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River People

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RIVER PEOPLE

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Master of Arts

by Ruth O. Madden

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RIVER PEOPLE

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Ruth O. Madden April 1989 107 pages

Directed by: Pat Carr, Joseph Millichap, Karen Pelz

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In the introduction to The World of the Short Story, Kay Boyle challenges the short story writer "to invest a brief sequence of events with reverberating human significance by means of style, selection and ordering of detail, and -- most important -- to present the whole action in such a way that it is at once a parable and a slice of life, at once symbolic and real, both a valid picture of some phase of experience, and a sudden illumination of one of the perennial moral and psychological paradoxes which lie at the heart of la condition humaine." River People is my attempt to meet that challenge. It is a creation of short stories about people I know or might know, small-town, seemingly ordinary people whose characters and activities are universal expressions of truth and humanity.

The short story genre allows me to inculcate variety in form, style and character. This collection includes several points of view, limited and omniscient, objective and unreliable. It offers brief revelations and more thorough studies. It deals with the past as well as the present. Lastly, it touches the lives of the young and the aged, men and women, the respected and the scandalous, the romantic, the tragic, the realistic.

Seed for Sharing

Angie was the first person I saw on the day my family and I moved to Western Kentucky. She stood tallest among a group of welcomers who met us with lemonade, brownies, and willing hands. They helped us unload the big, orange U-Drive-It truck and settle in the small, white frame house we had rented. They were perfect examples of Southern neighborliness, and I was delighted with them all. But it was Angie who captured my attention. Her fluffy, red hair and thoroughly honest smile framed a gray pullover shirt brightly imprinted with the maroon visage of Sherlock Holmes with his deerstalker and bowled pipe. I'll never forget the feelings that ran through me when I saw her shirt.

For eighteen long months, I had lived in the isolated Appalachian Mountains of Eastern Kentucky. There, I had entrenched myself in motherhood, spending both days and nights in the exclusive company of my three small children. My husband's work as a novice-lawyer had kept him busy and away from home and had left me to the seclusion of children and books. Socially, I had been totally inactive. I had envisioned our move to the small river town in Western Kentucky as a "coming-out" for me.

Angie's shirt bespoke an interest that mirrored my own. I could hardly wait to share with her the many stories I had read in the quiet solitary evenings of the past year and a half. She remained to help me long after the others had left, and as we unloaded and distributed boxes, we became better acquainted. Angie knew more about the Sherlock Holmes legend than I could have read in several years. She had seen the old Basil Rathbone movies and could compare them with the modern renditions of Jeremy Brett on PBS. She made bright, innovative comments on the Conan Doyle characters. "The modern Holmes is more human. He has faults. He's not so likable, but he's easier to understand. And he's definitely more believable." Angie seemed disappointed when I didn't contest her criticism.

Our discussion moved from Holmes to other short stories with which she was equally familiar. In the few hours it took to sort our bundles, Angie and I discussed literature, my new teaching job, her work on the family farm, the latest styles in clothing, recent terrorism in Europe, the upcoming election. To my gratification, there was no mention of formula, diapers, or disciplinary philosophies.

In the weeks that followed I saw Angie daily. She lived only a few doors from me although her farm was several miles out in the country. I was preparing to begin teaching, and she helped with the cutting and pasting for bulletin boards and other audio-visual aids. She involved my children in the tasks, and her ease with them was as

apparent as her artful eye for color and design.

We took long walks over the fields of her farm, up the river bank and through beautiful wooded areas. With the exception of the one eighteen-month stint, we were city people, and we welcomed the chance to enjoy nature at close range. Angie taught us the signs of fall and the natural clues to weather. One afternoon she delighted both the children and me with a persimmon adage. With a pocket knife, she cut through the fleshy orange persimmon pulp, freeing the seed.

"Now if there's a fork in the middle of this seed, we'll have a mild winter, but if we find a shovel in here, we'll be shovelin' snow on many a cold day this January." Angie's knife split the nut in half, and to our amazement, there in the middle lay the perfect design of a shovel.

Before her prediction had a chance to verify itself, we became believers in her expertise with nature. She brought us tomatoes, potatoes, corn and peppers, the harvest of her garden. At Halloween we decorated a huge pumpkin which she had grown herself.

As the persimmon had promised, we had a healthy layer of fresh white snow through most of January that year. One day when we were celebrating the cancellation of school, Angie came down to see how we liked her snow. We joined her in the front yard where we built a big burly snowman, tall enough to see to the river. Angie taught us to make angels. She found an undisturbed section of yard, dropped her tall

body into the snow and stretched out her arms. Moving them stiffly to her side and then up over her head, she drew wings in the snow. There were angels all over the yard before we tired of the play.

Later that afternoon, I took the unexpected free hours from school as an opportunity to complete a list of donations for the church bake sale. Everyone I called was willing to cook for the church, and in a short time my list was almost complete.

"I need someone to bake a red velvet cake." I urged Angie to volunteer.

"I don't care to make it." Her answer was brief, quick and startling.

"OK, I'll get someone else." I answered a bit quickly myself, and my voice did not disguise the betrayal I felt.

"Why would you do that?" Angie looked at me, obviously perplexed.

"Well, if you don't want to make it, it's all right with me. I'll get someone else."

"I said I didn't care to do it."

I put on my glasses as if that might help me sort out the confusion of our conversation. "What do you mean? What do you mean when you say 'I don't care to do it?'"

"I mean I'll do it." She shrugged her shoulders at the simplicity of her statement.

"When I say, 'I don't care to do it,' I mean I don't want to do it."

"Really?"

The quick relief of tension made us giddy, and we laughed at the inadequacies of a language that connoted totally opposite meanings for people living only a few hundred miles apart. I was struck by the fact that Angie was teaching me, a language teacher, the ambiguities of English.

"You should be a teacher, yourself, Angie. You're so good with children and you know so much, so many practical things to liven up the material in books. Did you ever think of teaching?"

"Oh, no!" Angie looked at me with panic. "I'd be terrible. I didn't even finish school. The first chance I got at a job, I took."

"You didn't finish high school?"

"No. I never was any good in school. I got a job when I was sixteen. Quit school and never went back."

"How in the world do you know so much about literature? I thought you had probably studied it in college."

She laughed. "I use the library. I'm probably their best patron."

Angie told me how she listened to tapes of the great literary works while she worked. She was so appreciative of the talented narrators that I borrowed some of the tapes for myself. I was surprised at how much a talented actor could add to the telling of a story, and before long, I was checking out tapes on a regular basis.

Later in the winter, I was invited to attend a book fair in Chicago at the expense of the school system. Unluckily, the invitation came too soon after I had burned my right arm, and I couldn't yet safely drive. Anxious to take advantage of the opportunity, I asked Angie to drive me. I would have plenty of free time so the two of us could shop and do some sightseeing. To my disappointment, she would not go.

"I never drive outside the county." Her explanation was quite final.

"Angie, driving's the same everywhere. We'd have a great time. How often do you get a chance at a paid vacation?"

"Sorry, but I'd be too nervous to enjoy myself."

I was half angry with her for the first time. I had to turn down the trip. I reasoned, however, that there were differences even in the best of friends. Often it was Angie's different background that was so attractive to me. A friend had to accept the good with the bad.

When spring came, I capitalized on Angie's background. I decided I had sponged enough off both her and other good neighbors, and I would grow my own garden. I had no idea how to begin. I telephoned Angie. She brought her rotary tiller in the pickup (unloading it was a family affair), and we broke the earth to make a twenty-by-thirty foot garden. Small as it was, it took up about a third of our yard and seemed to me to be an enormous undertaking. Angie chided me

about my great expectations, but she enjoyed my enthusiasm.

"You get the seed and I'll show you how to plant them tomorrow afternoon."

"What kind of seed should I get, and where do I get them?"

"The farm store has everything you need. Just pick out whatever you want to grow. Don't get too much though. You don't have an awful lot of room."

On spring Saturday mornings, the farm store is the busiest place in the county. I made my way through the crowd to the seed counter. For a good thirty minutes, I studied the colorful seed packets, making difficult decisions, which were usually swayed by the pictures of mature fruits, the promise of the seed. With a handful of choices, I took my place among the other customers who were easing their way toward the counter. There was no semblance of a line and I was not at all sure when I would be next, but the helpful lady behind the counter finally turned to me.

"Can I get you anything else, Mrs. Madden?" One of the attributes of a small town is that everybody knows you.

"Yes, please." It was ridiculous to be nervous about buying seed, but this was, after all, my first time. "I couldn't find any potato seed on the shelf. Do you have any?"

"Any what?"

"Potato seed. For growing white potatoes. Irish

potatoes." I couldn't understand her apparent confusion.

There was a long, quiet pause.

"What I want is to grow potatoes. Do you have any potato seed? I think I need about a half cup."

Her smile had a nervous question in it.

Finally, from behind me, one of my students came to my aid. "I believe Mrs. Madden wants a couple pounds of seed potatoes." The grinning teenager spoke with authority. To complete my embarrassment, when I turned to thank him, I faced a whole crowd of grinning adults, the rural version of a queue, which had gathered behind me.

Despite my inept start, with which I had intended to amuse Angie, had she not already heard about it, I planted the entire garden that afternoon. Angie showed me how deep to plant and how far apart. From her seed beds, she brought me plants: tomatoes (I threw away the useless tomato seed I had purchased), broccoli, cabbage, and peppers. She was a careful teacher, explaining why some plants needed to be far apart and why others should be neighbors.

In contrast to my urban background, or perhaps because of it, I loved the garden. As soon as the plants pushed through the soil, I began protecting them from weeds. Angie taught me to recognize the difference between the two. In the hot, summer sun, she showed me how to use the hoe, to mound the growing potato plants, to thin the onions. The hoe seemed to be an extension of her arm, and I told her I was impressed.

"Once," she said, her face as serious as a legal document, "I hoed so long and so hard that I burned up the handle."

"You did?" My imagination was painting the picture.

She laughed at my gullibility until her side ached and she had to sit down.

The garden work, itself a joy, resulted in beautiful vegetables, almost as beautiful as those on the seed packets. That summer Angie taught me to can them. Though I had never seen a pressure cooker, they were the focus of horror stories I had heard as a child. Memories of explosions and scars from the scald of boiling water were part of every mother's when-I-was-a-girl folklore. As a result, I was as careful as a fly on a lizard's nose to Angie's obvious delight. Neither her sarcasm, nor the fact that she had already canned one hundred quart jars of beans that summer, could dampen the pride I felt when I lined my fourteen quart jars of green beans across the kitchen table. Long after they had cooled, I left them where they could be frequently seen and appreciated.

Angie and I spent so much time together that summer that I knew I would miss seeing her when school started. That was part of the reason I suggested we start a book club.

"We can all read the same book. Then, one night a month we'll meet at one another's homes and discuss it."

"I don't have enough time."

"You'll really enjoy it, Angie. We always get more from the stories we read after we discuss them."

Angie dismissed me with a halting wave of her hand. "I've already promised to join a bunko club this winter. And, I'm chairman of the ways and means committee for the Altar Society this year. You better get someone else for the book club. Get some of your teacher friends."

I will, I thought, but I didn't. I let the idea ride for a while, but I didn't forget it. I decided to bide my time for a future opportunity.

It seemed to me, as the winter progressed, that Angie, like other farmers' wives, had more time during the cold, unproductive months. My husband and I were more often invited to their homes for parties. I decided to have a party, too.

On the Thursday evening preceding it, Angie stopped by to see if she could do anything to help me get ready. I was writing the names of books, movies, and TV shows on little slips of paper.

"You can't look at these," I teased. "We're going to play Charades."

Angie seemed uncomfortable with the game.

"Did you ever play before?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. I don't like getting up in front of everyone like that."

"It'll be fun. We'll have teams. The women will be on one team and the men on another."

Angie was uncharacteristically quiet.

"Oh yes, Angie, I'm going to bring up the book club, too. Maybe some of the women at the party would like to..."

I didn't finish my case for the book club because Angie's face had become extremely pale.

"What's the matter?"

She swallowed. "I have to tell you something. I should have told you before. I haven't lied; I've just avoided the truth. Maybe I did lie a little. I know I have to tell you now because it keeps coming up."

She didn't seem to be able to get the words out.

"What's the big secret? It can't be that bad."

"It's not a secret. Almost everybody but you knows. I didn't want you to know because it will make a difference between us."

"Whatever it is, it won't make any difference between us, I promise. For heaven's sake, tell me."

"I can't read." Her words were simple but filled with pain.

"What do you mean you can't read?"

"I mean I can't read. I can't read books in your book club. I can't read the words you're putting on those pieces of paper. I can't read road signs, and that's why I couldn't drive you to Chicago."

"I don't know what to say." I felt myself turning pale. "I just can't believe it. You're so intelligent."

"Just because I can't read doesn't mean I'm not

intelligent. You act like you never knew anybody who couldn't read."

"I never did. You're the only one. I mean you're the only adult I ever knew who couldn't read." I was saying all the wrong things, and the stupid words kept pouring out. "How do you know so much? About world events? About literature?"

"I listen. I told you that before. I listen to the news on TV every night. I watch 'The Morning Show' every morning. It's easy to keep up. The tapes. I know literature from tapes and public television shows. I'm not dumb. I just can't read."

"I didn't mean to say that you were dumb. I'm just shocked."

"I guess so! Especially since I'm the only adult you ever knew who couldn't read. That's a bit hard to believe, too."

Angie's glare reflected her disappointment in my response. I wasn't proud of it myself. I tried to put my less emotional face forward.

"Angie, I'm a teacher. I can teach you to read. You should have told me before."

"No!" It was one of her emphatic answers, so emphatic that she stood up to say it. "I didn't tell you before because I knew you would say that. I can't learn. I've tried. I don't want to learn to read. If you want me for a friend, you'll have to accept me as I am."

She gave me no chance to argue. She left with her last word.

There was no mention of it at my party. We played bunko, a non-verbal, just-toss-the-dice game. I was uneasy all evening. Despite my promise, it did make a difference. I guarded my words for fear I would embarrass her and myself.

It made a difference on Angie's part too. She didn't stop in for more than a week. When she did, I was overly cautious. We had traded recipes many times before. When she asked me for my apple cake recipe, I hesitated. I got out the recipe, but I didn't give it to her right away. I was thinking that she couldn't read it.

