. Pincus's, to use the pay phone. The number for the police was taped to the receiver. She talked a long time. When she was almost finished, she said "My stepfather tried to kill me. He's mentally ill."

A pause. The voice on the other end seemed far away.

"How do I know you're not the one?"

Maybe he didn't believe her. She'd watched the TV shows. They always needed evidence. She talked again.

Again, the officer replied, "How do I know it's not you?"

"OK," she yelled.

Myra slammed the phone down on the receiver and ran all the way home. While she was running, she made her plan. She wouldn't let Daddy Boyd kiss her goodnight. And she would never go to Stan and Bill's on his day off. The war had just started.

Until The Real Thing Comes Along

I'd work for you, I'd slave for you,
I'd be a beggar or a knave for you,
If that ain't love,--It'll have to do,
Until the real thing comes along.

It was five-thirty p. m. His Aunt Mag cleaned offices at the building next door. In fifteen minutes, like clockwork, she would leave out a side door, wearing cuffed anklets with open-toe wedgies, noticeable on the near North Side because she wasn't one of the new wave of college girls into the "forties look." She was sixty-five and she had started wearing wedgies and the rest on her first job at an army munitions plant. The rest was a waitress-blue utility blouse, pants and a rat tail. Back at the munitions plant Mag was awestruck by the boss's wife, a tall slender woman who wore upsweeps and chignons, fashioned with the aid of a long stuffed tail, then decorated at the side with a floral spray. In the forties before they started making polyester the boss's wife had shown Mag how to stuff a narrow piece of

hair net with shredded cotton, pieces of men's suits, anything she could find. Mag's hair was combed over the slightly concealed rat tail, but the short pieces always snapped out.

Usually Jack was out of the office by five-fifteen. He had time to catch the happy hour at Butch McGuire's, or pick up his laundry and still not run into her. Tonight was different. Most of his floor was working late. At ten to six, when he was trying to polish the report for his presentation the next day, Aunt Mag waltzed in. She glanced at the stack of papers on Jack's desk, shrugged and ambled into the adjoining office. With her nephew close behind, she checked out an empty office and a new machine in the copy center, then parked herself in the war room underneath the picture of Jack's favorite account. She propped up her feet on a footstool and yawned. "I'm thirsty."

Jack swung his arm up and fired a glance at his watch. "Yep, dinner time. Got to be checking out."

Mag adjusted the headrest on the back of the recliner. "I didn't say a thing about eating, did I?"

"You know, you're right, you didn't." Jack clipped and unclipped the sections of his report, trying to look busy.

She yawned again. "Where's the canteen?"

"The what?" He had to get this over as soon as possible.

"The canteen...Lord y'all don't know nothin' around here, do you? Where you been, boy? Ain't you never heard of

a canteen?"

Jack shook his head and pretended to read the report.

"Well, never mind your smartness, get me a bottle of soda pop...on the double."

Jack dropped the papers and ran over to a refrigerator stocked with test market samples of four or five flavors of pop.

Mag chuckled as she opened the bottle. "Who woulda thought it?" She closed her eyes and sipped slowly. "Jack in his own place...the boss." When she opened her eyes she did a double take, jumped up and pointed to a glossy of a male model holding a bottle of cream soda. "Look at that splib!" She laughed hard, slumping over, till her whole body shook. "He's as black as Pha Terrell." She looked up again, took another drink, this time choking and coughing until Jack had to fan her with a piece of paper.

Pha Terrell was a black singer from the thirties who shortened his first name, Pharoah, to Pha and pronounced it with a short "a" so fans wouldn't pronounce it "Fay" or "O-Fay." Jackson had been hearing Mag's "Pha Terrell" stories since he was fourteen; he would never be a fan.

While Mag was coughing, a secretary in a delicately patterned crepe de chine ran in to offer help. After the secretary left, Mag propped her feet up again. "See--there was this woman used to be down at Miami Beach. Always stayin' at that hotel, you know the one?" When Jack shook his head, Mag waved him away. "Anyway, she'd go out with

this guy, kinda looked like Herb Jeffries, she kinda went for the light ones, you know what I mean? Anyway after they'd go back to his place and he was all full, she'd start cuttin' on him." Mag laughed and slapped her knees. "Then she'd go out with this guy, kinda looked like Billy Daniels, another light one, they'd do the same thing, she'd start cuttin' on him too...Well, let me tell you, she didn't mess with Pha Terrell." When Mag laughed her head fell against the back of the chair; the rat tail popped out and slipped to the floor.

Jackson didn't notice. He was holding the report over his face and mumbling quietly. A few minutes later the secretary came in again, arranged some mail in a tray, then stood there for a minute, straightening papers and glancing sideways. Jackson peeked from behind the paper; he watched her as she moved, the silk material of her dress floating as she glided from tray to tray. She stepped carefully, almost tripping, then bending over to pick up a long, dark piece of something resembling a sausage wrapped in a tattered hair net. She held the dark thing by one corner and laid it on the desk.

Jack should have been horrified but he was past that point. Aunt Mag leaned against the desk, cleared her throat and went on. According to Mag, she was at a "Buy Bonds" rally in 1943. When Pha Terrell walked up to the microphone, the place went crazy. In 1937, his big hit "Until the Real Thing Comes Long" sold a million, but seven years later

everybody was still screaming for it. When she talked about that night, she shook her head: "He was with it. He was with it." Instead of lagging behind the beat, and trying to hold back the way some singers did, Pha Terrell got right in there. He didn't go in for a lot of mystery, he bared his soul right away. The way Mag told it, she was sitting close to the stage, writhing around in her seat, swinging back and forth with the rest of the crowd. At the end of his number when he went real high with the falsetto, his first bit of espionage, everybody was ready. When he sang the last line, "Until the real thing comes along," Mag went wild. Friends tried to hold her back but she was out of control. She jumped up on the stage, grabbed Pha Terrell by the arm and tore the sleeve off his suitcoat.

At this point Mag usually stopped talking and started singing the rest of the song. Jack grabbed his attache case and pretended to gather his papers, hoping she would take the hint and leave. But Mag was having too much fun. When she reached for the tail and threw it at Jack, he took a piece of paper and pushed the tail over to a corner of the desk. Mag laughed even louder. She stood on the toe of one wedgie until she could reach the rat tail. "You know what's in this thing, don't you?" She was still laughing. "It's the sleeve. I been wearing it all this time."

Mag dangled the tail in Jack's face, but he was watching the bit of silk floating around the corner; she'd been listening all the time, the secretary and lord knows

who else. He should have told Mag long ago that he didn't want anything to do with her or her Pha Terrell stories. She had a lot of nerve showing up at his war room. Before he felt guilty avoiding her but not any more. He was his own man. He had come up the hard way without anybody else's help. His destiny, his future, that was up to him. Nobody, including Mag, was going to slow him down.

The Bridge Party

Setting: The play takes place in a small town in middle Tennessee. Because the black people of the town must provide their own entertainment, the bridge club is the center of social life. Most of the women in the club are school teachers. Two are doctors' wives. Two others are morticians who have continued the family business after the death of their husbands.

The play opens in the sitting room of the Edwards home on East End Street. The house, built by the parents of Emma Webster Edwards in the 1880's, sits at the top of East Hill on a large plot of land deeded to the family by the local plantation owner, Emma's mother's father. It is a typical middle-class Southern black home of the time: well-kept, immaculate, with handed-down furnishings and mementos. The furniture style is mostly Victorian and quite heavy; two settees and a chair, all of well-worn, faded velvet. There is a tiled fireplace, handmade by the father, Will; two straight-back oak chairs; a low table in front of the settee with a Bible and two small fans; a phone on the wall. A

victrola sits on an old table covered with a fringed commemorative armed forces scarf. Beside the victrola is a stack of records. Off to one side of the living room stands a player piano stacked high with boxes of piano rolls. Since the purchase of the piano by Willie C., the oldest daughter, with the pay from her first teaching job, the home has become a popular place with young people. On many evenings a crowd can be found gathered around the piano.

Three tables are set up for a bridge party. On an open door leading off the stage hangs a silk crepe dinner dress.

Time: July, 1942. World War II is in progress. The family consists of the mother, Emma, the father Will, who works as a fishing and hunting guide, four sisters--Leona, Marietta, Theodora, and Willie C. (the oldest daughter, she is living in California)--and two brothers--Leon and Morris-- both overseas in the service.

Characters

LEONA, 29 years old

MARIETTA, 27

THEODORA, 22

EMMA EDWARDS, Mother of Leona, Marietta and Theodora

MARY JANE BARNES, Albert's mother

PETT MAE, doctor's wife

RUTH, mortician

EVA ZOE, guest

SAMUELLA, guest

MRS. HAWTHORNE, guest

ANGELINA, guest

OLDER SHERIFF'S DEPUTY, White, middle-aged. From out of town.

YOUNGER SHERIFF'S DEPUTY, 25, white. Knows the Edwards family.

Description of characters

Leona is a pretty young woman of 29, light brown skin, quick-tempered, can be high-strung at times. She is the only

one of the sisters who has to straighten her hair. After graduating from college, she returned to Columbia to teach, first in the country at Theda and Morning Star, then in town at Macedonia Hill school. Leona likes to reminisce about the past. When she becomes too bothered, she solves things by walking away. Her comments often reflect what one should say rather than what she really feels. She exemplifies what DuBois called "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Leona, however, is so anxious for social acceptance that she is scarcely aware of this division. In her mind the line between her own feelings and the feelings of others has become so blurred that she has no awareness of any conflict. The only evidence that the line remains is a sense of unexplained tension.

Marietta is soft-spoken, gentle, and bears everything well; she is deeply religious. She has dark brown skin, the darkest of all the four sisters, and straight black hair from the mother's Indian heritage. As a child she was known for telling outrageous stories. She is the only one of the sisters who didn't go to college. When she becomes too bothered, she resolves things by accepting them as inevitable. She is able to accept what happens as somehow God's will, but does not expect others to share her beliefs or follow her example. She is never self-righteous.

All the sisters are considered attractive, but Theodora

is thought to be the most beautiful. Although she tries hard to give an image of coolness and restraint, she is nervous and jittery underneath. Theodora resents people who discuss unpleasant things or argue, and likes to talk in pleasantries. She prefers the current and the new; she doesn't want to dwell on the past.

The sisters are basically selfless when it comes to the family unit. Because of their strong sense of family, they accept shortcomings in each other. They poke fun at each other for physical attributes, as was customary at the time, but are never demeaning or critical to one another. It is their natural style to have heated conversations, but they will do anything for each other.

Emma has medium brown skin and black, heavy straight hair that she wears pulled back. All the daughters except Leona have hair like the mother's. Like many other black people of her generation, Emma is a mixture of African, Indian and white. She is strong, outspoken, generous, religious. Her upbringing was strict but she likes to entertain herself by singing and playing ragtime piano. Occasionally she wears dramatic clothing in the evening or when an old man comes by in a wagon to take photographs.

