1-1-1990

A Light Divided (Original short stories)

Katherine Green
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Order Number 1343553

A Light Divided. [Original short stories]

Green, Katherine, M.A.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1990

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

A LIGHT DIVIDED

by

Katherine Green

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

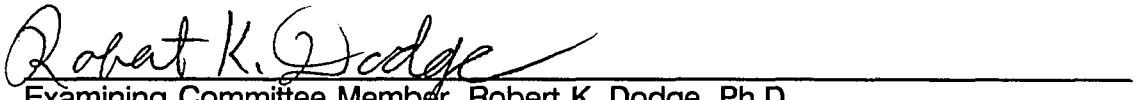
in

English

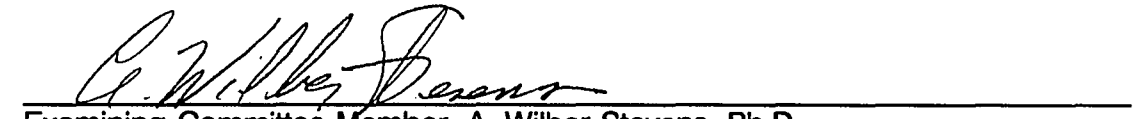
Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December, 1990

The thesis of Katherine Green for the degree of Master of Arts in English is approved.

Chairperson, Richard Wiley, M.F.A.



Examining Committee Member, Robert K. Dodge, Ph.D.



Examining Committee Member, A. Wilber Stevens, Ph.D.

Graduate Faculty Representative, Maralee Mayberry, Ph.D.

Graduate Dean, Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December, 1990

ABSTRACT

These short stories are about people in conflict; the characters venture toward personal growth, struggle to improve family relationships, and search for a relationship with God or the cosmos. A lonely man like Ernest Cauley [A Light Divided] takes actions which cause his increased isolation. His shattered hopes induce him to abandon his newfound friend, a companion who might have added stability to his dismantled existence. The tension between Evelyn Blackburn, her husband, Veldon, and his legal wife, Carmella is heightened not only by their curious marital arrangement but also by the inclusion of Jessie Lukas into their household [Trout Bite at Dusk]. While we see tension between the rational man and the religious zealot, we also view those individuals in collusion with the pious man. Characters like Rulon and Judith Jackson [The Seventh Floor is Heaven and the Holy Throne] and Alice Ann [Noon Candle] are on the brink of discovering that religious prescriptions cannot prevent one from experiencing the pain of life. Others such as Seth [The Seventh Floor is Heaven and the Holy Throne] and Shorty Chapin [Pure Foolishness] function as rational types to contrast the idiosyncracies of their devout counterparts. The themes and characters in these stories are rooted in rural towns, steeped in provincial attitudes and concerns. Often they are preoccupied with their own virtue, forever fascinated by their own

moral actions, blinded to their own inconsistencies. They are similar to characters Flannery O'Connor describes as "good country people." This volume treats themes of isolation, longing, disillusionment, fear of the unknown, within a context of reflective living. These characters live deliberately, sucking out the "marrow" of life; they are characters who live simple, unglamorous, yet courageous lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Light Divided

Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliance of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.
Walter Pater

"Damn." Ernest expelled a deep breath and leaned over to make another loop in his shoe laces. "Life just ain't worth it."

On the third ring, he reached over to the coffee table and picked up the telephone receiver.

"You're Mr. Ernest Cauley? This is Eric Randolph. You know, from Mountain Capital Bank? We'll be over tomorrow. . . you know, to fill out the pre-liquidation asset-inventory papers?"

The banker said everything with a question in his voice, as if he were asking Ernest's permission. Hell, nobody was asking. Ernest fiddled with the phone cord, stretching the round twists to fit around his index finger.

He listened. "Mr. Cauley, as I am sure you are aware, we can't continue putting it off like this? And I must insist . . . WE at Mountain Capital, you know, we must be allowed to fill out the necessary paperwork? Of course you understand?"

They were always wanting something or other. They were there to pounce on a man down on his luck. This was the man who sat behind his big red desk, smiling and asking about your nephew Tom, shaking your hand--happy to lend you money at twelve and three quarters percent, equally happy to foreclose on you. Ernest remembered everything about the man's office: the spongy green carpet, three fake trees in big brass planters, the tall leather chair, matching desk accessories arranged neatly on the mahogany surface, two manilla folders with Ernest's life spread out page by page.

". . . Then this will be satisfactory to you?" the man continued. "You see, the owner must be present for the inventory? You will be there then? About ten o'clock? Mr. Cauley, you will be there?"

"Where else'll I be going?" Ernest snapped.

"Well, very good. Of course you will feel free to look over the documents as the officials are completing the inventory? . . . See you tomorrow then?"

Ernest hung up the telephone. Of course he would be free (what a curious word in this situation) to look over the shoulders of the bank boys as they made up the auction list. Sure. Ernest scowled. Sure he would have his say-so, could keep his practically new, completely paid for, Japanese color t.v. off the list. He hoped to keep that at least. Ernest didn't trust those boys. They'd be coming in person tomorrow.

Ernest finished tying the shoe and stood up, rearranging the folds of his undershorts through the tan cotton-twill work pants. He'd walk to the post

office today; there might be some good news. He picked up his straw cowboy hat hanging on the nail by the back door and patted it onto his balding head.

The view from the back porch showed the guts of Ernest's block. People stored old dressers and broken chaise lounges in their back yards; they saved things that they'd never let be seen from the street. To Ernest, one place to stash things was pretty much the same as another. He booted a beer can off his cement porch into the weeds next to the house.

As he walked around his own house he could see that coolie hat of Mrs. Gray's bent over a row of peas. Mrs. Benns was hanging wash in her side yard. The sun had cleared the eastern range but wasn't high enough to make the sweat run down the back of his neck. It was a pretty nice day after all. Ernest took a large step over the irrigation ditch and walked toward Main Street. Walking was supposed to help one's disposition. You never know what good might come of it. But just the same, a man'd just as soon not think about it much.

A song sparrow whistled, "None's-better-n-this, None's-better-n-this," and actually, Ernest thought, it was a pleasant enough town.

He had walked nearly a block before sensed the new sound. He glanced behind him; a tan puppy followed. The little thing was galloping to catch up. It was just a baby. Where had he come from? Ignore him and he'll turn around and go home. Ernest didn't know which of the houses the pup could have come from. He'll go home when he gets tired, Ernest thought. But

the pup still followed. Both of them passed the house on the corner that used to belong to old man Harker before he died; now the new folks had put up new green shutters and repoured the front walk into a gentle curve. The place didn't look the same at all. The pup hurried his tiny legs after Ernest. As Ernest stepped wide, the pup wove in and around his legs. What a nuisance. A stupid pup could trip you up making you break something.

"Go on. Shoo!" Ernest stomped at the tiny dog. The puppy yelped, hopped backwards, and waited. When Ernest turned and began walking again, he heard short puppy breaths at his heels.

All along Fourth East, the pattern was repeated. Using his shoe, not a kick exactly, Ernest tried to scoop the pup away from under his feet. He'd stop and lunge menacingly toward the pup, who would retreat a safe distance then arrange himself joyfully under the man's feet again.

A rusty pickup pulled alongside Ernest. "Ho! Ern! Out for your daily, eh?" Walt pulled a red bandanna from the front of his overalls; he began to mop his forehead.

"Hi, Walt. How's it going?"

"Fine looking pup you got there."

"Ain't mine. You want him?"

"I can see he's already got a nose on him. A spaniel makes a real good bird dog."

"He ain't mine. I dunno who he belongs to. Did you get those hooves moved over to the south field?"

"Yea. Took all day Thursday. Turned the water in on it, so it should be ready to move 'em back before July or early August. Say, I was over in Short Creek yesterday." He said "shart crick" like most people. Most everybody around here said it that way. "Yea. Got a haircut. Mary Rose did it."

"You say you'll be moving 'em back about July?"

"What? Oh, yea. She don't look too happy, Ern. Mary Rose, I mean. She's pale and sorta droopy-looking."

Ernest was glad Walt liked the pup. It was probably an orphan. Ernest was rather pleased at the way it seemed to hover about his ankles--not nipping--sniffing around, testing. He wondered if the little thing had been weaned.

"Well, gotta be going, Walt. See ya."

"Hey, Ernest?" the big man said. "She wants to come home."

The bandanna was still out, now dabbing at his damp cheeks and swabbing the neck under the collar of his plaid cotton shirt.

"Think about it, Ern. She really wants to."

"Gotta find who this damned pup belongs to." Walt shrugged as Ernest moved away from the vehicle.

The truck spun off, gravel flying, and turned the corner. Walt was waving into the rearview mirror.

The pup was tired. His breath came in little short gasps. He lagged behind. His high-pitched whine rippled, long and cautious, at intervals of each six or seven tiny steps. Ernest slowed his pace.

Ernest felt angry. What the hell right did Walt have bringing up the subject of Mary Rose? That was over and done with. He'd done with thinking about it. She'd made her bed. What goddamn right did Walt have talking about her?

The sun was well above the east mountains. Ernest moved through little pockets of warm then cool air. It was funny how the air didn't heat up all at the same time; rather, it hung together in clusters like a family should. He wondered how the channel five weatherman got an accurate reading that way.

Mary Rose loved those movie musicals. Rogers and Hammerstein were the greatest team, she always said. She'd sit through the early show and the late on both Friday and Saturday nights, and she'd sob up a small pile of hankies through the sad parts during each of the four performances. Ernest's personal favorite was Music Man where the hero was so charming and sweet talking. But Mary Rose loved to be saddened like in Fiddler on the Roof where the papa lost his little darling daughters to the outside world.

Ernest couldn't help admiring the little pup's stamina. He was still hurrying along. The whining had stopped. Ernest quickened his pace. No need of moseying along. The pup was doing fine. Mary Rose had once been

like sunshine through her yellow chintz curtains--his own "Fair Lady." But he had long since quit thinking of her.

There was lots to do before tomorrow. The house needed repair. The window panes, paint cracked and peeling, needed a steel brush and a fresh coat of latex. In the flower beds the meadow grass was higher than the zinnias. If he took an old broom to the cobwebs lodged between the bricks, that would spruce it up a bit. With the bank taking it back and all, it might fetch a higher price if the place looked good.

Ernest looked good walking with the puppy. He tried to match the spring in the pup's step. They had right good rhythm together. It was the same with Mary Rose. When they had walked down the street, it was with perfect timing. Even now, he could coordinate his steps with her name. If he held out the last syllable, it copied his rhythm, "Ma-ry Ro-ose." Ernest's leg stretched forward, knee bent--"Ma-ry..." Then his weight shifted with a push-off and a straight knee, "Ro-ose." The motion was repeated again and again, "Ma-ry Ro-ose, Ma-ry Ro-ose.." The cadence drummed inside his head as his legs picked up speed.

Two boys on bicycles pedaled past Ernest in the same direction. Ernest walked even faster. Ernest sometimes ran at his top speed to keep the demons out of his head. Even at this age, he was nearly the athlete he'd been in high school. For now, he was content to walk rapidly.

Walt had no business bringing up that bit about Mary Rose. When she left, it had been for good. Mary Rose knew that. There was no coming back. Mary Rose always said the lieutenant in South Pacific knew that he wouldn't be coming back for his love; a man can feel that sometimes.

The pup passed him now; the game of chase had given the little thing a burst of energy. He tried, even with his tiny legs, to catch up to the bicycles. The pup continued pushing. Did the animal actually think he could win a race against ten-year-olds on wheels? A puppy was such a damn bit of bother. Just when you got used to them, they'd up and leave. Besides, you couldn't keep a pet if you had no home.

Ernest stopped in his tracks. He jumped the small irrigation ditch and stepped quickly behind a lilac bush. The dog still chased the rear wheels, but there was a greater distance between them than there had been moments before. The pup gave up and turned around to face the empty street. He scampered in circles looking for his new master. Ernest peeked around the edge of his shelter and peered through the green leaves and lavender flower clusters. The puppy looked thoroughly confused. The game had gotten out of hand. Pup and man watched the bicycle tires disappear down the street out of view. After studying every direction, the pup slowly padded down a side street and disappeared.

Well, that was that. Ernest stepped away from the shrub and turned in the direction he had come. This was enough walk for one day; there wouldn't

be any letters waiting at the post office anyway. He walked toward home half expecting to hear the happy pant of puppy breath coursing around his feet. Puppies were a lot of trouble. If they chose boys on bicycles, or a banker with a Caddie, instead of a man with a debt and a dream . . . well, that was their choice. A person could do nothing about that.

As Ernest got closer to home, he could hear baying. Somebody's dog hadn't been fed yet today and was letting the owner hear about it. The sound was deep, an old bitch. God, he was glad he didn't have a miserable, demanding pooch around. Of the neighbors on Ernest's block, he didn't know any who kept a dog. Maybe the poor old thing was being teased by rowdy boys. The baying got louder; each tone was long, wailing. Mrs. Benns' line of white sheets was waving gently in the morning breeze. Mrs. Gray was entering her back door with a full basket of garden vegetables. Through the even string gridwork of wax beans, Ernest could see the roof of a doghouse. A yellow cocker spaniel, tits dragging, stood there, throat stretched to the sun in doleful moaning. He had never noticed before that Mrs. Gray had a spaniel. My god, and where was the bitch's baby now?

It was crazy to think about it. Ernest got the same knot in his stomach as when Mary Rose sobbed aloud with Anna as the King of Siam lay dying in the Avalon Movie Theater on Main Street. After the string of movie credits, when the light against the screen finally faded, Mary Rose was still sniffling. "Oh, the light, bring back the light," she had said to Ernest. But Ernest couldn't;

the show was over. So they drove home, Mary Rose still weeping into her white handkerchief, Ernest whittled to half a man because he couldn't fix it for her.

Ernest brushed past the long grass on both sides of the narrow cement walkway. The weeding would have to wait. So would the scraping and the painting. It was no use to try to fix up anything. All would be gone tomorrow. Ernest felt the exhaustion of the past eleven years of struggle weighing on him, trying to eke out a living from a small herd of cattle on leased land. With supreme effort he dragged himself up the back steps and inside to his double bed, there to hum himself to sleep.

Trout Bite at Dusk

I

Evelyn Blackburn. . . B-U-R-N. You already got it on the police report. Veldon told it to the paramedics. The Blackburn place on West Honeyhill Road. . . on the Arizona border. Yea, I guess I done it; I don't know why. 'Cept I know once I started, I couldn't stop myself. Statement? I don't know. . . . It's a long-winded story.

I used to work at my daddy's Ace hardware store. That's where I first seen Veldon. He came in for a pipe fitting to repair the sink in his carpentry shop. He was a friend of daddy's, went to school together. We found the plastic sleeve together. I was fifteen.

He came over every Friday night for two months. When I answered the door, he'd tell me to go get my daddy.

