

SUICIDE HOUR
by
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I was dreaming. Something I couldn't even remember at the moment of awakening, and then I opened my eyes. For a minute, I thought I would find myself out of bed again. I had awakened so many times and found myself in the hall, or even downstairs, and if Lee or Mother shook me, I would be all mixed up, unable to find any explanation for being there.

For a long time, I lay still, waiting for the whirling confusion to settle down. I could feel my heart beating a jungle rhythm with the fear of something forgotten.

Pictures of what had happened to me during the day began to dance in the darkness. The bright sun, the other university students ambling along the streets, Selina and I going into the five-and-dime to purchase lipstick.

I had started to ask Selina if she had done her statistics homework yet when I saw her looking across the aisle. She was watching the four girls near the back of the store.

Ellen Mackay and her crowd. The queen of the forest surrounded by her toad, her cat, and her jackal. The toad, a fat, squat girl; the cat, smug and pleased-looking; the jackal, fawning, and despite her money, unsure. All three subjects homely, rich, from the "best" families, and accepted wherever they went. They were different from their queen only in looks. To all her other gifts, Ellen could bring a bonus of an undernourished-looking model's figure, long blonde hair, and a face that always looked pleasantly surprised because of arched eyebrows and short upper lip.

They had completed their purchases, and as I watched, Ellen glanced up. Although she had known me since the first grade, she looked through me as though I were made of glass. Then she and her menagerie left.

"You'd think they could get typhoid just staying in the same store with me," I said to Selina.

Selina handed the salesgirl her money and waited for change. She was an out-of-town student and barely knew Ellen. "What have they got against you?" she asked.

I didn't know what they or the rest of the town had against me. All I knew was that all the "nice" people had avoided me from as far back as I could remember. It wasn't until I had entered the university and met people from other parts of the country that I had been able to make friends.

Slowly I said, "Maybe it has something to do with my father."

Selina took the change the salesgirl handed her and dropped it into a pocket. "Why should it have anything to do with your father?"

I didn't know why I had said that. Perhaps it was because my father had done the only thing of any importance that had ever happened to me. "Well, I mean, you see he deserted my mother."

"That's a funny reason to be mad at you. I think it's more likely because you're so pretty. Ellen doesn't seem to like having pretty girls around her."

I glanced up at the wall mirror to examine my black hair, my sunburned face, and the old, cheap dress I wore, when I saw the woman. She was passing the aisle at that moment. A thin white-haired woman whose nervous face was outlined when she turned to speak to her companion.

And the minute I saw her I was frightened. What had there been about her that had made my memory rustle like leaves again?

She must have reminded me of someone from the past. Aunt Celia. That was it. Father's sister Celia.

Because of the silver hair and the nervous face. But Aunt Celia had died long ago, and besides, I had hardly known her. Why should someone who reminded me of her make me afraid?

We had seen Aunt Celia right before she died. No one had even known she was sick then. She had driven all the way up from Virginia because it was spring, she said. She liked the open road in the spring. That winter she had died. What was there about Aunt Celia?

I could almost see her. She had been sitting out on the sun porch talking to Mother. "Do you remember—" she had been saying. Do you remember what? She had been telling Mother about the visit before that one.

"Do you remember the last time I was here?" she had asked Mother. "I brought her a ball—"

I felt cold, as though someone were pulling a wet glove over my head. What else did she say?

"She had to have three stitches in her lip."

I had to have three stitches. When did I have those stitches? Let's see, Aunt Celia died nearly thirteen years ago, which means she visited us when I was six. When had she visited us before that?

I opened my eyes in the dark and looked at the ceiling. Somewhere below, water was slapping monotonously into the sink. Tapping. There had been the sound of the ball tapping. The ball Aunt Celia had given me. It had tapped lightly as it went down the cellar stairs.

"The way she ran after that ball and tumbled down the steps." I had chased the ball and had fallen, splitting my lip.

Then Mother was saying, "She wasn't afraid of cellars then. But we can't get her to go down into one now."

There it was. The cellar. That's what the woman who looked like Aunt Celia had reminded me of. That's why I had been afraid.

I hadn't been afraid of cellars once, but sometime afterward I had become afraid. I was six at her last visit; how old had I been the time before when I had chased the ball? I hadn't started to walk until late, when I was sixteen months old. Then whatever had happened to make me afraid had happened between the time I was sixteen months and six years.

My eyes were getting used to the dark. I could see the clock. It was made of ebony and ivory and someone had given it to me long ago, before I could tell time. The green light shimmered as though we were separated by a deep sea, undulating like fish seen through tangled seaweeds from a glass-bottomed boat.

I knew the hands of the clock would be in a familiar position. I always awakened at the same time. When the longer hand pointed straight up and the smaller one pointed at an angle, down.

Four o'clock. The suicide hour.

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I don't know what I expected to find in the attic. But returning from my part-time job the next day, I decided to see if there was anything there to help me remember what had happened long before.

I would have gone straight up if my brother hadn't been in the kitchen. Lee was sprawled in a chair, still in his bathrobe.

The bathrobe seemed to fill the room. It was a desert-island pattern, with a yellow beach, blue sky, and green palm trees unnaturally splashed with orange blossoms. And above it, Lee's yellow hair was almost as loud.

"It's after five," I said. "What are you still doing in your bathrobe?"

A minute before, he had been an inert mass of palm trees, but when I spoke, he acted as though he had been dipped in starch. "Ah, the little sister," he greeted me. "Your bright shining face is like a lighted beacon in the tossed sea of my life. Your sparkling—"

"You didn't get the job, did you?"

"—eyes are like candles in the window of my life. Your bits of conversation like nutmeats—"

"He didn't even go down and try." It was Mother, coming down the back stairs. She was dressed to go out, her short red hair brushed back, her nails sparkling, and her new dress fitting perfectly. Without thinking, I glanced at my old tweed skirt and wondered why there was never enough money for me. "He called on the telephone instead of going down in person, and naturally they said the job was already filled. We just can't get along on the small income from your father's business. I never saw a more unfortunate woman than me. First a husband who deserts her, and then a son who's thirty-two years old and hasn't yet had a steady job." She turned to me. "That reminds me, dear, if you got paid today, would you please give me the money now? I'm ashamed to be seen anymore with my old purse—"

"What's the rush?" I said, handing over my week's check. I watched her dash back and forth from the sink to the refrigerator.

"Oh, the old lady's going out with the charming Mr. Haimler again," Lee said. "May his wife rest in peace."

"Leander!" Mother said. We both jumped like small children. Lee blinked a little. Although he was thirteen years older than I, he looked like a little boy about to get a spanking.

"I'm trying to be nice to Mr. Haimler," Mother said, enunciating each word with sharp distinctness, "because his wife is sick. Don't you ever say a nasty thing like that again."

"*Mama mia*, don't get mad at me." Lee tried to sound jocular, but he didn't. Unconsciously, he began to chew on his nails. Then abruptly he turned to

me. “Methinks the little sister is not her usual sunny self this evening. Did one of your fathead boyfriends give you the air? You have to have rocks in your head to prefer going out with them when your handsome brother would be happy to take you anywhere.”

“Mother,” I said suddenly, “why does the whole town hate us?”

I watched her face. Instantly it assumed an odd, vacuous look. The skin that lapped over the outer edges of her eyes made them appear to be perpetually squinting. “Is anything the matter with you?” she asked. “You haven’t been having nightmares again, have you? I never saw anyone so strange. You won’t use the back stairs, you won’t go near the cellar, you—”

“Mother, please—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Nobody hates us.” She placed bread and sandwich spreads on the table so we could make our own sandwiches for dinner. “Don’t forget to sweep the front hall after you do the dishes. It looks terrible.”

Slapping both hands to his forehead, Lee rocked back and forth as though he had been shot. “I forgot to change your blouse,” he said to Mother.

Mother sighed. “You get more like your father every day. Always forgetting when it’s something for me. Bill was just like the type the man on the radio was talking about the other day. This man on the radio said you can live with people for years and not really know them. They seem to be all right, and then suddenly, just like that, they do something crazy.”

Eating my sandwich, I listened to them. Their talk went on and on, as unchanging from day to day as the tides. As soon as I was finished eating, I washed the dishes, hastily cleaned the front hall, and went upstairs. In my room, I took out my schoolbooks and spread them on the desk. The minutes dragged by, and I had to restrain myself from going out on the gallery and asking them why they didn’t leave.

At last I heard the front door slam, and after a minute, a motor start up. I went to the window. It was Mother leaving with Mr. Haimler. As I waited, Lee came out and went around to the back to get our car.

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As soon as he left, I went down the hall to the attic door. The room above was a large unpartitioned space with a pitched roof. In the watery light, I could just make out the outlines of the cobweb-covered trunks, boxes, and furniture accumulated by three generations.

For a while, I stood still and listened, not sure what I listened for. I was faintly troubled. Not only by the dark and loneliness, but by something else.

I walked around examining the belongings of those who were now dead. On the floor was a basket. When I lifted the lid, I saw a purple dress. I remembered Lee’s having told me once that the dress had belonged to my father’s mother. A vision floated in my head, without form or feature, consisting mainly of an aura of kindness. A sweet protectiveness.

I closed the basket. And then I saw the trunk.

It was a rusty khaki-colored trunk, and it stood in the corner under the window. Paint stains, cracks, dust, and torn labels covered every visible surface.

Every nerve in my body seemed to be tingling with some psychic stimulus emanating from the trunk. Someone else's fingers seemed to be pressing on the lock, working on the two end clasps, lifting the top.

The trunk was full of clothing, men's clothing. Not Lee's. I could recognize Lee's. Not my grandfather's. They weren't that old-fashioned. And they were in a terrible disorder, as though they had been thrown into the trunk by someone who hadn't much time.

There were more than ten suits in the trunk, and nearly twenty shirts and eight pairs of shoes. And more than enough ties and socks and handkerchiefs.

One of the suits, a brown one, had no sign of having been worn. It was new. Two of the shirts still had a store label in them.

My mind didn't function. It was capable only of observing at that moment, not of reaching conclusions.

An object glittered at the bottom of the trunk. I reached in, and my hand closed on something smooth and cold. It was a round, flat disc, very old-fashioned. A gold watch on a chain. And I didn't need the initials to tell me whose watch it was. I had known all along.

Only one person had owned those clothes. My father. And why would a man leave all his clothing behind when he deserted his family?

I closed the trunk. Somehow, somewhere, the atmosphere had changed. It had happened gently, subtly, so as not to alarm me. The hum of quiet was no longer harmless; it seemed to be telling me things.

From the outer world, I heard a car. I stood still and listened to the motor grow louder and then disappear. It was the first sound I had been aware of since I had come up. Was it a warning?

The stale air was beginning to make me nauseous, and yet I didn't want to leave. Even this substanceless world was better than what awaited me. The thing trying to tear loose from the cellar and envelop me in a black nightmare that would be worse than any I had ever dreamed.

And then I saw the face looking up at me through the hole in the attic floor.

I was jelled into a mold, icy without and shaky within. Unable to move, I remained exactly as I had been when the face appeared. Even my hand, about to shut off the light, remained suspended. All I could do was stare at the hole in the center of the floor.

And then I took a breath again. "Lee."

He was looking up at me, blinking. "What are you up to?"

I realized I must have been hearing something all along. The door, footsteps, sounds that couldn't penetrate the coating around me.

"What's the matter?" Lee asked.

"You frightened me."

"What are you doing up there?" He waited as I shut off the light, and then he helped me down the ladder, pushing it back and closing the closet door. "You know the old lady thinks it's bad for you to poke around in spooky places."

I followed him down the hall. I thought of the times long ago when Lee used to hide behind doors and leap out to frighten me.

“You’re nervous enough,” he went on.

“I wish you’d stop saying that. Sometimes you and Mother act as though I were losing my mind.”

“Oh, Lord,” he moaned suddenly. “I forgot. I went to town to change the old lady’s blouse and forgot to do it.”

A feeling of futility overcame me. No wonder the world was in the mess my history teacher was always telling us it was in. A brother and a sister couldn’t even find a way of communicating with each other. For a moment I disliked Lee, I disliked Mother, and most of all, I disliked the house.

“Look at this house,” I said. “Maybe I wouldn’t be so nervous if we’d moved long ago. Maybe if we used some of the money from the business for fixing the house instead of another fur coat for Mother, I wouldn’t be so afraid, I wouldn’t be getting up every night—”

I stopped abruptly and looked at him to see if he’d noticed the slip. For once I had all of his attention.

“Do you get up every night?”

I turned away and headed for my room.

