

OCCASIONS AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

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PREFACE

Recently there was a special on television about Charles Dickens. The Dickens character at one point said, "The hardest thing about writing is to begin." I completely agree with that statement; I, too, find that beginning is the hardest part. There always seems to be something more pressing--papers to grade, cooking to do, a book to finish for class. I find it very difficult to persuade myself that writing is important. Now spending time with my husband, or finding time to visit my parents, or attending endless numbers of meetings to try to improve some situation or other--those things are important.

A routine, I think, would solve many of these difficulties. I read somewhere that Ernest Hemingway would sharpen exactly one hundred pencils to a fine point before he would begin writing. Larry McMurtry said once that he sits at a desk for a set number of hours every day; sometimes he writes pages, sometimes not a single line, but he sits. That is what I need--a routine that will organize my life around the concept that writing is important. So far, I have not had the ability to establish that kind of routine. Between trying to earn a living and trying to fulfill my wife/family/friend duties, I guiltily snatch an hour here or an afternoon there. Also, sometimes--I

must admit this to be honest with myself--I frantically search for tasks that will prevent me from beginning. So, I fantasize about a quiet study to which I can daily consign myself. Someday, perhaps, the fantasy will come true.

On my dining room table, I now struggle not only with beginning but also with ending. Stories weave themselves in and out of my mind, and I constantly think of new scenes that will improve a story I wrote two years ago or of conversations that particular characters must have had. "Doors," for example, began its life as a long essay. It took over two years for it to metamorphose into a short story. "Christmas Colors" began as a story about half its present length. I then decided to expand it into a novella and wrote about five chapters for that novella before diverting my attention to another project. In this, its third manifestation, "Christmas Colors" combines elements that were present in the original short story or in the subsequent unfinished novella with new scenes that came to life in the interim. "Occasions" and "Ranches and Rings" started out in much their present forms, but I can easily envision future changes. One story that is not included here suffered from this difficulty of mine in limiting, in finishing, in considering a work "done." "Pure Romantic Slush" started out as an essay/story/spoof of the trashy, romantic

stories I grew up reading, but it soon exceeded my original conception and refused to confine itself to a short form.

Each time I read one of my works, no matter how old, I think of ways to improve it. Sitting at my table this afternoon, for example, at the eleventh hour for turning in these stories, I still keep thinking that I should go back over the stories and change the characters' names-- I haven't done enough in the eighteenth century way of using a name to define or express a character. I also could probably do more in nailing down the stories in specifics like descriptions of place, of appearance, of movement. Because I imagine conversations in my head, it is very easy for me to know what a particular character is doing at a particular point in a dialogue, and I perhaps expect too much of my reader by also expecting her/him to be able to do the same. I am afraid, however, that I will never get over my phobia for adjectives.

Because of my style, several people have suggested that I write like Hemingway. Two other friends said that I write like Tillie Olsen. These comments always interest me. However, I dislike Hemingway and have never read Olsen, so I cannot credit either of those authors with being an influence. If there is any author I have read "the complete works of," it would have to be Jane Austen. She is my favorite. In general I prefer women authors--everything from

Charlotte Lennox to Doris Lessing. However, I am fairly eclectic in my tastes, and so I have read a smattering of almost everything.

Although I have not read a lot of regional literature, I feel a certain affinity with writers like Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty. Like those writers, I have a clearly defined sense of "place" and would like to convey this sense to my readers. Of course, some stories (for example, "Ranches and Rings") require a much firmer feeling of place than other stories ("Doors"). This desire to supply my readers with specific details becomes stronger with each story I write.

Max Apple once told me that my *forté* was the essay. I suppose this is true. Certainly the stories I write express some belief or thought that I could turn into an essay. In this sense, all are autobiographical. However, all are also in another real sense fictional. The characters in the stories do things that I would never do, experience events that I have never experienced. Some stories are more autobiographical than others. Nevertheless, each seems to me to have a life outside my own life. This fact is brought home to me each time a reader says, "Lillian and Tom are not going to make it; they're going to get divorced." For that reader, the story has a meaning quite apart from what I thought I was writing, and certainly

quite apart from my own life. The story has assumed its own reality.

As far as the strictly technical aspects of writing, some parts give me more trouble than others. I find dialogue easy; descriptions hard. Female thoughts come readily; male thoughts must be carefully evoked. The omniscient point of view is natural to me; the limited point of view a trial.

Using these techniques, I generally try to write about things I know, for example, living in the country and horses. When I branch out to unfamiliar areas--the mountain states or motherhood--I feel less sure. For this reason various elements are often combined. I always hope that the better-known details will lend verisimilitude to the whole.

The themes I write about are not unusual. In this set of four stories, I feel a twin preoccupation winding its way through each one: the first of these preoccupations is the dichotomy between appearance and reality, and the second the essential loneliness of the individual. In each story, one or the other preoccupation predominates, yet both are present. For example, in "Doors," the appearance/reality question is paramount. However, Proserpiña's inability to share her inner turmoil with Peter is also a part of the story. On the other hand, while Anna's

loneliness and desire to establish a relationship with John in "Christmas Colors" is the focal point of that story, the realities about Todd's birth and John's life also beckon the reader.

By focusing on these themes, I am probably part of the mainstream of western literature. While I do not consider my works in any way perfect, I do hope that they provoke thought, emotion, and sympathy.

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RANCHES AND RINGS

It was a warm night out. Lillian had the car window rolled down; the radio was playing.

Love is a rose but you'd better not pick it,

It only grows when it's on the vine.

A handful of thorns and you'll know you've
missed it.

You lose your love when you say the word

"Mine."¹

Lillian glanced over at Tom. His eyes were focused on the road ahead, and he would occasionally nod or shake his head as though he were having an argument with himself. She rested her feet on the dashboard, leaned her head back, and closed her eyes. Lillian felt the night breeze on her skin and gave herself over to the feeling of travelling cocoon-like through the darkness. When she opened her eyes again, they were nearing the Gessner exit on the Katy Freeway. Their car was following a two-horse trailer. Lillian watched the rumps of the bay and the palomino. The palomino reminded her of the gelding, Bucky, that she had once owned. She closed her eyes again.

¹Neil Young, "Love is a Rose," sung by Linda Ronstadt (Los Angeles: Asylum Records, 1975).

The buckskin stood on three legs, his heavy eyelids drooping low. Lillian leaned against Bucky's neck and stuck her nose next to his skin. She breathed in the horse sweat smell; Bucky lazily swatted a fly tickling his back. The strings of his tail lashed her face. She leaned against the horse and absorbed the smell into herself.

A huge lighted sign to the left of the freeway pictured a jockey hunched over a galloping horse. "Come to Delta Downs; Quarter Horse Racing at its Best. Vinton, Louisiana."

The music was blaring loudly out of the jukebox. Lillian and Bobbi Jo forced their way through the tight press of bodies near the door and sat in two empty chairs in the back of the room. They ordered beers. Before the song was half over, Lillian was asked to dance. Her partner had black hair lying slickly on his head. Lillian could see the imprint of where his cowboy hat normally rested. He was long and lean and when Lillian shouted out over the song, he responded, "Buck." She gave herself over to the music, stomping down hard with her cowboy boots on the heavy beats. Everyone else dancing stomped, too, so the floor shook.

Lillian saw that Bobbi Jo was dancing with a short, fat fellow who only managed to be as tall as Bobbi Jo was

because he was wearing three-inch heels while she was dancing in her sock feet. Bobbi Jo returned to the table after the dance, but a few moments into the next one she was up again with a different cowboy.

After the third dance, Lillian also returned to their table. Time to change partners. Buck had looked like a puppet when he fast danced--none of his limbs went the way they were supposed to. She chugged down her beer, then rolled up her sleeves and looked over the crowd. Lillian didn't recognize anyone, but then that wasn't surprising. A young-looking boy with a pitcher poured her another glass.

"Where you from?"

"Baton Rouge. And you?"

"Vinton. What event are you in?"

"Nothing--just here to watch. My horse, Bucky, is getting old and slow. How about you?"

"Bull dogging."

He set his pitcher down and asked her to dance.

Lillian had lost count of beers and partners when Bobbi Jo sauntered over and said, "Let's go see John."

The bathroom was a one-holer with "Sue loves Bill" written in lipstick on the wall next to "For a reel good time call Sam at 526-7310." Both girls began unbuckling their belts.

"I gotta go real bad. Me first." Bobbi Jo sat down. "Thank God! I was about to pee in my drawers."

"Well, hurry up. I still might."

"Did you see that fat slob I danced with at first?"

"Yeah. Have you met anyone you liked yet?"

"Damn, no toilet paper. I'll have to drip dry."

"That's what cotton underpants are for. Get up or you might have to swim."

When the girls returned to their table, their glasses were full. Two cowboys asked them to dance as soon as they sat down.

Lillian finally found someone she liked. He was broad-shouldered and at least six-foot-four with his boots on. He slow-danced all snuggled up with his cheek against Lillian's and his arm extended, but he could really keep time. He changed his step often and whirled Lillian around occasionally. He said his name was Harvey.

Lillian was just getting to know him when Buck tried to cut in.

"Why are you dancing with my girl?"

Harvey cocked his head and regarded Lillian. "Are you his girl?"

"No. I've only danced with him three times in my life."

"Get lost," Harvey said to Buck.

Buck leaned forward and gave the heavier Harvey a small shove. "Get lost yourself."

"I'm losing my patience."

Buck shoved again. Several people dancing nearby stopped and turned to watch. The two men stared at each other.

Finally, Harvey said, "You want to make something of this?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go outside."

"Now, wait a minute," Lillian said. The two men started out the door. In a minute the ten or so girls were the only people left inside. They went out, too. The front of The Pelican Club was crowded with trucks and cars. In a small empty space, Buck and Harvey stood facing each other, their fists raised. A circle of onlookers soon enclosed the two, shutting off Lillian's view.

Bobbi Jo walked over. "What happened?"

"I don't know. I tried to stop it." Tears began to slide down her cheek. "This is ridiculous. Suppose one of them gets hurt?" It was the first time anyone had fought over her.

All of a sudden, the short, fat arm of the cowboy Bobbi Jo had first danced with was around Lillian.

"It ain't got nothing to do with you. They just felt like fighting. My name is Peewee."

Lillian stood on the hood of a truck to watch. The two cowboys danced around, but only a few punches had been thrown when the bartender opened the door and said, "The police are on the way."

Everyone dived for a vehicle. Lillian found herself with Bobbi Jo and two other cowboys she hadn't met before in Peewee's truck. Four of them were squeezed next to each other on the truck seat, and the fifth cowboy was scrunched up under the dashboard.

"Where are we going?"

"The party's moving over to the Chateau Charles."

"But what about our car?" Lillian's left foot was throbbing. She tried to disentangle it but could only move it over a couple of inches.

"Aw, don't worry. I'll drive you back over later to get it." He turned and looked dolefully into Lillian's eyes. "I swear."

Bobbi Jo's voice came from behind Lillian's head.

"Can you swim?"

"Who's got their god damned foot on the gas pedal?" Peewee roared.

Just as Tom and Lillian were passing the truck pulling the trailer, it moved over to the far right-hand lane.

The occupants of the cab were a young couple. She turned her head to watch them exit. Tom put his hand on her leg.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I was remembering a night in Vinton when Bobbi Jo and I went to the Louisiana Championship High School Rodeo."

"What happened?"

"Two guys got in a fight over me. I felt awful."

"Who won?"

"Nobody. Someone called the police and that was that. I ended up with a completely different guy. He was short and pudgy and named Peewee. His father owned the bucking stock for the rodeo. And then the next day, I met Carter at my cousin's house in Lake Charles."

"You should've married Carter. He could've afforded a horse for you."

Lillian turned her head away. "I didn't want to marry him."

"But I can't afford the things you want: a ranch, a horse."

"When you're a rich businessman, you'll be able to."

"Oh, no. My money's going into the market. You get a better return for your investment."

"Yeah, but you can't love a piece of paper."

"Dear, you are twenty years behind the times. History is on my side."