My daddy'd say, "Come on in here, Evvie. Come and set a spell." I'd sit over in the corner and listen to them talk; they'd talk hoppers or weevil, the sorghum crop, the high cost of farm machinery and building supplies, or the government taking all their hard-earned money for taxes.

One evening, I got up to find something else, something fun, to do. When I passed by Daddy, he pinched the back of my arm hard, saying in his high pitched, cheery voice, "Whoa there, baby girl. Stay here, Honey. We

menfolk need a young, pretty face to brighten up the room." Then he turned to Veldon with a laugh, "Don't we, Vel?" They both whooped it up. It was the first time he'd ever used the word "pretty" on me.

"The next week I found out I was getting married. Veldon, near fifty, already had a wife and seven kids with one on the way. He was a fine catch, Daddy told me, because he was already settled down and established around town. His wife, though now kinda sickly, was a real hard worker. I'd fit into their family just fine, Daddy said.

"I had wanted to finish high school before I was given in matrimony, but I guess God didn't want it that way. I was doing real good in school too, especially in Language Arts, but being a wife was a whole lot more important than schooling. God'd spoke to Daddy about the wedding, so the whole to-do was set.

You mean, was I surprised to be given to an old man like Veldon? Course not. Daddy had three wives hisself. My mama was the first one, so we was in the best position, legally you know. Ha! When Daddy got stingy with her, she'd threaten to call the cops on him and have him carted off to jail. That'd shut up his bellering about spending too much money.

Anyway, on Saturday, we pinned in mama's wedding dress on me. I stood next to Veldon looking up into Daddy's proud eyes. Mama, Ramona, Evan, and all the little kids stood on Daddy's left, and my new, pregnant sister-

wife and her seven children stood on his other side. Daddy married us proper, and we signed a paper Daddy'd wrote up for us.

We all munched on chocolate chip cookies and drunk Hawaiian punch, and that afternoon I carried my clothes into a room at the Blackburn house. I was scared 'cause I'd never kissed a boy in my whole life, and I knew Veldon'd be nearing me come nightfall. Mama'd told me that. She said just be watchful and quiet, and it'd all get figured out.

II

Carmella was my new sister-wife. She was more like a fourth mama than a sister, 'cause of the age difference and all, and she bossed me around more'n she should of. I guess she felt poorly all the time because of carrying the child, so she figured to get as much work as she could out of me.

Veldon slept in her room every Thursday night. For the rest of the week he stayed with me. On Thursdays I'd lay real still and listen to them upstairs. She was giggling like crazy, as always, and I wondered how they did it with her so fat and all. I vowed never to make the fuss that Carmella did. When it was my turn, I'd lay completely quiet. I never felt giggly anyway.

Carmella usually stayed in bed until eleven-thirty. She liked to watch All My Children. By then I had the bigger ones breakfasted, with lunches packed, and off to school. By eleven, I had put on fourteen bandaids and wiped a score of runny noses. I tried to keep the kids away from her window, so's she

could sleep. But the dirt was soft on that side of the house, and they liked digging, which made their sounds drift up even to the second floor where she was resting.

"Baby," she'd call. She called me baby. "Baby, get me a little sip of cranapple juice, will ya, and do quiet those young'ns down."

When I brought the juice up, it was too warm, too watery with ice, not stirred up enough, or there was grit in her glass. She wore a powder blue cotton robe that she had made just 'fore my wedding. It had cluny lace on the collar and little pearly buttons down the front. It made her look sweet and delicate even as big as she was in front. "Spread that afghan, Baby. Put it over my toes, will ya?" So I pulled the cover over her and tucked her in.

The children and housework became my chores, so did mending clothes and the pressure canning. My days were filled with work and more work. At daylight we weeded on the garden; Jake, Ben, Luke and Essie helped with that before they went to school. Six forty-five was Bible reading. I boiled hot oatmeal, frying eggs and hash browns while pouring tall glasses of raw milk, for breakfast. The kids complained; they liked their mama's cooking. Veldon wrinkled his nose, but then he would smile and pat me on my fanny saying that I'd get better at it. He ate his charred toast in glum silence.

The laundry was huge. There was always piles of it: a pile to fold, one to be ironed, another to mend then wash, and a pile to wash then put away until a younger child grew into it. Three and a half hours to vacuum upstairs and

down; Carmella insisted that vacuuming be done every day. By nightfall I was ready to drop.

Veldon'd come home and prop his feet up in front of the t.v. and say, "Baby Honey, come over here and sit on my lap. You look so tired." He'd stroke my hair and tickle me gently under the arms like my daddy always done. 'Cept it felt different now where I could feel the prickles from clear 'cross the room where Carmella sat, her knitting needles clacking together under her reading lamp.

Sometimes I'd ask Veldon if we could go into town to a movie or something. "Hell, child, if you've got enough energy for that, run in and stir me up some powder biscuits." I got mad that he was old and too tired for making fun. He made me feel old. You know, I never in my life had a date.

One day, Veldon dropped me off in front of Dr. Boston's office. Dr. Boston was Carmella's baby doctor, the back-up in case the midwife couldn't turn the breach or something. Veldon said I needed the doc to check me 'cause I was still having my displeasure days every month regularly. The doctor poked and prodded and said I was in good health for a teenager.

"You're the nervous sort. Tell your man to calm down; there's plenty of time for you to conceive and bear a brood of children."

I skipped out of Boston's office light as a seven year old; I had enough to do already.

III

In May we added two new members to the family. Rupert Alvin was a eight pound twelve ounce monster with inch long red hair sticking straight out from his head. Jessie Lukas was fourteen.

Carmella, squatting over two dozen yards of unbleached muslin, delivered the child into the patient arms of Amanda Farmer, her midwife, and fell back against the pillows cursing that she'd never get up out of bed again. She was telling the truth. Child number eight was a success, and he set up a squalling that lasted nineteen hours a day, seven days a week.

Jessie Lukas was Veldon's nephew from his brother Edward. I guess Jessie Lukas was causing a stir at home because he didn't believe in the principle. He'd registered the searing pain in his mother's face when wives two and three had been brought into the house. I guess it was extra hard on him because he was already near grown up when they came. And besides, they'd had no warning; Edward announced to his wife and child that a wedding was taking place. Wives Two and Three shared the ceremony then both moved in later that same day. Jessie Lukas needed the strong hand of someone not his father to teach him the principle and keep him in line. Veldon was only too happy to help his brother out. So we pulled a cot into one side of the nursery and the two boys shared the room next to mine.

We already had a Lucas we called Luke; now we had Luke and Jessie Luke. The new brother became a part of our daily routine. A cot in a corner

and an extra chair at the dinner table wasn't hard to manage. But his sneering attitude was. He hated Veldon. His uncle had him help in the shop every day figuring that if he needed more schooling, it could wait until his attitude had cleared. Besides, an extra pair of strong hands would be useful slinging two by fours and sheets of plywood.

Our new boarder was taller than me. His sandy hair, skinned around the ears by Veldon, was long enough on top that Jessie L. flung it back from his eyes in a nervous motion. He did this three times before he could finish a sentence. Under his cot, in addition to the neat stacks of three pairs of levis, six plaid work shirts, leather high-top boots, and a pair of low cut black Sabbath shoes (like postal carriers wear), he kept a heap of books borrowed from the county library. He read adventures like Ivanhoe and Hardy Boys mystery stories by flashlight under his covers. I know because when I'd come in to check how the baby was sleeping, the light would snap off and I'd hear his breathing quick and shallow. He still sat in his cross-legged position, the sheet up over his head.

"What'r ya reading, Jessie Lukas? I know you're awake in there," I whispered to him.

The lump under the covers was rigid for a few seconds. Then I detected a familiar flip of his head. Even with his hair plastered down by fabric, he couldn't restrain his nervous tick.

"Nothin'," he murmured. Another head jerk.

"Yes ya are." Then I waited.

"Yea. All right, but. . ." His head cocked to the right for the third time. ". . . I'm just getting to the good part." He brought Man With the Golden Gun out from under the covers.

Jessie Luke read me a bit. He was right; it was pretty exciting. His neck swayed back and forth as he read the words. I sat beside him on the bed and held the flashlight steady.

IV

I got tired of trying four drawers before I could find the hand can opener in the bank of walnut cabinets in Carmella's kitchen. The butcher knives were near the stove instead of the cutting board like in my mama's kitchen. One day I got the urge to clean and reorganize. I took pleasure in thinking about what utensils ought to go in which drawer and in what cupboard I ought to put the drinking glasses.

Carmella heard the clatter of pot lids. "Baby, what's that you're doing?" she called to me from upstairs. "Baby, I hear something. What's happening down there?" I swept the bottom shelf of frying pans onto the floor in front of me and stood up. She would be so proud of the way I was helping her.

"I'm fixing up the kitchen, ma'am," I told her.

One eyebrow arched up while the other squinched down. Her mouth was drawn into a tight sneer. She didn't like it.

I tried to explain myself. "I just thought that as long as I was doing the bulk of the cooking and such. . . " I bit my lower lip. ". . . I'd get the kitchen set up convenient."

I was right. She didn't like it at all. After the thorough cussing I got, she made me swear, hereafter and for all time, to leave her kitchen just the way I had found it, not one spoon out of the order she had planned. I went back downstairs to Carmella's kitchen.

I sneaked in to Veldon's den and called mama on the telephone to tell her how cruel Carmella was behaving.

"Don't come crying to me, Evvie," my mama said. 'You know as well as I do that living in the order takes sacrificing to our own stubborn wills. Sister Carmella will do right by you if you show the proper respect."

I hung up. If any changing had to be done, it'd be me that had to do it. That was only right, I suppose, she being the first wife. To do anything but get along with her was to risk being cast out, called a common whore.

"Veldon, build me a house of my own," I whined to my husband. "It don't have to be big, a tiny little thing even on the corner of the property over there."

"Don't be foolish, girl," was his reply. 'We're a family. We don't go breaking up a family."

I told Jessie Lukas about my mistake. His eyes steamed up with anger.

"I'm leaving the order, Evvie. I can't take it no more. The principle takes all the goodness out of people."

I was beginning to believe him. Tears welled in his eyes and rolled slowly down his white cheeks. The pain of the principle wasn't all held by polygamist wives. We children of the order shared a knowledge that was too personal to speak of out loud. I wiped across his cheek, smoothing away the salt water with my knuckles. He caught me suddenly with his long arms. My nose nestled against his neck. He smelled of Ivory soap and garden peas. He was stronger than I thought; I wondered if I could push him hard enough to get away if I needed to. But I knew better; he'd spring back in alarm if I squirmed one tiny bit. Jessie Lukas was a strange boy.

V

Veldon put us working together. I'd bring my broom and dustpan to the shop and sweep the sawdust and wood shavings into Hefty bags. Jessie Lukas was to move the big pieces of wood out of my way. I'd grab the other end of a two by eight, and we'd pile it at the clean end of the room. We'd sing kiddie tunes like This Old Man, I've Been Working on the Railroad, or Davy Crockett at the top of our lungs to make the job go faster. Jessie Lukas could make any job fun.

Every piece of wood or stray screw had to be sorted into one pile or another; even the smallest blocks were tossed into a bin and used later.

Veldon insisted that nothing go to waste. He said that's what made him a good businessman.

I told him he made money because he had free labor.

"Nothing's free," he growled and slapped me on the mouth.

Jessie Lukas got skinnier and skinnier. He often went to his room without supper so he could avoid Veldon's critical eye; actually, it was his critical mouth that Jessie L. couldn't take. Veldon believed that a mealtime was the perfect occasion for pointing out his annoyances and discussing a person's shortcomings. It was also time to teach about the principle. Jessie'd get up silently, flip his blonde hair from his eyes, and go to his books.

"You'll be getting that mop of hair cut off tomorrow, boy," Veldon called after him. The uncle was getting furious; his anger spread like rash across his face and neck. "I don't know what's got into that boy," he'd tell the rest of us.

When I brought the empty tray down from Carmella's bedroom, I snuck a wheat roll or a piece of chicken into Jessie Lukas. He told me I shouldn't be doing it 'cause I might get in trouble with Veldon, but at the same time, I could hear the gratitude in his voice. He was downright hungry from working all day.

I sat down on his cot, balancing Carmella's tray on my lap, and listened to Jessie Lukas read or watched him draw pictures with a soft-lead pencil. He drew beasts with scales and gigantic tusks. They had horny armor and poisonous fangs. He could draw them raging on their hind feet, pawing at the air with their powerful forearms. They were beautiful and frightening.

"You should be an artist, Jessie Lukas,' I told him. "You have a gift for detail; you could go to art school."

He said he didn't care about studying art. "I just want to get out of here.'

There was that running away thing again. No use even talking about it. The elders would find him. Even if he hitchhiked to another state, where'd a person stay? If he called to keep his mama from worrying, she'd have to turn him in, and they'd come for him. Every soul was needed to build up the kingdom. They'd spear him for sure.

VI

Rupert Alvin got the croup. Carmella was too weak in bed to spell me off to care for him, so I had to check on him dozens of times a night. It made a good night's sleep impossible. For five days I had slid out from under Veldon's heavy arm to go listen to the baby's breathing. The child would half wake up, sputter and wheeze, whimper some, and I'd rub his back gently until he drifted off to sleep again. Poor little thing. On Thursday the baby was worse than the night before. I crept across the cold floor to the crib; even my long flannel nightgown couldn't lessen my shivering. At every baby breath I worried that he might not take another. Should I go upstairs to get Veldon upstairs to come and pray for the babe? I couldn't force myself to enter their room. Instead I rubbed more Vicks on his baby chest, covered him with one more pieced quilt,

and sat cribside in the wooden rocker, tucking my feet up underneath my flannel.

Jessie Lukas was breathing soft and steady. I rested my head and forearms on my knees. It felt comfortable to be so near. I must have dozed off 'cause I was startled awake by a shadow standing near me.

"Sorry, Evvie," he said. It was Jessie Lukas. "I thought you was cold." He was putting a blanket around my shoulders. Tears ran down my face from the drawn out fear for the child and too little sleep; I was clear exhausted.

Jessie Lukas felt underneath me and drew out my foot, cradling and stroking it between his large, warm hands. His palms were smooth like suede deer hide, not at all like Veldon's. He warmed my other foot. I was still sobbing a little. Even in the semi-darkness, I sensed his intensity. Jerking me suddenly out of the rocker, he pulled me to my feet, grazing my ear against the row of buttons on his long-johns on the way up. He clasped his arms around me tight, kissing with noisy little smacks my hair, temple, my cheek. My own arms were pinned tightly against my side. He touched his lips to the bridge of my nose, my upper lip.

"I love you, Evvie," he whispered. "You're mine. I know you're mine."

I stood there taking the kissing and wondering if I was surprised at him. I wondered if I loved him back, if I could ever love him back.

"Come with me, Evvie. Let's get out of here tonight."

