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A matter of spirit

Barbara Jean Romkema
Iowa State University

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A matter of spirit

by

Barbara Jean Romkema

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An Occasion Like This

What was it about women's bodies that made them so different from each other? Gertrude wondered, as she studied the guests clustered around a mountain of presents at the other end of Janice's living room. She didn't buy the modern notion that a bikini made a woman look enticing. Women's bodies looked enticing or demure or sporty or old no matter what they wore. Her generation had known that, even under all those clothes.

And Carolyn, that girl-turned woman sitting behind the presents like a queen surveying her treasures, didn't need to worry about looking enticing. She spent hours shopping for just the right clothes for her honeymoon, for fear that Jeff would lose interest in her after the wedding. But God had done wonders with her body. It didn't do any good to tell Carolyn, Janice's daughter in so many ways. Granddaughters didn't listen to their grandmothers anymore. She stared at her chicken-skin hands.

"Mother? Aren't you going to tell Carolyn what you told me at my shower?" Janice touched her shoulder.

"Oh. Yes dear, remember not to break too many ribbons on your packages. Each broken ribbon means a child." She laughed in that cackling way she remembered her grandmother laughing, then subsided into silence. Was she playing her part as they expected? All those virginal girls now sitting

around the living room Janice kept redecorating every couple of years because she found some color scheme she liked better. Heaven knew she could afford it with her real-estate job and all the alimony she got from the good-for-nothing man Gertrude told her never to marry in the first place.

But what would those girls think if they knew she was analyzing their bodies, not in any perverse way, but merely with the interest of one whose body was withered and tired? Their sundresses didn't hide much--the firm breasts and tiny taut waists and flat stomachs used to be something she'd mourned the loss of. All the years she was bearing babies she thought she'd choke each time she saw some teenager whose womb looked so unopened. Now she finally understood why her Harry said women looked better with their stomachs a little pushed out. Compared to the guests, Janice looked fruitful, whole.

"Mother, do you want some coffee? Here now, careful you don't spill it." Gertrude reached for the silver tray covered with a doily and the most delicate china Janice could find downtown. The cake looked like Janice--white with maroon rosettes and garnished with chocolate-dipped strawberries. Leave it to Janice to serve chicken salad on the side in a butter croissant, and coffee with real cream, not just the powdered stuff.

Laughter burst in the room at some joke Carolyn had told.

Janice beamed appropriately. Gertrude knew Janice had chosen to sit in the papasan chair facing her to make sure she didn't spill anything on the new carpet. She wished she had cleaned her glasses before she left the retirement home. She saw white blurs on the lenses, probably dandruff.

Ah, stuff and nonsense, what did dandruff or aging bodies matter anyway? Janice was fighting the same battle with her body Gertrude had fought all those years. Janice had joined a health club for some ungodly sum just to get her stomach pulled in. She joked about it and said she ran for her heart, but Gertrude had caught her looking in store windows and pulling in her abdomen impatiently.

Gertrude guessed she was pulling it in now, as she sat on the paisley cushion, smiling and nodding at the various conversations around her. Janice wouldn't want to spoil the line of her Chinese silk dress, the robin's egg blue one she'd paid a fortune for because she said, Carolyn's bridal shower would only come once. Yes, Janice looked like a picture out of a magazine. Gertrude's friends at the home were jealous of her beautiful daughter. They didn't know Janice spent most of her time trying to stay that way.

What a shame women had to hate their bodies so much. Gertrude's felt like an old quilt that she wrapped herself in on cold winter nights, cozy and comfortable no matter how ragged or torn. Harry always swore he'd caressed every inch of it. He probably had, the devil.

A skinny girl was mumbling a poem about love, some piece of fluff no doubt, written by a woman who couldn't write but thought she could. Something about love being "forever" and "always new."

"That was wonderful, Sally," Janice said as the girl slumped down in her chair. Janice whispered in Gertrude's ear, "That writer's made million's in the greeting card business, Mother."

Gertrude didn't buy it, not the greeting card or the sentiment. Her generation hadn't come up with such corny ideas. Last week, when they were making decorations for the shower, Janice admitted to Gertrude that the divorce was all her fault, that she should have worked harder at her marriage, should have read The Total Woman before she took her vows. "They know so much more about keeping marriages alive these days," she'd said with a look that asked "Why didn't you tell me more?"

Gertrude didn't know what all the fuss was about. You found a good man and stuck with him, had his babies, and fought your fights. Sometimes sex was good and sometimes it wasn't. But you stayed together. You made do with what you had and you were happy. Those were all the rules Janice needed to know. It was her fault, yes, that she had broken the first one.

The cake tasted slightly of brandy. Gertrude brought the last piece to her mouth then watched the fork tremble all

the way down to the plate. She'd saved the strawberry for last. Slowly, deliberately she bit into its chocolaty sweetness. Ah, chocolate was one taste she could still savor. She was the last one eating but she didn't care. The retirement home food didn't measure up to this. Besides, they hardly ever let her have chocolate.

"Look mother, what a lovely set of towels." Janice touched Gertrude's arm as she got up to answer the doorbell. "Oh Kate, I'm so glad you could come after all. Carolyn was just opening her presents. Did you ever see such plush towels? Vicki picked them up at Herschner's." The newcomer was a pale brunette vainly trying to carry a baby in a car seat, a diaper bag bulging with paraphernalia, and a gift at the same time. "Oh, isn't she daaarling!" Janice crooned. The "oohs" and "aahs" moved from the presents to the baby.

It was a cute one, Gertrude agreed, but they all looked the same at that age. All eyes and no hair, and hungry mouths. Janice had kept Gertrude up nursing every hour or so during those first months. When her nipples bled, the doctor reluctantly let her use formula but only for a couple of days. Janice, of course, had refused to nurse Carolyn for fear of spoiling her bustline. Now she was considering plastic surgery because she thought she was sagging.

The gifts were being passed around the circle now, the usual pots and pans, potholders, silver trays and linens. There was even a cherry ironing board on display in the

corner. The difference was that these were the top of the line, the best for Janice's daughter. Janice called these gifts "the symbols of a woman's servitude." Gertrude liked to think of them as tools, the tools she used to fashion a home, full of important memories.

Gertrude leaned over to put her tray on the floor.

"No, Mother, I'll take it." Janice's voice was shrill.

"Now see what you've done!" Something dark spread across the carpet. She hadn't seen the coffee spill. She never saw things spill anymore. She just heard the noise of china clinking and the reaction of the aides at the home. This time there was dead silence followed by the wail of Kate's baby. Ah yes, Gertrude had forgotten that part. Babies always cried too much.

"I just got her to sleep. She's been fussy all afternoon." Kate glanced at Gertrude as she hurried out of the room, the baby in her arms. Gertrude heard it wailing in the kitchen.

"Now Mother, don't touch a thing. I'll clean it up." Janice's lower lip was tight, just like the day she announced she was marrying her boyfriend and stalked out of the house on his arm. "I'll have to try the carpet cleaner I picked up at the store yesterday. I thought I might need it after the shower." She flashed a pinched smile at the guests.

"Especially when you knew I was coming, right dear?" Gertrude readjusted her speckled glasses and looked Janice

full in the face.

"Well I . . . uh . . . well yes, Mother." Gertrude had never seen Janice at a loss for words. "That is a . . . problem for you. But then you're not the only one that spills things. With all these excited young girls here the whole carpet could have been stained!" Janice strode out of the living room, her shoulders tense.

Gertrude studied her dress to keep from laughing. The Janice who always knew what to say had made a mess of that one. Carolyn's friends would go home and tell their mothers that Janice Thompson had lost her composure. Gertrude could feel the guests watching her, in spite of their efforts at conversation. What was it they were thinking, she wondered? Were they surprised that Janice's mother was so feeble she couldn't keep from spilling her coffee? Did they see a hunchbacked woman in a black print dress that Janice considered old and dingy, with glasses so thick they made her eyes look owlsh, and salt-and-pepper hair that wouldn't hold a perm? She didn't care.

She pushed herself shakily out of the chair and rose to her feet. "I'd like to say something, Carolyn." Her voice sounded as harsh as a sick crow. It was a good thing Harry was gone. He didn't approve of married women speaking in public.

"Hush everyone, Grandma wants to say something." The conversation in the room died. Janice appeared in the

doorway, carpet cleaner and sponge in hand. Gertrude avoided her eyes.

"Well, I don't suppose you think an old woman like me belongs at a bridal shower," she began, her voice wavering over every word. "You probably don't think I know I'm here." Gertrude was glad she couldn't see the expressions of the girls across the room. "But I do." For an instant she considered sitting down. Her legs were aching and the guests probably weren't listening. Then Gertrude remembered the stain on the carpet, and went on.

"I was young, I loved, I got married, and I had babies." She couldn't find the baby; it must still be in the kitchen. "I grew old with Harry. He loved me. Now he's passed on."

Carolyn smiled at her encouragingly. Gertrude looked at Janice, the Janice who had folded her worry behind the too-serene curtain of her face, but whose eyes were like shiny steel balls. "Well, . . . I watch all of you trying to be beautiful, and uh . . . my own daughter thinks her mother isn't important anymore because she's wrinkled." Her voice rose to a screech, in spite of herself. "Well, fifty years from now all of you are going to be wrinkled and old, and if respect is only for young people, you'll feel like I do most of the time." She stopped, took a deep breath, then went on. "I'm sorry to ruin the shower, but someone has to tell you before they die."

Gertrude slipped down into her chair, her head shaking

back and forth involuntarily. Her heart felt like a rocket ready to burst through her chest. Harry always told her not to get herself riled up, but this time it felt good. She watched as the guests left the room, taking purses and nut cups with them. Most of them gave Carolyn a hushed, "goodbye," with a sideways glance at Gertrude. She smoothed the dress over her calloused knees, the dress Janice had told her not to wear. It had been Harry's favorite. She thought it just right for an occasion like this.

Hex Symbol

They painted it on the blue barn
the one behind the house in town,
two lovebirds preening around a patchwork star,
then added another to the bird house
to keep away evil spirits, they said.
Pennsylvania Dutch do it all the time.

Six months after, he was alone,
stumping in his muddy garden with
three-foot asparagus and weeds
for vegetables,

bounded by a rusty fence.