It was true; Lillian knew it. She was hopelessly enamored of a way of life that was essentially just a rich man's hobby nowadays. Her geology professor had told a story once. He said that his family was the living embodiment of Texas history. His grandfather had lived all his life way out in the country; his father had moved to a small town; he himself had been raised in the small town and then moved to Houston for his education and career; his own son had always known city life. So had Tom--only city life. But Lillian knew something else--her family had been two generations behind the times.

"Lillian, you know you love the ballet, and the theatre, and movies. You couldn't stand it one month in the country anymore."

"Those are just substitutes I've developed. Besides, so I want the best of both worlds. What's wrong with that? Anyway you are mistaken; I wouldn't be bored. I'd have lots of time to sculpt."

"You'd hate it! No art galleries or museums or intellectual conversation."

"Look, you spend your money the way you want to, and I'll spend mine the way I want." As Lillian spoke, she knew the chances of her ever amassing enough capital for

a ranch were small. The best job she could hope for was as an art professor at a university, and that didn't pay much.

"You should've married your rice farmer."

"He's not farming."

"Of course not. There's no money in farming. He's running a Home Electronics store."

This talk of the land was an old battle between them, an old, old battle. They never seemed to advance anywhere, only to repeat the same arguments over and over. It was the battle they waged the fiercest.

Lying in bed that night, Tom reached over and pulled her onto his chest. "I love you."

"And I love you."

"But?"

Lillian's voice was teasing. "But why do you always get your way?"

"But I don't"

"But you do--at least in all the important ways. And then you tell all our friends that I make all the decisions."

"You do."

Lillian dropped the bantering tone. Her voice got bitter. "Who decided whether or not we'd go to church? And whether we'd live in Texas or Louisiana?"

"You want to live in Louisiana? We'll move tomorrow."

It was a frequent ploy of Tom's--surrender completely so that Lillian would be forced to retreat. She sighed.

"You know we both have to finish our degrees."

"So you see, we can't move."

"But I wanted to go to grad school in Louisiana."

"They didn't offer your program at L.S.U., Lillian."

"I could've switched programs. Stop maneuvering. You know we're in Texas because you want to be here. Because you think the business opportunities are better here."

"If I were offered a job in Louisiana, I'd go."

"Yes, but the proviso is that you'll never apply to firms in Louisiana." Lillian got down to the important point. "Tell you what, we'll compromise. We'll live outside Beaumont or Orange on some land with enough room for a horse and a few head of cattle."

"I don't want to live in Orange or Beaumont."

Lillian rolled over. Tom pulled her back.

"My family's here."

"Mine's in Louisiana."

"And I don't know anything about animals."

"You'll learn." Lillian ran her hand down his chest and leg. "You've got such a nice, long lean body. You'd look great in jeans and a cowboy shirt, with boots and a hat."

"Oh, boy, shit kicker boots. Just what I wanted."

"Yes, you'll be so sexy."

To a large extent, Lillian's life had fallen apart when her father quit his ranching job and moved to the suburbs and the government payroll. True, she kept her horse on a small acreage and continued to compete in 4-H events, but it was never the same. As a girl, she'd saddle her gelding, Bucky, and ride down the ranch road that bisected the pastures. She could ride for two hours if she wanted, still not reaching the limits of the property. The ride out would be slow, with lots of stops to explore things--the hay barn or the wooded, swampy area in the back. Then, on the return to the stable, her horse would eagerly pick up his pace. Usually the ride ended in a full gallop and, if anyone accompanied her, a race. Once the family had moved, she was confined to riding around and around the small pasture. It seemed as though the circle got smaller each time.

"Where are we going to put all this junk?" Tom stood in the middle of Lillian's old room in her parents' house and surveyed the contents.

"It's not junk; anything you love is not junk."

"Have we got to take all those 4-H trophies of yours?"

"No, we haven't got anyplace to display them."

Tom ran a finger over a metallic calf. "All they're good for is collecting dust."

"Sometimes you're a real turkey."

"Look, I feel the same way about my own sports trophies. They're all at my parents' house and I don't care if they throw them away."

Lillian sat on the floor with a small wooden box between her legs. She was looking through the bundled groups of letters inside it.

Tom regarded her intently. "What are we going to take back to Houston this time?"

"Have I ever shown you a picture of Carter?"

"No. How about the china? At least that's something we can use."

"We haven't got anyplace to put it."

"We haven't got anyplace to put any of this junk, but you always find a place. Pretty soon the apartment will be so full we'll have to sleep in the car."

"Well, you can't expect my mother to keep our things forever."

"Your things."

"All right, my things. I'll remember that at our divorce--all the wedding gifts are my things."

"So now you're planning a divorce?"

"No, I'm just tired of being poor." Lillian looked at the glossy photograph in her hand.

She and Carter were sitting in his Super Bee on a deserted road near her cousin's house. The windows were down. Way off in the distance the rice pumps were giving the night a throbbing rhythmic sound. A mosquito buzzed near her ear; Lillian slapped at it.

"Have you ever thought about marrying me?"

"Yes." She felt the pressure of the humid night pushing her down. Her back stuck to the car seat. Even in the darkness, Lillian could see the flash of his black eyes. Carter raised her hand, turned the palm towards himself, and kissed it. His lips were so soft; her stomach did a somersault, the way it always did.

"And?" Carter's voice threatened and caressed her at the same time.

"And I think it would be a mistake. We fight so much even though we rarely get to see one another; how could we ever get along day after day?"

Carter just sat there; he still held her hand trapped in his. Lillian wished the words weren't true, but they were. Ever since she'd met him, she'd felt that they were right for each other. But not now; not yet; maybe in a couple of more years when she was finished with college and he had a place of his own to farm.

Casually, too casually, he let her hand go. "How's Bobbi Jo?"

Lillian brought her hand back to rest in her lap. She wiped the sweat off by rubbing it against her trousered thigh. "I don't see her much anymore. After we went to different colleges, we just drifted apart. Actually, I think she never got over the fact that you preferred me to her."

Carter swatted a mosquito and said, "Damn." He reached down and started the ignition.

"Not yet." She put out her hand to stop him.

He left his fingers on the ignition key but didn't stop the engine. "What?"

"Have you ever thought about it?"

"Yes."

He waited, forcing her to ask the second question just as she had forced him.

"And what are your thoughts?"

"I thought you'd be a good partner."

"Still looking at that picture?"

"Yes."

"I don't see what you saw in Carter," Tom said. "I read your letters to him and his to you; he was a bastard."

"You're right." She put the picture back, closed the box, and returned it to its place on her bureau. Carter

had been a bastard. And she had been a bitch. And all of it through ignorance and lack of self-knowledge. Lillian got up off the floor and walked over to Tom. She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "I love you." And she did love Tom. They got along well together; they liked the same things. They even liked to argue the same things over and over. But she'd loved Carter, too, though she had never admitted it to him. Her love for Carter had something to do with lust, with Louisiana, with the very land itself. It was a feeling of destiny, and she didn't have that feeling with Tom. But she'd lost Carter, lost him because she insisted he wait, that he hold time still while she did other things. Lillian felt Carter's loss with a dull ache whenever she allowed herself to.

"Let's take my history books back."

Lillian didn't quite know how she'd drifted away from her friends. Going to Rice University was the first step; it was all art and history and passionate intellectual arguments. But the first two summers back home, she'd returned to her old pattern. Cruising around with Bobbi Jo, livestock shows and rodeos whenever possible, chugging a six-pack under the drinking tree. Lillian had taught several of her ag friends bridge. They'd sit around all

night, drinking and playing until they forgot in the middle of hands what trumps were.

Then, the summer after her junior year, she'd decided to get a job to save money. She wanted to visit Europe, and so the following summer she went to Italy. Lillian planned to stay two months, but she became so enthralled by the art museums and the European ambience that she stayed for two years instead. She drifted from one town to the next, picking up odd jobs to earn money. By the time she got home, everything was changed. She'd met Tom; she wanted to go to grad school; all her friends were gone or married.

Lillian stood in the center of her living room, a high table with modeling clay and a partially-completed torso before her. She looked at the figure; it was a woman's body from the waist up with her arm flung over her forehead and her face averted. Because the form twisted somewhat, the sweep of line from the right side of the body, up and along the arm, then down after the elbow, was important. She couldn't get that line right.

"There's not enough light." She walked over to the window and looked at the blinds. She began taking down the curtain rod.

"What did you say?" Tom asked from the bedroom.

"There's not enough light in this damned room."

"You ought to work at the art building anyway."

"It's too noisy there; I've told you before, I can't work there."

Tom came out of the bedroom. Lillian knew he was looking disapprovingly at the curtains and the blinds heaped on top of a bookcase. She took off her blouse and surveyed herself in the gold-rimmed mirror; she had her arm over her forehead like the clay figure. "I can't get this figure right. Look at the armpit--it's terrible."

"Why the fascination with armpits lately?"

"I dunno. Rodin liked hands. I like armpits." She looked at the figure again. "I wish my breasts were small like that."

"I like them just the way they are." He began pulling her towards the bedroom.

"Hey, we don't have time. Aren't Sam and Ruth coming over about five?"

"It's only three now."

"I know, but I want to finish this."

"You can finish it tomorrow."

Lillian put her hand on the figure; she felt like working today, and since she hadn't felt like it in weeks, she wanted to seize the opportunity. "All right, Sweets.

But can we make it a quickie? We need to clean up the apartment before they get here."

"They won't mind. After all, we're not staying here." He tugged at her again.

"Let me wash up. You go on in; I'll be there in a minute." She sprayed the torso with water, then covered it with an opaque plastic wrapping. Lillian picked up her tools and carried them to the kitchen sink. She heard Tom's boots thud on the floor, then the jingle of his belt buckle.

When Ruth and Sam--friends from the university--arrived at five, rain was pouring down. The foursome had planned to go to Miller Theater, have a picnic on the slope overlooking the stage, and hear the outdoor performance of Daughter of the Regiment. Instead, they sat around the cramped dining table and ate the fried chicken which had been purchased for the picnic. After dinner, they moved into the living room and Tom turned on the evening news.

The living room was also crowded--with books, with furniture, with the used china cabinet recently purchased to hold the wedding china Lillian and Tom had brought back from her mother's house, and with the sculpture, which was pushed over into a corner.

Ruth reached over and picked up the edge of the wrapping covering the torso. "Can I see what you're working on?"

"No, please don't." Lillian jumped up and went to stand beside the sculpture. "When I'm finished with it, you can look." Lillian didn't sit back down until Ruth's attention returned to the TV.

When the news was over, they quibbled about what to do next. Finally Sam suggested going to Houlihan's on Westheimer. Lillian felt tired and didn't really want to go out in the rain, but she agreed to go. At Houlihan's a progressive country duo from Denton was playing. The male singer wore jeans and a straw cowboy hat with a huge crown and a small brim; the female had a high, clear voice. They sang country hits interspersed with their own songs.

Sam and Ruth were arguing with Tom over the metaphysical relevance of taxes, but Lillian just sipped a beer and enjoyed the music. Her foot tapped along to the beat. The duo began "Ruby" and Lillian stopped keeping time. The memory of an evening in the Pastime Lounge in Baton Rouge with Carter, drinking beer and listening to "Ruby" as it played over and over again on the jukebox, whirled around her. Tom got up for another beer.

"Bring me a Lone Star, will you?" Lillian said.

"You haven't finished the one you've got."

"I will have by the time you get back."

Tom got her Lone Star; when she chugged it and asked for yet another one, he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Why are you drinking so quickly?"

"I don't know. Something about country music does it to me."

Sam, who was a psych grad student, leaned his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. "I've heard of conditioned responses before, but never one like that."

"Sure. Country music--lots of drinking. Rock music--lots of dancing."

"Lillian tells me she used to drink plenty when she was in high school. She's been pretty temperate ever since I've known her." Tom's arm still encircled her shoulder. He pulled her closer to him.

"How could you drink in high school, Lillian? Weren't you under age?" Ruth's usual New York earnest manner was showing through.

"Louisiana's had an eighteen-year-old drinking age ever since Prohibition, I think.