Emma is a polestar; the women of the town look to her for guidance. For those who have experienced the loss of a loved one or who have suffered in some way Emma fills a gap. She is quick to forgive and slow to condemn. Emma has never favored light-skinned people of color over those who are

dark-skinned.

Mary Jane is stern, serious, wears plain dark clothes with high collars; she is suspicious of other people, expects other people to abide by her standards, not tolerant.

The play attempts to recreate the speech and atmosphere of a black middle-class home of the 1940's. Today the language might seem mannered and slightly artificial. The pace is slower, creating an effect of formality.

Leona is arching her back away from the spine of the chair. She appears to be uncomfortable. She wears a dress, a small floral print with lace at the bodice. Her hair has been freshly done in croquignole curls, a style popular with black women of her generation. She has never worn this particular dress when she is teaching. Three tables are set up in the living room for the weekly meeting of the "Bridgettes" social club. Leona, Theodora, and six guests, all club members, are playing bridge.The guests are Pett Mae, Eva Zoe, Mrs. Hawthorne, Samuella, Angelina and Ruth. Two tables are filled. Leona, Theodora, Pett Mae and Ruth

are seated at the table positioned center stage. Eva Zoe sits with her back to Ruth at the second table. The other guests respond, sometimes with laughter, to the conversation of the players at the front table. The third table is set off a little from the others and is empty.

LEONA

Where's Marietta and those sandwiches? I told her

[She stops to catch her breath, looks at the door.] shrimp salad sandwiches and spiced tea. Shrimp salad and tea.

[She plays out the words with her hands, then pushes a curl

off her forehead.]

PETT MAE

[Fumbles with the cards, organizing them in her hand.] Be sweet now, Leona. You look real cool and pretty. Real sweet. Anybody'd think you carried on this way all the time.

[Pett Mae is a large woman, 40 years old, with very light

skin and short, bobbed hair. She wears a floral large-print

dress, strongly colored with pinks, reds, and oranges. Pett

Mae is the wife of the more prominent of the two local

black
doctors. Her husband has delivered all ten of Emma's children. She laughs to herself often and hums constantly as she plays cards. Pett Mae has a high lilting voice; she likes to trill her words.]

RUTH

Now Pett, she can't help it.

[Ruth is a tall, sturdily built woman with dark brown skin. She sits with one leg pulled up and walks with a limp. She is serious, plain-spoken.]

PETT MAE

[After thought.]
Just be sweet, real sweet.

RUTH

Right now she just can't.

[Pett Mae starts to hum softly.]

LEONA

You know those little tea sandwiches...you take a sharp knife right across the edge, takes the crust right off. You

hold them like little diamonds, then you cut them down the middle into half diamonds.

[She gently twines the gold chain at her neck.]

THEODORA

Leona--

[Fidgeting with her hand, slightly exasperated.]

Marietta's been making shrimp salad sandwiches for years.

[Looks over at the empty table.]

Wonder when the rest of the bunch is gonna get here?

[Light-skinned. Has the looks of a movie star of the forties. Tall, statuesque, long slender limbs.]

RUTH

[Points a finger at Theodora.]

Theodora, you're just like one of those thoroughbred race horses. I swear you Edwards all race around.

[Looks at floor.]

The cleanest house I've ever seen.

[Shakes her head.]

You all must sweep and clean all day.

PETT MAE

Look at this hand.

[Rearranges cards, shakes her head.]

LEONA

Theodora's been up since five this morning sweeping and washing.

RUTH

That Theodora. She's a fast one.

THEODORA

[Feels forehead, as if trying to hold back some mounting

pain.]

Getting ready for my trip.

LEONA

Theodora gets up sweepin'. I used to sweep all the time myself...couldn't stand to see anything on the floor.

EVA ZOE

[Leaning over from the second table.]

That's a pretty dress, Leona.

LEONA

[Ignores Eva Zoe.]

I used to sweep all the time...just don't feel like it lately.

EVA ZOE

[More emphasis.]

Your dress, Leona, it sure is nice.

LEONA

[Turns sharply to Eva Zoe.]

Willie C. gave it to me. Said they wouldn't let her wear it to teach. Said they wouldn't let me teach in it either. She told me to keep it, wear it to club meeting. Willie C. always did have beautiful clothes.

EVA ZOE

Well, it sure looks pretty on you.

LEONA

[Looks down, smiles faintly and tries to place the chain

properly at her bodice, then smooths out the lace.]

Pretty or not, Professor Samson Barnes don't 'low no dresses with lace at his school.

RUTH

[To the air.]

Yes, Professor Barnes.

PETT MAE

[Holds up both sides of her collar.]

Well, we're bidding this afternoon, ladies, not teaching. Better leave the professor out of the game.

[The women laugh.]

LEONA

[Looks at door.]

Leave him out? If he saw me teaching in this, he'd leave school, march right home and tell it. It's a good thing my mother-in-law can't see me. She'd be carryin' on right now.

[Pulls at her necklace.]

PETT MAE

Little bird,

[Pauses.]

you married Samson and Mary Jane's son, not the whole family.

LEONA

Married. That's right, married. If that's what they call...

THEODORA

Pett...

[Fumbling with her cards too.]

...shoot, pass me that box of talcum powder. I'm gonna sprinkle these cards. Get 'em to shuffle a little.

RUTH

[To Theodora.]

You're as jittery as a little bug.

PETT MAE

[Teasing.]

I bet Randy's late with his letter.

LEONA

Theodora sweeps and sweeps. You can tell when Theodora's mad...

PETT MAE

[Still teasing.]

She tries to look real cool, but we all know better.

LEONA

You can tell by how hard she sweeps.

RUTH

Don't tell Theodora that.

PETT MAE

I'm an old bird, can't fool me.

[Theodora sticks out her tongue at Pett Mae.]

Give Theodora the powder. Doctor's first wife

[Raises her voice.]

used to put powder on a handkerchief...

RUTH

What'd she do that for?

PETT MAE

She'd put it on the handkerchief and slide it down her girdle.

THEODORA

[Unbelievingly.]

Her girdle? I'd never wear one of those.

PETT MAE

That's right--she sure did...

[Pauses.]

in her girdle, so she wouldn't stick to herself when she played whist.

[Theodora laughs.]

RUTH

[Pulls at her dress, adjusts herself in her seat.]

The heat'll do that.

[All the women laugh.]

LEONA

I wish Marietta would come on.

[Looks around.]

You know I have to keep her straight...

PETT MAE

Don't fret now, Leona.

LEONA

...The last time she made those little sandwiches she used tongue.

PETT MAE

[Titters to herself.]

Oh ho.

RUTH

Used to be that's all people fixed.

LEONA

Chopped it so fine you couldn't tell.

[Straightens necklace again.]

THEODORA

You didn't know the difference, Leona.

LEONA

That's not the point.

RUTH

Marietta can fix anything. Bet she coulda used my old shoe.

THEODORA

[Laughing.]

And Leona can eat anything.

LEONA

Should've been shamed of herself, said "Oh you're gonna love this, Leona. It'll melt in your mouth."

RUTH

I bet it tasted like your Papa's catfish.

LEONA

Well, if that's the kind of fish he catches, Papa can keep it.

THEODORA

Leona, Shh!

[Looks around.]

Papa's gone, taking Mr. Cordell Hull and the white sportsmen fishing,

[Exaggerated manner.]

just to help put food on the table.

LEONA

Well, he can. Ate that stuff Marietta fixed like a little

baby eating pablum...every bit. Then she tips in and says "Oh, by the way, Leona, it's tongue."

[Leona draws her shoulders in and shivers.]

I could have died.

[Theodora and Ruth laugh.]

LEONA

Papa spoils us, brings us whatever we want. No man will ever be like him.

THEODORA

I'll miss him when I leave.

LEONA

Don't say that, Theodora.

[Pauses.]

Not now.

RUTH

You all are grown. Not many can outdo the Edwards...Theodora and Leona teaching. Marietta and Emma working too.

PETT MAE

All living under the same roof.

[Eyes Theodora cautiously.]

That's a fortune.

EVA ZOE

[From second table.]

No wonder Leona bought that beaver coat last Christmas.

[Chuckles.]

LEONA

Eva Zoe, you bought one too....all the gang did, just like follow the leader.

[Pauses.]

Theodora...you looked like a starlet in yours.

EVA ZOE

Like one of those Dandridge sisters. What's her name?

[Stops to think.]

RUTH

Just like I said, Leona, we're grown women, taking care of ourselves.

LEONA

[Stops suddenly. Startled expression, as if she is thinking

of the idea for the first time.]

I'm by myself.

[Women all stop talking. Total silence.]

PETT MAE

You'll get by, little bird.

LEONA

Not when it's like this...it's hard...

[Serious. Looks at empty table.]

Poor Agnes, she's by herself too...

[Concerned.]

Ever since Joe passed...I guess that's why she's not here.

PETT MAE

Doctor did all he could.

RUTH

Don't tell anybody--I paid for Joe's suit myself.

PETT MAE

[Turns to Ruth, takes her hand.)

Ruth did too.

LEONA

I know you had to work hard on the body, Ruth. You and Jim, you used to work on the bodies together.

PETT MAE

He's gone, Leona.

LEONA

[Not listening to Pett, turns to Ruth.]

Now your husband's gone. You have to do all the business yourself...take care of it, call on the families...

THEODORA

Ruth always did dress the bodies, Leona.

[The discussion brings out the importance of the funeral as ritual. The women are unselfconsciously keeping alive bits of the culture of their old world.]

PETT MAE

And washed and pressed the hair. She styles it the same way they always wore it, even picks their favorite color, makeup and all.

LEONA

But you don't have him there when you need him.

[Women from second table turn and nod.]

I wish Marietta would come on.

RUTH

[Soothingly to Leona.]

We had all those years together, Leona...a long life.

LEONA

I guess mine's a short one then.

[Corrects herself; then speaks loudly.]

I guess mine was a short one.

[Women look at Leona with concern.]

RUTH

There's been a lot passing through lately. A lot of bodies to do. Can't argue that.

LEONA

Jim's gone. V.K., Mary's husband, he's gone too. Two funeral parlors in town and both run by women--And me and Albert...

[Throws down her hand.]

married a year and already separated.

PETT MAE

[Feels the cards lovingly.]

These cards are playing real nice, Leona. You better pick up your hand so we can whip these"n's"...

[She touches her mouth coquettishly with a lace handkerchief, mumbles something under her breath and leans

back tittering.]

Real nice.

RUTH

[Looking at Leona.]

She'll be all right. She tires out these days.

PETT MAE

Just stay real cool and pretty.

[Pauses, touches her face.]

In the pink.

[Winks.]

[The women laugh, even Leona.]

RUTH

That gold necklace sure looks lovely with your dress, Leona.

[Leona pulls the necklace out of her dress and holds it up in the palm of her hand. A small diamond ring is attached to the chain. The two women examine the ring as Marietta approaches the table.]

RUTH

And that's not all...land sakes, look at that ring.

PETT MAE

That's a big one, all right. If push comes to shove, you can pawn it.