I might have murmured something. I can't remember what. My ear was still smarting. At that moment I knew he was really going; it wasn't just talk. He was leaving town, leaving the order. In that minute I was sure he was going to make it. They wouldn't catch him; they wouldn't drag him back to this life. It came to me suddenly that I loved Jessie Lukas. He was fresh with promise. He'd find a way to wriggle away from the elders. I raised my arms to embrace his back and shoulders, the blanket falling to the floor in a heap. I kissed that soft curve of his neck like Veldon had done to me.

"We're going. Oh, Evvie, now I know we're going."

We stood there together, kissing, touching, each making silent plans. At that moment, the door swung open, and there backlit from the blaring hall light, stood the powerful silhouette of Veldon Blackburn, husband and uncle.

"Gracious Lord Almighty! What's going on here?"

I scrambled for the blanket, Jessie Lukas stooping at the same time. We bumped heads with a crack hard enough to send me back into the rocking chair, Jessie Lukas back onto his cot which, with the sudden weight, collapsed to the floor, leaving his arms and legs flailing like he'd been harpooned against it.

"I shoulda known you'd be nothing but trouble," Veldon bellowed at Jessie Lukas but included me in his charge.

Rupert Alvin woke with the crash and was screaming his frightened lungs out. Carmella called in her high voice from her bed upstairs, "What's

happening down there? Vel, are you alright?" At the same time, we heard the scampering footsteps of children dropping from top bunks, moving toward their bedroom doors.

"Stay where you are!" Veldon shouted. "Everyone just stay where you are!"

We all froze.

The shadow moved toward me. "Foolish child," Veldon roared and caught me squarely on the jaw with the back of his hand. "Get to your room."

Jessie Lukas was on him in a flash, his legs folded against Veldon's paunch, his forearms locked in a choke-hold around Veldon's neck. I snatched the shrieking baby from his crib and moved past the two men joined in combat. Veldon was clawing at the strong arms of Jessie Lukas, trying to loosen their hold. I slammed my bedroom door against the sound of their struggle, sinking to the floor in a sobbing heap.

All too soon I realized that the only sounds I heard were my own. Rupert had quieted some time ago. I listened for a shuffle in the room next door. Could they have gone outside? One or both passed out? Or dead? I strained my ear against the hollow door.

It was still dark when I woke up to find that I'd been sleeping, Rupert Alvin laying peacefully in my arms. I tiptoed cribside and placed the child in his own bed. The house was quiet.

In the kitchen Veldon sat slumped over the table, his head in his hands, his fingers plowing again and again through his sparse hair.

"Where is he?" I demanded, quiet yet firm.

Veldon didn't look up. He didn't move. He didn't answer.

"I asked you where he was." Veldon looked at me with real pain in his eyes. "Gone," he said. "I'll wait till seven then call the elders to get up a search team."

Here it was. The answer to dissent among followers was circling the wagons, keeping secrets, the order closed, knowledge dark. I stood at the kitchen sink, my back to the old man. There was a weary confidence in his voice. He was sure that Jessie Lukas would be found, brought back to us. My hands fingered absently the utensils laying in the drawer in front of me.

Veldon droned on. "Of course, it's not up to me to forgive your trespass against me. The elders will sit in your judgment. As for me, I could forgive you in time, I suppose, 'cause of your age and inexperience."

Cold, angry passion filled his eyes.

"Your daddy never told me about your willful spirit, himself being so anxious for me to pay off his escrow debt so I could have you. . . but the council, not me, will choose your punishment."

"And what about Jessie Luke?"

"For the boy, well, he's got to be taught the principle. Even a rogue mustang can be broke if you keep him hungry. I was wrong to give the boy too much rein. Timing's everything. You have to know when to pull on the bridle, when to reel in the line."

I could see the elders reeling in Jessie Lukas, breaking his spirit, mashing his pride. He needed a chance to grow.

"No you won't," I told my husband. "You can't buy Jessie Lukas like you bought me. . . No, no, no. . ."

I repeated the words again and again. And before I had realized what I had been holding, I'd plunged my fists against Veldon's back maybe a half dozen times. The man gasped for air, and my hands became wet-warm, stained with his red.

The knife clattered to the floor as I backed away from him, wiping my hands down the front of my nightgown. That's all I remember.

VIII

My story spills out sometimes hot like a volcano, yet at other times with the cold power of a mountain waterfall. You can judge for yourself. If you say I'm crazy, I'll live with that. If you say justifiable, that'll be okay too. Either way I'll deal with it; I'm used to adapting to things.

How can a person explain something she doesn't even understand herself? Maybe it is foolish to try to make sense of it all. Then again, maybe it isn't so hard to grasp. Trout come to the surface when they're hungry, when the day is almost through, when they've seen just enough of life to believe that the world is a wonderful, restful place. It's easier to net the young ones, before they've seen their mamas, their brothers and sisters, become someone's fish dinner. The smart fisherman knows all this; he dangles his hook at the time of day when his catch is feverish for a meal, when the critter is likely to make a mistake. Before one knows it, he's caught up in a net of social rules that he forgets to question. Then it's too late to turn back into the deep safety of the lake. Maybe Jessie Lukas can keep out of the shallow waters. I hope so.

The Seventh Floor is Heaven and the Holy Throne

The world was dark and quiet when God-almighty Jackson suddenly sat up in bed. "I've-a-seen His face," he shouted to his wife.

Actually, that's not his name--God-almighty--his name is Rulon David, but folks round here call him "God-almighty" cuz he's always calling on the Father, hollering to the heavens more than any human has a right to. If every one of God's children was asking for blessings with Jackson's loud acclaim, fussing up such a noise, God'd have one terrific headache. As it was, many believed him; ever'body else just let him rave. Besides, he wasn't hurtin' nobody.

Anyway, as folks tell it, he woke up one night, shouting that he seen God's finger, not the one 't was shown to Moses in the movie, but the long one, standing up straight and tall, the one Mr. Pintrab, our fifth-grade teacher, would use when pointing out division problems on the blackboard. So Rulon took the finger as a celestial sign. In the dream, God moved, one by one, down a line of people shaped from mud balls. They was all kneeling with their heads bowed; most of them Rulon recognized from town. God's finger touched each person on the forehead as He passed, denting the skin into a little black circle. When it came Rulon's turn, he didn't get the smudge, so he looked up. He saw God's face, the way he tells it, lit up and powdery, with

shiny locks of hair covering each ear and a flowing cinnamon beard, much like Rulon's own. God had a wide, coiled choker made of fourteen carat gold around his neck. He was smiling down at the way Rulon was getting along in life, and the whole scene made the hairs back of Rulon's neck stand out proud and prickly.

So he woke up yelling that he'd actually seen the good Lord's holy countenance. The wife didn't say nothing. Or maybe she said, "That's nice, dear" like she used to say to ever'body. If you said, "Hi there, Judith. How are ya today?" she'd say, "Nice. Very nice." "Judith," you could tell her, "did ya hear they're pulling out the culvert down the wash road? You'll have to drive five miles round." "How nice," she'd answer, squinting to focus and refocus her eyes on the red bricks back of the court house steps. Hell, you know, if you told her Judd's barn burnt down last night, she'd probably still answer, "It's so nice." Her mind was gone off somewhere.

Rulon said his vision altered his life forever, and though I personally couldn't see much differ'nce in him, I surely saw how it changed things for Judith and the kids. He'd said for years that God had some mighty plan for him. Last year he was supposed to lead the people in a holy strike for righteousness. He planned for townsfolks to leave their jobs and worldly concerns and march from the chapel he built in his basement down to Day's End, the only tavern we got around here, where there was supposed to be preaching, ridding of old Lucifer, and laying on of hands. At Day's End one

could receive the true call of God-almighty hisself, that is, I mean Rulon, and come with a meek, repentant spirit to the holy communion of our blessed Lord. But when he scheduled the meet for the first Monday of the month, there was one thing that Rulon forgot (he didn't have one practical piece of flesh on him anywhere); he forgot the reeling pull of the working man's thin wallet. And though they was true believers, nobody could actually show up. Rag Danford needed to drive over to Goshen City on Monday to collect his workman's disability. Johnny Bent had to get a full ten hours in at the mill 'cause he was counting on his overtime. Ruth Connor was waiting for the mailman with her Social Security. Booger Hudson had cows to milk. The whole Fisher crew woulda been there, but the twins had the flu, and on Mondays, clinic visits are free. It wasn't nobody's fault. Maybe Rulon should've held his do on a Saturday, but I guess that would've ruined the whole walkout idea of the thing.

Anyway the dream changed the way folks all 'round Goshen County looked at Rulon; it gave him a kind of emperor status. People'd hobble across the street right away if they seen Rulon pull into Rob's Gas and Go. They'd hang around trying to get him into some conversation, knowing that if they approached him clever enough, he'd jump up into the back of his pickup and start preachin'. When Rulon got all wound up, his eyes would get round and runny, and the veins'd pop out on his neck just like that old bull, Black Balzy, would do whenever I tried threading a rope through his nose ring. Rulon hissed, spit and kicked the tailgate, cussing that other religions didn't know a

God-damned thing about worshipping the Lord Almighty; they didn't even get the creation week right, cuz anyone with the holy spirit knew that Saturday was the day the Lord rested, the true Sabbath. Then toward the weekend there'd be a writeup in the Goshen County Times and ever'body could get the jist of the speech again.

"Come on over to the Chapel of Holy Martyrs," he'd tell the crowd. He meant his place. "We'll raise our voices in sacred strain to the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, the God of us all, from Tommy Beene here--put your flipper in your pocket, son--unto one the greatest among us--and I say this modestly, friends-- 'cuz you know he happens to be my brother-in-law, our own mayor, Brother Quentin Sayfield."

And ever'body started nodding, murmuring in agreement, clapping Mayor on the back. "That's so. That's so," they'd tell each other. "A fine man. One of the best."

"Let me draw you a picture of another fine man, King David. . ." Rulon went on to say. Then he started preaching the holy writ as it'd come to him while he was reading his Bible down by Johnson's Holler, or the moment he was touched with divine inspiration while driving a herd of sheep to summer pasture up in Abe's Valley. "It can hit you anywhere, the voice of the Lord can," he told the assembly. "So be on the look-e-out."

Rulon always drew a crowd. I'd have to say that for him. He could really pack 'em in.

In August Rulon decided not to send his children back to school after summer vacation. Mrs. Ellsworth reported the matter to the superintendent, who sent a formal letter of complaint to Mr. Rulon David Jackson--triple carbon copy to Mayor Quentin G. Sayfield; Cora Ellsworth, head of elementary education; and County Attorney Jim Wright. When Rulon didn't answer, Ellsworth and the superintendent drove out there. Rulon was sittin' in that pine porch swing that he'd made with the boards he dismantled from his old chicken coop. He had his King James Bible spread across his lap, one hand marking the scripture, the other in front of him, that middle finger up searching the afternoon sky for guidance and a pure understanding.

"Howdy, folks!" he told the officials, "You're just in time for my two o'clock meditation service."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jackson," said the superintendent. "We need to discuss a small matter of business with you, Sir."

"Sit yerself down," Rulon told them. "Judith! Some refreshments for our guests!" The only reply was the immediate clinking of lemonade glasses being reached down from an upper shelf. "Now, what can I do for ya?"

"It's your wee ones, Rulon," said Mrs. Ellsworth, settling her large fanny down against the wooden chair slats. She had known Rulon all his life, taught him K through 6th until he had to ride the bus to the Goshen County Junior High School. If anyone knew how to scare the foolishness out of a youngster,

she did. "They've missed seven and a half weeks. They have to come to school."

"They don't have to do anything you say," said Rulon with a breezy smile.

"Mr. Jackson, with all due respect. . ." the superintendent began, "it is mandated that all children be sent to public school until the age of fifteen."

"Prophets don't follow the laws of man."

"But, Sir. . ."

"Schools is wicked. Youngsters learn all about evilness. The boys is just trying to get in the girls' underdrawers, and they're learning 'em laziness and evolution. Schools have no holiness about 'em. They learn kids frivolous things--dancing and pi'ture drawing."

"But, Rulon," said Cora Ellsworth, "third grade is so. . ."

"Judith! That punch ready?"

"Mr. Jackson. . . er eh, Rulon, I wonder if you have considered the possibility that . . ."

"Let me tell you people. I want my boys home; they want to stay home. And Judith, as the wife of a holy man, would just as soon teach 'em here."

"We need to discuss this matter in a rational way, Mr. Jackson. You must see our point . . ."

"Now, if you'd like to discuss the gospel of Matthew, I'd be right happy to. . ."

"Rulon, dear, give the man your attention."

"Get off my porch, both of ya," said the prophet.

The car motor roared, then lurched into gear. "You'll be hearing from us," shouted the school official.

A cloud of dust spewed from the car's rear end, sending an avalanche of gray powder upon the head and shoulders of Judith Jackson, who was standing, jaw ahanging, holding a tray with four glasses of fresh-squeezed lemonade.

One Sunday, Rulon Jackson strode into the Community Methodist Church.

"I'm here to expose your fornicatin' ways," he told the crowd. He pointed his long middle finger at Roger Beene. The divining finger was at least an inch longer than the others, and crooked at the end where he had broke it that time, mashing it in the U-pin of his old man's grain auger. "I saw your car last night parked in front of Miss Farley's place. And it was still there at five o'clock this morning."

Roger's face went through all the shades of scarlet that a face can muster, and he stared at the floor. Rev'rend Jack started up again, trying not to notice the disturbance. Ol' Roger tried to concentrate on the sermon, but Rulon wasn't about to let the matter slide.

"Roger Beene, I'm talking at you. We're all waiting for an answer. Well, what is it, boy?"

Two of the larger members of the congregation each grabbed for one of Rulon's frantic arms. Instead of wheeling him about like they had planned, he ended up out-maneuvering them. Both men were left ridiculous, grasping and clutching at thin air.

"And you, Pricilla. Shame. Shame on you, girl." Rulon had everone's attention, even if they all acted smooth and casual like they weren't within hearin' distance. Nobody likes an eavesdropper.

"And if he ain't at yer place, he's over at Patti Jean's when she gets home from workin' at the United States Postal Office."

Pricilla shot a look at Roger.

Rulon spun around to another face among the pews and was just ready to raise his preachin' finger when the boys did get ahold of him and started backing him out of the meetin' hall.

"Come on over to the Chapel of Holy Martyrs, if yer tired of rubbin' shoulders with fornicators and hoodlums," Rulon shouted as the double doors closed behind him.

Now, I don't know if they's the guilty ones or what, but I have to tell ya, he added two dozen to his congregation from his outburst that day--so many that he had to borrow fifteen folding chairs from the Ladies Legion Auxiliary.