"You know--those drunkard Catholics."

"Shut up, Tom. Texans are no better. Who do you suppose rode in all those vehicles with Texas license plates that were lined up in front of every bar between the Louisiana state line and Lake Charles?"

"I guess those places have lost a lot of business since Texas lowered the drinking age," Ruth said.

"Yes, Lillian points them out every time we drive to her folks' house. 'That's where the Circle Club used to be; that's where the old Pelican Club was.' And so forth."

"To answer your first question, Ruth, the bartenders never checked I.D.'s too closely. Besides which, I always looked older than my age. In Baton Rouge there's only three things to do on a date: go bar-hopping; go dancing and drinking; or go to the drive-ins with a couple of six-packs when a horror movie is playing so you don't feel obligated to watch."

"In short," Sam interposed, "drinking is an integral part of the social life."

"That's right. My crowd was too busy drinking to worry about drugs." She stood up. "Anybody else want another drink?"

"Yes," Tom said, "Schlitz."

When she got back to the table, Ruth said, "Let's play 'When My Ship.'"

"What?"

"You know, 'When My Ship Comes In.'"

"What is this--bare your soul to your friend time?" Tom was leaning forward aggressively.

"You start, Ruth," Sam said.

"O.K. When my ship comes in, I want to spend a year travelling around Europe, staying in posh places and meeting the literary crowd."

"Woeeee!" Tom hooted. "The latest lost literary generation has just been found."

"Your turn, Sam."

"Well, let me see. . . . When my ship comes in, I want to buy a sailboat and sail around the world in it."

"That's so normal, Sam! Don't you know that psych majors are supposed to be weird?" Ruth always was disappointed by Sam's "normalness."

"Can I help it if I like to sail? Your turn, Tom."

"When my ship comes in, I want to live happily ever after with Lillian."

"No; no fair, Tom! You have to tell us how you'd spend your money."

"Ruth, you're making up new rules," Sam objected.

At the same time, Tom said, "But Ruth, I have told you. I plan to spend it on Lillian."

"No fair! There must be something you want to do."

"Well, I'd like to spend about ten years travelling around in a VW van. I'd still like to see the Famous Blue Men of the desert and also Carnival in Rio. Hey, did you see that film Black Orpheus?"

Ruth wasn't sidetracked. "O.K., Lillian, how would you spend Tom's money?"

"My money," Lillian corrected. "When my ship comes in, I'm going to buy me a trained barrel horse, a trailer, a camper truck, and then spend one whole year following the rodeo circuit."

"You're kidding. I thought you'd spend your year sculpting."

"Well, I will, in a way. Not sculpture, but sketches. Of cowboys, of horses, of rodeo life."

"Haven't you seen that new book about rodeo that's out?" Ruth always knew what new books were out. "It says that rodeo life is miserable."

"Wake up, my dear; life is miserable!" Lillian felt the sarcasm in her voice.

"What are you frustrated about, Lillian?"

"Christ, Sam. Stop playing the analyst. I've wanted to follow the rodeo circuit ever since I was a kid. I'm twenty-six years old and my time is running out." Her college ring felt unbearably heavy on her finger. She slipped it off and put it in her handbag.

Tom slapped his mug down on the table; beer sloshed over the sides. "I just don't understand your attraction for those shit kickers. They're stupid and prejudiced and

narrow. Ever since we went to the Houston Livestock Show last March, you've been going on this way."

"I haven't just started going on this way; I've always felt this way. It's just that I could put it out of my mind before. Now what happens? Every time I turn on the radio, I hear country. Everything from 'Afternoon Delight' to 'Margaritaville' to 'Luckenbach, Texas' has a country beat or a country message. Listen at what they're singing." All four of them listened.

You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille,
With four hungry children and a crop in the
field.

I've had some bad times,
Lived through some sad times,
But this time your hurtin' won't heal.

You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille.¹

"You see! Look at that singer. A popular club on Westheimer and the singer is wearing boots, jeans, and a hat. God, he's got a pony tail."

"Only red necks have long hair nowadays, Lillian. Straights have gone to medium cuts and gays to burrs."

"Bullshit, Ruth. That guy's no more country than Tom is. And that's not country at all. It just happens to

¹Roger Bowling and Hal Bynum, "Lucille," sung by Kenny Rogers (Nashville: Brougham Hall Music and Andite Invasion Music, 1976).

to be 'in' to sing country and dress country. This pseudo-country shit is driving me crazy."

Lillian knew that Tom was alarmed by the vehemence of her voice and the cursing. She rarely cussed. He put his arm around her.

"Lillian, just as soon as I can, I'll buy us a nice house in the suburbs. You can have plants and a dog in the backyard."

"Suburbs, God. I'd rather stay in the 4-by-4 apartment we're in now. Suburbs are for people who don't know any better. A few plants and a dog might be all right for a person who has never known any different, but not for me."

"Lillian, we can't afford it, don't you understand! Neither of us has any money."

She felt the band around her head tightening and tightening. She had to get free; everything was closing in. A settled life with Tom in the suburbs. No possibilities left. No chance that tomorrow would be different. "Don't you understand. I've got to live. I'd sell my soul for that year on the rodeo circuit."

Lillian was instantly sobered by the gravity and utter truthfulness of her words. The singer's voice, harsh and gritty, began again.

DOORS

For doors to the soul, ever tightly shut,
Do not turn on well-greased hinges,
But creak and groan as in some Gothic film
And warn of terrors without, entering.

The night air clammy touches my skin. I am sweating. No, not sweating. That damp feeling is just Houston enveloping me. I am wearing a loose blue shirt and baggy jeans. My hair is oily. I am very tired; I walk heavily towards my car. Fog hides my feet from my eyes.

I unlock my car. The other car materializes at my side. I do not notice it. I see and do not see the driver roll down his window.

"Hey, do you know the way to Sler Street?" I turn around. The words issue from his mouth like a dank vapor and curl away.

"What?" My voice is strange, muffled. I am not yet alive.

"Slocum Street."

"No, sorry, I've never heard of it." I open the car door and get in, then begin the automatic routine: insert key, secure seat belt, slam and lock the door, start ignition. Out of the back of my head, I see the white man

in the cramped rear seat of the other car slip past the driver and approach my window. My hand is on the shift.

His mouth is making strange fish-like movements. I cannot hear him. The car is hot; I am suffocating. I roll down the window. His face, corpse-colored, approaches mine.

"Do you know the way to Sler Street?"

"No, I don't." I see myself smile, then turn away my head. I am not yet alive.

The door, in slow motion, is jerked open. When did he unlock it?

"Get out." He is holding a pistol. The other two men are beside him; they too have pistols; they are as black as he is white.

I get out. "What do you want?" I smile foolishly. This isn't real. This is only a dream, a vision that floats past me on a box in the living room. "Here, take my purse. That's all I've got. Take my car." They do not answer me. "What do you want?"

"Get in the car."

I get in. I must sit on the shift console; the two black men flank me. The white man in the rear puts his pistol against my neck. It is cold. I am cold. He cocks the hammer. I try to raise my hand; it is frozen solid to my side. I try to scream; my voice is only a breath.

Stop! I am alive.

"I'll protect you, baby. I'm here. It's O.K. I won't let them get you."

The tears are salt on my face. "Was I hollering?"

"Yes. Was it the same dream?" Peter touches my cheek.

"Yes. I'm sorry for disturbing you. I'm O.K. now. Let's go back to sleep."

He pulls me onto his chest and strokes my hair. "I thought it would go away after a while. Maybe you need to see a psychiatrist."

"No, I'm fine. I don't know why I have it. Maybe it's something I eat." I listen to his heartbeat until I fall asleep. His skin smells like soap. Just before sinking away, I think of Sabrina Crane.

I am walking home from Weingarten's when I see her stopped at the traffic light. Good ole Sabrina. I've heard she's married now. She looks just the same. She's driving a dilapidated, rusty Ford, so she can't be making very much money. She does not notice me. I step off the curb and rap on the glass window. She looks around, startled. Then, she shifts to neutral and begins the long stretch over to the window handle. She can't reach it; she slides over a bit. The glass separation slowly descends.

A blast of scorched air batters my face; she has been frying herself in the unairconditioned car.

"Hi, Sabrina. How have you been?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"Great," I say.

"Where are you going?"

"Home. I live right in the next block."

"Listen." Sabrina lowers her head and looks at the seat upholstery.

I glance anxiously at the traffic light; it is holding red.

Sabrina raises her eyelids to look at me. I can see the crown of her head. She is very hesitant. What can it be?

"Oh, Piña, I'm glad I ran into you." Her smile is quick, birdlike, a flutter and then gone. "I think we shared a common experience. I'd like to talk with you about it."

My stomach drops to my knees. The light changes to green. The driver behind revs his motor, then honks. The sound scares me; I jump. Sabrina reaches over to the window handle again. My mouth feels dry. "Is your name in the book?"

"No, only my husband's name."

"Same here."

"Lawrence Snell. On Virgil. Phone me." The glass is sucked up by the rubber. The man behind honks again, this time a long, loud blast. Her car moves away. I am left standing.

"You didn't know Sabrina Crane at UT, did you?"

Peter looks up from his morning paper. "Uh-uh. Why?"

"I was thinking about her last night. I promised to phone her quite some time ago, but I've never gotten around to doing it."

"You two weren't good friends, were you?"

"No, but I ran into her one day. She wants us to get together. That is, she wants to meet me for lunch one day."

"So call her."

"I can't remember her husband's name anymore. 'Smile' or 'Smell' or something like that. And I don't know who else might know his name."

"What's got you into a lather so early this morning?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about her. I should have phoned her months ago."

Peter puts down his paper. He reaches across the table and takes my hand. "Have you thought any more about what I suggested last night?"

"No. It's too expensive." I end the conversation by going to the kitchen to rinse the breakfast dishes.

Peter follows me. "We can afford it, Piña. Your health is the most important thing."

I turn to face him, my hands raised in the dishwashing gloves like a surgeon's. Water slides down my forearm and drips on Peter's shoes. "Look, it isn't necessary."

He kisses me good-bye.

We are at a movie. A shimmering twelve-foot-tall woman is reaching for a door knob. The scary music begins. Stop! Do not open the door! I close my eyes. She is wearing a white dress; the red spots will be too intense. Can't she feel it, hear it, know it? Stop! The door hinges creak.

The audience breathes a sigh of relief. I open my eyes. Nothing awaits her beyond the door. I unclinch my hands.

Peter takes my sweaty palm. "Don't be so gullible," he whispers in my ear. "The director wasn't afraid when he shot this scene. Don't forget that it's just a film."

I try not to feel, to know, but the creaking hinges and eerie music are too much. I am afraid; more, I am terrified. What awaits me beyond that mist-enshrouded door?

I close my eyes. I am a little girl. I must go outside to feed the dogs. But it is dark outside! I am afraid. I don't want to go. A deep dark hole awaits me out there, just as it awaited Mr. Hart. I smell again the barbecue, see him turn the steaks, then walk over to the water sprinkler only ten feet away from where we stand. He disappears before our eyes--the ground swallows him: a deep, dark, gumbo-thick, black hole. I don't want to go! I will never be seen again, like Mr. Hart. Why can't Brother feed the dogs tonight? I am crying.

"They're your dogs. Feed them or they go to the pound tomorrow."

I dash out the door; the cement steps are cold on my bare feet. A slight drizzle is falling. The ground is wet. I skim the grass to the feeding spot, then bend over to dump the smelly ingredients of the can into a foil potpie pan. Suddenly I am illuminated in the headlights of a car. I straighten and shield my eyes like a scout. A slimy hand touches my shoulder. I jump and my foot lands right in some old, mushy dog food. Brother laughs; I turn and punch him in the stomach, then run for the house. The damp grass cleanses my foot.

I must go down the long, dark corridor that leads to my room before I can jump in the bed and hide under the covers. What was that sound in the closet?

I am sitting in an armchair reading Newsweek. The phone rings; Peter gets up to answer it. When he returns, he stands expectantly before me. "Who was it?"

"Jerry is in town. He wants us to meet him for a drink."