LEONA

[Confidently.]

It shines just like a star, a morning star, even in the daytime.

[Marietta carries a tray of sandwiches. An aroma of spiced

tea, oranges and cinnamon fills the air.]

PETT MAE

Here she is,

[Gestures to Marietta and speaks happily, melodiously.]

just as sweet as she can be.

EVA ZOE

[From second table.]

When you gonna learn how to play bridge, Marietta?

[Laughs.]

MARIETTA

I learned all I'm gonna learn, thank you.

[Marietta's speech is old-fashioned and reminiscent of her

mother's. She is a bridge between Emma and the other daughters.]

THEODORA

Bridge doesn't agree with Marietta's religion.

LEONA

Takes after Grandma...When Grandma was alive, we used to have to lock ourselves in our room just to play cards.

THEODORA

We cut our teeth on cards.

LEONA

Remember the first time Willie C. came home from college? We used to hide in her room so she could show us how to play bridge.

PETT MAE

[Teasing.]

Marietta thinks church-going folks shouldn't play cards.

MARIETTA

I said no such thing. Suit yourself. Do what you want.

[Laughs.]

Makes me no never mind.

EVA ZOE

There's not a woman in this room that plays cards on Sunday.

[All the women nod.]

PETT MAE

Sometimes me and Leona, Doctor and Doctor's new helper, Tommy, play cards till midnight on Saturday, then we lay our hands down.

EVA ZOE

Many a slam was ruined by the strike of the clock.

[Women agree in unison, nodding heads.]

RUTH

Marietta just has those ways. She promised the Lord she wouldn't play cards.

LEONA

It's so hot.

[To Marietta.]

Just spice the tea and pour it on the ice. That's all I need. Please hurry, Marietta.

[Leona fans herself.]

MARIETTA

[Good-naturedly.]

As many folks as I've cooked for, I guess I know how to make iced tea.

[A car can be heard passing by.]

LEONA

[Restless.]

All that noise.

MARIETTA

[Enthusiastically.]

They'll be whoopin' and hollerin' when Cordie Cheek gets to town. Ol' Saul Blanton'll be doin' plenty of business...sellin' plenty of liquor tonight.

PETT MAE

Not just our folks, either.

MARIETTA

When the law comes back, they'll want what he's sellin'...he'll know their business too.

THEODORA

[Seeming nonchalant.]

That had to be the boys comin' through on their way back from Nashville.

LEONA

[Deep in thought, only half-hearing the conversation.]

I heard Cordie Cheek was coming back today. If he is...I heard his trial was over.

[Nervously glances at door.]

MARIETTA

Saul Blanton'll know.

THEODORA

I bet it's the Alphas.

[Flustered.]

Randy's an Alpha.

PETT MAE

Listen to the sweetheart.

[More cars go by.]

RUTH

I didn't know the Alphas made all that commotion.

PETT MAE

Ask the fraternity sweetheart.

THEODORA

It's after the game.

[Embarassed.]

You know how everybody gets

[Pauses.]

after the game.

LEONA

If Cordie Cheek comes back today all the folks'll be out to see him.

[Excitedly.]

All of Macedonia school.

[The screen door starts to open slightly. The women look

up.]

THEODORA

Maybe that's the rest of the bunch.

[Looks at back table.]

The game's over by now. If Mary and Punk get back from Nashville in time, we can still get the prize for attendance.

[Marietta sets the empty tray next to Leona and goes to see

who's there. Mary Jane Barnes enters. She wears a plain dress, a drab purple color with a high collar and tiny buttons up to her neck. Her stare is stern, fixed, singleminded. She does not conceal her hostility to the group. When she stares disapprovingly at Leona, Leona begins

to fan herself more rapidly. Mary Jane notices the

women

playing bridge and frowns. The women at the tables look at

Mary Jane, then Leona. Mary Jane doesn't speak.]

MARIETTA

Make yourself comfortable, Miss Mary Jane. Rest a spell. How you and Professor Barnes gettin' along?

[Mary Jane doesn't answer. She was angry when she arrived,

but now her anger is increased by the sight of the women

playing cards.]

MARIETTA

Every Saturday afternoon, you know, the "Bridgettes," they meet at a different house, every Saturday.

[Mary Jane shakes her head in disbelief.]

MARIETTA

[Pointing to the empty table.]

Didn't get the crowd we usually do.

[Marietta turns to first table.]

You know Pett Mae, your doctor's wife, and Ruth, Jim passed away. She's the mortician now herself.

[Gestures to Pett and Ruth proudly.]
They're always at the front table.

[Leona arches her back and pulls away from the chair. She
clutches her necklace tightly. The women arrange their
hands. Mary Jane stands for a minute with her hand on the
door knob, then moves toward the straight-backed chair off
to the corner.]

MARIETTA

[With a sigh.]
Mama'll be home t'rectly, Miss Mary Jane.

[Mary Jane sits down in the chair. Leona stares intently at
Theodora until Theodora becomes uncomfortable, restless.
Theodora gets up, goes to a victrola and picks a record from
a stack. She plays "Take the A-Train" by the Duke Ellington
Orchestra.]

SAMUELLA

Theodora would come up with that one.

[Pleased.]

The theme for the club dance.

EVA ZOE

Remember our last dance...

SAMUELLA

Presenting the "Bridgettes" of Columbia, Tennessee...

EVA ZOE

We were dressed to kill.

[The women applaud and laugh. Mary Jane watches them closely, twisting nervously in her seat.]

PETT MAE

Better have something cool, Mary Jane. Doctor wouldn't want you all hot and...

[Gestures in the air with her hands.]

[Mary Jane looks over at the tables, then turns away and folds her hands in her lap. She is frustrated because she feels she is being overlooked. She is trying to control her anger; she pulls at her fingers nervously. The other

women

cast furtive glances at Mary Jane and then look away.]

PETT MAE

Theodora always did pick the latest.

RUTH: She's a thoroughbred.

[Gestures to Theodora, hums and snaps her fingers.]

"Take the A-Train"...that's Ellington's song.

EVA ZOE

Leona can sing it for our summer dance...for the Bridgettes.

RUTH

Go on over to the piano, Pett.

PETT MAE

That's a hard one...how does that go?

[Pett Mae hums to herself, but remains in her seat, arranging her bridge hand.]

RUTH

Oh, Leona can sing anything.

EVA ZOE

And eat anything too.

[Women laugh.]

PETT MAE

Remember when Leona sang at the club dance? She was wearing that blue crepe dress, the one with the gold hobnails across the front...so cool looking.

EVA ZOE

It sure did fit her nice.

LEONA

Nice is right. I bet you I couldn't teach in it. What you wanna bet?

[Mary Jane turns sharply and looks at Leona, then turns away. She wrings her hands nervously. She is becoming more uncomfortable.]

MARIETTA

[Looks over at Mary Jane.]

Rheumatism flaring up, Miss Mary Jane?

[Marietta leaves room and enters again with glasses of iced tea. Theodora rises and helps serve the tea. The other women murmur approval as they drink.]

PETT MAE

[She motions to Theodora to give a glass to Mary Jane.]

Doctor's orders, Mary Jane.

LEONA

[Waves hands in the air, stiffly.]

This tea sure does cool me off. Keeps my hair from going back.

[Glances worriedly at Mary Jane.]

Always did wish I had your hair, Theodora.

[Theodora smiles. Leona mouths words silently and fumbles with her necklace. The necklace with its ring comes loose and falls to the floor. Marietta serves tea to the second table, then sets a tray with four glasses at the empty table.]

MARIETTA

[Walks to the front and picks up the necklace and hands it to Leona.]

Mama always said you were marked.

[Loudly, as if to distract attention from her actions.]

THEODORA

Who was marked?

MARIETTA

Leona. Leona was.

THEODORA

Oh, Marietta.

MARIETTA

She was. Mama said when she was carrying Leona, she used to go across the street over where Miss Cora used to live. Went there all the time. Said Miss Cora's little girl was real dark, had real nappy hair. Mama said the little girl marked her.

LEONA

Marietta, you oughta be shot.

[Marietta laughs. Leona holds the necklace tightly in her

hand.]

[Mary Jane strains to hear every word.]

MARIETTA

[Turns to Leona.]

When you were born, Mama said you had the nappiest hair she'd ever seen.

[Women at all the tables giggle to themselves.]

LEONA

Everybody's heard that.

RUTH

Oh hush, Marietta.

THEODORA

Marietta always did like to tell stories.

LEONA

[Laughs in spite of herself.]

Like that one about Papa stealin a pig and hidin it up on the old professor's roof.

MARIETTA

I wadn't but twelve.

LEONA

Don't matter. You told it.

MARIETTA

Nappy or not, the professor used to chase all us home.

LEONA

[Dreamily.]

Mother always did have beautiful hair. Papa has that--

[Waves her hand as if to smooth the air.]

fine soft hair. Mother never could figure out how I got this hair.

MARIETTA

They say when you're carryin' a child and certain folks get too near you, they mark you...

[Pauses.]

...for life.

[Raises her voice so Mary Jane will be sure to hear.]

Said when she was carrying you, used to go over to Miss Cora's all the time. They say you have to be careful when you're carrying a child. Don't they, Pett?

[Mary Jane stands up abruptly, and drops her glass. It breaks. At first she starts to pick up the pieces, then stands up abruptly and marches out of the room. Theodora

rushes to sweep up the broken glass, then returns to her

seat. A door can be heard slamming.]

PETT MAE

We sure sent that ol bird flyin.

[Titters.]

EVA ZOE

[Laughing from second table.]

Now Pett Mae, that's your husband's patient.

THEODORA

I'm bidding hearts.

[Restless.]

Her son oughta keep her home.

LEONA

[Nervously, refusing to comment about Mary Jane.]

Two diamonds.

MARIETTA

She musta wanted somethin'. Runnin' all the way over to East End...all the way cross town.

THEODORA

Well, she didn't get what she came for.

[Fidgety.]

Whose bid is it?

RUTH

You'd think that woman would know better. Some people you

can't tell a thing. They just start running---never look where they're going.

THEODORA

Whose bid is it anyway? I'm in hearts.

RUTH

[To Theodora.]

All right, Miss Jitterbug.

RUTH

Leona...

[Turns to her.]

Leona, what you gonna do?

LEONA

I already bid.

RUTH

I don't mean that.

LEONA

Everybody has to run sometimes.

MARIETTA

[Comes forward.]

When I ran off with Joe Harlan I didn't have a thing in my

suitcase but Grandma's old hymnal book

[Pauses.]

and that nightgown from Sears, Roebuck, four sizes too big. Grandma couldn't stand Joe, so we ran off.

LEONA

[Responds enthusiastically, eager to avoid Ruth's question.

Looks in her hand and looks up.]

I still can't imagine Marietta running off with anybody.

MARIETTA

Papa told me to go to school, to A & I. I had to go off and get married. Didn't last either.

[Pauses.]

I've been working as a cook and a nurse ever since.

