Borders

Andrea L. Carter
Iowa State University

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Borders

by

Andrea L. Carter

A Thesis Submitted to the
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Letters From Somewhere in Maine

Two weeks after Rita Hayward ran away with the Tilt-a-Whirl man from the carnival over in Stillwater, she wrote her husband a letter from Maine, asking if she could please come back home to Missouri and to him, and could he send her some bus fare or maybe drive out and get her, maybe take a week's vacation from the body shop. Didn't he have one coming? Was that all right with him? The Tilt-a-Whirl man, whose real name was Eddie Lewis, had been nothing but nice, according to the letter, but he liked to smoke pot and do other things that she couldn't possibly have known about when she first met him. Now, Rita thought, it would be much better all the way around if she just came home as quickly as they could arrange it, so she could start trying to forget all about Eddie Lewis. And she was sorry about the scene at the house when Eddie had called LeRoy that name and threatened to break his nose and glasses. Rita sent him her love, at the end, and asked if eight years of marriage and two miscarriages didn't mean
anything to him, after all. Rita had never had good handwriting, and LeRoy had trouble making out most of the letter, except for the name Eddie Lewis, a few odd words here and there, the part about smoking pot and doing other things, and the picture of the sad face Rita had drawn next to her name at the bottom of the page.

It was three days later, at his sister Lydia's house, that LeRoy realized he couldn't think where it was he'd put Rita's letter. As Lydia came into the living room carrying his coffee, he was trying to remember whether he'd had it at work on Thursday, and whether it had been in his hip pocket when he'd taken a nap in the back seat of the MacAfee's Buick. If that were the case, it was quite likely that Lena MacAfee now had Rita's letter, and if she did, it was even more likely that all of Burlington would soon be familiar with the name Eddie Lewis. As LeRoy reached for the cup Lydia was holding out to him, he swallowed hard, as though he were keeping down the possibility of such a thing being true. When the cup changed hands, some of the coffee spilled out and ran down over the delicate design of the china; LeRoy watched the path it made with a certain fascination. He continued to watch it until it reached the bottom of the cup, where it hung for only a second.

"Look at this," Lydia said tightly, shoving her hands into the air below the drip. LeRoy waited, seeing her glare at the tiny wet spot she managed to catch on her right palm.

"Sorry," he said. Lydia did not look up from her hand. LeRoy sat down carefully on the divan.

"I am starting to believe, LeRoy," she said, never lifting her eyes,
"that your and Mama's number one major goal has become to wreck this house and my life, though not particularly," she swallowed, "in that order." She turned and walked out of the room; LeRoy looked at his coffee. When his sister returned, she was carrying a large beige napkin, which she draped over his knees. Briefly but critically, she eyed the angle of LeRoy's cup and reached to adjust the napkin slightly to the left. For a moment, LeRoy couldn't help feeling like a piece of furniture.

"And you're not supposed to drink coffee at this time of night, anyway," she said, folding her arms. LeRoy looked down at the cup in his lap; when he looked up again, he was surprised at how Lydia's face seemed to have thinned and sharpened. He guessed that this was something else that had come from marriage to Harvey Wilson. "Harvey's mother," Lydia continued, "says that it just flat out ruins your health." She tapped one finger on the pocket of his shirt. "And the problem is that you already look like death warmed up." LeRoy lifted the cup to his mouth, but stopped, thinking suddenly of Lena MacAfee. He looked up at Lydia, only to find that she was watching him.

"To be truthful, what you look like," she said, sitting down on the arm of the divan and tilting her head sideways, "is something right out of a horror movie." She plucked at the skirt of her dress, rearranging the way it fell over her legs. "And there's not an ounce of sense in that, LeRoy, and you know it." Her eyes met his. "And unless," she poked his shirt pocket again, "you want everyone in town to guess where--" Lydia paused and looked very carefully toward the doorway. "--where that whore of a wife of yours is, I suggest that you make some small attempt to pull
yourself together. Soon, I mean." LeRoy bent his face closer to the coffee, and the steam from it fogged his glasses. He stuck his tongue down along the rim of the cup to test for temperature; beside him, Lydia gasped and came off the divan as though she'd been pushed.

"Would you stop that, LeRoy?" she asked in a quick, high voice. "Would you just stop that this very minute?"

"Stop what?" LeRoy asked, looking up. His glasses were still fogged, so he could only see a blurred outline of his sister; he could, however, see out the very bottom of the glasses, and he could see the way her foot patted against the expensive carpeting of the Wilson living room. He kept his eyes there, on her feet, even after the moist feeling around his eyes was gone, and he knew his glasses were clear again.

"Stop what?" Lydia returned in an exaggerated whisper. "Stop what? Stop sticking your goddamned tongue down into your coffee cup, that's stop what." She turned from him to walk across the room. LeRoy watched the heels of her shoes lift and fall. "You just don't do that, LeRoy. Not in public." She paused. "Not anywhere." She turned to face him, and her voice was low. "Especially not here in this house, around Harvey and his folks." She walked toward him; when she came very close, LeRoy finally looked up. The first thing he noticed were the new lines feathering up between her eyebrows. "God knows," she spoke in a much fainter whisper, "they think I come straight out of the trashiest family ever to be placed on this green earth, as it is." She put both hands over her eyes. "And then, yesterday, LeRoy, Mama came over to visit, and you know that I have never, ever minded her coming over here any time she wants to. Not one
single bit. You know that's the truth," she said, looking out from between
her hands. "She comes over and brings along her knitting or whatnot, and
we sit around and talk--you know, just nice little visits--and then she
goes home." She was quiet for so long that LeRoy began to think that it
was the end of whatever story she had started to tell, and he wasn't sure
he understood why she had started it at all.

"And?" he asked, finally.

"And I have never minded," she said again, staring hard at LeRoy. "And
neither has Mrs. Wilson, LeRoy. Truly, she has never really minded Mama's
being here." Lydia breathed out heavily, and her hands folded closed over
her face again. "Then yesterday, LeRoy--oh Lord." Lydia swallowed. "Mama
came over, and she got to being silly and giggling--you know how she gets--
over some story or the other. And I have never minded her being here, LeRoy,
and don't you forget that, either. And then--oh God, and then, I'll be
damned if her kidneys didn't just give out, and she wet herself right in
Mrs. Wilson's favorite armchair. I thought," Lydia paused to swallow again,
"that I would die. When Mama got all of a sudden real, real quiet and stood
up from that chair, and I saw what she'd done, I thought that I would die." 
Lydia's hands slid slowly down her face, stretching it into unnatural lines.
"And Harvey's mother had to be there, with her nose stuck into everything
as usual, and she saw right off what had happened, and she got this funny
little smile, you know, like she might be so absolutely disgusted that she
was going to throw up, and then Mama started crying to top it all off, and
I wished, LeRoy, I prayed that I would die or just go up in flames, like
they do in cartoons. And just whichever came first, is all, whichever one
came first." Lydia's hands had slid all the way down the front of her dress to her waist, where they stayed, clutched together. LeRoy thought for a minute that she was going to start singing, although he couldn't say exactly why. The idea that Lydia might start singing made it easier for LeRoy to say what he was about to say.

"Well, about the time I got here, I started thinking that I might've just--lost that letter Rita sent me," he said, blowing at his coffee gently.

"You did what?" Lydia's shriek echoed first around the room and then sounded again out in the wide, tiled hallway. Immediately, both hands went to her mouth, and she looked to the door as though she expected any one of the Wilsons, or perhaps their cleaning lady Marva, to appear and demand that she try to keep in mind who she was, now. LeRoy was sorry that he had to see her this way. When no one came, her hands fell to the sides of her dress, and she turned back to face LeRoy. "You did what?" she whispered.

LeRoy looked down and blew into his coffee again. He knew for certain that he hadn't shown the letter to anyone except Lydia, who advised that he burn it immediately and tell anyone who asked that Rita had just run away. LeRoy agreed that it was much better for him if Rita just ran away, instead of running away with someone, especially the someone she had run away with. He had never mentioned the Tilt-a-Whirl man to anyone, and Eddie Lewis was a subject he would just as soon not bring up at this point, if he didn't have to. It was, in fact, the main reason he couldn't let Rita come home now. He didn't want to hear about Eddie Lewis, and he didn't want the men at the shop to hear about Eddie Lewis, and he didn't want the neighbors to hear about Eddie Lewis. LeRoy was seriously hoping that he
would forget Eddie Lewis's name, and that he could go back to thinking of him as the Tilt-a-Whirl man. He liked it better that way. More than that, though, he was glad that he had never been to Maine. He was glad that he had never been any further east than St. Louis, because he wanted very much for Maine to stay just the way it was; he wanted Maine to be just anywhere he had never been.

"And don't just sit there and stare off into outer space, either," Lydia said, suddenly in front of him, slapping at his arm. "This, LeRoy, is your idea of a joke, I take it?"

"No joke," LeRoy said. He plucked a white lint ball from his plaid shirt and kept his eyes on the second button from the top.

"No, no joke. No joke, no joke," Lydia repeated, patting her fingers on her chest and trying to be calm. Ever since she had married Harvey Ray Wilson and moved in with his family, Lydia had been trying to become calm. On very bad days, she sometimes counted how many times she stayed calm. LeRoy had not known about this until she told him the day of the Hayward family reunion, when she had stayed calm twenty-seven times. Personally, he was afraid that this was an early sign of some kind of craziness.

"It's no joke," he said again. "Why would I joke?" Lydia's hands dropped to her sides, and for the moment, she seemed as rigid as the china cup that was balanced on his leg.

"Do you have any idea what this could mean if you've left that letter somewhere? Anywhere? And people find out where that fruit loop of a wife of yours has run off to? With who she's run off with?" Lydia's left hand went back to her chest and began to drum faster than before; LeRoy watched
the shadow of her long fingers as they lifted and fell against the pale
dress she was wearing. "High school girls, LeRoy, have better sense than
to run off with carnival men. And to Maine. Maine, LeRoy. What in God's
name is in Maine?" Lydia sat down on the arm of the divan again and put
her other hand over her eyes. LeRoy pushed his glasses up the bridge of
his nose.

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know," Lydia moaned from under her hand. "You don't know."
LeRoy shook his head and sipped at the coffee, which was instant.

"You know, I'm not any too sure I even know where Maine is," he said.
"I mean, exactly, and all." Just saying the words out loud made him feel
better, and he lifted the cup to his mouth. He stopped drinking when he
saw Lydia staring at him.

"That," she said, narrowing her eyes, "is due only to severe stupidity,
LeRoy." LeRoy waited for the glare to end, but it didn't, so he lowered
his head to blow into the coffee cup, sending only quick, upward glances
in his sister's direction.