He picked up a mutt at the dog pound
which slunk around,
right ear dangling,
and never went into the house.

"She wouldn't want her floors dirtied," he said.

He sat in the middle of the garden breaking
sticks on summer evenings,
his fingernails long and yellow.

"Did I tell you she's at Wynona College?"
he'd ask me.

"She'll be coming home from Wynona
someday with a graduation cap,"

then fingercombing silver hair to hide
the shiny spot, he'd snort,
"My educated woman."

When I saw him last, he was scraping
the barn.

"Never did like the durn blue.

Green's brighter anyway."

Chips were flying, first the birds,
then the star,
shredded around the asparagus,
joining bits of flowered envelope and paper
like some sudden snowfall.

Doing It Right

It was good being a librarian. It was good putting dusty volumes back on the highest shelves so that children with fingers sticky from lollipops wouldn't muss them. The new books were good too, with shiny plastic covers Martha smoothed on to protect them before they went on the shelves. How she loved the feel of that shiny plastic, just after it was put on. Then there were the cards, in neat alphabetical order. Every week Martha checked one file drawer and retyped all the smudged ones, or the cards that had been typed erroneously and filed by Charlotte, the greasy assistant, who never would have gotten the job if she wasn't the library's benefactor's niece.

Charlotte spent her morning breaks gossiping with the boy that worked across the street at the bakery. Martha had caught them once sitting on the steps in bright daylight, kissing, or rather using their tongues in some peculiar way--oh, it was horrible! It was the cars honking outside that had brought her to the scene.

Martha always went back to the computer at times like that. Shiny and smooth, its curving keys formed perfectly to cushion her fingertips, the computer was like the old friend she never had. It whirred each time she started it up, like a cat purring away without needing to crawl on her lap. Most of the time it followed orders well. Once in a while it

reacted like Charlotte by shutting down in the middle of the day. Yet most of the time, like Martha, it would not tolerate errors. It simply produced the message, "Syntax Error" at the top of the screen, and its small white cursor blinked at her until she got it right. Martha loved getting it right.

Charlotte's aunt, Lady Janet Matilda Robinson, wanted Martha to computerize the card catalog. Lady Janet had made her demand at board meetings every year for the last five years, but Martha simply blinked her eyes and muttered something noncommittal. She didn't think a woman who flew around the world every couple of months, hunting through Chinese shops and Arabian souks to find the perfect items for her gift catalog, and hanging on the arm of every aristocrat she could find, should tell Martha Henry how to manage her library.

Where Lady Janet Matilda Robinson had gotten the "Lady" was anybody's guess. Most townspeople said she'd added it to her name after unsuccessfully romancing an English Lord on her visit to England ten summers earlier. "Like a bitch in heat," one patron said. Her origins were obscure, but her wealth was immense, and she used it to poke around in people's lives.

Martha didn't tell Lady Janet Matilda Robinson how many times she had found Charlotte in the library stacks reading some novel with a half-dressed woman on the cover, when she

was supposed to be shelving books. She didn't tell Lady Janet, because it was Lady Janet who insisted that Martha make room for those bestselling trashy novels on her shelves. She wanted them beside the classics of Bronte and Hugo. Matilda Robinson, indeed! The woman was as far from Matilda as she could get.

Yet, Lady Janet Matilda Robinson did do a few things right. She had the library subscribe to The Illustrated London News and European Travel and Life, to South African Panorama, and National Geographic. Most other libraries around Guernesey couldn't afford such luxuries. The Centerville librarian told Martha last month at the state library convention, that "There ain't no call for all them magazines about furrin countries. We got enough American magazines to keep people happy. What your Lady Janet gettin' them all for?" Martha thought anyone with bad grammar and gray hairs on her upper lip that looked more like a moustache every year, needn't be listened to for long. Lady Janet considered those magazines necessities. They were for Martha.

How could Martha tell Lady Janet about Charlotte's reading when she herself spent her evenings poring over the travel magazines, memorizing and cataloging every scene she could in her mind, until she fell asleep, exhausted? Martha felt she knew a portion of the world by now. Someday, when she had the money, Martha would fly in a 747 jet with a seat that turned into a bed, and rent one of those villas in

Tuscany. She would take the Concorde to England, and wander through the endless libraries of Oxford and Cambridge. She would sip cafe au lait at outdoor cafes in Paris and buy a long loaf of crusty bread to eat with her soup at supper. She would do it alone, gloriously alone, with no one around to muss up her belongings because she wanted to do it right. Martha Henry had to do it right.

The fact that Charlotte disliked her was no mystery. One day she showed up at the library with a fire-red triangle laced around her front and tied in the back, like a swimsuit. It was obvious she had a bosom like large balloons with the nipples protruding out in front. Her shorts showed the back of her behind, just as it curved out. She had bangles up and down both wrists. Her braided hair was wrapped around the back of her head and fastened with gaudy barrettes. Martha told her to go home and get dressed before she came to work.

Ten minutes later Charlotte was lounging by the front door, her arm laced around her boyfriend's.

"Didn't you hear what I said? It's a shame your mother lets you out-of-doors like that," Martha had said, well aware of the screechiness of her voice.

"Harv doesn't mind, do you Harv?" Charlotte replied, simpering, with a little jump that made her bosom jiggle.

Martha shuddered. She could feel her heart racing in her chest, her cheeks getting hot. "If you want a job working here, young girl, you cover up those . . . breasts!" She'd

pounded the checkout desk with her fists and watched the two of them trip down the front steps, laughing.

"Don't listen to the sterile old bag," the boy had called back with a wave.

That was when Martha had come the closest to firing Lady Janet Matilda Robinson's favorite niece and giving up her job at the Robinson Public Library. She'd dialed the phone number and talked to the Lady's secretary between clenched teeth, only to find out that Lady Janet was in Thailand for the next two weeks. "Would you like to leave a message," the secretary asked sweetly.

"No. No, thank you." Martha had clutched The Illustrated London News in her lap. She couldn't give that up, go back to checking out the travel magazines one issue at a time, after someone else had already fingered them. Martha would just have to wait for Charlotte to change jobs, or get married to the baker boy. With what she'd shown him already, she might as well be married. Meanwhile, Martha would continue to examine each magazine that came to the library, pulling out the spring swimsuit reviews, and particularly licentious advertisements, if she could do so without notice. That much flesh wasn't fit for anyone to see, especially Charlotte.

Martha didn't like to see her own flesh much. It had been wretched enough as a young girl of fourteen, to have to take a bath in the big washtub in the middle of the kitchen floor, with three brothers peeking through the keyholes,

although Mother said they weren't, and hooting at her when she was finished. Martha's bath water was always murky, because Mother said it took too long to heat up another tubful on the cast-iron stove, and she was the youngest. It left a greasy film on her skin which no amount of rubbing would take off.

She'd pulled on the underclothes that made her feel safe and brushed her hair at top speed just to be done, just to be sure Father wouldn't walk in when she was naked, and stare, as he had done one day. Mother had tried to comfort her in the bedroom closet, but Martha would not let herself be touched.

Once a month Martha forced herself to undress in the pearl pink bathroom with the door locked and the sliding glass bathtub doors shut, and her eyes closed the entire time. Her skin felt gritty, her breasts like tiny pears under the washcloth. The whole procedure only took about ten minutes, even when she washed her hair. Then it was like stepping from hell into heaven to feel the clothes around her, the tight corset and flat brassiere and dress with buttons from neck to ankle. Martha knew she probably smelled. Yet European travelers like Lady Janet Matilda Robinson should understand that sort of thing. Martha had read the Europeans bathed much less than Americans. She didn't care what Charlotte thought about it, even if Martha saw her wrinkle her nose whenever Martha called her to explain some filing rule. No one else ever got

close enough to matter. No one that is, but the children.

No matter how far Martha stayed away from them when their mothers brought them, whining and sucking their fingers, into the library, they managed to come up behind her and pull on her skirt. Sometimes they'd brush her leg on the way to the children's section. Occasionally a little girl would reach for Martha's hand when she needed to go to the bathroom. Martha always sent her back to her mother, frowning horribly so she wouldn't return. The mothers could never understand why their children cried. Martha hoped they'd learn not to come back.

The children's section had been Lady Janet's idea. That was wonderful for a woman with all of hers grown and gone. She didn't have to mend the books the children ripped, or replace those marked up with crayons. Lady Janet wanted to establish a weekly story time with, horrors, Martha as its director. Martha had left the board meeting in silence. So instead, Lady Janet kept sending what she thought were adorable wall hangings of green dragons and pink frogs from Taiwan. She bought red and yellow bean bag chairs from England, for the children's little bodies to squish into. Martha accepted all of these stoically and put them where Lady Janet had directed in her letters. Yet she thought they took away from the sheen of the dark classics etched in gold, that filled the adult fiction shelves. These were the stuff of libraries.

There was one advantage to the children, however. They lost books for weeks on end. Their mothers would stagger into the library laden down with a baby on their hips and a garbage bag full of books under their arms, and one or two children tugging at their skirts. They would look out the window and say absently, "I think I owe some fines on these books." Martha totaled up their fines with what she hoped was disguised glee, and held their gaze as they handed over the shiny coins, or sometimes bills.

Some of the mothers were former classmates, the ones who'd relegated Martha to the Punch Committee when planning the high school prom. Surely no one would fault Martha for the sweet revenge she felt, each time they dropped the quarters into her palm. Each quarter brought her closer to the Caribbean. That was one thing they'd never know.

She kept half the money in the fine drawer; the other half went into a Christmas tin Lady Janet had given her last December. It was full to the brim again, ready for emptying into the little safe she'd bought at K-Mart. Martha repeated the combination to herself when things got slow at the library. The numbers seemed magical; she loved the way they rolled over her tongue.

Even more magical were the mounting totals in the calculator window every Saturday night. The winter didn't seem so long when Martha could watch the shimmer of each coin in the firelight. It had taken five years to get this far, but

half a thousand was quite an accomplishment. Maybe in another five years she could take her first trip. By that time she would have figured out how to get a passport under an alias. It wouldn't do for Martha to go as herself. Lady Janet knew she didn't pay Martha enough for that.