LEONA

You never regret anything, Marietta.

MARIETTA

Well, it's done. No use talking 'bout it now. Should of thought about it then. You make your bed hard, you lie in it. Too late now.

LEONA

[With finality.]

Too late.

THEODORA

It's never too late for a Barnes to get their way.

MARIETTA

Go on back with him. Might as well. He makes a good living.

THEODORA

[Cautiously.]

Leona could leave town---go off somewhere else.

MARIETTA

He's a teacher. You'd have whatever you wanted. Might as well stay. Some things just meant to be. Lord might want it that way.

THEODORA

[Raises voice.]

What if they can't get along?

PETT MAE

Married to a big-shot Kappa. Look at that ring. Anything

[Covers mouth lightly with handkerchief.]

I got while I was married, I'd keep.

LEONA

[Clutching necklace.]

I never said a thing about giving anything up.

THEODORA

Sometimes women just have to leave anyway.

[Stares at Leona's dress.]

MARIETTA

Used to be you couldn't teach after you got married.

LEONA

The old professor, the folks over to the school, they didn't let Mother teach after she married Papa.

THEODORA

They didn't know the kind of man she married...a saint.

MARIETTA

Only man she's ever known.

LEONA

If Mary Jane comes back here again, I'll...

[Pauses.]

She sure does wear me out.

THEODORA

She can't bother you as long as we're here.

LEONA

Mother won't let her.

[Pauses.]

Doctor's gonna want to see me before the end of the week. The way I'm feeling, it might be time.

[She guards her stomach with her hands.]

THEODORA

You'll be all right.

LEONA

Mother'll be home soon.

PETT MAE

[Sprinkles more powder on the cards.]

You little birds have to be careful. Doctor wouldn't have it any other way.

RUTH

I got the flu just before Eugene was born. They had to put me to bed. Told me not to get up for a month. When I got out the bed this leg didn't have any feeling. Just started to draw up.

[Hits leg.]

I been limping ever since.

PETT MAE

[Touches Leona's hand.]

Always say to B. F., "Doctor, what must that one do?" He'll always say "Care, just a little care."

THEODORA

Hear that, Leona? You have to be careful. Can't go having a taste for everything, then acting fretful just because you can't have it. Look at you whinin' and carryin' on...by the time the rest of the gang gets here...you won't be worth a dime.

[Theodora gets up and starts to tidy room.]

[Marietta adjusts chairs at empty table and walks to the

front. Leaves room.]

End of Scene I

[Stage is dark. Theodora walks to spotlight. Fadeout on other lights.]

THEODORA

All that old furniture in the living room...

[Shakes her head.]

every time we have club meeting, there's hardly room to put up the card tables, there's so much furniture. Grandma's

folks--out at the Thatcher Plantation--when she first got married, they sent all this old furniture out here. You know how velvet gets when it's old and faded. Just like the inside of a casket.

Willie C. used to teach over at Macedonia Hill. When she got her first paycheck she went right out and put the money down on that player piano over in the corner. She always did know how to have a high time. Said she was tired of all this small town stuff. Everybody out in California has that new Spanish style, at least that's what Willie C. says.

About Leona--Marietta's cooked for half the town, Leona oughta know that. That's not it.

Both our brothers, Morris and Leon, they're gone, overseas. That's part of it. People always called Leon and Leona the twins because they look so much alike--Leon and Leona, look-alikes, me and Morris too. Now they're both overseas and Leona's taking it real hard.

[Fidgets, wrings her hands.]

Papa made sure they put Morris and Leon in the same colored troop. The other day they sent us a table cover with the Army Air Corp on it. Leona cried.

[Squeezes hands together and forces a pleasant expression.]

When I was at A & I Papa sent me this yellow raincoat--the one he used to wear on his boat.

[Theodora's music, "Take the A-Train," begins.]

All the bands that came to Nashville signed it. Erskine Hawkins and the 'Bama State Collegians, Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie. I had people signing all over the back of that coat. I'd turn around like this.

[Turns around.]

They all had their names on it.

Me, Willie C., Leona, Pett, Ruth--half the town went to A & I, our half the town, that is. I was the fraternity sweetheart, too. All the Alphas said it was because I had the deepest dimples

[Pauses, slows down for emphasis.]

and the straightest teeth they'd ever seen.

They're always saying I look like somebody. Now it's one of the Dandridge sisters. Dorothy...that's it, Dorothy Dandridge. The club dance is two nights before I leave. If I can get those new records for the club dance. What's that one? If Saul Blanton's shop gets it in time...

[Touches forehead. More resolved.]

I've never been late for anything in my life. I don't plan to be late leaving.

[Pauses.]

I'll take of things if Mother lets me. I'll take care of Leona.

I feel this headache coming on. I've felt it coming on for days. I've been up since five this morning sweeping and washing. I'm trying to get my things ready. I like everything on time. I've never been any farther than

Nashville, Tennessee in my whole life, and now I'm going out West.

I just got married last Christmas. Mother's worried because I'm going way out to California by myself. Randy, that's my husband, he's stationed out there in the army. I told her, I said, "Mother, don't worry. Willie C.'s out there." Willie C.'s my oldest sister. I'll be staying with her

[Pauses.]

and her husband, Ray. I'll only get to see Randy on weekends. Willie C. knows everything about the apple,

[Aside.]

that's what everybody calls the big city.

[Spotlight fades, bring up lights on bridge players. Music

fades.]

Scene 2

[The women in the room are playing bridge, chatting. Emma comes in.]

WOMEN

Howdy, Mama Emma.

[They murmur respectfully in unison. The conversation has the quality of call and response used in the black church.]

EMMA

[Laughs.]

Mary Jane's after me. I was walking up the hill when lo and behold if Mary Jane didn't come walking right up behind me.

[Mischievous expression, as if starting to tell a wicked story.]

I was walking along

[Looks up, moves right hand across the air.]

kicking up the dust...

[Mary Jane enters suddenly.]

MARY JANE

[Abruptly.]

Just the one I was lookin' for.

EMMA

[Turns, looks at audience.]

What did I tell you?

[Eyes are knowing.]

She was right behind me.

MARY JANE

I was right behind her.

EMMA

Sure was hot out there.

[Looks at Mary Jane out of the corner of her eye.]

RUTH

Up to the white Methodist church?

EMMA

There too.

MARY JANE

I followed her every step.

EMMA

[Ignoring Mary Jane.]

So I turned and whipped around the corner. I said to myself,

I'm goin' to see how my Leona's doing.

MARY JANE

That's where I was going too.

LEONA

Mother does the work of ten.

THEODORA

And she gave birth to ten.

[Women murmur in approval.]

PETT MAE

And doctor delivered all ten. Six living.

EMMA

It was mighty hot

[Pauses.]

down at that kitchen.

MARY JANE

[Negatively:]

The Methodist church.

EMMA

[Ignoring Mary Jane.]

You girls know Mrs. Durham?

RUTH

The mayor's wife?

EMMA

Well, Mrs Durham up and starts with me: "Now Emma, this here is a book on how to set the table. I 'spects you would enjoy it."

LEONA

Everybody knows about women like Mrs. Durham.

[She glances at Mary Jane.]

EMMA

[Laughing.]

She told me just the other day--

[Aside.]

You know I just listened, didn't say a word--"Now Emma, if you just come down and cook us our meal, you won't have to wash nary a dish."

[Emma stops short. Hands on hips, theatrically:]

Biggest liar I've ever seen.

THEODORA

Now, mother.

LEONA

Calling Mrs. Durham a liar,

[Pauses.]

Mother.

THEODORA

Mother sure does like to perform.

LEONA

Mother always has wanted to be on the stage.

RUTH

Have some iced tea, Mama Emma.

EMMA

That's all right, darlin'.

[Pats Ruth on hand.]

Your mama'll be all right.

[Graciously.]

Have some iced tea, Mary Jane.

[Takes glass and hands it to Mary Jane.]

MARY JANE

Emma, there's a thing or two...

EMMA

[Sips tea and gradually assumes strong, fixed stare.]

Mind your glass, Mary Jane.

MARY JANE

There's something...

EMMA

[Motions her away.]

Something what?

MARY JANE

Something I want.

EMMA

Will's gone fishing with Mr. Hull and the sportsmen.

[Worried.]

I got Leona. Don't know what I can do for you.

[The sound of cars going by can be heard. The women all look

towards the window.]

LEONA

Sure is a lot of commotion around here.

[Sighs and sips tea.]

When it's hot...in the summer when the screens are in...you can hear everything in the world...

[Thoughtfully.]

It was spring the last time I saw Cordie Cheek.

THEODORA

It's that bunch from out of town racin' up and down the hill again.

PETT MAE

Every time Tuskegee plays A & I they run all through the town. Bad as poor...

[Voice trails off.]

LEONA

That's where everybody goes, over to Tuskegee to get married.

MARY JANE

That's where you went with my son.

LEONA

The day before Easter.

MARY JANE

It was wet and cold.

LEONA

[Responds but doesn't argue with Mary Jane.]

When we went to Tuskegee, I had to wrap a coat around myself. I wore my silk crepe dress.

[Looks at dress on door.]
The one Aunt Ellen sent from Detroit, a peach color, soft, draped.

THEODORA
Sure did. You got all those clothes. The same size as that lady Aunt Ellen works for.

MARY JANE
It's been six months since you talked to my boy.

LEONA
[Stands up indignantly.]
In front of all these people.

MARY JANE
In a small town, everybody finds out anyway.

LEONA
All right, it's been six months since he went home to your house. I moved my things out first. We didn't live at Miss Annie Lee's a year.

EMMA
[Wheels around, addresses women playing bridge.]
Mary Jane's doin' more talkin' than listenin'.

MARY JANE

[To Leona.]

What did you expect?

[Mary Jane treats Leona as if she is on trial.]

EMMA

It's not our place to judge, yours or mine.

[Emma is quiet, dignified. She lets Mary Jane takes the floor. Her manner is deferring; to a stranger she might seem weak.]

MARY JANE

[Indignantly.]

Her not knowing how to take care of a house. Albert was used to having everything kept up.

LEONA

I was good to your boy.

MARY JANE

Did you or didn't you bring him down here every day?

[Emma looks from Mary Jane to Leona as the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law talk.]

LEONA

This is my house, too, Mary Jane.

MARY JANE

To your mother's house to eat his dinner?

LEONA

I was teaching out at Morning Star, out in the country. Miss Smith drove me into town late. When I got home...

EMMA

[Steps forward.]

My daughter's not on trial.

MARY JANE

To your mother's house to eat his evening meal.

LEONA

Mother always had the dinner ready.

MARY JANE

A wife's place is at home. Not out in the country somewhere.

[Pause.]

Is this the way you brought her up?

EMMA

Go on, just keep on talking.

LEONA

[Roused to attention.]

A wife's place? He never complained about that. I taught out at Theda, Morning Star...when we lived at Miss Smith's, I paid for that...four rooms, half the house. Was that my place? Things were fine when I was out in the country. The little school children, they hung on my every word. I was the moon, the sun. Every night Albert was there waiting when I got home. Then I came back to town. People started meddlin', talkin' behind my back...some people, that is...I've heard things--horrible things, gossip, lies...