“Why don’t you go back to town and change Mother’s blouse?” I said. “I don’t know how in the world you can be so forgetful.”

Lee’s eyes became vague again. Going to the window in my room, he looked out. It was the window that faced town. “Ah, Sister, what do you perceive when you enter our fair village? Your limited mind can only discern minor shops, a university, a house of entertainment—ah—of the more virtuous genre. But I, what do I remark?”

“I remark a vastly different panorama. A panorama festering beneath the surface, like vermin beneath a stone. Underlying the calm burgher visages, I perceive a cruelty and corruption entwined with one another like snakes. Behind the façade of the university, I sense the vast hypocrisy of an educational system that spoons arsenic into the minds of the young. Behind the marquee of the State Theatre, I can see the vast spider web of—”

“Lee, please shut up.” I sat down at my desk and made random marks on a sheet of paper. “Lee,” I said, not looking at him, “why did Father leave all his clothing when he deserted us?”

I didn’t hear a sound behind me. Finally I turned. He was sprawled on the bed, his eyes closed, and he looked as though he were asleep.

“Lee, did you hear me?”

This time he turned over and began to hum. While he hummed, he moved a finger like a baton. “How do you know?” he said finally.

“I saw the clothes in the attic.”

“How do you know they were his?”

“Because—well—I can tell.”

“Maybe he left in a hurry.”

I felt as though I were caught in a fishnet, struggling helplessly in the sea. “Why won’t you tell me things? What is it everyone in town knows but won’t tell

me? I can't stand it anymore. Lee, listen. I get the strangest feeling sometimes. It's been going on for years. I wake up at night, and I try to remember. I have a feeling that something happened long ago that I ought to remember."

Lee jumped up and went to the window. For a minute, I was afraid he was going to start the lecture about the town again. But instead, he returned and leaned over my desk.

"Sis."

"Yes?"

He reached out and did an odd thing. He stroked my hair. "How pretty," he said.

"What were you going to tell me, Lee?" I shook my head impatiently.

He put his hands in his pockets. "I guess you might as well know. The old man did something. That's why he had to leave town." I felt as though I were tearing free of the fishnet, but ahead of me was a shark.

"He must have been insane," Lee went on. "He attacked a little girl."

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All day I had been aware of an unpleasant sensation. I was in the library trying to study ancient history, but snatches from Professor Ordomenedroyd's lecture that morning kept intruding.

"—not noticed until the explosion. A break occurs between the surface and subsurface character. It may be a gradual thing, or it may be precipitated suddenly. However, in all the years before, even the closest intimates may notice nothing more than—"

A glance at my watch told me I had been in the library for three hours. Shutting the textbook, I turned it in at the desk and left.

He would be glad to see any of us at his home, the professor had said. Anyone who had a problem would be welcome to talk it over with him.

I went into Cunningham's. Looking in the directory, I found the professor's number and dialed. A woman answered before the bell could ring twice.

"May I speak to Professor Ordomenedroyd?" I asked.

"Certainly," she answered cheerfully without asking for my name.

Evidently she was accustomed to students' calling her husband. In a moment, his familiar drawl came on.

Somewhat breathlessly I told him who I was and asked if I could see him. Without hesitating, he invited me over.

I went up North U. and then right to Fletcher. The professor's house was on Ann, just a block short of the hospital.

At the first touch of the bell the door opened, and there was the tall, slightly stooped frame. The stoop came not from age but from being over-tall.

"Uh—hello," he said.

We walked through a narrow hall into a brightly wallpapered living room. Pushing aside a child's wagon, the professor waved me to a chair.

"I hope I'm not interfering with any of your plans," I said.

"Not at all."

He reached into his pocket and then held a package of cigarettes out to me. I shook my head. Putting away the cigarettes, he took out a pipe.

Abruptly I said, "Do you think that someone could experience something and then push it out of her mind and not be able to remember it?"

"Did you?" he asked.

"Did I? Did I what?"

"Did you push something out of your mind?"

I hesitated, feeling confused. Then, "Are you telling me it's a silly question? I mean, if I had pushed it out of my mind, I wouldn't know about it and wouldn't be asking you this question?"

His large, strong hands stuffed tobacco into the pipe. "Why don't you tell me what it's all about?"

"Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night?" I asked.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I mean, frightened."

He didn't glance up, and I was grateful. Leaning back, he folded and unfolded a used match. "Frightened of what?"

"I don't know. I wake up, and I'm just frightened."

"What about the remembering?"

"Well, it usually starts with something disturbing me during the day. A little thing. Like today. Something's been bothering me, and I don't know what. Well, anyway, a spark sets off in my mind. And then I wake up at night and start trying to remember. It's something that happened to me a long time ago, unless, of course, I only think it happened. But it seems so important to remember."

He didn't act as though he thought I was off balance. He simply acted friendly and interested.

Finally he said, "It isn't uncommon for some isolated incident to be pushed out of our minds, for one reason or another. What sort of things have you remembered so far?"

"Oh—vague little things from my childhood. But each incident seems to be leading to one big thing. Our cellar, for instance. That seems to be connected with what happened. And I always seem to remember at night . . ." I petered out lamely, but he said nothing. His silence impelled me to keep talking. "Especially around the suicide hour."

The phrase slipped out unintentionally. He stopped pounding his pipe into his palm, and for the first time, some expression came into his face.

"I read the phrase in a book once," I said quickly. "They called four A.M. the suicide hour because it is the time when a person's resistance is lowest. And that is the time I start remembering."

"I've heard the term," he said. His poker face was like a pie that was all crust, without any fruit of emotion within. "I don't agree that there's any special time for suicide. The man who finally destroys himself with a gun is only finishing something he started, in a manner of speaking, in his infancy. The final act is only the last step in a killing that's been going on for years. You know, the appointment in Samarra idea. Rendezvous with death."

I repeated the last three words.

He smiled gently. “You know, the person who always fails. Although apparently escaping, he’s always actually moving in a straight line to his rendezvous, putting himself in a position from which the only escape is death.

“By death,” he went on, “I don’t necessarily mean death of the body. Sometimes the body is saved and the mind is killed. Sometimes the mind is saved and the body killed. But in either case it’s a matter of having turned one’s coldness and hate for the world to oneself—”

“What hate? Why should a person hate?”

“Well—” He almost smiled again, and then he changed his mind. “It’s a long story. It depends on the kind of mother and father a person had, how much he was loved, how much frustration was imposed on him. Everyone has some aggression in him. Some turn it back on themselves, some turn it on others in various guises such as prejudice, some sublimate it into useful channels—”

While he talked, a picture came into my mind. A blurred picture of a large man with gray at the temples. The image faded, and I tried to cling to it as though it were a ledge over a chasm. The face was doing something. Going around and around. No, it was I going around. In a carrousel. And the face was watching me.

The professor was saying, “But that isn’t why you came to see me. You want to know if you could make yourself remember something. Well, I can’t help you. I don’t know. It depends on how painful the experience was.”

He leaned back with his arm on the back of the chair. “I used to work for your father,” he said.

I looked at him blankly, and suddenly I knew to whom the face watching the carrousel had belonged. It had belonged to my father.

“You used to work—you worked for my father?”

“Yes.”

I digested that for a while. “Do you remember anything about him?” I asked finally.

“Do you?” he countered.

“No. But I know he was a drunk, and he chased women and—and he deserted my mother.”

Strangely, he laughed. “That’s quite a picture. Well, in answer to your question, I worked for him when I was a kid. I did errands and was the general office boy. Naturally I wasn’t intimate with him.” He stopped to think a moment. “Did you ever try to see his partner?”

“His partner?”

“Yes. If you’re curious about what your father was like, why not get in touch with his partner?”

“I—well, that is, I know what he was like. You see, anyway, I can’t see Mr. White. He moved away, and someone else is running the business.”

“Oh.”

Upstairs I heard a woman’s voice calling. I knew I ought to be going, but there was one other thing. “Do you—that is, is it possible my father committed suicide?”

“Do you have any special reason for asking?” he said. His voice was even a shade more gentle.

“Well—” I decided to plunge. “I was in the attic in our house, and I came across a trunk full of clothes. I’m sure they were his. The funny part is that the clothes were almost new and there was an awful lot of them. And if a man went away, he’d take his clothes, wouldn’t he?”

A long pause followed. He was looking at me in a blank kind of way. He was no longer being soothing and tolerant. He was confused.

Standing up, I said, “I better be leaving.”

Automatically he stood, too. A faint frown rippled over his face. “What did your mother have to say about those clothes?”

“I never told her.”

“You never told her?”

“No. It wouldn’t do any good. She would say what Lee said. He left in a hurry.”

Placing the pipe, fortunately dead at the moment, in his pocket, the professor said, “I’ll tell my wife to come down. We’ll all have coffee.

“Oh, no thank you. I have to go.”

“Uh—well. Anyway, about the remembering. If you really want to, I could give you the name of someone who might be able to help—” As he spoke, he went to the closet and started to reach for his jacket. “I’ll drive you home,” he said.

I thought of his wife waiting upstairs. “Oh, no, thank you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“No, really. I enjoy the walk.”

He glanced doubtfully at the darkness without. Then he relinquished his jacket. “All right. See you tomorrow in class.”

* * * * *

Instead of returning the way I had come, I took the short cut. Down Forest and toward the field. There was construction going on during the day, and a monstrous steam shovel crouched amid the rubbish of excavation like a dinosaur.

I walked quickly, turning repeatedly to examine the black-holed work shack. As I passed the playing fields, I peered through the iron railing at the posts for baskets and nets. Moonlight gave the whole expanse a false glow that flattened out and sharpened shadows so they appeared to have been cut out and pasted there.

I walked past the field and approached the trees. I was just abreast of them when I heard something behind me.

I turned. I could see nothing. If I had to scream, I thought, no one would hear me. The closest buildings were university buildings, and they were all locked up for the night.

“Who’s there?” My voice quavered like an old woman’s. No one answered.

I began walking again. By now I was up to a thicket of woods. And then I heard a branch snapping. I stood still, looking at the underbrush on both sides. A stealthy movement came from the left, calculated and unanimallike. When I

whirled toward it, I saw a flickering shadow darting from one tree to another. Tall and straight. Not an animal.

I began to run. And as I ran, I could see the headlines: STUDENT MURDURED ON CAMPUS SHORT CUT. LEAVING PROFESSOR'S HOME, COLLEGE GIRL STRANGLER.

Behind me, the sounds accelerated. I looked over my shoulder and saw the shadow emerge from the trees. It was on the path with me now. Without thinking, I flung myself into the woods.

Thick branches closed over my head and on every side, grasping brambles groped for my throat.

Completely demoralized, I started to run back again, to get away from the thicket. But it was as though I had gone through a long series of rooms with the doors automatically fastening behind me. In a moment, I had lost all sense of direction.

I thrashed along, not even stopping to see if I was followed. Trying only to find an exit out of the jungle of dead twigs and leaves, I didn't even notice the sting of the thorns. Part of my brain continued to tick along independently. It was eight hours at least before daylight. Eight hours of dodging through the brambles. Mother always returned home late, and she never looked in my room. There would be no alarm until morning.

I felt suffocated by the branches. My breath began coming with soblike regularity, and the bushes turned into a roaring tunnel. A long unending tunnel that spun and whirled.

The next moment I was free. On the path again, with the stars above, normal and clear. Up ahead were the buildings of the university. And the roaring was gone. All was quiet and soothing.

Someone was hurrying up the path, coming at an unnaturally fast pace. But there was nothing stealthy about the movement, and it didn't come from the direction of the trees.

"Hold it," a voice called.

I stopped. From the light shed by the moon, I could see a loud sport jacket. But I didn't have my glasses on and I could tell nothing about the face.

"Lady Livingstone, I presume?" a voice asked, and then he was near enough for me to see him clearly.

Eldridge Knowler. A picture rose in my mind. I had been surrounded by a gang of bullies at the pond. All of them chanting something that had made me feel sick and dirty. A local ditty starting, "Roses are red, violets are blue," and then two lines about Father.

Just as they were all chanting, the incident had occurred. A boy on the outskirts of the crowd yelling that the ice had cracked. In an instant, the bullies had scattered and I had made my escape.

William Eldridge Knowler the third. The son of the president of the hospital. Had he only been playing a prank that time long ago when he had shouted the ice was cracking, or had he really meant to give me the opportunity to get away?

He was larger than he had been that day, but otherwise not changed much. He still wore his clothes as though he had just lifted them out of the

clothesbag, still had hair that couldn't decide whether it was brown or yellow, eyes that couldn't decide whether they were gray or green, a face that couldn't decide whether it was really good-looking or merely indifferent.

