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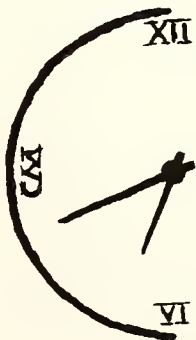
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BELLES LETTRES



1966 - 67

Belles Lettres

An annual anthology of student writing sponsored and published by the
Canterbury Club of Eastern Kentucky University
at Richmond, Kentucky.

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4 O'CLOCK SUN

GARRY HEARNE

In the darkness of pollen lights
to push the slick ring of a trumpet
and throw an arm
and jerk pleading hips
within the powering heat of
pressing bodies
and fall within the dust of 4
o'clock sun
to feel the horn of a sweat-burnt bull
whip the scarlet of a silkened fiber;
to reach and touch without a feel
of the weed that flows back and
back with the pushing of a deep current
and breeze as a missile among virgin
depths
to learn of new Gods.
What thoughts of marvel create
a dream
the steel point gouges my eye
spattering blood beneath my lid
and running over my teeth
and drying upon the hardened points
of my beard
one
last
gulped
and
wheezing
breath
then I find
and take
the
selfish secret
of
the
4 o'clock sun

LIFE

KATHY SCHWETTMAN

fleeting, transient life
you rush by swift as the murmuring wind rustles the
leaves of fall
and brush a kiss upon my cheek

Oh, kiss me firm and hard, dear life
that when you glide away in mystery
your secret memory will fill me with a deep and
faithful love.

Kiss me upon the mouth until my heart pounds with joy
and the blood surges into my innocent cheeks,
then when you've slipped away into the looming,
uncertain future
I will linger in contentment and be not afraid.

kiss me not in fickle passion as does mortal man
and leave confusion and doubt in each sigh
do not merely brush the kiss upon my cheek
love me in completeness and purity, O Life—
give me hope

This is what my heart does long for.
This is what no man can impart.

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

PAT ABNEY

What is depression?
Is it plastic flowers on a tombstone?
or leaves full of color dying?
Maybe it is knowing that beyond
The corner there's emptiness.
Is it knowing that we live in a shell
which cracks with every step
or maybe depression is
Simply—just living.

PRAYER

SUZANNE ANKRUM

Well, here we are again, God—
sprawled in the middle of the muck
swept into the corner of the universe.

Neither sleet, nor rain, nor pestilence and plague has kept us from
our rounds.

(round and round we've crawled in persistent survival, with heads
above the murk, kicking at the seaweed.)

A well-turned and fertile rib-bone gave us our lead.

You forgot the resilience of rib-bones, God, when you sentenced
woman to childbirth.

Eve grunted, grimaced and bled till Cain and Abel were at last put
to her breasts.

And when their mother ran dry, they nursed the land
to string their arbors and fatten their flocks.

Soon, however,

The land too had shriveled and lay flat and empty.

(and Cain's wives pulled at the looms, weaving their ordered
geometric patterns

till the rain came and flushed all but Noah down the drain of
eternity.)

Then you plopped us down on a pile of mud with a shovel in one
hand

and a sprig of tree in the other—

“Dig,” you said.

So we dug.

We dug tunnels and build cities from what we'd shoveled.

We pushed dikes against the seas, cut up the lands, and parcelled
them out.

Meanwhile,

A few sentries of sanity

quietly went about the task of planting those green sprigs
that we cling to

as we once again find ourselves here, God,
kicking at the seaweed.

I'M SORRY

KATHY SCHWETTMAN

I'm sorry—

you're too real
(you don't pretend enough)
you are tender, loving, full of life.

I'm sorry—

you're too genuinely and individual
(you don't wear the false-face so it completely
covers)
you are too alive for this life.

I'm sorry—

but if you won't play by our rules, you can't
play at all.
all your umbrellas have to be green and
your cigarettes filtered.
don't up-stage; by all means break a leg
just naturally identify with the role and
you'll forget your acting
who then could doubt your actuality?

I'm sorry—

(I really am)
But you've had your chance.
You'll never learn, will you?

I'm sorry—

but damn your sincere soul to hell
But remember I am sorry

THE BASIC TIDE

ALLEN SCHAAF

The basic tide—

The first flood into untouched lowland palms
Then back in quicker ebb; new shells along the white
Vast stretches of the overwashed reflecting beach;
Gems, and evidence that life once lived
Of which I knew nothing . . .

THE NAMELESS:

A Fairy Tale

KENN KEITH

The young American soldier walked.
He walked through the German town.
Passing a cemetery, he was struck by
the Beauty of the Place, and he went in.
In. In.

The grass was green, and the graves
were many.
Stones, markers, farewells.
Safety?

He paused before a grave without a name.
:Hello.
From where came the voice?
:Hello.
No one near him.
And the American soldier said,
“Where are you?”
:Here, before you.
“Before me?”
:Yes,
The reply,
:Before you in my nameless bed.
“My God!”
:Don’t be afraid. I have questions.
“Are you, are you—dead?”
:Man says so. I think not.
“You’re American?”
:No, German.
“You’re speaking English.”
:No, German.
“But, I can **understand** you!”
:Oh, yes.
“My God!”
:Don’t be afraid.
The American soldier removed his hat.
He stood, his brow suddenly wet with fear,

and he appeared to be one of his new-found
company: dead.

And the voice from within,

:Why are you here?

And the American soldier said,

“I walk.”

And the voice,

:You walk among those whom you have killed.

Do you smirk?

“No, I don’t smirk. I have killed no one.

I was a child when the war was fought. I
killed no one.”

The voice,

:Then your father, your brother, your friend.

Who else has slain me whom you can name?

“I don’t know. God, I don’t know!”

:You say ‘God’ quite often. Do you believe in
Him?

“Yes, of course.”

:‘Of course.’ ‘Of course.’ I see. But, then,
you have the chance to do so. You were only a
child, and now that you are finally here, the
holes have long been filled and the grass is now
the harvest. ‘Of course.’

And the American soldier said,

“Who are you?”

And the voice,

:I am you. Rather, I am your father, your brother,
your friend—with one exception: I did not return
to the arms of my mother, the eyes of my father, the
heart of my wife.

“Then, you are a soldier, and you were killed fighting
for your country?”

:For my country? Tell me, brave American, how many
men died for their country?

“What do you mean?”

:You are very young.

And the American soldier said,

“I would die for *my* country.”

And the voice,

: Yes, you might—*now*. Until a bullet is calling your name, you might die, in your thoughts, for your country. Oh, but enough of senseless thoughts! Let us talk of important things.

“Important things?”

: Yes, things of the Land. Things of my Land. How do you fare in my country, American? Do the children wave at you?

“Yes, the children wave.”

: Do the girls smile at you?

“Yes, the girls smile.”

: And what of the older ones? Those who have children in the ground. Those who have lost a part of themselves to the ground. What of those, American? Those who saw the bomb or the bullet, as in a dream, strike down a smile they loved or a blonde head they kissed? What of those?