"That thing you married," Lydia went on, never shifting her gaze, "is
no doubt having the time of her ignorant, miserable life, without ever
once considering what kind of a mess she's left behind her. Would you be
willing to bet me on that one, LeRoy?" He didn't answer; he was glad,
though, that he had never told his sister that Rita had married him only so
she could have the same name as an actress. It was a different kind of
glad than the one he felt having never told Rita that she was dead wrong
about the name to begin with, but it was still glad.
Suddenly, the air caught in LeRoy's throat, and he knew almost for certain that Rita's letter was at home, on the dresser in the bedroom, right where he'd left it. He looked quickly up at Lydia's face to see if she'd guessed, somehow, but she was staring over his head, chewing on a hangnail, which was something he hadn't seen her do in years. He didn't look down soon enough, though, because she caught his eye. Looking at her, even for a second, nearly made him choke on his own embarrassment and guilt.

"Well, are you just planning to sit there? You could at least try to think where you've left it." LeRoy stared at his lap and cleared his throat; Lydia stomped her foot. "I mean, this isn't exactly the best news I've had all day, everything considered, LeRoy, but it's your life that's falling apart here. Do you want that to happen? Is that it?" Lydia looked toward the hallway, briefly.

"Everything's--fine, Lydia," he said, finding that he couldn't quite look her in the face, finding that it was next to impossible for him to come right out and tell her the truth at that point.

"You really are stupid, aren't you, LeRoy?" Lydia looked down at him as though she had never quite seen him before that very minute.

"It's probably--home or something. You know," he said. "I bet--you know--I bet it is right at home." He tried to laugh and was immediately sorry, because the noise that came out of his throat didn't sound anything at all like a laugh. "I'll just--" he swallowed, "--bet anything."

For a second or so, there was silence, and then Lydia put her face in her hands and made a choking sound. LeRoy got up from the divan so that he could pound her on the back a couple of times, if it became necessary,
but the sound ended as quickly as it had started, and there was silence in
the room again, complete and hollow and almost frightening. Lydia raised
her head; she closed her eyes once, and then again, and then she squeezed
her whole face in around them to keep them shut.

"I don't think that I can honestly put up with much more," she said,
and LeRoy didn't know whether she was talking to him or not.

"Well, so," LeRoy cleared his throat, "so what do you think I ought to
do about Rita, then?" He set the cup down on the coffee table in front of
the divan and picked up his jacket from across the back of a green armchair.
He glanced down at the cushion to find out if this was Mrs. Wilson's favor­
te, but he couldn't tell.

"I don't give a damn, LeRoy," she said, looking at him with a hard
look he didn't recognize. "Do you catch that? I. Don't. Care. Period." She
leaned forward to put her forehead into her palm. "I am tired, LeRoy. Do
you understand that?" Her eyes met his, but only for a second. "I am
tired," she swallowed, "of being responsible for you and for Mama. I am
sick and tired of it. And I am sick," her eyes met his again, "of living
more of your life for you than you do, LeRoy. All right? All right?" Her
voice began to get louder. "Stop bringing your messes to me, and stop
leaving them strung all over my house. All right?" By the time she fini­
ished, LeRoy was half afraid that the Wilsons or Marva might come to see
what was wrong. And he wasn't sure he could explain it. Lydia put her head
in her lap, so that her face rested on her knees.

"Well--I miss her, Lydia. What if I miss her?" LeRoy asked the back
of his sister's head. "What if I'm just downright lonely? Did you ever
think of that?" Lydia didn't answer; she didn't move. "What," LeRoy paused, "what if I write her to come back?"

Lydia looked up with cold, clear eyes.

"Are you deaf, LeRoy? Deaf?" She shook her head. "Whatever you do, it's your funeral, not mine." She looked away, toward the door and hallway. "And it don't matter how many flowers there is, a funeral is still a funeral, plain and simple." LeRoy waited for her to explain what she was talking about, but she only put her head back into her lap.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said, finally, looking down at her. He couldn't see her eyes, but he had the feeling that they were still clear and still cold.

"Just go home, LeRoy," she said, waving him away with her hand. "Just go back to your own empty house and deal with your own messes, and leave me alone. I don't want to know--I don't, LeRoy--any more about this, do you hear me?" She wrapped both arms around her head, so that her voice was muffled, and LeRoy had to lean close to hear what she was saying. "So go ahead, LeRoy. Invite her back. Just invite her back, and then you and her and the Tilt-a-Whirl man can all live happily ever after, isn't that what you want?" It was just what LeRoy did not want, and he found it suddenly hard to breathe. "Well, isn't it?" There was a strange sound, which LeRoy took to be a laugh, and then there was silence.

For a few seconds, he stood over her, watching her, and she never moved. He thought about patting her shoulder, but he decided against it. He reached down, instead, and picked up the beige napkin from the floor, where it had fallen when he stood up. There was still some coffee in the
cup, and he picked it up and swallowed it, pulled on his jacket, and went through the hallway to the front door. Before he closed it behind him, he stopped to see if he could hear anything, but there was nothing to hear. He waited, and still there was nothing.

* * *

The second letter came on a Wednesday in early November. It was open in LeRoy's hands before he knew for sure that he wanted it to be open.

My dear husband LeRoy,

How are you? I am fine. As you have probably already seen on the front of this envelope, I am still in Maine, with Eddie, as we are living with his grandmother, who lives here. She is a nice, kind of fat old woman, who cooks real good, you would like her, she is a little like your own, and I bet I would get as fat as a pig if I was to live here too long. Eddie is staying for the winter, maybe for good, he does not know yet. He is now working at a place kind of like a T.G.Y. at home, only there are no T.G.Y.s here. He started work day before yesterday. I have told him that I am going back to Missouri, and he says O.K., but he will get me a job in the material department, if I want. I do not know what I am doing yet.

I haven't heard from you, but I guess there could be lots of reasons why. I am thinking that I might have forgot to put the zip code on my last letter. Or that you have lost my letter and cannot find my address. (It is the same as on this envelope.) Eddie's grandmother said that you
are probably so mad that you'll never let me come home, and I am afraid that she just might have hit the nail with the hammer. As I was such a fool to run off clear across the whole United States of America with Eddie who I did not know too good.

I will tell you this much, LeRoy. Eddie does not live with me in the BIBLE sense or anything like that, you know what I mean. We are only good friends and now that is all. Eddie says that he will tell you that himself, and that he is sorry he threatened to break anything of yours that night he came to our house to get me. You should believe me on this, as I have never lied to you on any other occasion. Have I? If you will send me the bus fare I can get a Greyhound that will bring me to Kansas City where you will be able to pick me up the easiest. One way is only $119. I called the bus place to make sure. Eddie says you looked to him like the kind of man to do the right thing, and I have guaranteed him he is right. Eddie's grandmother says that she wishes you would either shit or get off the pot. Ha. Ha. She is a card.

If I am not coming home, please mail my sweaters, as the weather is starting to get cold here. Also, the microwave was my birthday present, so it is still mine, even if I am not there, and I hope you remember this. If I am home Thanksgiving, we can go to your mother's house, as I guess you will be doing, anyway. Your wife,

Rita Hayward

LeRoy finished the letter, shoved his glasses up on his nose, and placed the envelope next to the first one, also face down, under his underwear in the third drawer of the dresser. For a moment, he was tempted to
read the return address, look at the postmark, again, but then he knew he would start imagining a place for Rita to really be. As it was, he could already feel the way Eddie Lewis was starting to drip out of the letter and settle around his bedroom. Lydia had been right to begin with; it would only be worse if Rita came home. This way, she was just somewhere--else. Somewhere in Maine, wherever that was.

*       *       *

It was two weeks later that LeRoy found the postcard in his mailbox on the front porch. He had spent most of the morning packing and unpacking a cardboard box full of sweaters. The box was inside on the bed, empty. Before he could stop to think about who would be sending him a postcard, he found himself staring at a snowy, wooded area, which he thought looked an incredible lot like Jack Thomas's woods, where he and Mike Tremble, from the shop, sometimes went hunting together. Standing with the open screen door resting against his back, LeRoy smiled and turned the postcard over.

LeRoy,

I guess that I am staying here with Eddie, as he says that is O.K. with him, and you don't say anything at all. I am working at that T.G.Y. place I told you. Please send my sweaters. Eddie says that it gets real cold here and that soon everything will look worse than on this card. I bought it at work because it reminded me of home, now I am sending it to you.

Rita Hayward
LeRoy swallowed and looked up to see his reflection in the glass of the front door; the thing he noticed first was how thin his face seemed. He stepped further out onto the front porch, and in the hollow silence, the screen sweeping shut behind him sounded strangely loud. For a while, he only stood there looking at the postcard as he turned it over and over in his hands, thinking about how trees grew heavy with snow in the winter. When that stopped making sense, he raised his head and held the card against his shirt with both hands, so it wouldn't spill.
It was the first week of November, exactly one week before her daughter and granddaughter were coming from Oregon to visit that Mamie Ray Watson found the tooth in her back yard and became afraid that there might well be an entire corpse somewhere in the vicinity of her flower bed, just waiting to make its presence known. Mamie Ray had seen several movies on television about dead bodies and the things they could do to surprise people, and as a result, she was not any too crazy about the idea of prancing around her back yard, just waiting for something to grab her ankle. She liked to think that she was a little brighter than that, brighter than to do something she considered to be downright careless. When Goldie first called about coming to visit, Mamie Ray had been tempted to say something about the tooth, and about how maybe it wasn't such a good idea if Goldie and Teenie came, and about how it would probably be better if they stayed at home in Oregon. Unfortunately, Mamie Ray knew how Goldie's face would
twist up into that rolling-eyed look, like she knew something that the rest of the world ought to know, but didn't. The very idea of it was enough to make Mamie Ray close her mouth over the words before they could come out. Having Goldie hinting, as usual, that she was some kind of feeble-minded old woman was an embarrassment Mamie Ray did not need. She was perfectly aware that dead bodies were only dead bodies—she had buried two husbands, after all—and she knew that they didn't grab people's legs, really. She had known that all along. It was—something else, all together. It was that, try as she would, she could not get past the fearful notion that the body in the back yard, wherever it was, might take it into its head to—well, surprise her. Like the one on T.V. had done to that blonde actress who had started out doing toothpaste commercials. After all, Mamie Ray reasoned, those stories came from somewhere. They had to.

In addition to that, there was the dream to worry about, and it was bothering her now more than when she'd first had it, probably twenty years ago. Shortly after her first husband Matthew had died, Mamie Ray dreamed that he came back and lived with her, only he didn't really live with her, he just sat at the kitchen table with his hands in his lap and watched her all the time. Finally, in the dream, she had actually ordered him to leave, to be dead again, because she just couldn't stand him sitting there at the table and staring at her anymore. Then she felt so bad when she had to watch him—in the dream—shuffle out the back door, that she woke up right then and there without finding out what else happened or where Matthew had gone. She had not remembered about the dream for years, not until she found the tooth, but now the dream was almost as troublesome as the tooth and the
dead body and the fact that her daughter was coming next Thursday, when
Mamie Ray did not want visitors.

Around four o'clock Friday afternoon, the day after Mamie Ray found
the tooth, Goldie called and asked Mamie Ray if she remembered what day
it was. Mamie Ray supposed that this was intended to be cute, and she
didn't see any reason that she should have to put up with nonsense this
late in the day. She told Goldie she thought it was Saturday night, wasn't
it?