The library board never asked what happened to the fine money. Martha had told them once, all those upstanding businessmen that had refused to dance with her at any of the high school dances, that all extraneous earnings of the library were used for the purchase of new and delightful experiences for library patrons. Lady Janet has clapped her on the back and said, "What a novel way to describe your books! Good work, Martha." Her back had stung all day.

Yet when Saturday came, and Martha ate corn chowder and bread for supper, put on a bathrobe, and started a fire, the board members, the children and Charlotte melted into the darkness when Martha poured her money onto the rug. She arranged the quarters, nickels, and dimes into neat piles. The bills she bent into triangles and arranged into decorative shapes. Then she clasped her hands around her knees and looked at it all. Martha Henry was doing it right.

Sometimes Martha imagined herself going to a bank in Toledo and changing all those coins and ones into five crisp one hundred dollar bills. When the fire was really blazing and the children had been especially nasty, Martha imagined changing those five bills into one five hundred dollar beauty.

She'd hide it in her brassiere some morning and wear it all day at the library. The thought gave her goosebumps from head to toe; she was Hester hiding the Scarlet Letter on her bosom.

Martha sipped hot milk as the fire died down, then counted each coin back into the safe before she hid it lovingly under the floorboard in her bedroom. She slid into the lumpy bed her parents had bequeathed to her, and tried to shut the flashing coins out of her eyes. Yet, no matter what the dear insomniac who wrote to Prevention magazine said, the tryptophan in her hot milk did not make her drowsy. And the dream came back, louder and more horrifying than before.

It was five years later. She was dragging her one thousand dollars in pennies out into the street on the way to the travel agency, when Charlotte and her husband ran out of their bakery and pulled the sack out of her hands. They poured the pennies all over the sidewalk. Children came running from all directions--children with chocolaty faces and runny noses and dirty hair--to stuff their pockets with pennies until they bulged. Martha tried to throw herself down upon the copper mountain, but something was holding her back. She pushed and pushed against the something, but she couldn't move. Then she heard a cackling sound, and saw Lady Janet waving a black wand over her head. Lady Janet was nodding at the children and smiling . . . and Martha was reaching for the pistol she'd hidden under her sweater. She

took aim, and woke up, so drenched in sweat she had to change her flannel nightgown.

Sunday was the day for confession over the family Bible, and a thorough analysis of the travel magazines that had come in that week. Martha was almost ready now, she felt, to settle on a destination, to chart out her travel route, and take the first tentative steps towards getting a passport. She pulled out a thick yellow stenographer's pad, and made a list of the travel agencies within a 10-mile radius, then made a second list of names from the telephone book to use as aliases when she called the agencies. Of course, they usually didn't ask the name of the caller, but Martha wanted to be prepared.

She would start tomorrow, with a different voice for each call. Martha hoped the telephone company wouldn't trace her calls back if--but no, there was no if, only now. She estimated it would take at least a year to be certain about her destination. Martha wanted to research each potential country thoroughly before she made her decision. She figured another year for finding the best route to and through the country. Then there was the messy business about the passport--Martha didn't know how many years to estimate for that. She knew one thing, however. Her ten years of savings would be used to the fullest, otherwise Martha might as well be Charlotte, squandering her body and everything else she had for the sake of trinkets from the baker boy and Lady Janet's catalogue.

The next morning Charlotte was gone, the baker boy was gone, the money from the fine drawer was gone, and Lady Janet was very much there.

"I wanted you to check the library's money, as soon as Charlotte's father told me she had run away," Lady Janet said, twisting the ends of a jungle print sash around her polished fingernails. "It isn't that I thought she'd do such a thing, but she's been so preoccupied with money lately, asking me to ask her father to give her an allowance--an exorbitant amount--and wanting all of her catalogue orders on credit. You know Martha, she's never really had a mother, and I thought maybe you'd be a good influence on her."

Lady Janet opened her tapestry purse, pulled out a scented handkerchief, and began dabbing at the corners of her eyes. "Charlotte needs someone as consistent as you are, as careful about her work, and I certainly don't mean to run on like this but then, she always was my favorite niece . . ." Martha made her way over to the computer, and began typing in words, anything, to cover up Lady Janet's discomposure. Martha never cried. Her brothers had seen to that.

"Martha, I suppose I should call the authorities." Lady Janet tucked the handkerchief back into her purse. She pulled out her reading glasses, half-moons, and settled them on the end of her nose. "But first, I would like to look over the books a little, so I have a thorough understanding of where the library money is going. I assume you have a record

of what the fine money is used for? Books or something like that, I believe you said?"

Martha began typing faster. "Uh, yes, Lady Janet, I generally use the money for whatever area needs it at the end of the month. That can range from utilities to . . . plans for the weekly story time."

"I see." Lady Janet had found the black ledger and was scrutinizing Martha's tiny figures. "Just how much do you charge for fines?"

Martha's voice came out in almost a whisper. "Two cents per item per day." She prayed none of her classmates would come into the library with an overdue book. Mrs. Sanders, the chronic offender, usually came in every other Monday morning.

"Did you say two cents?" Lady Janet's forehead was wrinkled. "I'm sure Charlotte told me you charged four cents per item. Do you suppose she was keeping the extra money?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Lady Janet." Martha's fingers were flying over the computer keys. She was surprised she could get any words past the huge lump in her throat.

"She may have been planning this for quite some time." Lady Janet's voice wavered; she resorted to the handkerchief once again. "I knew she was having some problems, but I never realized"

Martha fixed her eyes on the computer screen, where she had been typing over and over, "I stole it. Two cents per

item per day." She erased the screen, trembling.

"Martha Henry, this is no reflection on your impeccable bookkeeping, but may I suggest that you keep a record of the fine money from now on? I need to know where every cent goes, especially now."

"Yes, Lady Janet. I'll see to it."

"Now please don't disturb me dear, I'm going to make a difficult phone call." Lady Janet swept out of the room into the hallway, where the public phone and restrooms were located.

Martha didn't know where it came from, all that water spilling out of her eyes, in great heaving sobs, as she made her way over to the black ledger on the desk. She had a hard time seeing the words, "Fine Money," she printed at the top of a new column. But everything blurred as her hand wrote in a small \$500 under the heading. The paper was getting all wet, Mrs. Sanders was coming into the library with her four dirty-faced kids, and Martha Henry was doing it right.

Drawn Away

Not an ordinary death,
though his body in the coffin looked as waxy
as the rest.

Not everyone is warned ahead of time
when they're going to die.

(Grandma always said he was
hallucinating
but Grandpa insisted it was God.)

He kept promises that year
before he dropped
at the "Amen" of the sermon,
and the congregation, stunned,
wouldn't leave,
even after they dragged his body out.
They said it was the finest
he'd ever preached,
(but then, he always preached fine),
and did God send tornadoes
to his children and grandchildren
to let them know he was gone?

I don't remember the funeral much
just clouds like green poison
the thud of earth as they lowered the box down,
and her shriek at his going beyond.

Coming Close

I am eating chocolate chip ice cream off a scoop in bed. Mother doesn't know. I will hide the scoop under my pillow until morning, then wash it quickly when she is doing chores. She doesn't know I eat ice cream while she helps Debra with her homework. I try a different kind each night so she can't tell the boxes are getting empty. It is my private thing to do.

Soon Debra will come in and climb into her bed and ask me what flavor I have tried this time and how my tongue felt licking around the frozen ball until the chocolate or butterscotch or strawberry got smaller and smaller and disappeared. Debra does not need ice cream at night. She has Mother to listen.

Debra has Mother but I have Grandmom who laughs at me twirling around her living room. I fall, breathless, on the long gold-and-green couch that could be a queen's and listen to her grandfather clock chiming one, two, three. Grandmom plays Beethoven and Mozart on the record player Granddad bought her before he died. She has a black piano with polished keys. She shows me pictures of ballerinas from Russia and makes me tutus out of crepe paper. Sometimes Debra visits Grandmom with me and plays her pretend flute because she cannot dance. Debra has only half a foot. She will not let me see it very often.

Mother is tired. She is scolding Debra who says she

can't learn arithmetic because she has half a foot. Mother is good at figuring. She tells us she's kept the books for the farm since the time she married Big Jake. I don't remember when they married, but Mother says I cried and spit up all the way through. Daddy Jake was not my father from the beginning. Mother says my real father went away. Debra does not have a real father either, now that Daddy Jake is dead. We make up stories at night about our fathers coming back to take us to Disneyland. But Debra has pictures of her real father; I have to make mine up.

Now that Daddy Jake is dead, Mother keeps the books for our neighbors too. I like to watch her bent over the big leather books in the evening, sitting in a warm corner of the kitchen at the rolltop desk Grandpop made before I was born. The kitchen always smells like bread. Mother's glasses are gold circles shining in the lamplight. She never sees me watching her. When Mother works, her face looks the way I feel whirling around on tiptoe to Swan Lake at Grandmom's.

Debra is coming in, step-slide, step-slide. "Was it chocolate tonight?" She sounds like she is smiling.

"With nuts? Did you make her happy?"

"No. She was looking at Daddy Jake's picture and stroking my hair."

Debra's hair is brown and curly. Mine is like Mother's, blonde and fine. Mother told me once that my father's hair was blonde like hers, but I have never seen him. Mother says

her hair was long to her waist when Big Jake brought her to our farm.

"Amy! I want to take flute lessons at school." Debra is joining me under the new Morning Star quilt Mother made for my birthday this year. "Talk to Grandmom so she'll talk to Mother. Mr. Connell has a flute I can buy. Someday I will be a musician in a huge orchestra."

"And I will be a dancer on a huge stage."

"Grandmom will come to our performances, and Mother will keep our books."

"But who will take care of Daddy Jake's cows?"

Mother tells us she will keep the farm for us. She cries when the neighbors want to buy the land, and sends our hired man, Barney, out to tell them she won't sell.

Debra keeps whispering to me about the flute, about how shiny and long it is and how much her fingers want to trill the keys. I promise to tell Grandmom. Then we kiss on both cheeks and she leaves for her bed. I curl up in the warmth she has left.