But it wasn't just Rulon's powerful speechifying that called people to join him. You see, Rulon had this notion that life is like riding an elevator in a big city department store. You come in on the first floor, called "Infancy," where

you move from the waters of your mama's womb to becomin' a air breathing mammal. The next floor is "Accountability" where you have the prophet take away your sins and dip you in the holy waters of baptism. Then you move up to gettin' you a wife and raising up youngsters, consecratin' them to the betterment of the kingdom. By the fifth floor, if you're ready to move on up, you hear the spiritual call from the good Lord. And the sixth is teaching all God's children about what you learned on the floors below. (That's the floor Rulon was now visitin'.) The longest time is spent here, if you come up correctly, and you go right on teaching and preaching until you croak. That's when you pass right on up to the top floor which is getting into heaven and sitting at the golden throne of God Almighty, now I don't mean Rulon, and sing praises all day with the other shoppers. Rulon says if you don't keep the promises on each floor of your spiritual station, you'll end up tumblin' down into the bargain basement where (and Rulon jabs you in the ribs a bit) there ain't no bargains. Now I admit that I don't understand his plan on the whole, but I'm fascinated by the absence of man's sin. Hell yes, human beings is full of meanness and jealousy, but they basically is good and leave you alone for the most part. And though I ain't a religious man myself, I once dropped by his place just to see what all the fuss was about.

Rulon had a heifer that'd jumped the low place in the fence and was in my field of new alfalfa. I was afraid she'd get the bloat if we didn't get her out of there, so I wandered over to Rulon's to get his rope. It was the Saturday

Sabbath, and a whole crowd of cars was out front. The preachin' had started and I could hear Rulon warming them up with his loudest hellfire routine. Judith was in the kitchen mixing up the Hawaiian punch and settin' out the cookies. I figured the best place for me was the front porch where I could hear ever'thing, and still have the fresh barnyard air float past my nostrils. I set down and propped my Red Wing workin' boots on the porch railing.

The screen door snapped, and Judith stood there wipin' her face with the corner of her yellow checkered apron.

"Well, Judith, how are ya? Service over?" I asked her.

She jumped back, surprised. "Oh! It's you. I'm nice, quite nice, thanks." If someone'd give her a thing of lipstick and then cut the rubber band she kept in her hair, she'd look pretty damn alright. "Go on in, Seth, if ya wanta."

"I just come about yer heifer."

"He'll be done after a time so's he can help you."

"Sit down, Judith. You look tired."

Judith Jackson sat down with a force that I wouldn'ta thought she had. She grinned a crooked little smile and propped her feet alongside mine. The meadowlarks were singing, "Fairfield's a pretty-little-place." And with the slight breeze across our arms and the sunshine brightening up the bottom of Judith's print dress, I knew they was right. There wasn't any flies lightin' on us anywhere. And I could hear the faint tumble of the rocks in Peterson Creek.

"I'm a-leaving him, Seth," she said at last.

I jerked upright, pulling my feet off the railing so fast that I got caught up on a loose nail and tore a big old hole in my sock.

"I ain't staying here."

I was struck dumb. She hadn't never talked to me like this before.

"You sure, Judith? I mean, do you mean it?"

"Takin' the Friday five-thirty Union Pacific to San Francisco."

"I can't believe it," I said, not believing it.

"Well, I've a-stood it as long as I can. I'm not about to bake another batch of Sabbath cookies or mix another pitcher of Sabbath punch."

"Just so long as you're sure," I told her. And I wondered how the prophet was going to take the news. "Have you told him, Judith?"

"I ain't a-telling him. He'll come in from his milkin' and I won't be here. That's all. I just won't be here."

It might not be that bad, actually. I was taking it all pretty calm, and Rulon, well you never know, he was pretty matter-of-fact about most things. But how was it going to look to his people, a prophet whose wife leaves him? Rulon could never allow that. "And the boys?"

"He needs 'em here."

"Maybe you ought to wait a little while, Judith, until. . ."

"I'm a-leaving, I told ya."

Well, I ain't a person to be telling what somebody should or shouldn't be doing with her marriage. But I knew Fairfield, and I was sure it was gonna be

pretty hard for a man to keep a congregation where ever'body knew he couldn't keep a wife.

"Wanna ride to the station on Friday?" I said to her at last.

"No, thanks." And she marched inside.

Pretty soon the meeting broke up. Most folks either declined the social hour, or grabbed a handful of chocolate chip cookies and a Dixie cup of red juice as they rushed out the door. It being Saturday, there wasn't time for socializing, with the chores waiting and all. Judith and I made up the fare-thee-well committee; I heard Rulon downstairs folding chairs so's in case he needed his band saw or leather punch he could get to 'em.

Judith was clearing the leftovers when the boys ran past and out the door with cookies and the egg bucket. Good boys, those twins. Josh was a mite taller and had one tweaked ear. Or was it Jake with the funny ear and Joshua with the brown mole on his cheek?

"Damned good service," Rulon told his wife as he came up the steps.

"That's nice," said his helpmeet.

Rulon smacked his lips against her cheek. "Boys go to the coop? I told 'em they could go fishing after."

"Seth's outside," she told him. "Heifer's in his hay."

"Seth! You connivering old bull! Missed you at meeting, brother." And he swung the screen door with arms wide to greet me.

"Get yer rope," I told him. "God-almighty, she'll be sicker'n a coon in a melon patch."

"I'm a-coming, friend," he shouted, slapping me on the back as we walked toward the barn.

Friday the big departure didn't come off. One of the twins come up missing. I was at the savings and loan, and in none too good a mood neither, since I had to be paying another bit I borrowed for that lower south-forty. Jack Helper come up to me with a handshake and a cuff on the neck.

"Hell, it's good to see ya, Seth. Say, did ya hear about God-almighty's boy? He's missing since sun-up."

"Which one is it?"

"The boy, you know, with the bad ear. That Joshua or Jacob? I ain't sure myself."

I told Jack I better check it out and hauled ass over to the Jackson place. The volunteer sheriff's posse was there, neighbors, kinfolk, the mayor hisself, and some friends of the boys. Judith was in a state--sitting on the porch, rocking, bobbing her legs in a flurry up and down. She folded her arms across her chest, dropped her fists into her lap, folded those arms, then dropped them again. I picked up one hand and cradled it 'tween my own. She'd 'bout rubbed the skin clear raw.

"Any news, Judith?"

She looked at me, then to the other searchers; a shudder of grief run through her spine. Rachel Beacon come from the kitchen, holding out a glass of lemonade. Judith shook her head slowly. "They's always together, those two."

"That's so. I never seen 'em apart," said someone behind me.

Judith took a deep breath, knowing she'd be telling the story again and again. "They went overnight hiking five miles down the Peterson, you know, where the water goes underground into those rocks. . . . When Josh woke up this mornin' Jake was nowhere to be seen."

"Where'd he go off to?" wondered someone in the crowd.

"If we knew that, he'd be back by now, Howard," I snapped at the fool.

"Ever'body's tense, Howard. Don't mind him," said Judith, smoothing over rough nerves. "The posse's been out since seven. Rulon's downstairs praying with his church council; then they're goin' out again."

Joshua, his eyes red and weary from too many tears and questions, moved over to his mama and sat, his head against her knee. "I told him I wanted to explore some of those old mine shafts down by Raven's Knoll, but he wouldn't go. He's a-scared of dark, wet, cramped places."

The crowd was getting impatient for answers.

"You didn't hear nothing in the night, did ya?"

"No bear down this low, are there, Ben?"

"You ain't pulling our leg, are ya boy? You'd better not be pulling our leg."

"Did you two have a quarrel, dear?" asked Mrs. Ellsworth, who had left her students in the capable and mature hands of Ellie Johns, and rushed right over.

Ever'body had about a thousand questions, and no one could supply any answers.

God-almighty Jackson swung open the door, and led by his governing council, moved toward the assembled jeeps and pickups.

"The map! Get the map!" one of them yelled.

Booger Hudson spread the green topo map on the hood of his Toyota four by four Cruiser. The finger that Rulon shared with God was poised in readiness. It was pointin' up catching all the saintly rays until the exact moment it was to be put to the test. Ever'body held their breath in anticipation.

"Stand back. Give him room," someone shouted.

"God says our poor lost child is . . ."

Judith stopped her jigglin' and leaned forward, her hands covering her face.

". . . in a wet place."

Ohhhs and ahhhs rippled through the men and women.

"Our strayed lamb will be found. . ."

The womenfolk squeezed forward, their arms pressed tightly against their bosoms.

". . . I sense boulders and a stand of Juniper. . . ."

"If he don't hurry, it'll be nightfall," Howard whispered to me.

"Quiet, you," Mrs. Ellsworth commanded.

"Jacob is well and happy and waiting for us . . . THERE!" The finger dropped with a mighty thud on the metal hood. All crowded around to see where it landed. Cutter's Cliffs. A string of murmurs went round the group.

"Hell, that's a good seven miles from their campsite."

"I know of some old boarded up mine shafts up there!"

"Impossible to find him, if he's gone up in those parts."

"Say, Josh, you're supposed to be the adventurous one. He wouldn't go lookin' for trouble, would he?"

Rulon jammed his fists together and said something about putting on the whole armor of God and gettin' right out to look for his child. "Besides," he told the men assembled, "it'll soon be dark."

I stayed with Judith to fend off the hennish hands and misplaced advice of the town womenfolk. They kept offering potato salad, red jello, and chocolate layer cake (the ladies had been a-fixing stuff since they heard the news), and though the group formed a hefty chow line, Judith didn't eat a thing. "Don't worry," they told her forty-four times an hour. "Brother Jackson has God's help now. He knows where Jacob is." I was wondering where God

was when the whole thing started up. But I didn't have no right messing in other people's beliefs, so I kept myself quiet.

"It's my fault," said Judith under her breath. "I shouldn't have let them sleep out."

"Nonsense, dear," said Mrs. Ellsworth between forkfuls of Mamie Harper's chocolate supreme cake, the secret recipe for which won her a purple sweepstakes ribbon at the state fair. "These things just happen. If anyone can find the boy, your husband can."

I got a sudden urge to take a pee, so I walked around the house to the barn. You couldn't see this side door from the house, so it was a safe spot. The gray wooden boards were wet from their spring linseed oiling. There was a wide swath of wheat growing, the fruits of some careless seed thrown there. It was knee-high now, tall enough to hide the still usable plow disks and other machine parts kept as emergency replacements. Just as I was puttin' away my business, I saw that the door was left ajar. I 'magined I heard rustling or sniffling, so I walked inside to check it out. Behind a low wall of hay bales peeped a little blonde head. He was bawling full-fledged at seeing me. I walked over and sat on last summer's hay, which still smelled sweet and leafy.

"I didn't mean nothing," he said. "I was a-scared-a-the dark."

He hung his head in shame. No cheek mole. It was Jacob alright. I could see the tweaked ear right plain. I moved to call the women from the house, but stopped myself.

"Where've you been, boy?" I asked the child, trying to cover my anger with my best whatever-you-done-kid-I-understand-and-will-help-you tone.

"I come home last night. It was dark. There was noises." He was wiping his wet nose on the sleeve of his plaid shirt, which, under the circumstances, I was sure his mother wouldn't mind. Slurp! The boy sniffed back a whimper. "When I got up this morning, ever'body was standing around, and I knew I was in deep trouble."

"Dry your face, son," I told him. "There just might be a way."

We was on our way to Cutter's Cliffs in a matter of minutes. Nobody noticed me backing my pickup to the side of the barn. I reached across and opened the passenger door. The kid crouched on top of the towing chain and crescent wrenches I kept there on the floor. We could come out of this yet.

It was sundown, but the sky was still light enough that I didn't use headlights. I could see vehicles parked over at the meadow south of the cliff face. We drove around the other way and stopped. I dug a flashlight out from under the seat and another one outta the jockey box. The two of us scrambled up the rocky slope, and I led the boy into the gaping mouth of some miner's dream. These tunnels had been abandoned so long ago, even none of us old men remembered any digging going on.

"Seth, where we going?"

"Don't worry, child, just follow me."

The passageway made switchbacks and forks, and we picked our way through the darkness, stompin' through the puddles left by the tearful walls. Got to remember to get fresh batteries for these lights, I thought. The glow was dimmer than that half-wit Ed trying to cash his paycheck from those circus qypsies.

"I'm a-scared, Seth. Let's go back."

"Shh! listen," I stopped up short. "I thought I heard voices."

Sure 'nough. They was coming close. We turned into another chamber, and I nudged him to the floor and took away his EverReady lantern.

"Yer not gonna leave me, are you, Seth?"

"Count to fifty, slow, then start calling, son."

I held my light to his face. His eyes were tearing again.

"Just stay put. Don't go wanderin' about. Hear?"

"I won't." he whispered. "I'll set right here."

I tussled his yellow hair. I could hear the voices of Ben, Howard and Rulon coming near.

"I feel something, brethren," the prophet was saying. "We're close. Jacob!"

"Our secret, eh sonny? Just our little secret?"

I could still hear the child breathing as I moved off down the passage. He started yelling for his daddy just like I told him. When I drove back round to the south face, ever'body was bright and bushy about the rescue. Booger said

that even though they had some false starts, God-almighty knew all along where to find his son. He seen it with his divine eye. We drove back to town with horns a-blaring.

The writeup in the Times took a full page. "Prophet Water-Witches Own Son" the headline said. It told all about how the seven year old had gone up there on a dare from his brother, and how Rulon used his potent finger to seek out the child. It even mentioned Judith's stone-like virtue. The article made me glad of the timin' cuz Jacob was supposed to take his dip in the forgivin' waters of baptism the next week. Ever'body was caught up in the excitement. Clumps of people stood around in front of the five and dime just waitin' for a chance to hear the story again, proud to be able to throw in a stray detail. Rulon moved from emperor of Fairfield to king of his realm, and Judith shared his throne. There's even talk of framing in a new Chapel of Holy Martyrs on the corner of God-almighty's property. I can't see no reason why they shouldn't. Hells bells, every place needs a town hero, and having a prophet is better'n most got.

Pure Foolishness

At the ching-ching of the bell cable, Shorty Chapin stood up, rubbed his greasy hands down the front of his levis, and walked toward the pumps.

"Cun I help you?" he said to the man behind the wheel. The man was mopping his forehead with a soiled handkerchief--no, not a handkerchief, more like a square torn from an old white shirt.

"Whew!" the man said, "It's hot." And throwing his shoulder against the pickup door, he swung out. Climbing after him were two little girls, maybe five or six years old. Impossible to tell the ages of kids. His woman sat motionless in the truck, eyes closed, head leaning back, her mouth open slightly as if to let the gray shade from the station awning slide down her throat.

Shorty had noticed the open windows and shook his head. No air conditioning. Nearly August and people expecting to travel this country without air. Pure foolishness.

"You be needing gas?" Shorty asked the man.

"Maybe a little. I can get it, though. Just want to stretch a bit and catch a little air. Sure is hot."