"Jack will read it for me, and I can easily memorize it." Her tone was defensive, accusing.

The next day, I stopped by her house after school. The conversation was slow in starting.

"You said it wouldn't make any difference, and now you can barely talk to me."

"I know. The fact that you can't read doesn't make any difference. I just need some time to get used to it. What does make a difference is that you won't let me teach you."

"We've been through that." She spoke abruptly. "I don't want to discuss it."

"Angie, we have to discuss it. You've taught me so many things, I can't name them all. Now, when I have a chance to reciprocate, you won't let me."

"You don't understand how embarrassing it would be."

"I don't understand how embarrassing it would be? You're talking to the woman who stood in front of half the county and ordered a half cup of potato seed."

She smiled, but her smile was brief and pained. "It's not the same."

"Angie, there are books to teach adults to read. I brought some with me." She got up from the table and walked away. "Wait, let me finish. These aren't Dick-and-Jane books. They're designed for intelligent adults. They begin with road signs and grocery displays. Remember how proud I was of the first few quarts of beans I canned. That's how you're going to feel the first time you can read a recipe. In a year you'll be reading the stories you've only listened to before." I hesitated. Both of us had tears in our eyes. "I know how painful this is for you, how embarrassing. But the decision is going to be worse than the lessons. Angie, every Tuesday evening my mother has a meeting. We can use her house for the lessons. It'll be our secret until you are ready to tell it."

She was on the verge of silencing me. I hurried on.

"Angie, think about it. Give it a chance. You can always quit if you don't think it's working out."

My argument was finished. There was a long silence. Angie left the room. She came back blowing her nose. She paced the floor near the table. I sighed.

"I don't know." She choked out the words. "I'll think

about it, but I don't want to discuss it again. If I decide to take the lessons, I'll let you know."

I didn't want her to put off her decision indefinitely. "All right. I won't mention it again, I promise. Wednesday night at the Altar Society meeting, you let me know what you've decided." I got up to leave, but turned at the door. "Friendship has to be two ways, Angie. I can't do all the learning. If you won't let me teach you, that is going to make a difference."

Wednesday night I followed her around like a shadow despite my effort to be nonchalant. She said nothing. It was a long evening. I made sure I left at the same time she did to give her the opportunity to speak. I was determined not to mention it myself, as I had promised.

We walked out to the parking lot. There were several others around, and I was losing hope of her acknowledgement. As she turned toward her car, she looked back at me.

"If you still want to go to your mother's Tuesday, I don't care to go with you."

A Few Questions

"Mrs. Lane, I'm going to ask you a few questions. They're part of the paperwork I need for the Green River Home Health Care Office. So we can send someone out here to help you take care of yourself."

Tootie nodded but withheld total approval. The tall, soft-spoken nurse seemed nice, but she was a stranger.

"How old are you, Mrs. Lane?"

"I'm ninety-four years old and I weigh ninety-four pounds." She smiled at the accomplishment.

"When's your birthday, Mrs. Lane?"

"February 9! I was born in 18 and 94."

"Are you single?"

"I'm a widow." Tootie wondered why she had asked that. The nurse already knew about Kirby. Tootie had overheard Katie tell her about the hard life she had led in the years before Kirby had settled down. The two women, one a complete stranger, had stood at the front stoop and discussed her marriage, her man. As if they knew! She remembered the day Kirby had told her father he wanted to marry her. Wasn't that like him to tell her father instead of ask him. Kirby was always so sure of himself. Independent, cocky.

"She's never had a well day in her life," her father had glared at the tall, sassy farmhand who wanted his daughter. "You're buying yourself a bundle of doctor bills." But Kirby didn't flinch. He took her, skinny and sickly and barely able to handle a hoe, and made her his wife.

"Do you own your home?"

"Yes, I do. Kirby bought it, oh, back during the time FDR was president. He bought it then, and now he's dead, I own it. He paid cash. Never owed for it at all."

"Do you live here alone?"

"You know I do. That's why you're gonna send somebody to help me."

The nurse smiled and recorded the answer on her clapboard. Tootie reminded herself that she was supposed to be friendly to this woman. If she didn't pass the test, she had to go to the nursing home. She hoped they didn't put her in the same one Kirby went to. The smell of urine and alcohol filled her nostrils and she saw the long hall outside Kirby's door. Crazy people touched her as she walked toward his room.

"I want to come home," Kirby whispered when she leaned over his bed. "Give me another kiss, Toot."

"Mrs. Lane, do you watch TV?"

"I hardly ever do. I can't see. I listen."

"Do you have a favorite program?"

"Umhuh, I like Divorce Court. That judge really gives

it to 'em good. They can't put anything over on him. And I like Wrestling. Sometimes I can't find the channel for it though. And I like both them shows Little Joe is in, you know, the one about Heaven and, what's that other one? Oh, you know, Little House in the Prairie.

Tootie's thoughts drifted to Little Joe. She saw him ride up to the ranchhouse. Young again. Not so much hair. He really has too much hair for an angel. It'd be something if you could get that old show of his on the TV. What was the name of it? Big green fields and horses and Paw... "Bonanza." She said the last word aloud.

"Excuse me?" The nurse leaned closer to the old woman.

Tootie felt a cloud of confusion. It might be a trick. Her eyes narrowed to alert her mind. "What was your question?" She had to think straight. This was a test.

"Mrs. Lane, do you have any family?"

Tootie regained her confidence. "Yes, I do. I have a grandson. He lives in Texas. He has two sons, but I don't know where they live. He's divorced. But he brings them to see me sometime. I have a granddaughter in Chicago. She said I could come and live with her any time. She would come and get me."

"Are you thinking about moving in with her, with your granddaughter?"

"I did think about it, but it's too noisy and I don't like smoke. It chokes me. Sometimes, I can hardly breathe when all of 'em are smokin'. Whew!" Tootie shook off the

memory.

"Do you communicate with your granddaughter? Talk to her?"

"She lives in Chicago. Oh, you mean the telephone. I don't use it. I don't like the ringin'. It makes me nervous."

"Do you write to her?"

Mrs. Kellogg writes for me. She reads me her letters, too. My granddaughter has a phone. Mrs. Kellogg can ring her up if she has to. She called her when I was in the hospital."

The nurse seemed to understand and continued writing.

Tootie studied her large figure. Boy she's a big girl! She's bigger than the boys. In her mind she saw her two sons. The older one stood tall, like Kirby, on the rock ledge. He was casting his line. It swung out, way out into the river. The younger boy sat nearer her own spot. His line dangled, tempting nothing. She could outfish both of them. And her, only ninety pounds. She moved her hand to reel in the sleek catfish that tugged at her line.

"Are you ok, Mrs. Lane?"

"Just a little cramp in my hand. A Charley horse. Tootie massaged her right hand with her left. Her bony fingers clutched the loose skin, and her nails dug into the flesh. She had forgotten her nails. She had meant to have Mrs. Kellogg trim them. She could feel their length and could imagine the yellowed thickness that should have been

trimmed off. She quickly hid them in her lap so the nurse couldn't see them either.

"Mrs. Lane, have you ever considered going into a nursing home?"

She had seen them! She knew about her nails!

"Has your Doctor ever talked to you about it?"

Tootie concentrated on the question. "He told me if I didn't get anyone to help me, I'd have to go. I have a lot of people to help me. Mrs. Kellogg writes my letters. She reads me my mail and takes care of my bills. Neighbors bring me food. People from the church stop in nearly ever day. Brother White brings tapes of his sermon. I don't go to church anymore. I don't cook anymore." Someone had told her to say she wouldn't cook and Tootie was glad to get it in. "I might have to go to the nursing home. If I have to, I will. I don't think I have to yet. I'd rather stay here." She wondered if she should tell the nurse that she would die if she had to live in a nursing home. Better not to say too much. "Empty barrels make the most noise," her mother used to say.

"Mrs. Lane, do you take your medication by yourself? "Yes, I take the four on the table in the morning, one from each bottle. At night I take the same ones except for the little, bitty one. It's only for in the morning. I have a headache pill in on the dresser - for when my head gets to hurtin'. I have some sleepin' pills in the top drawer, but I don't take them except when I can't sleep."

"Do you usually sleep through the night?"

"Most always."

"If you need to get up during the night, can you manage it alone?"

"Yes, I can manage it." Tootie felt herself sigh. The test was getting long and the weight of fatigue began to settle over her shoulders. Who was sitting in Kirby's chair? He wouldn't like it if he came in. Katie. She had forgotten that Katie was in the room. She couldn't see her face, but she knew Katie was smiling. Katie was the one who had told her to be friendly, to answer the questions, but not to talk too much. Katie thought she might sound confused, and Tootie knew she was right.

"Mrs. Lane, do you ever go out?"

"I don't go to church anymore." Had she already answered that question?

"Do you go out in the yard?"

"They won't let me." A pout clouded her face and she forgot that she was hiding her fingers. She pointed through the window at a small white house much like her own and directly across the street. "The one over there keeps an eye on my yard. If she sees me in the yard, she tells Mrs. Kellogg. And then I really get the dickens! Once she told me she cried when she heard I went out under the tree to put some food out for the birds. She's afraid I might fall and break my hip. I don't want to worry her so I promised I wouldn't do it anymore."

Tootie watched the nurse write down her promise. With it written down and turned in to the government, it would have to be honored. She couldn't sneak out to feed the birds anymore. They really didn't need the food, but she enjoyed feeding them. She turned her heavy head toward the window and envisioned Kirby's yellowbird. It flit about the tree and settled near his lawn chair. Cautiously it pecked at the bits of pawpaw Kirby tossed as bait. Contrary to its nature, it finally hopped up on the barrel, not two feet from Kirby's hand, where it found the fleshy orange pawpaw that was its reward for the intimacy.

"Mrs. Lane, I know you are getting tired. We have only a few more questions."

Katie had said she would be nosey. How many more questions could she have on that paper? Tootie reminded herself that she wasn't going to tell her about her money. Some things other people didn't need to know. They would probably talk about it after they left. All the neighbors would be chattering about how much she got on her check. Kirby had kept cash and hid it away. No one knew how much they had then. They thought he was rich. He let them think what they would. That's why Mrs. Kellogg said he was mean to me, thought Tootie. He wouldn't put in a real bathroom for years. Taking care of her colostrum was so messy without a sink and running water. He finally had 'em fix one. Paid for it the day they finished. Took all the money he had hid. "'Bout time," was all they said then. They

didn't know. They didn't know she had twenty-eight dollars hid under the rug right now. She reaffirmed her decision not to tell them. Not even Katie.

"Mrs. Lane, do you think you need someone to help you?"

Tootie studied on it. It was a trick question like Judge Whompner would have asked. "I'd rather do it myself. I can do most of it. I just can't see to take care of myself in the morning."

"You mean to irrigate your colostomy?"

Tootie heard Katie move in her chair. This must be an important question. Tootie had always taken care of herself. Kirby would move the chair in there for her. He picked up the vaseline and soap. He got the Cancer Society bandages down from the top shelf. But she did the rest herself. Why couldn't she do it now? Oh, yes, she couldn't see. But she could hear, better than she could ever hear before. She could hear them on the street talking:

"Kirby Lane's widow."

"She must be a saint, puttin' up with that old geezer for fifty years."

Their picture had been in the Clarion. Fifty years. Not all bad. Not all bad.

"Yes," Katie interrupted. "She can't see to insert the tube properly and to keep everything clean."

"Let Mrs. Lane answer the questions please."

Tootie realized that Katie had helped her. She must have drifted off.

"Katie could help me take care of myself, but she can't get here every day. I have to do it in the morning. The Doctor said to do it at the same time every morning. The nurse in the hospital told me that too. I feel better if I do it early."

"When did you have the cancer surgery? How long ago?"

"Years! Maybe 25 years ago. They all said I couldn't handle it. It makes my sister sick. She can't hardly talk about it."

Only Kirby hadn't worried about her. He had just said, "Do it woman. It's your job, now." He even left when she came home from the hospital. He was gone ten days that time. He knew she could handle it and she did. By the time he got back it was a routine, a habit. He got back on the first. He always came back in time to pay the bills. They - the women who brought food - said he had deserted her when she needed him the most.

"God only knows where he's gone off to," they whispered. She didn't know where he'd gone. She never knew where Kirby went off to when he left. But this time he came back with money, money to pay the hospital. She should have told them that. Some things you just don't tell.

"Mrs. Lane, do you know who is president, President of the United States?"

"I didn't vote. I didn't want to. I hated to vote for a Republican and I'd had to vote for the actor, Ronald Reagan." Kirby used to take her to vote. They'd walk down

the alley and cut through the back of the Baptist Church, her church. Not Kirby's. He never went to church with her. Not even once. That's why they said he was an atheist. Maybe he was. He said he might die a lost soul, but never a hypocrite like some of her church friends. He shouldn't have judged them so harshly, the way they judged him. He should have gone to church with her. But, she didn't think he was an atheist.

"Mrs. Lane, do you know what day it is?"

"Tuesday."

"What date? What month and year?"

"October 15, ____. Tootie reached into her mind for the year, but it was not there. She said some years to herself, 1939, 1975, but they were wrong.

" I have to study on the year for a minute." She put her hand to her forehead and rubbed slightly, hoping to stimulate the thought. Clouds pushed into her memory. She felt a tight band around her throat.

"That's all right, Mrs. Lane. I forget the year sometime myself."

No, you don't, Tootie thought. Only an old, senile, washed-up hag who can't take care of herself would forget what year it is. Dear God, she prayed, what year is it? 1980? No. No. October 15, ____. She needed time to study on it. She was married in 1912. Her babies were born in 1919 and 20. Her mother died in 1930. Her father died in 1944, during the war. A year later her oldest son died. An

accident. Then Kirby. When was it Kirby died?

"Mrs. Lane, I th___"

"Wait a minute." It was 1969, the year they said we went to the moon. Kirby never believed it. He said they had all kinds of tricks they could do on the television. A while after that her boy had a heart attack. She couldn't remember the year. She went back to Kirby.

"Mrs. Lane, I think I have all I need now. I hope I haven't worn you out." She turned toward Katie and began explaining the next steps in the application process.