"Do you think this is the time of day for an exploring expedition?" he asked.

"What?" I said stupidly.

He stared at my clothing. I looked down. I was covered with twigs.

"What were you doing in there?" he asked.

"I was going through the short cut when I heard someone following me. So I ran in there."

I could tell nothing about his expression. We stood together on the dark road for a moment, neither one of us saying anything.

Then, "Wait a minute," he said. I watched him slip into the jungle I had just emerged from. Listening to him thrash around, I wondered if he would ever feel what I had felt. And then I was sure he couldn't.

He came out and shook the leaves off his jacket. He hadn't found anyone.

I shook the leaves off myself also and tried to think of something to say.

"Where were you—that is, how did you happen to see me?" I asked finally.

"I was visiting Professor Ordomenedroyd—"

"Professor Ordomenedroyd!"

"—and he told—he can't help his name—me that—"

"But you can't have. I was just there."

"Yes. As I was trying to say, I dropped in to see him and he told me a student of his had just left and he felt she ought to be accompanied home.

"Oh. I—that's very kind of you."

Again I could think of nothing to say. We went past Chemistry and Science. As we approached State, the school buildings began to give way to small homes and then stores. From Cunningham's, a bright patch of light spilled out into the street and we could hear voices buzzing within. How nice it would be, I thought, to be having a soda in there with Eldridge Knowler.

"You—are you a friend of the professor's?" I asked.

He stopped to light a cigarette, and it seemed to me he was hesitating. He wanted time to think. "I've know the professor a long time," he said finally, his eyes following a pretty girl who had just passed. "You see, I talk over my sister with him sometimes. You've heard of Emily Knowler?"

Emily Knowler. Yes, I had heard of her. Not really unbalanced, but everyone knew she was a little queer.

"I see you have," he went on. "You and I ought to start a club. 'The Psychiatrists' Delight.' Or 'The Have-You-a-Skeleton-in-Your-Closet Club.' No one eligible unless he has at least one disreputable connection, reasonably close. None of this sneaking in with a distant uncle who has the twitch."

I looked at Hittacker's dry-goods display. "What makes you think I'm eligible?" I said.

He was silent so long I turned. He had become very red, something I wouldn't have thought possible. Then he smiled sheepishly, but ignored my question.

We continued past the shops and then up toward the bus terminal. As we left the lights of town behind, I began to feel uneasy again. I kept glancing over my shoulder, examining the road, but I could see no one.

My house finally loomed in front of us, a dark scab on a scar of a road. A medium-sized house with a white fence, an oddly twisted tree that resembled a gnome in the front yard, and iron bars around the lower windows to keep out burglars. A house with cheerless rooms, an attic full of trunks, and a cellar—

“By the way,” my companion said as I stopped at the gate, “I’m not sure I introduced myself.”

Over his shoulder, I could see the yellow moon hanging low in the sky behind a blurring mist. It had a soft, accessible look, as though it might not be completely out of reach.

And then from somewhere in the house a voice shrieked, “Hey, Sis, is that you out there? Come on in.”

I caught sight of Eldridge’s eyes, veiled and obscure. He glanced at the dark windows, and then he looked at me. “I’d better go,” he said.

My stomach contracted painfully. Abruptly I thought of a story an economics instructor had once told me. An executive had been asked the secret of his success. “Jump at every opportunity,” he had answered. And how did one recognize opportunity? “Keep jumping,” was the reply.

My opportunity was here, and my legs felt like lead.

“Th-thanks so much,” I stammered, and I watched him turn and walk down the road. When he had disappeared, I went into the house and ran up to my room, slamming the door.

* * * * *

Miserable, I undressed and took my shower. In my pajamas, I went to the window. The moon was paler and higher now, no longer accessible. In front of the house, the road stretched endlessly in both directions, lit at intervals by hazy lamps. Far away I could see the lights of town.

I don’t know how long I stood there before the telephone rang.

I listened to it for a moment as though it had no connection with me, and then, suddenly, a thought occurred to me. I dashed to the stairs, flew down and grabbed the instrument.

“Hello?” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“Lady Livingstone?” a voice asked.

My hands tightened. Waiting to get control of my voice, I didn’t speak until I was certain I wouldn’t sound excited. “Lady Livingstone?” I repeated. I tried to remember where Stanley had found Livingstone. “You might try Ujiji.” That pleased me. Casual. Sophisticated.

“Oh,” said the voice, “I thought this was Bangweulu.” His effort sounded a lot more casual and sophisticated than mine, and then, to my horror, the receiver clicked.

I stared numbly at the dead instrument, trying to hypnotize it back to life.

The last time our paths had crossed, I had been ten years old. If our acquaintance continued at that rate, I might get to know him when I was fifty.

Thinking of all the statements I might have made that wouldn't have terminated the conversation, of how happy I might have been at that moment, of how unfair the world was that made it impossible for a girl to telephone a man, I went to the kitchen.

Contrary to my expectations, Mother was home. She was at the sewing machine, squinting at some light-green crepe, and I remembered she had said something about making herself a dress for a dinner she was attending. Lee was lounging on a chair, watching her.

"Oh, boy, how popular the little sister is," Lee exclaimed when I came in. "Men calling day and night. Pretty soon we won't be able to live with her she'll be thinking she's such hot stuff—"

The telephone ring made me jump as though I had received an injection. I dashed back, but at the table pulled myself up short. It had rung only once. I didn't want him to think I had been waiting. "Lee," I called. "Lee, come here and answer this."

"Aren't you there?"

Second ring. "Hurry. I want you to answer."

"For Pete's sake—"

Third ring. Suppose he hung up? I snatched at the telephone. "Hello?"

"Is this the lady who explores dark continents?"

Since the only thing I could think of saying was something nasty about his having hung up, I said nothing. Instead I laughed.

"This is William Eldridge Knowler the third paying his respects. Perhaps you do me the honor of remembering me? Some time in the distant past, oh, about an hour ago, our paths crossed fleetingly. I had the privilege of rescuing you. I know it's difficult to recall these minor events, normal events that might happen to anyone at any time, but perhaps you will remember a rather striking sport jacket with—"

"Oh, yes, now it's coming back to me."

The voice broke off abruptly. "There's a game next Saturday. Would you like to go?"

In the same voice, he might have said, "A T & T is going up. How about five shares?" I wanted to answer, "I'll consult my attorney." But I was afraid to take the chance. "I'd love to. Thank you," I said.

"Swell," he answered briskly. "I'll pick you up at two." With that the receiver clicked. Telling myself that I would hang up on him someday, I put the telephone back.

"Oh, you're not talking anymore," Lee said, coming into the hall. I fixed the cover over the typewriter that shared the hall table with the telephone, and walked out. "I wanted to tell him you don't need any more boyfriends," Lee continued. "You already have enough." He put his arm around me. "Which fathead was this, Sis?"

"What's going on?" Mother demanded as we re-entered the kitchen. "I don't think a college education is good for you. You should have a full-time job

instead of wasting your time in school. A college education was what made your father the way he was. Always full of mysteries, too. Who was that on the—”

“Eldridge Knowler.”

“—telephone? At least you can—Who?” She dropped some pins from her mouth and turned around to face me. Lee, who had been wandering vacantly, became still.

There was something wrong with their reactions. They weren’t what I’d expected. They weren’t surprised and pleased. Mother looked stunned.

Her eyes almost disappearing into the wrinkles around them, she said, “Who did you say?”

“Eldridge Knowler. E-l-d-r-i-”

“Eldridge Knowler, the hospital president’s son?”

“Yes.”

Lee began cleaning the nails of one hand by scraping them with the nails of the other. And Mother sat down and did nothing.

“Will you kindly tell me what’s wrong?” I said, biting out each word.

Mother straightened up. Before Lee could say anything, she erupted into speech. “Nothing’s wrong. The only reason we’re so surprised is that his stuck-up father let him, that’s all. But we’re just as good as those Knowlers. Better. Your Eldridge has that funny-acting sister that never goes anywhere and doesn’t see anybody. We’re better than they are. Is he going to be a doctor like his father? He’ll probably be a surgeon—”

“—and he and his father will cut up people together,” said Lee, rubbing his hands.

“—and run the hospital. I can just see their faces—”

I stopped listening. I would never get it out of them. It was like all the other times. Always secrets. The whole town whispering behind their hands, but I couldn’t know.

The steam of words flowed together into a common river, and gradually I became aware of another sound. A sound that I had heard in the early hours of the morning and that had been disturbing me all day.

It was an insect clicking.

A draft seemed to slither across the floor from a nonexistent crack. I pulled myself to a stop. Don’t go off. It’s not normal to feel like that just because you heard a cricket. It probably got into the house through the cellar window—

The room was cold. Not ordinarily cold but with an eating cold that nibbled away at my skin, gnawed at my bones. Like the times Mother wouldn’t order enough coal in order to save money.

What was the cricket trying to tell me?

* * * * *

Four A.M. The most precarious rung on the ladder to morning.

The hour of danger when the soul meets with despair and reaches out into the darkness for the end to pain. The hour psychologists call the suicide hour.

It was hard to make out the phosphorescent face of the clock. It shimmered in the dimness. But I could see enough to know that the long hand pointed up, the short one at an obtuse angle.

Rubbing my face, I wished there were an operation for removing ideas from people's heads. Like cleaning out a closet.

The sound I'd heard today. A soft buzz and then a stop. Silence broken by sound. The cricket. Sounding like something remembered from long ago. Why should I be afraid of a cricket? There had been a gleam of sun struggling to penetrate the dusty window. A strange window in a strange neighborhood. Children shouting outdoors, the rumble of a streetcar. There were no streetcars in town. It must have been the city.

What was I doing in this dusty office?

"You don't believe in much light, do you?" a voice said. Lee's voice.

Yes, Lee had been there, and Mother, too. Standing in the low-ceilinged room, Lee was talking to the man behind the desk. A small, thin man peering up at us.

What was the man doing? Papers rustling in his bony fingers. Well, what of it? That can't be all. The papers—no, not the papers. The writing. The writing?

Walking down narrow wooden stairs. Mother's heels clattering. Did we leave the office already? But I'm not through yet. I've got to go back?

A blank wall. Why can't I get back? Maybe if I try another way—

Mother had said something to the man. "He left a note—" Mother said.

A note! Father left a note when he went away. That's who the man was. A detective. A detective who was supposed to find Father.

"Come on, Ma," Lee was saying. "What do we want to find the old man for? We don't want him anyway."

"Don't want him!" Mother was saying. "Do you think that check from the business to going to support us?"

Wait—that isn't what I want. The sounds. Going all the time. Click, no, not click. Bang. A buzz and then a pause. Buzz, pause. Like a cricket. Buzz, pause.

A typewriter! That was all. Just a typewriter. That's what the cricket made me think of. Our dirty old typewriter in the front hall. Something I see every day.

Something I see. But I never hear it. Nobody in the house ever uses it.

Buzz, pause.

The sound had come from down the steps. That time, long ago in the dark, I had been lying in bed. And I had heard a sound. Someone down below had been typing in the middle of the night. Typing at the suicide hour.

* * * * *

Every seat in the huge bowl of the football stadium seemed taken. I watched the students streaming in with their triangular flags and hothouse chrysanthemums, and I listened to the band saluting the visiting team with "On, Wisconsin!" and I tried not to glance at Eldridge every other moment.

I had tried three different outfits before deciding on the one I was wearing. I had wanted to borrow my mother's yellow leather jacket, but when she had

refused, I had settled on my own camel's hair jacket. With it, I wore a white sweater I had borrowed from Selina and a tweed skirt I had just bought myself.

Eldridge seemed to know everyone. Innumerable people came over to say hello and to chat about the teamwork between Bob Stricklen and Herb Miculich, the chances of Leadhead Supron making All-American, and a new formation tried out by Gus Weinberg.

Finally a shout went up as of five thousand Indians descending on a settlement. A coin flew into the air, and someone bent over. For a moment, I thought he was going to get kicked, but it was only the ball, and that was about the last I got to see of the game.

Everyone in the stadium shot up like jack-in-the-boxes, and blocked my view. Resignedly I sat down and watched a tan coat in front of me groaning, a mouton and tweed wringing their hands, and three sport jackets shouting invectives.

Looking around, Eldridge saw me. "Why are you sitting?"

"I can't see."

"Come here." He helped me to my feet and lifted me to the seat. To show an intelligent interest in the proceedings, I said, "I hear Chick Conacher isn't just a dumb football player. He has his hand in nearly every pie in the school."

Absently, Eldridge answered, "Must be his left hand."