[Throws cards down.]

Who'll take my hand?

[Leona walks by the front table. She goes off through the

darkened side of the stage. A record begins to play--"Until

the Real Thing Comes Along," by Andy Kirk and the Clouds of

Joy.]

RUTH

Lay Leona's hand down. Somebody'll bid for it.

EMMA

Now let me tell you something,

[Turns to Mary Jane.]
if you want to judge, judge me. I'm proud
[Touches her chest.]
of my children.

MARY JANE

Proud that you cooked her husband's meals?

EMMA

My daughter's a teacher and I was a teacher before her. Your son knew that before he married her.

MARY JANE

Teacher. I wish Samson could see the way she's fixed up right now. Hair all curled up and greased, dress open at the neck.

EMMA

The child's entertaining her club.

MARY JANE

Entertaining, all right. You brought her up to perform and go on...I better take what I came for and leave.

EMMA

Talk...talk...
[Moves head around, imitating Mary Jane. Stops

suddenly.]

I'm a Christian, so I can't say what's on my mind.

[Looks around.]

THEODORA

She's layin' down, Mother.

[Emma nods, takes off her apron.]

MARY JANE

Emma Edwards, I want the courtesy due a mother-in-law.

EMMA

Now let me tell you something, Mary Jane. I've given you courtesy. I've heard everything you got to say, and you don't have a thing to tell my daughter.

MARY JANE

I want to know what you intend to do. I come to see if your daughter's going to do the right thing.

EMMA

My daughter's not on trial.

[Steps forward.]

Mary Jane, if you got something to say, say it now.

MARY JANE

Emma Edwards, I got reason to wonder about how you raised this girl.

EMMA

If you want to judge, judge me.

MARY JANE

All right, I'll say it then. I heard you singing and playing over to the school. Playin' that ragtime piano, right at the school dance.

EMMA

Lay low, catch a meddler.

[Puts her hands on her hips and squints at Mary Jane.]

MARY JANE

You call that Christian? I been knowin' you all my life.

EMMA

Just keep on talkin'.

MARY JANE

I remember the day you and Will Edwards was walkin' home from school, in the ninth grade. He dared you to take your hair loose, down over by that bridge on the way to this house. I saw your mother come lookin' for you. She whipped you all the way home.

EMMA

Judge me, Mary Jane--

[Emma reaches up and undoes the bun in the back of her head.

She shakes her head and her long, heavy hair falls over her

shoulders.]

Go on.

MARY JANE

Alright. I've seen you put on dresses all done in satin and silk, all sorts of finery, wastin' hard-earned money. I've seen you sit out on the front porch with all your children, your hair piled up on your head posing for pictures every time that old man comes by in the wagon. They say you put on fancy clothes and shawls with fringes just to sit in the house at night. When Shuffle Along comes to town you run off with them, up to that tent. Why is that?

EMMA

You know my cousin, the one born over by old Macedonia school...wrote Shuffle Along, Brownskin Models...all those shows.

MARY JANE

You call that Christian?

EMMA

I'll tell you Christian--go up yonder to St. Paul's A. M. E. church up on Macedonia Hill. Look by the front of the church. My papa's name is right on the cornerstone.

[Pauses.]

He helped build that church.

MARY JANE

A. M. E.?

[Indignantly.]

African Methodist. Well, that's about the only African thing about you. You an' your high yellow daughters. African Methodist. I told him, I said, marry a Baptist. You and your high yellow...

EMMA

I never made a difference between light and dark. I never made a thing about color. Why, my own pappy was the blackest man you've ever seen. My mother loved him and married him.

MARY JANE

I can see who you come from.

[Smirks.]

Well, I think your daughter's too high falutin', that's her problem. I guess she thinks she's too light.

EMMA

If you think my daughter's so high falutin', then why you here askin' about her? My daughter's carryin' a child, your son's child. Don't nobody care about whether your son's light or dark. I got four girls. Leona, she's light brown, Theodora, she's a little lighter. Willie C., she's medium brown, Marietta, she's a dark brown. And they all have the same father. I nursed them all. Raised them all. Never said, well, this one's first, this one's lighter. You the one goin' on about light and dark. Talkin' about high yellow this, high yellow that.

MARY JANE

[Hears noise, turns to see Marietta entering room carrying a

stack of hymnals. Mary Jane looks around for Leona.] Where's your daughter?

EMMA

Which one...Leona? Didn't you see her walk out?

MARY JANE

[Watches doorway for a minute, then turns to Emma.] The reason she's not goin' back with my boy...

EMMA

You're the reason.

MARY JANE

The reason she's not goin' back with my boy...I don't think he's the father in the first place.

EMMA

You don't <u>think</u>?

MARY JANE

You heard me.

EMMA

[Sarcastically.]

And just who do you <u>think</u> the father might be, Mary Jane?

MARY JANE

You know that's Wallace Mitchell's child.

EMMA

Lord ha' mercy.

MARY JANE

Don't take the Lord's name in vain, Emma Edwards.

EMMA

I'll tell you one thing, Mary Jane, and get this straight--one thing every one of my girls will always know--the father of her children.

MARY JANE

That child'll be light enough to pass--and the whole world'll know it--there's only one thing Albert wants.

EMMA

[Hand on her hips.]

And what's that?

MARY JANE

He wants his ring. He wants it back.

[Stage is dark. Leona walks to spotlight. Fadeout on other

lights.]

LEONA

[Holds up the chain with the ring on it.]

He wants this back. Why should I give it to him? That day when we ran off to get married--I wore flowers in my hair. I was teaching school out at Morning Star. Of course, I taught a long time before I got married. He was living down at Miss Eva Zoe's--that's how we met. That night after we came back from Tuskegee--we went back to Miss Eva Zoe's.

I didn't go out much at A & I. Me and Wallace Mitchell courted. We weren't 'lowed off campus on school nights. Had to go in groups on Saturdays. Of course I went to the formal

dances.

[Leona's music starts. "Until the Real Thing Comes Along,"

by Andy Kirk's Orchestra.]

Wore beautiful clothes from Aunt Ellen. She worked for this rich white lady in Detroit. Everybody at Hale wanted to wear my clothes. I just wanted to get good grades, that's all. Be invited into the honorary.

Oh yes, about Mr. Durham, the man Papa knows, the mayor, Mama knows him too, knows his wife. I sassed him that first summer I was home from college. He slapped me on the face. Said "It's a good thing you're Emma and Will's child."

When I came back home from A & I after I got my teaching diploma, I taught out at Morning Star. Taught a long time before I got married. One of the teachers over to the school said to me "Albert, you remember Albert Barnes, from A & I, went to Fisk too. He's stayin' over to Miss Eva Zoe's and teaching at Macedonia Hill. He's a Kappa. You didn't know him at A & I, did you?" I thought and I thought. No, I didn't know him.

I can still wear my clothes. If I go to the club dance in Pett and Doctor's basement, I'll wear one of Aunt Ellen's dresses. I won't even show. My mother-in-law thinks I'm carrying Wallace Mitchell's child. It's a lie and she knows it. One thing, I will always know the father of my children. I know it'll be a girl. I know how she'll be, not too light and not too dark, the same color all over. Of course as soon

as they find out you're expecting you have to stop teaching. I don't know why. I don't even show. This lady uptown didn't even notice. Am I foolish, vain? Don't I have a right to be? It's my ring. Why should I give it back?

Theodora thinks I ought to leave the baby with Mother, go off somewhere else. She says a teacher with a divorce...says they'll never hire me back. She thinks I oughta go away, leave the baby right here. Marietta says I ought to go back to him, that a wife's place is with her husband. No matter how bad things get. She says she learned her lesson.

He kicked me when I was scrubbing the floor; that's why I went home. That night--I cried and cried--went running home to Mother. All right--I'm sorry

[Little sobs and whimpers.]

--if you're looking for a big hero--

[Raises voice.]

I never was that brave. Was I just supposed to sit there like a dummy? If you don't whine, who'll know you're alive? If you can't stand things, don't you have to let somebody in this world know?

Mary Jane Barnes,

[Turns to look at women on stage.]

she sure makes me hot. It's a good thing Morris and Leon aren't here. They'd put her out.

[Spotlight fades; bring up lights on bridge players.

Music

stops.]

EMMA

My Leona never did rip and run like some girls. I sent her to Hale Dormitory at A & I. Mae T. from home was housemother to the girls. All my girls lived at Hale.

MARY JANE

You know there's something odd about a woman who waits till she's 29 to marry and have a family.

EMMA

My Leona. She taught right there at Macedonia. Just like all the rest of your husband's teachers.

MARY JANE

Being principal never meant watching every move.

EMMA

Samson Barnes does.

MARY JANE

I never in my life held a card.

EMMA

Lie low, catch meddler.

MARY JANE

I'm not meddlin'. You hear me--

[Raises her voice.]

my son wants his own.

EMMA

[Lowers her head, taking in the words. Then looks up abruptly:]

Well, maybe he'd better come and get it.

MARY JANE

Either the ring goes back or she comes back.

[Turns to door where Leona exited.]

Either come back to my boy or give me that ring. If you want to stay, I can't stop you. But the ring goes back.

[Mary Jane leaves.]

[A record begins to play "Until the Real Thing Comes Along."]

THEODORA

Everybody oughta be back from Nashville by now. The rest of the gang'll be tippin' in.

[To Eva Zoe.]

Leona sure does love that old record.

EVA ZOE

[Nods.]

Bet you're thinking about the club dance.

THEODORA

That old song.

[Shakes her head.]

Not for the club dance.

MARIETTA

They didn't bring that boy Cordie Cheek back from Nashville.

[Music stops. Women look at Marietta.]

LEONA

[Enters, walks to the center of the room and steadies herself on a chair.]

I thought his trial was over...

MARIETTA

It was over, all right.

LEONA

When school let out, he came up and said, "Miss Leona, we're leavin' the country, comin' to town. I'll be at Macedonia Hill in August. You'll be my teacher...he didn't know I wouldn't be there.

RUTH

School'll be starting before you know it.

THEODORA

You know how people talk. He'll be all right.

MARIETTA

They didn't bring him back, Theodora.

PETT MAE

The paper said they freed him on that charge of messing with a white woman.

MARIETTA

I'm telling you now, they had a party on that old bridge over there.

LEONA

[Dreamily.]

He was a little boy out in the country at Theda. That's where I taught him.

MARIETTA

They really had a party on that bridge.

LEONA

I showed him how to brush his teeth, how to tie his shoes. In a small town you teach everybody.

MARIETTA

Cordy Cheek's gone.

[With finality.]

They hung him on the way back. You know, by the Murfreesboro Pike. A bunch of them. Got together right there, on that old bridge that goes over the Duck River. They stopped the car and...

PETT MAE

[Painfully.]

He was a marked man.

EMMA

A man...