Grandmom and Mother have been fighting again. Grandmom is always telling Mother to sell the farm so that she can use the money for her girls, for new clothes, for interest at the bank. Mother tells her Barney needs the job and the cows are part of the family. Grandmom is telling Mother about the

flute lessons today. "But the flute is much too expensive," Mother says.

"I'll pay for it. The girl is longing to play. The music feeds her soul." Grandmom always talks that way.

"Let her learn to make music for herself."

"The lessons are free?"

"As long as she's in school."

Debra and I are listening in the guest room, pretending we are playing with our Barbie dolls. Debra has her fingers crossed behind her back until she hears Mother say yes. Then a smile spreads across her face like syrup pouring over pancakes. I act as though I don't hear and keep dressing Barbie. I want to be a dancer.

There are men coming to our house, men with hungry eyes. They pretend they are looking at Mother, since she has given up her black Sunday dresses, but their eyes are on the cows and the land. Mother knows it, Debra knows, I know it, Barney especially knows it. He scowls at their pickups that roar into the yard and the flashy shirts they wear to make Mother look. Sometimes she looks with disdain, a word we learned in vocabulary last week. Sometimes she is friendly and then I am afraid. So far, they can't make her smile. Only Daddy Jake's picture and Debra's hair can lighten her eyes.

Grandmom says there is a new store in town, a studio that belongs to an Englishwoman, Madame Thompson. She is looking for dance students. Grandmom takes me to see Madame Thompson one afternoon when Mother is working.

Madame Thompson's studio is small and dark, with shiny wood floors. Two little girls stand at the barre in black leotards and pink tights. They move their feet into the five positions Grandmom taught me, while a fat lady plays a black piano. Madame Thompson counts, "And one and two and three and four," her voice like creamy butter. Her dark hair is coiled on her swan's neck, and her arms curl about her like butterflies at rest. When the girls are finished, Madame Thompson makes me point my toes and exclaims over my feet, "Most dancers must work for years to get the kind of arch she has naturally, Mrs. McCully; it would be a shame not to give her that chance!" Grandmom squeezes my shoulders on the way out of the studio.

I knew Grandmom and Mother would probably fight about the lessons, but I did not think Mother would cry. She points to the neat sums in her leather book and shakes her head at Grandmom's words. Now I am the one crossing my fingers. Debra is practicing her flute.

"I will pay for them all." Grandmom's voice is soothing.

"Buy Amy is my daughter."

"And my granddaughter."

"None of the other children need these lessons. We're

farmers, not city people. All Amy and Debra will need to know is how to cook and clean and raise children."

"You forget these two have a thirst--"

"A thirst you have given to them!" Mother is angrier than I have ever seen her, except for the day we lost Daddy Jake to the tractor that crushed his heart. That anger never leaves my nightmares.

The next day Grandmom orders pink ballet skippers. Barney nails up some pipe in my room for a barre, and glues a mirror behind it. Mother spends much of her free time outside watching the cows. She says there is poetry in them too.

"Amy, time for chores." Mother has her overalls on, her hair tucked in a bandanna. She carries a bucket in each hand. I am not listening. Debra is lying on the living room carpet fingering her flute. I am dancing to Swan Lake with real movements now, a few sissones, then up on my toes and down to strengthen my ankles. My toes catch in the worn spots on the gray carpet, and the living room floor shakes when I jump. But Mother will not let me dance on the blue linoleum Grandmom put in the kitchen last week. She says a farm house was not built for such foolishness.

"Amy!" Reluctantly I untie the satiny toe shoes Grandmom bought for me last winter. I place them in the box,

one toe inside the other, and wind the ribbons around. They are safe under my bed, where I do not eat ice-cream anymore. Dancers must be thin, Madame Thompson says. Debra does not have to watch her diet.

The cows chew stupidly. The bucket calves upset milk all over my shoes. I am sick of cobwebby barns and manure on my shoes and doing the same chores over and over again. Debra does not have to do chores in the barn; she thinks she sees Daddy Jake in here. When he was alive Debra and I used to like to help him feed the animals. We would give the calves names like "Bessie" and "Scooter" and watch them grow strong from the milk we fed them. Then Daddy Jake would sell the calves, and we would cry under my bed. Every time I come in the barn I know Debra is right; it smells like Daddy Jake. I wonder what my father smells like.

Mother wanted Debra to make pies yesterday, but she wanted to practice her flute. Mother made the pies in silence, her fingers pushing the crusts into fancy shapes. She thinks we are not learning to be good homemakers. We whisper to each other that we don't want to be good homemakers, and walk to Grandmom's for comfort.

There are seven girls in my ballet class now, but I am the best. Most of the girls come from rich families in town, and do ballet to stay thin. I am the only girl from a farm. No one else practices at home; no one else wants to be a ballerina. Madame Thompson wants me to go to a ballet school

forty miles from our town. She and Grandmom have been talking a lot after class. Grandmom's eyebrows are wrinkled and she strokes her chin like Grandad used to. I think she is trying to decide how to convince Mother.

Debra is first chair in her band. Many of Debra's friends play drums or clarinets, but no one in my class is a dancer. The boys laugh at the way I walk with my toes out. The girls just watch me silently. They don't know that my turnout is the best Madame Thompson has ever seen.

Barney sits on our porch swing in the evenings with Mother and the leather books. He says that the crops might fail again because we haven't had enough rain. Debra and I do not like to see Barney close to Mother, his dusty boots almost touching her shoes. He pulls on his mustache and jabs his index finger at the books when he comes. Debra says Barney is Mother's financial advisor. I think he is something else too, when they drink coffee late at night, whispering and laughing.

I like to hear Mother laugh again, but I don't know why she'll only laugh with Barney. Even when I tell her the best jokes from school, she only smiles. Mother brings pints of cherries and beans and sugar-'n-cream sweet corn to Barney's little house down the road. Barney is much smaller than Daddy Jake was, but his hands are huge.

Grandmom has cancer. Mother tells us tonight, just before we go to bed. Debra grabs my hand and squeezes it tight, then crawls under the Morning Star quilt with me even though it is crowded. I beg her to talk, but she just curls herself into a little ball and squeezes her eyes shut. I talk to the figures on the wallpaper for a while.

During the night Debra wakes up screaming. Mother hurries into the room, looking like a ghost in her white flannel nightgown, and brings Debra back to her room. I hear them crying and talking together. I want to be with them, but I am afraid they will stop talking if I come. I lie staring at the tinsel stars Mother glued to the ceiling when we were little. Debra and I loved watching them shimmer in the yard light. We liked to imagine we were sleeping outside in a magic forest. Later, we imagined I was Titania dancing in A Midsummer Night's Dream, while Debra played in the orchestra. Now the stars look misshapen and old.

Debra goes to school today; Mother says I can go to Grandmom's. I want to dance for her, and talk. Mother says Grandmom will be dying soon.

Grandmom wraps me in her wrinkled arms and gives me lemonade and tells me she has had a good life and not to worry. She says they cannot stop the cancer now, so she will stay at home with us and do everything she can until it's time to go. She talks as though she's going on vacation; I cry until her shoulder is damp and my eyes look like an owl's.

Then I lay on the floor and listen to Tschaikowsky. I think that I shall never feel so comforted and desolate at the same time again.

They are all asking about Grandmom--my teachers at school, Madame Thompson, the neighbors in the grocery store, even the minister from the Grace Baptist Church Grandmom went to every Sunday. Now she watches church services on TV, and complains that they do not feed her spirit.

What can I tell them, all of them, except that we are waiting? The doctors were right--Grandmom has no pain--but she looks more and more like the dried apple dolls she used to make for us in the winter. We dressed them in bright calicos, but their shriveled faces never looked very happy. Grandmom's clothes hang on her like tents. She cannot eat anything but clear broth, which I spoon into her mouth every evening. Last week Mother made Grandmom her best pecan pie, the kind Mother said won the blue ribbon at the county fair when she was my age. Grandmom took a taste, but pushed the rest away, her eyes blank and tired.

We have a nurse helping Grandmom, since she cannot use the bathroom by herself. The nurse is heavy and loud and smokes cigarettes in Grandmom's kitchen. She comes to Grandmom's house wearing uniforms with yellow spots on the hems, and looks at her watch all the time. Mother says we

should be thankful for the nurse, but I think Grandmom doesn't like her. Grandmom doesn't say much, anymore.

I tell all the people, some of whom I don't know, that Grandmom is fine, thank you very much, and hurry away. Sometimes I wish Grandmom could have gone fast, like Daddy Jake. I do not want to tell people we are waiting.

Mother leads us through Grandmom's house to her dark bedroom. I know if Grandmom could get up she would push the curtains open and put on Vivaldi. Grandmom says Vivaldi gives her life.

She wants to see us one at a time, Debra first, then me. Mother is biting her fingernails as we wait in the hall. I can't hear anything through the door, but when Debra comes back she is smiling. The room smells stale. Grandmom looks yellow, the yellow of fat on a chicken's neck. Her eyes are grey and dull.

"Amy." The word pushes out of her mouth, as though pressed out between her tongue and teeth. She motions to the Queen Anne bureau with one bony hand. "Perfume. On you and me." The hissing of her words is eerie.

The Wind Song is strong. I dab a tiny bit on my neck and wrists, then touch some on Grandmom's neck. Her skin feels like fine paper. "No, more," Grandmom says, her eyes squeezing into slits. I obey her until the brassy smell makes

me want to choke. I return the bottle to its place. Grandmom's cheeks are wet. "Now," she motions again, "closer." I lean forward to understand her words.

She reaches for my hand and pats it twice, the way she used to just before she handed out peppermints in church. "Amy," she smiles, a faraway look in her eyes. I am afraid her mind is leaving, as it did yesterday. She thought I was Mother then.

I pull my hand away from hers and cover my face, trying to push down the hot prickles in my eyes. I don't want to think about summer days without Grandmom and lemonade on the porch.

"Amy." The word comes hissing out again. "I wanted . . . to see . . . you dance . . . and Debra . . . play . . . orchestra." She licks her cracked lips with a dark, almost purplish tongue. The breath is rasping in her chest like a bellows. I am afraid she will die in front of me, before she has talked to Mother.

"I . . . gave money . . . Sarah . . . for lessons." She nods several times. "You . . . and Debra." She smiles weakly, while I whisper "thank you," willing the tears to stay in my eyes until she is finished. I don't want her to know how much she's changed, how little of Grandmom is lying in this bed. She is trying so hard.