Abruptly his supporting arm disappeared, and I nearly fell as he began to shout something at one of the players. Everyone was screaming unintelligibly, going faster and faster like a locomotive without an engineer, and then an ear-splitting yell closed that aspect of the festivities.

Now the tan coat was jumping up and down, the mouton and tweed were embracing, and the three sport jackets were pounding each other's back. The band played "Hail to the Victors," and everyone shouted, "Our team is red-hot, our team is red-hot, our team is red-hot. Yea."

Catching a glimpse of the field, I saw a bundle of arms and legs kicking and squirming, and after a while, men peeled off like artichoke leaves until only one leaf was left. Uniforms hurled out of the wings and carried it away.

I turned to Eldridge. "Is he hurt?"

But with the intensity of a man outside the delivery room, Eldridge watched the field. "Third down. Four to go." Then he looked at me. "What?"

"Is he hurt?"

"Who? Oh. No, he's dead. Look at that boy go. Split play. Split play. Atta boy, Leadhead. You bamboozled 'em."

I sat down again. For a while I counted pennants, and then I took a paper and pencil from my bag and played ticktacktoe with myself. And then finally everyone was standing. I jumped up. "Did we win?" I asked politely.

Glancing around, Eldridge took my arm and hurried me to the back of the stadium as though he were sneaking me from jail to avoid a lynching. "It's the half, athlete," he said.

We squeezed and struggled through the crowd in the aisles. At the rear, Eldridge said, "You wait here, and I'll see if I can get frankfurters and Cokes." He disappeared, and I waited alone, watching the crowd streaming by.

And then a voice said, "Hello, there."

I spun around at the sound of the drawl and saw Professor Ordomenedroyd, the collar of his tweed topcoat almost meeting his hatbrim.

The moment I saw him it was as if I had an inkling of what he was going to say. A pulse throbbed in my neck.

"I was going to get in touch with you," he said. "Let's move back here so I can talk to you."

Making an effort not to sound apprehensive, I said, "I can't. I'm waiting for someone. As a matter of fact, it's a friend of yours. Eldridge Knowler." I watched his face and noted the look of surprise. He glanced at me quickly and said, "Oh, I didn't know you knew him before I sent him after you that night."

I felt myself growing red. "I didn't."

But he was thinking of something else. "Well, I guess I can talk here. I hope you won't mind what I did."

I put my hands in my pockets and waited.

"I thought you were so troubled—you know, the other night. And your ideas about your father—well, I had known him and they didn't seem just— Well, anyway, I used to work for him, as I told you, and I still know someone who works in the plant. He gave me your father's partner's address."

At this point the professor seemed to think I ought to say something, and he paused to give me the opportunity. But when I said nothing, he went on. "I—uh—didn't violate any confidences. I just telephoned Mr. White and I explained who you were and how you felt about your father and I asked him what he knew."

Why had he interfered? I kept thinking. I didn't want to hear what Mr. White had said.

And then I looked at myself with unfriendly eyes. He wasn't interfering. I had gone to him for help, and he was trying to give it to me.

"That was very kind of you," I said.

"Uh—no, not at all. You see, your idea about your father just didn't seem to agree with the one I had—but anyway, about Mr. White—oh, hello, Eldridge."

Suddenly I wished a fire would start in the stadium or someone would faint or a cloudburst would begin. Anything to distract them. I heard Eldridge offering the professor a frankfurter and the professor refusing, and then Eldridge was holding one out to me. I stared at it. "I don't feel hungry, thank you."

His Coke in mid-air, he examined me. "Everyone eats frankfurters at football games," he said as though that settled the matter.

Then he looked at me more closely. "Were you two discussing something I shouldn't hear? Shall I make myself scarce?"

As casually as I could, I said, "Oh, it's all right. Everyone knows about my father anyway."

I felt rather than saw Eldridge raise an inquiring eyebrow at the professor as though he were asking the latter a question. The professor shrugged. Then he said, "The reason Mr. White never wrote to you was that your mother never encouraged him to. She evidently didn't care for him."

From the direction of the field came a voice over the loud-speaker and then the sound of the band starting up again.

“Mr. White and your father were friends since boyhood,” the professor continued. He was watching me as he spoke, and I tried not to show anything.

“He couldn’t understand where you had gotten your notion that your father was a drunkard and a—a philanderer. He said he knew your father perhaps better than anyone else, and your father almost never drank. And as for chasing women—well, he said he used to work late every night, but he was never with women. Mr. White used to try and talk him into hiring more office help, but your father used to try and do the work himself because—because well, your mother couldn’t seem to get along on what he was earning.”

The air felt mild, softly protective.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “—I want to thank you again, Professor Ordomenedroyd, but you see, all this doesn’t really help.”

A student went by balancing Cokes. He bumped into us and apologized. “It doesn’t matter what Mr. White said,” I continued. “Whatever you say, there *is* something we all know my father did.”

Absently, the professor leaned over and picked up something in the mess of peanut shells at our feet. It was a silver disc on which people have their names printed. He glanced at it and threw it away.

Then he said, “Mr. White said something else. He said to tell Bill’s daughter that no matter what the evidence, no matter what she heard, it wasn’t true. Bill could never have attacked a little girl.”

* * * * *

I was having lunch in the cafeteria when a voice said, “Hi.”

It was Selina. She sat down and unwrapped her sandwich. “Did you get your dress for the hop yet?” she asked, biting into the ham and cheese.

“A dress!” I said bitterly. “What for?”

“Oh, Eldridge will ask you. You’ll see. If I were going, I’d get the dress right away. It’s only two weeks now, and all the best ones will be gone.”

“Wouldn’t I look silly with a dress and no date!”

“You should have said yes to one of the others and then turned him down if Eldridge asked—”

Again someone said, “Hi.” Growing hot all over, I turned too quickly.

I had known Eldridge for more than a year by then and I had seen him on an average of at least twice a week, but each time he called and each time I caught sight of him on the street, I still felt feverish. I turned away from his grin and put salad in my mouth. It tasted like sawdust. “Hello,” I mumbled.

“Always the soul of politeness.” Dumping his books on one chair, he dragged another over and sat down. He exchanged greetings with Selina and then said, “If you knew the sacrifices I make coming here all the way from the medical school just to set my eyes on you. Want to go to a night club after the dance?” he asked in my general direction.

There was a pause. For a moment, I concentrated on my salad, and then slowly I put my fork down and wiped my mouth. "You mean," I said, still slowly, "leave the fellow with whom I'm going to the dance in order to go to a night club with you afterward?"

"Aren't you going to the dance with me?" he asked in amazement.

I took a firmer grip on my fork. "Oh? I didn't know you had asked me."

"Well, I just took it for granted. Who else would you go with?"

"Thank you very much. But I already have a date for the dance."

Who said those stupid words? A moment ago, I had exactly what I had been waiting months for. Months? Years. The big hop. I had been dreaming about it ever since I had talked Mother into allowing me to attend college.

And now a few words had ruined it all. Years of anticipation wiped out with a few foolish words. I'd have to sit home alone on the day when everyone else would be going. I'd have to hear all the details for weeks afterward.

"Already have one!" Eldridge was exclaiming. "But you can't have. It's still two and a half weeks before the damned thing takes place."

All my disappointment and misery lashed out at him. "Oh, it is, is it? Well, in case you're interested, I've been getting invitations for six months."

"Six months! I was breaking a rule speaking about it this early. I never make appointments this far in advance. Why you might be dead or—"

"And then the money would be wasted," I said bitterly.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I could always get another date."

"Well, then go ahead and get one. Maybe there's some knock-kneed, cross-eyed, pock-marked beauty who hasn't a date yet—" I stopped. I didn't have a date yet.

"Want to see me get the prettiest girl on the campus?" He was grinning, the slow, exasperating grin that both irritated me and quickened my pulse.

"Suppose you had a patient who was expecting a baby," Selina interposed, "wouldn't you make an appointment in advance to deliver it?"

Eldridge's voice changed. Losing the bantering tone, he said to me, "Break your date. You know you'd rather go with me."

I tried to ignore the last words. It wasn't too late. I could still go. I could still have the excitement of planning and the fun of buying the dress, and I could still attend the big hop with Eldridge.

"He's breaking my heart," Selina said quickly, before I could say anything. "Tell him yes. Do it for my sake."

It was all I needed. "All right," I acceded.

Eldridge grinned, but this time I didn't spoil it.

Standing, Selina said, "Well, back to the grindstone. Anybody have to go to the library?"

"I can't today," I said. "I work."

She winked at me before she turned, and we watched her progress toward the door. When she was out of earshot, Eldridge turned to me, his face suddenly serious, as though he wanted to tell me something. Then his attention was distracted by someone entering. I looked up.

It was Ellen Mackay and her crowd.

I watched Ellen striding in. She wore a beautiful gray flannel suit, and hanging loose on her shoulders, a leopard coat. Her hair was tied back with a yellow ribbon. I wasn't the only one watching her. Other heads were turned to observe her progress from the door. Without seeming self-conscious or awkward, she was still aware of the attention she was getting.

She was almost past our table when Eldridge stopped her. A moment before, I had been vibrating like a harp, but now all was discordant again. I could tell nothing from Ellen's face, either. With her usual charming display of pleasure reserved for the elite, she greeted him, and then she glanced at me.

It wasn't possible for her to ignore me, nor was it possible for her to pretend she didn't know me. She nodded.

"Have a seat," said Eldridge.

I took more salad and didn't look up.

Glancing around as though to make up her mind, Ellen said, "Well, it is a little crowded. We won't be disturbing you, will we?"

Eldridge pulled over some chairs, and she and her friends seated themselves. Immediately their talk began bouncing back and forth like a ball. I didn't even try to keep up with five such poised extroverts.

I finished my salad slowly, and then forced my milk down. Hoping they wouldn't notice, I rose. "I'm off to my job now," I said, trying to sound casual. The word *job* was probably new to Ellen.

I was afraid Eldridge would remain. But to my relief, he hopped up also. "Will you excuse me?" he said to the others. Again I tried to read some expression on Ellen's face, but again I was unsuccessful. Very animatedly, she said, "Certainly," and went on talking about a dog she was getting.

When we left the cafeteria, Eldridge said, "I have to tell you something."

We watched some students trooping by into the cafeteria, and when they were gone, he added, "I think you ought to be warned."

I looked at him and forgot about Ellen. It was like getting ready for a party and then receiving a telegram that someone you love has died. Until that moment, the most important problem in the world was what you were going to wear. And then along comes the telegram, and the party isn't anything.

"Did you hear me? I hate to tell you this, but he can't be in his right mind. I want you to be careful." Unconsciously I began to rub my head. "I've been receiving some letters with a local postmark. They don't say anything in particular. They're simply full of obscene words. They're from your father. He must be back in town."

* * * * *

The room was dark. Submerged in a clogging confusion, I sat up and looked at the clock. The dial was at an unusual angle. The small one pointing down on the left, and long one pointing down on the right.

Was it morning? Did I have to go to school?

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs and Lee's voice singing an off-color ditty. It was evening, not morning. And I was going to the big hop.

“Hey, Sis, it’s snowing. You can’t go to the dance.” Tying my robe together, I told Lee to come in. He was wearing an ancient sweater, a battered hat, and a dusting of snow. I ran to the window and peered out. Everything was white. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was twenty past seven.

Lee dropped on my bed. “Boy, I’m dead. I’ve been trying to kill squirrels. But I only got one.”

I brought out my things and placed them on the dressing table. White satin slippers, evening bag, pearl earrings. Then I took the dress from the closet and hung it up. It had taken all the money I could save, and I had given up a suit for it, but I felt it was worth it. It was white taffeta with a strapless top.

There was a movement behind me, and as I turned, Lee said, “Why don’t you come to a movie with me tonight?”

I looked at his rumpled blond head. For the first time in months, I really saw him, the chin squared at the bottom, the regular features, the deep-blue of his eyes. So much going to waste. I felt sorry for him.

“Why don’t you go to a movie with Mother?” I said.

“I asked her. But she’s sewing herself a dress for that dinner she’s going to tomorrow night.”

“Another dress! When I asked her to please make me a gown, she said—”

Below the bell rang. At first I paid no attention, and then, startled, I glanced at the clock. It wasn’t anywhere near nine yet.

In a moment, Mother’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. “Look what came from the florist,” she said, coming in.

I took the box from her. It was white with satin ribbons. Carefully I undid the bows, wanting to save them. I was the first gift Eldridge had ever given me.

As the tissue paper came off, Mother made a sound over my shoulder. Nestling within the box were two white orchids.

I lifted them out, ashamed of the way my hands shook. Holding them up to the mirror, I watched their reflection. Smoky pearls lifted from the depths of the sea.