"How long will he be here?"

"Only tonight and tomorrow."

"Darling, I've got some work to do. I promised my boss I'd have it ready tomorrow. But you go ahead. I don't mind."

Peter sits on the footstool. "Your boss won't mind if it's a day late; it couldn't be that pressing." His eyes glance at the Newsweek on my lap.

"No, I really do have to have it ready tomorrow. I promised."

"And I promised Jerry that we'd meet him." Peter runs his hand through his hair. His eyes meet mine.

I lower my eyelids. "That's fine. You go ahead."

"He wants to see both of us."

I look up and stick my chin forward. "Don't be stubborn. He's your friend."

"He used to be your friend, too."

"We were only friends because of you."

"Look, are you still mad over what I told you he said about you?" Peter stands up and paces around the coffee table.

"No, I'm not mad."

"Yes, you are. I should never've told you. You see, I can't tell you things; I can't be open with you."

"Don't be silly. I appreciated your telling me. I'm glad I know what he thinks of me."

"Then come with me."

"No."

Peter comes to a halt before me; he towers over me. "You're putting me in a damned uncomfortable position. How can I tell Jerry why you didn't come?"

"Just tell him I had too much work to do."

"That's a lie."

I pull my legs off the footstool near Peter. I put them on the edge of my chair and curl my arms around them. "So it is. So tell him I think he's a bastard."

"You're overreacting. All he made was an off-the-cuff remark that he never expected you to hear."

"But I did hear it. And it was not only cruel, it was untrue. I expect more from my friends."

"You won't change your mind?"

"No."

"I should never've told you."

Peter puts on his overcoat and opens the door. A sheet of cold air strikes me. He leaves. I pick up Newsweek and flip through it until I find the science section. A title

leaps out at me. "Astrophysicists Discover More Black Holes." I begin to read the article, but my mind won't absorb the words. More black holes. I throw the magazine down, lean my head back, and try to reconstruct exactly what Peter had said Jerry said.

I am at home alone when the phone rings. I feel tired and drained.

"Hello, Proserpiña? This is Weldon. Have you got the Smith contract?"

"Why, yes. I hoped to have some time to work on it tomorrow."

His voice sounds very far away. "Well, I'm here at the office working late. Something's come up, and I need to see the contract."

"Can't I answer your question over the phone?"

"No, it's more complicated than that. I'd come and pick it up myself, but my car's busted this week. My wife and I are sharing the car, and she's at the ballet right now. Could you possibly bring it over?"

"Sure. No problem." I try to make my voice sound bouncy though I am exhausted. "Do you need any help?"

"No, just the contract will be help enough."

I think about my old blue jeans and baggy shirt, but decide not to change. No one but Weldon will see me.

At the office, Weldon tells me I look tired.

"Yes, it's been a rough week."

"Take it easy. Work isn't everything. You have to live, too."

I respond that Peter and I have big plans for tomorrow night. I think to myself that he's right. My life is too routine, too patterned. I walk down the front steps of the building. My feet feel like lead.

A car pulls up beside me.

OCCASIONS

Suzanne, waking in the air-conditioned house, first thought of the weather. She went to the window and searched the sky for clouds. Rain would ruin the wedding. Then she hurriedly took a shower and dressed. She chose a blue pants suit--one of her trousseau garments. Before she left, she wakened Jill, who was sleeping on a cot in the room, and then knocked on other doors along the hall.

Downstairs she ran into her father at the front door. When he saw her, his face twisted into a mimicry of a smile; his eyes met hers and then darted away.

"Good morning," he said. His voice had a false, hearty sound to it. He bent stiffly over and kissed Suzanne awkwardly on the forehead.

She thought of his sullenness and hostility towards Alan. Suddenly she wanted to scream at him. Stop being an ass! It's my wedding. Suzanne wondered if her anger showed in her face. "Please be home on time, Daddy," she said. And at least be polite to the guests.

He looked her full in the face. Their eyes exchanged the knowledge that he didn't want the wedding to occur, didn't like Alan. She tried to put her confidence, her assurance, into her smile. He turned and left the house; she waited until the sound of his car engine had gone before moving to the door.

Outside, the heat of the July sun was already pressing down. As she walked across the lawn and down the slight incline to the summerhouse, she amused herself by thinking of what she might see. Naked male bodies? Jockey shorts? Men always seemed so ridiculous in jockey shorts. But no, there was Alan, already dressed and walking out to meet her.

"Is it safe to enter?"

"Sure. Not everyone is awake yet, but those who are have their clothes on."

Suzanne walked into the summerhouse--sleeping bags and mattresses were scattered around the concrete floor. Three still held white-sheeted bodies. "Well, I guess you'd better wake them up. We've got a lot to do today." She walked back outside and sat in the wooden porch swing that hung between two large oaks. She rocked herself slowly back and forth. A slight breeze touched her face; it was cool here in the shade.

She wondered if she and Alan had made the right decisions--the wedding had started out small, but now it seemed to be mushrooming, to be assuming a life of its own beyond her control. They had wanted a fun wedding, and so invited their friends to come early. None of their friends could afford motel rates, hence the sleeping in cots in the main house and on mattresses in the summerhouse.

"O.K., Suzanne, everyone's up. You can come back in." Alan stood in the doorway.

She patted the space beside her. Alan walked over and sat down. He put his arm around her and she leaned her head against his shoulder. She thought of her father again. "I love you, Alan." They rocked for a few moments then got up together and went to the summerhouse.

Rick met them at the screen door. "What can I do to help, Boss?" Alan's cousin Rick had been calling Suzanne "boss" all week. At first she'd taken the title badly, thinking that it implied something about her personality. By Friday, however, she knew someone had to take charge.

Suzanne reached up and pulled the string for the overhead fan; it whirred into high. "Well, pick up the mattresses and stack them. Set out the table for breakfast. Then go to the house and make sure all the girls are up. I'll start the eggs and bacon. Who wants a fried egg?" Suzanne busied herself at the summerhouse until her mother sent a message that she was needed at the house. By then, Jill and some of the other girls were down at the summerhouse, so she turned over the cooking to them.

At 10:30 the house party that had gathered for the wedding still hadn't set out on the proposed tour of Baton Rouge. The early risers had been ready for an hour,

and as quickly as the heat drove them into the cool main house, Suzanne drove them back out again. She was dialing the organist's number for the fourteenth time when Rick and Jill and several of the others came in the den and turned on the TV. She felt herself close to screaming.

"Will you please get out of here! You all are supposed to be gone by now. Leave!"

"Well, Suzanne, we don't really feel like visiting the state capitol. We're about toured out. Besides, it's awfully hot down there in the summerhouse." As usual, Rick was the spokesman for the dissidents.

"Has everyone eaten yet?"

"Yes, the third shift is just finishing up."

"They can wash their own dishes," Jill added. "I'm tired of waiting on them."

"O.K., Rick, I appoint you chairman of the round-up committee. Get everyone organized and out of here. You have to go. Mama and I have too much to do today--we have to arrange the house. Please."

Only the rising note in her voice and the wild look in her eye convinced them. Reluctantly, with many sighs, the small group left the house. It was another forty-five minutes before the whole party actually set out. As the three packed cars were leaving the driveway, Suzanne rushed out and flagged the last car down.

She leaned in the car window--the air conditioner hadn't yet worked its magic--and kissed Alan. "Please," she whispered in his ear, "keep them away at least until 4:30." She waved good-bye, then stood for a few seconds watching the dust settle. Next she had to get her brother Bob to leave for the New Orleans airport. An aunt was arriving in two hours.

In the hours the house party was gone, Suzanne and her mother accomplished many things. Furniture was arranged, silver polished, and the schedule of ladies to serve at the reception worked out. Some deliverymen brought the musician's electric organ to the house and set it up, and the parish priest phoned three times. Father Ogg didn't approve of the ceremony that Suzanne and Alan had written, he didn't approve of the secular music that they had chosen for the wedding, and he most of all didn't approve of a "foreign priest" being brought into his church to officiate at the ceremony.

Suzanne was lucky--her father was a friend of the bishop. So, for the final time (she hoped), Suzanne repeated that yes, the ceremony and music had been approved by the bishop, and that no, Father Gerome--who was to conduct the wedding--had not arrived in town yet. "If worse comes to worse, Father Ogg, could you do the rehearsal

tonight?" Suzanne hated having to ask him, but Father Gerome had phoned that he was having an emergency in his own parish and might be late. When she hung up from talking to the priest, she repeatedly dialed the organist. No one answered.

Suzanne was in the middle of a phone conversation with the caterer when the door burst open and the wedding party poured through it. They all looked hot and tired. She shooed them to the back patio, then served cold beer and chips. The patio was shaded by a pair of huge old magnolias and cooled by a late afternoon breeze.

"Where did y'all go?"

"The Old State Capitol, the New State Capitol, and the river front."

"You didn't go to L.S.U.?"

"No, we ran out of time."

"What did you see--was there an art exhibit at the Old State Capitol?"

"Yes. It was 'Scenes from Cajun Country.'"

"And we saw Huey Long's statue," Jill added.

"You'll never guess what Alan did." Rick's eyes danced and the rest of the group emitted low moans. "We were on top of the state capitol--you know, the observatory platform thirty-four stories up. Anyway, we were all wandering around. Suddenly Alan started calling people

over. He said he had something important to say to us. It took at least five minutes to gather everyone together. Guess what he told us?"

Suzanne thought for a minute. "Probably that he was hungry and ready for a beer."

"No." Rick was enjoying telling the story. "Alan said, 'I want you all to know that this'" Several people chimed in with Rick to complete the sentence, "'is the high point of your tour.'"

Suzanne flung up her arm to her forehead in a melodramatic gesture of despair. Her voice took on its Nellie Trueblood, ingénue-in-distress, accent. "Alan, you didn't! How could you disgrace me this way? You promised--no puns until after the wedding."

Alan laughed in self-delight. Puns were his favorite form of humor.

"You really ought to consider marrying me instead," Rick said. "We'll just continue on with the arrangements as they are. Only Alan and I will switch places."

Suzanne smiled and asked them where they'd gone for lunch. As it happened, Alan had suckered some of the newer additions to the group on Cajun beer, too. "Mother's milk for Cajun babes," he called it, getting several people to agree to try it. Rick and Jill and Ann, who had been on a day trip to the Tabasco Factory on Avery Island earlier

in the week and who knew exactly what Cajun beer was, helped Alan persuade the inquisitive ones to taste it.

"Well, I drink it myself," was the meek answer Alan always returned to the gasping, tongue-lolling initiates.

"He did drink his," a disgruntled voice chimed in. "And ours as well. It's a dirty way to con people out of a drink, is all I can say."

It suddenly occurred to Suzanne that she hadn't arranged for drivers--who was going to drive whom to the church tomorrow? She had decided to skip the expense of limousines, but now she needed to persuade their friends to serve as drivers. And her father's car was dirty. "Rick, will you do me a favor?" She smiled her most engaging smile.

At six o'clock everyone went to dress for the rehearsal. When the telephone rang, Suzanne threw on a robe and rushed to the head of the stairs. She hoped it was the organist. Instead, she heard a one-sided phone conversation. Her mother had answered the ringing.

"Yes, this is she. . . . Oh, Ruth, how is Pops? . . . Oh, no. Is he in pain? . . . I'll try, but I don't know. . . . I'll telephone you later."

Bob, Suzanne's brother, went and stood by their mother's elbow.

"Is something wrong with Pops?"

"Yes, he's in a coma." Suzanne hurried down from her listening post.

"Mama," Bob said, "I can fly you there this evening. We'll rent an airplane at the airport. We can fly back tomorrow morning. There's no problem--you'll be back in plenty of time for the wedding."

His mother's answering voice was very small and quiet. "I can't leave. There's too much to do here. The house isn't ready."

"Mother," Suzanne tried to make her voice earnest, "we can still cancel. You go to Beaumont and I'll telephone the guest list tonight and say we've had to postpone."

"No, it's too late. People have already come from out of town."

"They'll understand."

"No, I don't want that. Neither would he."