[Indignant.]

that boy wadn't but fourteen years old.

MARIETTA

The same ones that took him down for the trial and were supposed to bring him back, they stopped the car and...

EMMA

[Cynically.]

They did it right there, Mr. Durham and gang.

MARIETTA

Don't take long for things to get around. Saul Blanton...he's the first to know...knows everything. What he told me

[Confidentially.]

after they stopped the car--said the Cheek boy tried to run off. Old Durham's gang went right after him, grabbed the boy, held him down, with him screamin' and hollerin' the whole time. They kept him out there two hours, wanted the boy to write a confession--but his hands...

[Leona moans. Marietta holds her right hand up to the light

and turns it slowly.]

they were burned so bad--he couldn't even move.

[Leona moans again.]

I heard they shot him close up, then hung him before he died.

[Pett Mae knocks powder off cards. The cars come by again,

but this time they stop. A car door can be heard closing.

There are footsteps, and then a man's voice calls through

the screen door.]

MAN'S VOICE

Anybody home?

[The door opens suddenly. A man wearing a deputy's badge is standing there. He looks around, scowls at the player piano.]

DEPUTY

What you darkies doin' in here?

[Looks around again.]

Y'all tryin' to hide somethin'?

[Goes over to piano and bangs the keys.]

Where'd you get this?

[He looks at the women, their dresses.]

You been playin' poker for money?

EMMA

[Feigning respect.]

And what might we do for you this fine afternoon, sir?

[Emma says everything graciously, but with an air of pretense--to the manner born.]

DEPUTY

I been deputized by the law. I come up from Nashville.

EMMA

[Graciously--air of pretense.]

And why would that be, sir?

DEPUTY

They got a bunch of us to come here...take care of things. 'Cause a all the trouble that boy caused.

EMMA

We wouldn't be causing any trouble.

[Smiles beatifically.]

DEPUTY

Well, we ain't lookin' for any either. We been told to go to every colored house in town. Collect all the guns.

EMMA

[In mock disbelief.]

Why sir...

[Door opens again. Younger man comes in. Also wears deputy's

badge. About 25 years old.]

YOUNG DEPUTY

[Matter-of-factly.]

Howdy, Emma.

EMMA

Afternoon. Why, if it isn't young Mr. Frank, Mr. Durham's boy.

[Mock excitement.]

YOUNGER DEPUTY

Howdy,

[Turns to women, doesn't remove hat.]

Emma, I know you folks. Been knowing you since I was a little boy.

EMMA

Yes sir.

[Bows slightly, shifts feet a little.]

YOUNGER DEPUTY

Emma, we know Will has a gun.

[Turns to other deputy.]

Will Edwards--the best shot in Middle Tennessee, white or colored.

[Other deputy starts to pay closer attention.]

Why, I was out on the Duck River one day, I seen him fishing with Doc Sommers. He was paddlin' a boat with one hand, reached up, shot a duck out of the air with the other. And you know, the water didn't even move.

[Older deputy laughs in disbelief.]

YOUNGER DEPUTY

It's the truth, I seen it.

OLDER DEPUTY

[Looking around.]

We been all up and down the hill, all over Mink Slide, all the way to the bottom, We got every gun.

[Pett Mae and Theodora huddle around Leona, murmuring words

of comfort. Older deputy sits down in chair at front table.

Pett Mae starts to chatter nervously.]

OLDER DEPUTY

Shut your mouth.

[Deputy slaps his knee. Pett Mae starts to cry. Leona stares

at Pett Mae unbelievingly, then covers face with hands.]

Do I have to tell you again?

YOUNGER DEPUTY

[Calmly.]

Aunt Emma, we know Will's got a gun. We come for that gun. We're going to Saul Blanton's house up the street.

[To older deputy.]

Bootlegger's bound to keep guns in the house.

[Turns to Emma.]

Emma, when we come back, we want that gun.

Exits.]

MARIETTA

Half the white folks in town buy their liquor from Saul Blanton. 'Course he bootlegs something stronger than that.

[She stands by the door, looking out. She talks to women

from this spot.]

Well, I 'spect they'll be comin' back down here t'rectly

[Passes sideways glance at Emma.]

--Durham and his deputy.

THEODORA

Deputy, my foot.

RUTH

Where in the world do you suppose that old deputy came from--showed up here with Frank Durham? Never seen hide nor hair of him in my life.

MARIETTA

No tellin', they find 'em anywhere. Just give 'em a gun and a badge. Reckon that's all they think they need.

THEODORA

If that old man's a deputy my little schoolchildren might as well be.

MARIETTA

Don't matter what you think. If he puts that gun to your head you'll be gone just the same.

End of Scene II

[Stage is dark. Emma walks to spotlight. Fadeout on other lights.]

[Emma addresses audience. She acts out sequence, alternating between mocking tone and an overly gracious tone.]

EMMA

[Mocking, imitating the deputy's surly tone.]
"What you all doin' up there playin' poker for money?"
[Answers graciously.]
"Why sir, we wouldn't be doing a thing like that."
[Pauses, seriously.]
You know I always wanted to be on the stage. Mr. Durham's boy couldn't match that.

[Laughs.]

My mother always said "Lie low, catch a meddler."

[Loudly.]

That's "lie low, catch a meddler."

The law's known for putting its nose in other folks' business. One night they drove right up to the house. Said

[Menacing tone, acting role.]

"What you darkies doin' up there on that porch?" I said,

[Graciously.]

"Why, sir, we're just out getting a spot of evening air."

[Loudly, angry.]

So they said to me,

[Menacing.]

"Well, you better get on in the house." And I said

[Graciously.]

"Why sir, this is just Emma Edwards up here on the porch with her family." And he says

[Shocked.]

"Will Edwards' wife? Doggone." And I said,

[Graciously.]

"Why yes sir." And off he drove.

[Starts laughing.]

I'm a performin' woman.

[Hand on one hip.]

You know when I was comin' up you weren't allowed to sing and go on for a living. Me and my chum Olivia used to perform over to the old Macedonia school. I used to be the

end man for the minstrel show. Oh, I was something in my time.

[Starts to strut across stage.]

I walked for the cake.

[Demonstrates step.]

Did the real Charleston--not the way they try to do it now. After I was grown,

[Confidentially.]

Mama couldn't say anything then, I would get up on the stage and do the Charleston.

[Laughs.]

I played the piano for all my girls, right over there at old Macedonia school, for every last one of their dances.

[Sings out loud, first line of song only.]

"There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." All the songs didn't go fast, either. Sometimes I'd go slow

[Moves slowly gesturing with hands, sings to waltz time first few lines of "I'm Just Wild About Harry." Continue instrumental of "I'm Just Wild About Harry" up and under.]

I sang and played so one night till Will Harold came up and got me, that's his real name, William Harold Edwards, always called him Will, he said "Woman, come from over there--they can hear you singin' all the way to Nashville."

Will Edwards always thought he could boss me.

[Puts both hands on hips.]

He was the one told me to take my hair down.

[Tension rises in voice.]

The day Mama whipped me all the way home...I had great long braids, way down my back--Will said, "Emma, put your school books down and let me see if that's real hair. The teacher at school says you got those braids from an old Injun man. Go on, I dare you."

[Aside.]

When I was a little girl over at old Macedonia, they used to tease me, they'd say "Emma, who's that old Injun man ridin' around in back of your house?" Well, when Will started teasin' me too, I got mad as the dickens. Said, "Why that old Injun man's my Grandpa."

[Indignantly.]

And I took down every last braid.

Theodora's running around 'bout to get one of her headaches. Thinks she knows everything. Leona's in one of her nice-nasty spells. I wish she'd hurry up and have that child. Marietta won't say a word, she knows more than she'll tell. When my girls start tryin' to tell <u>me</u> what to do, I just tell them

[Soothingly, proper.]

"Darlin', why your mother's forgotten more than you'll ever know." Theodora likes to talk about selling that piece of land next door. Well, I'm telling you--they'd have to be real aristocrats. Nobody except aristocrats.

[Uppity, proper.]

That land was given to me by my mother's grandpa.

[Raises voice.]

My mother was Charlie Thatcher's daughter...the son of the biggest plantation owner in middle Tennessee. They let my mother get married right there at the Thatcher place. She wore a red velvet dress.

[Aside.]

A real aristocrat.

[Quietly.]

When mama was alive they used to come and get her for all the funerals. Sent me to Fisk, too. They gave us all this furniture. Those two settees, the chairs, everything you see. Theodora likes to fuss about it. She says it's old. But old things won't wear out.

I've given birth to ten children

[With emphasis.]

including a set of twins; 'course they didn't all live. Now Willie C.'s gone to California, Theodora's plannin' to leave...I don't want Theodora runnin' off to California by herself. But I guess I can't change it--she's goin' anyway...Willie C.'s 34. Theodora's just 22...nothin' but a baby. She tries to look real cool, but she's nothin' but a baby. Morris and Leon overseas. Leona's gonna have a baby and the father's...

There's never been an argument like that in this house before. But I can't condemn Mary Jane. She's just trying to do right by her son. I've been knowin her all my life. She's

just not an aristocrat.

Mary Jane's an honest-to-goodness talker. The way she goes on you'd think people ought to go to jail just for playin' cards.

[Laughs.]

She's as bad as the law. I'm only speakin' for Emma Edwards, but I've been goin' to church on Sunday and to the meeting of the Phyllis Wheatley Circle and to my lodge

[Hands on hips.]

longer than I care to remember. You can't fault Emma Edwards there.

I'm used to people talkin'. I just let her talk. Just talk herself out. Won't change my mind. Furthermore, won't get her anywhere, either.

If I had to count the times Mary Jane and Samson have stopped here and stayed for dinner...the two of them...and about half of the rest of the town, too. I remember the time I baked chicken, made those teeniny little rolls, real light and that charlotte russe. Wish I had some teeniny little rolls about now.

I never have closed my door to folks,

[Turns to one side, confidentially.]

specially meddlers--meddlers

[Holds her hands together as if cupping something precious.]

they're real sly--you won't catch one

[Reaches in the air and brings hand down empty.]

--don't even say hello when they pass

[Looks over her shoulder quickly, then turns back.]

unless they've got a reason. I've never fought with one, don't get mad either.

[Lifts finger in air.]

I just let them talk, then I strut around, sing a little, smile and send them on their way--they're halfway down the road before they figure anything's wrong.

[Laughs.]

I never have closed my door--specially to meddlers.

[Continue music to end. Music fades. Spotlight fades. Bring

up lights on bridge players.]

Scene III

[It's getting dark. None of the women at the bridge party
have left, although the club meeting has been over for some
time. On the surface, the women are relaxed and sociable.
An atmosphere of underlying tension, however, has been
created by the news of Cordie Cheek's lynching.]

THEODORA

Mother sure loves to perform.

[Emma eyes Theodora sheepishly. Emma sits still, not moving;
thoughtful pose. Marietta enters, stepping lightly. She goes
over to the phone on the wall and places a call.]