“I wonder what Dr. Knowler would say if he knew,” Mother said.

I looked at her, but she’d already turned away. “I’ll put the flowers in the refrigerator until you leave,” she offered.

She went out quickly, as though afraid I might ask a question, and Lee followed her. When they were gone, I shut the door and finished dressing. Then I went to the door, and leaning over the railing, asked Lee to bring the orchids up.

In a moment, he shuffled in, still yawning. He dropped the flowers on the table, and then his eyes widened. Slapping a hand over his face, he held the other arm out as though struck by a blinding light.

“No,” he panted, staggering until he found the bed and could collapse again. “My Lord. My own kid sister. That dazzling goddess, that rapture-inspiring divinity—” Jumping to his feet, he grabbed both my hands and twirled me around.

He was about to start the whole blinding-light routine again when the bell rang. Busying myself at the dressing table with nothing, I sternly kept myself from running the comb over my hair again. Below, I heard Eldridge’s voice.

Holding my coat over my arm, I went out and peered over the railing. He was leaning politely over Mother, listening. I watched him for as long as I dared, and then I went to the head of the stairs. I was hoping he would look up and grow misty-eyed with adoration, but he continued listening to Mother. When he finally did glance up, I permitted my coat to swing casually and raised my eyebrows, hoping to resemble Ellen.

“Hi, Sadie Thompson,” were his first adoring words.

“Doesn’t she look sweet?” Mother said. “Leander took her all the way to the city to shop. She got the dress—”

“Good night, Mother,” I said, afraid she would tell him the price, size, and the number of days I had spent looking for it.

* * * * *

With the shutting off of the lights, the door became a magic portal opening into a Christmas card. The simple act of closing the door transported us to a hushed, new world, tenanted only by the two of us.

It had stopped snowing, but there hadn’t yet been enough traffic to destroy the purity of the scene. Trees, like skeletons suddenly softened with flesh, had come under a spell that transformed them from Cinderellas to princesses. Snow spangles caught sparks from the road lamps and exploded into showers of light.

In the car, I listened to the tires crackling on the crust. All sounds were muted to a frozen stillness, our voices falling with the softness of snowflakes. From the open, hoar-frosted window came a pleasantly stinging iced lotion, and my breath formed gossamery sprites. Suddenly I thought of maple sugar I had once seen dripped on snow. The center hot and soft, the outside cold. It was the way I felt.

On the outskirts of town, passersby began to sprout. Furred figures in long dresses and black-coated ones. The townspeople, in ordinary clothes, gave the street a Hadeslike effect, with the elect and the damned still waiting together.

We had to park about a block away from the intramural building and walk the rest of the way. We went up the steps of the red brick building, past the trophy-bedecked checkroom and into the huge gymnasium. The theme was rustic that year, and the tiled walls were almost concealed behind shrubbery, fake trees, and haystacks.

As we came in, I caught a glimpse of long blonde hair. I looked again. I was close enough to see it was Ellen Mackay. She was standing under a basketball net with a tall fellow beside her.

Had Eldridge asked Ellen first, I wondered, and been refused because she’d already had a date? As I thought that, she became aware of us. She stared for a fraction of a moment and then nodded slowly.

We were evidently late, because as we came in, the band leader was rapping for attention. “Okay, everybody,” he was shouting. “Quiet, please. We’re picking the king and queen of the dance now. In keeping with the theme this year, we’re going to do country dances while the judges circulate to pick the winners.”

While the leader shouted, the band played, and everyone chattered, judges were chosen from the faculty, students, and band. Finally the circle formed and the band struck up “Shoo Fly, Don’t bother me.” We shuffled into the center of the ring, hands high, and shuffled back, hands low. Chaperons stomped from the side lines, and beside me, Eldridge sang so loudly my ear ached.

The judges began pulling people out. Those eliminated stood on the side and joined the stompers. While I waited for the tap on the shoulder, I looked around, hoping Ellen would go first.

The music changed, and we went into a long line, men opposite women. Then abruptly, Eldridge left the line and I realized he had been eliminated. Saying something, he patted me on the shoulder and grinned. He was gone, and I was facing a stranger.

“Where oh where is little Patricia? Where oh where is little Patricia? Where oh where is little Patricia? Way down yonder in the pawpaw patch.”

As we doubled to go under the bridge after “Little Patricia,” I saw Eldridge pulled into one of the eliminated groups. He was paired off with a small girl in a lavender dress with practically no top.

Instead of paying attention to my own group, I watched what he was doing. Then the music broke off abruptly and a roar went up. I felt my arm almost wrenched out of its socket while someone shouted, “The Queen.”

Before the fact could register, hands circled my waist. I kicked air for a minute, and then I was looking at a blurry smear of faces below. Dizzily, I listened to the roll of drums and felt the blood leaving all other parts of my body to keep a rendezvous in my head. Another roll of drums announced the snow king, and someone I had never seen before was standing beside me.

When the band started up again, I saw below, like a trail in the wilderness, Eldridge’s face. He lifted his arms, and I slid down into them. For a minute, I tasted wool and a chord of memory pinged. A whiff of scent from the past, a shred of memory puffed away before it could be caught. The soft pressure, the faint essence of tobacco, and most of all, an unfamiliar sense of security.

He was smiling. A faint smile, part pride, part sarcasm, part something else. We moved away from the crush around the platform. Behind me a voice kept repeating, “I’m from the *Daily News*. What was that name again?” Through the noise, the confusion, the heat, I was conscious of a hand gripping mine.

From a short distance off, I saw Ellen again. Her eyes traveled like a cool mist over my dress and hair. Then she started straight for me. Habit was strong. I would have liked to turn away, the way she had always turned from me, but I couldn’t. When we had finally struggled through, she smiled her slow, poised smile. “Congratulations,” she said. “I’m so glad you won. You really deserved it.”

I felt intensely hot. Would I have said those words to her if she had won?

Eldridge mopped his forehead with the hand that wasn’t holding mine and said, “Let’s get out of this rat race. There’s punch over there.”

We finally got to a clear part of the dance floor, and Eldridge helped us to punch. Then he began speaking to Ellen’s escort.

Turning to me, Ellen said, “Do you remember Mrs. Lorchout?” The question was an odd one. I hadn’t known that Ellen was aware of my existence in

high school, and Mrs. Lorchout had been a high-school English teacher. “And how she called you a fourflusher,” Ellen went on, “because she thought you had copied a composition?”

Ellen had a destination in mind. I could see that she had her eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead and wasn’t stopping for traffic signals.

“I think the reason she behaved so abominably to you,” Ellen said, “was because of your father.”

I kept my face unchanged. Unobtrusively, I placed my hands behind me so she couldn’t see them tremble. I had a feeling there was more.

“It’s dreadful to hold something against a person because of her father, don’t you think so?” she persisted.

My continued silence was almost disconcerting her. She began to step on the gas, anxious to get the trip over with. “And it’s particularly admirable of Eldridge, isn’t it?”

She drew blood that time. “El—Eldridge?” I stammered.

She didn’t have to hurry anymore. Now she had her audience. Slowly, almost sweetly, she said, “Yes, I mean, you know, because it was his sister whom your father—his sister was the one.”

I was looking into distorting mirrors. Here a face widened so the features were stretched into a grin. There a face elongated so the features were frozen into primness. The mirrors were directly opposite one another, and a spinning top in the center was reflected in both, going around and around into infinity. Above everything was the unbearable din, a blaring of instruments, a shrieking of voices, laughter, jeers, all pressing in on me like the contracting walls of a vault.

Ellen’s face was one of the elongated kind. It wavered in the waterlike fluidity of the mirror, growing narrower and narrower. The other faces began to recede, leaving Ellen and myself in the pool of the mirror. Even the voices, stretched and contracted into unnatural tones, were receding.

One of the voices said, “Yes, of course I knew.” It took me a while to recognize it as my own. And the elongated face looked surprised, taken aback. And finally it sank beneath the surface.

* * * * *

And then the night air massaged my face. I hardly knew how I got to the street. That movement blended with the others with a deceiving fluidity. The farther I walked from the building, the better the magic of the amorphous masseuse worked. Gradually, the din in my head diminished as the snow-cleansed air streaked through the rooms of my mind, sweeping the clutter away.

Finally I slowed down. Turning, I found I was still within sight of the intramural building. The car was right behind me. Eldridge would be missing me soon, I thought.

Then I stopped dead.

Someone had moved behind the tree up ahead. It was a long run to the intramural building. And the tree was close.

The part of the tree trunk that had moved before now detached itself from the tree and started toward me. I couldn't hesitate any longer. Holding up my skirt, I spurted back toward the building. I was praying that my high heels wouldn't trip me when a sharp pain broke out in my side. Frantically I turned to see how much distance lay between my pursuer and me.

And then when I turned, an odd thing happened. Whoever it was darted behind a car.

Some of the fear seeped out abruptly. He was afraid of being seen.

Holding my side, I continued running up the block. When I reached the foot of the stairs, I looked again. There was no one in the whole deserted street.

For a while, I kept on watching. I wasn't even relieved at having escaped. I almost wished my pursuer had followed me up the stairs so that someone else could have seen him and known I hadn't imagined the incident. It was insane. He had started toward me and yet hidden himself when I stopped. What was the purpose of it all?

I was still there when I heard footsteps. It was Eldridge.

He was running a hand through his rumpled hair and wiping his face. At the sight of me, he stopped short. "Where were you?" he demanded. Continuing down, he examined my face. "What's the matter?"

"I saw—someone was following me again."

"Where?" Then, without waiting for an answer, he went past me. In the street, he looked around at the cold whiteness that couldn't have been less inhabited.

We walked back to the tree, and I told him about how the man had stopped when I had turned, as though afraid of being recognized. While I talked, he bent over the snow near the tree. It was ruffled.

Finally he straightened and brushed his hands, although there was no snow on them. "Why did you leave the dance?"

I pulled my coat closer and didn't answer. The gesture made him say, "Come on into the car. I'll put on the heater." He started up the motor, and the whirring sound filled the car.

"Well?" he said.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He pushed the car lighter in and reached for his cigarettes. Then, in the middle of the operation, a suspicion of what I meant must have occurred to him. "What?"

"You all knew." I tried not to let my voice crack. "But none of you would tell me."

"Do you mind letting me in on what you're talking about?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, stop it. I know all about your sister and my father."

He said, "What happened? Who told you?"

"Your friend. Your friend Ellen."

Confusedly, he leaned forward and crushed out the newly lit cigarette. Then he looked out of the window as though searching for something. Whatever it was, he couldn't find it.

"Well, what of it?" he said finally. "You were bound to find out sometime."

I corked the flow of angry words. He was right. Why was I so furious? Because he hadn't wanted to hurt me? Because he took me out in spite of it? I slumped in the seat. "Doesn't your father object to your taking me out?"

"What has my father to do with it?"

He had answered the question. His father had objected. He slid over, and I leaned my head back on his arm. We watched each other for a moment, his face a little worried and I feeling a little worried. We kept watching each other until our faces finally touched. And then I stopped looking into his greenish-gray eyes.

When he lifted his face, I opened my eyes reluctantly. All around us was the deserted street, so empty it was hard to believe that just up the block were several hundred people. He dropped his head on my shoulder and I could feel his hands shaking slightly. Then he made a sound, a dissatisfied sound. Finally he said, "Were you wondering if my father would object to this, too?"

I thought about those words, and the comforting mist around me began to lose its comfort. I found myself stiffening. But when I tried to move away, his hands tightened. Was he taking me out to spite his father? Was it part of the revolt everyone went through during the early part of his life before he settled down? "We ought to go back," I said.

"Why?" he said. He bent over me, and the warm pressure lowered protectively again. His mouth moved from my lips to my chin, and then I saw it.

It was lying on the back seat of the car. Partially in shadow and partially in the light of the street lamp, it gleamed fitfully. I must have exclaimed or taken a deep breath, because Eldridge lifted his head sharply. Then his eyes followed mine to the back seat. He was puzzled.

"What's wrong, hon?" Even at that moment, the endearing term impinged on my memory. In the car was a sweetness as of flowers permitted to die in a lonely room.

"Eldridge, how did that get there?"

Lifting himself off the seat, he reached over and picked the object up. In his hand was a gold pocket watch, very old-fashioned. "I never saw it before," he said, puzzled. "It looks like real gold."

"Eldridge, that shadow. I mean, the person who was following me must have put—"

"Why?"

"I don't know." My voice was rising, and I tried to lower it. In a moment, I was afraid. I might be screaming. "I don't know. It's insane. It doesn't make sense to follow me and then hide behind a car and then start—"

"Wait a minute. Cut it out." His hand closed on mine.