"Amy." Her eyes are suddenly alert, cautious. "Your father." She stops, as if uncertain. "Was . . . good boy

. . . young, . . . too young." She closes her eyes. "Hurt . . . Sarah . . . can't . . . forget." Her chest is heaving fast again. I pat her hand, wishing she would stop. She squeezes it back, trembling. I kiss her dry lips, taking with me the smell of her breath, like sour milk.

Barney builds the coffin. I visit her grave, out in the pasture on the top of a hill, just beside an old cottonwood tree. I know she likes the pink wildflowers that grow here. Debra and I eat ice-cream in our beds every night.

The crops are burning up in the fields. We have not had rain for over two months. Barney and Mother page through the leather books and argue on the front porch when they think we are asleep. Debra doesn't want to hear them argue; she tells me to shut the bedroom door. I watch them from the couch in the living room.

Mother stands looking over the land. Barney is behind her, his hairy arms folded across his chest.

"What do you want to do, Sarah? You have to be happy too," he says.

"Margaret wouldn't use the money for land and cattle. She wanted to get away from all of that. Why do you think she gave it to the girls?" Mother does not look at Barney.

"She was too highfalutin for you, the old--"

"Barney!" Mother turns, her eyes blazing. "Go home,

please."

"Suit yourself." Barney trudges down the steps, without looking back. I hurry to our bedroom and look for Grandmom's picture under my bed.

There are men visiting our farm, this time without the flashy shirts. Barney and Mother do not swing on the porch and drink coffee in the evenings anymore. Barney tells Mother, "You do what you have to do," each time he sees her, and jabs his finger into whatever is in front of him. Mother bites her lip.

Debra has not played her flute for over a month. I miss the silvery warble of the high notes and the deep vibrato of the low notes drifting through the house. Debra follows Mother around like our dog Blackie follows Barney. Mother teaches Debra embroidery while I dance in the kitchen. Mother doesn't say much about the floor anymore.

While Debra does chores with Mother I work on my pas de bouree's or go to Madame Thompson's studio to practice. I dance until my muscles tremble and my body feels sore and wonderful. Sometimes I sit in Madame Thompson's office after evening classes and study the pictures of Pavlova and Baryshnikov on her walls. We talk about her training in the ballet schools and what it's like to try out for a company. Then I drive home, tiptoe into the dark house, pull off my

leotard, and fall into bed. Mother never hears me come in.

"Amy." Something in Mother's tone of voice makes me hurry to her. She puts down the knife she is using to slice carrots and dries her hands on her muslin apron. Her eyes look greener than usual. "Come into my room and let's have a talk." she says. I follow her, holding my breath.

Mother picks up the antique brush on her dresser and sits on the bed, flicking the bristles through her fingers. "We need to talk about your ballet school. Madame Thompson called me this morning." I can hear the soft swishing of the brush in Mother's hand, and the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room.

"Can I go, Mother? I need some new toe shoes first. And some tights and maybe leotards as well. But Madame Thompson says one of the teachers at that school taught her when she was my age, and she's excellent. And Madame Thompson says my arabesque's are getting better--" Mother listens to my rush of words, her eyes narrowing into slits, like a cat's.

She holds up her hand. "You can't go, Amy. We can't afford it."

"But what about Grandmom's money? She said we could go on with our music and dance because she left some money, and Mother, what else will I do without my ballet, and--"

"We're using Grandmom's money to save the farm. Barney

says if we lose it now, we'll never get it back." Mother suddenly seems to be far away, as if the room is expanding and she is moving away from me and the words we are saying are falling in between, echoing back to each other. "Amy, the farm is all I have left of Big Jake," she whispers.

"What about Debra? Will she go to her conservatory?" I am shouting, trying to reach her. We know which conservatory is "Debra's." Debra has been talking about it ever since she started flute lessons.

Mother looks small, almost pathetic as she brushes the cabbage rose quilt top Grandmom gave her for Christmas. I can barely hear her answer. "If she wants to Amy. Daddy Jake left some money for Debra. I put it in a savings account for her wedding and for setting up housekeeping. But Daddy Jake said the money should be used for Debra's future, and lately I've been thinking maybe she won't get married . . . with her foot and all. Daddy Jake left some money for you too, Amy, but not enough for your school Maybe you could get a scholarship or a job or something?"

I can hear the swish, swish, swish of the brush on the quilt. "Daddy Jake felt your father should provide some for you," she says.

The silence hangs between us like a chord begging for resolution.

Scene From The Cot At Evening

Daffodils
spring spine-straight
from a wicker basket,
like so many
young girls
shouting for experience,
while fingers of night
close round the gray-tiled cell
for safekeeping.

We're Having A Sale On White Mountain Freezers

It must be the nurses' cap, Mark decided, that kept reminding him of Molly, leaning against the wall in her father's barn, that prayer cap pinned to her head so tightly he knew it would never come off, and that prayer dress, light lavender calico, failing to hide the fine smoothness of her legs. She was barefoot; she had just come in from the yard, and the tops of her feet were clean, but the bottoms were coated with manure--just a light coating--just enough to outline their delicate shape. That was the first thing that had intrigued him about her, the way she walked barefoot in the manure, but looked so unsoiled, like a wildflower before it's been picked the petals pulled off one by one.

Mark had watched Molly watching her father, his arm shoulder deep in the backside of a cow, as he turned a calf around, clucking, "Whoa, girl, that's it. Easy now," finally emerging triumphant with one of the calf's legs, then the other, and soon the head peeking out. Lawrence Brumbaugh, one of the seven appointed preachers at the Old Order German Baptist Church, shook the manure off his arm, then caught the calf and lowered it to the floor. It lay panting, while its mother let out a bellow of distress and turned to look at her offspring. And all the time, Molly stood watching, her face registering neither distaste nor surprise nor elation, her eyes pools of tranquility that nothing could stir up.

"Got ourselves a fine heifer, Dick," Lawrence had boomed

out. "Molly, go tell your mother to come have a look at her." Then turning to Mark's father he chuckled and slapped his thigh. "My woman can't resist the look of a newborn calf. Almost like a celebration of God's workings, you know, just to see the animal."

"Yes, right, well I'll send you the bill for this, Lawrence," Mark's father had said, with a quick glance at the manure speckling Lawrence's beard and clothes, and the fluid and afterbirth pouring out of the cow. Mark had known then it was a good thing his father ran a hardware store, and didn't make deliveries to farmers very often.

Mark wished the missionaries' mailboxes weren't located in the hospital. It wasn't so much the bother of walking from the other compound--he was over in this compound fixing water heaters and who knows what all the time--but the smell of medicine from the pharmacy was enough to send tingles up his spine. Years of allergy shots and doctors had ensured that Mark reacted to the sight of any white jacket. He was surprised he had made it through the immunizations required to get him to this country--yellow fever and cholera and typhoid--the kind that swelled his arm up for a week.

Then there were the sick men in one hallway, women in the other, their children wailing in their arms, or staring at Mark with solemn black eyes. Mark tried to remember to

walk through the men's hallway, else some of the women would shrink back and pull their veils in front of their faces. The Arab and Indian women only saw women doctors; they wouldn't think of uncovering themselves in front of another man.

But it was the nurses, with their caps and uniforms, far too close to the style of the Old Order garb, that punctured Mark's composure every day. It was like seeing ten or twenty Mollys walking past him in the hallways, until he watched them closely and noticed their lack of grace, and the busyness in their glances.

Mark pulled two letters out of his box--one from his parents, and one with that neat curvy writing he recognized immediately. He wondered how she had managed to mail it without her mother seeing. The Old Order women usually went everywhere in bunches.

His parents wanted to know what everything was like--the weather, his house, the other missionaries, the work he was doing. "We miss you at the store this summer, Mark," his father wrote. "Paint and lawn mower sales are higher than they've ever been. Must be the people of Philipsburg want to fix things up this year. By the way, Lawrence Brumbaugh came in here last week. Looked a lot less worried--it must help that you're gone."

Molly's letter was shorter, more to the point. "How are you doing, Mark? I'm real lonely for you. Tell me what it's

like, so I can pretend I'm there. They keep sending me to Youth Fellowship so I'll meet a Brethren boy. It's not working." At the bottom of the page she added, "P.S. Grace Garber got married in her parent's garden last week to Thomas Hanes who isn't from the Order. Her wedding dress was satin, but like the garb. Everyone keeps hoping he'll join soon. The next sentence was marked out with deep heavy circles. Mark made out the words, "I kept thinking that--", but the rest of the sentence was illegible. She continued, "They're all being real friendly to Tom, just like they were to you," and signed it simply, "Molly."

Mark slipped the letters into his pocket just as one of the Danish nurses he had met last night glided by with a "Hello, Mark" and a smile. The word must have gone out before he came that he was available. At the welcome the Mission put on for him, there were several English, Danish, and American single women missionaries who wanted to meet him. Most of them were nurses, although one was a doctor. Mark got the impression they were looking.

He didn't get to make any more deliveries to Lawrence Brumbaugh's that summer, although he watched for the opportunity constantly. Most of the time Lawrence strode into the store, his black pants, suspenders, and full gray beard making him look like an old German immigrant. He pulled

paint and paint brushes off the shelves. "Been painting my house this summer," he told Mark. "Actually I got my women doing most of the work." He'd slap his thigh and stride out, chuckling, while Mark would picture Molly painting trim, those long fingers guiding the brush carefully along the edges.

One day he brought a check into the Second National Bank, and there she was behind the little sign that said, "Molly Brumbaugh." He thought he saw a slight smile come to her lips as she counted out his money, but when she handed the pile of bills to him, her eyes were the same cool depths of blue.

"You started a new job?" he asked.

"Yes. Now that the painting is done."

"I come here a lot," he said.

"Yes," she said. "You're Mark, from the hardware store." Then she counted out money to the next customer, Mr. Hahn, the carpet and linoleum dealer.

He waited for her after work one day, and took her to the bowling alley for coffee. The next week they went to the park and fed the swans. Then the weather grew colder, and he asked her to a movie. Her eyes grew troubled. "No," was all she said.