"Always is, this time of year." Shorty looked at the traveler, sure that the man'd faced his share of disappointments. He wore a fake citified smile, a plastic grin that'd been sitting on his mug so long it had hardened there.

Shorty's pa would've called him a "city puke" lookin' for a rattler to step on. A born loser.

Shorty replaced the gas nozzle. "So. . . Where you from?"

"Hundred and fifty miles north. Murivale."

Two more kids, a boy and a girl, emerged from the back of a horse trailer. The boy must have been nearing his teen years, those gawky awkward years when nothing about a kid matches; his clothes, his stride, his voice all appear to be tailor-made for some other body.

"Picnicking today," the man continued. "Yes siree, I've been down this highway thousands of times . . . worked seventeen years making deliveries for Swen's Candy Company."

"That right?" Shorty asked, watching the kids move toward the ice cream bin and lean against the cool enamel surface.

"Yea, just wanted to show the kids and the missus here my old route. Going to take one of these side roads wandering through the mesquite and cactuses. I've passed 'em lots of times. . . . Never had a chance to follow one. . . always wanted to. Yep, we're just going to take one, stop and eat, follow it back around to the highway, and then home again."

Shorty heard a low whinny from the trailer.

"Oh, and do a little riding. Brought Ole Jessie. . . not much to look at any more, but she could use a little exercise."

Shorty looked at the dilapidated rig and shook his head. "You got enough water?" he asked the man. "There's a hose around the side there. . ." pointing the direction with his forehead, "and an old half-barrel. Fill it up for the mare."

"Much obliged," the man said, moving off toward the back of the station.

Shorty leaned his head through the open door slightly. "You're welcome to come in the station, Ma'am. It's cool inside."

He watched the woman closely. She was a frail thing. Pure foolishness to expose her to the desert on a day like this. Folks from up North had no idea about the desert, what the desert could do. No idea at all.

"There's a wooden chair in there by the desk. Go ahead in and sit for a while; you'll feel better," he urged the woman again.

"How far is it?" she asked, stirring slightly. "How far to a place called Mel's Landing? How far to Jacob's Spring?" The woman slid across the seat and moved with Shorty toward the building.

"I don't know those places, Ma'm."

"Well, he knows." she answered, looking toward the corner of the station where her husband had disappeared. "He's been all through this area. He used to be on the road six nights out of seven, but he's in insurance now." The pale woman leaned confidentially toward the station-owner. "Is it true that the dirt roads take off from the highway and head straight out to the middle of the desert and finally come wandering back to the main road again?"

"Yea, most of them," Shorty reassured her, "They're mostly old cow roads from the ranching days, before the springs dried up."

Shorty pointed to the chair and lifted a white paper cone from the stack, filled it with cool water, and handed it to the traveller's wife. There was something comical about all this. Shorty didn't like it. He wondered if he should go out and ask the guy if he really knew where he was going. But then again, folks called certain places by different names, like the point up near the old lava cone. Some people called it Cutter's Point or Sorghum Hill; the locals knew it as Molly's Nipple; then the State Road came through and made a sign which pointed seven miles to Davis-Bell Ranch Road. It wasn't really confusing because most folks knew where you were talking about, but it was confounding as hell to try to give directions. But one thing Shorty knew for sure. You could get turned around out there. When you spied out the road looking to the north and it turned west for thirty miles, straight into the deep of the desert; when it wandered in all four directions before turning toward the Virgin; when it looked ten miles distance but took forty-five minutes to get there; that was when you lost your sense of direction. It was perplexing; it made you a little crazy. Only the desert itself knew how far it was to any given point, and even for Shorty, who had been trying to figure it out for more than fifty years, the desert gave little help. Oh, he had picked up some tips along the way: watching some hawk float upward on afternoon thermals or the pointing direction of a lizard sunning in the early morning hours. He watched for the slightest sway of a

mesquite branch in the afternoon which he had learned was almost always tow'rd northeast in the spring and easterly, if at all, during the summer. But these signs were pitifully few, and when he got out there they didn't seem half as helpful as when he sat at home and thought about them. No, the desert was as harsh to one man as another, even if you had studied its ways. But if these Northerners wanted to go off exploring in a beat-up outfit in the middle of the summer without any provisions, well, that was their business. Shorty silently took the empty paper cone from the woman and filled it again. "This is nice," she said, eyes closed again but turning slightly so that the draft from the swamp cooler hit her more directly. The dingy ribbons tied to the cooler grill waved horizontally, showing that the fan was on high. The woman had unbuttoned the top several buttons of her shirt and was fanning the wrinkled cotton up and down, exposing an ivory expanse of skin and shoulder blade.

Shorty watched her, aware of the sounds outside--the man backing the mare out of the trailer and the kids splashing each other with water from the metal drum. The woman was thin and pale--pretty in a muted sort of way--the type of woman who had probably traded her father's two-story with a backyard swing for a run-down, sun-soaked trailer squatting on some awkward piece of land outside a tiny town. She had been left alone too much, with four brats and all the chores. Several wisps of hair had escaped the elastic band at the base of her neck and hung limp over her ears and jaw. She could be beautiful if treated right.

"Myra!" the man called. "Get in, kids. Myra, let's go!"

The woman jerked herself to her feet and moved toward the door. She turned toward Shorty, muttered a weak "Thanks," and was soon back at her place in the Chevy.

"Thanks for the water, fella," the man said. "We're off!" The truck trailer rolled over the black hose, ching-ching again, and pulled away from the station.

Shorty stood for a long time watching the rusty back-end move away down the road.

* * * * *

Shorty Chapin slowed his truck to look for sign. "Whoa," he said. Shorty always said "whoa," whether to his bay colt, or to his pickup truck. He even said "whoa" if his wife happened to be driving. It was one of those things you just got used to. He rolled down the window, making the dust collect in a wide band on the outside of the glass, and stuck his head through the opening.

The kid said he had seen something out here, a cow maybe, or a horse. But kids these days, they had no more knowhow than to mistake an animal for another of those three-wheeler motorcycles that race about messing up the hills. If one of Shorty's heifers had gotten herself lost this far out, there was no telling what had happened to her. But still, he had to check. Stopping the pickup, he grabbed his field glasses from the seat, and climbed out. Ought to be coming onto something pretty soon.

Jumping to the top of the dusty tire, he scrambled up the metal ladderwork which converted his truckbed into a cattle transport, and braced his legs against the rails. He looked through the lenses, long and slow, into each direction. The Joshua trees made humanlike silhouettes against the bleached sky; the mesquite and sage looked pale and heat-struck, and he could almost hear the earth cry out for moisture. It had been a pretty fierce summer, and one had to expect at least two more weeks of sun before the mid-August showers. To the west, Shorty thought he saw something move; then it was gone. He jumped to the ground, flinging his glasses on the seat again. After shifting into four-wheel-drive, he pulled off the dirt trail and began moving overland. No time to follow this meandering road; it might go miles in the wrong direction. If this was his heifer, he could reach her in fifteen or twenty minutes, that is, if she didn't move on. How she got clear out here was a wonder.

Shorty drove twenty miles, stopping every five or so to check the direction and the terrain. They were heading for Sutter's Wash. If she got on the other side of that, the truck couldn't follow, and he'd be damned to let that happen after this day-long hunt. Each time he looked through the binoculars, he thought he saw movement, then the apparition vanished. His stomach was starting to growl. Taking another swig of water from the large jug he always carried, he bounced and rattled toward the shadow. Funny how this land looks completely flat from a distance, yet rocks and gullies appear magically as

you're actually driving over it. He watched the dust settle in an even coating over the truck hood and windows.

His stomach growled again, and Shorty noticed the sun had moved past its highest point. Can't possibly get home till after suppertime. One more look, then give her up. He steered toward a squatty knoll where he thought he might be able to see further, but this time he didn't need to get out. He saw a shadow all right, something, but not a cow, a couple of miles ahead. Shorty pressed the gas pedal and bounced heavily toward Sutter's Wash.

As he neared, the object stopped moving and Shorty saw what he thought might be the bloated belly . . . no, a pack of some kind. It was a horse carrying some sort of large gray pack. Shorty turned on the windshield wipers, dry, to clear off the dusty powder. He had to see. He urged the truck forward.

The animal shied and started moving off again. Shorty Chapin stopped the truck and walked slowly toward it. The pack tied to the near-dead animal was actually a boy--a boy tied to an old mare. The child, long dead the rancher guessed, was stiff and shriveled. His skin, gray and moistureless, clung to bones and slack muscles as if trying in one last desperate defense to protect the precious cargo inside. But tied on. . . . How had he come to this?

Shorty climbed to his vantage point once more to survey the terrain. Across two gullies, he saw that the road, the one he had left miles ago, had come around again. He panned the scene through the glasses. The silhouette toward the West was unmistakable: a vehicle, a multi-toned Chevy pickup,

hood up, attached to a rusty-white horse trailer. Suddenly Shorty admitted to himself that this is why he had driven into the desert; it wasn't the heifer at all. He was confirming what he had already figured out, had felt for several days--too little gas, too little food, too little water--a foolish venture for this time of year.

The horse whinnied weakly; she looked up at Shorty, her dry lips pulled back into a half-sneer, half-laugh, and then sank to her knees. The body rolled, half crushing a large mesquite beneath it; the boy's body was still firmly strapped to the side.

Shorty surveyed the scene. The singed metal shell, a manmade oven, had spewed out its occupants; the bodies dotted the harsh Arizona landscape. Shorty could feel heat waves rise up from the pink soil, the mid-day sun squeezing the life out of all but the hardiest living things. A penetrating silence pressed against everything he could feel or see. The rancher looked from the boy on the horse to the area near the plateau and back again. That gnawing-stomach feeling was back again; the heat weighed heavily against his lungs, and dizzied his mind. He couldn't think what to do. Shaking his head slightly, he stared mutely at the sandy terrain sprinkled with cacti and Joshua, ironwood, yucca and sage.

"God Almighty!" Shorty cursed as he jumped to the ground and slammed his truck door, drawing his knife from the leather sheath at his side.

* * * * *

In front of his station stood Shorty Chapin watching his own tow truck pull the beat-up Chevy and trailer across his attention bell. He listened to the long sequence of rings. The County Sheriff's people had borrowed the truck; Shorty had made an excuse to stay at the garage. Just seeing her vehicle caused Shorty to envision that pale, sensitive face drawn in deep lines from dehydration and terror. The volunteer posse trucks pulled in, and the men stood outside talking in low voices. A dusty jeep pulled in after the others, and Sheriff Well Campbell hopped out shouting, "Fill 'er up, Shorty."

Shorty placed the nozzle into the tank and watched the numbers spin round and round.

"Got some papers in the jeep for you to sign. Horrible thing. Terrible." Shorty studied the pump dial. "You gotta swear out a statement 'bout what you seen."

Vultures circling above six dead humans and a directionless mare composed the death scene racing through Shorty's mind. The woman wasn't the last to go, thank God. She was spared the misery of her girl's last breath, of her son's being tied to the paunchy old horse.

"Check the oil, Welly?" Shorty asked suddenly.

"Naw, I'll do it later. I'll put these papers in on your desk."

Shorty hung the nozzle back on the pump and replaced the gas cap. He watched Sheriff Campbell pull open the glass door and join his partners. The posse members were still shaking their heads about the stupid Northerner who'd killed his whole family out in the desert.

Shorty walked into his station, placing the wooden chair where the cool, moist air could hit him straight in the face. He didn't want to hear about it; he was sick of thinking about it. He might have warned them, or checked their supplies, could've drawn 'em some kind of map.

Among the typed papers waiting for Shorty's signature were black and white photos of the scene of death. The eight by tens retold the story again and again. She was laying just as he remembered, her head close to the truck in what was then probably the only bit of shade. The husband had made circles of tracks, kicking and digging at the sandy wash in a wild death dance, a delirious reel, much like a beheaded chicken's, to the sky gods who watched the tragedy happen.

In spite of the cooler, sweat poured down Shorty's neck and soaked the band of his cotton tee shirt. Perhaps he HAD seen what might happen. Perhaps he could have stopped them. Probably not. It was pure foolishness to think a person could prevent people from making mistakes, keep them from their own brand of misery. They were gone, but he was here. After fifty-six years, Shorty still survived, here in the desert, through plenty of close calls and many scorching summers like this one. He gazed at the close-up--her head in

the sand, a fly resting gleefully on her cheek--and put the photo, face down, in the top drawer of his desk. He shuffled the pile of forms and photos and returned them to their manilla envelope, just after signing his name along the line marked "Witness."

Noon Candle

"Let your light so shine before men. . ." Matthew 5:16

Alice Ann pressed the metal clasps of the leather coin purse closed. The clerk slapped the white sales ticket into her palm with a thanks-have-a-nice-day-hello-how-are-you; it was a mingled dismissal and greeting, one to Alice Ann, the other to the customer behind her. Staring into the cash machine, the clerk pressed the button which propelled strawberry jam, vanilla wafers, lite beer, and Kotex toward the electronic price scanner. Alice Ann watched the sweet, youngish face of the grocery clerk hoping for a chance to say something--'bye, God bless, it's a beautiful afternoon--something. If she let this chance go, that is, if too many of these opportunities passed, she'd find herself like all the other city folks walking around eyes ahead, an icy brusqueness insulating their hurried bodies. Too late. Now the clerk had accumulated a sizeable mound of packages at the end of the belt and with a flick of her wrist typed g-r-o-c accompanied by her numeric singsong, "one ninety-seven, eighty-nine, seventy-two twice." The customer pressing Alice Ann from behind smelled of bleach and breath mints.

It would be healthier for people, Alice Ann thought, to go back to the corner IGA, one like Granger's in Redburn, where she grew up. Granger's was

a country store. Rusty Granger didn't need those long aisles of freezer compartments that you must walk past shivering at each step. His apples came in fresh, and you bought them fresh or not at all. He kept them in their traveling carton next to four or five heads of iceberg lettuce on a table near the back. Besides, Rusty would reach the topmost can at your pointing and didn't make a fuss if you shook your head and he had to put it back. "It needed a bit of dusting anyway," he'd say with a laugh.

Granger's combined the distinct almost nutty smell of lemon oil and Windex. That Hawkins boy scrubbed down those windows every Thursday afternoon to put up the weekend-special banner, EVERY Thursday. That Tommy Todd Hawkins made circles against the glass with his paper towel. Rusty grinned, "That's it, son. Round and round. Round and round." She missed small town markets where you could spot a shipment of something new. In city supermarkets some deceiver came in at night pushing cans and boxes forward, whisking gray-feathers at them so that you couldn't tell how old they were. Here the doors lunge open at a person and the clerks deliver their good mornings to the cans, counter, or the penny on the floor that nobody wants. Alice Ann winced at the clerk who didn't see her. With round purse handles over one elbow, she slid the loops of her grocery bag over the other and ambled toward the door.