"You don't understand. I've seen that watch before."

He looked at the watch and then at me. Releasing my hand, he turned it over in his palm. "Where?" He slid his thumbnail around the worn edge. He found a catch and pressed. The watch snapped open.

I stared at what lay within. I hadn't opened it myself when I had seen it before. Inside was a ringlet of hair.

Eldridge switched on the car light. His eyes filled with something more than confusion. I didn't want to know what it was. He couldn't believe I had placed the watch there myself.

He examined the hair as it gleamed under the light. Finally he held it up to my hair. I didn't have to see it to know it would match.

"I don't get it," he said.

I took the watch from him. "The last time I saw this," I said, "it was in the attic of my house. That watch belonged to my father."

* * * * *

Trying not to think of the cold, I kept my eyes on the house from across the road. I pretended to be waiting for someone. Whenever a passerby approached, I glanced at my watch and then scrutinized the street.

Clouds scuttled across the rusty, dying sun and darkened the sky so that it seemed to be evening. The flickering shadow and light gave an end-of-the-world aura to even the good section of town, proving, to my momentary satisfaction, that man's best was no match for nature's worst. In other lights, the Knowler house had an expansive, welcoming appearance. Welcoming, that is, to the right people. The red brick, trimmed with white and field stone, gave the house a faintly Southern appearance. But now, on its high elevation, surrounded by what looked like acres of lawn, it reminded me of Dr. Knowler. He, too, always appeared surrounded by acres of lawn.

At two-thirty-five, the housekeeper finally left, and I was sure I had a clear field. As I walked up the long, broken-shell driveway, I wondered if someone was peering at me from one of the windows. The white oak door, protected by pillars, looked completely inaccessible. Was this really where Eldridge lived? The same Eldridge who had taken me places and who had sat in our front parlor and who had held me in his arms? Did this tight-shuttered, pursed mouth of a house relax into a smile for him?

I almost ran the last few yards to get it over with. I knocked as loudly as I could.

It took quite a while for the knock to be answered. It was only the thought that someone would come and see me running down the endless driveway that kept me there.

I knocked twice before the door moved back. The hallway was dark, and I couldn't see who had opened the door. To make matters worse, whoever it was said nothing.

"I want to speak to Miss Knowler," I said in an authoritative voice. It almost convinced even me that I had a right to be there and that I hadn't made a preposterous suggestion.

The figure in the doorway came forward. In the miserly light from the sky, I could see a girl dressed in a green-and-white uniform. "Who?" she said.

"Miss Knowler," I answered composedly. The maid seemed untrained and not very bright.

"Well—I don't know."

“Tell her it’s urgent,” I said encouragingly.

“But she doesn’t see people. Miss Bagnold, the housekeeper, isn’t here now. Maybe you better come back—”

“It’s all right. I’m a friend of the family’s.” I tried not to glance around. Suppose Dr. Knowler returned early?

“Well,” she said doubtfully, “come in.” She stared at me hard, and I wondered if she recognized me. For the first time, it occurred to me she would be able to describe me later.

We walked onto a dimly lit balcony. Set in niches on opposite walls were two small white statues, and beneath them were identical spider-legged tables with vases of fresh flowers in them. The maid didn’t take my coat. She walked past the white iron railing down four steps to a hallway with a large staircase at the far end. On either side of the hallway were doors leading to what seemed like an infinite number of rooms.

The room we went to was the kind that blurred into a dreamy ivory. Except that nothing in it could definitely be called ivory. It was too refined to be pinned down. The rug was refinedly faded, the furniture refinedly decayed, the fabrics refinedly about to fall apart.

In one corner, someone moved.

I hadn’t noticed her at first because she blended in so naturally with her surroundings. She was as much a part of the room as the rug and the furniture, and just as hard to be pinned down.

Still, nothing about her was what I had expected. She looked anywhere from thirty to forty years of age, although I knew she was slightly less than thirty. And whatever looks there were in the family had passed her by and gone to Eldridge. She was stocky, almost fat, and completely colorless. Her skin was a paste shade, dotted with freckles; her hair the same mixture of ivory as the room; and her eyebrows and lashes so pale they were invisible.

What she was doing was unexpected, too. I had pictured her as working on a sampler. Or even doing nothing at all. Simply sitting at a window and looking out. But she was holding a glass, a cigarette, an ashtray, a magazine, and two sandwiches. The system, whatever it was, went to pieces when we came in. The sandwiches slid away, along with the ashtray, cigarette, and magazine. Only the glass remained intact.

With an exclamation, the maid went in, and as though doing everyone a considerable favor, began picking up the mess. She looked at me resentfully, as though expecting help. So I bent down and helped her.

The woman across the room watched me. She seemed to be shortsighted, even more so than I. I wished the maid would hurry and leave, and then I was afraid of her leaving. I didn’t know anything about this woman who was Eldridge’s sister. Just scraps of gossip I had heard around town over the years. About a woman who had once been a fairly normal child, although perhaps too quiet, until something shocking had happened to her. After that she had become a virtual recluse. Until the night of the dance I hadn’t known what had happened to her.

With the force of a wave, it occurred to me I had done a stupid thing coming to a house where I wasn't welcome and putting myself in close proximity with someone who might be a raving lunatic.

Without warning, the maid left. Almost ready to follow her, I wondered how I would get help if I needed it. The house was large. I might never be heard.

"What do you want?"

The voice was without inflection. Neither angry nor friendly. And the nearsighted eyes still peered at me.

Forgetting all the tactful things I had planned to say, I blurted, "I'm the daughter of the man who attacked you long ago."

The words almost took shape and hung between us like a scaffold. We both stared at them. If she's really sick, I thought, I might be doing her harm.

She turned the deepest red I had ever thought a person could get. And with the red came an intensity of confusion that made her resemble a map crammed with too many cities. And then I realized that her principal emotion was distaste. She was like a prudish clubwoman who had just been told a dirty joke. She sat down again and began munching her sandwich. Her shoulders were stiff. Then, abruptly, she said, "Would you care for some tea?"

"Miss Knowler," I spoke urgently. "I'm sorry to have to talk like this to you. But it's important. There's something I have to know."

She stopped chewing and turned small, blank eyes on me. She might have been queer, but sometime, long ago, she had received her training and it was still strong. She was as inaccessible to me as all the other people in this section of town. I had wormed my way into her house, and for the moment, she would be civil. "Won't you sit down?" She took another bite. "I don't know what you're talking about. You must have gotten—confused somewhere."

Of all the things she could have said, that stumped me the most. What if it wasn't true? Suppose Ellen had lied. What was I doing here? Eldridge's sister wasn't queer. I was. Maybe she was humoring me until help arrived.

"P-please—" I stammered. Then I remembered. Eldridge had confirmed it. I knew he had. Or had I dreamed it? "Please—it's important. I have no right, but—"

"I don't care to discuss it." She turned her wide back to me and faced the window.

I was getting angry. I was tired of being bounced by everyone like a ball. "This is important," I said again, trying to match the coldness of her voice. "I have only one question to ask you. Are you sure it was my father that— Are you sure it was my father?"

She began to walk, heading for the door. "I'm sorry, you'll have to leave. It's time for my nap."

"I tell you I have to know!" My voice shook. I hadn't gone this far just to be snubbed now. I started to follow her, and then I saw him.

He was standing at the door. Evidently he had just returned from school. He still had his coat on and carried books.

When he saw me looking at him, he came slowly into the room. Both his sister and I acted paralyzed by his presence. We remained where we were as

though waiting for someone to push a button to release us. He dropped his coat and books on one of the chairs and rubbed his hands together. "What about something hot? This room is like a grave." Turning on a lamp, he picked up one of the sandwiches and bit into it hungrily.

Eldridge's presence cut into the corseted stiffness of the house, and warmth began circulating through its veins.

"Aren't you home early?" I said.

Sitting down, he grinned. But it wasn't his usual easy grin. He was disturbed. Involuntarily he glanced at the windows beyond his sister, the ones that commanded a view of the street. He was worried about his father's finding me in the house. The whole thing didn't seem so important to me any longer. I wanted to get away. I was afraid if I remained for another minute I might start crying.

"I'm sorry," I said. Never had he invited me to his home. I was only good enough to take out, not to take home. "I had to ask your sister something."

"I heard you." Then he looked at his sister. His expression was hard to read. It was moody, and it carried neither like nor dislike.

"Why don't you answer?" he asked her. His sister went to her own chair and dropped into it. Her look of a haughty clubwoman returned. "I don't want to discuss anything further with either one of you."

Abruptly Eldridge sat up, his face flushing with annoyance. "Don't give me that. Answer her."

She kept staring at him, her face growing colder. I wonder if the subject I had brought up was one that hadn't been mentioned in this house for seventeen years. Perhaps in this kind of house it was something you simply couldn't discuss.

"Very well," Eldridge's sister said finally. Her voice was low, but there was more dislike concentrated in it than I had ever heard in a shout. "He convicted himself with the note he left. That and his disappearance. I wouldn't have known. It was dark. I didn't see the—man's face."

* * * * *

The sticky heat turned my clothing into a steaming compression chamber with perspiration crawling insectlike along my legs. Up front, the steel supports of the outdoor platform glared like white-hot branding irons under the scorching sun.

I wished the commencement exercises were over. All week I had been saying good-by. Good-by to professors, good-by to out-of-town students, good-by to Selina, good-by to classrooms and libraries and labs, good-by to a way of life I had followed since I was five.

Everything, I had thought, was going to be wonderful when I graduated. Eldridge and I would be married and we would buy a lovely little cottage and we would continue to go to dances and to have lunch together. And now I was graduating and Eldridge was still talking, the way he'd been talking for a year now, of going away somewhere for his internship. And there would be no more dances. No more lunches. No more dates. No more anything.

All around us, students were laughing and chattering. Quotations from the president's address: "Our country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous effort—" Plans for the future: "—buy five hundred chickens, in about a year you'll have—" Nostalgic recollections of the past: "Remember the time she dropped the glass and there was old Finney from the ed department—"

And then Eldridge said, "Do you remember the time we took that drive up on that hill?"

Yes, I remembered. Such a small thing while it was happening, such a big thing afterward. I remembered the way the sun had turned Eldridge's face a ruddy bronze. I remembered him leaning back and watching a passing bird.

Do you remember the time at the pond long ago, do you remember when you kissed me in broad daylight on the library steps, do you remember "Where oh where is little Patricia?"

What happens to the little Patricias? Where do they go, the girls in the sweaters, the boys with the letters on their chests? One never sees them after they graduate. They simply exist for a time on campuses and then evaporate.

Had I been happy those times? Or is happiness always something that is gone, not now?

From the station we could hear the train whistle. Conversation seemed to slow down as it sounded. For a moment, everyone appeared to be picturing the mammoth steaming into the station, straining to be off again with its human nourishment. We could hear the gears grinding again, the engine getting up steam, the chugging. We could almost see the train, with small dark figures on the rear platform waving, growing smaller, disappearing into the distance.

The burning ball of torment far above seemed to broil and sizzle the liquid in my brain. And there was no way to escape it, no protection in the whole inferno.

Finally we were breaking away. The exercises were over, the farewells finished, and we were walking back to State, where Eldridge had parked his car. As we walked, I thought of home. The winter hangings still up, the living room dark and heavily carpeted. A room of twenty paces, a house ten minutes' drive from a picture show, five minutes' drive from a food store, no minutes' drive to visit anyone.

I had been the only one at graduation without a family. Mother had had to keep a beauty-parlor appointment, and Lee had said he wouldn't go if "that Eldridge" went.

Eldridge said, "I'll take you home. Then I have to see some professors."

The car felt like a coffin that had been left in the desert for a week. I watched a fly buzzing around, getting nowhere, and then just as the air was becoming refreshing, we went home.

After Eldridge left, I stood for a long time, watching the house. The parched, dying grass, the broken fence, the dirty opaque windows.

Finally I saw the truck in the driveway. I wondered why it was there until I remembered Mother telling me we were converting the heater from coal to oil. After all the years of talking about it, she had finally decided to spend the money. It was cheaper doing it in the summer.

Tiredly I walked around to the back. The outer door was open and so was the door to the basement. Not looking down, I called, "Hello."

A voice said hello back, and then a man came to the foot of the stairs. "We're putting in the new tank," he told me.

Slowly, still giddy from the sun, I went up the front stairs. Looking into Lee's room, I saw he was out. Once in my room, I had to lie down to get rid of the dizziness.