He met her for lunch several times a week. He'd find her stretched out on the fallen leaves in the park, barefoot, in spite of the chill. She was usually reading whatever she

could get her hands on--book versions of movies that had been on TV, newspapers, women's magazines, and occasionally, the small Bible and hymnbook she carried in her purse. "It helps me live a good life," was her only remark.

One Saturday, when they were out walking on the country roads around the Brumbaugh's farm, she asked him to come to church. "My father is getting nervous about you." she said.

"Why?"

"Because you aren't from the Order." She picked up a handful of gravel and began throwing the stones into the ditch.

"Aren't you allowed to see boys from outside the Order?"

She looked towards their farm. "Yes." Mark watched as two more stones sailed into the ditch. "But my father is a minister of the church, and he's worried that I might--" she faltered.

"Marry," Mark finished. She kept staring at their farm.

"Don't others marry outside the Order?"

"Sometimes." She looked straight at him. "But usually the husbands join the Order. Or else the wives leave. But not after they've been baptized." They walked along in silence for a while.

"So you want me to come to your church?" Mark said, finally.

"If you like." Molly stared at the ground the rest of the way home.

It had been different, Mark thought, as he stood up for the hymn in the mission church, different sitting with the men on the left side in their black coats and hats, beards flowing over their chests. The women were seated on the other side, as usual in their prayer dresses and caps, but their dress material was plainer for worship, the women's mood more solemn.

This mission church was more like his home church except that the service was in Arabic. The order of worship was the same as back home, and men and women sat together, and the old pump organ reminded him of the one his mother had played at the evening service for so many years. Here the hymnbook opened from left to right and the women came to church bare-legged because it was so hot. But otherwise the people sang and prayed and tried to make their children sit quietly through the sermon just like back home.

At Molly's church, the service had lasted two hours. There was no organ, only a songleader, and all of the hymns were sung to the same chant. There were no flowers, no fancy altarcloths, only the simplest of benches. The Brethren greeted each other with a kiss on the lips before they sat down. Lawrence Brumbaugh spoke on the need to live a life filled with good works, and how necessary it was to keep the family together. Mark swore Lawrence was staring straight at him. He tried to pick Molly out from the group of women on the other side of the church, and finally, after a number of

tries, he found her, the little bun on the back of her head showing through her prayer cap. Mark wished he knew how long her hair was. Molly told him she couldn't cut it after she was baptized. She said her mother's hair reached to the floor when she washed it.

Molly's church hadn't had Sunday School. The mission church did--both in English and Arabic. Mark stayed behind to watch the Arab children doing motions to the tunes he had sung as a boy, with an occasional Arab tune here and there. He wished Molly could be here to hear the children sing. She'd started singing one day when they were out walking, her voice high and clear in the morning air. She'd told him she always wanted to take piano or guitar lessons, but the Order didn't permit it. She played her harmonica while Mark listened, keeping time with his foot. She could have gone to the Opry, the way she played that thing.

He told her one evening after they'd spent the day in Dayton together, and were sitting at a Mexican restaurant, trying to decide who would eat the last few nacho chips. "That's one thing we're allowed to do, that we're good at," she'd said, "eat!"

"Molly, I applied for mission service through our church."

"Why? Is that something you have to do, like the

Mormons?"

"No. It's something I've wanted to do ever since I was a kid. When the missionaries came around to our church dressed up in native costumes and showing slides, I'd always volunteer to help, just to be close to them."

"So you're going to be a preacher, like my father?"

"No, just a maintenance man." He laughed at her raised eyebrows. "Missions need those too, you know. They have toilets that plug up and washing machines that don't work, and generators that stop working and walls that need painting. I'm good at that; I like it."

"So why can't you do that here?" Her eyes had turned blue-gray. She dropped her gaze to the table. "The Brethren believe in taking care of our own. We help farmers out of debt. We fix up the houses of people too old to fix them themselves. We pay for the old people in nursing homes. Your church lets welfare take care of them."

"You don't believe in missions?"

"If every church did what ours does, you wouldn't need missions."

Mark pushed the nacho chips away, suddenly too full.

He hadn't known if he should touch Molly, could touch her since she was baptized. Mark had seen Molly's brother roaring around town in his red Z-28 Camaro, his arm around a

girl or two every weekend. But Zachariah Brumbaugh wasn't baptized yet, and Molly said teenagers were allowed to be a little worldly. Mark hadn't felt he could ask his father what the Brethren attitude was toward--showing affection. So he kept his distance, although he ached to pull off her cap and stroke her hair.

Here Mark rarely saw men and women show affection. Yet at the airport when he arrived, he watched men greeting men, and women greeting women with a kiss on both cheeks. Almost like the Brethren's Holy Kiss, Mark thought. Only worlds apart.

One month before he left, they went to the mall. Mark was telling Molly about his visits to New York to his church's headquarters, about the interviews he had gone through, and the psychological tests he had taken. They'd been reading books and studying newspapers together on the Middle East, and that day she was going into peals of laughter at his attempts to push out the guttural sounds of Arabic.

They bought some fudge. Molly ate it the way she ate everything--daintily, licking her lips between each bite. When they got to the end of the mall, and were standing there laughing at each other, she grabbed his hand, and pulled him behind the telephone booth. Then he had kissed her, pushing the cape on her dress back and drawing her close to him. She said nothing, just pulled the cape back over her dress front and lowered her eyes.

Molly had read books with Mark, and circled the date of his departure in red on the little datebook she carried with her in her purse. She'd helped him pick out clothes at Thomson's Clothing Store and met him at the airport when he returned from each of his trips to New York. But never had she asked him to her church again. Never had she repeated her views about missions.

The days kept hurrying by--mornings of restocking shelves, afternoons of repairing can openers and blenders, and manning the cash register when his father went to Doyle's Cafe for coffee, and evenings of seeing Molly or his family. His father strutted around the hardware store that last week as if he had had a new baby, so proud was he of the fact that his son was "serving overseas." Members of the church wished him good luck, and slipped him an extra five or a card when he rang up their sales. The Sunday night before he left, the church held a commissioning service, and Mark stood up and answered, "Here am I, send me!", to the minister's question.

As his mother, Ava, told the Ladies Aid, "Maintenance men are needed for mission work. No one can preach the message at the evening service if the electricity don't work, or take care of sick people at the hospital if the water pump needs fixing." So she held her head up proudly that night. Molly was invited to the service, but didn't come.

It was 103^o in the shade, with 99% humidity. Mark wore what he called, "the missionaries' garb," a tea towel around his neck to wipe off the sweat that poured down his arms and back. He noticed on the calendar that morning that he had been practicing his "Salaam Alykum" with the Arab people for five weeks. Already the little Arab girls at the mission school clustered around him when he came at recess time, shouting, "Marcas, Marcas," the "c" coming from deep in their throats. The Arab women teachers giggled when he walked by, his tool box in hand, and he found he could understand snippets of the things they said about him.

It had been six weeks, he calculated, since he and Molly had faced each other across the checked tablecloth at Grandma's kitchen. They were drinking steaming mugs of cocoa and sharing Grandma's famous hot apple dumpling with cinnamon ice cream.

"My father is glad you're leaving. He wants to know how long you'll be gone," she'd mumbled, staring at her fingernails.

Mark put down his spoon. "Tell him I'll be gone for two years, unless I decide to stay longer." She let out a slow breath. "Long enough for you to be dated and married by a Brethren fellow," he added.

"That's what you want?"

"I can't join the Order."

"I'll write," she'd said, and finished her half of the

dumpling.

She'd kept that promise, he thought, as he made his way over the dusty parking lot to the hospital entrance. The Indian receptionist, with the red dot in the middle of her forehead, smiled and said, "Two letters today, Mr. Matthews. You are lucky."

He tore open Molly's first, sat down on a concrete block outside, and scanned the paragraphs, his eyes slowing down in the last few paragraphs where she described a calving she'd had to help with. "Father said his hands were too big to get the calf turned quite right, so for the first time in my twenty-one years, he asked me to help." They'd gotten the calf out. She wrote, "It made me think of the look on your father's face the day he came out to our farm, when I first saw you." Then at the bottom of the page, in smaller writing, she'd added, "I don't think I'll write anymore. It's too hard. Molly."

Mark crumpled the letter up and put it in his pocket, then tore open his parent's letter. His mother wrote about the Church Bazaar, and the speech she'd had to make about Mark's work. His father wrote, "We're having a sale on White Mountain freezers now. Your mother wants me to buy her one. Do you think she needs it? Saw your Molly in here yesterday, but she wouldn't talk to me much. Hope all is well with you. Dad."

Sunday Morning

Blast! Sharon was just lighting her cigarette, was just watching the fire burning away the paper bit by bit as she sucked in the cool smoke and blew out the fatigue of another night of trying to sleep, when those two kids from next door starting pushing out the patio door, whining in their shrill little voices about wanting to go for a walk, and ruining another Sunday morning's quiet. Their mother was the one who complained to Sharon about hearing her TV through the walls at two o'clock in the morning. She forgot to mention the screaming Sharon put up with every evening from six to eight, the screaming of their precious darling colicky baby girl that looked just like Sharon's own, the one she had pushed back in her mind two years ago, and now it kept trying to come back out.

Of course, it only took one look at Sharon's sniveling seven year old who was always spreading peanut butter and rock music all over her townhouse, to make her push the memory back farther of the day she spread her thighs for the creep who was his father, and her baby girl's. And the days when he slammed Sharon around the filthy trailer weren't hard to forget either, until the neighbors ignored her swollen eyes and bruised arms because it was easier. And the day he poured down his final vengeance upon her baby, the one Sharon had begged for, and she found its forehead battered in, but its

eyes still staring, staring, petrified.

So it was better to shut out the neighbor's kids, especially the oldest who walked a little funny, and whose mother acted like the girl was some kind of person, even though she screamed a lot and could hardly talk. It was better to go into her sunny kitchen and forget the crying that wouldn't stop until she'd hid it under the trailer, and the garbage man had hauled it away.

Case #1075

Subject: Michael Hanes

She calls it living hell
while you, laughing as your arm
swings free,
swivel around to face me,
coffee mug in hand,
and call it nothing worth talking about.