I failed the test, Tootie accosted herself. What year is it? Kirby, how long have you been dead? Old Ugly-cat died the same day, ten years later, 1979. That was the year the great-grandsons came to see me on Christmas. They were here for the first service at the new church. We will be in the new church nine years this Christmas. Mrs Kellogg said so.

"1988!" She said sharply. "It's 1988!" Her eyes squinted as she scanned the room for a response. There was no sound. She was alone.

Legacy of a Party

Jeannie finished making her sandwich and pulled the metal tab on the Mr. Pibb can. Taking a long drink, she looked out over the can to see her Daddy coming across the yard. He was carrying a case of beer and a paper bag bounced about the can tops, threatening to topple over the edge. Jeannie opened the door for him.

"You don't look sick to me." The stocky, ruddy-faced charmer smiled at his ten-year-old, wide eyed, dark-haired daughter as she took a second big bite into her sandwich. "What are you eating?"

"A sandwich." The mumbled syllables were barely audible. It was not a sandwich she was proud of.

"What kind of sandwich?"

"Mayonnaise."

"Mayonnaise? Mayonnaise and what?"

"Bread."

"A mayonnaise sandwich! Ugh! No wonder you're sick."

"I'm not sick."

"Your mother said you thought you were too sick to go to the dream party."

"Oh, yeah. I don't think I'll feel like going."

"But Jeannie, the party's not 'til tomorrow. How can you know today that you're not going to feel like going tomorrow?"

"O.K., I just don't want to go."

Jeannie's mother came into the room in time to catch the last statement. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. You love going to the Spenser's. Nobody had more fun than you did at last year's party. What's this all about?"

"I wish it was going to be here. I hate the long ride to their house."

"It's only a half-hour's ride, Jeannie. You'll hardly be settled in the car when we'll be there."

Jeannie knew better. She remembered the ride two years ago. She felt sick again.

"Look, Jeannie. Here's your new shirt. Jeannie's Mom pulled a white shirt from the bag that had bounced about the beer cans and held it up for her to see. On the front a blue cat held a plucked red bird by its long skinny neck. Beneath in blue letters were the words: "I'd Rather Be Dead Than Have A Red Head!"

Jeannie laughed. "OK, tomorrow's the dream party. I'm gonna show the shirt to Bobby." She grabbed it and ran through the hall and up the stairs.

When they had finished laughing at the new shirt, Jeannie became uncharacteristically serious. "Do you want to go to the dream party, Bobby?

"Hell, yes." Bobby didn't hesitate. Lately he used

the word "hell" a lot. Jeannie had noticed it ever since his fifteenth birthday. Whenever he used it, he really meant what he was saying. He's not a bit afraid of going, she thought.

"Don't you want to go, Jeannie? Gosh, it's gonna be great. Our boys are gonna pound 'em this year. I mean the cats are dy-na-mite. I mean we are going to dom-in-ate!"

"I know, Bobby." She couldn't help smiling at his enthusiasm.

Bobby swung his legs over the side of the bed where he had been prone, listening to Jeannie's questions. "I can't wait to see what the Spensers have fixed up for us. Remember the feathers?"

Jeannie's eyes brightened remembering the bag of red feathers she and Bobby had scattered under the dogwood tree in the front yard. Bobby had hung a stuffed redbird, mostly plucked so that it look badly wounded, from the lowest branch. She'd put a big blue bow on Garfield, the one she'd won at the fair, the one with the big smile, put a feather in his mouth and set him under the tree.

She and Dad and Bobby had painted signs, too. First they had painted them white. Then Bobby had lettered them in blue. One sign read, "WELCOME TO CAT COUNTRY". They had put it just on their side of the old Lead Creek Bridge where the Spensers couldn't miss seeing it when they crossed.

When she thought of the bridge, a lump formed in her throat. She put her hands to her throat to stop it from

getting any larger.

"What's the matter with you, Jeannie?"

Her brother's frown startled her, and Jeannie forgot the lump. "I like the dream party better when we have it at our house."

"Sure," Bobby agreed, "part of the fun is making all the decorations. Remember last year when we hung the twisted blue and white crepe paper strips from the light fixture over the table? Boy, it looked great."

"It matched the blue plastic plates and cups."

"And Mom's blueberry cheese cake. But, you know, Jeannie, it wouldn't be fair if we had all the fun. Every other year we have to give the Spensers a chance."

"Yeah, I guess. Bobby, how long have we been going to the dream parties?"

"A long time. When I was a kid, the University of Kentucky used to never play basketball against the University of Louisville. They were, like, in two different leagues. I mean, UK played only the best teams. Everyone always talked about how it would be if the two teams met, but talk was cheap because everyone knew they wouldn't meet. Then it happened. The two teams met in the semi-finals of the Mid-East regionals. The Dream Game. I remember how excited we were. It was 1982. The Spensers were big Louisville Cardinal fans even then. They had the first dream party. No one calls it the dream game any more, now that they play every year. But we still call it a dream

party.

"Do you remember last year's game, Jeannie? It was a real thriller. No one was ever more than five points ahead, and the cats...."

Jeannie did not remember last year's game. But she remembered going to the party two years ago, and she did not want to go tomorrow.

Dad was the first one up the next morning. He had already had breakfast when Jeannie came downstairs. "Want to help me decorate the car?" he asked as she came into the kitchen.

"No, I don't feel good."

"Jeannie, you're not going to start that again, are you? Bobby will help me decorate, but you are going with us to the party."

"I'll help," she offered, hoping to soften the determined lines she saw in her Daddy's face.

There was no joy in the decorating of the car. Her Daddy had blue and white plastic flyers for the antenna and signs for the bumpers. He laughed about them, but the sounds were muffled in Jeannie's ears. She felt the pressure of an echo chamber, and she could not respond.

When they returned to the kitchen, Jeannie sat in the corner, absent-mindedly chewing on a piece of toast while the rest of her family made plans for the dream party.

"I'm going to begin celebrating our victory early." Her Daddy took a beer from the refrigerator and peeled back

the aluminum tab.

The fizz was like an alarm to Jeannie. She heard the light blast into the air and from her memory she heard again the brush of scattering rocks as the right tires hit the soft shoulders. She remembered gasping, loudly, gulping air in fear. As if in sympathy, she did it again.

"Shut up, Jeannie, we just hit some loose rock." She heard him say it again as if she were back there in the car two years ago.

Jeannie's stomach hurt. Tight muscles pulled against her diaphragm making it difficult to breathe. Bobby and her Daddy were going over recent game statistics, comparing players. They were right next to her. She heard them, but their voices were distant, muffled by the continuing sound of the fizz.

"Jeannie."

Her mother's voice startled her.

"Change your clothes. It's almost time to go. Put your new shirt on and wear some blue and white ribbons in your hair. Want me to fix them?"

"No, I can do it." Jeannie went complacently up to her room.

A half-hour or so later, when she returned, her Daddy was the only one in the kitchen. He was wearing his "GO BIG BLUE!" shirt, and he was drinking another beer. Jeannie remembered two years before when she had asked him not to drink before he drove to the Spenser's. He had become very

angry. Biting on the end of her finger, she stared at the nearly empty can.

"Want a drink, honey?"

"No." Her answer was indignant, and her Daddy looked confused. He continued watching her closely.

Bobby came in spouting knock-knock jokes about the Cats and the Cards. Jeannie knew he thought he was terribly funny. Sometimes she thought so too. But today she could not laugh.

"Let's go, gang." Her Daddy held the door until everyone was out. Jeannie was last. She noticed that he was still watching her, studying her, like she had words written on her face. She felt guilty, but she was not sure why. Maybe because she was wishing that something would happen to keep them from going. Maybe the car won't start. Maybe Daddy will be dizzy from the beer and fall down the back steps and break his leg. Oh, her stomach hurt. She kicked stubs into the lawn, making her way to the car.

"Jeannie, why don't you sit up front with your mother? Bobby and I need to do some serious planning about how we're going to gloat when we win this game." Her Daddy touched her shoulder warmly, giving it an understanding squeeze, and then he stooped, getting into the back seat.

Jeannie looked from him to her mother. "Want me to drive?" her mother was saying as she shuffled through her purse looking for keys.

Jeannie felt pounds of weighty tissue melt away from

her body. She climbed into the front seat. Her heart pounded, pushing heat into her face.

"I'll bet the Spensers use that Bad-Call Brick, again." Jeannie heard Bobby talking to her Daddy in the back seat, but she didn't turn around so they could see her. "Remember that red brick," he went on. "It was made out of sponge and they threw it at the TV every time we got a fair call. I'll bet they'll be throwin' that red brick again this year."

Jeannie felt herself giggle. It was not a laugh. It was a giggle - the kind that keeps on coming, the kind you can't stop.

Watchers

The two men watched one another in turns. Little Steve watched the back of Sheriff Canton's shoulders move with the draw of his cigar as he strode down the long hall. Pacing back, the sheriff watched Little Steve who had diverted his attention to an imaginary spider on the cell wall. Watching was a habit cultivated in the long hours that filled the county jail. Little Steve had become proficient at it and held that advantage over the sheriff. Whereas Little Steve could inspect and dissect the sheriff's physical motion, mental attitude, and direct intention, all in a span of the hall's length, the sheriff's watchfulness was slow to bring him enough data to form his purpose. Of course, Little Steve had the further advantage of knowing the sheriff well. Over the years of their acquaintance, Little Steve had participated with his friends in lengthy discussions on the sheriff's general character and breeding. In a group study, they had determined just when one might expect the sheriff to appear and for what purpose. They had discussed at length the expression on his face as an indication of his intentions. The coloring of Sheriff Canton's complexion suggested to Little Steve and his friends what attitude they should adopt in their responses to his questions -- the

darker red, for example, the less they should say. From the position of the sheriff's cap, Little Steve had often correctly decided whether he should stand or sit and how much attention he should feign. Little Steve's extensive research into the sheriff's character put him at a definite advantage.

Also, there was the mouse. Little Steve had been practicing the art of watching on a small, gray, pink-bellied mouse who had scampered in with the jailer's wife when she served lunch the previous Wednesday. For five days the uprooted mouse had run from corner to corner in search of an escape tunnel.

"You've been watchin' too many war movies on TV," Little Steve had told the confused rodent. "If you want out, you're goin' to haf to make a run for it when they bring the lunch." But the tiny mouse must have had a matching brain, for he did not complete the suggested plan. Instead, whenever the door was opened, he sped behind the cot to the furthermost corner of the cell.

Since Little Steve could not convince him that his retreat was in opposition to his freedom, the young man determined to aid and abet the unjustly incarcerated mouse by depositing pieces of cornbread in the corner beneath the sink. Little Steve had deliberately chosen that corner because he could watch it from his seat on the cot and because, being on the front wall, the corner could not be seen by watchers other than himself.

The mouse seemed to become familiar with Little Steve's habits and to depend upon them. He obviously trusted his cellmate to provide the morsels and, within minutes after the meal had been delivered, the door clanging shut as the jailor's wife left, the tiny bit of gray fur would ease its way down the wall-to-floor seam to gather up the prize. Little Steve watched the cautious advance. He watched the mouse so closely that he could describe the movement of the tiny whiskers in the chewing process. Careful, however, not to watch the mouse while the sheriff was watching him, Little Steve began to form a plan for the escape of his cellmate. Despite the wet-mopped cleanliness and disinfectant odor of the cell, Little Steve counted on the mouse surviving until the end of the week when he would be getting out himself.

A squeak of the door alerted the prisoner that it was his turn to watch again. Little Steve studied the back of Sheriff Canton's neck, the middle bulge of fat holding up an upper bulge, a wad of hair and, finally, a cap. Then he devoted his attention to his nails while Sheriff Canton studied him. Canton didn't seem to be able to hide his dislike for the small-framed, blond boy busily cleaning his nails. The boy was so predictable that he offered no challenge to the experienced detective. Canton found him to be like all small people, easily led, easily misled. Little Steve's capture was no feather in the sheriff's cap. He had caught a bluegill while fishing for a cat, and the bluegill

was barely legal size. Perhaps he ought to have thrown him back. As Sheriff Canton sized up the bluegill, he rubbed his chin in thoughtful disgust.

"Well, Steve, you've only got a few more days to stay with us," the sheriff greeted the fidgeting boy. "Been thinkin' 'bout what you're gonna do when you get out?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are your plans, Steve?"

"I think I'll get a job." The boy shuffled his feet to prove his attentiveness.

"It ain't gonna be easy," suggested the sheriff. "You've got yourself a reputation 'round here. You should maybe think of lookin' up in Louisville or Cincinnati where you're not so well known."

"You're right about that." Steve stood up to match the sheriff's reddening face.

"With a little help, you could drive up to Louisville, get you a room, and then look for a job. You got a car, Steve?"

"That's my Ford truck out in the parkin' lot, Sheriff. The one I was drivin' when you pulled me over. But it ain't runnin' right."

"Maybe you could get it fixed up. You ought to ask your girlfriend to see what it'd cost you to get it fixed up." The sheriff paused as if assessing the problem. " You need to be plannin' for your future a little so you don't end up back in here again next month."

"Yes, sir." Little Steve was extremely agreeable.

The sheriff ambled on back the hall. The watch was over.

By Tuesday, Little Steve had worked out a way to catch the mouse in his cap. It was no big deal catching the rodent, but Steve wasn't sure how long he could keep it quiet in his cap without the sheriff or the jailor noticing. He was going through a practice run when the jailor brought him a visitor.

"What are you doin' here, Tanya?" Steve tossed both mouse and cap beneath the cot.

"The sheriff said I could come in and see ya." The girl's quick, nervous grin was an ineffective attempt to be casual. "He said you was gettin' out Friday."

"You better get out'a here," Little Steve grumbled. "Your daddy's gonna have a fit if he hears you was here seein' me."

"I don't care 'bout him," Tanya returned smartly. "I can see anybody I want to. Want me to pick you up Friday? I can get the car. They don't know you're gettin' out."

"Yeah, Tanya. Come by and get me. Ask the sheriff what time. And Tanya, ask Billy to look at my truck and let me know if he can fix it. Ask him to let me know how much, will ya?"

"Sure, Stevie."

"Go on, now, Tanya, before somebody finds out you were here."

"See ya Friday, Stevie," Tanya shook her fisted hand twice and gave her lover a tremulous smile.

On Wednesday, the two men continued to watch one another. They were friendlier than usual, but no conversation interrupted Little Steve's study of the escape plan. He still could not get the mouse to lie quietly within the folds of the cap.