I stretched out and closed my eyes. Once I remained still, it was almost pleasantly cool in the room. I tried to make plans. But I couldn't concentrate. A deadly sensation of uneasiness was creeping up around me. What was wrong?

The men in the basement. Was I sure they were what they said they were?

Stop it. They're all right. The truck proves it.

And then came the shout from below.

A number of voices mingled in a confused chatter, and immediately afterward footsteps sounded on the cellar stairs. Slowly I got out of bed.

All day I had been waiting. No, not all day. All my life. For years I had been waiting. I had known about this for a long time.

My uneasiness had nothing to do with the men below. They were all right, and I knew they were all right.

The footsteps started up the front stairs. I couldn't avoid it any longer, and I went out into the fall. The face of the man coming up conveyed excitement mostly, and perhaps a touch of —horror? No, that was too strong.

The man stopped when he saw me and didn't seem to know what to say. A moment before, he had been all action, and now he was all hesitation.

"Where's the telephone, miss?" was what he finally said.

Instead of asking a normal question, I pointed to the front hallway. Then I followed him down, because it would have looked absurd to go back. Besides, this was what I had spent my nights trying to remember, wasn't it?

From the direction of the dining room came two more men. While the first man went to the front hall, one of the others said to me, "Have you lived here long?"

"What?"

"Have you lived here long?"

"All my life."

Apparently that was an interesting thought. The men exchanged glances. Then, "Is your mother coming home soon?"

"I don't know."

"Are you alone?"

I wondered why he was so determined to keep up a conversation. And then I decided it was because he was trying to keep me from listening to the man on the telephone. "Don't get excited," he continued.

I looked at him.

Evidently he felt I was in a state of shock. Or maybe feeble-minded. "It's all right," he went on. "It's old, anyway. There's nothing for you to worry about."

But the voice of the man on the telephone came through over his babbling. I could hear him say to the police, "There's a body buried in the cellar."

* * * * *

Sometime after three o'clock, they found the body. I sat at the living-room window looking out while we waited for the police. The rain started about then, a hot, muggy rain. The endless downpour streamed by in the same sedate lines minute after minute with well-bred unchangeability. The interminable patter on the roof, the humming stream from the pipes, the soft gray light were so monotonous they numbed me.

A low humming blended with the slushing sound of tires against wet cement, and a car nosed out from behind the gauze of rain. Like spectral robots, three figures glided out of the car and came up our walk.

Two of the visitors were in uniform and one wore a business suit. They greeted me politely and asked to be taken to the basement. Instead, I told them where to find the stairs, and I took up my post at the window again.

Time neither stretched nor contracted. It didn't seem to move at all. I wasn't aware of whether a long interval passed or no interval at all before tires swished outside again. These men barely glanced at me and then headed for the kitchen. Deliberately I wound every muffling device I could around my senses, blunting my hearing, blurring my seeing, dimming every perceptive organ.

I was only vaguely conscious of the feet on the back stairs again, the slam of the kitchen door. Turning away from the window, I didn't see what went into the second car.

But then the vacuum was pierced. At last I was conscious of a voice, a voice trying to get through to me.

"What did you say?" I asked.

It was the man in the business suit. Evidently he had been talking to me for some time. "I just wanted to ask a few questions. What is your name?"

I gave him our names and the number of years we had owned the house. Then, "You said your father doesn't live here. Where is he?"

"I don't know. He deserted my mother seventeen years ago."

"Have you heard from him since?"

I hesitated, remembering Eldridge's letter. "No," I said. My head was beginning to hurt.

"Where is your mother?"

"She might be shopping or at—no. I'm sorry. I feel confused. She's at a beauty parlor. But I don't know which one."

"Did your father leave a note when he left?"

Involuntarily my eyes moved to the typewriter in the front hall. The familiar twang against the string of memory again. "Yes."

"What was in the note?"

Almost forgetting the man, I went to the hall to look at the typewriter.

"What are you doing?"

I turned, startled. The man was staring at me. He must think I'm peculiar, I said to myself. I tried to think of some rational explanation for my behavior. "I thought—perhaps my brother left a note about where he was," I said.

"Do you know what was in your father's note?"

I opened one of the windows wider, but it didn't help. The heat was too heavy to be stirred by the rain. "Don't you know?"

"What?" All along he had been secretive, knowing. He was the one moving me around the chessboard. Now, for the first time, he hesitated.

"Don't you know about my family?"

"I haven't lived in town long."

"The note he left said he had attacked a little girl."

The man's face closed. Wiping his perspired brow, he said, "I'm afraid we'll have to wait here until your mother returns." He avoided my eyes as though I had a disease that could be caught visually.

We kept on sitting in the front room, the man glancing at our books and removing one now and then and looking through it. I continued to stare at the rain. Through the window, I could see the men sitting in the police car. Everything began to smell, sound, or look wetness.

I don't know how long it was, but finally, like a visitation from another world, a car appeared, coming from the direction of town. The man in the business suit dropped the book he had been reading and went to the door.

I could hear Mother's shocked ejaculations and the low, soothing voice of the detective. The sounds went on for some time before they all came into the living room. I was faintly surprised to see Lee with them, since I hadn't heard his voice. They went on talking, the man and Mother, and finally he said, "I'm awfully sorry, but you'll have to come down to the station house with me. It's a matter of routine. We just have to ask you a few questions, and then I'm sure you'll be able to come home. They may simply ask you not to go out of town—"

"I never heard of such a thing!" Mother ejaculated. "What are you talking about? You're treating us like criminals—"

I'm sorry. It's the customary procedure in a case like this. Your daughter, of course, must have been very young—she won't have to come with us. But I must ask you and your son to come with us."

"I have an appointment tonight. I don't want to have—"

"You may be able to keep the appointment later. In any case, I'm afraid I must insist—"

They went on like that for some time, and finally Mother had to give in. She got another coat from the closet, and they were almost out when the man, not Mother, remembered me. He turned and said, "If you're nervous about staying here, we could give you a lift into town."

I stared at him for a moment without understanding. Then I blinked. "Wait," I said. I ran upstairs, grabbed my raincoat and purse, and ran down again. Silently, Mother, Lee and I followed the man into our car. The police car followed behind us. Nobody spoke the whole way. We were almost in town before the man asked where I wanted to be dropped off.

I thought about the question. I had lived in one place all my life, and I had no one to go to when I was in trouble. "Drop me at the State, please," I said.

The man in the business suit said, "Don't you want to stay with a friend?" "No, thank you. The State will be fine."

They slowed down in front of the theatre, and several people turned to stare at the police car. Behind me, they didn't start up immediately. The man in the business suit wanted to see if I really went in.

I bought my ticket, entered, and sat down near the back, although I generally sat up front. After what seemed like a terribly short time, the lights came on. With dismay, I watched everyone getting up. I was sure I had just come in. Slowly and carefully, I moved out with the crowd.

Outdoors it was still raining. I went past the lighted shopwindows and then out on the dark road. A car came up behind me and slowed down. "Do you want a lift?" a strange voice said. "No," I answered, looking around. There was a laugh, and the car started up again.

An ugly little picture formed in my mind. Maybe, once long ago, another car had been driving along this road. And a little girl had been walking here. And a car had stopped, and the man in the car had asked the little girl if she wanted a lift. And the little girl, like me, had said no. But that man, unlike the one who had just stopped, hadn't laughed. He had gotten out of the car, caught hold of the girl—

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Then I saw our house. Smothered in instant misery, I saw that not one light showed anywhere.

I unlocked the door and turned on the hall light, locking the door again behind me. The moment the light went on, I saw the note in the typewriter. For a minute I remained still, staring at it. I couldn't understand the wave of horror that washed over me.

Finally I went to the typewriter. "That detective said we could go if we didn't leave town," the note said. "I've gone out and Lee went to a picture show. Mother."

My first reaction was relief. What had I expected? It was a note like hundreds of others Mother had left.

Then the misery overcame me again. How could she do it? How could she go out and leave me alone at a time like this?

I went to the kitchen, turning on every light on the way. It would show anyone waiting out there in the dark that there were people at home. In the kitchen, I shut the door to the basement, and put the kitchen table in front of it. Then I thought, whatever it was that had been in the basement is gone now. There was nothing to be afraid of.

How had I known there had been something to be afraid of?

I pushed the thought away. The body had probably been there before the house was built. Everyone had to die, and everyone had to become what that

had become. Taking a book with me, I went upstairs and turned on the radio. I was using every device I could to ward off whatever had to be warded off.

Above the voices on the radio, I could hear the rain. Instead of letting up, it seemed to be coming down with more fury. The radio was full of static. Finally I shut it off and went to the window. As I stood there, the heavens suddenly crackled and sizzled with a white blaze. And while they writhed in the agony of fire, a monstrous whip lashed out, snapping across the sky. The whip darted into our front yard, and with an ear-splitting searing and tearing, cracked the elm in two.

For a moment, I stood rigid. The blaze continued in my mind for a long time after it was gone from the yard. Finally I dropped the shade and moved back.

I had to go somewhere, I couldn't remain alone. I went out on the dim gallery, and around to the living room. Now I was out in the open, vulnerable on every side.

Below, the lights were still on. Was the shadow that followed me watching every move I made? I couldn't go out. Someone would have to come here.

Quickly I dialed. After one ring, a voice on the other end said, "Knowler residence."

"May I speak to Mr. Knowler, please?"

A pause followed. I wondered whom the voice belonged to. Probably the housekeeper. Finally the voice said, "Mr. Knowler isn't home."

The words were like the whip of lightning. At the back of my mind all along had been the thought that whenever things became bad enough, I could get Eldridge. I wouldn't call him unless I had to, but once I had to, he would be there. And now he wasn't.

"Do you know where he is?"

This time the voice said, "Who is this speaking, please?"

Reluctantly I gave my name.

Again there was a silence. Then, "I see." The simple "I see" might have been Madame LaFarge memorizing a name for her knitting.

And finally, "Mr. Knowler had a disagreement with his father tonight. He has gone away. He left a note saying he was going to California."

I dropped my head on my arms. I was watching a dark triangle on the table, between my elbows. In it, a train was disappearing. A dot growing smaller until it no longer existed. Pallid flashes from somewhere washed the scene in a strange bloodless light.

Sometime later I went up the stairs and into my room. When I looked out the window, I thought at first I was in a nightmare standing at some strange window facing an unknown land. This wasn't my room. Then I remembered the lightning. The tree was down.

Below, the telephone burst into life. I had a picture of someone featureless sitting and waiting. A person who could see our front hall and wanted me downstairs so he would know exactly where I was. And when I picked up the receiver, there would be a bloodless whisper of a voice, a murmur that would divulge something dreadful.

Then suddenly I was running out of the room. It must be Eldridge. He was at the station, waiting for me. He had blown up at his father, decided to leave, and had been trying to get me all afternoon. But I had been at the movies. God, make it Eldridge. God, let me get there in time.

Holding to the railing, I raced down three steps at a time. My heart pounded with hope again as I reached the bottom of the stairs. And then the ringing stopped.

I remained where I was, still holding the railing. The silence was overpowering now that the harsh jangling had stopped. The house was filled with it. A silence pregnant with something awful laboring to be born.

My whole life would have been changed if I had answered the telephone in time. Just a small thing. Like the bullet at Sarajevo.

I'll call once more, Eldridge had told himself. If she isn't home this time, I'm leaving without her. Impulsive. He had always been impulsive.

I went up to bed and listened to the wind. It was traveling at an uncanny speed, whistling around the house and tearing at the foundations. Shrieking, it strained at the house as if there were still something rotten within. And at the same time it wept that it had to be the instrument of tearing. I didn't have to weep. The night was doing it for me.

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There was the sound of a typewriter. A buzz and then a pause. Someone pecking out a message.

Who would be typing in the middle of the night? I saw the green dial shining through the dark, but I couldn't tell the time.

The room was icy. From somewhere behind me, a steady wind was coming in. What's that other sound? Like a river. The rain. It's raining outdoors.

Mama won't like me running around like this. I'll just go to the door and see who's making that noise. I can look over the railing. No, it's dark in the living room. Maybe it's Daddy downstairs. Maybe he's home from work now. Poor Daddy works so hard. But he'll hold me even if it is late. He'll tell me a story and keep me warm. And I'll smell that funny smell on his suit. Like smoke.

Go on tiptoe so Mama won't hear. Why, it isn't dark. There's a light from the back stairs. Daddy must be in the kitchen. What's that funny noise? Like bumping. So many noises tonight. Typewriters and rain and bumping.

I'll go to the top of the back stairs and look down. Then if it's Daddy—

I was running. As fast as I could. Back along the gallery, past the row of doors. Must find my room. Quick. Must get into bed. Hide under the covers. Bury my head.