“They look neither right nor left, but continue to plow the fields.”

: Do you understand, American?

“Yes, I understand. I understand their burden.”

: You see, it is impossible to hate if you are numb.

“Yes, I understand. I understand.”

: Good. Tell me, American, what is the season now?

“Fall. It is Fall, now”

: I was tucked in here, in the Fall. The crops should be nearly ready for harvesting.

“Yes, harvest is near.”

: And the grapes? What of the grapes?

“The grapes are still hard, green knots, clinging tightly to the vine.”

: Soon they shall be purple as the cloth of the dead and hang as heavily as dust in a windless place.

“I know.”

The American soldier looked at his watch; his time was short. And he said,

“I must go.”

: Yes, I suppose you must.

“I’ll remember this, I think.”

: No, it is better to forget. But one thing I ask. Each

day, look out across the land for me. Notice the hills
and the fields and the sky. Breathe deeply of the air.
Pat a child on the head or kiss a girl. Learn my language
and my ways, if you will. But never stare at those ones
in the fields.

And the American soldier said,

“I will, I promise.”

He turned to walk away.

:And, American?

“Yes?”

:I, too, if once more given the chance, would die for my
country.

And the young American soldier walked.
walked away.

THE END

DONNA POHLMANN

The strangeness of the day,
The wind sitting still
On the branches of bareness.

The leaves have fallen
Under the burden of time,
Tired of hanging without reason
To the thin stem of life.

They lie crumpled upon the ground,
Covered with dirt,
Pounded by massive worries
Which are no longer theirs.

The fragments are gathered and fired;
The dullness turns to bright flame,
The living matter to ashes,
And the end to the beginning.

ONE TIME

GARRY HEARNE

So many voices
And not a one to hear
So many arms
And not a one to touch,
to stroke, to lie upon
So many days
And not a one to fill with
easy smiles
bubbled to whispering laughter
So many ribs
And not a one to lay
hand upon
And throw back head
And raise knees upward
to the chest
So many hearts
And not a one to know
to hold
to enfold

One
Death
or
Two

THIS GREAT DARK GLOOM

REBA MILLER

this great dark gloom
now settling over my sinewy Maypole limbs
slowly is consuming cerebral cells
like myriads of wriggling maggots

thrusting their pulsing tentacles
into dark and private chambers
of my craggy mind,

and threatening to rob it of its sanity
while it is yet an embryo

TO THE RAIN

JAMES T. GILBERT

The winds blew
an eddies of dust
rose from the parched earth.
It was strange
with everything so dry
an bitter an dirty.
I was dying then.
Ignorant,
crazed with thirst.
I knew not where to turn.
But my protector,
in the form of one
most humble,
knew of my plight.

Listen! The wind is changing!
The sky is cloudless, but
there's a new smell
in the air.
The stars continue their
stately procession
across heaven's vault.
The earth looks up
an implores,
or beseeches.
An the withered grass
lifts its head
one last time.
Then . . .
all is silent.

Little by little it grows,
now pattering gently
on the dusty walk,
now plungin' an
bubblin'
in its self-made puddles.

Now poundin'
furiously
on the roof an
drippin' an streamin'
down the windows.
I walk out thru the meadow
an' hold my head up.
The rain soaks me an
drips down my face.
An the wind howls an screams
an blows my hair.
Thunder, the belated harbinger
of this ecstasy,
rolls down from the hills an
is music—
the melody of freedom from bondage.
An lightning streaks
across the ebony sky
in countless crisscross patterns.

The rain is pure
an clean an white an
it reigns triumphant.
It washes away th'
scum an filth,
rushes it thru th'
gutters an sewers,
away on its journey
to its rightful place
in the underworld.

Now it's a steady stream
dripping down my neck an
around an thru my collar
an tricklin' happily
down my legs.
Umbrellas are vile things,
they keep you from being
cleansed.

I run an cannot
be caught
in th' rain.
I'm safe again,
my faith an strength
renewed.
Plodding ever onward
in my ceaseless quest,
for what?
an the rains still came.

METAPHORICAL LONELINESS

FRED D. MULLINS

A scrap of paper tumbling down a city street after dark
A sign on rusty hinges, whipped by midnight breezes
The damp handkerchief of a soldier's young widow
A train whistle blowing in the fog
The whimpering of an abandoned dog
Leaves blowing over a new grave
The ticking of a clock
A soldier, a hobo, a drunk
An old man selling papers
No letter in the mailbox
Rain on a barred window
A smokeless chimney
A moonless night
A mateless wolf
A table for one
Barren trees
A park bench
A cold bed
A feeling
An exile
A whore
A leper
A tear
An end!

THE SIGN

KENN KEITH

I have a Garden, and Roses are there.
I prune them and pick them and water them,
also.

Each evening I water them.
At six o'clock, when the sun is leaving, I
go into my Garden and water my Roses.

Last night I was in my Garden with my Roses.
As always, I thought of my Son.

He was small and blond.
Soon, he was large and blond.
War came.
He hadn't even known the small country
existed.

I still have the telegram we received.
It is stained, now.

"Be reconciled and rejoice," I once read.
I am not reconciled.

My Garden reminded me of my Son, and I
looked into the Sky.
A trailing vapor of silverness stole across
my vision.

Some call them 'winging birds of flight.'
I hesitate to do so.
No, I think of them as worlds apart.
Height they have, and Beauty,
Grace and Loveliness.
Worlds alone, safe, leaving behind them a
Sign.

Roses are fragile.
I'll bring you one.

THE STEEPLE

GARRY HEARNE

I saw a steeple rising high into the sky.
It has been a long time I thought.
I was passing as a stranger through a foreign land.
I stood and thought of entrance.
Through glimmering glass-stained doors I walked
into the church.
How little I deserved to be there.
I did not go far into the room
but knelt behind a bench within the back.
With almost tears I glanced upon the
golden hanging arms.
There was a whisper:
Two plump women were standing in a corner
regarding me with some concern,
 “Do you know who he is?”
 “No, I don’t.”
 “Perhaps we’d better watch.
 He might be here to steal.”

They stared.
I turned my head away.
Two thin comrades joined the group.

 “I wonder where he’s from.”
 “Certainly not from here.”
 “Don’t bother him, but watch.”

The most courageous of the group advanced
yet, kept her distance.

 “Excuse me, I don’t believe we’ve
 seen you here before.”
 “No.”
 “The minister isn’t here right now.
 Just we ladies of the Women’s Committee
 for Sunday Afternoon Recreation. I don’t
 believe the church is to be open right now.

I'm sure the minister would be glad to talk to you. Perhaps if you'd come back in a few hours . . .”
“No, that's all right,” I said a little sternly and walked away.

Oh, God, I only wanted to pray.