On Thursday, Billy stopped in to say he could fix the truck, and an hour or so later, the sheriff strode down the hall. Little Steve watched his heaving back. Canton stopped when he got to Little Steve's cell and interrupted the young man who was busy getting his blond locks to fall into their proper places.

"Well, Steve," the sheriff studied the boy's blank face. "Tomorrow's the big day. Have you been thinkin' 'bout what you're gonna do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." There was a long period of conversationalless quiet. "And what have you decided?"

"I've decided to get a job." The prisoner spoke with a note of finality.

"Glad to hear it." Another long pause. "Have you thought about looking up in Cincinnati?" The sheriff's voice sounded hopeful.

"I thought about it, Sheriff Canton, but I just don't have the money to go up there, and my truck ain't fixed up yet."

"Ya' know, Little Steve, I hate to see a boy like yourself end up in a bad way, become an embarrassment to your parents, spend your time in a jail cell. I feel like a good job in a new town might be just what you need to turn your life around. I really hate to see you here. It's not the place for you. You're basically a good kid, but you just haven't had many opportunities."

"I guess not, Sheriff."

"It was bad luck, you gettin' caught with that little bit of marijuana. You ended up here, and the real criminals, the guys who sold you the stuff, are out celebrating.

Little Steve, unsure whether to agree to this or not, simply cleared his throat.

"You know, Steve, it's too bad. That's the way it happens too often. I mean, we didn't want to arrest you, especially since we knew Eddie Greenwell was the real culprit. I mean he's makin' a fortune sellin' to you young guys, and he's scot free."

In an obvious attempt to avoid oral commitment to the sheriff's theory, Little Steve shifted nervously to his other foot.

"I'd like to help you out, Little Steve. You know, Eddie Greenwell is no friend of yours."

The nervous prisoner seemed relieved to find something he could agree to.

"No, sir, he's no friend of mine."

"You don't owe him a thing, boy. He sure didn't give it a second thought when you got picked up."

"No, sir, I don't owe him nothing."

"The truth is," Sheriff Canton began to philosophize, "you don't owe anybody but yourself. It's time you started thinkin' 'bout yourself. What you need is a chance, a new start, a new job."

"I sure would like to get a job."

"And you could get one, Little Steve. You owe it to yourself. Be your own best friend. That Greenwell fellow ain't nothing to you."

"No, sir, he's no friend of mine. He never done nothin' for me."

"Maybe I could help you get that job, Little Steve."

"I sure would appreciate it, Sheriff."

"Maybe I could get you some gas money and a little for a room and food so you could make a new start. You got nothing to hold you here, do you, boy?"

"No, sir, I got nothing special here."

"Well, I'd be willing to help you if you'd be willing to help me."

Little Steve's thoughtful expression awaited the sheriff's proposition. He altered his apparent inclination to lean against the bars since the sheriff was already there.

"I'll tell you what I can do for you, Steve. I can help you get a start and you can help me keep Greenwell from

putting other kids, like yourself, in jail. I can give you the money to make a buy. You make the buy, bring the stuff to me, and tell the judge about it. It's that simple. You know Greenwell. He'll sell to you. Hell, he sells to everybody. We pick you up and you tell the truth about the sale. It's no skin off your back. You're gonna be leavin' town anyway. Taking the seed money I'm gonna give you to get a new start up in Cincinnati. There's a lot of good jobs up there in Cincinnati. One night's time doin' me a favor and you're gone. Course, you'd have to come back and testify - just tell the judge about it. But you ain't goin' that far. It wouldn't be no trouble for you to drive down here, especially since you'd have your truck all fixed up and runnin' good."

"I sure would like to get the truck fixed up. Billy said he could fix it."

"Sure, he could," encouraged the sheriff. "You'll be leavin' here this afternoon with enough money to get it fixed. You think you could make the buy, maybe a week from now, maybe next Friday?"

"I guess I could do it," Little Steve stammered with reluctance.

"Greenwell wouldn't think there was nothin' unusual about you wantin' to make a buy. I'd let you handle it completely on your own. Let's say we give you $500 today. We make no contact with you once you leave here so there's no reason why anyone would suspect you're buying for us.

You get ahold of Greenwell late in the week. Tell him you're goin' up to Cincinnati. You're gonna take the stuff up there for a quick profit. Tell him anything you want to, just so he don't get suspicious. Meet him on Friday, buy the stuff, and bring it back here to me. It's that simple."

"I don't know, Sheriff," Little Steve slowed in doubt. "It's gonna cost a lot to get my truck fixed, and then I'd haf to have quite a bit to get me started lookin' for a job."

Sheriff Canton's face reddened. "OK, kid," he said. "You get $700 when you leave here."

"I think I could do it, Sheriff. Greenwell is no friend of mine. I don't owe him a thing." He paused thoughtfully. "Sheriff, since I'm gonna' be leavin' here, I mean, you know, movin' away, do you think I could take Tanya out to dinner as a sort of good-bye occasion?"

Sheriff Canton's eyes steadied themselves, and he glared at the boy.

"$720, Little Steve," he said, "and you contact me as soon as you've made the buy. We'll expect you Friday night."

"Yes, sir." Little Steve was agreeable again. "I'll be here."

"You got any questions?"

The boy shook his head.

"We understand each other?"

Little Steve seemed unsure if it were a question or a

statement.

"Yes, sir," he ventured.

It was all arranged. At 4:30 Little Steve put the last of the cornbread crumbs in the sink corner of the cell, readied his cap, and sat back on the cot to watch. His eyes scanned the length of the floor-to-wall seam. No mouse. He waited. Finally, he went to the door, shook it, stirred the crumbs with his forefinger and sat back down on the cot. Nothing.

Restless with waiting, he got down on his hands and knees to inspect the corner behind the cot. He stirred the air with the bill of his cap. The only movement in the cell was his own. He made a thorough search of the corners, the floor, the cot. He even looked up. The mouse was gone. At first perplexed, he began to smile at the ingenuity of the mouse who had found his own way out.

Little Steve left the jail feeling good with his cap on his head and $720 in his pocket. The sheriff watched him saunter down the concrete steps and get into Tanya's car.

"Keep an eye on him," he told his deputy, "from a distance."

On Saturday, Billy towed away the disabled Ford truck, and by Monday, Little Steve was driving about the county at a predictable sixty-five miles per hour. Word spread that Little Steve was movin' to Louisville, and on Thursday night the sheriff's deputy reported that he had followed the boy and Tanya down to the Executive Inn where they ordered

dinner from a table with a romantic view of the river.

At five o'clock on Friday, the sheriff lit his cigar and settled into his desk chair to wait. Little Steve didn't call until 10:30 by which time the sheriff's face was red and his ashtray, full.

"Sheriff, it's me, Steve. I made the buy."

"Where the hell are you?" the sheriff barked into the phone.

"I'm out at the park. I'm in the diner out here, and I was wonderin' if you'd mind comin' out here instead of me comin' down to the jail. I sorta hate to come back down there."

"Stay where you are. I'll be right there."

Within a few minutes Sheriff Canton pulled into the crowded parking lot and quickly entered the diner. Little Steve was sitting at a table on the far side of the room. The sheriff cleared his face of an uneasy expression. He sat down across from the boy.

"Have you got it?"

"Yes, sir. I did just what you said."

"Tell me what happened."

"I told him I was goin' to Louisville to get a job. I didn't mention about your helping me to get started. I asked him for the stuff. He gave it to me. I paid him and came here. Then I called you."

"Where is it?"

"Well, I was a little nervous about havin' it on me. I

mean, you know, that's how I got in jail in the first place. So, I got somebody to put it in your car when you pulled up. It's out there on the seat."

The sheriff got up quickly. "Come on, boy, let's take a look," he said.

Little Steve followed him out to the car. On the seat of the car was a small white wad of tissue. The sheriff picked it up.

"That's it," said Little Steve proudly.

Sheriff Canton unrolled the tissue which held one, slightly smudged joint.

"This is it? What the hell do you think you're trying to pull? I gave you $720 and you bought one joint?" The sheriff's voice was loud and his face was getting very red.

"You didn't say how much you wanted." Little Steve's small size added to his totally innocent appearance.

"You stupid bastard, where's the rest of the money?"

The sheriff's tone startled the young people loitering in the parking lot. Curious to see if Little Steve was being arrested again, they began to move in closer near the cruiser.

"I said where's the rest of the money," Canton glared at the blond boy shifting from one foot to the other.

"I spent most of it." There was a brief pause. "I got the truck fixed and Tanya and me went out to dinner. You said that'd be OK. I got a room up in Louisville. It's close to the mushroom farm. That's where I'm gonna work. I

got a job diggin' mushrooms or doin' somethin' with 'em. I start Monday." Little Steve's voice was growing pleased, and the crowd was nodding in approval.

"I want to thank you, Sheriff Canton, for helpin' me to get started on a new life. I'm leavin' for Louisville tonight, right now, as a matter of fact. You don't have to worry no more 'bout me. I won't be botherin' your jail again. I got a job and a place and a lot to look forward to. And I owe it all to your good advice."

The crowd broke into spontaneous clapping.

"If you need me to testify, tell Tanya. She'll know how to get ahold of me." Little Steve reached out to shake the sheriff's hand.

The color of Canton's complexion revealed that he was thinking hard. Yet, unaware of his automatic handshake, he glared, wordlessly, at the boy. Sullenly, the sheriff watched him get in the fixed-up Ford truck and drive off through the cheering crowd.

Ageing Black Walnuts

Anna walked like she breathed, unaware of the action. On this warm September afternoon, George watched her brisk, sure movement some eight feet in front of him. She paused, bent to pick up a gum ball, and continued alongside him. George and Anna walked well together. She no longer had to make an effort to keep up with him, and because she enjoyed touching the leaves, bushes, and flowers along the path, she seldom passed him up. Perhaps from years of practise, their steps generally fell together.

"What are you going to do with all them scraps?" she indicated the wood pieces she pushed in the wire cart George had fashioned from an old baby stroller. Wood pieces and short planks salvaged from the construction site of the riverfront apartment building poked through the sides and top of the cart. Although Anna had complained about looking like a garbage picker, she had shuffled carefully through the clutter on the river bank to select only the best pieces. Their fine collection added a glint of anticipation to their routine four block walk to and from the post office.

"Oh, I don't know," George answered slowly. "It's good wood. I might make some blocks for Marsha's boy for

Christmas."

"It'd cost more to mail 'em all the way to California than they'd be worth. That child's too old for blocks anyway."

"A boy's never too old for blocks," George paused, "and we can afford the postage."

"Maybe Marsha and her family will get back here for Christmas."

"Not likely. Not likely." George accepted the absence of his children realistically.

"They might," Anna proposed, but she let the conversation drop. They had only one block to go, and she did not prolong her wish.

George directed all his attention to his walk. His steps became more difficult. By the time he reached the porch, he had already eyed the green aluminum chair that awaited him. He eased his body into the chair, relaxed, and congratulated himself on the distance covered while Anna pushed the basket around back, parked it in its usual place beside the back porch, and went inside to the kitchen.

George leaned his head back against the padding Anna had made for his chair and smiled. He entwined his fingers across his stomach and dozed peacefully.

"What ya gonna do with all that wood, Mr. Baker?"

George opened his eyes and insisted they focus on the two small figures standing in front of him. He recognized the uniformly dressed duo, two neighborhood boys whose

sweat-dampened, light blue shirts and muddied navy pants suggested they were on their way home from school.

"Boys, you look like it's too hot to be in school."

"It is," nodded Tom. "School started too early again this year."

"What happened to your pants?" George pointed to the skin shining through like an egg yolk amid a circle of dried mud, knee level on Tom's pants.

"I fell down on the playground at recess and tore a hole in 'em," Tom explained matter-of-factly.

"Did you fall down today, too, Joe?" George had moved his eyes to the knees of Tom's slightly shorter companion.

"Naw, I got them holes last week, I think." Joe sat down on the grass to examine the specimens a little closer.

"What ya' gonna do with that wood you got around back?" Tom repeated his original question.

"I haven't decided," George replied. "I'm gonna use it for something real special. The first thing I need to do with it is to get it in the shed. Do you boys think you could help me do that?"

"Sure," Tom said, and the two of them dropped their books and ran around the corner of the house before George could get out of the chair.

By the time George reached the shed, the wood was neatly stacked beneath his workbench. Anna had overheard the work force and was directing the activity.

"Thanks, boys," George joined them. "Why don't you

come in for a visit?"

"We can't," explained Tom. "We got to go home and change so we can go huntin'."

"Yeah, we're goin' huntin'," Joe beamed with enthusiasm.

George watched the two scamper off like the rabbits they'd soon be stalking. "It really is too hot for kids to be in school," he said.

"It won't be for long. Jack Frymire says we're in for a cold winter. He says we're going to have eight measureable snows this year. I read it in the paper."

"Don't he say exactly when it's going to start?" George teased.

"Laugh if you want to, but Mr. Frymire knows what he's talking about. He was right last year, and I'll bet we get all eight of them this year," Anna warned. "I'm goin' on inside. You comin'?"

"No, I'm gonna do some work in the shed." George turned his attention to the workbench and it was almost supper time when he came out of the shed and carefully closed the door, turning the wooden latch on the outside. He walked slowly toward the house. Midway he stopped and leaned on the chair balancing himself while he looked in the direction of a noise from the clump of forest that partially hid the bend in the river. George watched the two boys emerge from the trees. When they crossed over to his side of the road, he could see that they were carrying some

sticks.

"What ya' got there?" he called to them.

"Joe broke his bow and arrow," Tom said in a thoroughly disgusted voice. "He fell on 'em."

"Bring 'em over here and let me take a look."

While they crossed the yard, George managed to move around to the front of the chair. He sat down to get a better look at the broken weapon.

"I'm afraid I can't do anything about the arrow, but the bow just needs a new string. Tom, you go ask Anna to give you some string from the kitchen drawer and a pair of scissors."

Joe relaxed his long, drawn face and watched closely as George removed the broken string. He replaced it with a piece Tom held out apprehensively and trimmed up the job with the scissors Anna had taken personal charge of.

"Here ya' are." George returned the bow. "Sorry about the arrow."