"You mean it ain't Saturday night?" she asked, when Goldie didn't
say anything. "I lost my calendar back in June, and I ain't been able
to keep track of anything since then, Baby." There was, in fact, a calendar
sitting right on top of the kitchen T.V., a little cardboard one she'd
gotten from the oil company. October was still showing, so Mamie Ray
walked over and tore it off. She looked at it for a moment, and then she
wadded October up into a little ball.

"Mama," Goldie started, and she didn't sound as though she thought
Mamie Ray was very funny, "I'm coming back to Missouri in a few days, remem-
ber that?" Mamie Ray rolled her eyes, but she didn't say anything. "And
I'm coming for a reason, Mama, and we both know what it is, and we'd both
be a lot better off, if you'd just face up to it."

"What's that?" Mamie Ray asked the phone.

"I'm coming, Mama, to make sure you're okay, and that you can still,
you know, live all alone there at the house." Goldie cleared her threat.
"It's not meanness, Mama, so you just put an absolute end to that silly
notion you've got about my coming to do you some kind of dirty deed. I'm
coming," Goldie swallowed so loud that Mamie Ray could hear it all the way from Oregon, "for your own good. Keep that in mind, and I'll appreciate it to no end." Mamie Ray made a face at the receiver before she answered it.

"And I'd appreciate it no end," she answered, "if you'd mind your own business and let me attend to mine. How would that be?" Mamie Ray had seen a plot similar to this on a television program last season, only it was about an elderly man; personally, Mamie Ray thought that if he'd had a little more fight in him, or if he'd had a gun, he could have avoided having to deal with his son and daughter-in-law completely.

"Mama," Goldie said, and it sounded to Mamie Ray like she was about to start a speech.

"What are you going to do about it if you do decide that I ain't fit to live here alone?" Mamie Ray shouted into the phone. Goldie didn't answer. "I'm guessing," Mamie Ray said, "only guessing, mind you, that you're planning to stick me away somewhere. Sell my very own house out from under my very own feet, and stick me away where you and Mr. Smarty don't have to worry about me." Mamie Ray stopped, and still Goldie didn't say a word. "How close am I to right?" she asked the phone.

"Mama--"

"Do you know how old I am?" She didn't give her daughter a chance to take a guess. "Sixty-eight, Goldie. I'm sixty-eight. Sixty-eight is all I am, and I am still in my right mind, and I don't have to wear plastic pants, yet." Mamie Ray stopped to catch her breath. "And I don't care what you and your schoolteacher husband have got to say on the subject."

"Mama, Jack thinks--"
"No," Mamie Ray answered, "Jack don't think, that's half the problem."

"That is completely unfair!" Goldie shrieked in Oregon. "We are both trying to do this for your own good. And we're not trying to run your life for you, either. We're--" Goldie paused, either trying to calm down or to stall for time, Mamie Ray wasn't sure which. "We're trying to make sure that there's somebody there close to take care of you, to--you know--be there for you in case you need someone to be there."

"How about I get married again," Mamie Ray asked, reaching into the pocket of her apron, where the tooth was.

"No one wants--" Goldie started loudly. Mamie Ray could hear the way her breath was coming in short puffs. "Mama," Goldie said then, very quietly, "you are too old to get married again. Besides," she swallowed, "there's not a thing in the world wrong with a nursing home, or something like that. There's real nice ones--estate-like places--right here around Portland and all over. Jack and I have written and called all over the place, and we found out everything you'd want to know." She paused, and Mamie Ray took the telephone receiver and pretended to bang it on the kitchen counter. When she put it back to her ear, Goldie was talking again. "And you'd just have a ball out here in Oregon. I mean, you ain't hardly ever been out of Missouri your whole life. It'd be a real treat."

"Oh, like hell it would," Mamie Ray yelled into the mouthpiece so loud that her voice echoed in her ears for a few seconds.

"Mama," Goldie tried again, in a pinched kind of voice, "Jack told me that you wouldn't take kindly to this, and I assured him--I assured him--that he was dead wrong on this one. I told him you'd be glad to give up
any heavy responsibilities at this point in your life. I told him," Goldie said in quick, biting syllables, "that this would make you happy."

"Then you," Mamie Ray said, "are a half-wit--"

"Mama!"

"--and no longer my daughter." Mamie Ray smiled. "And no longer welcome in my house, so don't even bother coming here."

"Mama!"

"If you come, I'll lock the doors, and you won't get inside." Mamie Ray heard an angry sigh come from Oregon.

"Mama, I'm going to come, and I'm going to bring Teenie, just like I said I was, and we are going to talk about this like two reasonable adults, and you are simply not going to throw another one of these temper tantrums, do you understand me?" Goldie waited. "Do we understand one another?"

Mamie Ray could see that she had no alternative at that point but to hang up the phone. It rang again, about two minutes later, but she didn't answer it. Instead, she turned on the T.V., so she could watch the last half of Family Feud. Then she remembered that there was a movie on that she wanted to watch, so she turned on the television in the bedroom, too. It was an old western with Dean Martin as the bad guy. For a few minutes, she was so busy running back and forth between good parts of each show, that she didn't have time to answer the phone, and finally, about half-way through the movie--long after Family Feud was over--the phone stopped ringing every few minutes, and Mamie Ray didn't even really notice, because Dean Martin was dying, and she realized that she had been thinking of the wrong movie, and that this wasn't the one she had wanted to watch, after all.
That night, Mamie Ray woke up several times, and at four o’clock in the morning, she was convinced that if there was a body in the back yard, it had to be Matthew. It only made sense. In the old dream, she’d seen him make it as far as the back door, and then she woke up. And without her there, in the dream, to make sure he got back to the graveyard, there was no telling where he might’ve ended up. No guarantee, even, that he’d made it out of the back yard. Mamie Ray chided herself for not having realized all of this sooner. If Matthew had been in the back yard for over twenty years, all during her second marriage, it was no wonder he was making his presence known, now. Twenty years was a long time to spend waiting for someone to realize where you were, Mamie Ray guessed. She actually felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment when she thought about how she’d been taking flowers to the cemetery across town all these years.

She knew she wasn’t going to be able to sleep, so she got up and turned on the television and watched the movie that started at four forty-five. It was a mystery about someone who was killing a bunch of showgirls, but Mamie Ray figured out early on who the killer was, and she was disappointed that everyone in the cast, even Robert Conrad, was so stupid that three more girls got killed unnecessarily. Mamie Ray kept yelling clues at the screen, but no one caught on that it was the piano player until the last ten minutes of the show. And of course by then, it was too late for anyone but Michele Lee to be saved. Mamie Ray was so disgusted with them all that she turned off the set before they showed the credits at the end. She sat for a few minutes, staring at the dark picture tube. At least, she thought, it hadn’t been a movie about bodies that surprised live people.
By the time Goldie started calling the next day, around ten, Mamie Ray had been in the yard most of the morning, designating all possible grave sights and marking them off with ice cream sticks and pieces of dark green thread left over from the pantsuit she had made earlier that year for Doris Throckton's fat older daughter. She didn't like walking around in the back yard, but she didn't see any way around it. It wasn't until she went into the house to get a drink of water that the phone started ringing. She picked it up without even thinking about who it would probably be.

"Don't you ever hang up on me again, Mama--" Goldie screeched into Mamie Ray's ear. Mamie Ray set the receiver on its cradle and smiled. It rang again, less than a minute later, and she picked it back up.

"You keep a civil tongue in your mouth, this time around," Mamie Ray shouted into the phone before Goldie had a chance to say anything. "I got better things to do with my time than put up with you and this phone, so why don't you say whatever it is you have to say and leave me alone. All right? Do you hear me?" All the words came out in a rush, and Mamie Ray found herself breathless by the end of the last question. She unbuttoned her coat and yanked the stocking cap off her head. Then she pulled her gloves off with her teeth.

"I'm only trying to do what I think is right, Mama," Goldie said. Mamie Ray heard her say something else to someone on the other end of the line. "Jack thinks you should be in a home, where someone can watch out for you, and so do I."

"Oh, you do?" Mamie Ray asked. "Did you ever think that I don't want no one to watch out for me? Did you ever think that I wanted to be left
The tooth was on the kitchen table, where she'd set it down when she went to the sink for the glass of water. She walked over to the table and picked it up.

"It's not a question--not just a question, I mean--of only what you want, anymore, Mama," Goldie said. There was a sniffany little sigh before she spoke again. "What are people going to think of me, if I let you--. Mama, when I was out to visit last year--face it, you couldn't even match your own socks up right. You were eating spaghetti and God only knows what else out of tin cans, sitting in front of the T.V. all day. What kind of way is that for you to be living?" Mamie Ray held the receiver out at arm's length and dropped it, but the cord wasn't long enough for it to hit the floor, so it just bounced up and down for a while before Mamie Ray grabbed it in mid-air.

"What?" she asked Goldie in the middle of a sentence. "I dropped the phone."

"I said," Goldie answered, "what's supposed to happen when you fall down on the ice this winter? What's supposed to happen if you fall on the steps and lay in the back yard--just tell me--and no one finds you there?" Goldie was quiet for a second, and Mamie Ray grew very anxious about what might happen, even if the dead body was Matthew.

"What?" Mamie Ray asked, finally, and her voice came out dry and quiet. "What?" Goldie said. "You'd freeze to death, that's what."

"Is that all?" Mamie Ray asked, breathing out heavily with relief. "Is that all? Is that all?" Goldie asked. "Are you crazy?"

"It--could be worse, I thought," Mamie Ray answered.
"It could not be!" Goldie roared into the phone. Then she was quiet for a while. "See, Mama? You just love to make me upset, and that makes this whole discussion pointless. I want what I think is best, and you want what you want, and nothing's ever going to get settled until we can talk this thing out, face to face." In Oregon, there was a long sigh.

"My guess is that not much'll get settled then, either, so why bother coming all the way out here?" Mamie Ray examined the tooth in her palm.

"Why do you have to be this way?" Goldie asked. "You never used to be."

"But this way now," Mamie Ray tried to explain, "is sixty-eight years old, and if I do die this winter, now or next year, in front of my T.V. or," she swallowed, "out in the back yard, what difference does it make? In the long run, I mean." Goldie didn't answer. "All I want is to be left alone to do it. Is that too hard for you to understand?"

"But a woman in your condition--"

"My condition's fine, until you call and get my blood pressure all worked up," Mamie Ray informed her. "So you have a nice winter, okay? Say hi to all my grandkids, however many there is, now. All right?"

"There's three," Goldie said.

"Well, three's nice," Mamie Ray said. "Write me a letter sometime and tell me their names." She thought for a minute. "And remind me what Teenie stands for, because I must've forgot."

"Oh, Mama," Goldie groaned.

"Good-bye," Mamie Ray said, taking the phone away from her ear to hang it up. She half-expected it to start ringing again, but it didn't. She stood and watched it for a while, before she pointed her finger at it.
"An old woman," she told the phone, "ought to be left to do whatever it is that she wants to do, without being bothered." The phone didn't answer, so she turned and headed back outside. She was halfway down the steps when she remembered that she was almost out of ice cream sticks, so she went back inside to grab another handful.