LISTEN ALL MANKIND

PAT ABNEY

Listen all mankind
Come ye close.
I have heard the
Professors and teachers
Predicting the future—
A Glory of the Human Race!
Mankind shall rise to
a level of grace . . .
He will reproduce life,
Make food from nitrogen and oxygen,
And make babes from chemicals
Oh Yes!—Body organs from plastic.
He will conquer and command
Land, sea and universe.
Just wait till the day
When you, Great Species
Will no longer have to think!
The Cybernetic Beast
will devour your brain.
Gloat mankind in
Your sweat of pride.
Tomorrow shall bring
A gallows of guilt!
A red sun shall rise—
A yellow race will sink.
Slowly, The stink of Man
will fade . . .
The world will be free!

I SHALL NOT WEEP

CAROLYN MURPHY

I shall not weep;
I dare not descend
Into that dark chasm of
Loving you deeply.

I must flaunt vague promises,
And run barefooted among
Sweet flowers of hypocrisy.
(Oh life, you are too bitter)

Someday, when youth is yesterday,
When I am charred and stale
From masquerading indifference,
I will look for you among life's ashes.

I shall not weep
If I cannot find you;
I will die the slow death
Of a would-be woman.

A ONE

DONALD SEARS

Sightless birds wing their
Way through burning winds that scorch
granulated land
Their hollow cries herald their
Meek journey in a hot void

A-TWO

A dead leaf was caught
By a whirlwind and forced up
in torrents of air
It spiralled skyward to be
Cast free and fall a dead leaf

MIND WHIRLS

SUZANNE ANKRUM

mind whirls and body jumps
hand raises to think and say and tell and show and
now I wait to laugh and smile
to fling hair and catch a whiff of scent to make me feel a girl,
a soft, a wanted touch.

But to sink into mother's lap, solitude, thoughtful
thoughts of me—this is the warm security of tomorrow.
To know I can say here and now I want only aloneness,
when last night lonely lost in a crowd sang—and flung its hair.

Now love in the tree's bend and
welcome in the open door
give me the promise of all that comes from both
my bursting lonely hug of here
and soothing warm corner of tomorrow's lap.

ONLY THE DEAD

KENN KEITH

I am alive,
therefore I consider death.
(It is a practice from which only the
dead are free.)
I visualize how it might come to me.
One idea keeps returning.
I see a desolate field.
Flowers, there, are long since
decayed
and the sun shines only through
clouds.
It is here that I lie.
A bullet has found my pulse.

This is a dream of the young.
War is the dream.
Dreams merge into reality.
Reality is life, and life dies.
Only the dead are free.

THE ART OF COLLECTING SACRED RELICS

DONALD SEARS

The blood was still running
from the side still, seen
But we flies were hungry.

The man was still, dying
and the wood still green
But we termites were hungry.

The body was still, cooling
and the meat still lean
But we worms were hungry.

The eyes mistook our transparent
wings for those of angels
And pronounced us holy
And enshrined us.

AD FIDEM

DONALD H. SMITH

Oh, Faith, dim light in this fast darkening world,
Now shed your unseen beam on our high hope
And let your rays of infra-red be swirled
To show us God, and how with love to cope
With deepening gulfs between the hearts of men.
Across the spectrum of the long-waved light
Through endothermic power that He can bend
From far beyond His universe's height,
God sends his love to fight athermic sin.
Sweet Sister, help me see eternal truth
Through your good news, and bring your word within
And lead me down the straight path you make smooth
With pyrogenic evidence. No fear!
The warm glow will be proof that God is near.

IT WOULD BE PRETTY, BRETT

GARRY HEARNE

Would that all were well in Windsor Castle.
And Putney really like to pulse and beat
without the dum-dum bell of clanging shod.
And Cynthia could hum within the let-me
 charred oak length
without the labored twinkles of Scorpien mouth
on close and tear and masticate.

Would that all were well in Windsor Castle.
And Christina crossed her sinewed watered puke
and dangled meteor burned glow about the
 whitened drop.
And Nathan thought about the type he focused
and lay the folds out smooth and patted still.

Would that all were well in Windsor Castle.
And Elizabeth slid along the darkened molecule
and tumbled down long barren cold in
show teeth ivory.
And Nifrem rode the horse
where crystaled water splash awoke within the
coolness to give love.
And Nida touched the yellow of the fly-bee pick
a hundred thousand times within the thumb of
finger curved.
And Drop-Drop of the blue black still
stood neat and wait for slanted angled pale
of that round cheese.

MY LOVE RIDES

JAMES BLACK

My love rides with insecurity
On a steed of uncertainty
Driven, like chaff
By the currents of
 Your whimpers and smiles.

OURS HAS BEEN

KENN KEITH

Ours has been the dream of children,
the excitement of a tree-house,
the magic of a safe run past a barking dog.

Ours has been the hand-holding of pals,
the kiss of an uncle for a niece,
the special looks of a secret club.

Ours has been the touch of a kitten's paw,
the tweek of an ear,
the smile of an old woman's grief.

Ours has not been the love of adults.
Ours has not been the passion of man or of woman.

What, then, of our existence?

I do not have a ready answer.

But, my princess, I realize this:

I want you, as I have never wanted
Woman.

I need you, as I have never needed
Man.

I desire you, as I have never desired
Breath.

So, ours has been, but what will ours become?
Ours will become,
will become,
will become. . . .

TIME'S REFLECTION

DONALD SEARS

I saw a mirror hanging wide
In chambers bleak and fused with doubt.
The groping image darkly seeks
Yet lights' awareness search each face.
The child in faith reached for the man;
The man in hope reached for the child.
Each hand outstretched, to never touch
Reflected through charades of time.

ODE TO A CAMPUS CO-ED

EDWINA A. DOYLE

Diverged in countless directions,
Assuming different roles,
Performing gross dissections.
Pulling toward opposite poles.

Rushing in a frantic way,
Thoughtless and not caring,
Wanting only empty play,
Burdens never bearing.

Seeking ne'er to find,
Meaning in existence,
Complacently resigned
With blind persistence.

Yielded to themselves,
Conscience and concern
Stacked away on shelves
Never to return.

TODAY AND TOMORROW

CAROLYN MURPHY

The first snow
vaguely hinting
Of what is to come . . .
Having happened before
But remembered only
In the mind's awareness
Of itself.

Your first kiss
vaguely remembering
A thousand such kisses
Given before sadness . . .
New because it is now,
When love again is aware
Of itself.

THOUGHTS BEFORE SLEEP

PAT ABNEY

There is a tick
from the clock
A stir in the hour.

A plane will pass by
and people will sleep.

A gasp from the lungs,
a being inhales death.

A potted artificial rose—
a pretense for life

A phone sits idle—
communication has ceased.

A chair with two inviting arms—
But no one accepts.

A house from your past—
memories of childhood.

A room never changing—
A feeling that it is and
always will be the same.

A flick from the wall
dowse lights of recognition.

Probe in the darkness—
Separate yourself from the web.

Imagine, then dream
But always with opened lids.

Go into fantasy—
Scream for help!
Sh . . . Reality will hear—
Then sunshine will shout.

Lay your head on the pillow
Sleep—baby—sleep.