Somewhere he drools over metal armrests,
propped up by pillows, secured by belts.
They cannot hold you to him
nor to those halls of pastel quilt he'd call home
if he could call anything, anything at all.

Today you pay the bills, prepare the lesson plans;
leave her to the sobbing,
weekend eyes, dark-ringed,
for time, you say, brings death to life,
hate to love, pain to joy,
the cycles of nature continue,
and perhaps, through time,
other seeds you'll spill,
to blossom perfectly within her.

English Lesson

There are five of them in my class, all women. Whoever assigns teachers to these classes must have thought I'd do better with the younger women, the ones who can say "hello" and "give me some milk," whose children follow behind them in a row, all black eyes and hair, and bright wisps of energy. They leave their children in the nursery, where the two underpaid American teachers will teach as much English as they possibly can to those tiny tornadoes. I wonder if it's the sugar and food coloring in our food. The children never sit still.

The old people shuffle up the stairs, their hair tied in gray braids, mumbling together in Vietnamese. They sit in their dusty classroom and wait, with the look of those who have waited for a long time, who have nothing else to do but wait. Occasionally they stare at the black board, but only sometimes, do they see.

My students half-run up the stairs, calling to each other in those strange rising and descending tones, filing into our room where the yellow paint hangs in shreds from the ceiling, but the sun pours through huge cracked windows. They find their places in the small semi-circle I have arranged, and wait, expectant.

"What is your name?" The women tell me "Han" and "Mon" and "Vahn" and "Tran" until I am beginning to think this is one of those jokes students play on new teachers, making all

their names rhyme. Three of the women have been chattering in Vietnamese; the other two sit rigid, facing each other.

"What country are you from?" The largest woman, Tran, with chubby cheeks and a flat face, tells me she and the two women beside her are from Vietnam, but she--pointing to a small shy woman who looks far too young to be married--she is from Laos. And the other--a tall woman with black braids, and slightly reddish skin--she is from Cambodia. Tran names the countries with a slight curl of her upper lip. The two women stare at me, watching my reaction.

"They do not understand our language," Tran says. "They only understand English."

"What country are you living in now?"

"America." All five of them answer, as if in one breath. Even the Laotian pushes out a smile.

"Do you like America?" Tran shrugs her shoulders.

"Yes. It is okay. We don't like war." The Cambodian woman gives me an intense stare and nods.

I pass out the books. They are studying my stomach, just showing at five months. "Baby," Tran says.

"Yes. Five months." The three women go off into volleys of Vietnamese, pointing to their stomachs and giggling.

"How many children do you have?" I ask each one.

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

"Two."

"Three," Tran says. She is off in another volley of Vietnamese.

"Tran," I interrupt.

"We want to know how many you have."

"One. This is number two." They smile.

"I had four." Tran says.

"Yes? What happened to the fourth?"

"He got sick. In Thailand. He died."

"Oh." I stare out the windows at the melting snow outside, trying to imagine what it would feel like to watch my son die.

"My baby." The Laotian woman is trying to get my attention.

"He died?"

"She died. No food. And no doctor." She is too small to be pregnant four times, let alone five. I have known the anguish of a baby waiting for milk in the night, five minutes of screaming as the milk slowly warmed in the pan. Yet I have not known what it is to have no milk to stop the screaming.

Today's lesson is about nouns. I decide to let it pass.

"I lose my husband. Two years." Vahn is talking, a small well-built woman who could be a model. She holds up two fingers for emphasis.

"Where was he?"

"He had to fight. I think they kill him. I run with my children across the river to the camp. He live in the camp too, but I do not know."

"Why?"

"Camp is so big. Then someone tell me, and we run together." She shows me with her hands how they met and embraced, then beams as if she has told a good joke. The women slip into Vietnamese again.

"Did you all have family members who died?" I'm not sure they understand me. They smile and look down at their books, where there are line drawings of hundreds of nouns.

I hear the mumbling of the old people spilling out of the class next door. It must be time for the break. I tell the women where the restrooms are and where they can get a drink of water, even though I have told them before. I want to stay in the room, in the sunshine, instead of waiting out in the hall discussing the employment opportunities of Vietnamese refugees with the other American teacher. The employment opportunities are grim, unless they can learn English. So I must teach them English. But is there time for this kind of teaching too?

I stretch out, hands behind my head, covered with sunshine from my head to my feet. This is a February thaw, a brief respite from the tragedy of winter with a broken-down car. Today I walked the two miles to school, and tried to decide if I should paint the baby's room yellow or blue.

I don't notice her behind me at first. Then I feel her gaze on my shoulders. "Teacher," the Cambodian woman says. She unrolls a magazine she has been twisting in her hands. It is a copy of Time, borrowed, no doubt, from her sponsor. "Show you." I pull another chair close to mine, but she continues standing. The magazine is a feature on Cambodia.

She pushes the magazine in front of me, its pages falling open to a photoessay of Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime. The nightly blaring of newscasters during the Vietnam War was lost on me. I don't understand who did what in Vietnam. I know we were supposedly fighting the Communists. I don't know what or who Pol Pot is. I only know that this red-skinned woman is standing over my shoulder pointing to pictures of mounds of dead bodies with lines of half-dressed starving people walking between them. "Me, me," she is saying in a low guttural voice as she points to the walking skeletons. "My family," she says, as she points to the dead bodies. She shows me another picture of soldiers gunning down a line of hostages, and imitates the sound of guns. "See, you see? Now you understand?" I nod, knowing I am lying, and that my son is waiting for me at home with his new Johnson and Johnson toy.

She stabs at the pictures again, turning the pages faster, as if to show me all of the pictures at once. There is more blood here than I have seen in real life. "Now you understand?" she repeats, "very afraid, very afraid." Her

voice chokes; she reaches for me as I surround the grief pouring through her with weak, alien arms.

The other students return. She wipes the tears away with her scarf, and sits down in the semi-circle, staring at her fingernails. The magazine is laying open on the chair by the window. "Do you all know what nouns are?" I ask. Their faces are blank.

"Nouns are naming words. Words that describe things. Like chair and desk and dog and baby and hair and everything in the world."

Tran's face brightens. She pours out a stream of Vietnamese to the women beside her. The Laotian woman squirms in her seat and smiles, embarrassed. The Cambodian women-- "Han," my roster reads--stares through me, to a place I can never reach.

Celebration

Everything is perfect, from the
tabouli right down to the carob
coconut balls we made together yesterday,
you chattering a mile a minute about this
third birthday party and how important they
are back home, because many children don't
live past the first few years,
and now with a one-two-three we cheer,
while you blow the candles out,
and he wags his head in that funny way
that means he's excited.

Maybe its your guts I celebrate,
what kept you going through months of suctioning
mucus out of his throat,
every seven minutes,
your head resting on his crib
between times,
eight operations,
pneumonia every month,
a doctor who said he should be dead,
two miscarriages,
and an "accident" the Koran and I
wouldn't let you abort,
now the little brother who pulls phones

out of walls.

Let's celebrate the scorching years
you suffered,
one day at a time.

He rips the paper off huge presents,
squealing with delight,
his eyes owlish behind thick glasses,
and chases his brother
around the table,
pulling streamers behind him,
while you, laughing,
cover him with balloons.

He has a normal brain.

One month ago when the doctors
closed the tracheotomy,
one in particular was watching,
and saw what you had said
for two years.

Your son recites TV ads now.

We wrap up what's left of the
bakery cake,
you pressing the tabouli on me
as I assure you that yes,
this was just like American
birthday parties,

actually better;
the wind whips my car back and forth
on the way home,
as I sing "Happy Birthday"
to him, to you,
to no one in particular.

Cranial Correction

We laid him on the ancient padded table,
his eyes darting from framed diplomas on both walls
to snapshots of children long grown and gone
and pictures of Jesus surrounded
by lace doilies.

"Those are my grandchildren," she smiled,
limping her way to the chair by his head,
the smell of lavender strong behind her.

"I'll tell you what I'm feeling," she said, cupping
seamed hands around his cheeks,
"a circle of bones jammed together
into a forehead, near devoid of blood
and oxygen.

He has a heavy head."

She sighed, pushing invisibly, then "Ah," she said.

"Is this your beautiful daughter watching?"

while we, bent over, breathless,
missed the tiny movement of bone
in his forehead,
she said made the difference.

"Like children you've never known
they are, when I'm finished,

and bone on bone line up like
toy soldiers in a row."

We paid our ten dollars, collected
diaper bags, and tiny coats,
lumbered out the front door that played music
when you opened it
and drove home watching him.

On His Way Up

When the doctor first told my husband, Jim, that our 9-month son was brain-injured, I called up the doctor and argued with him for half an hour. When I hung up, Jim and I clung to each other, weeping, on the dark floor of our trailer.

Now Craig, our son, 6 years tall, stands by the bed waiting for his turn in the bathtub. I marvel at his strong legs and straight back, at the eyes that are bright and inquiring, when once they were glassy and glazed.

Craig's second and third years are hazy in my memory, shrouded in despair. We enrolled him in the infant stimulation program at our local area education agency, faithfully did the exercises they gave us every week, and waited for Craig to "catch up." Every nine weeks the staff tested him and every nine weeks he dropped lower and lower on the development scale. The pre-school teacher of the handicapped suggested that I might want to consider having another child, or finding a part-time job.

Jim and I discovered that most of the parents didn't make time for the therapy the staff gave them, because they didn't expect their children to be helped. Every six months we returned to the nearby university hospital school, only to have the specialists there tell us as kindly as possible that our son was hardly progressing at all.

We didn't need them to tell us that. With much

trepidation, we had decided to go ahead and have another child. Our wonderfully normal Erica Joy was born in May of 1982 when Craig was almost 2 years old. By the time he was 3, she was much better at crawling and creeping than he, she was more dexterous with her hands, and she was beginning to imitate words. Craig just cried when he wanted something.

I went to work because I couldn't stand to watch Craig sitting hunched over in the corner waving his hands in front of his face while Erica played with toys. He got angry when I pulled away the rattles that he shook all day long. My close friend, Cathy, came every morning to help Craig through his exercises while I worked. She became frustrated at his frustration each time he was asked to stack blocks one more time, or put the rings on a cone. "How is he supposed to get better just by doing these things over and over?" she asked one day. "We're not doing anything about his brain!"