*     *     *     *

"How come it took you so long to get to the phone," Goldie wanted to know when she called the following Wednesday. Mamie Ray shrugged. "Well?" Goldie asked again.

"I was outside doing some yard work," Mamie Ray answered, rubbing her nose with her glove.

"Mama, what kind of yard work is there for anyone to do at this time of year?" Goldie demanded. "And why didn't you call someone to help you?"

"Oh--" Mamie Ray said, "--last minute raking, dug up my glad bulbs--you know." Mamie Ray swiped at the dirt on her pantlegs.

"I would've thought," Goldie said, "that the ground would be too frozen to dig in by now."

"Oh, no--no." Mamie Ray pushed aside the kitchen curtain and looked out in the back yard. "It's been real mild here so far, digging ain't too bad at all."

"I see," Goldie said. After that, neither of them said anything for what seemed to Mamie Ray like a whole minute.

"Are you coming or not?" she asked finally. It took Goldie a while to
"No, Mama, I'm not going to be able to, after all," Goldie said in a rush of words. "Teenie's come down with the flu, and that wouldn't be so bad, but Jack's not feeling good, either, as of this morning, and it's just too long a trip for me to go off and leave him here if he's not up to it." There was another long pause. "And I know it's Thanksgiving and all, but maybe you can call up some of your friends there in Burlington, or something--I don't know. But since you didn't want me to come, anyway, Jack and I have decided that the other matter can wait until--spring, maybe, or summer." Mamie Ray smiled.

"Well, it's a shame about them two being sick," Mamie Ray said, still grinning. "And you don't need to worry about me and Thanksgiving, but don't say I didn't warn you about what a sickly looking person Jack was way back when you married him."

"Mama, I don't need to hear this right now," Goldie said.

"I'm just telling you," Mamie Ray continued in a loud voice, "that--"

"Fine, Mama," Goldie said shortly.

"What does Teenie stand for?" Mamie Ray asked. It was a question that had been bothering her since Saturday.

"It's short for Christine, Mama," Goldie answered.

"Well, that's good," Mamie Ray said. "You all have a good Thanksgiving and a real nice Christmas. And New Year. And Easter and Fourth of July."

"I think," Goldie said, "that I'll be in touch before that." Mamie Ray made a face at the phone. "And you forgot Decoration Day, just for the record," Goldie said. Mamie Ray held the receiver away from her ear, then
brought it back quickly.

"I never did," Mamie Ray said, "so don't you pretend like I have."

"What?" Goldie asked.

"I have never forgot Decoration Day, not once, not in years and years and years," Mamie Ray shouted at the phone.

"I didn't mean--" Goldie laughed. "Never mind, Mama. It was--a joke, sort of." Mamie Ray stared at the receiver alongside her head. "I'll talk to you around Christmastime, then, all right?"

"Fine," Mamie Ray said. The phone disconnected in Oregon, but Mamie Ray held onto her end for a while. Finally, she set it back in its cradle and walked to the window. Outside, the back yard was a mess, and Mamie Ray hadn't begun to dig in half as many places as she needed to. It was a good thing there was a fence, she thought. She pressed her nose against the glass.

"Why don't you leave me alone, too?" she yelled through the window. "What did I ever do to you, except tell you to stay dead and to quit bothering me?" There was a light snow that had been falling since morning, and it made the yard look very quiet.

"Why don't you go out to Oregon?" Mamie Ray muttered, pulling off her glove, so she could find the tooth in the pocket of her winter coat. "You wouldn't even have to live in no old folks' home," she said to her pocket. She brought the tooth out and examined it. "You always put up with her better than I did." She pushed her hand close to her face. "How about it?" she asked. "Oregon?" There was no response. "Oregon?" she repeated hopefully.

She stared at the tooth for several seconds and rolled it back and
forth in the palm of her hand. She tossed it in the air a couple of times, but the second time, she dropped it, and it rolled under the stove, and she had to get the broom to get it out. When she had it in her hand again, she went back to look out the window once more. Everything was just the same. She went to the T.V. and switched it on, then walked into the bedroom to find an envelope.
Business

Jessie had been at the cane-on-the-ceiling business for close to an hour when Darlene came to share her troubles for the first time that morning. In that hour, Jessie had not accomplished one thing that she had not set out to accomplish, and she knew it. The whole affair had, in fact, started only that morning at breakfast, when Mary Lou and Sonny and the girl got up and left the table without so much as a backwards glance, and then had stayed upstairs all morning without a peep. Jessie could hear them up there mousing around; she knew they were up to no good, and it filled her with a kind of rage to know that she didn't know exactly what no good it was. At one point, she had nearly started climbing the stairs to find out, but then the cane idea came. And now, after forty-five minutes or so, she liked to think she had this cane business down to an art.

The timing was most important, she'd decided: too long between whacks, and they'd forget that she was onto their little to-do; too regular, and
it'd get old too fast. This way, she was more than pleased to know that every time the rubber tip of the wooden cane exploded against the ceiling, at least one of the sneaks upstairs—and probably her husband, too—jumped and squirmed like they had the hives. And that was just how it ought to be. After all, Jessie thought, you have to treat children like children. The idea stuck, kept coming again and again, and Jessie liked it.

She even said it out loud as she sat down in the rocker and stretched her arm above her head to see if she could reach the ceiling without standing up, but it came out as not much more than a whisper. She was about to say it again, maybe a little louder, when she looked out the window and saw Darlene coming hard for the house, moving as fast over the jutting, broken sidewalk as the phenobarbital would let her. The medicine Darlene took for her epilepsy made her body move in cartoon slow motion; at full speed, the effect was—downright comical, Jessie decided. For a few seconds, she watched Darlene's jerky, wade-water walk; then she remembered what she was about, and she stood up.

Clenching her teeth, she gave the ceiling another whack, and a burn oozed along the muscle of her arm. She cocked her head, then, and listened for the absolute silence that was sure to follow. Instead, she heard a cough and the girl's giggle, and she hit the ceiling again, twice, and the timing didn't matter at all. Not a bit. And this time, there was no sound. Nothing. You just have to treat children like children, she thought.

By the time Darlene managed to throw open the front door, Jessie had heard her fumbling around on the porch, and she had come to sit on the edge of the seat of the rocking chair long before the younger woman lurched into
the room. For a moment, Darlene just stood inside the door, panting, running the point of her tongue back and forth across her pale lips. She sent several quick glances around the room before her gaze came to rest on Jessie; when it did, she swallowed hard and closed her eyes, which caused two measly tears to inch out onto her lashes. Then she dropped her permanent-waved red head back onto the lavender sweater she was wearing and let out a loud, terrible moan. Watching her, Jessie guessed that the sweater was at least one or more sizes too small.

Oh, Lordie Lordie God, Aunt Jessie," Darlene sobbed, clenching and unclenching her hands, "the most horrible thing happened up to the house this morning, and I can't ever go back there to Bobby Joe, because he says I can't." For a second, there was silence; then her head began to flail from side to side. Jessie measured the little woman with her eyes, from where she sat in the rocker.

"My guess is that you're just about to die," Jessie said, trying to remember exactly how many times Darlene had just about died since Labor Day, and here it was just past Thanksgiving; she knew it was at least six or seven. Darlene grew still, her head came up, and she stared hard into Jessie's face. Jessie decided on seven, for sure.

"Oh, God yes, Aunt Jessie," she breathed wetly, rushing forward. Jessie sensed the embrace that was about to happen, and she raised her arm with the elbow up, so that Darlene would have gotten the better half of a fine black eye had she not stopped when she did. While Darlene was bobbing to a cartoon halt, Jessie was counting, and it was eight times since Labor Day.
"The last thing on earth I need," she said, pushing herself out of the rocker, "is you slobbering all the hell over me this early in the day, Girlie." She reached for a straight-back chair and slid it in Darlene's direction. "Now you just knock right off with all this blub-blub stuff and calm down before you make yourself sorry." Jessie hefted the weight of the cane in her hand and looked at the ceiling. "Next thing you know, you'll be having one of your spells and expect for me to take care of you. Now, ain't I right?"

"Oh, but Aunt Jessie," Darlene sobbed loudly, nodding and grabbing the chair and sitting down to rock back and forth on the palms of her hands, "Bobby Joe is madder than a wet hen over this whole thing--and all I was doing was watching Daryl and Charlie King play pool--but try to tell him that, I'd like to see you try." Darlene shook her head, fidgeting on the chair. "He says he's going to leave and go back to live with his mama, who would love nothing in this world better." Darlene let out another long moan and covered her face with her hands.

"Dar-lene!" Jessie said sharply, slapping the cane against the fleshy part of Darlene's thigh and staring briefly up the darkened stairway. Darlene closed her mouth, swallowed, and stared, wide-eyed and silent. "You just stop this business, Girlie, and I mean pronto. Good Jesus, everyone in Burlington'll be able to hear you if you don't put a damper on that mouth of yours." She pointed the cane in Darlene's direction; Darlene eyed it and drew back slowly. "Now you just go on with whatever story it is you come here about, but you leave off with all this whining, because I ain't got no use for it, you understand?" Jessie stared at the redhead for a moment
and walked toward the window, peering through the parted curtains. When she turned around again, Darlene was sitting in precisely the same position, looking at the wall, waiting for the go ahead, Jessie supposed. "Well?" she asked, looking over Darlene's head to the clock on the wall. It was nine forty-five.

"Well," Darlene started. Jessie lifted her arm quickly, and the cane met the ceiling like the sound of a far off rifle. Darlene kind of melted into the chair. Jessie watched her calmly until she began to breathe again.

"Good, good God, Aunt Jessie," Darlene said, finally. "What in the world are you trying to do except for to knock a hole right in through the plaster, I'd like to know?" She stood up and walked unsteadily to where Jessie was and stared up at the ceiling. "I'll bet anything," she said, "that you've already put a crack in it." Before she found one, though, Jessie pressed the heavy tip of the cane somewhere very close to Darlene's navel.

"That's my business, Darlene," she said quietly. "You sit down and talk." Jessie watched as Darlene listened to the sound of each word, slow and separate; Darlene backed up until her knees hit the seat of the straight-back chair, and she buckled into it.

"All right, all right, all right, Aunt Jessie," she said, patting the palms of her hands together. "I'm just trying to ask do you want to pay a fortune to have a new ceiling put in, is all. You can't treat your things that way and expect them to last any time at all. Like Bobby Joe--ever time he comes in the house, since he put that new rug down, you can just bet he takes his old dirty boots off at the front door, or I remind him about it
"real fast." She paused to take a long breath; Jessie examined the ceiling.

"And that's the way you--"

"Would you get on with it?" Jessie asked. For a few seconds, Darlene only frowned back and forth between Jessie and the ceiling, and then she put her hands over her face. Jessie wasn't absolutely sure, but she guessed that Darlene was trying to remember why she'd come in the first place.