Tomorrow may not come—
No one will know

Goodnight, pull dark's covers
Essence before existence . . .

DESIRE

CAROLYN MURPHY

I long, my dark stranger,
To lick the belly
Of your cool, strong existence;
Doing thus, become like you—
A giant amid the
Stagnant complacencies of youth.
I want to taste the salt
Of your being until I am
One essence with you.
I want to crowd your strength
Into one fist and
Squeeze until its sweet juices
Flow into my hungriness and
Quench my thirst for life.
I long to be a parasite
To the proud, rambunctious smile
You offer to the sun.
I want to be you,
And burn with radiance
When you laugh at life.

THE CROSS

GARRY HEARNE

The short order cook
wore filth-stained white.
One hand scratched the scalp
covered by black matted hair.
The other slung a cross from his chest
toward his shoulder.
The chain caught upon the ear
and dangled there.
His grimy hand rubbed the sweat
from his beard-stubbed face.
The heat from the steam table
blew into his face and burned.
“God dammit.”
The massive paws, extended from the
hairy arms reached to jerk the chain
from the ear.
The cross well splotched with grease
succeeded in flopping over his shoulder
and fell upon his back.

DON'T CRINGE FROM THE RAIN

KENN KEITH

Don't cringe from
the rain
if it chances to run
down your nose as
you walk in it.
Receive it for what it is:
an affirmation of a
Land beyond.
Believe in it.
Walk in it.
Remember me in it.

(I remember you in it.
But, then, I cringe. . . .)

REMEMBRANCE

GRACE McCOWAN

Mama was standing at the door with the curtain pulled back. I could see her from the road before we pulled into the drive. When she saw the car begin to make the turn, she let the curtain fall back in place. I saw her pulling Papa's wine-colored sweater around her shoulders as she came out the door. "Careful, Mama, those steps may be slick."

"Nonsense, Jane, I've kept the snow off so none of you would fall." Mama hugged Albert and the boys before she got to me. She held me from her and looked at me. "You're looking well, Jane." Then she looked back at the others. "My my, you kids are growing. Let's get in by the fire. This wind is cold enough to freeze the smoke as it rises from the chimney."

"Boys, quit throwing snowballs and get in the house!" I really didn't want to yell at them during their Christmas vacation, but they did need to get in and change clothes.

The flames from the grate jumped and danced about on all the walls. I could tell that Mama had a pine log in the fire by the smell and the cracking and popping. She seldom used pine logs except for special occasions because they always burned so much more quickly than oak or ash.

"Mom, you've really been cooking. Out there in the kitchen there are enough pies and cakes to feed Cox's Army."

"Now, Albert, you just hush. I was just a tellin' Miss Smith this morning how nice it would be to have someone to cook for and look after again for a few days. Why, that baking and fixing just gave me a something worthwhile to do again for a change. And if I know Mary's kids and your boys, they'll make chicken feed of those sweets in no time short."

I held the heavy old cup in my hands and studied it. "Mama, I thought Mary put Papa's coffee cup in the cupboard last fall when we were here." I set the cup back on the warming closet.

"She did, but everytime I looked above the stove I felt something was missing; so finally I just set it back up there. Well, I guess you all are starved. I'll have supper on the table in a jiffy. You just go on back in the front room and rest up a bit from the long ride."

Twenty-seven

“Oh, no, we’ll help you. Those sweet potatoes really do smell good.” Albert rubbed his stomach.

Mama just smiled. “Okay. There’s hot water in the teakettle. Then just go out on the porch and get the butter in off the shelf.”

I saw the snow was coming down harder when Albert opened the door. “Guess Mary and them won’t get here tonight if this keeps up. Looks like it’s turning into a regular blizzard.”

Everything was really good at supper; it didn’t leave much to be wished for on the Christmas Day table. Mama had always enjoyed cooking and doing things to please us children and Papa. She could make nearly any meal compete with one of a holiday.

After eating we all went into the front room for a while. We didn’t do the dishes first because Mama had thought, “Mary might get here yet tonight; so let’s don’t put the things away for a spell yet.”

Albert sat in Papa’s big high backed hickory rocker in front of the hearth. The bark seat of the chair sagged from the many years of use. Mama took her usual little sewing rocker to the right of the fireplace, and the boys and I dragged up other chairs.

“It really makes this ol’ house seem like a home again to have you here. Having company always makes it seem more like Christmas, too.” Mama got her needle and thread and some pieces of quilt material from the basket beside her chair. “I remember the first time your Papa and me had company for Christmas. It was your Aunt Rose and Uncle Joe. They hadn’t been married long then. I guess you were only a year or so old then, Jane, ’cause you were all the child we had. They were so happy and jolly-like it just made me feel good. They were allus smiling at one another and laughing over most nothing. They were just like a couple o’ birds in the spring. I remember the rings she had on her hand. They were so pretty and shiny. I told Papa that I would like to have some rings like Rose’s, but he just said, ‘Any fool can go head over heels in debt for things he don’t need, but I’m not doing it. Besides, I don’t see that rings mean that much. Why, with what them rings would cost, I could buy a heap o’ things I need on the farm’.”

I knew what Mama meant. It made me think of the summer I had been laid up with poison ivy for a couple of weeks. Mary had said something to Mama in the kitchen. “Mama, why doesn’t Papa joke around with you the way Uncle Joe does Aunt Rose? Why

Twenty-eight

doesn't he ever notice when you look pretty, or when you fix something to eat that he likes real well?"

Mama didn't answer for awhile; then she had said, "Why, Mary, honey, of course your Papa isn't like that; it just isn't his way to act like your Uncle Joe. But your Papa loves all of us very much." Mary had gone on outside in a little while, and then I had heard Mama crying. I had always been ashamed to tell her I had heard.

Mama moved very little as she rocked, and her needle worked the small red and green quilt blocks together. No one said anything because we wanted Mama to go on. She never finished telling anything if she was interrupted while she was thinking.

"Papa had finally said when I mentioned it a couple more times, 'Maybe when we've been married about fifty years and don't have so many worries ahead of us, we'll see.' But he forgot all about even saying such a thing, and I never mentioned it again. I guess your Papa was right though about rings not being so important. They didn't keep Joe home with Rose; he finally left with that other woman."

"Will you put some more wood on the fire, Albert? Mama, what is the pattern of the quilt you're working on?"

"This is another Flower Garden, Jane. Isn't it pretty?" She held up one of the finished sections, and we all agreed that it was beautiful. I never could understand how such fine and tedious work had not ruined her eyes and nerves too, for that matter. Anyway, she had trunks galore full of quilts upstairs. And she had lavished enough on us kids to last us a lifetime. Still she sewed on, never making a mistake in her stitching.

Mama leaned back, and her rocker stopped its slow rhythm for a minute. She didn't say anything but just gazed into the fire. I could tell that she was thinking about something. I waited. The boys looked up from their checker game, then went on back to playing.