As she stepped on the rubber mat, the doors opened outward in a whoosh and in bounced two pig-tailed girls followed by their drooping mother,

a baby perched on one hip. "Dia-pers, dia-pers," the girls chanted as they led the woman to the correct aisle. Alice Ann thought kids made a curious mixture of liability, licorice kisses, and vomit. But she had always tolerated them, sweet-faced little things, fingering every square of glass at the mall, tugging at shirtsleeves for a cookie or a ride on the miniature carousel in front of K Mart. Moss had wanted kids. They might have had some, too. But not in the city; the city was no place to raise children, or pups.

Alice Ann halted at curbside. Lots of traffic today; makes you wonder where they're all going. She tried to step off the curb, but cars were whizzing past her, all trying to get somewhere. The corner stoplight should be turning red soon; that would give her a chance. She could cross right here if cars would give her just a little time, time for every purpose under heaven. Moss was well accustomed to the city before he had sent for her. Of course, Moss had been content wherever he lived; hometown or big city were the same to him.

Always Alice walked in daylight, when the sun beat fiercely through her umbrella and straw hat. She usually contrived some little purchase for herself: a quart of milk, a pack of Q Tips, a bag of huge rubber bands to stretch round her newspapers left waiting at the apartment dumpster. She'd make for the market right after "All My Children" and easily be back for the "Wheel."

"Watch it, Lady!" shouted someone with a red sportscar and horn.

Alice stepped quickly back to the curb. God had given her good legs--still fast--like when she and Moss used to sprint--tackle in hand--down the grassy path to Hal's Reservoir. The thought of growing old made Alice frown. Nights of Olay treatment seemed important some years ago, and now, rarely remembering to slather it on, her cheeks and breasts were becoming dry parchment. Standing there at the corner, Alice Ann pushed her hair back from her temple, handbag flopping as she moved her arm. She still had pretty hair, even white. It didn't require a hairdresser. The natural curl she'd had since childhood. The even, God-given tones made dyes and solutions unneccesary. Alice Ann wondered if Moss would have enjoyed fingering these frosty strands as he had the chestnut curls of her twenties. Moss could have been with her now if things had worked out. Nor is woman without man, in the Lord.

Alice Ann remembered the month-old pile of woman's magazines that she meant to deliver to the hospital waiting room. Tomorrow, if it were sunny, would be a good day to take them to the third floor. She held a policeman's palm, purse dangling, toward the windshields of the waiting cars as she crossed in the direction of home.

* * * * *

Clouds gathered gray in the late afternoon sky, implying an early night. The smoked glass of the chapel windows made the outside atmosphere

threatening, rain ready. Alice Ann relaxed the grip on her scriptures. She relished darkness and loved these stunted winter days and long peaceful nights, evenings that kept bicycles and laughter indoors.

"When ye are in the service of your fellow man, ye are in the service of your god," someone said from the pulpit. Alice Ann remembered the chocolate cake on her kitchen table. She knew that she should hurry home to deliver it to the Oscarsons. It was blessed to give. Brother Oscarson had been out of work for over six months; with five children at home, any little thing would be appreciated. "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread." This town once offered her a job, long ago, at Mosses petition. So in a lonely and weakened state, she had sold Mama's little homestead in Redburn and followed her heart to this place. The job vanished, Moss explaining through a river of sorrys that he had misunderstood the man in charge. He tried to talk to other agencies, but by this time Alice Ann was in a state of frightened confusion, much too disoriented to train for any kind of work. She and Mama were both of the nervous sort. Neither could bring herself to learn to drive a car. Alice Ann rehearsed excuses that she couldn't stay for dinner if Oscarson asked. He might invite her to share a slice of cake with the family, force her to sit on the edge of their broken down armchair and nod at his recitation of the evening news, weather, and sports. Perhaps it would be better to forget the cake, rather than embarrass his sweet lady with charity or to face the humiliation of turning down another dinner invitation.

Alice raised her bowed head, and at the organ's farewell, she walked to the door. She was tired; church seemed long. Vaguely she considered quitting church. After all, she had heard it all before. Buttoning her coat against the darkening sky, Alice pushed the glass doors open and stepped toward home.

* * * * *

The sky grew darker as Alice Ann struggled with the locks on her second-story door. Someday, not able to take the steps anymore, she would make a decision to leave this place. To be healthy is a blessing. By the looks of the sky, it was liable to rain at any minute; though clouds, like marriage proposals, were just as likely to blow away. She used to have Mosses friends over for bridge or canasta in the evenings. Alice watched them laugh and tell outrageous stories. She trailed them nearly every Saturday climbing around the hills looking for stones for Mosses rock polishing machine. She still kept the shiniest and prettiest stones in a clear ginger jar in her kitchen window, never tiring of how the morning sun would slant and warm them, making them look translucent and magical. Not so now. The outer darkness of the sky gave the stones a solid terrestrial tint that the kitchen bulb overhead could not penetrate. The not-so-lovely rocks had gone to his friends' children whose parents were always looking for some school show-and-tell trifle. Now, minus friends and

weekends, Alice Ann wondered if she should have kept more of them. Those friends weren't exactly the kinds of people she would have chosen on her own anyway--not the solid, salt-of-the-earth types found in little, out of the way places like Redburn, Idaho or Conway, Utah. So when they stopped calling with invitations to dinner or tickets to a musical variety show, she was relieved rather than saddened. Anyway, most of them abandoned their apartments and bought motorhomes for touring or condos in Sun City.

Alice Ann looked from her kitchen window to the parking lot below. That man again--a three week resident--crawled out of a sportscar and strode toward the door below hers. Newcomer. Though it wasn't like her, she had stopped speaking to these move-in move-out strangers some time ago, often thinking that she could be genuinely friendly if they'd only give a person a chance. That last thought contained a furtive tone that surprised Alice Ann. Her no-contact rule was surely more an avoidance of nuisance than a plea with helplessness in it.

This man had smiled and said hello to her several times at the mailboxes. At her flushed nod, he talked on and on about the weather. She looked down at him now, a timeless face, neither old nor young, in Mosses hair and sweatshirt, his mouth tipped into a slight smile. He stopped directly below her kitchen window and looked up, searching Alice's face carefully. The smile widened, and he called, "Home from church, huh?" A frown, sweet and acrid like scorched carrots, spread across Alice Ann's forehead and down her warm

cheeks. She wondered about the man. He seemed country grown. Judging by his warm smile and disposition, he was not yet citified. But he appeared to like it here. He was a puzzle. He proved that there is opposition in all things, people and faith. Polarities grow in one's subconsious, dark and wet, larger and more ponderous at each decade of life. Alice Ann wondered when she'd see him again.

Standing at the window watching the wake of her countryman, who lived alone in the apartment underneath her, Alice Ann heard the polite door closing, the deadbolt clicking in the lock below hers. How had he guessed about church? She hadn't paid equal attention to his dailies, though if placed in a country town, she could tell any stranger which car was whose, whose cousins from Brooklyn were visiting, or even that the Bakers were having roast beef for Sunday dinner. But here, in this sun-parched land, with new faces forever parading past, changing jobs, cars, and apartments like underwear, a person became choosy about the man she spoke to in the laundry room. One of these seemingly harmless people might be brother to the drug dealer-rapist that Metro police hauled in last night on the news. Someone must be his brother. The accused's on-camera eyes were alive with hate, wild with stimulants, his arms pinned behind, an officer attached to each. The captor's black bandana held only a couple of strands of long hair from flopping across his cheeks. Someone was his brother. Someone was his brother's keeper.

A parade of murders (possibly gang related), shootings (taxi driver and motel clerk), robberies and dark family squabbles were the nightly news and business of Metro police. TV called the brawls "domestic violence." Alice Ann had seen a bit of that. She had once overheard an argument between a young mustached Hispanic and his woman: "Ah, Chita, doan' lea' me," the girl sobbing, his pleading, refusals, promises which welled into anger, more tears. She caught wind of a reluctant truce. All this (not the actual words, of course, but the tone) Alice Ann had heard one blustery day as she stood, a brown grocery bag in each arm, trying to free her shoes from the tangled wad of cassette tape that blew in uneven zee's across the sidewalk in her path. Just as she was about to step over the glistening jumble, it caught her in a sudden gusty breeze and wrapped itself more than once around her ankles. And, without the aid of hands, she was trying to free herself when she overheard the couple name-calling. The woman, sobbing ow-wow-wow, was deaf to his familiar baby-I-love-you routine. In his frustration he'd raise his fist to strike her, only to lower it again, them being streetside in full view of people in passing cars. And Alice Ann, there on the pavement, trying to free her feet of the slick brown web, forced down the umber lump trying to fill her throat. If only they could see the possibilities of God's love and forgiveness. She kicked away the final shred of magnetic tape, shuddered a deep spasm of disgust and terror, and moved toward home. Episodes like the one Alice Ann had witnessed were

common on the six and eleven broadcasts, which was evidence that Satan was doing his eternal work in this dark temple.

Peering at the rear-end of her neighbor's car through glass and trees, Alice came to a newfound resolution. When she saw that sweet man again, that kind newcomer, she'd show a different side of herself. He'd recognize her as relaxed, now the rural daughter, glowing deep from faith in God and wholesome country cooking. She could be that way again. Alice heard his door open and close, not softly. Squinting hard through the fish eye lens of the door viewer, she caught a distorted glimpse of his back moving toward the parking lot.

* * * * *

Alice Ann punched her remote through the channels: for God so loved the world that He gave them late night TV, and she smiled at her pun. So she was, again, plumping the pillow, rearranging the quilt, pulling up the sheet, folding down the blanket, flipping TV channels, turning the thing off, then on again. Sunday nights were worse TV than usual. Engaged in this rehearsed activity, she heard the first thump.

A door slammed below her. Noise. Not giggles, maybe laughter, or a mild joke. Home from a party perhaps. Alice Ann glanced at the clock: 1:15. It wasn't typically the evening for a late-night bash. Have your nightcap and be

off, Alice hoped. The greys on the television set formed themselves into a riotous sword fight, not Eroll Flynn but somebody else in grey pantalets and silver shirt slitted at the chest. All men on the screen were shouting, the music roaring its pulsing march.

"Ahoy there," the bucanneer called in a throaty laugh. Bump. Laugh from below.

Alice Ann pushed the volume down three times. She became aware that the swashbuckling was accompanied by impromptu shouts from under her floor. But Alice Ann ignored noise; that's what one learns to do in the city. This swashbuckling not-Eroll fellow moved himself into a treacherous position balancing on the narrow side of the ship, one hand among the ropes readying itself for the upcoming heroic swing; his sworded hand slashed the air in front of his pantalooned attackers. Volume down again.

"Give me that! Get down!" ". . .do it! if I were you. . ." Less volume. The fake Erol said something to the duke or prince or well-dressed whatever that Alice Ann didn't catch. It was something about the girl, a dark haired beauty, not a movie star either.

". . . move over there, you. . . I'll tell you what to do."

Alice Ann strained to hear the movie. Sound was amply supplied from downstairs. Someone was crying. The screen heroine was not in tears. Below they were shouting at each other. The furniture rocked to some rude unaccompanied dance. Why all the commotion at this time of night? Only bits

and pieces of dialogue floated through the ceiling to Alice Ann above. But their banging seemed to work its way through the plaster and two by fours, sending small tremors up through Alice Ann's mattress. What were they doing down there? She tuned her ears into sharp focus too late to catch a vital bit of dialogue. Alice Ann listened for voices.

The loudest one, male, did all the shouting. ". . . bitch, you . . ." he cursed through his teeth. Most of what he said Alice Ann couldn't make out, strings of the Lord's name, but the anger was unmistakeable. The female voice in the room answered in little bursts of sobs. She said "don't" more than a couple of times.

After Alice Ann realized that the party below was not friendly, she possessed a desire, even a need, to find out what was happening. After all, if something perverse, or even criminal, was going on, she'd like to hear them if they moved up her stairs. Robberies were one thing that Alice Ann imagined went on in a dark house, quiet street, no one realizing until well after the fact, no one listening. But rape was another thing altogether.

Another voice (Was that another man? How many down there?) a milder one, but a man's voice, certainly a man's voice. The new voice was not angry (amused?). What were they saying? "... on---bed" (or head, or dead--Alice Ann couldn't be sure). The woman moaned "oh-h-h" or "no-o-o" in a long tense sigh.

The imagined truth of the sub-activities caused shivering in Alice Ann; she felt a wave that grew, sludgy and hot, from the bottom of her stomach crawling to her throat to well there, waiting for some action, some cry of grief, some offer of aid. Life lived for others is life worthwhile. Should she call the police? The rape, if it was a rape (a gang rape?), should be reported. The police would have to know the apartment number; what was it? Cops insisted on knowing the exacts of such things. TV or tape recorders could sound live. It is not permitted for the sons of man to know everything. Anyway, it could be an embarrassing mistake. Flipping off the television for a final time, Alice Ann moved to a sitting position. In the darkness, she could hear the voices below, one still angry, one still scoffing, one still crying. Or maybe there were two. To be sure, there were two. Blessed be the lawgivers, for they shall come to the aid of the daughters of man.

Alice Ann put her ear flat against the cool wall. Through the hollow space, the voices were crisper, but still rarely intelligible. "Get down. . . want it again, Bitch?"

A sharp "no, please no" was followed by quiet sobbing. "Please, please, don't."

Alice Ann herself was no stranger to family fisticuffs; her father had been a violent man. Many times she had witnessed a bloody nose or cut lip on her brother or mother; she had more than once nursed with ice her own bruised cheeks. That was such a long time ago, Alice Ann had forgotten the helpless

green-brown feeling that balloons inside you as voices rise in anger and the slugging and kicking begins. "Stop it! Hold still! Don't! . . .still!" Lo, the night and the day were as one long night.

Not knowing the exact nature of the dispute downstairs, she didn't know if she should pound for quiet on the floor or put on her robe, march downstairs, and ask about everything being all right. It was impossible to imagine that the small town man born far away would allow such people into his place. Driven by terror and compassion, Alice Ann threw the remaining covers from her legs and stood upright folding her arms across her breasts, thinking. The voices came even louder now, the man working himself into a fury of whore-bitch talk. Courage begins at home and courage never faileth the hearts of the faithful. Alice Ann convinced herself that, raped or not, that woman down there was being beaten, and something ought to be done. No woman can serve two masters. Alice Ann was an ear witness. The whole problem with modern society was that people don't care and won't get involved. The merciful shall receive mercy. But wait, an ear witness? What police officer would trust the testimony of a sixty-two year old woman who, in the middle of the night, heard or thought she heard the cries of a maybe woman being whacked by a couple of guys, perhaps only one, who may have been drunk, or just kidding? Great. They would drag the informant away. Alice Ann feared the jailor's key. Quiet yourselves before God and Neighbors, ye heathens, that the faithful pray not in danger. On her knees, Alice Ann now put her ear flat to the parquet; she must

make sure. With her ear toward the racket she crawled gingerly forward and back, looking for the perfect spot, cautiously avoiding overturning her knitting bag alerting them by the crash of needles spilling to the floor. Her new position helped very little. The voices were still not clear. "I'll do it again-do you want it again? . . ." Then something.