"Bobby Joe?" Jessie suggested.

"Oh," Darlene sucked in sharply. "Oh, Aunt Jessie, it's downright horrible. Bobby Joe says he's going to leave because I ain't been faithful to him. Now, he's wrong, ain't he? I mean--he is, ain't he?" Her hands came from covering her face to ball at her neck.

Jessie knew almost for certain that Darlene had not been unfaithful recently, not since she herself had given the girl the what-for when she'd found her out on the back porch with the Orkin man the day he came to spray for roaches early in the summer. Jessie snorted.

"What--exactly, I mean--did Bobby Joe accuse you of?"

"It was awful," Darlene whined. "I ain't even sure that I can tell you in the very words he used." She put her hands back over her face and rubbed them up and down quickly, as though she were erasing herself. They came to rest directly over her mouth.

"Well?" Jessie said. For a moment, Darlene was silent.

"Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm," she muttered.

"What?" Jessie rapped the cane on the back of the chair Darlene was sitting in. "Would you get you hands away from your mouth and talk like a normal human being?" Darlene's hands dropped into her lap.
"He said," she took a deep breath and blew it out, "he said that I'd drop my pants for anything that moved. He said that very thing to me, his own wife, that very, very thing." Jessie sighed and bit down hard on the inside of her cheeks in order to keep her mouth from twisting. When she knew for sure that she wasn't going to laugh out loud, she clenched the cane tightly and sighed again.

"Well, Darlene," she said, shaking her head, "if he don't really know anything that's purely factual, then your best bet is to go straight home and deny anything and everything he says." She watched the girl sitting in the chair, nodding absently. "Don't that make sense?" The clock on the wall said nine fifty-two. Jessie lifted the cane above her head all in one smooth arc. She thought she felt something land in her hair, and she wondered if it was plaster. When she turned back to look at Darlene, the younger woman was clutching the seat of the chair with both hands.

"I really, Aunt Jessie, I really--really wish that you'd let me know when you was about to do that." In the middle of Darlene's loud and catchy breathing, a high, child's giggle sounded down the stairway; immediately, Darlene sat up straight.

"Little Jessie's upstairs?" Darlene twisted to look at Jessie. "I thought they was all leaving this morning." She turned back to look up the stairway. "Jessica Marie Taylor," Darlene called out in falsetto, "you get your butt down here to see your Aunt Darlene, you hear me?"

"No!" the child screeched from the top of the stairs.

"What did--?" Jessie started. "Who--?" Her anger made it hard to breathe.
"Jessica Marie!" Darlene shouted again, "you heard me, now--what are you doing, Aunt Jessie?" Jessie grabbed the redhead's arm and started for the front door.

"Say good-bye, Darlene," Jessie said, reaching for the door knob.

"But what," Darlene sputtered, "am I supposed to say to Bobby Joe? What am--?" She stumbled and nearly fell when Jessie shoved her past the screen door.

"If you want to keep this man, unlike that unfortunate retard you got yourself ahold of last time, you best just do like I told you," Jessie said, feeling the print of the screen against her nose. "And see if you can't try to manage on your own for about five minutes or so this morning--I got business of my own to attend to, all right?"

Darlene's mouth wobbled, and she bowed her head.

"Sometimes, Aunt Jessie," she said, pouting her lips, "you are just plain old mean-souled." Jessie closed the door in Darlene's face and turned to mull over the dim stairway. The child, Jessica, had come down to one of the middle steps, where she was sitting, putting on a pair of black patent leather shoes.


"Mary Lou Burns," she yelled, purposely using her niece's maiden name. "You and Sonny-Boy might as well quit your sneaking around up there and get down here on the ball." She sniffed. "If you think you've got me fooled for a minute, you got another think coming."

The child finished with her shoes and turned to look up the stairway
just as her parents appeared like nervous ghosts behind her. From where she stood, Jessie squinted to see them in the dark upper hallway, and she realized that they were all dressed in their Sunday School clothes.

"And where do you think you're off to?" she asked. She watched them both shift from one foot to the other, like they were dancing to some quiet music no one else could hear. Mary Lou's round face began to twitch.

"We wasn't sneaking behind your back," Sonny said. Before he had even finished talking, Mary Lou put a hand to his mouth to silence him.

"Aunt--Aunt Jessie," she started, taking the first step down, turning to look up at her white-faced husband. "Aunt Jessie, we're going to go--" Her voice thinned to nothing, and she closed her eyes for a second. Jessie rapped the cane in her palm, never blinking. "We're driving to Chicago," she tried again. "You know, in Illinois, because Sonny's folks, well, they asked us, and we," she swallowed, "we said we would. Aunt Jessie." Mary Lou's voice was small and soft and infuriating, like a gnat buzzing around a person's face, and Jessie's grip on the cane tightened until her fingers were numb.

"I got this little bit of vacation, so this is, you know, kind of like a vacation-anniversary combined. You know," Sonny said. Jessie stared up at him, and his big voice, too, seemed to die in his throat. He stepped down and laid one arm around Mary Lou's shoulders; Jessie saw her niece jump and then sink under its weight.

The child had been scooting down the stairs on her bottom, one step at a time. When her feet reached the linoleum floor, she stood up and brushed at the back of the ruffly blue dress she had on.
"We're going to Grandma Taylor's," she said, swiping at her seat. "We been planning to go for about two years," she told Jessie.

"Oh, it hasn't been that long, Silly," Mary Lou interrupted quickly. "Two weeks more like."

"Grandma Taylor's, huh?" Jessie asked, staring at the child, trying hard to ignore the eyes that were no less blue than Sonny's.

"Yessir, and you can go too, if you want. Can't she, Mom?"

"Of course she can go," Mary Lou said too soon. Jessie thought that she sounded a little like she was being strangled.

"Mom and Dad'd be real--real glad to see you again, Aunt Jessie," Sonny said. The couple on the stairs exchanged a pained look.

"Uh-huh," Jessie said.

"Boy, I can't wait hardly no more," the child said, pulling at her dress to straighten it. "I ain't seen Grandma since I was just about a baby, and Eddie'll be there, too, and he's my best cousin." She plucked at the skirt of her dress. "The one I'm going to marry, I mean," she said.

"You can't marry Eddie, Jessica," Mary Lou interrupted again. "He's your cousin, and you can't marry your cousins." The child turned sharply from Jessie to her mother.

"Well, I will too, Missie," she shrieked. "Just you wait and see if I don't." Jessie smiled in spite of herself and placed a hand on top of the child's head.

"You tell that Mom of yours that you know what you want, ain't that right, Baby?" The child made a sass face and nodded. Jessie watched her niece's lips tighten into a thin line.
"You bet I do," Jessica said, twisting away from Jessie's hand to twirl on one foot in the middle of the room, her skirt flying out full around her. Jessie stared at the child for a moment, and then she turned back to the two still close to the top of the stairs.

"We heard Darlene down here," Mary Lou said, but her voice was far too quick and high to sound normal.

"Uh-huh," Jessie said, gripping the neck of the cane.

"We was just about to come down," the younger woman laughed a frantic coughing laugh, "but Sonny couldn't get his tie knotted up right." There was a long silence. Jessie looked at the clock on the wall.

"Uh-huh," she said again. There was an art to almost everything that had to do with showing someone that you weren't to be taken for a fool, Jessie realized.

"She sure was sounding off about something or another," Sonny said. He tried to smile and nearly succeeded. The problem was that he reminded Jessie of some silly, stuffed teddy bear, all fat and mindless, and she snorted shortly through her nose.

"We was trying to hear what was going on," Jessica said, walking toward the window, where a blue and red pump-handle top lay on the floor. "But there was so much racket down here, you wouldn't believe it." Mary Lou gave the child a solid look, which she ignored. "What was you doing down here, anyway, Aunt Jessie? Beating on a drum?" She squatted to the floor and began pumping the top's handle; on the smooth linoleum, it turned noisily. "Huh?" she prompted again. Jessie didn't answer, and the child kept moving the handle up and down; the metallic whirring was the only sound in
the room.

A movement at the top of the stairs caught Jessie's eye, and she turned to see Mary Lou step away from Sonny's arm. Her voice was low, but Jessie had little trouble making out what she was saying.

"You probably ought to go out and get the car started and warmed up a little bit, Honey." Mary Lou smiled a quick twitch of a smile, and Jessie felt her own mouth pull into a line. For a moment, there was silence as Sonny looked from his wife to his daughter to Jessie. He moved down the stairs slowly.

"I'll just go start the car up, then," he said, and his smile didn't reach his whole mouth. No one said a word as he opened the front door and went outside. Jessie watched the way Mary Lou's eyes followed him long after the door closed, and she snorteded again.

"Someone," Jessie said to the bottom step, "ought to snatch you bald-headed for a fool." She was afraid if she looked up at her niece, her temper would not be controllable. Instead, she turned to watch the child. Jessica laughed and let go of the top, staring after it as it rolled crazily across the floor, finally coming to rest under one of the runners of the rocking chair.

"That'd be a sight," she smirked. "A bald-headed Mom." She looked carefully between her mother and Jessie.

"You," Mary Lou spoke low and suddenly, pointing at her daughter, "are a damned sight too big for your britches."

"Well, look who thinks they've got room to talk," Jessie said, walking fast to the foot of the stairs, looking up at her niece. Mary Lou backed
up a step and folded her arms across her chest; Jessie felt the urge to go after her and bring her down the stairs.

"I ain't got britches on, besides," Jessica sassed, pulling her dress up around her waist to reveal white panties. "I got on a blue dress. Are you blind, Miss Missie?" Mary Lou blew out a short, angry breath and started down the stairway, but her eyes met Jessie's and she stopped cold. Jessica looked from one to the other, still holding her dress up; finally, Jessie took the cane and swatted the little girl's bottom.

"Put that goddamned dress down--who do you think you are, anyway?"
The child gasped and turned to stare at Jessie with wide eyes; she let go of the hem of the dress and dropped her head onto her chest, her mouth set in a pout.

"As for you," Jessie said, turning back to Mary Lou, "I'd like to know why you think you ought to run all the way out to Chicago, Illinois, to visit that boy's straggly-assed family." Mary Lou didn't answer. "They're whores and thieves and liars, right down to the last one of them."

"I knew this would happen." Mary Lou raised her face to stare at the ceiling, and Jessie swung the cane hard into the palm of her hand.

"You knew what?" she asked, liking the sting of the cane, liking the way the sting grew every time the cane popped in her hand.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," Mary Lou muttered.

"You better talk to me, Girl, if you know what's good for you," Jessie said, swinging the cane harder.

"Oh, Aunt Jessie, try to understand just once," Mary Lou begged.

"They're Sonny's folks--his folks. And it's just for a couple of days--we
ain't staying forever, for Pete sakes." Jessie heard the whine that had snaked into her niece's voice, like she was five or six years old. "And we haven't got to see them in four years, since they moved out there," Mary Lou added. Children, Jessie thought.