"You know," she began, "Your Papa was really a good man. I guess he was actually one of the best men the good Lord ever created. You kids don't picture him life that. It's the reason I'm telling you now. Maybe I'll never be studying on it again; so maybe I'll never tell Alice and the others. You all always felt he should show more affection, but it just wasn't his nature. He had been brought up by very stern parents, just the opposite of mine. And

he believed the Good Book; so he honored them and did not depart from the way he had been raised, as it says a child is to do.”

Mama started rocking and began her perfect stitching again. I felt that she was talking more to herself than to us, anyway. The boys weren't listening to her at all; they were absorbed in their game. I couldn't tell about Albert; he just held his pipe in his hand now, and his lids were way down on his eyes. Then he raised them and looked at me when he knew I was trying to figure out if he was sleeping.

“Your Papa was strict with you kids, too,” she continued. “I used to worry about that and wish he would let up a little sometimes. Now as I look back, though, I see he was right. None of our girls ever got into trouble, nor the boys never did anything for us to be ashamed of. And that's more than I can say for most of the other families around here. Yes—your Papa was nearly always right. It's so lonesome since he's gone that I guess it would be just more than I could bear if he had been more like Uncle Joe. You know what I mean.”

I smiled to myself, but I saw the water which had formed in Mama's eyes. Yes, if Papa had been a man who expressed his love more openly, I suppose his death would have brought on Mama's; it almost had as it was.

We didn't go to bed until late; at least Mama said it was late, though it was much earlier than we were used to giving up at home. “They must be going to wait until tomorrow to come. It's so late I'm sure they are.” We had all taken her cue and gone on to bed.

The next morning Albert and the boys went out to the barn to look around and said they might go over the hill and see if they could spot a good tree. Mama was upstairs checking on her tree decorations. We had made most of them when we were children, and she still had them. She had always said she had rather have them than any of the new stuff from the stores. She always checked them over for any needed repairs before letting the grandchildren hang the little ornaments on the tree. I was getting fruit out of the boxes Albert had brought in from the car when I heard the knock at the door. “Goodness, that must be Mary,” I thought. I dropped the oranges back in the box and hurried to the front room, wiping my hands on Mama's big red-checked apron. I patted my hair in place just before I opened the door.

“Good morning,” he said. “Is Mr. Allen here?”

“No,” I replied, and before I could tell him Papa was dead, he interrupted.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I must have the wrong place. Can you tell me where he lives?”

“No, sir, you have the right place, but Papa passed away in the early fall. Is there something I can do for you?”

He looked confused. “No—I mean, yes. Last summer, Mr. Allen came to our shop in Knoxville and bought a gift. He asked that it be delivered here about Christmas.”

I thought the man must be mistaken. “But Papa was never in Knoxville in his life except when he was there in the hospital.”

“Yes. Yes, he was in the hospital then, he said, but the doctors had given him a pass a couple of times. I remember he said something about enjoying himself a few days because he wouldn’t be around long. I thought he meant around the city.”

My mind raced back to four months ago. We wouldn’t tell Papa just how serious his condition was, and he had known all along.

“Anyway, Mr. Phillips, my boss, suggested since I was going through here on my way home for Christmas, it would be much nicer to deliver these than to mail them. Good day, ma’am, and Merry Christmas.”

“Yes, and same to you,” I faltered as he gave me the small box. He tipped his hat and hurried down the steps to his car.

“Jane, is that Alice down there?” Mother called from the stairs.

“No, Mama,” I answered and went back to the kitchen. I sat in a chair by the table and took the little box from my apron pocket. I just stared at it on the table a while before I opened it. Under the bow was a card. I recognized Papa’s uneven writing at once—

“Mama, even if I can’t be with you this Christmas, I’ll be thinking of you. Here is a little something you always wanted, and I never felt I could afford. Maybe this will help make up for all the things I should have done for you and said to you. Papa.”

I opened the box. Inside were two rings—one plain gold band and one with a very small diamond. I knew this would be just too much.

I heard Mama coming down the stairs. I stuffed the bow, wrapping paper, card, and box into my pocket. “Who were you talking to, Jane?”

“Just Albert and the boys, Mama,” I lied.

That was six years ago. I never did have the heart to give Mama those rings and that note which Papa had meant for her to get that Christmas. Maybe I should have; I don't know. I've worried a lot about it, but I just kept putting it off until the right time.

I guess the right time was last week, and I guess I won't have to worry about it any more. Last week when Mama was lying in her coffin, I slipped the rings on her finger. Did I see her smile just a little?

HIPWINDER

DWIGHT BRATCHER

I can remember the first time I ever saw that fat, sweating man. He came around the corner swaggering like drunks do when they are trying to act sober. I was answering the telephone and asked him to sit down in the lobby for a second until I could check on a single room for him. I hung up a moment later and turned toward the heavy form sinking like a gob of paste in the large chair.

"Can I help you, sir?" I asked.

He raised his huge body up from the chair and with a grunt shuffled to the desk.

"Yea," he grabbed his flabby throat; "Ya got any rooms left?"

"Sure do; just fill out the register, and I'll try to fix you up." I noticed that his hands were swollen and covered with long red marks. He tore up several registration cards before he finished filling one out. I took the card, which was nothing but a bunch of scribbles, and handed him a key to room 16. He thanked me and moved up the stairs like a pregnant hound carrying her last litter.

I had become well acquainted with the average drunk during my last few months as night auditor and desk clerk at the Rustic Lodge. The Rustic, being located close to some of the better clubs in town, gets many of the upper class drunks on my shift. They usually stay only one night and return home to an angry wife the next morning, but the heavy man was different. He wasn't loud, and he stayed over for several weeks. I didn't see him again until two nights later. I was working around three A.M. on the transcript when I noticed him standing at the desk. His eyes were very red, and he sniffed a huge nose. He was unshaven, and his breath smelled of cheap whisky.

Thirty-two

"What ya doin'," he mumbled trying to smile.

"I'm tryin' to get these books to come out right."

"Boy, I'm a drunk sonuhfabitch ya know." His eyes shook like the bubble in a carpenter's level.

"I can see that." I could tell he wasn't trying to be funny. He had that look of a scolded child when I laughed. He wanted to tell me his problems; I could feel it coming. But somehow he was different; for some reason I wanted to listen. I wish I hadn't now.

"Ya know I been drunk for six days now. I'm a sick man ya know." He always said his "You knows" very distinctly with poetic rhythm.

"O. K. Tell me about it."

"You think I'm just the average ole bastard you know. I'm na'kidenya I'm a sick man. I hate to get up in th' mornin'. I'm goin' to the doctor; I'm goin' take a cure; I'm na'kidenya." he stammered. He was trying to suppress something; I could tell by the pitch of his voice. He wanted to tell me something. I felt sorry for him. I generally hate the sight of these slobbering fools. He was different though. He hadn't always been a drunk and was having a hard time of it. He really was a sick man.

"I been married 16 years, and that crazy woman just sits there; she made fun of me you know," he looked out the window. "Yea, she's a crazy one all right." He started to smile. His eyes became more glassy, and it was all he could do to keep his heavy lip from quivering. He knew that I noticed his sorrow, and he blushed.