"All right then. Go to Beaumont. Bob has suggested the perfect solution. I can take care of everything here. There's not much left to do."

"I'll think about it," her mother said, then went to her bedroom and closed the door.

Father Gerome hadn't arrived by seven-thirty, so Father Ogg, after once again telling Suzanne that he

didn't feel the ceremony to be a proper one, directed the rehearsal. After it ended, the whole party went to a fashionable restaurant for the rehearsal supper. Everyone was gay and laughing, including Suzanne's mother, who made a couple of remarks about Alan's impatience for the wedding night.

"I'm glad it'll all be over tomorrow. I've been so worried that you two would jump the gun."

Alan sang his response, "Happiness is a warm gun," in Suzanne's ear, and then went down on his knees before her, his hands clasped together, and teased, "Mother Superior jump the gun."¹

The mock desperate look on his face made Suzanne laugh and blush at the same time. She wondered if her mother's comment was based on her own experience or not.

Her mother's voice rose higher than Alan's. "Now, Alan, as your soon-to-be mother-in-law, I warn you not to go off half-cocked like that."

Her mother's face was so innocent, Suzanne wondered if she realized what she'd said. Rick let out a big hoot, and it was Alan's turn to blush. Suzanne's father got up from the table and left the room. Alan looked anxiously at his retreating back, then stood up to go after him.

¹ John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "Happiness is a Warm Gun," sung by the Beatles (London: Northern Songs Limited, 1968).

Suzanne's mother caught his arm. "It's O.K., Alan. He'll accept you eventually. It was the same way for Bob's wife--no one is good enough for his children. Don't worry about it."

Alan sat back down.

Suzanne leaned over and kissed him on the ear. "I've made my choice, Alan, and you're it."

In whispers, the news about the grandfather's health was passed from one wedding party member to the next.

Rick, Jill, Alan, and Suzanne were the last to leave the restaurant. On the drive home, Rick asked Suzanne about her grandfather.

"Well, he's really sick now. However, when Mama and I went to visit him in May, he complained of having a bloated stomach and dizzy spells but seemed fairly well. He showed us all about his garden and even crawled underneath his camper to show Mother how to empty dirty water." Suzanne paused as if remembering. "But what really convinced us that he wasn't too ill was the way he snapped at Ruth--that's his second wife. We figured that anyone with as much vinegar as he had couldn't be all that sick. So when we came home, we mailed out the wedding invitations. We even teased him about being the highest stepping dancer at the reception."

"Are you close to your grandfather?"

"No--he's always lived too far away. And he divorced my grandmother years before I was born. My mother's still bitter about that. But she loves him."

After everyone else had gone to bed, Suzanne and Alan sat on the den couch and necked. They went so far as to stretch out full-length on the couch, so when the door opened and Suzanne's brother entered, they had to jump up. Suzanne felt guilty though she knew it was ridiculous.

"Suzanne, what are we going to do about Granddaddy?" Bob was always blunt.

"I don't know. It's really too late to cancel the wedding, and besides, it would be very expensive. On the other hand"

"It's really up to your mother to decide," Alan interposed.

"Yes, you're right. And she seems determined to continue." Bob went to the refrigerator and poured himself a large glass of milk. He swallowed it in one long, gulping motion. "Well, good night, you two. Pleasant dreams." Bob laughed as he went out.

"Darling, it's time to go to bed." Suzanne reached up and touched Alan's cheek. "I really shouldn't be kissing you, anyway. My mouth has broken out in mouth ulcers."

"I don't care. Besides, I'd rather spend the night on the couch with you than another night down at the summerhouse with the guys."

"Is it uncomfortable down there?"

"No, I'd just rather be with you."

"And I with you. Oh, Alan, only one more night apart!"

Alan walked her to the bedroom door, kissed her lightly on the lips, then stepped heavily away and down the stairs. Suzanne waited until she heard the side door slam.

Suzanne had hoped to sleep late the next morning, but the household sounds awoke her, and once awake she couldn't go back to sleep. The house throbbed with noise and activity. The telephone and doorbell rang constantly: the flowers and cake were delivered, neighbors dropped by to offer help, and two overseas relatives wired telegrams of felicitation. Besides that, there were thousands of last minute details to be taken care of. The tuxedos and ice had to be picked up, Alan needed a hair cut, and all the bourbon in the house had already been consumed.

Suzanne grabbed the ringing phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Suzanne? Is your mother there? This is Ruth." Suzanne went and got her mother. She listened to the fragments.

"When? . . . Was he in pain? . . . What are the arrangements? . . . Yes, we'll leave tomorrow morning." Suzanne's mother put the phone down and turned.

Suzanne saw her tears. The girl put her arms around the older woman. She felt awkward, for her family wasn't the affectionate kind. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"It isn't that he's dead. He was old and had a good life. It's just that he's my father."

The family began gathering in the hallway. The doorbell rang and so Suzanne answered it. Two of her mother's friends--pink, powdered, soft-voiced Southern ladies--had come to arrange the flowers. Suzanne told them the news, and they joined the group pressing close to Suzanne's mother. With a toss of her head, the mother showed that her tears were under control. She cut the whole group off by turning to her friends.

"Ah, you've come to do the flowers! They're in the living room. Bob, Rick, will you help me set up the outside tables?"

The hairdresser took too long to do Suzanne's hair. When she got back home, she had to rush to get ready. Suzanne had planned a slow-paced day leading up to the evening wedding. Towards that end, she and her mother had begun planning and making arrangements six months

previously. Now, instead of the hot, soothing bath she'd anticipated, she had to jump in and out of the tub. Suzanne swore silently when she dropped her compact on the floor. She was determined that she'd remain calm, that there would be no hysterical, last-minute tears to mar her wedding. She slapped on her make-up, then hurried into her dress and jewels. She'd wanted all the traditional things, like pictures of her getting dressed with the bridesmaids clustered about, and one untraditional thing--a chance to talk to Alan just before the ceremony. Now there was no time.

When she came downstairs, her father was the only one still waiting; the others had already left for the church. As they were walking out of the house, a car slammed to a halt before the door. Bob emerged from the dust cloud.

"Have you got another copy of the ceremony?"

"What?" Suzanne asked stupidly.

"The wedding ceremony. Father Gerome hasn't got a copy of the ceremony."

"Oh, my God! Father Ogg was supposed to give it to him when he arrived. The wedding is going to be a disaster."

Suzanne, being careful not to trip on the long dress, went back upstairs to get her copy. Bob grabbed it from her hand and took off, the car spraying gravel and dust as he left.

Suzanne went back inside. She couldn't sit down because of her dress, so she walked back and forth for exactly two minutes, then went outside and got in the car. Her father didn't say a word to her. She tried supporting herself on her hands, but finally gave up and sat on the edge of the seat. The car jerked away from the curb, and Suzanne was thrown backward. Her dress was going to be a mess, too. She examined her emotions. She was surprised by how calm she felt. In fact, she felt rather numb. Everything had turned into a huge muddle.

The guests said later that the only person who floated down the aisle was Suzanne's mother. Dressed in a flowing, pastel flowered dress, she looked more the part of the bride than the bride herself. As Suzanne began her march down the nave, someone in the pews whispered at her to smile. She tried, but it felt forced. The bridal march music didn't begin until she was half-way to the altar. It occurred to her that she had forgotten to tell the organist that her dress wasn't solid white. Instead it was blue with a transparent white overlay. The organist probably had thought she was the maid of honor.

Alan's smile was genuine, and Suzanne was glad to exchange her father's stiff arm for Alan's comforting one. Despite the fact that Father Gerome hadn't previously seen a copy of the ceremony, everything went very smoothly

until Suzanne's father went to the lectern to read a Scriptural passage. He stood there a few seconds not saying anything, then he began speaking. His voice was low and he paused every few words as though to keep the emotion from breaking out.

"Before I begin . . . I want to tell you . . . that this afternoon my wife's father . . . Suzanne's grandfather . . . passed away. Please remember him in your prayers." The last words came out in a rush.

Suzanne blinked her eyes rapidly trying to hold back the tears. They were tears of anger, not sorrow. She was suddenly furious. Her thoughts raced. Why did he do that! He had no right. Suzanne sensed that the atmosphere in the church had suddenly and irrevocably changed. She felt the heat grow in the church--Father Ogg must have turned the air conditioning off--and felt a rising wave of hatred. As her father's voice continued the reading about a bride leaving her father and cleaving to her husband, Suzanne felt a huge lump gathering in her throat. She fought it, because she refused to cry. Alan held her arm tightly.

After Alan's mother read a passage about one's lover looking as lovely as a gazelle, Father Gerome came to the lectern. He was young, unlike Father Ogg. And liberal. Suzanne was so glad Father Ogg wasn't doing the ceremony.

"We are here for a joyous celebration. Our joy is reflected in many things--in our beautiful and special clothes, in the flowers, in our smiles and the photographs being made, in the happiness of the bride and groom." The priest continued on. He spoke of love, of two made into one, of the great occasions in life. He made no mention of the sorrow of the day, as if he too realized the inappropriateness of it here.

Their kiss lasted longer than it should have. Alan and Suzanne practically ran down the aisle. Rather than stand on the church steps and receive congratulations, they immediately returned to the house. They had a few moments together before the crowd began to arrive.

Suzanne wanted to have the best time of anyone at her reception, but she only had a few sips of champagne; she never tasted most of the wedding food, and she danced only occasionally. In short, it was quite different from her imagined wedding evening in which laughing, with a glass of champagne in one hand, she would dance with every man at the reception. Alan tried to liven things up on the dance floor, and dutifully asked every woman in the wedding party to dance, but the evening never began to vibrate.

Moving outside for some fresh air, Suzanne heard a friend offer her mother condolences. Her mother passed the situation off beautifully.

"I can't be too sorry, you know. He was eighty-six and had a very full life. And he was always in good health except for the last few months. And you know, when last I talked to him I said, 'Pops, we're expecting you at the wedding.' And he said, 'Sis, I'll try to make it.' I feel as if he has made it, that he wanted to be here with us this evening."

When Alan danced with Suzanne, he told her that the priest had missed a perfect opportunity to deliver a really beautiful homily on the succession of generations. That one marriage had ended today and another begun, that the great cycle of life was thus evidenced. Alan's comment was good, too. Suzanne couldn't think of anything good to say.

In their motel room later, Alan and Suzanne made love. When he had exhausted himself and fallen asleep, Suzanne lay in bed and thought. Certainly her marriage had begun with an ill omen. Perhaps it was her own fault for defying all the taboos. She had walked up the aisle at the rehearsal, refused to wear white, and seen Alan on the morning of the wedding. But it still didn't seem fair, so her resentments slowly began to squeeze themselves out and roll down her cheeks. She tried to be quiet. It wasn't Alan's fault, and he would feel bad if he knew she was crying. And the worst thing, the

worst thing of all, was that her father had humiliated her by not asking her to dance. She would never forgive him.

Suzanne rolled over and tried to sleep. Tomorrow she and Alan had to begin the long drive to Beaumont and the funeral.

CHRISTMAS COLORS

There was no room for him at the inn. The large, light-haired man closed his eyes and leaned his head on the back of the chair. He felt like having another drink, sitting before the fire to watch the news, and then going to bed. Instead he had to go out into the cold again. An earlier conversation repeated itself in his mind. With his eyes closed, he watched the scene begin. As in a dream, he observed himself from the outside.

"Hello. I'm Dixon. John Dixon. I have a reservation."

"Sorry, sir, all our rooms are taken." The clerk glanced at the ledger before him, nodded, then looked up again. "We held your room until six p.m., but when you hadn't arrived by then, we gave your room to someone else."

"Are you the manager?"

"No, sir. He's on his supper br--"

"Get him." The clerk noted the cold smile on the man's face, then turned and went into a back room. After a few moments, the clerk returned, but it was several minutes before a small, neat, balding man walked to the desk. He wore a crisp pocket handkerchief and a bow tie. The clerk explained the situation, then moved away to answer another guest's question.

"Listen, I telephoned ahead to say I'd be late. Whoever I talked to promised to hold my room."