"Save it," Jessie said, "for a fool, which I ain't one of. You go out there once, and next thing you know, you'll be going out there every time you turn around. Next thing you know," she paused to swallow, "them half-wit relatives of his'll be trying to talk the both of you into moving out there with them, and that girl over there," she pointed in the general direction without turning her head, "will end up worse off than he is."

"Than Sonny, you mean?" Mary Lou asked.

"Who else would I mean?" Jessie laughed. "George Washington?"

"What is so wrong with him?" Mary Lou demanded, slapping one hand down on the banister.

"Wrong with him?" Jessie forced a laugh and bent to beat one hand on her thigh. "That's a hoot, Missie. Even your own daughter knows he's the most shiftless bastard ever born on the face of the earth." She looked at Jessica, who was studying her black patent leather shoes, and paying close attention to the slow tap-tap they made on the smooth, flowered linoleum. "He's worthless, worthless, worthless," Jessie said, "and you know it." Mary Lou put her face in her hands and Jessie nodded.

"I just don't know what it is you expect, Aunt Jessie," Mary Lou said finally, raising her head. "He's a good man, and he's good to us and to you, and you still don't have a decent word for him." She took a deep breath and released it slowly. "I just don't know what it is you want."
Jessica's shoes tapped louder and faster in the silence.

"What I expect," Jessie said, glancing quickly over at the child, "is a little consideration around here. Is that too much? Is it? I give you all a home, keep a roof over your all's heads, and then you let him talk you into sneaking around behind my back." Her breath was starting to come harder, and for the moment, the art of it all was starting to wear thin. "Sure, you can tell that little whore Darlene all about what you're up to--" Mary Lou opened her mouth, but Jessie shook the cane at her. "--don't deny it, either, because she told me so herself."

"Then, she's a liar, too," Mary Lou shouted. "I wouldn't tell Darlene a word about anything if she begged me on her hands and knees. And what," she pointed back at Jessie, "do you get around here if it ain't consideration, I'd like to know? You run our lives, and we let you, and the first time we plan to do anything without your permission, you act like we're mean little kids trying to do you dirty." Jessie felt a deeper anger growing with every word her niece spoke. "And as far as the house and the roof go, it was you who said you didn't want to die a lonely old woman. It was you, Aunt Jessie, who begged us to stay here. Am I speaking an untrue word? Am I?" Jessie had never seen Mary Lou this way, and she didn't like it now. "I am twenty-seven years old, Aunt Jessie, and I've been married almost ten years, and my life is mine, goddamnit, it's not yours." Jessie wasn't really aware that she threw the cane until she saw it fly end over end across the room; when it landed, it lay on the floor like a live thing, rolling stiffly before it came to a final rest. The child walked over to toe it with her shoe.
"From this day forward," Jessie said, forcing the words up from her throat, "I don't want nothing to do with you, Missie. Do you understand? I want you out of my house and out of my life. Do you," she said again, "understand?" She watched Mary Lou's face for a long time before she turned to the child, who was still kicking at the cane with the toe of her shoe.

"You wasn't planning to go too, was you?" Jessie asked her. "All the way to Illinois?"

"I wanted to go," Jessica said quietly, plucking at the skirt of her dress, glancing up occasionally at her mother. Jessie didn't turn to find out the exact nature of those looks. She licked at her upper lip and narrowed her eyes.

"Well, then, you just go on," she said, nodding slightly. The child didn't respond. "And I hope and pray I die while you're all gone." She yanked at the girl's arm and knelt down so that they were face to face.

"How would you like to come home and find your only Aunt Jessie dead?" She felt her own breath, hot in the space between her face and the child's. Jessica's mouth quivered once before she began to cry in low, hiccuppy sobs.

"I won't go--nowhere, Aunt Jessie," she sniffed.

When the front door opened, no one saw it except for Jessie. Sonny stood rigid, looking from his wife to his daughter, both white-faced and weeping. Jessie watched him, her eyes following the path his took; she rose from her haunches and smiled.

"You leave my house," she said. "None of us needs the likes of you disrupting things around here." On the stairway, Mary Lou gasped, but Jessie didn't turn. "Go on," she said to Sonny. He ignored her and walked
toward his daughter.

"Would someone mind telling me what the hell's been going on in this house?" he asked, starting past Jessie. Before she knew just what it was she was doing, her hand swung and hit him full in the mouth. Dazed, he licked at the blood on his inner lips.

"Don't you curse in my house," Jessie said, watching his face. She took his measure as he stood, motionless, and she grabbed one of his large arms in both of her hands. When she started for the door, Sonny followed her for about three and a half steps; in the middle of the fourth, he stopped and pulled back hard on his arm. The next thing Jessie knew, she was falling.

On the floor, she became aware of several things—Sonny's mouth hanging open limply, Mary Lou's hands clenched in her hair, the child grabbing up fistfuls of her blue skirt, and her own dress up around her white thighs. For a moment, she lay very still; when she moved, it was to raise herself on one elbow to pull the skirt of her dress down around her knees. And it was then that she saw Darlene out on the front porch.

"Well, you big old sonofabitch, you," the redhead shouted, bursting in through the front door, "is all you know how to do beat up on old women who can't defend theirselves?" Before Jessie could say anything, Darlene had jumped onto Sonny's broad back and was riding him around the living room, punching small fists into his spine. Jessie pulled herself into a sitting position.

"Darlene!" she shouted. Sonny shuffled across the room, trying to rid himself of Darlene, who was biting his shoulder. "Darlene!" Jessie said
again, slapping her hand onto the floor. Darlene turned to look at Jessie, but the excitement had been too much, as Jessie feared. Her arms went slack from around Sonny's neck, and her body jerked itself to the floor.

"Now look what you've done," Jessie said, looking up at Sonny, reaching for Darlene's shaking body. Sonny took a step backwards, but didn't say a word. Jessie shoved her fist into Darlene's mouth to keep her from swallowing her tongue, and she felt a grim sort of satisfaction in the pain from the teeth that clamped down on her hand. When a puddle began to seep across the linoleum between Darlene's legs, Jessica moved over to stand next to Sonny. Jessie felt their eyes on her as she held onto Darlene through the worst of it. When it was over, Jessie sank into a sitting position and mopped a hand across her face. She heard Sonny clear his throat, but she didn't look up.

"Do you want us to do anything before we leave?" he asked too loudly.

"Before--?" Mary Lou said from the stairs.

"Jessica girl, get yourself together now, all right?" he said. Jessie waited.

"I have to stay here," the child answered. Jessica smiled.

"You can come with us," he said. "Mary Lou," his voice was louder, "get your all's coats and the suitcase and come on. Now," he said. Jessica stroked Darlene's arm and waited. "Bring that little purse of Jessica's, too," he called up to Mary Lou.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jessie watched the child. Jessica looked over and met her stare.

"I ain't going, Daddy," the child said.
"Sure you are," Sonny said. Mary Lou started down the stairs with the suitcase and the coats.

"No, I'm not." This time there was something final about her words.

"Are you sure?" Sonny asked. He cleared his throat. "Eddie's going to be there and all, and you ain't seen him since he came to visit last Christmas." Jessica nodded. Sonny went to help Mary Lou with the suitcase.

"You can't make a child do what it don't feel," Jessie said to no one in particular, staring down at the floor. Mary Lou took Jessica's coat from where it was draped over her arm. She hung it on the end of the banister.

"You ain't going then, Jessica?" she asked. The child looked at Jessie again and shook her head.

"Nope," she said in a small voice. Mary Lou and Sonny stood for only a second before they started for the front door.

"When do you all expect to be back?" Jessie asked from the floor.

"We'll be back Wednesday," Sonny said without looking around. The door closed behind them, and Jessie raised a hand to her chest.

"See," she said to the child, "they wasn't a bit concerned with you. All they care about is theirselves." Jessie pulled herself to her hands and knees. "And did you see how your Daddy pushed me down, tried to hurt me?"

"Yessir," Jessica said, walking to the window beside the front door, pressing her face against the glass. Jessie watched her from the middle of the room, saw the way her body strained when the car pulled into view.

"Ain't I told you he was like that?" Jessie asked, getting to her
feet. Over the child's shoulder, Jessie saw the car back into the street and then move forward and disappear over the hill at the end of the road. The window was clouded from Jessica's breathing.

"Well?" Jessie prompted.

"Yessir," the child said again.
Texas

In my opinion, no one in Denton Pollick's entire family would ever have found out the truth about Russell if Denton hadn't been home from school because of the dirty laundry policy Dorothy made up in the fall when school started. The dirty laundry policy stated that no one--absolutely no one--had to go to school if he didn't have any clean clothes to wear that day, and as luck would have it, Denton didn't have a clean stitch anywhere in the house. I have always thought that it was incredible good luck, too, that he was sitting in front of the T.V. in his dad's bathrobe watching *The Price is Right* and eating Captain Crunch when the phone rang and Dorothy answered it. He told me later about how she dropped the receiver right on the kitchen floor and sat down at the table with her hands over her head.

Because naturally Denton was curious about what exactly was going on, and naturally he picked up the phone, I mean. And they--the men at work, I guess--told him the truth about his dad Russell being dead. Now, if
things had been different, I would've found out later that same night, any­
way, when my dad got home, because he was the insurance man for the plant
where Russell Pollick worked, and he knew all about it; in the long run,
I probably ended up knowing more about Russell's death than Denton did.
But if I'd been the one to tell the Pollicks that he was dead, I'm not
sure that they would have believed me, because Dorothy's story was just
too good. Plus, they weren't real nuts about my mom, and they would've
said that she was just making the whole story up just to make them mad. In
reality, my mother would never have done anything like that, because she
wouldn't have wasted that much of her time on the Pollicks, one way or the
other. But it was a good thing Denton was at home, anyway, because the
dog showed up that afternoon, too.

I didn't show up until four o'clock, which was after school and after
my mother had spent twenty minutes telling me how I was going to ruin my
life by running around with the Pollicks, like they were the only people
in Burlington to run around with. My mother had never been overly fond of
Denton's family, but when I made the mistake of telling her that they put
milk in their hair, she never forgave them. And right afterwards, my sister
Martina started holding her nose on the bus whenever she had to sit next to
one of them. To be honest, I didn't blame the Pollicks a bit for not trust­
ing me any farther than they could've thrown me, and maybe not that far.
At any rate, I did show up at four, and Denton's mom Dorothy was nowhere
to be found, and neither were his brothers Daryl and Raymond. Denton was
watching T.V.

"Hey," I said, banging on the screen door. The Pollicks were the
only people I knew who kept their front door open during the winter. Of course, they were the only people I knew who had a dirty laundry policy and the only people I knew who cooked goulash in a washtub and probably the only people I knew who combed their hair with milk to hold it in place. Through the screen, Denton's hair looked pretty stiff, like Dorothy had used a lot of milk that morning. Or maybe not—sometimes, when it didn't get washed between one day and the next, the milk just sort of built up. The smell kept changing, though, so you could usually tell about how many days it had been, total.

"Hey," he said back at me. I started to open the door. "You can't come in unless you want to get dogbit, though," he said in the same voice. I let go of the screen.