"Gosh, thanks, Mr. Baker," Tom said. "We got more arrows. It don't really matter about them. You fixed that bow up good."

Joe reached into his bulging pockets and retrieved two handfuls of black walnuts. "You want these? We found 'em in the woods. They might be Indian food."

"That's exactly what they are," George smiled.

"They are?" Joe was astounded at his own expertise.

"They're black walnuts," Anna explained, "and if you

have enough for a recipe, they make the best brownies in the world."

"I got some, too." Tom emptied his pockets in such a hurry that his hands got in the way. "Is there enough?" he asked hopefully.

"I don't think so." She squinted her eyes measuring the small pile of nuts they had spilled on the ground. "They have to be hulled and then cracked and picked. It takes a lot to get a cup of nutmeats."

"We'll get some more. There's lots in the woods."

"It's too late tonight," Anna touched the small boy's shoulder. "It's almost dark now."

"Maybe you can find some after school tomorrow," George suggested. "I don't think the Indians will eat too many between now and then," he smiled at the boys.

"OK, we'll see ya' tomorrow," Tom said, assembling his hunting gear.

"See ya' tomorrow," Joe added.

And they were gone.

Anna gathered the walnuts into her apron. She and George exchanged smiles over the boys' enthusiasm. Their smiles lingered filled with memories of the enthusiasm of other boys many years ago. They walked together to the back door.

The next day was the first of many deliveries from Tom and Joe. About twice a week they stopped by the Baker's kitchen with a basket of black walnuts. Usually they found

a plate of freshly baked walnut brownies on the table. While they ate in the backyard, they watched George break away the green-brown hulls. George used the wire spool turned on its side for a table. He hit the walnut with a smart whack of his hammer to crack it. He showed the boys how to wield the hammer to crack the nut severely without smashing the meat.

One afternoon in October, Tom and Joe found George in the shed. When they had emptied their pockets of walnuts, George handed each of them a wire rack. Placing them on the bricks George had already assembled, they formed a line of racks. George explained to them how walnuts should be aged before eaten so they wouldn't rot or mold and could be stored through the winter. With Anna's help they spread the nut meats over the racks where they could benefit from the sun. George moved his fingers through the nut pieces to scatter them.

"Now you can cook brownies all winter even if it snows and we can't find the walnuts? I hope it snows." The child's afterthought probed Goerge's experience.

"Oh, it'll snow all right," George said, relaxing in a chair near the drying racks.

"Eight times," Anna laughed as she returned to the kitchen.

"How does she know it'll snow eight times?" Tom asked amazed at Anna's prediction.

"She's just guessing." George did not to try to

explain. "She's right, though, about the winter. You'll find fewer and fewer walnuts on your hunting trips. But you've already gathered enough to fill several of these racks."

"Where's the rest of 'em?" Tom's eyes sought the old man's answer.

"Well, some of 'em are waitin' to be shelled and some of 'em are needin' to be picked. Anna does most of the pickin'." George held out his swollen hands as proof. "I'm better at crackin' than pickin'."

"Me, too," said Joe, picking up the hammer. The three of them turned their attention to the walnut business.

A few weeks later on a Saturday afternoon in November, George moved slowly along the drying line he had formed with his six framed screens. He carefully noted each of the precious walnut kernels, turning those that had begun to age. He lifted the sixth screen, gave it a calculated shake, and placed it at the end of the line nearer the shade. Debating the building of a seventh screen, George remembered the stack of wood he had accumulated in the shed. A chilly wind at his back urged his feet along the path in that direction.

At the foot of the shed door, a woolly worm inched his way toward a warmer environment. George steadied himself with his right hand against the door and bent to examine the traveler. Careful not to disturb the worm's journey, he refrained from touching it, but moved in close enough to

recognize the small band of light fur at the worm's neck.

George rubbed near the sensitive shoulder blade his hand could never quite reach in agreement with the prediction of the woolly worm's dark coat. He straightened his back with some effort and left the pile of wood pieces to wait the winter.

George's small steps and frequent pauses were deliberate, and he touched the tree, the chair, the porch banister with the assurance of familiarity. Once inside the house, he pushed up the sleeves of his comfortably worn sweater and washed his puffy hands at the sink. The warm water relieved the stiffness of his fingers, and he used the towel to dry and massage them. He flexed his fingers to make sure they would react properly.

Almost confidently, he lifted the plate of brownies that Anna had baked and carried it from the table to the window sill above the sink. The deep smile lines of George's face fell deftly into place as he approved the sweet, magnetic smell of the brownies. George studied the silent distance as he often did lately. Even with a squint George could see no movement from the woods near the river bank. He turned his best ear toward the window so that he might detect some hint of approach. His eyes widened briefly when he caught the jumbled sound of buzzing and crackling.

George moved rather too quickly away from the window. He held on to the table edge, caught his breath, and lowered

himself into his reading chair. He lifted one leg and then the other onto the hassock. The laughter of the nut-gathers came more clearly as George picked up the morning paper. He adjusted his glasses and prepared himself for a surprise visit from the more active partners in his walnut business.

"Hey Mr. Baker! You in there, Mr. Baker?" a red-faced, camouflaged-colored ten-year-old called out. "It's me and Joe, Mr. Baker. We got some nuts for ya'."

"Come on in, boys." George motioned to the two little heads now bobbing at the storm door. "You say you found some more walnuts?"

"Not as many as before, but we're glad we got some, right, Joe?" Tom came through the door displaying his nut collection in the wire fish basket he had borrowed from his sister. His brother, a veritable rough copy of himself, followed on his heels.

"I'd say you were lucky to find any nuts this late in the fall," George congratulated them. "Pour 'em in the pan on the sink. There's enough there to keep me busy for a while yet."

Joe took a seat at the table while Tom went about the delivery. "I guess you been cooking some of them nuts this morning, Mr. Baker." Tom pointed toward the plate of brownies with his chin since both his hands were engaged.

"Mrs. Baker mixed up a batch of her best brownies," George tempted them with delay. "She thought you boys might enjoy some of the fruits of your labor."

"I ain't too big on fruits," Joe said, "but I sure do like brownies."

The old man moved slowly out of his chair and returned the brownies to the table. Tom joined them quickly, and George proudly passed around the plate. He didn't have to eat any to enjoy this treat. The boys helped themselves to a respectable two apiece.

Tom shared the exploits of the morning hike. He related the brief encounter with a rabbit they had chased through the woods and had almost caught; he described in detail the droppings from a deer that must have passed across their path only hours before; he drew air pictures of the tracks they had followed all the way to the river bank.

"I smelled them brownies before we ever got here," Joe broke in. "They sure smelled good."

"Have another," George grinned.

"One more for the road," Tom helped himself.

"I'll wrap up a couple for you to take home," George suggested, and he began looking for the waxed paper.

"Does Mrs. Baker care if you do that?" Joe asked.

"She'll be glad I sent 'em with you, I'm sure."

"It's real nice of you to do that. I never saw paper like that before. My mom uses aluminum paper."

"Well, this will hold it, I think."

Tom had retrieved his wire basket and was moving toward the door. "See you later, Alligator," he waved.

Joe followed him out carrying the brownies. "After

while, Crocodile," he beamed.

"Don't mash them, Joe. You boys be good," he called from the doorway.

Joe paused as he passed the drying nutmeats. "You don't have no more room on your racks. You gonna build any more?"

"Not this year, Joe. I can feel the winter in the air. There won't be many more nuts to gather." George watched the boys zigzag across the road and turn the corner.

Later that afternoon, he told Anna about the boys' visit. He elaborated on their exploits in the woods, describing in detail the frightened rabbit they had chased through the fall leaves. He shook his head acknowledging their fun while he put the aged nuts into plastic bags to make room for the newly shelled ones. Anna wrapped wire twisters around the tops of the small bags.

"How many more do you expect to shell? We have more than we need, now. Aren't you getting tired of fooling with them? You've worked yourself all day cracking, picking, and spreading these things."

"This will be the end of 'em, Anna," George put the nuts in the cabinet. I expect we can use the other eight during the winter."

"I don't know what we're gonna use 'em for. It don't seem right doin' all this work and we aren't supposed to eat nuts anyway." She shook her head at the foolishness of it. "Course, I know it's really for the boys. I wish I hadn't

missed them this afternoon. I don't guess they'll be coming 'round now that the walnuts are gone."

"No, I don't expect so." George spread the last few meats on the drying frames and began stacking them to take inside out of the damp night air. "They're getting to be a right good size, the boys are. 'Specially Tom. He's got good, strong arms on him for his age. I was noticing this morning how much they've both grown." He paused a moment. "I was thinking we might ask 'em to shovel the snow off the walk this winter. Could give 'em each a dollar to clear the front walk. It'd be good for 'em to earn a little money, and it'd save us havin' to slide around in the cold."

Anna glanced at her husband, but he was preoccupied with the rack of nuts and didn't see her smile.

About Mr. Yardley's Letter

Gossip in a small town is rampant. So much of it is true that people are apt to believe all of it, and, like all gossip, there's a vast amount that's pure fancy. The small town health department achieves a place of importance at least second-in-line among gossip sources. It is the sorting machine for sex offenders, no matter how small or how personal the offense. When an outbreak of a social disease causes the health department to quadruple its out-going mail stack, the post office, third-in-line among gossip sources, becomes involved, and telephone wires hum with the news. The whole town enjoys an I-told-you-so chuckle at the expense of a few wayward clients of the local pool hall, the first-in-line gossip source.

An occurrence of this kind stirred the heavy November air hanging over the telephone lines in our small river town. While we were busy vocalizing the latest health hazard, in terms of whether there were forty-nine or fifty-two letters in the out-going mail stack at the health department, Ed Yardley, if you can believe what you hear, knew only of his own letter which he immediately shredded and burned. Though decisiveness is totally out-of-character for Ed, he apparently fought the perspiration of

fear with action. Before his wife had returned with the groceries, he dug into last week's newspapers to find the advertisement he remembered. Without hesitation he drove to the only local public phone at the shopping center and called long distance to Indiana to the newly-opened office of Charles L. Beechmont, M.D., where he made an appointment for 4:30 that same afternoon. Ed returned home and began his daily routine on the farm before anyone knew he had stirred. Anyone, that is, except the two early risers who saw him using the public phone, an extraordinary action for anyone who is not in some secretive trouble, and his father, who met him before he reached the barn.

"And where you been runnin' off to?" The older man stood with his hands on his hips just as he had stood when he had disciplined Ed as a small boy.

"Had an errand." Ed's I'm-already-late tone seemed to satisfy the older man's question, and both of them began the feeding silently.

Most of the many hours they spend together in the business of caring for their cattle are spent in total silence. Neither man cares for the other despite the familial bond, and each would prefer working with Ed's only son Jimmy. But since, as we all know, Jimmy's never going to be a farmer, neither will ever have his wish.

Jimmy Yardley has chosen a more social career. He owns and manages the local pool hall and grill. His marriage to a local beauty has already lasted an entire

year, contrary to the predictions of both his father and grandfather, and has resulted in his inheritance of The Pool Hall, simply named but grandly prosperous. Townspeople generally agree that Jimmy is a credit to his mother-in-law's memory. He provides his clientele with quick food, hot coffee, and frequent stories. They, or I should say we, provide one another with good company, and The Pool Hall continues to be the most popular place in the county for 5:30 breakfast, 10:00 coffee, 12:00 lunch, 3:15 after-school snacks, and 7:00-10:00 P.M. sandwiches, gossip, and other speculative offerings. These include the opportunity to mingle with the town's finest ladies and gentlemen and its most notorious riff-raff, all in the course of one evening. Everyone from R.B.Gifford, the county judge, to Smooth Sally Jennings, the alleycat queen, can be expected to show up at The Pool Hall several nights during the week and regularly on Saturdays. The Pool Hall is the place to go before you decide where you're going. In short, Jimmy's "ridiculous lark" is a huge success.

His choice of a profession is indicative of his personality. Jimmy is rebellious, fun-loving, personable, popular. His free-spirited, live-for-the-moment philosophy makes him the exact opposite of his father and the stone in his grandfather's shoe. Nonetheless, both the older men find his charm irresistible and refuse to detach themselves from his company, which most of us find admirable in them. Each day at noon they head for The Pool Hall for lunch and

the light, fascinating company of their only offspring.

Generally the elder Yardley spends his hour bantering words with his grandson as he long ago bantered them with his spirited wife. The devilish exchange enlivens him and probably provides him replays for lonely evenings in the large, rambling Yardley Place, unaccustomed, as it is, to its present, silent condition. Like the farmhouse, Mr. Yardley prefers the noise of human conflict and the warmth of human contact. And, so, several times a week he also eats his supper, has his evening coffee with The Pool Hall company, and stays until almost everyone has gone home.

Ed seldom comes by in the evenings, maybe early on a Saturday night when the place is crowded and Sally is entertaining with her version of the latest gossip. Ed always seems to enjoy her stories though he knows, like the rest of us, that there's little to no truth in 'em. Generally, though, Ed's evenings are spent in the company of his wife unless there are ag dinners or meetings. Their frequency is the only suggestion of Ed's enthusiasm for the business of agriculture, but some say he only uses them as an excuse to free him from the chilly house where he never seems quite at home and from the company of his father who no longer attends due to the privilege of age. It is our opinion that Ed never fits in any home, neither in his wife's, where he must be shoeless, capless and dirtless, nor in his father's, where he hung his cap as a boy. Ed's one token rebellious act was his parting from that house.

That was years back, of course, but we remember it like yesterday. All the town buzzed with the news that Ed had ignored his father's threats and run off with his pretty high school sweetheart. We were astonished at his defiance but gratified when he returned with his bride to the small white frame tenant house that lay within the shadow of the Yardley Place. We knew, of course, that the placid compromise was the result of his mother's intervention, but then we had not expected her to remain silent in so serious a situation.

Ed's infatuation with his new bride lasted only slightly longer than her cuteness. Within a few years she had extended the size of her waistline and the length of her tongue. She took Ed's father's place as general foreman of the family, and her husband found himself doubly directed and again homeless.

Ed might have turned to his work had his hill farm offered any hope of monetary success. He recognized, as did we all, its obvious limitations and turned instead to his attractive son. The boy took no interest in farming, and the father apparently found the youth's disrespect for his family heritage refreshing. The enamored father permitted his son's every whim. His indulgence was duly noted in neighborly gossip, and we predicted the boy would come to no good end because of it.