"You say she's crazy. What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, just the way she goes on. I send her money ever day. I saw her yesterday. She laughed at me, she calls me names, and I just give her more money. I guess I'm the one that's crazy. Yesterday I went to the house. I sell cars you know. Sometimes I get a good deal, ya know cash like. Well I give her some of my commission. You know what she did?"

"What?"

"Well, she sneared up her ole face and calls me a fat sonuhfabitch. She's crazy as a loom you know."

"Why don't you have her committed to an asylum?"

"Oh, I guess I still got a lot of feeling for her. In my heart you know." He sat down on a black lobby chair and stared at the floor for an hour or more before going up to his room.

One week later in the same lobby the fat one approached. "Loe" he spat.

"Man, you're up a little late tonight. Don't you think you had better get some sleep."

His hair was matted down with dull oil, and he was wearing the same old blue serge suit that he checked in with. His eyes were swollen almost shut with dark circles cut by scores of tiny creases. He wore no tie and slippers with no socks. He looked worse than I had ever seen him. He had lost all reason and spat broken sentences in a fusion of elation and fear.

"Looky here what I got today"; he opened his coat pocket. "I got it for myself." I looked into his coat pocket at a small ball of fur. At first I thought it was only his fur gloves turned inside out, but it moved. The puppy stuck its head out of the fat man's pocket and yawned curling his tongue in a straining jerk that shook the stained serge flap. He licked his nose and snorted a little cough.

"Where in the hell did you get that?" I asked.

"Got him on the road; cars was tryin to run him down. I got papers on him. I got papers on the ole boy. I got lots of feelin for him. In my heart ya know." He tugged at the pup's ears with huge calloused hands. He smiled for the first time in weeks.

"Me an ole Hipwinder's got lots in common"; he gazed at me.

"Hipwinder?"

"Yea, I always carry him in my hip pocket like this, and he winds around in there."

"Sure is a cute little rascal."

He walked toward the staircase. The puppy poked his head out like a young kangaroo. The fat man paused at the foot of the steps.

"Been any calls?"

"No."

Tears started streaming down his purple veined cheeks. I couldn't look at him cry and turned away. His words stung my ears.

"By God! BY GOD! I GOT FEELIN!" he reeled, then whispered loud, "I got powerful feelin!"

Three nights after he had shown me the pup I noticed him bothering a young couple out front. The fellow and his girlfriend were waiting for a cab, and the fat man was yelling something at the top of his voice. The young man motioned to me with the wave of an arm. I grabbed my coat and rushed out on the sidewalk.

Thirty-four

“Can you get this idiot away from me?” The young man squinted in the wind.

“I was tryin’ to tell ya’ll bout LOVE, smart boy.”

“Come on man, let’s get inside, and you can tell me about it, O. K.?”

I put my hand on his shoulder and maneuvered him through the door. It was cold, and the warmth from the inside brought a deep wheeze on the lips of the stumbling man.

“Gonna help me to my room boy?” he whispered.

“Sure.”

He spoke in whispers as we moved down the hallway. “Ever thin’ bugs a man, even taste.”

“What’ya mean?” He was getting heavy.

“The feelin’ ya have when you taste somethin’ but can’t tell what it is; I mean like ya once tasted it before, but it wasn’t the same thing as you tasted now, but it tastes like what ya tasted before. I mean what ya tasted before has glimmerins of what ya tasted now; hell I don’t know.”

We reached his room, and I opened the door with my pass key. His room looked much like he did. The desk was cluttered with blue envelopes, letters, cigarette butts, and an occasional splotch of ashes ground in a wet ring where a glass once stood. He lowered himself to the bed and began unlacing his shoes. The puppy would make quick pokes from under the bed at his hands.

The fat man seemed to forget I was in the room. He crawled on the floor and between laughs growled at the yelping pup. They seemed quite happy. It lasted only a minute.

“I’m in deep wit her boy.” His eyes became salve.

“Your wife?” I asked holding up a picture of a rather nice looking middle aged woamn. There were finger prints and smudges covering the frame.

“Yea, you think she is nice, but she ain’t.”

“What really is the matter with you?” I couldn’t help myself.

“Long story, too long; I talked to her last week. Said she would call or come by if she changed her mind. I got feelin’.” He laid back on the bed. As I was slipping out the door, he raised up. “I’ll give her all she wants; money, by dern; rings; I’ll forgive her, man. Have her come to me?” I closed the door and left.

Another week of constant drinking made the fat man subhuman. One night, however, he walked in the door straighter than usual.

“Been any calls for a drunk sonofabitch like me?”

“No.”

“I still got a room here don’t I?”

“Sure.”

“You won’t tell anybody if I tell you something, will ya?” His eyes became more piercing.

“No,” I answered, eager to hear what seemed important.

“I’m leavin’ this Goddamned place; I’m drawin all my money out of the bank morrow and sellin all my cars off the lot, and I’m leavin’. Leavin’ that crazy woman. I didn’t get any calls? Any calls for a man in room 16; any yet?”

“No, no calls at all.”

“I’m leavin tomorrow with Hipwinder.”

“Tomorrow you say.”

“I’ll be checkin out tomorrow; all my friends said, ‘Frank, you ain’t gonna do hit.’ I said I wuz an by God me an Hipwinder’s leavin.” His coat pocket was moving.

“I’ll have your bill ready early.”

“Goddamn right, I like you, so does Hipwinder.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m leavin tomorrow. I sent word. She knows.” He banged his fist on the desk like a soap opera actor. “Are you sure? Goddamm I love that bitch. I love you boy. Level with me an ole Hipwinder.”

I looked up at him, and the only words I could choke out were “I’m sorry.”

“Look again for room 16. I got powerful feelin!”

“I wish I could do something sir.” He walked away before I could finish.

The next morning I was dressing for work. The radio blared. “This is Bill Norris with the city News. The zoo bought two seals with the proceeds from a recent dance. City council passed a dog leash law for the Southern district. Today Frank Billins, used car dealer, was found dead in a gas filled room on the third floor of the Rustic Lodge. Police found a small dog on the outside window sill of the room. The force was summoned by the hotel manager when Billins’ wife discovered the body early this morning . . .

STORMS END AND STORMS BEGIN

KENN KEITH

. . . don't weep for me,
dear brother,
save your tears for those in
sin . . .

. . . the pain!

Dear God, the pain was unbearable! Had she really endured it for so long? But then, the pain would soon be over. The knowledge was in her and around her.

. . . in her . . .

The cancer was in her. Cancer is and cancer will be. Life is a doctor's scalpel. But not God's. Not God's Not God's.

. . . around her . . .

They stood around her: those she loved. Neal. Annie. Robbie. Her husband and her children stood around her. Judgment was on their faces. She'd been judged and found dying. Silly. Silly.

Her breathing was forced. She was tired of forcing. Should she let go? No! A moment more and them . . .