The manager looked thoughtfully at the man across the counter. Finally he spoke. "I'm sorry, sir. There is no record of a call here. You know, Christmas time is our busy season. The rooms are in great demand."

"Nevertheless, I phoned. And now I need a room." The large man's voice was not raised in the least, yet there was an edge to it.

The manager removed his handkerchief and dabbed at the palms of his hands. "Well, I'm afraid I can't ask the people who already have your room to leave. However, I will telephone some of the other places that rent out rooms. We're the only inn, but there are some boarding houses."

"Yes, I know." Dixon had picked this small ski valley because of its isolation and lack of development. He wanted quiet, not a jostle of people and a crowd at the towline.

The manager began to telephone one number after another--all were negative replies. "I'm sorry, sir, every place is full. Perhaps you could try Elderville; it's just twenty miles up . . ."

"Look." John Dixon's eyelids sank until they had almost covered his dark brown eyes, and his smile grew

larger and larger. "I've been planning to ski here for the last six months. I made my reservation, I paid a deposit, I reconfirmed, and I phoned today when it was obvious that I wouldn't arrive until late. I want a room. You're liable. Have I made myself clear?"

The small man hesitated, then said, "Well, there is one more place I could try. A private home. But she sometimes takes in guests."

The large man noted the manager's hesitation. For a second, he weighed Elderville against the nervousness. Then, in a voice which was unusually soft, said, "Try it."

The manager dialed a number without looking it up in the directory. "Hello, Anna, this is Cecil. We've got a problem here. . . ." Listening to the one-sided phone conversation, John Dixon knew that she didn't want him. The manager glanced up at the man opposite him, flushed, asked the clerk to hold the line, then disappeared into the back room. After a short while, he reappeared. His lips were forced back into what was intended to be a smile.

"All right! Everything's arranged. You're really quite lucky she'll take you. Very nice house. And she's an excellent cook--I'd try to arrange meals if I were you."

"The first free room--notify me. In the meanwhile, I'll run a tab at your bar and restaurant." Dixon turned to leave, but the manager hurriedly raised his hand and

said, "Just one more thing, sir. The lady--Mrs Mitchell is her name--asks that you come before eleven." Dixon's brow furrowed. In response the manager drew himself up to his full height. "After tonight, Mrs. Mitchell will give you a key so you can let yourself in. When you're ready to leave, the clerk will give you directions to the house."

Dixon watched the stiff, retreating back of the manager, asked the clerk to watch his bag, and then ambled towards the bar.

The cold air hit him directly in the face. He loaded his suitcase back into the Mustang, regretted that he hadn't asked Hertz for a heavier car, and reviewed the clerk's directions. Although he'd been to the lodge once before, he didn't really remember the neighboring roads. Wondering whether he was more likely to get stuck or lost, John Dixon put the Mustang II in gear.

The road was clear most of the way. When he turned off the highway, though, he cursed. Nothing was going right today. First his conference had lasted overtime, then he'd rushed to the plane only to find his flight delayed, next no room at the inn for him, and now he had to drive up a god damned mountain. The dirt road ahead rose at a steep incline. On either side of the road, mud tire

tracks now glazed over with ice were separated by a large middle hump of dirty snow. John Dixon put the car in reverse and backed up across the highway. He slammed the gear into low, accelerated smoothly, and began the climb uphill. The light-bodied car slipped and skidded around the road, throwing mud. Everytime the car hit a rut, it bottomed out on the hump. The Mustang threatened to stall several times, but each time he swung the wheel hard and accelerated; with his foot on the gas pedal and his fingers on the steering wheel, he tried to feel the car's shudders so that he could keep the car at just the pace that produced the best traction. At the top of the hill, he pulled into a circular driveway.

The house was large, rambling, and white. In the light shed by the front porch fixture, he unloaded his bag. Pressing the doorbell, he ran his fingers through his hair, then turned and looked at the mud-spattered Mustang.

The door was answered by a boy about seven or eight. He was black.

The child twisted around and yelled, "Mommy, the man's here." Dixon picked up his bag and walked inside. The long and rather wide hallway ended in a staircase. A woman emerged from a room to the right of the stairs. She was tall and solidly built, with auburn hair and

fair skin. When she got very close, Dixon saw that her eyes were blue.

"Come in. I'll carry that for you." She reached out to take the bag.

"I'd rather carry it myself."

"O.K. Your room is upstairs." She led him past a living room where the false light of a TV illuminated two black-haired, pale children. Then up the stairs and into a bedroom. "This is it."

He put his bag down and looked around. He was immediately struck by the one incongruous object in the room. Set back against the same wall as the door, and completely unlike the other conservative furnishings, was a four-poster bed. Although it lacked a canopy, it rose high off the floor on elegantly swirled, delicate posts which didn't appear capable of bearing the weight of the bed, much less his weight. With its rose-patterned bedspread and flounce, the double bed was too ornate and too fragile. He looked back at her.

"The ground rules. First, Cecil, over at the inn, will keep your deposit. After you leave and I make sure everything's still here, you'll get your money back."

He lifted an eyebrow.

"Sorry, bad experiences. Secondly, no visitors upstairs. You can use the living room or the study if you

want to bring anyone over. Third, here's a front door key and a key to your room. Please lock the front door when you come in and go out. Fourth, . . . well, there's something else I need to tell you, but I can't remember what. Anyway, that's my room--the one nearest the stairs--if you need anything. Usually I'm downstairs in the living room or in the kitchen."

Her accent was strange. Dixon couldn't place it. "What're the chances of getting meals?" he asked.

"Sure, I'll feed you. But I don't have a strict schedule, so you might prefer to eat at the inn. Breakfast--around eight. You won't want to come back for lunch. Besides, we usually just have sandwiches. Supper--sometime after six. Let me know beforehand, say by five, whether to put your name in the pot. By the way, what is your name?"

"John Dixon."

"Anna Mitchell." She extended her hand.

"Your children?"

"Jamie, Marie, and Todd. Todd answered the door."

"Do they always stay up this late?"

"During vacations, sometimes. When strange men are coming to the house, usually. There's an alarm clock over on the desk if you care to use it." She closed the door behind her.

Dixon looked around the room, this time more slowly. Dark wood panelling and a big, heavy desk against one wall, as well as a leather armchair and a bookcase filled with large, hard-covered tomes, revealed it to be more an office than a bedroom. The gun rack mounted on the wall was empty.

He walked into the adjoining bathroom. There was no tub, only a shower, and the towels were dark brown. He stripped off his clothes, dropping them on the floor one by one, then stepped into the shower.

The bedroom felt cold after the steamy bathroom. He walked over to the bookcase and selected a thick text entitled Trusts and Wills. Dixon sat down in the armchair to read, but the contact of leather against his bare skin made him overly conscious of his nakedness. He got up and locked the door, then sat back down. After only a few pages, Dixon replaced the book in the bookcase and took a newspaper out of his overcoat pocket. He consumed the paper, methodically reading everything on each page. The advertisements received their fair share of his attention, as did the obituaries. He noted how many children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren each deceased had.

When he finished the last page, he got into bed, the sheets cold against his skin. Dixon's mind went over the

conversation with the inn manager again and again, and instead of sleeping he tossed about the bed. The four-poster was not long enough for his legs, and the blankets felt insufferably heavy. Finally he switched on the bedside light, rose, went to the bathroom, and searched through the medicine chest. There were no sleeping pills.

He leaned against the bathroom doorjamb, then walked over and rummaged through his suitcase. He thought of the closet--a zippered clothes bag hung at the very back. Opening it, he saw five suits lined up in an orderly fashion. Closer to the front of the closet a few items dangled from wire hangers. He removed a red terrycloth robe, put it on, switched the light off, and went to the door.

Dixon inched his way down the dark corridor and carpeted stairs, then along the hallway to the room where he had seen the children watching TV. His fingers searched for the light switch; when he flicked it on, he saw that the room was a jumble--couch, armchairs, toys, clothes piled up by a sewing basket, a fireplace, and an abstract painting on the far wall. He decided against TV, so he eased his way down to the next door and opened it. The light switch was again hard to find; when he turned it on, the overhead glow illuminated an old-fashioned study, the kind he hadn't seen since his prep school years. Books

lined the walls, and there was the requisite painting over the fireplace. The living room had been cluttered, but this room was neat.

An expensive stereo set occupied the lower part of one wall, and a piano stood in the far corner. The roll-top desk in the opposite corner looked very business-like, while armchairs, ottomans, and lamps faced each other in the center of the room. The far armchair had a swing-away board attached to it, so that the person seated there could write as well as read.

Dixon browsed around the room, noticing that the books were grouped into subjects. There were big sections of history, art, and literature. He pulled out a book called Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days, read the dust jacket, then settled in an armchair. The inside leaf was inscribed, "To Anna--So you'll know what it was like. JCM."

He read for a while, then went to the kitchen and helped himself to a beer in the refrigerator. He heard the clock chime twice and went back to reading. Dixon still didn't feel sleepy; he was considering a second beer when he heard footsteps. Anna Mitchell entered the wedge of light in the hall. She looked in, but didn't pause. After a second or two, she reappeared.

"Hi." He stood up. "I couldn't sleep so I came down."

"That's all right. I was just checking the front door." She didn't move away.

He looked down at his body, then back up at her. "I hope you don't mind. I borrowed this robe from your closet."

"No problem. A man who stayed here last winter left that. I keep meaning to give those things in the closet to Goodwill, but I can never seem to get around to doing it. You know, tomorrow and tomorrow."

John Dixon saw that she was looking at the beer bottle on the floor. "Oh, and I borrowed a beer from your refrigerator. I'll return it--tomorrow."

"Not to worry. Those beers have been in the icebox a long time. I just keep them for company--too fattening." She patted her hips. Anna was wearing a long robe tied around the waist with a sash. Her full, womanly figure was clearly outlined.

His face was very attractive, but not handsome in the classical way. His eyes were dark. His nose began downwards, then jumped over a slight bit to the right. Perhaps a football injury, she thought. His moustache followed his lip line, then drooped down at the corners. The moustache accentuated his full, firm lips. When he smiled, the gold rim of a tooth cap was visible. Anna had

never seen anyone except blacks with gold tooth work. Somehow the gold filling seemed right for him, though. His teeth were very white and his smile predatory.

Anna was intrigued by his complexion. With such dark skin, one expected black hair. Instead, it was very light brown, almost blond. His chest was hairy, much hairier than James' had been. And he was much heftier than James. In fact, his body was just the sort of big, broad-shouldered athletic build she had fantasized about as a girl. Luckily he hadn't gone to fat yet the way so many muscular men did. That was one thing about James. He had stayed trim and attractive. Dixon's legs were very muscular. And straight. Anna had always been particularly attracted by hairy, muscular legs. It amused her to realize that Dixon's legs were more attractive than her own fat-kneed, bow-legged limbs. The red robe looked good against his brown skin. She wondered if he were wearing shorts beneath the robe. She doubted it.

"Where are you from?" Dixon broke the silence.

"Can't you guess?"

"Well, 'icebox' and 'supper' are Southernisms. On the other hand, you've said 'not to worry'--that sounds very British. Your accent is strange; I can't place it."

"Not bad at all. I was raised in Mississippi, went to school in Massachusetts, then lived and worked in Europe for several years."

"Where in Massachusetts?"

"A boarding school--Concord."

"Well, you don't look like a preppi," he said. "I'm an Exeter man myself."

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days."

"Been to Vietnam?"

"Yes. Your husband?"

"Yes. Don't read 'The Burn Ward' unless you've got a strong stomach. It's a horrible story." She turned away.

"What time does the lift start up?"

"About eight. See you in the morning." She checked the front door again before going upstairs.

It was very early when he took his place in the tow line. The greyish, sodden sky was a weight pressing him down. His mind, heavy from too little sleep, refused to function. He moved forward stupidly. When his turn came at the front of the line, he waddled forward with his huge wooden feet. He felt clumsy, unnatural. The line swung around. The sudden fear, as always, that he wouldn't be in position in time. Then the attendant placed the tow bar under him. The line was slack for a second; with a jerk, John was pulled forward. He got his balance right,

his knees bent to just the necessary degree to keep everything aligned. The wooden feet kept pulling outwards, trying to go in a different direction.