"You ain't got a dog," I said.

"We didn't before General Hospital came on," he said without looking away from the television.

"And you got one now?" I pressed my face up against the screen and tried to see all around the living room. It looked the same as usual, except Denton's dirty clothes were piled in the middle of the floor.

"He ain't in here, Barb," Denton said, pointing to his left with a long-handled spoon. He was eating out of a half-gallon carton of green mint chip ice cream, which was dripping all over the blue bathrobe he had on. "He's in the kitchen." Denton took another bite of green ice cream. "He done eat up most of the ham Mom bought at the store yesterday," Denton informed me. "He's real smart; he can open up the refrigerator all by himself." Denton nodded his head and his hair lifted and fell all in one big
flap on top of his head.

"Well, chain him up or something, so I can come inside," I told him, pecking at the screen with my fingers. I was starting to get cold on the front porch.

"We ain't got a chain," he said, "and if we did, I wouldn't try to put it on him. He done bit Mom on the leg and almost took Daryl's hand off when he come home from school." Denton licked on the spoon and stuck it back in the carton.

"Well, if he bites people, why'd you let him come in the house?" The Pollicks were always doing things that didn't really make much sense to me. I could, at least, understand why my mother wanted me to make new friends.

"Well, we didn't exactly let him in," Denton said, running his tongue along the handle of the spoon, "he sort of got in." He turned the spoon over. "And now we can't get him out. Mom says he'll want out of his own accord, sooner or later, but he ain't showed no signs of that, either." I watched Denton, who had gone back to watching the T.V.

"You are a big, fat liar," I said. "You ain't got a dog in that kitchen any more than I do."

"Come on in and find out," he answered without looking at me.

"Where's Dorothy at?" I demanded, pounding on the screen and kicking it near the bottom. Denton didn't look at me, but he pointed his spoon in my direction.

"She left with Raymond and Daryl for a little bit, and would you shut up? I been watching this man play this stupid game for half an hour, and he's just about to win the big money, if William Shatner don't lose it for
him. All the time he was talking, Denton was waving the spoon for me to be quiet, so I shut up until I heard the studio audience applaud and the prize announcer start talking.

"Can I talk now?" I asked.

"Our dad's dead," he told me.

"He is not, Stupid, he's at work."

"They called from work, Stupid," Denton said. "He got killed under a sheet of steel, this man said on the phone." Denton smiled proudly. "He was doing something dangerous when it happened, the man from work told me so."

I didn't know if Denton meant something dangerous that he was supposed to be doing, or something dangerous that he wasn't supposed to be doing. And I didn't ask.

"What's a sheet of steel?" I said instead.

"It's like sheets you put on a bed, only heavy," Denton told me. I knew that wasn't right, but I wasn't going to say anything about that, either. Denton looked up at me. "What'd we do in math today?" Denton was in eighth grade, but he was in my seventh grade math class. He stared at me, waiting for an answer, and set the ice cream down on the crate that served as a coffee table.

"Oh, nothing much," I said back, scraping one fingernail up and down a row of squares on the screen. It made a little hum noise. "What're you guys going to do now?" Denton didn't answer right away; instead, he started wiping up the wet green places on his bathrobe with his fingers and then licking them clean.

"Well, we got this dog, now," he said. "And it's just about Christmas,
and all." He held the front of the robe up to his mouth and sucked on one of the places where a drip had been. "I get this housecoat dirty," he said to me, "and Mom won't ever wash my clothes no more."

"How's Dorothy?" I asked. "Is she okay, I mean?" I swallowed. "Did she cry and stuff?" Denton let the bathrobe fall out of his mouth.

"Not a bit," he said, reaching for the carton and closing it up with the spoon still inside. "That dog showed up, and she started calling him Russell, and she acted just fine after that." He stood up and came over to the door, carrying the ice cream. "Before that," he said in a lower voice, "she mainly just sat in at the kitchen table. That was during All My Children, though."

"Well, can I come in or not," I asked finally, when Denton turned around and headed for the kitchen.

"Knowing how much you like dogs, I wouldn't risk it, if I were you," he said from the other room. I heard what sounded like a very big dog growl.

"Don't cross me, you mangy sonofabitch," Denton shouted in the kitchen. Even though he was only thirteen, he already talked worse that either one of my parents. I stood at the door a couple of seconds longer, but Denton didn't come back into the room.

"See you later," I yelled through the screen.

"Yeah, Barbara," he called back. I let my hand fall away from the door, and I turned around and walked back to my house, which was just across the street, and a much nicer house all the way around, according to my mother. Martina was out in the yard playing with her cat; it was a new one she'd only had about three weeks. The last one she had got killed when our
fat Aunt Alice came to visit and fell through the back porch and landed on top of it before it knew what was happening. Martina was, as a result, very protective of this new cat, which she called Baby Rose, Rose being our family name. Mom still wouldn't let it live in the house with us.

"Pollicks' dad got killed at work today," I told Martina. She looked up.

"So?" she asked. About that time, the cat bit her on the thumb, and she slapped it up alongside its head.

"So nothing, I just thought you might like to know, is all." I kicked at the snowy ground, and some dirt and snow landed on Martina, who had on her good winter coat.

"Knock it off!" Martina yelled, jumping to her feet. She was a good four inches taller than I was. "What do you want? You want me to cry? Is that it?" I looked back over my shoulder, afraid that Denton would hear, what with us being not very far away and their front door being open. "You want me to cry over the Pollicks?" she asked again. Before I could answer, she threw back her head. "Boo-hoo," she wailed out in falsetto, "boo-hoo-hoo-hoo."

At that point, I had no choice but to kick Baby Rose across the yard. And it was just lucky for me that about the same time, the Pollicks drove up in their car, and Dorothy and Raymond and Daryl all climbed out and headed for the house. So while Martina went chasing off across the yard to make sure her stupid cat was all right, I ran as hard as I could back across the street and caught up with them just as they reached the porch.

"Hi, you guys," I said from behind them. Dorothy turned around and
looked at me like she wasn't sure who I was. Raymond and Daryl ran past her into the house.

"Hi, Barb," she said finally. She was still holding the screen door open, and she turned and looked at it like she'd forgotten why she was holding it open. She shook her head, then, short and fast, like a person does when they've got a bug in their hair. "You coming in?" she asked me.

"I guess so--if it's okay," I said, looking inside. She kind of half-nodded and followed me into the living room; she asked Denton right away if Russell was still around, and Denton said he was. Dorothy walked into the kitchen. At first, I was confused until I remembered that Russell was the dog's name, too. I knew my mother would have gotten a real bang out of that if she found out, so I started making notes about what I could tell when I got home, and what I couldn't.

"You want to go to Texas with us?" Raymond asked me and Denton, who was turning off the T.V. "Dad done took off without us, I guess, but me and Daryl's going, ain't we?" Raymond took off his coat and threw it down on the divan, which kind of sagged across one end of the living room.

"Going to ride horses," Daryl screeched. Daryl was eight, but he acted about four and still couldn't talk in whole sentences. I was starting to wonder if he was ever going to get any smarter.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Denton asked Raymond, ignoring Daryl's hopping around the room in a modified skip, which was, I supposed, how he thought you rode horses.

"Texas," Raymond said. "Dad went to Texas." Suddenly, from the kitchen, Dorothy let out a yell.
"That damned dog," Denton muttered, looking at me and shaking his head. Then he turned back to Raymond. "Now what in hell are you talking about?"

"Texas, Denton, Dad's in Texas." Raymond sprawled out on the divan next to his coat.

"Dad is where?" Denton asked, looking over at me again.

"Texas horses!" Daryl shouted.

"Our dad's in Texas," Raymond said. Denton didn't say anything for a while, and I figured he was probably worried, what with Raymond being only six.

"Our dad's dead," he said, finally. "Who told you any different?"

"Mom said Dad's in Texas, Dummy," Raymond said again, stressing each word as though Denton were hard of hearing. Denton looked at me again, and I shrugged. In the kitchen, Dorothy let out another yell.

"Mom!" Denton shouted. "Mom, get in here and tell Raymond that he's crazy." Dorothy grunted loudly, and Denton sighed and rolled his eyes. "If you don't get away from that dog," he called out to her, "you're going to get eat up alive." Dorothy appeared at the doorway of the kitchen with a broomstick. Her hand was bleeding and the hair that had been stuffed up in a bun was straggling down around her face.

"Russell done ate that whole ham," she said, smiling.

"Mom, what are these two little chickenshits talking about?"

"About what, Denton?" she asked. I was starting to wonder what was wrong with Dorothy. I mean, it wasn't anything about the way she looked or the way she talked, but both of those things were part of it. Like, right then, Denton was standing there yelling at her, and she was just
smiling and talking real soft.

"About Texas!" Denton was shouting. "About Texas! They think Dad's in Texas!"

"Well, he is, Denton," Dorothy answered in that same quiet voice. "He's been wanting us all to go to Texas for years, you know that as well as I do." Dorothy pulled a few stray strands of hair back over her ear. "He just didn't want to wait any longer on all of us."

If I had to guess, I would say that it was about then that Denton started to think the same things about Dorothy that I was thinking. I know he did, because he didn't say anything, and it was just not like Denton not to say anything. But he didn't. Instead, he stood there for almost a whole minute, and he looked like he didn't know what to do, like he was worried for a while that someone was playing a bad joke on him, and then for a while like he was hoping he'd gotten the story wrong over the phone, maybe. When I thought about it later, I figured that Denton really did want to be wrong, right then.

"Do you think I should buy some dog food?" Dorothy asked, looking over her shoulder into the kitchen. Denton stared at her like he needed a foreign translator, like they have on television sometimes.

"No," he said finally. And after that, no one said anything for what felt like too long a time.

"So, what's this dog look like?" I asked, wanting for things to be easy again. Dorothy crooked her finger at me to come stand next to her. I wasn't sure I wanted to be that close that fast, but I walked over next to where she was standing, anyway. Denton, I realized, was moving at the
same time as I was, grabbing Raymond and Daryl by the arms and dragging them with him out the front door.

"Put your all’s coats on," Dorothy called out to them. I tucked my head down and bit on my lips to keep from laughing, because the idea of Denton putting on a coat over the blue bathrobe suddenly struck me as being funny. Dorothy put her hand on my arm, and I lifted my head.

"See?" she said, guiding me into the doorway. "See?" She kept one hand on my arm and pointed with the other one, the one that still held the broom. "He’s right over there in the corner."

Next to the stove was the biggest black dog I had ever seen in my life. And all over the kitchen floor were meat bones and leftover goulash and handi-wrap and paper and one plastic container, which had been chewed in half. The dog looked at us and growled, but I had the feeling that he was too full to do much moving around.

"Ain’t Russell the smartest thing you ever saw?" Dorothy asked me. "He can open up that refrigerator all by himself." She cocked her head to one side, and then she leaned down close to my shoulder. "I bet anything that he’s had special training by a professional dog handler," she whispered near my ear. Then she looked in my eyes and nodded.

"You think so?" I asked, because I didn’t know what else to say.