More "No-o-o-o." Something else.

"Don't" (or I won't). Repent of your sins and come to the police for your retribution. By our holy God shall ye be harshly judged for the sins of your loins, saith the Lord. Alice Ann, lying arms and legs outspread, one ear forced to the floor, listened to the sobbing that wouldn't stop. It was louder inside her head than from the room beneath. Her heart raced, shoulders heaved in rhythm, and she thought that the distant siren might be moving in her direction.

* * * * *

The rooms were quiet. The ear could find no more anger, no more sobbing, not even the closing of a door. Alice stood, wrapping the afghan around her shaking body. Looking through the dim light, she inspected the monastic baggage of her thin life. Once she might have described them as her comfort, her salvation. The worn afghan, hand knitted with love; a half-dozen church books; a few bargain-rack dresses and double-knit pantsuits; the TV, of

course; and Mama's wooden rocker were all the importance she possessed in the world. Now they lacked meaning. She fell back into the chair in desperate rocking fury. Yea, she that hath eternal life is rich. Worldly possessions, earthly happiness, both so transitory, mean nothing. Eye hath not seen nor ear heard the things which God hath prepared. Yet, did He still remember Alice Ann? She cast a skyward plea to heaven to protect her against the trespass of any voice, any country smile, forever this time. In the darkness the holy inspiration she had long awaited formed a clear picture. She saw what she must do--never again push the deadbolt from its doorframe--never again venture into the sunshine--submit to the darkness, let it enfold and protect her.

Tethered

Grandpa never said nothing. "You okay?" I asked, but he didn't answer. He was thinking. Thinking and listening to the stream.

"Come on. Let's get going," I told his closed eyes. He just sat there, leaning his back against the tree, with his fingers laced atop his big belly.

"Hmmm?" he said sleepily.

"Come on, Grandpa. This ain't no fun." I straddled his bent knee, trying to ride horsey-style, but he wouldn't move it.

I looked down at the white bubbles swirling against the mud-and-gunnysack dam that Grandpa had just made. The brown froth (minus the tiny twigs) looked like the rootbeer floats he stirred up on Sunday evenings. He liked to call it "Indian soap"--said it was better than Ivory, slicker and smelled of sunshine instead of pasteboard. "I used all the Injun soap," I lied. He wasn't in any hurry. The chocolate water pushed its way between the furrows and silently melted the dirt clods in its way. The corn, already a few inches high, looked polished, deep green, delicate.

"Look, PawPaw. I see something."

"Hmmm?" he answered again.

"Might be a badger. I told ya. Ya shoulda brought your twenty-two.

"Gopher I 'magine," he said at last.

"You through restin'?" I asked, picking up his shovel and the empty burlap bag.

"We got time; just settle down." He wouldn't budge from his spot under the walnut tree. Sometimes I helped him crack nuts for cookies; those hard black shells had a way of popping out of my nutcracker, but I could handle them with my hammer even if I smashed the insides together with bits of shell. The horse devoured the peels after he'd tromped under the tree to squeeze the round bullets out, leaving only soft green casings behind.

"It's too hot to sit around. Wanna see me do a cartwheel?" I did a quick one, then wiped the tiny rocks and bits of straw from my palms down the front of my jumper. Dirty. Mizz Kitts, the queen of the Merc, told me I was supposed to act like a lady, and I tried. But I got itchy when it was hot like this, when the insides of my knees and elbows stuck together. I needed to keep moving to keep the sweat from running down me.

Grandpa reached inside the bib pocket of his striped overalls and pulled out his white handkerchief. He lifted his straw cowboy hat just enough to wipe the white strip of forehead underneath; then he handed the cloth to me.

"Wipe yourself a bit; then we'll head home."

Grandpa's water turn came on Wednesdays and Saturdays. I followed and watched him dam up the water or shovel it out to make the water go down the field just right. Hard work. We did the ditch, walked to the bottom of the field to wait for the water, then back up and moved the dam to another spot.

Took us all morning. When the water trickled out, we walked back to the house, scraped our shoes on the hoe-without-a-handle sticking up through the cement, and went inside to a long drink of water and baseball on TV.

I counted base hits and thought about things. Grandpa had helped me catch my first fish. We chumed them with kernals of corn and little balls of Velveeta so they'd come in to shore; then I smashed a ball of cheese on my hook, carefully. "Don't spike your thumb," Grandpa said.
I cast as far out into the pond as I could. "Thri-i-ing," sang the reel as the line advanced. Plop! Off went the cheese.

"Need some help?" Grandpa asked.

"I can do it." Next time I did.

When the fish took a bite, I reeled in quick but even, just like he told me. Grandpa got the net under him; he pulled the hook out. "Well, Missy, here's your very own fish." He konked the thing dead with some pliers. I jumped up and down, sobbing.

When I got bored with jacks or coloring books, I filled a glass of water, picked up his black barber's comb and sat on the back of the couch, legs straddling Grandpa's thick shoulders. One strand of hair on top was left long to comb back to meet the short fringe that connected his ears. Dip the comb into the glass, wet the long hair good, comb it up high, and try to get it curled around a couple of little silver dolly curlers. Roll it down tight to his head, if some hairs get loose, wet it and try rolling again. Try some Brylcream to stick it

together, more water, try it again. Grandpa sat there, saying nothing, while I combed and wrapped and rewrapped the lock around each curler. He caught the drips down his nose and forehead with the cuff of his plaid shirt and let me practice. When dry, I took the curlers out and combed the hair carefully into three little puffs, like a poodle's, sitting on top of his head.

"How do you like it, PawPaw?"

He could smile, snort, nod--all at the same time. Then he put on his hat, and we went out to do chores.

I sat against Grandpa while he watched the Saturday night fights. He put his arm around me, rubbing one spot on my bare shoulder until it hurt. But I never dared to move or say so 'cause he'd stop it right away. We just sat there quiet together, his eyes on the screen, mine closed tight against the pain.

"Hungry, Sunshine?" he asked. I nodded, and soon he returned with a bowl for each of us. Several inches of milk covered the crumbles of homemade bread. He had dribbled honey on top. We ate. He watched the screen; I leaned my head against his arm.

Buzzer Crawley cleared up that business about the cows. When I asked Grandpa what they were doing, he said, "I'll tell you when you're older," and then his lips clamped tight. I hoped like crazy for my birthday, but Buzzer told me all about it out behind the horse corral. And he must've been right; he was nine.

* * * * *

"Crazy old man. . . . Drive faster, will ya?" The Chevy raced along, spewing dust and gravel behind it. "Risking his life like that--downright stupid. I wouldn't of done it."

"Aw, he didn't mean nothing."

"Almost drowned us both."

"You both got out."

"No thanks to him. . .jumping in before he thought. He can't swim. Hell, it's been fifty years since he was in water deeper'n his knees." The dials on the dashboard, clouded with a thick layer of white dust, showed that with their current speed and full tank of gas, they'd cross the state line before supper.

"But you're both okay now, right?"

"You don't know nothing about it. When I dragged the old man to dry land, he just lay there, shaking and crying. Wouldn't answer when I ask'd him what the hell he did it for. Shaking and blubbering like a baby. It wasn't like they just took his land away from him or something. . . nothin' to bawl about."

"Everybody in town thinks he's a hero for trying to save your ugly hide," Neal laughed.

"Damned embarrassin', man. Still won't speak. Gets that glassy-eyed look every time he looks in my direction."

"It's cool, right? I mean, stay away for a few weeks. Then when you come back, it'll be forgotten. Everything will be smooth again. Right?"

"Get this. I'm never going back. He'll take care of the kid."

"But she's your kid."

"They'll get along."

Neal moved his eyes from the road to his best friend. It's funny that you can know a guy for your whole life and not have the slightest idea about what's moving and bumping around inside him. Neal had never understood this guy's beef with his old man. It had always been prickles between them.

"Watch the road, idiot. You wanna kill us?" The car dipped and bounced over the potholes in the dirt lane. "Never has worked a real job--does railroad crew for a few weeks until he gets unemployment; then he's on his ass the rest of the year."

Neal kept his eyes on the road.

"Never answers when you speak to 'im. You could tell him to stay the hell away from the water, and he'd do exactly as he pleased anyway. He wouldn't explain a word." Neal's friend made angry zigzags in the dashboard dust. "Always putterin' around. Tries to fix everything with left over baling wire. Won't do it right the first time. Just won't listen."

"But everything turned out okay, right?"

"Just watches TV with that vacant stare."

"You don't have to go back to them."

"Crazy-assed stupid old man."

* * * * *

Grandpa was mad. He wouldn't talk. He wouldn't open his eyes to look at me. He sucked in quick and noisy pocketfulls of air. Maybe he was sick.

"Grandpa, you okay?"

No answer. I could see his eyes twitching back and forth under the lids.

"What's the matter? Are ya sleepy?"

He was thinking. His mouth made little laughing noises, far away sounds.

"It's me--Missy. I'm your little sunshine."

He didn't want to talk.

"Wake up. I'll do some tumbles for ya."

One leg jerked itself off the edge of the couch, and he just left it there. I tried to lift it back on, tried to make him comfortable, but the leg was heavy and tense. Finally he relaxed into sleep.

I watched him sleeping for a long while. His lashes had opened just a crack, enough to give a peek of white eyeball. Stubs of grey whiskers covered his chin and neck, like thousands of tiny drops of water. I placed his broad hand, warm and idle, gently on my hair and snuggled against his overalls. His pocketwatch marked soft regular beats. "No more, no more, no more," it

ticked, making my eyes hot and itchy. No more swings made of rubber tires. No more shot rabbits in gunnysacks. No more coins for penny candy.

Family Secrets

Mother and I waited in Grandma's kitchen, in a sunny field of yellow daisy wallpaper. Gram was in bed dying. We spoke in funeral voices, low hushed monotones, in case the old woman cried out from her room. I surveyed the geraniums on the window sill. Slanting through the white gauze curtains, the sun rested on Mom's tan forearms and the mahogany rocker. The wooden arm had been repaired once, and I could see the fine bead of hardened glue still marking the break. Moving over to the chair, I traced the line of glue with my fingertip and asked her to tell me a long-ago story, something about when she was small. My mother's tired, not-quite-blue eyes studied the patterns on the linoleum. Her small, delicate lips were always the same predictable pinkish-brown. In many ways she looked like a child.

"When I was six, I had lots of chores. One job was to clean the separator. That's a device that skims off most of the cream from the milk. Then we could churn butter from the thick cream. It has dozens of little pieces that must be cleaned carefully and put back together just right. It was a tedious job for a little girl.

"See that bucket in the corner over there? Every morning I took that empty egg pail to the chicken coop, rooting gingerly under those nasty hens as they flapped and pecked at me. Then I carried the full pail back into the house

and washed each egg gently before putting them into the ice box for breakfast.

"By the time I was nine, I was making supper every night for a crew of hungry workhands. I sewed my own school dresses and made work shirts for my younger brothers. I sharpened sickles and mended leather halters, too. It took two full days to wash and iron for everyone.

"Look outside there. That deep irrigation ditch connects your grandma's patch of lawn with her neighbor to the north, a man named Brough. "Gruff" Brough, we neighbor kids called him, to make a rhyme. I used to pick my way along the duck path to Brough's place and stand hidden in the river willows. I watched his horse chew on the pine post it was tethered to. His ducks and chickens marched through the broken-down fence and waddled into my daddy's adjoining pasture. It is the only place I know where you could constantly hear the sounds of farm life. His animals all called out to him at once.

"I could squat hidden in the low bushes, but didn't dare stay long. Mama had warned me away from there. Besides her persistent fear of me drowning in the deep canal, she was aware that old Brough didn't like strangers, especially little kids, hanging around. I used to think that, if provoked, he might crawl out of his den like a ruffled badger and chomp a little girl in two. That is, he might if he could catch her. But I reasoned it was no more likely that he'd chase children through the dense underbrush of the

narrow footpath than he'd pursue his fowl. His ducks knew his habits; they laid their eggs among the willows where Gruff Brough couldn't get to them. He was the laziest man in town, Mama said.

"One afternoon I scooted a goose off her clutch of eggs, waving my arms and shouting at her until she slid off into the water. The eggs were warm and smooth; they smelled a little like sweet clover. I dropped one, just to see, but sprang back crying at the tiny head and beak of a half-formed chick.

"At the same time I glanced periodically at his house in its coat of weathered whitewash. Watching his back door, I fancied him sauntering out, putting his feet up, having a smoke in the scruffy old chair. But no one was there; the chair was missing a leg, the door missing its handle.

"In his side yard was a rusty, homemade trough, filled with scummy green water. It was made from half an old oil drum--not at all like the round stainless-steel tank at home. Standing there in the shade by that large canal, I watched his back door cautiously. The old man might suddenly come out demanding to know what trouble I was causing.

"Do you hear his cattle bellowing? Old Brough never feeds them. That's why they plead like that. He lets them get their meals on other people's property.

"As long as we have lived in this house and Brough has lived in his, across the pasture there, he's let his animals wander over here and eat daddy's alfalfa, clean up our troughs, and water here. He never mends his fences, and

every time we call him to come get his stock, he answers like it's our fault. He promises to get the fence repaired, but never gets around to it. Any fixing that's been done over there, my brothers did it.

"How I hate that man--the old bastard. There were irritations enough without that one terrible year. In '42 he sent Daddy to prison. Brough had again let his cows feed on Dad's hay all winter, his grass pasture all spring. By branding time, his were well mixed with ours. Dad and the boys branded all the late calves. He took the yearlings to market and butchered an old one for the family deep freeze. After feeding them like that, Daddy deserved whatever he could get out of them. Brough called the authorities. They sent my daddy to the state penitentiary for six months for cattle rustling. I'll never forgive the old bugger for that. Six months of doing Daddy's chores too. Of course the kids at school all knew; they whispered and giggled behind me. People on the street pointed me out--the offspring of an ex-con. Whenever a grownup asked me whose little girl I was, I'd mumble my name.

"None of his seven brothers came to shield the family honor. Jacobsons who attempted defense might be considered guilty by association. All of those brothers are stocky and hard-working, but not a one of them is a brave man.

"One night after evening chores, I swiped a wax lantern and made my way down the duck path to old Brough's place. My pockets were crammed full of rounded stones I had fished out of the ditch-bottom. I didn't have a plan yet,

but knew I wanted to cause some little bit of mischief, provoke a spot of misery for the man who had caused my mama to sit up nights whimpering.