. . . she was screaming, screaming, screaming but she knew she wasn't screaming because she wasn't screaming . . .

. . . was a child again . . .

She was a child and she was at her mother's side and her mother was saying, "Clara, let go of me, I'm trying to cook. Clara. Clara!" But she didn't let go, for this was her mother, and she loved her so . . .

. . . for those in . . .

She and her mother and father sat in a pew at the church, attending the funeral of her aunt. The choir was singing, "Don't Weep For Me, Dear Brother, Save Your Tears For Those In Sin." She shuddered and took her mother's hand. Someday, she, too, would die. She, Clara, would die. She didn't want to die. She didn't want to die.

. . . DON'T WANT TO DIE!

. . . she felt herself shout the words. Neal was beside her and holding her hand. Tears were falling from very red eyes. She was sad that Red Eyes were crying: Neal's eyes were red and crying.

Her son's eyes, too, and her daughter's eyes were crying. Robbie

Thirty-seven

and Annie. Little Robbie. Tall Annie, towering over him as they stood, side by side, judging her.

She wondered if Neal could care for them properly now. She wondered, and the room became darker and darker and. . . .

The night was serene and beautiful. A death-pale moon hung amid hundreds of gleaming stars, while a summer wind moved silently through greenly-clothed trees. Occasionally, thunder rumbled from the heights or depths of somewhere, as if it were a hungry animal, growling for food. A silverly coolness of lighting dashed merrily around the edges of the night, like fine lace on a dark-blue napkin.

Down a darkened street through the complacent night, Neal Martin weaved drunkenly. He was hot, and he tugged at the collar of his shirt in an attempt to rid himself of heat. He was angry, and bitter. The damn kid was at Annie's again. He was always at Annie's. Never home. Never home where he belonged. Never home with his Daddy. Never home when his Daddy came home. Well, he'd get the damn kid tonight and every other night that the damn kid went to Annie's.

It was all Annie's fault, because she was poisoning Robbie's mind against his own Daddy. Poisoning his mind. Her and Fred. Poison. Well, he'd show the damn kid, and Annie and Fred, too. Show them. Damn. Robbie. Annie.

Neal stopped and looked up at the sky. Putting his head back made him dizzy, and he felt as if he might fall. Clara. Clara, why did you die? Why, Clara? Wind tore tears from his eyes.

His unsteady pace never faltered until, reaching Annie's walk, he turned and started toward the dark house.

THE NIGHT WAS SERENE AND BEAUTIFUL.

The room was hot and sticky, despite the fact that the two windows in it were open. Anne Wayne lay in the room on a bed whose sheets were wrinkled and faintly damp from tossing, turning and perspiring. Anne prayed for sleep. She had taken two sleeping pills an hour earlier, and she vaguely wondered if what the doctor had said about her becoming immune to their effects was true.

She turned, for the fifth time, to her other side, pumped up her pillow, and settled herself. She knew why she couldn't sleep. Soon, Daddy would return home from a drinking bout, find Robbie not there, and come to get him. Home. She thought of the home Daddy

Thirty-eight

and Robbie shared: two dirty basement rooms. Home. Was it any wonder that Robbie fled to her, Fred, and the children at every given moment?

Robbie. Such a lonely boy. And strange. He had been neither before their mother had died. Mama. He had been a happy child. Mama. Then, death. Mama. Daddy had tried, at first, to be both a mother and a father to Robbie, but had soon given up the attempt and had stopped even being a father. Drunk. She and Fred had offered to take Rob, but Daddy wouldn't hear of it. Drunk. So, Robbie had changed until now, six years later, he seemed to hate everyone. Everyone except herself. He loved her fiercely. Mama. No wonder, though. She had been seventeen when their mother had died. Robbie had been eight. So she became a mother to him. And she worried about him.

Worry. She worried about everyone and everything. She worried about Daddy and Fred and Robbie and Junie and Freddy, Jr. And herself. Hadn't her mother died with cancer, and mightn't she, also, die with it? Mama. She knew that it was hereditary, no matter what Dr. Bell said. Dr. Bell did try to help her, though. Those two weeks in the hospital had relieved some of the pressure. She was less tense when she returned home. But she had missed Fred and the children so much. Funny. While in the hospital, she could hardly imagine having told Dr. Bell that she might hurt the children. Funny. Crazy people hurt their children. She wasn't crazy. Fred told her. Every week the doctor told her. She wasn't crazy.

She sighed, thinking of Fred, and wished that he weren't working, and were there with her. She turned for the sixth time. Daddy would arrive soon. Drunk.

Daddy. He, too, had changed since her mother's death. When she died, it had destroyed him. He began to drink. To seek her mother in a bottle. She wasn't there. Mama. Daddy had spent all the money which, over the years, had been carefully hoarded, and had lost the job he'd held for twenty years. Drunk. Now, he worked where and when he could, loved strange faces in bars, lived with Robbie in a dirty basement apartment, and drank. Daddy. Drunk.

Then she heard the scraping of feet on the porch, and she got up so that she might open the door before the bell began wildly ringing, and the children awoke. Mama.

"Robbie," Annie's voice wafted up the stairs, "Robbie, Honey, Daddy's here. He wants you to go home with him. I told him you

Thirty-nine

were sleeping, but he's drunk, and I don't feel like fighting with him tonight. I guess you'd better get dressed and come on down."

Immediately Robert Martin was awake. He raised himself from the bed, swung his feet over the side, and sat. His mind was tired and sad. Why did Daddy have to come? Why? Couldn't he stay away, just once? Annie's house was clean and never smelled musty. Fred was good to him, and little Junie and Freddy, Jr. were fun to tell stories to. He liked to tell stories. Pretending was fun.

He'd been pretending for as long as he could remember. When his mother had died, it was fun, at first. He used to pretend that she was on a long trip, and he looked forward to her coming home. She never came. Death stopped being fun. The day he finally decided that she wasn't coming home, he'd begun to pretend even harder. Mom was a movie star. Mom was an acrobat. (Mama was dead.) Mom was a lady lion tamer. Mom was a lady pilot. (Mama was dead.) Mom was, was, was—he never said it—dead.

But then, he had Annie. Now she was his mother and her home was his home. But Daddy always came. And he'd be drunk. And he'd lean on Robbie all the way home. And people, if there were any, would stare. And when they had to cross streets, Daddy would yell at cars and play bullfighter and laugh. And when they got to the dirty basement apartment, Daddy would talk about Mama and cry. And tell Robbie that he had been a mistake. And that his birth had killed her. And Robbie would sleep on his side all night to keep from smelling Daddy's breath. And in the morning, it would start again. Daddy would fuss about the dirty apartment and fuss because Robbie was never home and fuss about Annie and Fred.

Tears welled in Robbie's eyes as he began to dress. He pulled on a shirt and a pair of pants and, carrying his shoes in his hand, went down the steep attic steps into the light of the kitchen. He sat at the table to put on his shoes.