The assumption, we were learning, was that he would not get better, that these kids didn't get better, because nothing could be done to help the brain. The word "retarded" was being used more frequently by the pre-school teacher of the handicapped. She told me to "hang on" until Craig was three. Then he could be enrolled in the special education school, and we could resume our lives, at least to some extent.

Yet we were not willing to put Craig in the school, not when so many of our questions went unanswered. If Craig were so retarded, why was he able to pick out by name a book from

a pile, three or four times in a row? Why was he able to link a song I was singing to one that had been played on a record player over three months ago? When Craig heard the song, he crawled to the record player and stood, waiting for me to put the record on. Why could we tell, instinctively, that he understood much of what we said, even though he didn't respond to our commands most of the time? Why did we, and our friend Cathy, sense that there was a bright mind in there that didn't know how to show itself?

So many of Craig's reactions to everyday stimuli were abnormal, and no one seemed to know why. The pre-school teacher of the handicapped simply shook her head and said, "That's just the way these children are." Craig was so sensitive to sunlight, that when I took him for a stroller ride at ten o'clock in the morning, he screamed and covered his eyes until I found a shadow to rest in. The eye doctor dismissed his sensitivity as the normal reaction of a blond-haired blue-eyes child. But Erica, our blond-haired blue-eyes daughter was in the same stroller, and she spent her time looking around and cooing.

Craig was so sensitive to touch that when we gave him a bicycle ride on a windy day, he became as stiff as a ramrod and cried until we stopped. It took us six months to get Craig to pick up a piece of food and put it in his mouth, because he couldn't stand the way the food felt in his hand.

We weren't sure how well Craig could see, since his

eye-hand coordination was so poor. He always put pegs to the side of the hole in the pegboard, rather than directly in it. Our eye doctor had no tests for non-verbal children that measured acuity, only those that measured muscle imbalance. He said we would have to wait until Craig learned sign language, or at least was able to point to the pictures on the wall. But how could Craig point to the pictures if he didn't have long-distance vision? How could there not be any tests, after decades of handicapped children?

We made the by now much-dreaded visit to the university hospital school several months before Craig's third birthday. The physical and occupational therapists administered tests, taking little note of our triumph that Craig was finally standing alone. Instead, the therapists recommended that we buy Craig a wheelchair, so that he wouldn't have trouble keeping up with the other children once he entered school. They told us that Craig did not understand as much as we said he did. My angry protests were recorded in the medical files--"Mrs. Romkema is having difficulty accepting her child's handicap."

Several weeks later I sat on the couch watching the psychologist from the education agency administer Craig's first IQ test. The minute he began laying test materials out onto Craig's cardboard desk, my heart sank. The IQ test was based on the performance of motor activities, such as pouring and stringing beads, and on speech. The psychologist was

testing Craig's disability, not his ability! As the psychologist moved down the test, marking a check in the "F" column for "flunk," I dug my fists into the couch cushions. Halfway through the test, Craig became so frustrated that he threw all the beads and boxes off the desk and refused to do anything more.

I told the psychologist about Craig's book recognition, and after several minutes of ignoring me, he finally said that, yes, what I was suggesting was at a much higher level than Craig's other performance, but that he had no place for that on his test.

"What do you do when you have a child that's paralyzed?" I challenged him. "How can you tell his mental age if he can't perform these motor skills?"

"We can watch his eyes," he said.

"But what about children with visual problems?"

"Well, I guess we don't have many tests for them," he conceded.

One week later the psychologist recommended that Craig be placed in a classroom for moderate to severely retarded children.

That was when my mother sent me a book given to her by a woman from her church. It was about a little girl who had gone to an Institute in Philadelphia that took a different approach to brain-injured children. We called them and discovered they had a 13-month waiting list. We couldn't wait

that long. We were also deterred by warnings our therapists gave us of the intensity and cost of the Philadelphia program. If we got into the program, could we spend ten hours, seven days a week on one child? Jim was a student of veterinary medicine with no family medical insurance. How could we possibly find the money?

Nevertheless, the more I researched the Philadelphia approach, the more I felt we had found an answer. Every parent I called whose child was on this type of program had seen tremendous change. One child was now normal. We continued reading and asked friends to pray that we would find a way to do the program.

Several parents we had called had received their program from a small center in Ohio that used many of the same methods as the Institute in Philadelphia, as well as the best methods gleaned from others in the field of Human Development. We called them, hoping Craig could get in. He was evaluated at the Rehabilitation Center For Neurological Development one week later, in Piqua, Ohio.

In the four and half hours of that evaluation, most of what I had been asking professionals for years was explained by Craig's developmental specialist. He said Craig was chemically-imbalanced, that his sensitivity to sunlight was linked to a biochemical disorder that blocked his absorption of nutrients to the brain. His tactile sensitivity and vision problems were not due primarily to the fact that his brain

couldn't send messages to the body, but that outside stimulation had never gotten through to the brain!

For three years Craig had probably only seen the outlines of the world around him, not the details. Our job was to give his brain the optimum environment for development-- supplemental vitamins and minerals for the imbalance problem and 200% more stimulation than a normal child would receive. Then we would watch and see what Craig's brain would do with the information we gave it.

The underlying assumption of this therapy approach was that the brain could be helped. Although part of it might be damaged, or, in Craig's case, perhaps never stimulated enough to develop, over 90% of the brain was still available for use. In other words, through continued stimulation, it might be possible for the brain to establish new pathways around the damaged areas.

We believe those pathways are being established. For the past three years we have been watching Craig soak up stimulation like a dry sponge. After six months on nutritional supplements, he shot up, gained weight, and looked at the noonday sun. As he filled the air with delighted giggles, we realized he had never seen the trees and sky before. After six months of having his body stimulated with a hairbrush and massager, cold washcloth and hair dryer, Craig became much less hypertactile.

After a month and a half of doing light stimulation and

tracking exercises in a dark room, and flashing large picture cards at him every evening, we began to notice his eyes watching the pictures. I'll never forget the night I held up two cards and asked for the zebra . . . and he pointed to the zebra.

That was when we realized that Craig's main channel of information for three years had been his ears. It explained why he loved having books read to him, but would not touch individual pictures. Three months after we began the program, members of our church asked us what was happening. "Craig is so bright-eyed and alert. He looks much better!"

We agreed.

Now the boy therapists thought would never read recognizes over a hundred written words. At 5 1/2 years, he could match words and pictures, pick out alphabet letters and colors. He is beginning to put the letters in order to spell his name.

A very crucial part of Craig's therapy has been "Patterning." Craig, like the majority of brain-injured children, did not crawl or creep properly, and hence missed out on the developmental stages that help organize the brain neurologically.

Several times a day he lies on a table, while four volunteers help us move his arms, legs and head in a crawling pattern. He giggles when we sing "Old Macdonald" or "Jesus Loves Me" to keep the beat. Then he crawls up a foam-covered

ramp to practice what his brain has learned. Thousands of patterns later, his crawling is close to normal.

After swinging him on swings, rolling him in barrels, doing somersaults over a bolster, and spinning him in a chair, Craig's vestibular and cerebellum, those parts of the brain that control balance, are functioning much more normally. His balance is not perfect, but it improves all the time.

Almost without our noticing, the boy who always sat on the lower part of his back with his head hunched forward, now sits with back straight and head erect, because his brain is able to control his muscles. The spasticity that was ever present in his small frame slowly seems to be decreasing. He is mastering the use of a spoon. He can drink without spilling a drop. Appropriately, his first word was "go, go, go." His latest word is "yes."

Some doctors have suggested that Craig's progress is not necessarily due to the program, that "he might have gotten there anyway, if not now, then later on." If what we have done is simply speed up his rate of development, then I say, "Why not?" Craig would have faced years of frustration and discouragement and loss of self-esteem if we had decided to let him progress on his own. Would Craig necessarily have gotten the stimulation his brain needed from the haphazardness of everyday life?

Other doctors oppose this type of program because they feel it focuses too much on one child, and hence causes the

breakdown of the family. This program is for Craig, but also for our family, since the more Craig improves, the more balanced our family life becomes. Erica understands that Craig needs to do therapy to "help him learn to walk and talk better." He is her "best buddy," and I daresay that the way they carry on giggling and laughing at night before they fall asleep is similar to the play of "normal" siblings all across the country.

One year ago, we brought another child into our family. Elena Rae, also wonderfully normal, has grown up around the patterning, her life enriched by the over 150 volunteers who have come to play with her and Erica, and to help with Craig's therapy. Grandmothers, young mothers, college students, and everyone in between have learned that Craig is not a category but a little boy with a problem in his brain.

In early April, one of those 70-degree days that promise spring, I took our children to the park. I watched Craig climb first hesitantly, then with a confident grin, up the rungs of the slide. He reached the top, slid one foot forward, then another, until he was secure on his bottom. Then he took my hand, said "go, go, go" and slid down. The other mothers sitting on a park bench nearby didn't understand why I whirled Craig around and around and hugged him close. Erica clapped her hands and shouted, "Good boy, Craig!" Those mothers didn't know that Craig had just gone down the slide by himself for the first time in his life.

We do not know how far Craig will progress, or how many more pathways we will need to establish around the hurt parts of his brain. But I know I feel a fresh delight each time I see him like this--long and lean in his Charlie Brown underwear, looking at me with love. I want to be there when he gets wherever he's going; not matter how far that may be, I will love him.

In The Ninth Hour

When I cried out that You were not there
to hear me,
cried out in the dim sweltering room
where shadows lay like daggers across
the children, whose troubled eyes
watched their mother pounding the mattress,
begging for her son
to walk--

When I cried out, and they cried, crawling
over my bruised knees and up to my chest, in a tangle
of needy arms and lips and hair
that I could not escape from,

When I cried out, "God in heaven!", not knowing
suffering before except as a word in hymnbooks or
thrown about after a college crush,
now knowing the thin piercing tremor stretching forward
and ever forward in time with no solace but
You, who could stop it all with one word,
if You willed,

As Your Son cried out and you did not stop it
all, left Him there hanging,

Then they rested against me, the little one

suckling,
and I pondered the presence
of peace.