Soon, he ceased to regard himself. The line was pulling him up, up. There were only a few skiers ahead of him, and so the slopes were fairly clear. The sky began to lighten. The green of the pine trees marched up the white mountainside. He saw tracks among the trees. Probably a fox. The silence of the morning was only broken by the mechanical sound of the tow line, and the vista of mountains and trees only scarred by a swath cut out for a long line of tall steel power towers. John turned his head to look all about him. When he twisted his body to look below him, his skis turned as well. He grabbed the bar and straightened himself. He began to feel elated.

At the top of the mountain, the dismount from the tow line seemed easy. He stood and watched the other skiers moving below him. King of the Mountain. Then he pushed off. The wind stung his face so that he had to squint. No goggles. He stopped, pulled his cap lower over his ears, then shoved off again. He headed straight downward, then turned abruptly and traversed from side to side, his knees suddenly graceful, bending elegantly first left, then right. He aimed directly for rocks and

trees that stood as obstacles in his path; he wanted to see how close he could come to them before stopping in a turning side movement that sprayed snow.

Once, before a huge rock that rose brownly from the snow like a single sentinel left by the glaciers to guard their retreat, he leaned too far to the left. The bindings on his skis released and he was down, soft, in the snow. He watched as one ski dashed away from him, then came to a halt against a tree. John was pleased the ski had not headed straight downwards, lethally gathering force as it went. He didn't want to walk down. After remaining in the snow a long moment, he got up. A skier halted sharply before him.

"Are you hurt?"

Her hair was cut short, and her chin quite square. If it hadn't been for her voice, John couldn't have guessed with certainty what sex she was. He looked away, his eyes fixing on a huge pine etched against the sky. "No. Thanks, but I'm fine." He looked at her and mustered a weak smile.

"I saw you go down, then it seemed like a long time before you got up. Sure everything is hunkey-dorey?"

"Yes."

She waited before him, her ski poles planted in the snow.

"I was just enjoying the feel of the snow," John finally said.

"Would you like to ski down with me?"

"No, thanks. I think I'll take a breather. Maybe have a cigarette or something. You go on ahead--don't let me hold you back."

After she left, John pulled his remaining ski against his chest and kissed it. He slapped away the snow that clung to his clothing, then carefully leaned the ski against the rock. He thought for a minute, clambered to the top of the rock, and looked down. Skiers, all brightly colored reds and yellows and blues, moved below him. There, nestled close to the bottom of the mountain, was the inn. And beyond the next ridge were other houses and the highway. He jumped down from the rock, his boots sinking deep into the snow. He removed the ski from its position against the brown monolith, then walked to the pine tree where his second ski waited. Underneath the tree the aroma of pine filled his nose. He looked up through the towering branches, each laden with its garland of snow. The sky was now blue, as sharply brilliant as an icicle. No portent of new powder for the morrow in that sky. John clamped on his skis and began the downward journey again.

Up and down the mountain he went, each time the gathering knot in his stomach on the upward climb, then the moment of omnipotence on top of the mountain.

Finally, the earthbound explosion, discharge of stored energy.

After his third run, he felt both tired and hungry. He lined his skis up in the ski rack and clumped into the inn in his heavy boots. It was warm inside the inn. He took off his ski jacket, hat, and gloves as he walked into the restaurant. Before he entered the room, he surveyed the customers, then sat in a booth. The waitress gave him coffee so hot that it burned his tongue. He ordered the Skiers' Special--two eggs, sausage, biscuits, and hash browns.

While he waited for his order, he read the local paper that someone had left on the table. He worked his way through news, next sports, and still his food hadn't come. John called the waitress over and told her to bring him a large slice of melon right away. The first bite was exquisite--sweet, soft, cold. He closed his eyes and considered a whole field of ripe melons, considered being a melon farmer. He smelled sausage and opened his eyes. The waitress, holding the Skiers' Special just under his chin, laughed at him.

Anna went to the inn's picture window to see if she could locate her children on the slopes. When she couldn't pick them out of the crowd, she went back to the fireplace and began reading.

She was to the part in Northanger Abbey where the heroine gets invited on a drive, when a voice, deep and gravelly as though from too many cigarettes, broke into her thoughts.

"Want a drink?"

She recognized John Dixon's voice at once; Anna looked up slowly. His mussed hair and red, glowing face revealed that he had just come in off the slopes.

"Hi, you left early this morning."

"Yes, I couldn't wait to get on the slopes. What are you doing here?"

"My kids are skiing."

"Don't you ski?"

"Yes, marginally. I don't really like it. I'm afraid of heights."

"But there's a tow line up the mountain. You can keep your feet on the ground. Is it being on top of a mountain?"

"No, it's going downhill. That moment--it happens every run--that my skis are out of control. I'm going too fast. I can't stop; I hate it." She smiled. "So I sit here in this soft chair by the fire and read." She looked up at him. For the first time, she noticed that his face was deeply pock-marked.

"What are you reading?"

"Jane Austen."

"Very genteel. Look, I'm going for a drink. Like to join me?"

"I'd better not. The kids wouldn't know where to find me."

"About supper tonight. I'd like to eat with you, if I may. I have a feeling I'll be pretty tired. A home-cooked meal sounds great."

"Sure. See you later."

When John arrived back at the Mitchell house, he immediately went upstairs and took a shower. He thought about taking a nap before supper, but decided on the evening news instead.

He walked into the living room, but no one was there and the TV wasn't on. Instead of turning it on, he wandered out the door, down the hall, and into the study; there was a fire going. John settled into a deep armchair and put his feet up on an ottoman. He drifted off to sleep.

A gentle voice singing awoke him. It was the black child, holding a framed photograph before him and moving it to the sound of his words. "My daddy's the best. My daddy's the best."

Just then the older boy whom John had glimpsed the night before stood in the doorway. He scowled as he

listened to the younger child, then rushed over and grabbed the photograph from his hands.

"Give me that. He's not your father. He's my father."

"He is too my father."

"Is not. And it's all because of you we don't go to Grandpa's anymore. You nigger."

The words were spoken just before the mother entered. Her eyes registered the belligerent stances of the two children, and Todd's tears.

"All right, what's going on here?"

"Nothing." Jamie gave his answer in a tone of voice that implied it was none of his mother's business.

"Todd, what happened?"

The child started to answer, saw his brother's face, and was quiet.

"Very well. Jamie, go to your room." Her eldest son gave her an ugly look, then turned and ran out of the room.

Anna sat down and pulled Todd on her lap. A door upstairs slammed shut. She was trying to coax the child into telling her what had happened when the daughter entered.

"Mama, what's wrong with Jamie? He"

"He was being mean to Todd again. I sent him to his room. I'm going to talk with him now. O.K.? Incident over. Marie, set the table for supper. Mr. Dixon's eating with us." At the doorway she paused, then turned back to John and said, "I apologize to you." He heard her steps go upstairs and a soft knocking at a door.

John walked to the piano and looked at the photograph. A tall, slender man with dark hair and a serious smile looked out at him. The man's arm was lazily draped over the neck of an Appalossa. The skin on his drooping hand was almost the color of the Appaloosa's white coat.

John was awakened the next morning by knocking at the door. He looked at his watch and saw that it was eight. He had overslept. When he got out of bed, his muscles ached. John slipped on the red terrycloth robe.

"Mr. Dixon, I saw your car was here and wondered if you wanted me to fix you breakfast?"

"Yes, I'd like that." He put on ski clothes and went downstairs. The children were already eating. Jamie looked sullen and toyed with his food. Marie chattered away while Todd kept asking his mother questions. The youngest boy's eyes grew large when he saw his mother serve John three eggs and four pieces of toast.

Anna sat down to eat after she served John. "I'm going riding this morning. Who wants to go with me?" Two additional sets of eyes joined the pair already focused on their plate. "Nobody? O.K., I'll go by myself. Jamie, you're in charge while I'm gone."

"Mama, I want to go. But today Mr. Jones is bringing the tree. Remember?" The girl looked very much like her mother.

"Oh, yes. I'll get the stand out before I leave. Jamie, Mr. Jones will help you set it up in the study."

"Is it horseback riding you're going?" John looked questioningly at the woman seated across from him.

"Yes. Do you ride?"

"Not in years. But if there's a horse I could rent, I'd like to go along."

"We have our own horses. But the children won't mind if you ride theirs. I'd appreciate company. Have you got any other clothes?"

"A pair of jeans. And my ski jacket will do. No boots, though. Guess I'll have to wear shoes."

"What size are your feet?"

"Tens."

"I think I've got a pair of boots that will fit you, especially if you wear a couple of pairs of socks." John noticed Jamie give his mother a furious look when she offered the boots.

Anna drove John to the nearby barn where the horses were stabled. "This is my mare, Mariposa," she said, indicating a beautiful buckskin. "She's a Quarter Horse. You can ride Handsome over there. Very gentle--you'll get along."

"And whose is this?" John was standing near the third horse stall. Inside, a large Appaloosa stallion rolled his eyes and arched his neck.

"That's Diablo. My husband's horse. I ride him occasionally, but not too often. He's quite a handful."

"Do you mind if I try riding him?"

Anna started to refuse, then stopped. She smiled slowly. "O.K., but don't say I didn't warn you." Unlocking the equipment room, she showed him which bridle and saddle to use. As she bridled her own mare, she watched John handle the stallion.

"Sure you haven't ridden in years?"

It was his turn to smile a slow smile. "I was raised on a ranch. . . . Aren't you going to use a saddle?"

"No, I feel like riding bareback." Anna mounted the mare using the awkward two-step movement she had developed for occasions when there was no fence or mounting block available. First, she jumped up and supported herself on Mariposa by putting her midsection over the horse's back; secondly, she swung her right leg over. The mare stood absolutely still.

Diablo, on the other hand, fidgeted around the paddock. Every time John moved to his side, Diablo stepped one or two paces away. Finally John got his foot in the stirrup, but the horse again started moving away. John took two awkward one-legged hops after Diablo before swinging up and on.

"That's a bad habit he's got," John said.

Anna tried not to giggle. "Yes, he needs some training."

They set out across a field, then into some woods. The snow, the horses prancing, the silence: it was Christmas Eve.

"Mind if I ask a question? You don't have to answer."

"Go ahead."

"Where is your husband?"

"He's dead." Her tone of voice indicated that she didn't want to discuss the subject further.

He wanted to ask her about Todd, whether he was adopted or what. But he suspected that she would resent the question.

Anna lay forward along her mare's neck. She took off her mittens and stroked Mariposa's neck.

John considered lying back along Diablo's rump, but he didn't trust the stallion yet. He'd look a fool if he were thrown. "How did you get to this town?"

"My husband and I decided to move for Todd's sake. We bought that huge house--a room for each of the children. A study for myself and my husband. A guest room for our friends. And family. That is, for James' family. But we were hardly settled in when the accident happened." She bit her lip, then rubbed her eyes with her left hand. Mariposa whinnied; Anna sat up. "Hey, you really ride well. I'm glad you wanted to come. Diablo needed exercise."

"I understand you used to take in boarders. What happened?"

"Well, it was just a scheme to make extra money. I had all those empty rooms, and it seemed ideal. But" She finished the sentence with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Did people steal things?"

"Yes, you wouldn't believe. Everything from the bathroom scales to my grandmother's antique purse. But that wasn't the worst. Some people didn't know how to treat Todd. It just didn't work out."

"I promise not to take the bathroom scales. But I admit some of the books in your library are quite tempting."

"You like to read?"

"Long ago and far away I was an English major. Until the greedy jaws of business scooped me up."

"I'll bet you're successful, too. What do you do?"

"Oil. What else?"

"Don't you miss your ranch, horses, literature?"

"Sure, but I don't have much time to think about things like that. Just every once in a while someone reminds me that people have souls." John took his feet out of the stirrups and let them hang loosely.

She smiled her thanks, then galloped ahead. John grabbed for Diablo's mane as the stallion leaped out after her.