In truth, the boy loved both his father and grandfather but paid little attention to either of them.

They were his audience, but his performance was to delight them, not necessarily to please them. We told one another that his mother would shake some sense into him one of these days, but we were underestimating Jimmy's charm. Even her stout expectations succumbed to Jimmy's winning disposition, and he achieved manhood on his own terms.

Jimmy has his grandfather's strength, his father's good will, his mother's audacity and his own pleasant personality. This extraordinary combination makes men his good buddies and women putty in his hands. While we don't condone his philanderings, folks don't generally condemn him either. Mostly, we just shake our heads, accepting Jimmy for what he is. Some good does come from his charm, after all, because Jimmy uses it to make The Pool Hall a popular haven for comfortable companionship and pleasant social exchange. But on the day of the letters when his father and grandfather came into the hall, noticeably in their routine fashion, they had their choice of tables. We noted the absence of the regular crowd as did the two farmers.

"Everybody's busy today, I suppose." The young man responded to their observation. He smiled at his elders and wiped his hands on his bespattered apron. "Annie, get Dad and Grandpa something to drink."

Since he called the order without looking back, Jimmy couldn't see the scowl on Annie's face. She made a noisy exit, slamming the kitchen door that always remained open.

"What kind of a bee's in her bonnet?" The elder Mr. Yardley acknowledged her angry gesture.

"She made a big pot of chile this morning and now she's afraid she'll have to eat it all herself." Jimmy pulled over a chair, straddled it, and joined the other two men.

"A few days like this," Mr. Yardley predicted, "and you'll have to join me in the field."

"What I'll have to do, Grandpa, is to get my wife a real job. Are you two gonna eat or just sit here and pick at my empty restaurant?"

"You use the term 'restaurant' loosely." Mr. Yardley returned his grandson's grin.

"I'll buy a bowl of your pretty wife's chile." Ed's father removed his cap and pushed the long, thin strands of hair back from his face. "I need a hair cut. Think I'll get one this afternoon."

"Might as well. The way these flies are biting, it's gonna rain today anyhow."

"I've been thinkin' of lettin' my hair get long enough to braid." Jimmy grabbed at the opportunity to light a fire under his grandfather.

"What are you, an Indian?" The older man jumped predictably to the defense of acceptable social standards.

Lunch was less animated than usual due to the lack of participants, but the three men parted amiably at the end of an hour's rapport.

At around 3:30 Ed left his work and went back to the house to clean up for his appointment. By that time we were all speculating on the reactions of the wives of the letter holders. Ed's wife was almost never the subject of town gossip since everyone recognized her self-assumed authority and no one wanted to risk bearing the brunt of her response. But on the letter day, several of us wondered at what sort of expression her indignation might take. Ed, apparently, did not wonder. His answer to her queries, once she had heard the rumors, would be the stock answer to all unproven small town gossip.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," he would say. "You don't believe all those old women's waggings." The practice of giving the gossipers a female gender lessens their credibility even though it is contrary to reality. "They'll name anybody to liven up their stories. Just you wait. By tomorrow they'll have Father Bently on their list." Ed's dismissal of the rumor would offer his wife a reasonable way to disprove the words she wouldn't want to believe anyway. The rampant spread and magnification which is a hallmark of small town gossip is also its weakest link because it makes any denial believable. Ed's wife would gladly accept his light treatment of the rumor, and she'd be no more affected by the gossip than she would by the social disease. Everyone knows he hasn't touched her in months.

Ed's more practical concern was obviously with himself

as he nervously approached the recently painted offices of Charles L. Beechmont, M.D. The offices were miles from our town, on the other side of the river. It was a place outside the realm of our regular sources of gossip, and weeks would pass before we knew anything of his visit. Even then the details would be sketchy, at best, and more fanciful than most would be willing to believe. But, some would listen to the tale that the offices of the new doctor were empty and that Ed's relief at being alone was his dominant emotion. He signed in at the window, picked up a magazine and took a seat in the corner where he fidgeted nervously for the next several minutes. His sporadic attention skipped from the magazine to the examining room door, to the window, and back to the magazine. Finally he was distracted when a man emerged from the restroom door directly across from him. Surprise mingled with disbelief as he stood to confront the similarly shocked expression of the elder Mr. Yardley.

Neither man spoke. The elder Mr. Yardley turned, closed the door and looked back at the silent, accusing face of his son. They stood, neither speaking, both in the discomfort of raw truth. The heavy silence was shaken by the opening of the front entrance door. Jimmy, with the undaunted assurance of youth, walked into the already overcrowded room. His smile broke halfway between recognition and greeting. He looked from one to the other, his facial muscles frozen, his mouth gaping.

The receptionist leaned over her desk and peered through the opening. "Mr. Yardley, did you want to see the doctor now?"

"No," they answered in unison.

Edith's Home

Joyce had tried for two days to prepare herself for this visit. What could she possibly say to these people? "Don't talk down to them," she had warned herself. "Just be friendly. Ask questions. Compliment them. Try to remember their names. Be friendly. Be friendly." She took a deep breath, zipped her purse, and opened the door of the car which she had parked a few yards from the home. She picked up the brown paper bag, and determinedly put her foot out in the direction of the gate. She was glad to have a package to hold on to. A misshapen female figure walked through the gate, approaching her stalled advance and increasing her dread of this awkward visit. She read Amelia's name displayed on a plastic covered card pinned to her sweater and noted her oversized belly and slight waddle which suggested a six-month pregnancy.

"Can you tell I'm pregnant?" Amelia followed her greeting with a big grin.

Horrified at the thought, Joyce uttered a slight gasp, and her pained expression begged for no more details. But Amelia, obviously anxious to talk, went on.

"I don't know exactly when my baby will be born, but I have to leave this place before it's time," she said moving

from one side of the walk to the other, cutting off their progress almost completely. I don't want that doctor what comes over here bringin' my baby. He don't know the first thing about having babies. He asks the dumbest damn questions. All he really wants to know is who the baby's daddy is. I ain't tellin' 'bout the baby's daddy. It's nobody's business how I got my baby. I can take care of my baby and I can take care of myself. I don't smoke no more since I'm pregnant. It can give the baby cancer. Are you giving away cigarettes? I'm going to give my cigarettes to the baby's daddy. It won't hurt the baby if his daddy smokes 'em." She lowered her head to hide a quick grin.

Midway into Amelia's blaring, disjointed story, Joyce had begun to have doubts as to its physical certainty.

"She ain't pregnant!" A tall stooped-shouldered, boney-faced woman confirmed her supposition. "She's just got fat on purpose. She eats a lot so ever'body'll think she's pregnant." The interloper stood on the grass at the side of the walk. Her hands on her hips and her disgruntled expression were sure signs that she was about to take charge. "You better get on in there and get ready for the priest. Just cause this is your first time don't mean he's gonna like it if you ain't ready."

Joyce thought the angular woman might know what she was talking about and headed for the door. Three old men were waiting there for her, two standing outside and a third inside holding the door open. Everyone seemed to know what

they were doing. She followed their lead.

She was so nervous her hand shook against the paper bag. In some unrecallable way she had volunteered to visit the Riverview Home at the last Altar Society meeting. She scolded herself for always doing that, volunteering, only to regret it later. Now she was in this preposterous place led by a flock of wayside directors. She was uncomfortable and fearful. What should she say to them? She had been told to go to the cafeteria at 9:30, set the front table with an altar cloth, and assemble the Catholic patients before Father Boniface got there to say a short mass. She doubted the last part, about the short mass. Father Boniface had never said a short mass. At least during the mass, she wouldn't have to keep up the conversation. Afterward she was to distribute two cartons of cigarettes and twenty packages of sugarless chewing gum. She doubted the wisdom of distributing the cigarettes, but she wasn't going to make waves. After all, handing out the goodies was the easy part. The talking was what she was worried about.

"Can I have a pack of cigarettes?" An old man standing very close to her spat the question into her face. "He wants one, too." He pointed with his thumb to his mute companion. Joyce was startled by the appearance of the companion. He was tall, nice-looking, and young, very young. Other than for the fact that his hair was a bit too short to be stylish for his age, he looked perfectly normal. He might have been a recruit in the army, just out of high

school and freshly shorn for boot camp.

"They don't get no cigarettes." The tall, angular woman continued to direct the show. "They ain't Catholic."

"Edith don't know ever'thing." The old man snarled as he continued his argument. "John-boy might be Catholic. He ain't said.....yet."

But Edith was having none of it. "You two get on out of here," she ordered. The smokeless pair showed enough sense to obey her. Then she turned to Joyce. "Close that bag up good and don't give nothin' away 'til after the services. Otherwise, won't nobody stay to hear the priest."

Joyce twisted a knot into the bag and put it at the back of the table. She started to put her purse with it, but decided to keep it on her shoulder.

At the front of the room, a tiny, old woman was already spreading the cloth on the table. Joyce moved to help her.

"Don't talk to Betty. She's nervous. She don't like people to talk to her." The tall woman pursed her lips, an emphasis on the seriousness of her order.

Joyce smiled her thanks to Edith and walked to the front of the room to get a better look at Betty. The old woman's hands were knotted, the white pressured knuckles shaking against the starched altar cloth. Joyce searched her mind for a few comforting words. Friendly. She wanted to be friendly. Betty's tense quaking became more manifest and the bent head pressed its chin more deeply into the small chest.

"She don't like nobody to watch her either." The reprimand, heavy with disgust, came from the back of the room.

Joyce quickly retreated toward the crowd gathering near the paper bag.

"Ain't you gonna give us no cigarettes?" A big man, tall, muscular and mean-looking, snarled at her as he leaned over the table.

Joyce glanced nervously at the bag within his reach.

"You don't get nothin' 'til after the priest leaves and you know it." Edith's arms fell from their folded position and swung alongside her long steps directed toward the table. The crowd dispersed quickly. Joyce watched as they moved toward the front exit. The big one was the first through the door.

I'm learning, she thought, and shot an appreciative glance toward Edith, but Edith was busy setting up chairs, putting them in perfect lines.

Joyce drifted around the room, looking for opportunities to help out. Mostly she got in the way, everybody's way. Several in the room announced their intentions to round up the Catholic parishioners.

"I'll fetch Billy. You git Mrs. Spenser and Ed Leach."

"Tell Murphy to get Junior. Don't say nothing to Grandma Beachmont. She can't come noway, today. The Doctor's done said she has to stay in the bed. Don't say nothin' bout the church meetin'."

Voices of demand and suggestion filled in the names of those who were expected to attend. It was a practiced exercise, and when Father Boniface arrived a few minutes later, all was in readiness.

There was a hum of welcome as the old priest entered the room. Betty slipped into an obscure seat set for her on the far side, but near the front where she could see easily. Two wheelchair patients moved into the open slots left wide for their convenience. A man with a stringless guitar took his place to the left of the altar. He stood, as a musician would stand, giving his attention to the priest. Everyone fell into their proper places when Father greeted them, and the murmuring died. Edith closed the front door and walked toward the backdoor.

Joyce turned her attention to the rows of parishioners, their eyes on Father Boniface who was beginning the mass. As well as they could, they prayed the mass with their priest. Although they squirmed and scratched and dozed, they were not like children. They did not call out or play or disturb one another. The sermon was a brief description of honesty, and each of them seemed to receive it as a personal message. At the last blessing, they seemed proud to have taken part and happy that it was over.

Joyce stood to the side as Father Boniface went from one to the other with kind words of encouragement. He blessed each one individually and thanked them for coming. They patted his arm, touched his elbow, shook his hand with

their thanks. It seemed important for many of them to touch him. Others, who kept their distance, nodded their appreciation.

Father Boniface was the first to leave the room. He nodded to her as he left. As soon as he had gone, the crowd turned to her for their rewards. Before she could tear open the cartoon, they were grabbing for the cigarettes. Joyce looked around for Edith to help her, but she could not find her. Help was unnecessary because within a couple minutes, the cigarettes and chewing gum were gone.

"I didn't get my pack." Amelia's disappointment singed her voice. "I wasn't gonna smoke 'em anyway because of the baby, but it ain't right I didn't get none. I was gonna give 'em to the baby's daddy. He ain't Catholic, but they wasn't his cigarettes. They was mine."

Amelia wasn't any unhappier about it than Joyce was. Alternatives ran quickly through her mind, but before she was able to choose one, Edith pushed the guitar player through the front door.

"Give 'em back, Sonny. You only get one pack." She nudged his hesitant arm.

"Here!" Sonny thrust his hand toward Amelia who grabbed her rightful cigarettes and sped away, no doubt to find the baby's father.

"You gonna be comin' every week?" It was Edith's first question. She was more used to giving orders than asking questions, and she didn't wait for an answer. "Cause if you

are, you need more cigarettes. We're gonna have three more at the services startin' next week." With that announcement she turned and left the room.

"Edith," Joyce called after her, "Where were you during the Mass?"

When she heard her voice ring out into the empty room, she was startled to realize they were the first words she had spoken since she had arrived at the home.

Edith stuck her angular forehead back through the open door. "I couldn't stay," she said, "I don't belong."

Foundations Under the Bridge

The lot was an eyesore. Mimosas rooted in the cracks between upheavaled concrete slabs spreading a profusion of limbs and hiding much of the litter, but ragged spring weeds and grassy tufts pushed indiscreetly through a dark mixture of sand and rock. Shadows from the bridge abutments above and to the side cast a dark lattice over the left side of the lot. A tall brick Masonic hall stood to the right. Its small, well-trimmed and hedged yard made the old Barker lot look even naughtier.

An old woman slowly made her way through broken glass and pieces of rusted pipe, pushing them aside with her cane. Her white hair, waved across her forehead, was held with a shiny, colorful scarf which was tied beneath her chin. She wore a long, black coat, light-weight but warm for the season. She stopped, balanced herself with the cane, turning her back to the breeze. Her quiet face listened for the sounds of the river hidden behind the levee on the other side of the street.

A young woman joined her. There was a distinct likeness between the two figures though their ages were separated by half a century. The slight stoop of the older woman made her appear shorter, but they were about the same

size and had similar features, soft gray eyes and high cheekbones. Mary Helen James, the older woman, wore rouge. Her niece wore the natural, vibrant pink of youth.