"I walked slowly so I wouldn't startle the drowsy birds nesting among the willow branches. They were used to me; I hoped not to set up an alarm. House and sky were dark when I got there. His old International pickup wasn't pulled into the yard. Good. Not home yet. Creeping as close as I dared yet still cloaked among a spotty hedge of wild roses, I dug the first rock out of my pocket and hurled it against the house. It hit hard, sending a little spray of stucco onto the wooden porch. The next one met its mark, delivering that suspended ping identifying a pane of splintering glass. Another stone and another found its way to the floor inside the old man's parlor.

"His animals were strangely unaffected by the curious noise. They seemed accomplices to my righteous deed. It was the first time I remembered them being quiet. But I wasn't about to question this queer gift now.

"After emptying my pockets, I sat back, savoring my revenge, amused in the silence of the dark night. Who was to know? Cleansed of the angry feelings I felt toward this place, I suddenly grew bold. Mama would be out looking for me soon. I swept up the wire lantern handle and marched princess-like toward the mess I had made.

"On the porch there were chards scattered everywhere. The crunch of broken glass accompanied my every step. Holding the lantern up, I counted two panes missed, unbroken. I left them alone. Tears welled in my eyes. Then

a little sob found its was from my stomach to my throat. Then another and another. I grabbed the rickety porch rail for support. No use. It couldn't steady me.

"The blooming lilac gave off a sweet perfume as I tried to pick my way across the yard toward home. I could make out the violet blooms even by candle light. The flowers gave off a strange smell at night, however, as though mixed with English Leather after-shave cologne--the kind that Daddy used every morning. I dodged a grey shape strung between two elms--it startled me for a second--a hammock with a bundle of old rags piled up in it.

"Walking double time now, I gained the security of the wild yellow roses and the duck path. Looking back, I wondered if the hammock shifted in the slight breeze. Then I heard the familiar scratch of a match against denim. A tiny light flared outlining a man's dark face. It was Brough, laying in that hammock, watching me and lighting up a cigarette. I turned and ran, the willows snapping into place behind me. Even the absence of pursuit didn't slow me until I came into the shelter of home. I snuffed out the lantern and slipped down the back steps to my basement room.

"Waiting in torment on top of my bed, I flinched at the slightest noise. What I at first thought was a knock at the upstairs door was only a dog barking. The footsteps I assumed were those of our neighbor turned out to be a pyracantha branch scratching at my window. Mama didn't need to be troubled by my vandalism; she had enough on her mind. I agonized over

bringing more shame into this house. "Two weeks passed without a word. I hadn't been found out; I hadn't been punished. After the third week, I ventured down the duck path again. The buzz of locusts signaled late afternoon. The ducks waddled down the dirt slope for periodic dips in the cool water. I could see the house. The glass still littered the porch. Little squares of cardboard box were fitted into the panes from the inside. These would probably have to do until the harvest money came. I pictured old man Brough huddling in there against the cold when winter winds nibbled at the paper panes. There was an old straw broom leaned against the door jam. I looked around, carefully this time, for the owner. Then I moved forward, sweeping the porch thoroughly and depositing the glass splinters in his burning barrel out back. This time, as I trudged toward home, I stood tall but still not proud. I wondered, hopefully, if someone had seen me.

"Daddy came home that winter; things got back close to normal. As far as I know, Brough never mentioned the incident. He never got around to getting his back bedroom windows replaced. He was the laziest man in town."

My mother's face was darker, even in full sun. Tears playing in the corners of her eyes, she looked wistfully out into the front yard, to the water in the canal moving slow and deep. The circular ripple of eddys brushed the surface, tracing the deeper currents below. She told me to run out and play; she'd call me if she needed me. I stood and moved over to the door. The glass doorknob felt cool and waxy. Turning toward my mother, I fumbled

between my teeth and bit off a chunk of the Bazooka wad I had been chewing. I offered it to her in my outstretched palm. She put it between her own lips and smiled. Then I skipped out into the sunshine.

So Much Depends

Louis Hartley closed the cover, laid the book on top of the others in the cardboard box, and reached for the next volume on the bookshelf. It was a handsome leather-bound edition of Robert Lowell. Louis ran his index finger over the even grain of the cowhide and lightly along the gilded pages. He scanned the titles: "The Lesson," "For the Union Dead," "Skunk Hour." Louis sat on the edge of the crowded desk and puzzled over the phrase, "while the books lie in the library, and go on reading," then turned the page to see the underline in red pencil:

> I pray for memory--
> an old turtle,
> absentminded, inelastic,
> kept afloat by losing touch . . .
> no longer able to hiss or lift
> a useless shield against the killer.

He closed the book and laid it in the box wondering if he should pack any more today. There was plenty of time; the mover was notified and waiting for a phone call to come and pick up the cartons. Dean Anderson had told Louis not to hurry to clear the office; he hinted that Louis might change his mind. The Dean had made some vague, felicitous remark about how much Louis would be missed and wondered if the professor wasn't making a big mistake leaving the college. Mistake indeed, Louis thought as he looked

around the familiar room. Yellowed rectangles left the memory of art prints and vacation photographs against the bare white office walls. Louis had cleared the walls first, and now he had several boxes of books packed. That's enough for one day. The professor wondered where to put all of this at home. On the other hand, he thought, if I hurry with the boxing, I could call the movers to come tomorrow. No hurry. On the outside of the door he slipped the plastic nameplate from its slot. He dropped it into the large trashcan which was already filled with old lecture notes and grading sheets from the last seventeen years. Louis reached in and pulled out a handful of the grading forms. He smiled as his eyes scanned the student names, rigid in neat, ordered rows, not at all like his memory of them.

* * * * *

The poet rolled a blank sheet into the typewriter and typed his name and the date in the upper righthand corner. He spaced down and centered the carriage. He stared down at the j, k, l, semi-colon. After rolling the carriage back to insert the time--2:14 a.m.--underneath, he laced his fingers together behind his head and stretched both elbows backward. He studied the keyboard and wondered what to write.

* * * * *

Louis walked past Dean Anderson's office. The room was dark; the glass door returned a muted reflection of the man in the hall. Louis paused. The gray hair over his temples was brushed back blending into slightly darker hair behind the ears. Looks more like a professor than a poet, he thought. Louis shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the building entrance.

Louis was glad that he'd talked himself into not signing his contract for the coming school year. He'd postponed making any final decision all summer; he first needed to prove his talent to himself. Perhaps he was merely tired of college life. Louis asked himself what he hated most about being a professor, but it had slipped his mind. Anyway, if things got desperate, he still had two weeks to change his mind, sign the contract, and be in class for the fall session. But it would never come to that. On thinking of it again he realized that the two weeks were nearly up. Louis searched his memory; fall session registration would begin Monday, tomorrow. Louis would have to make that final decision today, once and for all, while he still had time to retrieve his letter of resignation from the Dean's mail bin where the Dean insisted that it wait during the six-week break. Things hadn't been going well. It was too much to ask that in the few weeks between semesters he could write poetry which would insure he was making a good decision in leaving academics.

The professor had written poetry before, lots of unfinished poetry. Some short poems had been published, if you counted the ritual entry into the college literary magazine and some erotic pulp sent to Penthouse under a fictitious

name. Louis could visualize being a poet. That was the important part. Picturing oneself as already having achieved the desired goal would pave the way for the attainment of it. He anticipated writing poetry until dawn, watching horizontal bars of light come through the blinds and slant across his carefully planned pages, making the carbon characters look somber and eternal. He would meet with his publisher, sign a hundred copies of his latest collection at an autograph party, speak to a ladies literary club, and never, never, never read another freshman "pome" as his students called them.

His colleagues, basking in the comfort and security of a teaching college, would probably never reach their full potential. The professional pressure of a university atmosphere could inspire greatness. This pressureless environment was stifling. Sometimes a man had to take a chance. Louis could feel the sensation one gets on the downhill side of the rollercoaster track. Soon, he thought, those colleagues would be congratulating him. They'd say, "Why, Louis, we knew you would be famous someday," and "Louis, I've read your latest collection and it's the most significant contribution since. . ." and "Louis, you've been hiding your talent behind class syllabi."

* * * * *

So much depends. . . the poet thought. He tried to force his fingers to type out something beautiful or profound. Writing was so difficult, so extremely

difficult. Even prose wouldn't cooperate; prose could be translated into a poem. But no prose would come. He looked down at the round black keys and pressed his fingers hard against them. The typewriter made slow, deliberate clickety-clicks. The poet looked down at the typed characters: q w e r space u i o p, q w e r space u i o p, q w e r, q w e r, q w e r. . .

* * * * *

The former professor pushed through the glass doors of the Humanities Building and stood on the portico. The campus seemed motionless on Sundays. Now and then, a student slowly pedaled toward the library, a nylon backpack slung over one shoulder. Two students walked directly in front of Louis, one talking and drawing large figures in the air, the other looking straight ahead and nodding his head slowly. An airplane flew directly over the building breaking the quiet of the inner campus. Deep within him, Louis felt the pulse of the university, even in these settled hours. He looked down at the steps in front of him. Then, with shoulders erect, and spine extended to show his full height, he marched down the steps and strode across the lawn.

* * * * *

Leaning back in his chair, pad and pencil in hand, the poet drew flower petals around the looseleaf holes. He drew connecting geometric patterns--assorted triangles and semi-circles--across the top of the page, then down the center. He balanced the pencil over his ear. He noticed the way the light slanted through the window across the room. He got up and adjusted the curtain.

* * * * *

" Dr. Hartley! Dr. Hartley!"

A young woman in faded jeans and sneakers ran after Louis.

"Dr. Hartley!"

Louis turned toward the voice.

"Hi," she said, "remember me? I'm Lisa Daniels--you know, in your 408 class last fall?"

"Oh, yes. How are you, Lisa?"

"I'm in grad school--you'll just die--in poetry no less."

Louis thought about this.

"It's all because of you. Your class was so . . . so great. I learned lots; anyway, you were just fantastic . . . I just wanted to tell you."

Louis looked down at the girl.

"Well, I'm late--meeting some kids for coffee. Bye, Dr. Hartley."

"Goodbye, Lisa," he called softly after her. Louis could picture her face sitting three rows back; she had a pretty smile. He couldn't remember her final grade and wondered what he'd given her. He wished he knew.

* * * * *

The poet reached inside his jacket pocket for a pencil. He touched the lead to the tip of his tongue and put it to the notepad. He sucked in a large breath in preparation to exhale words upon the page. He paused for a long time. The pencil was poised motionless above the top line. The poet threw the pencil across the room and jabbed the radio "on" button.

* * * * *

Louis stood outside the Sunset Lounge and wondered whether or not to go inside. He liked the intimate mood of the place where you could sit quietly and think. Maybe some young women would come in and sit at the bar. A guy would go over and buy the pretty one a drink, and while they talked, he would end up tracing his finger along the stitching on the back pocket of her jeans. She would lean toward him and laugh softly at his stories. After a time, she'd wave to her girlfriends and the couple would leave together, the man's car keys clinking musically in his hand.

But the Sunset wasn't the sort of place artists go. Louis wished he knew a good place. He walked up the street till he reached the gold placard, "Executive Club," and stepped inside. His membership here was one luxury he felt he deserved. After all, he had few vices; his dues were paid with money saved on women and gambling.

A stern looking porter took his hat and coat and handed them to a young blue-vested boy. The boy disappeared. Someday soon Louis would raise a commotion when he walked in here. Soon they'd be saying, "Are you the Hartley who writes the wonderful poetry?" and "Come this way, Dr. Hartley, I've saved the chair by the window," and the doorman would ask for the poet's autograph. Louis would sign it "To Harold, my very dear friend."

* * * * *

Light slanted through the blinds; it was almost morning. The poet decided against a parody of Eddie Guest. An aubade would be appropriate. So much depended on the first words. So much of the end product was due to the quality of one's inspiration. The poet chose one of the pencils and poised it above the yellow note pad. He drummed his fingers upon the desk top. Then he sharpened the pencil to a finer point, chewed on the eraser top, and went to the kitchen to get a beer.

* * * * *

Finding an empty chair near the tennis court entrance, Louis picked up the folded newspaper and began reading. He looked up as a young woman bounced in, a covered racquet slung over her shoulder. She was wearing a tennis dress; her legs were slender and tan. Nearing the place where Louis sat, she glanced at the Morning Gazette he propped lightly against his knees. She planted a kiss on the silver mustache of a distinguished looking man sitting at arm's length. Louis shook out the paper a bit and stared at the newsprint. The girl was talking gaily about the match: six-love, six-two . . . but Louis couldn't hear the rest because the boy in the vest was asking Louis if he wanted a drink. The tennis dress was short and as the girl moved, pantomiming her winning strokes, the skirt hiked up showing bits of her matching panties underneath. Her father looked around the room in the stern expression he usually wore; his smiles were reserved for the daughter only. Louis concentrated on the headlines. There was a story about a bank holdup and directions for baking some kind of pie.

Louis began silently composing a poem to the girl. He pictured himself handing it to her. She would show it to her father and he'd come over to shake the poet's hand. Then club members would undoubtedly crowd around them begging Louis to read the poem aloud. Afterwards, applause. The girl might hold his arm gently and lay her head against his shoulder. He already had the

title in mind; titles were easy. He'd call it "Tennis Player," or should it be "The Tennis Nymph"?

The first line was a bit harder; the first line had to grab the reader while the following lines could merely hold the reader's interest. Louis had told his students that at least a dozen times per quarter. That probably amounted to thousands of times over the last several years. "Grasp the reader firmly by the shoulders," he used to say, "and keep his attention by shaking him if you have to."

The girl patted her father's shoulder, and with a quick wave, disappeared. Maybe she would come back and Louis could finish the poem about her. After a time, the father left also, so Louis folded the newspaper and started for home.

* * * * *

The poet looked down at the lines in the center of the page. He said them over and over, a musical incantation, rolling the sound of the words over his tongue:

In see-through tortoiseshell the snapper clings to olive branch
Till sunset, knowing too soon
Who he is.

He tore the sheet out of the machine and crushed it tightly in his hand.

The poet looked down at his typewriter. It sat there idle and unresponsive. His eyes traveled over the cluttered desk top, and down to the white wads of unsuccessful attempts overflowing the wastebasket and littering the carpet. He thought about what he had done, the decisions he had made. It was too late, too late for everything. He let his fists crash against the typewriter keys and pounded the keys again and again. He shoved the typewriter as hard as he could, sliding it back and off the edge. The typewriter thudded heavily on the floor. The poet rested his head and forearms on the vacant blotter. His body heaved, shoulders rising and falling in deep spasms of agony.

* * * * *

Louis' footsteps took him without thinking directly in front of the Humanities Building. He looked up at the three-story structure. He fished around in the pocket of his slacks for his office keys. At the door of the faculty lounge, Louis paused. The soul of a man is that upon which everything depends. The words of Lowell's poem circled in the professor's mind, ". . . absentminded, inelastic, kept afloat by losing touch . . . a useless shield against

the killer." Then, suddenly, the old turtle turned the key in the lock and walked toward the Dean's mailbox.