On the table lay a long, thin knife. When he'd finished with his shoes, he carried the knife to a cabinet in the corner and dropped it in a drawer.

He moved through the house to the living room. Annie and Daddy were there. They were arguing. Robbie was sad that it was always this way with Daddy and Annie. Since his mother had died, they had been fighting about one thing or the other. Mostly about him, however. As he stood in the doorway and watched the two—

the small woman whom he loved and the huge man with whom he lived—throwing words at one another, a raw, metallic taste filled his mouth and his eyes with pain. But, as he said, “Come on, Dad, let’s go home,” no emotion was conveyed. Only a vast, empty, impassiveness.

Serenity had fled from the night. Clouds, whose aim seemed destructive, had hidden the moon and were roaming the sky with a surging freedom. Stars had settled closer to the belly of their creator and were no longer visible. The soft wind had become a roar, and the complacent thunder a tumultuous shout. Lightning, jagged as glass, had risen from the horizon and now stood in the center of the sky, hurling down its name. Aliveness reigned: violent aliveness.

Through the new-night, Neal ran, his breathing heavy and dry. Drunkenness had left him, and painful soberity was upon him. God! What had it come to? Robbie. Annie. Robbie, why did you do it? Why had Robbie done it? And Annie? Annie, why? Clara! Why did you die? Why? Clara Annie Robbie! His mind closed in on itself.

He stopped running, steadied himself on a lightpost, and looked up at the mad sky. Blood on his hands and arms seemed unreal in the glare of the light. He grasped the post with his hand, pulled himself to it and, leaning his head against it, cried, rackingly, as only some can do. He shook there for several minutes, then he raised his head and wiped blood and tears from his face. He released the light, put his bloody hands in his pockets, and, hunching his shoulders against his life, walked down the street to the basement apartment he called home.

The thunder shouted, called and moaned. The wind and lightning ran hopelessly.

SERENITY HAD FLED FROM THE NIGHT.

Anne stood in the now-cooling bedroom before a closet door. She breathed rapidly and rubbed at her head. Her head hurt so. Pain. Voices inside were calling to her. Mama. She couldn’t quite make them out, but they were there, calling. Mama. A trickle of blood had started from the corner of her mouth, but had dried before it could drip from her chin. A small swelling appeared above her left eye as the lightning ran through the room, painting her face white. Voices. Her head hurt so.

Should she use It? She wondered if she should. Fred had said It was to be used when something threatened her or the children. Well, the children were safe, but she had been hurt. She and Robbie. And Daddy. Drunk. Mama. She had failed Robbie. Robbie would be hurt most by it. By what had happened. By the terrible thing which had happened to her and Daddy and him. Robbie would be. Hurt. Should she use It? Fred might be mad and the doctor might be mad. But that couldn't be helped. Yes, she'd use It for Robbie and It would do for him what going to the hospital had done for her. Relieve the pressure. Relief. She would use It and fix everything for Robbie. Settle it for him. Settle the horrible thing which had happened to all of them.

The voices reached a peak in her head and she recognized the voice of her mother. Calling her! Mama! Mama! She giggled, stepped forward, and opened the closet door. Mama. The lightning ran and ran and ran.

Robbie lay crying under a huge tree in the loud night. Never in his life had he felt so alone. Not even when his mother had died. Then, he'd had Annie and Daddy and pretending. Now, he had no one.

He thought of faces. And blood. And the knife. He thought of the blood.

He had come into the living room. Daddy was there, and Annie was there, and Annie was scolding Daddy for the way he was ruining his life and for the way he was ruining Robbie's life. Daddy swore and told her that she didn't love him. Nobody loved him. Not Robbie, either, because she and Fred were poisoning his mind against his own Daddy. Annie said that was silly, but how could they be expected to love somebody who caused them nothing but worry and pain. Robbie had asked Daddy to please come home with him, but Daddy had said to shut up and had slapped him. Annie screamed that she would kill Daddy for that. Daddy laughed and laughed and laughed and he got red in the face and tears ran onto his shirt. Then Daddy stopped laughing, and he told Annie that she was crazy and that Fred had put her away. Annie cried and rubbed her head and cried and rubbed her head. She started calling Daddy drunk, drunk, drunk and rubbing her head drunk, drunk drunk. Then Daddy hit Annie, and she fell and then was up. Then a maze of faces floating around. Daddy's face and Annie's face and sometimes Mama's face. Then, the knife.

He had run to the kitchen and had got the knife and was between Daddy and Annie, and he was cutting at Daddy's face and arms and hands, and Daddy wasn't hitting Annie any more but was standing looking at Robbie crying son son son, and Annie was screaming at Robbie to stop and was pulling at his arm which was cutting with the knife and was making Daddy bleed, and then Annie stopped pulling on his arm and was just standing there crying Daddy Daddy Daddy, but Daddy was running out the door saying God God God son son son.

Now Robbie was out in the night, under a tree. In Annie's back yard. Robbie prayed for death. It would be so nice. He'd get away from it all, then. Mama. Daddy. Annie. He stopped crying and sat up. He looked at the house.

The back door was open and light poured from it and fell on the ground. As he watched, Annie stepped into the light and, opening the screen door, called him.

"Robbie? Robbie, are you out there? Now, I know you're out there. Come in. It's over now, Honey. I'm going to fix it for you. Me and Mama. Honey, come in. We'll fix it." Her voice was a plea and unnaturally soft.

Robbie raised himself, looked at the black, black sky, and started toward the house, and Annie standing at the back door. Annie would help him. He loved Annie. Mama. Daddy.

The rain began as Robbie moved toward the house. It beat down, and Robbie was wet before he had taken two steps. The rain fell from his hair into his eyes, and he could hardly see. But he could see Annie, as he approached her. He saw her raise her arm and saw, in the light, the gun. He opened his mouth to tell her that he loved her and didn't hate Daddy, but a sudden noise in his head stifled the intention.

. . . until morning comes,
and shadows flee . . .

. . . in the cold ground she was and there was no separation of the
two, save for a man-made box . . .

. . . a sinking of earth, above her, gave evidence of passing time . . .
. . . long wilted flowers were now brown stalks of dust, flirting in
a rusty tin cup standing on three legs . . .

. . . until . . .

. . . a stone, moss-covered, bore the legend: Until Morning Comes
And Shadows Flee, Sleep, Dear Woman, Sleep . . .

. . . and inside?

Inside a throb in the breast and a sob in the throat. Inside a
lovely vacuum of death inserted by the Hand.

Inside and inside?

. . . sleep, dear, . . .

. . . might a voice be heard? A woman's: Mama. Mama. I thought
I heard you calling me. I thought I heard you telling me to do it.
I thought I did, Mama. Mama, tell them to let me go home. Tell
them, Mama. Mama? Mama? A man's: Clara, Clara, Clara . . .
give me another beer . . . Clara, Clara, Clara . . .

. . . no, no. A voice is not heard. Pleas and cries are not resounded.

SLEEP, DEAR WOMAN, SLEEP.

Forty-four

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