"I own this piece of property." The old woman spoke as if it were an admission rather than a fact. "I would like to give it to you and young Mr. Barker. It was his grandfather's home place. I understand you plan to marry in the fall."

"Yes." The young girl's voice showed her surprise. "In the fall. We're getting married in the fall."

"You may, of course, use the lot in any way you wish. It is in shameful condition now, for which I am very much to blame, but there was once a beautiful home here. Years ago before the bridge was built. Even before the railroad station and levee blocked the view of the river."

"Thank you, Aunt Mary Helen." The girl's face flushed with her bewilderment.

"You needn't thank me. It should rightfully belong to the two of you. Certainly not to me. I'm not sure why I even bought it after Marshall Barker died. Perhaps it was an admission. Anyway, now I am merely returning it.

"I didn't know you knew Gary's grandfather."

"I knew him. We were children together." The old woman nodded, gathering her memories. "We played together along the river bank and worked together in the fields. One of my earliest memories is of Marshall burning a bucket of tobacco worms. He had picked the fat green worms from the

lush leaves of the tobacco plant and collected them in a rusty white bucket which was filled to its red metal brim. He dangled them at me, taunting me with a description of their cold sticky bodies. But at the end of each threat, he would toss the worm into the blaze, much to my relief." In the quiet spring breeze Mary Helen James remembered clearly the freckled-faced boy tilting the bucket inches from her grimaced face.

"You know why I got to burn these buggers, Mary Helen James?"

"Cause your daddy tole ya to."

"Cause if I squash 'em in pieces, the pieces will grow into a bunch of new worms. There's only two ways to kill a backer worm - you got to burn 'em or you got to bite their heads off. Some fellers chew 'em up before they spit 'em out - if'n they spit 'em out."

She remembered him telling the story so well that she could see the circles of pleasure around his bright eyes.

"On rainy days" she told her niece, "we used to play in the rock caves farther up the river." She pointed with her cane under the bridge and up over the bluffs. "I would read him stories from my paperbooks, and he would tell me tales he'd heard from the men around the railroad or from the farmers he worked for. He was always the better listener, even as a boy. We were lovers when we were hardly more than children. It was an innocent love, physical, playful, innocent.

"I hope I don't embarrass you, Patsy. You don't know me very well, another fact for which I am to blame, and now I don't have the time for pleasant, introductory conversation. Old people feel the need to come to the point. I asked you to walk with me today because I wanted to tell you about Marshall Barker and to give you this site of his old home. I doubt that his grandson knew him any better than you know me. It would be a shame if no one remembered Marshall. He always wanted a family, children to tell his stories to, grandchildren to share his heritage."

"I'm not embarrassed, just a bit surprised." Patsy's honesty was apparent. "Would you want to sit on the concrete slab over in the sun? You must be tired from the walk down here."

"Yes, good. Let's sit there. Not exactly comfortable, but adequate."

Patsy brushed loose rock from the cold stone, and Mary Helen James lowered herself carefully. She sat quietly for a few minutes, her long thin hands motioning for Patsy to join her. The girl did not appear so young close up. She was not in her teens, but then not far out of them either. She moved to the side where a piece of the concrete had fallen away and righted it so that she could sit facing her aunt. The smallness of the slab put her some inches below her aunt so that she had to look up to watch her face. A warm spring wind pushed two aluminum cans together and blew the faint scent of honeysuckle across the cold stones.

"My mother, your grandmother, was German, precise and organized. On Mondays we washed; on Tuesdays we cleaned; on Wednesdays we sewed. I always knew what my role was and I did it. I never shirked my responsibilities at home nor did I ever do more than was expected of me. I didn't mind the work; I didn't enjoy it. I simply did what I was supposed to do. When your Dad, my little brother, was born, I assumed part of the responsibility for him. I bathed him, dressed him, watched over him, but never really cared about him. The old woman's voice faltered. "I never gave him an extra hug the way I've seen him hug you.

"I sometimes kissed his skinned knee because that's how one makes a child feel better. It was as close as I ever got to an expression of love for him." Her sad, old face knotted at the painful admission, and she was quiet again.

"But you loved Gary's grandfather." Patsy's interruption was an obvious attempt to relieve the old woman's pain.

"Well, that was a different world, a world of make-believe. In the real world, I was a dutiful daughter and sister and an ardent student. I read everything I could find, especially about history and politics. I always planned to work in a government job, something important. I never dreamed of a family, of marriage, but always of a job, a position. You have to understand what sort of person I was to understand my relationship with Marshall Baker.

"I was as dutiful to my church as I was to my family.

I attended regularly, and I listened conscientiously. I always believed I was a good person because I did my duty, contributed my part. I listened to the sermons on chastity and purity and believed in those virtues. But I never considered my relationship with Marshall, sinful. It was always make-believe.

"On summer evenings when the dishes were cleared away, I would walk down the river bank to the woods, up the footpath to the rock ledges, and Marshall would be there waiting. He was always there. I would go when I could, maybe a couple times a week, and he was always there.

"As I look back, I wonder how many evenings he waited when I didn't come, how long he was there before I arrived. I was very thoughtless, very thoughtless. He was my pleasure, but I was his love. Thoughtless people are not able to love."

The old woman's confession seemed to end. She rested quietly. A barge horn lowed in the distance. Patsy was uncomfortable with the conversation, but she was also curious. She waited several minutes and then broke the silence.

"Your words say you didn't love him, but they sound as if you came to love him."

"I don't know. I left town after high school and went to a sort of secretarial school in Lousiville. Marshall was working in his father's store by that time. He never asked me not to go, never asked me to come back to him. He knew

about my plans to work, and he would not have asked me to give them up. Also, he had little to offer at that time. I gave no thought to a future with him. It was simply time to give up the make-believe world, and I did not regret leaving. We parted on friendly but final terms.

"I studied and worked in Louisville for ten years. When your Dad was eighteen, he enlisted in the army. Several months later my father died, and I returned to care for Mother." The old woman spoke matter-of-factly, with no sound of regret in her voice.

"It was 1941. I had no trouble getting a job. Most of the men were in the armed forces. I went to work at the Court House. On my first day at work, Marshall Carter came to see me. His parents had died and he was living alone here, in the old house that used to stand right on this spot." Her eyes looked upward as if the old house were still there. "It was our love nest," she said wistfully. "We'd come here whenever I could get away from the real world - work and caring for Mother."

"Wasn't that rather scandalous for a small town?" Patsy couldn't contain her own curiosity.

"We were very discreet, and people seemed to turn their heads the other way. Everyone thought I was so good to come home and take care of Mother. It wasn't the sacrifice they imagined, and I wasn't the good person they thought me to be.

"I used Mother." She looked Patsy straight in the eye

when she said it. "She was an semi-invalid for seven years, and I used her as my excuse to avoid marriage all that time. It was a terribly dishonest thing to do. I did it so I could have my lover and keep my freedom. Marshall wanted to marry, to have children. He had been turned down by the army, and he felt a great need to prove his manhood. I could have given him that if I had married him. I refused to do that." She paused a moment, then went on, "What's worse, I didn't give him the opportunity to find someone else who would have been a good wife to him. I wouldn't allow him to broach the subject of marriage. I didn't even have the decency to face him with a refusal. Without a thought, I kept him hoping for seven years.

"When Mother's health worsened, I used that to break off with him. I saw him less and less and then not at all. Three months after Mother died, Marshall married."

"Could you have loved him and still not wanted to marry him?"

The question was obviously not new to the old woman. She smiled. "I don't know, Patsy. I believe I was right in not marrying, but, I have terrible regrets. Til my dying day I will regret my dishonesty with Marshall Barker. If I hadn't held him back for so many years, he might have married differently. Few prospective brides were left by the time he began looking. And he married so quickly.

"I always thought he was unhappy. He had only one daughter and she was never with him. She was closer to her

mother, I suppose. Marshall quit coming to church, and I seldom spoke with him."

Mary Helen James stood and carefully balanced herself. She pointed in the direction of her home. "I used to walk every morning from my house down that alley that runs along the back of the houses, passed Marshall's wife's house, where he lived with her and their daughter. He'd be there sometimes by the kitchen window when I passed. Usually he didn't see me. He'd be reading the paper or eating breakfast. He was always quiet. His wife talked a lot. I could hear her even when the window was closed. When I would see him in the alley, he'd nod, not say anything, just nod, if he saw me. Usually he didn't. In later years he walked with his head down, so sad-looking. I felt bad about it."

The old woman turned to leave the lot under the bridge. Patsy walked alongside her.

"Marshall had a lot of trouble, finances mostly. The family store couldn't compete with the big department stores. His parents' old home was in terrible condition. The city was after him to do something about it. He couldn't sell it, couldn't afford to fix it up to rent out. It got older and more and more in a bad state.

"I remember walking down this alley on my forty-ninth birthday." She spoke slowly as she walked, pausing occasionally to rest. "I remember thinking how healthy I felt. I was in great spirits. No one was in Marshall's

window. I was glad to do without the guilt feeling that morning. I came to the side alley where I always turned to go up to River Street where I crossed over the tracks, over the levee and went on down to the river. That's when I saw Marshall coming out the back door of the old Barker house." She looked back at the lot, replacing its vacancy with her vivid memory. "He came down the misfitting concrete steps carrying a rusty can and a paper bag. I had already turned into the alley, but I wasn't more than a couple yards from him. He looked straight at me but made no motion and walked on down toward his wife's house.

"It hurt my feelings a little that he didn't speak, didn't even nod. It was no more than I deserved, of course. I remember thinking that he had bigger worries caring for that house, and he couldn't be expected to concern himself with my feelings. It hurt though, and I carried the pain of my guilt on across the tracks and down to the river where I rested a while. I did that every morning - walked down to the river, rested a bit, and then walked back home. I'd get back in plenty of time to shower and get ready for work.

"As I came over the levee, I smelled the smoke. The front window of the old Barker house was in a full blaze. I knew right away that Marshall had done it, had set the fire. The house was insured.

"People were already gathering. I didn't stop more than a few seconds. I hurried on home as fast as I could."

"Did he really burn it down?"

"Yes." She was quiet, remembering. "I was never so frightened in my life," she continued. "The whole town knew I walked down that alley every morning. The sheriff would ask me if I had seen anybody. I was a terrible liar, wore my feelings on my face. And I hated dishonesty." Her voice quivered with emotion. "I had been dishonest once and paid for it with the weight of guilt for years. But I couldn't forget the hopeless look on Marshall's face when he passed me in the alley.

"When the sheriff came, he brought Marshall with him. After a morning of soul-searching, I was ready. I didn't hesitate."

The old woman recalled the meeting as if it had been yesterday. She repeated the words, hers and Marshall's. "'I was deep in thought this morning, Sheriff, and I didn't notice much of anything until I smelled the smoke. I'm awful sorry about your house, Marshall.'

'Thank you, Mary Helen.'

"He smiled and nodded when he spoke to me."

Mary Helen James leaned on her cane. She turned to her niece whom she seemed to have forgotten for the moment. "Thank you for walking with me. I enjoyed our visit." She removed an envelope from her coat pocket and handed it to her young companion. "This is the deed to the Barker lot. I hope you will put it to good use. Good-bye for now."

Patsy did not attempt to continue with the old woman or to question her further. The story was ended. There was

propriety in silence. She crossed the street and climbed to the top of the levee where she could watch her aunt as she walked slowly home, alone.

Touchdown at Brandenburg

On April 3, 1974, when Susan was eight years old, a tornado roared up through the Ohio Valley, skipping off and on the Ohio River and battering the earth with indiscriminate destruction from Owensboro, Kentucky to Zenia, Ohio. Two days after the storm, Susan and her dad were driving up Kentucky Highway 60 from Lewisport to Brandenburg, a town the tornado had reportedly levelled. Susan was keeping her eyes alert for signs of the much-talked-about storm, but for the first half hour of the ride, there was no evidence of disturbance.

"Dad, how come the tornado didn't hit Lewisport? How come it didn't hit our house?"

"We were lucky. You never know where a tornado's gonna touch down."

"Did it make a touchdown at Brandenburg?"

"That it did, Susan, and you'll see exactly where and how it touched. A tornado's a powerful storm."

"I know." Susan looked again at the passing fields for evidence. "How powerful was it?"

"Now that's a good question, one I've been wondering about myself." His blue eyes sparkled, and he gave a wise

glance to the questioning face of his small daughter. "We're on our way to find the answer to that question right now."

"I here'd it blew straw into a tree so that the pieces stuck out like nails."

"I heard it."

"I did too." Dozens of bobbing brunette curls danced gaily about on Susan's head fencing off her father's emphasis.

But he would not be easily ignored. Her father continued the conversation with a new approach.

"Susan, did you ever hear Uncle Bob tell about the time he caught the catfish at Troy Bend?"

"Sure, he tells about it all the time."

"I was with him when he caught it. It was a big fish. He had a devil of a time reeling it in. Big fish. Must have weighed fifteen or twenty pounds."

"Is that all? I thought he said it weighed about fifty pounds."

"Well, it hard to remember exactly. The lines of her father's forehead deepened as he momentarily turned toward Susan. "It was a big fish, but it's hard to remember just how big. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, but Uncle Bob probably remembers better than you do because it was his fish."

His arched eyebrows punctuated his daughter's conclusion, but he did not respond.

Silently, they watched the passing landscape. The car sped through fenced countryside where cows nudged their calves playfully and colts tempted the laws of gravity, balancing their bodies above long, spindly dancing legs.

"I here'd th.."

"I heard."

"I heard that the tornado picked up a coop full of chickens in Brandenburg and sat 'em down five miles away, and they wasn't even hurt." Susan spoke with the tone of authority, but her expression suggested a need for confirmation.

Her father smiled slowly. "There was a fellow down at the pool hall the day after the tornado. He said his Aunt Bessie went in the bathroom at 5:03. The tornado hit at 5:05 while she was sittin' in there on the throne. She heard this big roar. By the time she gathered herself together and opened the bathroom door, the rest of the house was gone. Just her and the toilet and the four walls around it was a l was left."

His expression totally serious, Paul glanced toward the silent Susan.

Her closed lips were drawn tightly across her teeth and her chin jutted out in a line with her squinted, doubting eyes. It was a cross between a frown and a glare.