MARIETTA:

[Talks for a minute quietly.]

Yes sir, Mr. Saul. I thank you kindly.

[Hangs up phone, turns to Emma and women.]

Well, Mr. Saul says he's been entertaining Frank Durham and his deputy.

[Women laugh nervously.]

PETT MAE

If anybody knows how to entertain, it's Saul Blanton.

[Leona enters room. Sits down in chair. No music.]

RUTH

How you feelin', Leona?

LEONA

I'll pass, I guess.

RUTH

It's the weather.

[Fans herself.]

LEONA

[Shakes her head.]

I keep thinkin' about Cordie Cheek..that child. I taught that child one year...seems like I been knowin' him all my life.

[Crying turns to Emma.]

Mother, I can't help myself.

EMMA

Help yourself, help yourself to bed. That's all you need to do right now.

LEONA

It's a good thing Morris and Leon aren't here. Hot as they are, they'd have the whole lot of us up to the courthouse...we'd all be on trial.

[Theodora looks uncomfortable. Emma shakes her head and closes her eyes as if to cancel out Leona's words.]

RUTH

Look at Mama Emma.

PETT MAE

She's not about to let them mess with her.

[Trying to change subject.]

Didn't the boys mail you that scarf over there, Mama Emma, the one with the gold fringe?

[Theodora is looking off into space, not listening to conversation. Emma is still deep in thought. Leona looks

anxious.]

LEONA

[Points to the scarf.]

Every time I see that scarf, it makes me think about Leon and Morris.

THEODORA

[Looks dejected.]

I can feel one of my headaches comin' on...she would start all that stuff

[Pauses.]

just when I'm getting ready to go to California.

PETT MAE

Who?

THEODORA

You know who--Mary Jane Barnes.

RUTH

Mary Jane's as bad as the law.

EMMA

[Looks up as if out of a dream.]

I been knowin' her all my life. Don't talk about her. She can't help herself.

[Wearily.]

None of us can. She can't help being how she is.

LEONA

If I'd lived that long I'd know better than to go on like that.

EMMA

How long?

LEONA

As long as Mary Jane Barnes.

EMMA

[Turns to Leona.]

Many an old bird shat in the nest.

[Women laugh.]

EMMA

[Turns to Leona.]

Go on back to bed, Leona. Nothin' for you to do runnin' around here.

LEONA

[Upset.]

You all won't let me do a thing. I'm older than Theodora. You let her go off to California, and she's only...

EMMA

Theodora's not the one that's going to have a child.

[Strains voice.]

I don't have to tell you that.

[Emma rubs hands hard on dress, then, soothingly to Leona.]

...Now darling...

[Moves closer.]

Leona...you know you're just a baby to me. That's all you'll ever be to your mother.

LEONA

Mother, I've been teaching almost eight years now. I can take care of myself.

EMMA

You think I'd let Theodora go runnin' off to California by herself if her husband wasn't out there?

THEODORA

[Turns to Emma.]

Mother, Willie C.'ll be out there waiting.

EMMA

That's right, <u>waiting</u>--where's Willie C. gonna be on that long train ride out yonder? No tellin' what's out there.

[Frowns.]

How long they say it was?

["Take the A-Train" up and under.]

PETT MAE

Six days.

THEODORA

I don't have to go by myself.

EMMA

You don't have to go at all.

THEODORA

Leona could go with me.

[Music stops.]

EMMA

Leona?

THEODORA

Leona--

[Thinks for a second, face brightens.]

me and Leona--could make the trip together.

EMMA

Leona who?...Leona's having a child this month. How's Leona going all the way out to California?

RUTH

Leona? Her insides never would take a trip like that. After a baby it takes months to get yourself straightened out.

MARIETTA

Sometimes you mess yourself up for life.

PETT MAE

Doctor wouldn't have it. A train trip could start the worst hemorrhaging. I knew of this one girl...

[Titters nervously.]

she started right on the train...and it's even worse for the baby.

[Pett Mae, as the doctor's wife, has the last word on all

medical questions.]

THEODORA

She could leave the baby here, start a new life.

[Marietta listens to the conversation from the door; she

continues to look out the door at frequent intervals.]

EMMA

A new life?

[Shakes her head.]

Now, let me tell you something, Theodora Edwards, and you get this straight, no daughter of mine's gonna leave a child and go runnin' off somewhere.

[Leona is not responding. She is watching Theodora and Emma's faces. There is a ray of hope in her expression, as if perhaps a solution for her will come out of all this.]

THEODORA

Oh mother, it's nothing like that.

LEONA

The whole town'll be talkin'.

EMMA

The whole town...the whole world...the whole town's already talkin'.

[Looks stern.]

A whole heap of it anyway...that's all they do...talk.

LEONA

Folks say...

EMMA

What folks? Don't tell me about "folks."

LEONA

They say having a baby without a...

EMMA

[Hands on hips.]

Who's "they"?

EMMA

If you have to go runnin' in every direction every time this one says that way and the other says this way...you'll be runnin' all your life. They...

[She thinks for a second as if toying with the word.]

...who's "they?"

[Emphatically.]

...nice-nasty, that's what it is...as long as I can remember, Leona, I've been tellin' you...if you do what everybody says just to be doing it even if it's wrong and then you turn your nose up when things get a little dirty even if it's for a good reason, you'll be an old bird up in a nest and you still won't know which way to turn--you won't know which way is right and which way is wrong. You remember what I called it--I said "nice-nasty."

[Sternly.]

You hold your head up, Leona Edwards, even if you're the only one who thinks you ought to, even if the whole town's talkin'.

LEONA

Sometimes they won't hire you back teaching after you have a

baby.

EMMA

My daughter wouldn't worry about that, even if she had to wash and iron--day and night.

THEODORA

Now, Mother.

[Tries to humor her.]

Leona's a school teacher. She shouldn't...

[The rest of the sentence is inaudible.]

EMMA

[Pats her foot up and down to her own words, speaks loudly

to drown out Theodora.]

And never see that child awake. She'd work her fingers to the bone...

[Stops rhythm suddenly and stomps her foot emphatically.]

LEONA

Mother, I don't know if I can do it on my own.

EMMA

You're Emma Edwards' daughter. You're not on your own--and don't you forget it.

LEONA

But what about a father?

EMMA

[Slaps her hands hard on her skirt.]

No use goin' on over somethin' you can't change. Life wasn't meant to fit just your purpose or anybody else's

[Pauses.]

for that matter.

[Narrows eyes. Looks directly at Leona]

Folks do things they never dreamed of...they do them anyway. You'll just have to do the best you can.

LEONA

[Sheepishly.]

Maybe I can get some money from the Thatchers.

THEODORA

O Lord, there Leona goes talking about that mess again.

EMMA

[Indignantly to Theodora.]

Don't you talk about your forefathers, young lady. My Mama was Charlie Thatcher's <u>own</u> daughter...

LEONA

[Nods thoughtfully.]

The biggest plantation in middle Tennessee.

MARIETTA

Used to be the biggest. They're not that grand anymore.

EMMA

They used to send a car out to get me for funerals. Haven't seen them since I finished Fisk.

THEODORA

And you won't either.

MARIETTA

Sure won't.

[Marietta is still standing by the door. In between comments, she looks out and then turns back to the women.]

MARIETTA

Lord have mercy. If that ain't Mary Jane comin' up the walk.

THEODORA

Mary Jane--what does she want now?

MARIETTA

No telling--knowing her.

[Shrugs.]

I know one thing--I sure don't have time to go round worryin' about what shade a brown I am.

[Laughs, then looks straight ahead with a natural smile.]

I'll tell you that right now.

PETT MAE

That bird's looking for one of Emma Edwards' high-yellow daughters.

[Looks at Marietta with mischievous smile and touches handkerchief to her face.]

EMMA

[Emma goes over to window.]

She's an old bird--and a scared one too.

[Mary Jane enters. Walks to center of room.]

MARY JANE

I couldn't get home--cars runnin' up and down the street. Keeping a woman on foot from going back to her own house. I had to walk all the way back.

EMMA

The law's out everywhere these days.

MARY JANE

Well, I don't want them asking me--trying to find out where I'm going....

[Angrily.]

They'll pay for killing Cordie Cheek.

[Anger increases.]

They took that boy's life.

EMMA

Talk won't change a thing...the law knows what they did.

MARY JANE

When people take things that don't belong to them, they ought to pay.

EMMA

Rest yourself, Mary Jane.

MARY JANE

When somebody takes something that doesn't belong to them in the first place, you never forget.

[Emma sits on edge of straight-backed chair, silently rocking back and forth.]

MARY JANE

I had to come back. I woddent a been nothin' out there by myself...Not that I was leaving the whole thing for good. I planned to come back to East Hill anyway.

[Looks over at Leona. Mary Jane is restless, nervous and

embarassed that she had to come back to the house so soon,

her strong-willed, single-minded nature is still apparent.

She continues to press her case.]

THEODORA

[Restless, fidgety.]

Some people sure do have a lot of nerve.

MARY JANE

I'm back here because of what they did to that boy--Cordie Cheek.

[Starts to sweat. Wipes face on sleeve.]

My feet--my whole body's 'bout to give way. My throat's dry as that wind out there. Took all I had to come back here.

[Looks startled, as if finally realizing what has happened.]

I was driven back...all because of what they did to that boy on the way from Nashville. Next thing you know they'll be saying we did it too...

[Gradually raises voice higher and higher.]

I circled back, turned all the way around; my mind's just a spinnin' and spinnin'. But I want you to know I didn't forget. I'm still gonna get it back. I still want my ring.

[Silence can be heard in the room. No one responds. Finally

Theodora heaves a dejected sigh. Emma steps forward and motions to Theodora. Theodora gets up and hands Mary Jane

Barnes a glass of water.]

EMMA

[Half-humorously.]

Folks need to rest...walked all the way up East End Hill--a glass of water for our guest.

[Women murmur in unison.]

EMMA

[Half-humorously again.]

Give this traveller, weary that she might be, a chair.

[Women murmur again. Room darkens a little.]

EMMA

Mary Jane, rest yourself.

[Mary Jane sits down. Laughing and talking can be heard outside the house. Men's voices are heard. Voice calls out at screen door.]

VOICE

Sheriff's deputy.

[Theodora goes to the door. Ushers in deputy. Room becomes darker. At some point, more lights are turned on. He is red-faced.]

OLDER DEPUTY

[Walks up to Theodora.]

Say, ain't I seen you somewhere before--in somethin' at the picture show?

[Scratches his head.]

You look real familiar.

[Scratches his head again. Theodora's expression freezes.

She doesn't move. Deputy changes the subject, looks serious.]

Where's the gun?

[Looks around. Surveys women sitting at table.]

EMMA

I looked, sir. I looked high and low.

[Exaggerates, looks up and down, waving hands and feigning

bewilderment.]

I do believe Will took all his guns, sir. He's gone off hunting with the colored doctors from Nashville

[Lowers eyes.]

...and with President Hale.