I heard screaming. The sound echoing through the night, tearing at my eardrums, searing my brain like a branding iron.

And then I was awake. I was sitting in my own bed in the dark. My heart was racing, and the terrible cry still vibrated in my mind. I was holding my head in my hands, and I was screaming.

Where am I? The typewriter—the rain—something happened.

The dream. The suicide hour. Not a dream. What really happened?

The typewriter. That was it. The typewriter had wakened me in the middle of the night. And I had looked at the clock. The big hand pointing up and the little one down. The clock Daddy had given me, saying it would help me learn to tell time.

What happened after I heard the typewriter? I didn't know. I almost knew. I was frightened—no, not at first. I wasn't frightened until afterward. When I came up the back stairs.

The back stairs. Daddy.

But I never called him Daddy. Only Father. The man who stayed away late, was mean to Mother, and deserted us—

No, no, no, Daddy. How warm and strong his arms were. He called me honey. Who said those things about him? They weren't true. Mother and he couldn't get along. That's why she said them. When he couldn't stand it at home and worked late, she said he was drinking and going out with women. He never did anything wrong. Not Daddy.

I have to get out of the house. Put on the light—the light? But I left all the lights on.

I ran to the switch. It clicked, but nothing happened. Outdoors the wind still moaned. I looked at the clock. It was nearly four.

Mother must surely be home.

Opening the door, I ran out on the gallery and down to her room. No one was there. The bed hadn't been slept in.

Down the hallway to the stairs. Below, too, it was dark. I sped through the living room to the telephone.

I only stopped when I saw a note in the typewriter.

I had taken away the note Mother had left. There hadn't been a note when I had gone upstairs.

I sat down in the chair by the typewriter. My head was spinning, and I was afraid I would faint. All I wanted was one strong light.

And then I was out of the chair again. The seat was warm. Someone had been sitting in the chair. Just a short time ago, someone had been sitting at the typewriter.

I picked up the note. Holding it at the right distance from my eyes, I waited patiently. I didn't have long to wait. The lightning flashed again.

"I'm going away for good." That's what the note said.

The same note Daddy had left seventeen years ago. I must be losing my mind. How could the note still be here? I had heard typing. But I had thought it was part of the dream. It had sounded exactly the way it had sounded long ago when I had been three.

The only difference between this note and the note Daddy had left was that this one had my name on the bottom.

Someone was here. While I was sleeping, someone must have come in and typed the note. Whoever it was knew I was going away. I was going to the basement.

The whole world would think I had run away, but I would be in the basement. For a long time. Maybe even seventeen years, the way Daddy had been.

Daddy, Daddy, I was screaming again. The panic was as loose as the elements outdoors. Daddy hadn't deserted us. He hadn't attacked anyone. He had been killed and put in a hole in the basement. Moldering all the years while I tried to remember. Because I had seen Daddy killed.

I whipped up the telephone. No sound. No dial tone. Just a horrible hum of silence. I pulled frantically at the door before I remembered it was locked. The key? Where was it? I had left it on the table. I felt all over, but it was gone. The windows—no, I can't. There are bars on them. Through the dark, past the living room to the kitchen. The door was locked, and this key was gone, too. And the back stairs yawned open, a dark well disappearing into a dungeon. The dungeon that would be my home from now on.

I knew now. First I had heard the typewriter in the middle of the night. Buzz, stop. Buzz, stop. Then I had gone down the hallway to the back stairs. And after that I had seen him.

My daddy. Lying on the floor with his face down. And the back of his head all red. Someone had been bending over him, trying to drag him across the floor, bumping him down the cellar stairs—

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The screaming was intolerable. A hideous uproar going on and on, pounding against the walls of my ribs like a captive creature.

And then there was another sound. Even my screaming couldn't mask it. Nothing stealthy. Nothing hidden. Very audible. Footsteps.

And finally a voice. "I bet you know now, don't you?"

I saw the outline in the archway, a darker shadow against the darkness of the room.

The scream in my throat died stillborn. I felt like closing my eyes, going to sleep. Now I wouldn't have to lie awake any longer trying to remember. If only the shadow in the archway would go away.

I walked toward it. No use running away any longer. I was too tired. I deserved a rest.

"Let's find a candle." I said. My voice was tired, too. And outdoors, even the storm was losing its emotion. It had spent itself until nothing was left.

I groped through the dark. At the door to the basement, I stopped and stared down into the room I hadn't seen for seventeen years.

The character of the basement had changed when I heard the voice. It had become a cellar again, the lowest level of the house. At that moment, I could have easily descended the steps.

I found some candles and went to the stove for the matches. In the blue light, I looked up.

Lee blinked at me. The same Lee I had known all my life. Not very steady, didn't like people, couldn't keep a job, cruel to animals, without any friends. But harmless. Always ready to do anyone a favor. My brother, Lee.

His voice slightly querulous, he said, "I had to do it, Sis. He saw me running away from that girl. He would have told Mama."

He was trying to answer the question I hadn't asked. What made you do it, Lee? Why, Lee? But the question was unanswerable. If Lee had the answer, the question wouldn't exist.

My brother. My own brother. Had Daddy said, "My son. My own son."

"Listen, Sis, you won't tell Mama, will you? I wrote a note saying you were going away, but I'll throw it out if you won't tell Mama. She won't love me if you tell her, Sis."

How tired I was. If only I could go to sleep. How would I get through until dawn? I had to get through until someone came.

Where was Mother? He couldn't have—stop it. What was I thinking? You'll run again. And then there won't be a chance. A chance for what?

"Lee," I said, "why don't you go to bed." My voice sounded unnatural.

Lee noticed. He had been scratching his head, and then he stopped and turned.

"Where are the keys, Lee?" If I had kept quiet, it would have been all right. But I couldn't. The more he looked at me, the more I had to talk.

"The keys? They're all right. I'll lie down here." Still watching me, he moved toward the living-room couch. He leaned back and closed his eyes. I didn't move. I stayed where I was and looked at him stretched out on the couch.

Then he sat up. "I can't go to sleep."

I tried not to move. "Why not?"

"I know you. You'll tell Mama."

"No, Lee. I won't tell." My voice wavered.

There was no use saying to myself that he was the old familiar Lee. Because he wasn't. He wasn't anyone familiar.

"I've been following you," he said. "You see too much of that Eldridge. You'll tell him. I hate that Eldridge."

"No, I won't tell him, Lee. Why do you hate him, Lee? Why did you write him those letters?"

He glanced at me and then he reached out and made a motion. As though he were patting something. Suddenly I remembered the time he had stroked my hair. "I wanted him to leave you, Sis. I wanted you to stay with me. Why did you always leave me? You always left me, just like Mama did."

He started to move toward me. I couldn't see his face. Only the outline of his figure against the candle. There was no use running. The doors were locked. If I ran, it would be over more quickly. It would be a hideous chase down to the basement or up to the attic. Perhaps hiding in a closet and waiting, I couldn't stand that.

And then the thin cord of bravery snapped, and I was running. It was as though my running had snapped a cord for him, too. The shredded cord of sanity.

As I had known he would, he darted after me. I could hear him trip in the dark, and then he was up again.

I started for the stairs. I was halfway up when he caught me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back down the stairs. Even as he stumbled again, the grip didn't loosen.

I took deep breaths. That seemed to be the only important thing. Taking in air as long as I could. At least the suspense was over. I could stop struggling.

A vestigial flash of lightning passed weakly over the sky like a ghost of itself. In the light, I finally saw Lee's face. He was looking at me, his expression dazed, his eyes clouded. It was the Lee I knew again. And he was examining me as though he had just found out who I was.

All he had time to say was, "She was such a pretty little girl. I wanted her to like me. No one liked me—" and then we heard the key in the lock.

We both turned. The door smacked back. The light switch clicked, but nothing happened. Then there was the sound of a bag opening and the scratch of a match.

Mother looked around. In the light from the match, I could see she was as neat as always. Not even wet. She seemed to have dropped in from somewhere that didn't have rain.

She peered at us, squinting as though not believing her eyes. Coming closer, she struck another match and stared again. And then she stopped staring at me and concentrated on Lee. I looked at Lee, too.

He had crouched down, near a chair, and all purpose had left him. But it was more than that. He was transfigured, and in a way that puzzled me. He reminded me of something.

"Don't leave me again, Mama," he said. "I'll be good. Please, Mama, don't go away again."

I knew now of what he reminded me. A small boy. Even his voice was the voice of the little boy he had once been. He cowered on the floor and repeated the words over and over. And finally he crumpled up completely, hiding his face in his hands.

"Don't leave me alone, Mama. Don't go away again."

* * * * *

Yesterday I saw a woman who made me feel uneasy.

We were sitting in the center of the movie house, near the front. I turned to say something and then I saw her. A thin white-haired woman with a nervous face.

And then I remembered. She was like that other woman, long ago, the one I had seen in the store who had reminded me of Aunt Celia. The one who had helped me down a long winding road that led to a grave in a basement.

The brief glimpse of a face was a break in the dike that allowed the memories to come washing over me again, voices and pictures on the crest of the wave like driftwood.

I thought back to the time when sleep was a bottomless pit of nightmares. When the hands of a clock could frighten me.

As the threads of memory knitted in and out and were cut off at the bend like a view of a road in a picture book, I longed to tear the page and see the world beyond. I wanted to straighten out the rippling phrases that merged and separated.

For instance, "Lady Livingstone, I presume?" And I could feel the terror of the dark road again. See Eldridge in his loud sport jacket again.

"The way she ran after that ball and went tumbling down the steps." But that was Aunt Celia's voice. And the scene had shifted to our sun porch.

After all these years, I'm not always sure which voice belonged to which statement. Did Ellen Mackay really say, "It's dreadful to hold something against a person because of her father, don't you think?" Was it Lee who said, "He must have been insane. He attacked a little girl."

Lee had still had enough sanity then to know it was insane to attack a little girl. What had he said to explain it? "No one liked me. I wanted her to like me."

Poor Lee. A little boy left alone day after day by a mother too selfish to do anything but amuse herself. A little boy who had listened to a mother always tell him what a worthless father he had. A little boy who never found out that his father was driven to working constantly by a woman who never had enough money.

A little boy, who despite everything, took care of the sister who was thirteen years younger than he.

And there was the professor, squinting at his pipe. "You know, the person who always fails ..."

Lee had failed at everything. At school, at getting a job, at making friends.

For months after they took Lee away, I sat alone after work watching the fields and wondering how many more times I would sit at that particular window, watching that particular view.

I was like an elderly childless widow whom everyone has forgotten. Waiting for some philanthropist to appear and take the old lady out for an airing.

The philanthropist, when he finally did appear, was tall and quiet. Someone I had met at work.

His name was Sherman, and we talked about Eldridge one day. We had driven out into the country over a bumpy road where the car jogged like a horse and buggy. On one side had been a low wall hung with creepers and dropping away to a checkerboard land. On the other side had been a wild tangle of ivy. The road had climbed until we came to the clearing that overlooked the patchwork quilt of green.

I recognized the clearing immediately. It was the one that Eldridge had taken me to see that spring morning.

There was an abrupt silence when Sherman turned the motor off. For a moment the air was lifeless, but then, as we grew accustomed to the silence, the atmosphere became saturated with small sounds. Birds twittering, insects clicking, a distant bell tinkling.

A breeze tiptoed into the car as though doubtful of her welcome. And down in the valley, the line of green cornstalks, still spindly as teenagers, flowed in a gradual sweep like a fan of feathers.

Then Sherman was talking. He was saying something about indifference, about people not caring enough. About my mother, who did not know that her not caring enough could lead to a murder.

Overlooking the valley where I had first begun to love, and where, much later, I began to grow up, I thought about Eldridge. He had cared enough to defy his father. He hadn't cared enough to stay where he was and marry me.

The sky was striated with color, and the valley basked in the reflected glory as though it were personally responsible. But this time with Sherman, unlike the time long before with Eldridge, I had no desire to romp in the grass. I knew it wouldn't be as soft as it looked.

We would go away, Sherman said, and forget the town that hadn't cared enough.

The sun beat down on his face, making it ruddy, reminding me of the other face that had always been too warm. The memories that were wreathed in the incense of young grass would never leave. Images of the first spring couldn't grow stale, but the pain, I began to see, would. The days with a bottom layer of despair and a top layer of ecstasy were pared off until only the middle remained.

And instead of someone with a wool jacket that smelled of the same tobacco that my father had used, there was someone who wasn't my father all over again. At last I found someone who had to stand in his own right.

THE END