"Another fellow," Paul continued in a serious tone, his eyes on the road, "told me he was sittin' at the dinner table. His whole family was just sittin' there eatin'

supper. Boom! The tornado hit his house - took the bedroom, the living room, the kitchen sink, the tablecloth right off the table they were eatin' at....and never touched the dishes or silverware."

Susan retightened her lips, but her small body shook with muffled laughter and it pushed itself through her nostrils until she could not contain it. The two of them laughed aloud - Susan, wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes.

Then for several miles they were quiet.

"Grandpa told me a story." Susan broke the silence.

Her father grinned and bit his lip in anticipation.

"He said back when his dad was a young man, they used to play baseball on Sunday nights." Susan looked at her father for a reaction. There was none. His eyes remained glued to the road, his face stoic.

"It was in Louisville where Grandpa lived. His Daddy was an engineer for the L&N Railroad. One Sunday afternoon he was runnin' a passenger train to Cincinnati. This was a long time ago when they had passenger trains. Anyway, he was in the engine of this train and he went passed a field out in St. Matthews where there was a baseball game goin' on. Just about that time the batter hit the ball, a hard hit, way out in right field, out across the highway and smack dab into the engine. Grandpa's Daddy just reached right out and caught it - on a fly."

Her father laughed, loud and unrestrained.

Susan was quiet, grinning, letting the story sink in. Then she continued, smartly, sitting up straight in the position of the winner.

"It really happened. I read about it in the paper. The Courier Journal." She smiled triumphantly. It said some of the outfielders in that game were fast, but none as fast as the engineer. By the time he threw the ball back, it was in left field."

He nodded, acknowledging the truth of the story and still laughing.

"There was a picture." Susan piled on the evidence.

When he had controlled his laughter, her father looked over at her, pride and appreciation in his smile.

The car was quiet except for the hum of the motor. At Irvington, they veered to the left toward the river. Homes along the wayside sported clumps of Easter flowers and forsythia bushes, yellow with April blossoms. The purple hue of the spring forest was smeared with green splotches. Though it was still quite cool, everything, even the grass, had begun to dim the brown of winter in favor of a sunny green.

Susan gasped as the car came over the crest of a hill, still several miles outside of Brandenburg. Her father pulled to the side of the road where they could take the time to review the devastation that lay before them.

Parts of trees, broken like toothpicks, had been tossed about the fields. Other trees stood, scarred, some missing

their tops, some draped in twisted metal roofing, many with their bark completely peeled away. Clumps of rootwad and rock, or maybe concrete, lay alongside ragged foundations of missing homes. Clothing was scattered everywhere, in the trees, in the ditches, everywhere. Bloated carcasses of cattle dotted the fields. Horses, too. Fence, torn from the earth and lashed like a whip, now lay in a wavy line along the roadside. A thin, torn two-story remnant of a barn stood near the road. More than two-thirds of the structure was gone, but the hay remained in the rafters, neatly stacked, undisturbed. Buildings had no tops or no sides, but little rubble about their yards. They had not crumbled, but exploded. The valley had been blown up and what remained was deeply scarred.

"Oh, Dad," Susan let her words out slowly, "I hope you brought the camera."

The Truth about Uncle Johnny

In May of 1968, Kentucky thoroughbred racing received two severe blows - Dancer's Image crossed the finish line of the Kentucky Derby first and Johnny O'Keefe died. Three days after the race was over Churchill Downs stewards announced that Dancer's Image's postrace urinalysis revealed traces of an illegal anti-inflammatory drug, phenylbutazone, and that Forward Pass, the second-place-finisher, was the winner of the Kentucky Derby. On that same day, some one hundred miles downriver from Churchill Downs, Johnny O'Keefe was buried.

His niece, Kelly, stood in the corner of the chair-lined funeral parlor as members of the family paid their last respects. She watched Uncle Johnny's son slip his last bet, a two-dollar win ticket on Forward Pass, into his shirt pocket and back reluctantly away. It would be years before the courts would award Forward Pass the cup declaring him the official winner of the ninety-fourth Kentucky Derby. To some the question of whether Johnny O'Keefe was a winner or a loser would never be answered. That decision would vacillate with their interpretation of the truth.

Kelly had begun interpreting the truth about Uncle Johnny the first time he had touched her many summers

before. It was hot, July or August. All Uncle Johnny's family, her soon-to-be stepfather's family, were gathering on the hillside that overlooked a spacious blue pool. Men carried picnic baskets, bags, coolers. Women carried babies and diapers and towels. Kelly was not one of them. She did not belong to this family. She did not even know them. Her mother belonged, and her little sister Maggie who was part of a package, belonging where her mother belonged. But Kelly was already ten years old, an individual. On this bright, sunny afternoon amid the squeals and squabbles, Kelly felt a sore loneliness that she couldn't name.

She didn't recognize the deeply-tanned arm that took her elbow and propelled her toward the pool. Her attention honed in on keeping her weight balanced above her quickly moving feet, and there was no time to recoil from his thrust.

"Last one in the pool is a jackass!" Uncle Johnny shouted his dare to the twenty odd kids that were piling out of trucks and cars just over the hillside. Mostly blonds and redheads joined them as Uncle Johnny baited them, extending his right arm forward like a general's sword. "Come on, cousins!" His left arm remained firmly on hers. It carried her down the hill and into the pool.

She was not the "jackass", the shocking word he had called loudly into the air. With his arm he had included her in the run for the water and with his words, "Cousins," he had called, he had included her in the family.

Immediately she loved this tall, bronze, brazen man who had so much power over the children. "Uncle Johnny," they called as they clamored about him in the water. He tossed them, dunked them, raced with them. He started games, keep-away and fox-across-the-Green-River. He laughed with big white teeth forming his brown grin. The gold of his hair bobbed indiscriminately about the children. He showed Kelly no special attention after that first deliberate encounter. "Kelly," he called exactly like he called the names of other cousins, "catch the ball." His familiarity was epidemic. She was accepted. She was included.

On the day of the funeral, Uncle Johnny was the center of peaceful respect. But that had not always been the case. There had been terrible scenes. She remembered one particular encounter with the truth when she was thirteen. She recalled her stepfather's anger. "He's a damn loser," her stepfather had hit the table with his fist and stormed toward her mother. "Why in God's name did you ever lend him any money? You ought to have had better sense. We'll never see one red cent of it again." Kelly had stiffened, witnessing the near-violent accusation. She hated her stepfather. She wanted to defend Uncle Johnny, but she could not. She knew he had probably blown the money on the horses. Mostly she wanted to defend her mother. Kelly knew Uncle Johnny's charm. If he'd asked her, she would have lent him any amount.

"It wasn't enough!" her stepfather bellowed. "The rest

he stole. He took the poor box! Pennies and dimes! He was caught red-handed. This time he's goin' to jail. I don't know how he got away with writing all those bad checks last year, but this time he's going to jail." His temper cooled with the thought of it. No one wanted to see Uncle Johnny hurt despite the pain he caused, not even his victims.

Even at thirteen, Kelly had known Uncle Johnny was a compulsive gambler, especially on the horses. When the races were in Louisville, he worked an extra job and bet every cent he made. He went to Churchill Downs to bet personally four or five times a week, as often as he could without losing his regular job. He was as much a part of the track as the flower gardens. Uncle Johnny knew all the regulars, every runner, every bookie. On days when he couldn't be there in person, he sent his bets with them.

He had told her stories about the bookies. The stories Uncle Johnny told were at his own expense. They were bawdy stories, not dirty ones. Children were allowed to listen in. She remembered him sitting in the front porch swing on a Sunday afternoon. Kelly was eleven or twelve at the time, and she sat on the coping, watching the lines of his brown face and the movement of his light eyebrows as he described himself hiding under the train while the bookie and his muscle looked in every car. Uncle Johnny's stories were never really memorable. It was not the facts, but the way he told them that captivated the attention of both children and adults. Uncle Johnny laughed at himself and all the

world laughed with him.

He was equally good with smiles. Kelly was not one to laugh loudly even at Uncle Johnny's best story, but he had often made her smile despite overwhelming odds. She remembered the flowers. Beautiful summer blossoms in the middle of winter. Sick with a cold and the general depression that so often invaded her early teens, she had shut herself up in the cramped attic bedroom she shared with Maggie. "You have company," her mother called from the foot of the stairs, and Uncle Johnny swept into the room bringing the fragrance of summer and promise with him. Those were her first flowers, and while she had received many others since then, none had given her such pleasure.

"Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady." Uncle Johnny had picked up her hands and formed them around a basket mostly hidden by blossoms. It was obviously his pleasure as much as hers.

There was no hint of pleasure today. Kelly moved about the crowded funeral parlor weighing the reminiscent comments from Uncle Johnny's mourners. She pondered the thought that there would be less laughter at family gatherings in the future. There would also be less friction, fewer confrontations. Watching his unnaturally quiet face, Kelly remembered the last near confrontation two years earlier. She had watched him that day from another corner, a corner cloakroom in the Knights of Columbus hall where Maggie's wedding reception was being held and where she had

discovered the theft.

Uncle Johnny is one of those "good ole boys" who turns any gathering into a lively party, Kelly thought as she saw his skilled hands shuffle the deck, delighting the crowd with the disappearance of four jacks following four queens into a hotel of cards. And Uncle Johnny's a thief. Her melancholy face did not match the bright red gown she had chosen for the wedding. He stole my last twenty dollars, took it right out of my wallet, opened my purse, got my wallet, and stole all my money. Despite her anger, she was at a loss as to what to do about it.

This was not the day for an ugly scene. Not on Maggie's wedding day. But not on any day did she want to be the cause of Uncle Johnny's humiliation. Certainly not for twenty dollars. But it was her last twenty. There would be no more money until her check from the V.A. on the tenth. She could wrap up sandwiches from the wedding reception to take back with her. No one would notice. If they did, she would simply tell them the truth - she was taking care of the poor student who was going to be hungry next week. She and Maggie had often taken food back to school.

Getting back. That was the problem. She had to buy gas to make the trip to Louisville. No money from Mom. Kelly knew her mother would be broke flat from the wedding, all the dresses, and the reception. She couldn't ask Maggie either. Maggie knew about the twenty dollars, and she would want to know where it was. Kelly thought she might say she

had lost it, but, knowing Maggie, wedding day or not, she would want to conduct a search and that might turn up the truth. Kelly wanted most to avoid the truth.

Uncle Johnny had pulled her mother in her soft mother-of-the-bride gown onto his lap. Uncle Johnny was a toucher. He always put his hand on you when he spoke. He rubbed your head with his knuckle; he gave your shoulders a squeeze. When he was serious or sad, he picked up your hand while he spoke to you. His touch was natural, unaffected. Kelly was not a toucher. She didn't like social kisses between friends or relatives. But she always kissed Uncle Johnny. He had a current about him that made you want to touch him and to welcome the warm touch he had for you.

Her mother gave him a soft fist to the chin and turned toward the cloakroom. Kelly stepped back quickly, folded the empty wallet, put it in her purse and tossed the purse to the table where it was lost among the others. No evidence to accuse Uncle Johnny.

Kelly's mother stuck her head into the cloakroom. "What are you doing in here? Maggie's opening her gifts. You're missing the fun."

Kelly had joined her mother sorting through the opened packages, naming the givers and applauding their choices. Kelly's thoughts were diverted only slightly when her mother held the glass deviled egg dish from Aunt Alma and Uncle Johnny. She did not want to look at him. He might know she had seen him in the cloakroom. But she could not control

her eyes. They slid slyly toward the card table. He was losing. He always lost.

"Alma's so lucky today. She's won three pots in a row," Kelly's mother indicated the card game at the end of the reception hall. Even in her moments of deepest adoration, Kelly had never considered Alma, Uncle Johnny's wife, lucky. Alma was not smiling. She seldom did. Her winning did not seem to affect the unhappy aura that was a pervading part of her personality.

Even as a child Kelly had not liked Alma. Completely opposite her husband, she had little to do with the children other than to try to hush their noisy games or to assemble them for meals. Kelly's only memories were of her setting the table, drying the dishes or playing cards. Kelly had always felt a distinct discomfort in Alma's presence. Not jealousy, because Alma was never a threat to her attentions from Uncle Johnny, and the only evidence of their marriage was the faded picture on Granny's wall, but it was her general sadness that was disconcerting. Kelly thought Uncle Johnny's wife shouldn't be smothered in such hopelessness. Kelly never wanted to hear that Alma and her kids were moving back in with Granny again. She never asked why Alma so often looked like she had been crying.

Maggie finished opening wedding presents just as Uncle Johnny was finishing one of his stories. The wedding guests laughed loudly, urging him to tell another. Kelly felt his deep blue eyes look toward her. You knew it was my purse.

It had my monogram. She smiled despite her silent accusation. That's how it was with Uncle Johnny. He made you smile even when you didn't want to.

As the bride and groom were preparing to leave, she saw Maggie kiss Uncle Johnny good-bye. Maggie wouldn't want her to accuse him, to embarrass him. Uncle Johnny handed Maggie a big box, store-wrapped in expensive silver paper with an enormous white ribbon.

By the time Kelly reached the wedding couple, Maggie had the box open. Inside was a large, brown wicker basket with double lids that secured the red and white checkered cloth within. She had seen it in the window of the A & B Florist and Gift Shop across the street.

"It's for picnics," Kelly heard Uncle Johnny explain. "I know Alma gave you a gift," his hand stirred the air to hush the bride's objection, "but I wanted to give you something special, especially from me. I wish you many picnics in your life together, a lifetime of picnics." Uncle Johnny basked in their thanks and in the sincerity of his wishes.

Kelly moved away quietly. He had bought it with her twenty dollars. He was welcome to it. It was a meaningful, memorable gift, for Maggie and for her.

Since the wedding, Kelly had not seen Uncle Johnny. His illness and her studies had intervened. And, she had become an adult.

She looked again at his still, waxen face. She

remembered his generous gifts. Many were physical, gaily clad packages and warm loving touches. Many were spiritual, gifts of hope and laughter. They were what had been true about Uncle Johnny.

She looked at the worn pari-mutuel ticket snug in his pocket. It was a sort of signature. Uncle Johnny made his last bet, perhaps with someone else's two dollars, on the most scandalous race ever run in the Kentucky Derby. The token he carried to his grave was a source of controversy and shame for the thoroughbred racing world. Still, it was a winner.