OLDER DEPUTY

[Hesitates, as if trying to make sure he's hearing right.]

President--what President?

EMMA

Yes sir, President Hale from A & I.

[Looks sideways.]

A & I, sir. That's the colored college up at Nashville.

OLDER DEPUTY

Don't know nothin' 'bout no A & I.

[Angrily. Still looking around.]

[Theodora smiles, covers mouth with hand. Women turn faces

down to hide laughter.]

OLDER DEPUTY

What I want to know is, do you or do you not keep a gun here?

[Marietta steps forward. Stands next to Theodora.]

EMMA

I'm doin' poorly right now.

[Confidentially.]

And my daughter,

[Gestures to Leona.]

you know, she ain't quite...well. Her Papa ain't here either. My daughter, she ain't well, you know.

[Emma lowers her head sheepishly.]

Will wouldn't dare to leave a gun.

[Deputy stares at Emma coldly.]

OLDER DEPUTY

You know I could tear this old house apart right now--and you wanna know somethin'? Ain't nobody in this world could stop me.

EMMA

[Deferentially.]

Why sir, that would be your right.

[Bows slightly.]

And where is young Mr. Frank, sir?

OLDER DEPUTY

He's held up down there at Blanton's house.

[Stands still and sways slightly; makes a sheepish grin. It

is clear that the deputy has been drinking.]

Damned if that Blanton don't have everything made and put in

a bottle.

EMMA

[Glances knowingly at Marietta.]

Sir, I have looked high and low.

OLDER DEPUTY

[Impatient.]

I heard that already.

[Looks around angrily.]

You know if that Will Edwards is as smart as they say he is, he'd be a damn fool to keep guns in the same house with a bunch of women.

[Walks swiftly toward door. Stops, turns around. Goes over

to piano. Bangs a little.]

Been a long time since I felt so good.

[Looks up at stacks of boxes containing piano rolls.]
This a player piano?

[No one answers. He turns around and starts to walk back
out.]

MARY JANE

When somebody takes something that's not theirs in the first place, they ought to be tried...they ought to pay.

OLDER DEPUTY

[Looks shocked.]
Who's this?
[His face is angry. He approaches Mary Jane and holds her
hard by the arm.]
Look here, Auntie.

MARY JANE

When somebody takes something that's not theirs in the first place.

OLDER DEPUTY

[Pulls Mary Jane closer.]
What's wrong with this darkie? She crazy or somethin'?
[Mary Jane looks frightened. She stutters. Obviously

she

realizes her words have been misinterpreted. Emma touches

Mary Jane's shoulder. Turns to deputy.]

EMMA

Don't mind her. She's worried about her son.

[Deputy eyes Mary Jane contemptuously.]

OLDER DEPUTY

Just a bunch a cacklin' women...

[Turns around and yells at women. Staggers slightly.] NowdontyouthinkI'mleavin'forgood.SoonasIgoback to Blanton's and see the rest of that cock fight. I'll be back...you hear.

[Marietta follows behind. When the deputy goes out, she falls against the door in a gesture of relief. During the

time the deputy has been there everything has been silent.

Now talking and strained laughter burst out. What might seem boisterous and loud in another culture can be taken

here as a mixture of grief and release from pain.]

LEONA

Mother, you ought to be ashamed.

[Women laugh.]

THEODORA

Mother, I thought you told us Papa went fishin' with Mr. Cordell Hull.

LEONA

Mother sure does like to perform.

RUTH

Mama Emma, it sure is too bad you couldn't have been in the colored shows.

EMMA

Mama Emma's danced and sang all she wants to, darling.

[Emma looks up beatifically.]

Your Mama Emma has lived her life.

THEODORA

Oh Mother, you'll be here after I'm dead and gone.

[Mary Jane sits in corner. She looks quietly determined.]

EMMA

When Marietta called Saul Blanton on the phone, said the law's on the way, I know Saul was waitin' when they got there...

[Laughs.]

We've dealt with the law up here on East Hill many a day.

[Looks at Mary Jane.]

MARY JANE

You mighta dealt with the law, but you won't put <u>me</u> off.

EMMA

It's not puttin' off. You're an old bird, Mary Jane. You said all you wanted to say...that ring won't be going back to you. Furthermore, Leona's stayin' here. You're welcome to send your son. Anybody's welcome here, always will be. We're not about to put anybody out.

[Emma grabs her hair and brings it forward over her shoulder.]

LEONA

[Loudly.]

I'm stayin'. I'm going to raise the baby right here. That ring belongs to me and I'm keeping it. When something belongs to you, you have a right to keep it.

[Mary Jane turns away and stares at the wall.]

EMMA

[Looks at Ruth.]

I guess Cordie Cheeks' mother'll be coming to see you about the wake. She'll be picking out the suit.

RUTH

A young boy's suit--

[Emphatically.]

I'll be going to her.

[Pauses.]

I guess I'll have to wait...

[Looks at door.]

I'm sure not going out there now.

[Emma continues to arrange her hair. She reaches in her apron pocket and takes out a few hair pins. Taking out one pin at a time, she slowly pins her hair up at the top of her head.]

PETT MAE

[High-voiced.]

Look who's gettin' fixed up.

MARIETTA

Mother's gone and found herself a party.

EVA ZOE

Where's the party, Mama Emma?

EMMA

Never you mind about a party...

[Teasing.]

I'll party you.

[Women laugh nervously. A few of them absent-mindedly begin to arrange their hair and clothes. Emma takes off her apron and throws it on the sofa, then smoothes out her dress. She reaches in her pocket for another pin and puts it in her hair.]

SAMUELLA

Look at Mama Emma--she's dressing up.

EVA ZOE

Remember, Mama Emma, when you used to get all fixed up and play for our high school dance?

THEODORA

Mother doesn't need a party to get dressed up and go out.

MARIETTA

She never did.

LEONA

She'll start gettin' ready at the drop of a hat.

RUTH

Wonder when we'll be able to leave.

[Emma walks to the door and opens it slightly--starts out.]

RUTH:

Where you goin', Mama Emma?

EMMA

[Turns and addresses women.]

Why, I remember one night I put on everything I owned. Shawls, everything.

[Hands on hips.]

Will said, "Lord have mercy, Emma, where you think you're going?" I turned around just like this, said "Just going out to look at the stars."

[Leona walks to door leading off the stage. She takes a silk crepe dinner dress hanging on the door and holds it up to her body. She seems to be deep in thought, then turns towards Emma.]

EMMA

[Walks over to a chair and picks up a shawl.] It's dark now...a beautiful night and the stars are all out...I guess I'll go out on the porch. The stars'll be out right about now.

[Ruth struggles, stands up and walks a few steps toward the door. Emma walks out the door while the women watch.]

END OF SCENE III

[Stage is dark. Spotlight on Marietta.]

MARIETTA

I don't know why things had to turn out the way they did with Cordie Cheek. God tests your faith. Sometimes there's no point in tryin' to blame anybody. Maybe it had to be this way. No point in trying to talk about how things could have

been different. I just have to believe that.

Leona's been goin' on about havin' that baby without a husband...about what the town'll say...lots worse things been said about folks. If that's all anybody ever says about you, you've done pretty well, I'd say.

I try to be real quiet, real nice and not worry folks with a whole lot of mess. When Leona and Mother start that talk about the Thatchers, I just let them go right on. Don't say a word. Makes me no never mind. I wouldn't be surprised if Leona told that same story to the baby...that baby

[Laughs.]

I'll tell you one thing...it'll be a talkin' one.

You know Leona's the one that always listened to Mama's stories when she was comin' up. Mother likes to tell folks that Grandma got married up to the Thatcher house in a red velvet dress. She did no such thing.

[Slowly explaining.]

Grandma ran off and got married, same as me. When her own Papa died they sent for Grandma in a big black car. She wouldn't even go. Said she was mad--at the Thatchers. Why?

[Laughs.]

That's somethin' you'd have to ask Grandma. I couldn't tell you that.

[Laughs.]

You see, Mother likes a good story. And she knew Leona would eat up whatever she told her.

Let other folks live in peace. That's all I know to

say. Leave other folks alone. I try to help when I can, otherwise I leave them alone. Mary Jane goes on about card playin'.

[Pause, with emphasis.]

She's performin' herself. Card playin'? If that's all anybody ever says about you, you've done pretty well, and that's the truth.

Like I said, I don't know why things had to turn out the way they did with Cordie Cheek. Folks'll go on for days...doin' a whole lot of whoopin' and hollerin'. But it won't amount to much. Saul Blanton. They think he's just a performer. Somebody to laugh at. They think he's a gambler, a bootlegger, just somebody interested in money. They come runnin' through here...all the time lookin' for this old gun and that one. Saul Blanton can get 100 guns from Chicago, just like that. Now I don't believe in gamblin'--

[Aside.]

That's how Saul Blanton got rich, that and bootleggin'.

[Faces audience again.]

but sometimes you gotta fight evil with evil. They take us for a bunch of fools, they think they know where all the guns are, even Mary Jane could a gone straight to fifteen or twenty guns.

Like I said, I don't approve of gamblin'--or guns either--but I don't judge people. I hope it never comes to guns--but it might have to. I'll tell you this--if it does they'll be pullin' the white folks out of the Duck River,

buryin' them at night. Folks'll be layin' on the roofs down in the Bottom, on top of Ruth and Jim's business, Saul Blanton's barber shop, Curtis' cafeteria, the Elks' lodge, with rifles aimed, just a waitin'. And when they come through--

[Pauses, looks off.]

They're busy lookin' for one gun. Time may come. I ain't sayin' it will come, but I'm tellin' you...Saul Blanton can get guns from Chicago any time he wants.

Now I hope it never comes to that--but the Lord works in mysterious ways. Folks may not believe this, but the whole world's lookin' right here. If you think what we say don't count, just watch. I'm not sayin' I'd fight, but we're going to get justice sometime. We're gonna get it, sure as day and night.

[Spotlight fades slowly.]

Appendix

Although the characters in "The Bridge Party" are fictional, the play does refer to two historical events, which, however, in contrast to the action of the play, were widely separated in time. In 1945, after the close of World War II, a race riot occurred in Columbia, Tennessee. This event is described in Langston Hughes' Fight For Freedom: The Story of the NAACP. About ten years earlier in Columbia, a young boy who had been tried and acquitted on charges of molesting a white woman was lynched; his body remained hanging from a tree for several days until a minister was given permission to cut down the corpse.

"Take the A-Train" was composed by Billy Strayhorn in 1941 and recorded by the Duke Ellington Orchestra in the same year. By the year 1942, Strayhorn's composition had received worldwide recognition as the theme of Ellington's orchestra.

"I'm Just Wild About Harry" was written by Eubie Blake for the musical "Shuffle Along." Although this composition is

popularly remembered as a fast tempo piece, it was originally conceived and played in waltz tempo.

"Until The Real Thing Comes Along" was a million-seller in 1936 for Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy with Pha Terrell as the vocalist. In an earlier version, popular in the black clubs of the twenties, this number was known as "The Slave Song."