When John came in from skiing that afternoon, the Christmas tree was set up in the corner of the study. There was neither tinsel nor ornaments on it. Just popcorn strings, candy canes, and construction paper cutouts. There were no lights, but the tree seemed to radiate its own green luminosity. The popcorn, candy, and paper figures reflected this green glow. A glass angel atop the tree, pierced by a single golden ray of light from the window behind the tree, cast a rainbow on the opposite wall. John looked out a westward-facing window--the sun was sinking in a blaze of pink and violet. It was a summer sunset, not one for December.

Presents wrapped in colored tissue paper were piled up beneath the tree. John asked about supper, and Anna invited him to Christmas lunch the next day. He accepted.

After supper, Anna gathered the three children in the study and read a story to them. It was about Joseph. About how he loved Mary. Then he found out she was different, and he was very unhappy. His friends made fun of him, and his family told him to break their engagement. But an angel of the Lord came and gave him strength. And he understood.

After that, Dixon suggested Christmas carols. Anna banged away at the piano while everyone else yelled out the songs. John's voice was flat and off-key, but he sang enthusiastically anyway. John noticed that Jamie seemed to be really enjoying himself. Soon everyone was thirsty, so the group retired to the kitchen for hot chocolate and Christmas cookies.

On Christmas morning, John got up very early and went skiing. The slopes were deserted. Fresh powder had fallen during the night, making the downhill course perfect. He felt the power enter him, and pushed off. Halfway down, he realized that he was singing Blake's "Jerusalem" at the top of his lungs. He felt good.

Anna had told him that dinner would be at 1 p.m., so he left the slopes at noon to drive back. Along the road he saw a supermarket sign that said, "Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year." He stopped and bought a bottle

of white wine. He was hungry, too, so he also got a bag of potato chips to tide him over until lunch.

Back at the house, he saw the three children out in the side yard. Jamie was flying a motorized model airplane; the boy turned slowly around in a small circle while the airplane droned above him. The other two children watched with rapt attention.

When he opened the front door, the aroma of roasting turkey greeted him. John went directly to the kitchen, where he found Anna standing over the stove. She wore a long, wine-red velvet skirt and a pink low-cut blouse. Her hair was pinned up in curls. She made John think of the line in the Christmas poem: "And visions of sugar plums danced in his head."

"Sorry I'm not dressed for a formal affair. Here, I brought you a bottle of wine."

"You look fine. Wine--fantastic! And it's dry--my favorite."

John sniffed around the counter; he saw two pecan pies and a mincemeat. "Hey, are you planning to feed an army?"

"No, just to make an absolute pig out of myself as I do every year." The doorbell rang. "Hey, John, will you get that for me? I have to keep stirring this gravy."

John went back down the hall to open the door. The small manager from the inn stood on the landing, his

arms filled with presents. The manager's bright smile faded when he saw John.

"Merry Christmas. Come in. Can I help you with those?"

"Thanks, I'll manage. Merry Christmas to you." The slight man--again wearing a bow-tie--slipped past John and into the living room. He put the presents down. "Where's Anna?"

"In the kitchen." John followed the manager back down the hall. So that's why he didn't want me to stay here, John thought. Anna was his girlfriend.

"Welcome, Cecil. I'm glad you're here. Cecil, you and John have already met, right? How about fixing the three of us a drink?"

"Where are the children?"

"Out playing."

"I brought them each a present."

"Oh, you shouldn't have. Getting the Christmas tree for them was enough."

"But I wanted to."

"O.K. Dinner's almost ready. You fix the drinks-- I'll have the sweet vermouth on the rocks--while I call the children."

Anna's first shout to the children went unheeded, but when she said, "Mr. Jones has brought you a present," they all scrambled inside.

By the time the adults got down to the living room, the three kids had already torn the paper off their packages. Marie's was a beautiful, blond-haired doll wearing a wedding dress. The girl cradled the doll in her arms.

"Here, Anna, this is for you." Cecil gave Anna a very small package, the kind that only a ring or a pair of earrings can come in.

"Why, thank you, Cecil. We have something for you. too. Jamie, will you give Mr. Jones and Mr. Dixon their packages?"

The boy distributed the presents. Anna put her gift aside, unopened, so Cecil did the same.

John opened his. The card read, "To warm and relax you after skiing." Inside was a bottle of brandy.

"Thank you. I didn't expect to receive anything this Christmas."

"Haven't you got any family?" Cecil asked.

John smiled at him but didn't answer.

"Well, time for dinner. Is everyone hungry?"

Anna led the way to the dining room.

They had worked their way through the ambrosia, the Mississippi wild rice dressing, the cornbread dressing, the turkey, the green beans à la Anna, the broccoli, the gravy, the pickles, the nuts, and the wine. John had two

helpings of everything but the ambrosia. He began to regret the second helpings when Anna announced dessert: choice of pecan pie, mincemeat pie, or plum pudding with hard sauce. And, of course, an after dinner liqueur. The children's eyes looked filmed over--they had been allowed to have a glass of wine.

Before Anna finished getting the dessert orders, the phone rang. "Oh, bother. Jamie, go answer it."

The boy was gone for several minutes. When he returned, he was very excited. "Mama, it's Grandpa and Grandma. They want me and Marie to go down and visit for the rest of the holidays. Grandpa wants to talk to you."

Anna sat absolutely still for a long second. "Shall we have dessert later? I feel too full myself right now. Excuse me for a moment." She got up. "Jamie, I want you to hang up the phone when I say to--I'm going to use the phone upstairs."

Marie and Todd began clearing the table; the men rose and moved into the living room. After a few minutes, Anna called down the stairs. "Marie and Todd, your grandparents want to talk to you."

Jamie confronted his mother in the hallway. "Can we go, Mama?"

Cecil asked John a question; John didn't reply--he was waiting for Anna's answer.

"No, Jamie. We've talked about this before. Your grandparents must invite all three or none--I asked them to come up here, instead. They said maybe in the spring."

"But I want to go!"

"Jamie, you can't always have what you want. We are a family, do you understand?"

John didn't hear Jamie's reply, but he heard the front door slam as the boy went out. Marie and Todd bounced into the living room with their mother.

"O.K., gang. How about a ride on the snowmobile?"

The children shouted and clapped their hands. "Me first," Todd called.

"What snowmobile?" Cecil asked.

"My present to myself," Anna replied. "Everybody upstairs and change Church clothes. Cecil, I guess you'll have to go as you are."

Anna took each of the children on a short ride, then the two men. John asked if he could drive; when Anna consented, John invited Todd to go with him. The other four watched while John took the machine on a much more daring run than any of Anna's; he full-throttled over hills to achieve a jump, careened the snowmobile in sharp curves, and even managed to turn it on its side. Of course, the

the other two children demanded that they, too, be allowed to ride with Mr. Dixon.

It was late afternoon before they finally had dessert. After finishing his plum pudding, Cecil left to go to work. There was a special program on television the children wanted to watch, so Anna asked John if he would like to go feed the horses with her.

"Sure. Your car or mine?"

"Neither. We'll use the snowmobile. That's why I bought it--we can cut through the pastures to the stable rather than having to drive around by way of the roads. Why don't you drive?"

Anna wrapped her arms around John's waist. She wanted to lay her head on his shoulder, but she couldn't--she had to tell him where to go.

Diablo was loose in the paddock; when he saw Anna and heard the rattle of the feed bucket, he trotted over to his stall. Anna filled the horses' water buckets, put their feed in the mangers, then locked Diablo's stall gate and opened those of Mariposa and Handsome.

"I'm afraid we have to stay here until they're finished. If we don't, Handsome will come in here and eat all of Mariposa's feed as well as his own."

"Why don't you let the gelding out with Diablo, then?"

"Diablo doesn't like Handsome much. See these scars?" She ran her fingers along a few scar lines.

While the horses munched contentedly on the molasses-coated grain, Anna gave each a swift once-over with brush and curry comb.

"There, my beauties. Handsome, you old flirt, Merry Christmas." Anna pulled an apple from her pocket. "It's funny, but he's the only one of the three that likes apples. My father had a donkey once that loved tobacco."

"Was that your father or your husband's father on the phone this afternoon?"

Anna sighed. "My father. Calling straight from the heart of piney woods Mississippi."

"I couldn't help overhearing. Don't they accept Todd?"

"No, they don't."

"Will you tell me about Todd?"

Anna looked at the ground, then up at him. "Pick a number from one to seven."

John remembered this childhood game. "Four."

Anna turned away, walked to the tack room, then back. "Things are not as they seem. All three of the children are adopted. I am barren. That is, I am barren now. I got pregnant when I was sixteen; my brother took the baby; the pregnancy was a mess and so it seems I

can't have any more children. I didn't find out until after I married James. We decided to adopt. My parents don't know. They think Jamie and Marie are really mine. They won't accept Todd as being really mine, too." Anna spoke in short, terse, breathless sentences, and her eyes never wavered from John's.

He decided to try another number to see what would happen. "Seven?"

Anna smiled; he knew. "Both Todd and Marie are adopted. Marie is really Mexican-American. James wanted to adopt her to make up for the sins of his fathers in Texas. Todd is penance for the sins of my fathers; unfortunately, their sins are not as easy to assimilate."

"Six?"

"James traveled a lot. He had a black girlfriend in South America. Todd is the result."

"Three?"

"James received a war wound in Vietnam. We adopted all three."

"Two?"

"I had a black lover."

John thought a minute. "Five?"

Anna turned her back to him. She leaned her arms on the fence. "I was raped; I don't believe in abortion. Voilà Todd."

"One?"

"Once, when I was in Biloxi, I saw a black child on the street. He mumbled something to me; I ignored it. I thought he was asking for money or something. James stopped--the boy was lost. I was so ashamed. I took his tiny black hand in mine and we went looking for his mother. The child could hardly speak coherent English, he was so frightened. I knew then that I wanted to adopt a black child. James agreed. We got Todd as a baby."

"Do your children know the truth?"

"Does it matter? As long as I love them, does it matter which story is the truth?"

"I'm sure it matters to them."

"People believe what they want to, anyway."

"But the truth shall set ye free."

"Not if you are black and a child."

"Should three be hurt or one? You know, don't you, that Jamie is already confused."

Anna closed her eyes. She stood with her hand supporting and shading her closed eyes, then looked up at him. "How can I choose? James and I made our decisions together, not alone. Not alone."

"It seems as though Cecil wants to help you make decisions."

"Cecil is a very kind man--good to the children, good to me. But he isn't James, and he can't replace James."

Dixon lifted up her chin and kissed her.

She didn't relax, didn't mold her body to his.

He let her go.

"The truth shall set ye free," she whispered.

"I'm married. Separate vacations. Very modern. We don't believe in children."

Anna didn't believe him. She remembered his earlier comment about there being no presents for him this Christmas and his reluctance to admit that he had a family. "Two?" Her smile told him she didn't believe him.

"I like my life as it is. No entanglements."

"It's nice having another liar around. Ready to go back?"

"Want to go skiing with me tomorrow?"

"Can't. I promised the kids we'd go ice skating in Elderville."

When John got back to the Mitchells' after skiing, the last of the twilight lingered. The lights were out in the front rooms and the house looked deserted. John went in. Marie was seated on the floor outside the closed study door. She was coloring in a book.

John put his hand on the door knob, but the little girl said, "You can't go in there."

"Why not?"

"My mother is dancing."

"What?"

"You know, dancing. She always does it when she gets sad."

Through the door, John could hear Ravel's "Bolero." He stood there next to the door, listening as the music grew gradually louder. John could feel her, through the door, dancing. Dancing out her sadness. Dancing out her loneliness. Conjuring up the man she had walked slowly and regally down the aisle towards.

Dancing. He could feel her. He stood tensed by the door, while the little girl colored.

Then the music changed. "Carmina Burana" came on. "It's all right now. She's just listening. She'll come out when it's over."

John knew that Marie was right. He sat down in a hall chair to wait.

When she came out, her face was pale. She looked at him, but there was no surprise in her eyes.

"I wanted to tell you that I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Yes, I know." And she went to the kitchen to fix supper.