"I ain’t got a doubt," she answered, staring at the dog.

"Well, maybe you’re right," I said, looking at the front door and wondering where Denton had run off to.

"I know I am," Dorothy said. She let go of my arm. I looked down where her hand had been, and there was blood on my sleeve from the dogbite
she had on her hand. I knew my mother was going to have plenty to say about that, too. Dorothy never even noticed, though.

"All right," Denton said, slamming in through the front screen door in his robe, "first thing we have to do is get rid of that mangy-assed dog before it has us eat out of house and home." He looked at Dorothy, eye to eye, and it was as if Russell Pollick's death had made them strangers in their own house. I tried to see behind Denton to where Raymond and Daryl were standing, but I couldn't.

"This is my dog," Dorothy said, clutching the broomstick up tight against her.

"This ain't nobody's dog," Denton told her.

"How you going to get him out?" I asked, backing up as the dog stepped out from behind the stove. It was a question I was concerned with most, I think, probably because I was the closest one to him at that minute. Denton didn't answer me, but he walked into the bedroom he shared with the younger boys and came out a few seconds later with a wooden ball bat.

"You two get in the bedroom," he told Raymond and Daryl, who were still standing in the middle of the room, near Denton's dirty clothes. I don't think I'd ever seen them stand still for so long. They both looked up at Denton as he spoke, and they both walked into the bedroom, like they were under a spell or something. "And you two," he said to me and Dorothy, "get over there on the divan." Well, it didn't take me two seconds to shrug away from Dorothy and jump up on the divan. I climbed from the seat to the arm, and as extra protection, I climbed all the way up on the back and leaned against the wall. If the divan didn't fall in, I was going to be pretty
safe.

"Come on, Mom," Denton said, walking toward Dorothy. From where I was, I could see into the bedroom, where Raymond and Daryl were just standing, looking down at the floor, and I guessed that Denton must have told them the truth and made them believe it, because there sure wasn't any more jumping around about Texas and horses. While Denton and Dorothy stood in the great Burlington, Missouri Stare-Off, I watched the younger Pollicks and wondered if it wouldn't have been better to let them think that Russell was in Texas, after all.

"Wake up, Mom!" Denton was shouting, when I turned around and looked toward the kitchen doorway again. "This dog is a mean bastard who's probably got rabies, for all we know." Dorothy put her hands out and gripped Denton's shoulders until he winced. I would be willing to say that she must have had ahold of him pretty good.

"We can't let him go, Denton," she whispered. Denton took the broom out of her hand, where she had it crooked in one thumb. He turned and looked at me and shook his head.

"Oh, yes we can," he told her. "Now move." Dorothy came over to the end of the divan, and there was a look on her face that I remembered from having been lost in a grocery store in Kansas City once, when I was five or six. I walked back and forth along the fruit and vegetable aisle, just so I could look in the mirror behind the oranges and stuff and see someone I knew, even if it was only me. I mean, I was only five or six. But that's how Dorothy looked right then, like she didn't really know anyone.

After all the fuss, it was pretty amazing how quick Denton got the dog
out, actually. He just took the broom in one hand and the bat in the other, and he ran into the kitchen yelling and waving both arms, and he chased the dog Russell right into the living room. I screeched and grabbed the wall with the palms of my hands and knew for sure that if the divan decided to collapse, it would be soon. I looked down to my right, and Dorothy was as stiff as a board, her hands clenched in fists under her chin.

I was so busy watching Dorothy, in fact, that I didn't even get to see the dog dive through the door; I just got to see the screen slap shut behind him. I took a long breath and blew it out slowly. Denton was grinning and raising his hands over his head like he was the cham-pion, as he called it. He was always doing that to show off. I rolled my eyes and looked at Dorothy, who had sat down on the arm of the divan. I started to tell Denton to knock it off, but Dorothy was already talking.

"You know," she said, leaning her head back so that she was looking up at the ceiling, "I remember once when this wasp got in the house in the summertime, and Russell was trying to chase him out the door. Do you remember this, Denton?" I looked over at Denton, but Dorothy didn't. She pushed a few loose strands of hair back over her ear and rubbed at her nose. "He was such a funny man," she went on. "And he'd read in some stupid magazine that you was supposed to be able to kill wasps with ketchup." Dorothy lifted her head up and looked at Denton, or the wall behind Denton, maybe, and started laughing, giggling breathy giggles and bowing up and down on the arm of the divan. "I swear to God that was the funniest thing I ever saw—a grown man chasing around the house trying to squirt ketchup on a goddamned wasp." Dorothy was laughing so hard by this time that there
were tears on her face. "Denton, don't you remember this?" He shrugged and shook his head.

From up on the divan, I could see into the bedroom, where Raymond and Daryl still were. Only now, they weren't just standing, they were playing what looked like must be the new Russell Pollick game. They'd pulled a sheet off of the double bed, and they were throwing it up in the air and letting it fall on top of them. Then they'd play dead for about ten seconds and get up and do it again. I figured that Denton must've tried to explain what a sheet of steel was. I decided almost immediately that this was something else my mother would be better off not hearing about. I was going to motion for Denton and Dorothy to look in the bedroom, but Dorothy started talking again, before I could.

"That wasp must've flied into every room in the house, and that Russell kept on chasing after him and squirting ketchup all over the walls, and I kept screaming," she paused for a catchy breath, "screaming that he was going to clean up every bit of it, and he said he didn't care, and I was laughing like crazy and so was he," she said, rubbing her fingers across one wet cheek. "He said he didn't care at all." She rubbed her cheek again. "He said that he'd read that ketchup was a surefire wasp killer--I told you that already, didn't I?" Her giggling was getting quieter, and she kept swiping quick hands over her wet face. Denton was across the room, staring at the floor. "Every time, Denton, I bet every time I see a wasp, I'm probably going to think about the way that damned fool Russell chased that one all over this house with a squirt bottle of ketchup that summer." Dorothy's voice sort of died away. "I don't think he ever did get it,
either," she said. "I can't remember exactly how it came out, now." Her voice was almost a whisper. Then she was quiet for a long time, pushing limp pieces of hair back over her ear and into her lop-sided bun.

"Well, I guess I better head home," I said, and it was surprising to hear my own voice, what with the room being so quiet. Denton didn't look up from the floor, even though I stared at him for quite a while. I glanced into the bedroom, where Raymond and Daryl were still throwing the sheet in the air, before I started climbing down from the divan. They didn't even look like they were having much fun, now, but they kept playing anyway. I shrugged.

"Well, I'll see you all tomorrow, or sometime," I said, walking toward the door. When I got to the screen, I pressed my face against it and checked outside to make sure Russell the dog wasn't waiting out there for me. I didn't see him anywhere, but that didn't mean much—he was a smart dog, as everybody kept pointing out, and he could be hiding.

"Do you think," I said, swallowing, tapping Denton on the arm, "that the dog—you know, Russell, I mean—that he's gone?" Denton nodded his head, and his hair fell forward in one big flap. "Well, okay then, I guess—see you all later," I said.

No one answered, not even Raymond or Daryl, and I went out through the door, closing it very carefully behind me. For a couple of minutes, I sat down on the cement front porch, even though it was cold through my pantlegs. I stared across the street for a minute, and decided that Martina must've gone inside, because she and the cat were nowhere to be seen. So I got up and started across to my house, and I only turned around once to look back
at the Pollicks. I couldn't see them anymore, of course, not even outlines through the screen. Inside the door and windows, it just looked dark, now. A car was coming down the road, so I had to hurry to the other side, thinking about how it would have been just like Russell Pollick to take off for Texas without telling anyone, if that's what would have happened. My mother always said he was like that. I shrugged my shoulders deeper into my jacket and stepped into my own yard.
The last time Claudie Rose visited his mother at Quiet Hills, in late October, she talked mainly about Houseton Dyer, the Jewel Tea man, who had nearly saved Libby Morris from being an eternal morphodite. Claudie didn't know what to say, so he stood at the foot of the bed and patted the lump of her foot under the covers. She also talked about how much she was enjoying the beach. Claudie patted her foot again. Sometime over the last year, she had convinced herself that she was no longer in Missouri, and now she simply refused to listen to any of Claudie's sensible conversation, closing her eyes and pretending to be asleep every time he started talking about Dahlia or the kids or any of the people in Burlington. When he left the home at noon, he still didn't have any idea who Houseton Dyer and Libby Morris were, let alone what a morphodite might possibly be. His mother had always been the most troublesome woman he had ever known, but now that she thought she lived in Florida, she was impossible. The doctors told him she was getting
worse; Claudie Rose could not imagine what worse could be.

When she wrote a month later, she informed him in her letter that she believed she might need a parasol for Christmas, that the sun was starting to freckle her fair complexion, and Claudie didn't know whether to laugh or cry. His wife Dahlia laughed until she couldn't breathe, bowing up and down and walking in circles and slapping her hands on her thighs. She went so far as to insist on saving the letter to show at her next ladies' club meeting, hoping all the other ladies would get a real bang out of it, too. As far as Claudie could tell, the ladies met once a month chiefly for the purpose of getting a bang out of one thing or another. Sometimes he wondered whether or not they ever got a bang out of him. Mostly, he tried not to think about it too much.

As it happened, he decided to buy his mother the parasol for several reasons, but he'd forgotten every one of them by the time he and Dahlia were on their way to Quiet Hills for the Christmas visit, and she discovered the badly wrapped package in the back seat under his insurance briefcase. She turned red in the face and threatened to throw the package right out the window if he didn't explain that very minute what he thought he was doing, anyway. Claudie was silent, sorry that he had tried to pull one over on Dahlia, when he knew how poorly she took to being crossed. He didn't say a word, so Dahlia rolled down her window and held the present out alongside the car, where Claudie couldn't see it; snow blew inside and gathered on the rug in the rear deck. Claudie cleared his throat and thought about ways to reason with her, but he knew before he started that she probably wasn't going to understand.
"Now, Dahlia," he said in the voice he always used when he was reasoning with the kids, "I always get you what you want for Christmas, don't I?" Dahlia pulled a deadpan face in his direction. "Don't I?" he prompted.

"I ain't as crazy as a loon, I'll have you know," Dahlia answered. She pulled the parasol up alongside the window, where Claudie could see it. The tissue paper had torn away at one end and was flapping like a big white bird trying to get loose from Dahlia's hand.

"And it didn't cost much," he said, "hardly anything." He tried to watch his wife and the road at the same time. Dahlia was staring out the window.

"It's guh-reen," she said, falling back against the car seat in a fake swoon. "To top everything off, you had to go and buy a green umbrella," she turned to look at him, "when you know that green is a color I simply cannot stand." Dahlia swooned again.

"But Mama likes green, though," Claudie said, eyeing a road sign so he could figure out how many more miles it was to Quiet Hills.

"Your mother," Dahlia said, sitting up straight to lean toward him, "probably don't even remember what colors she likes or don't like. She don't remember anything else. She didn't even send the kids no birthday cards this year. Now how about that?"

"Now, Dahlia," Claudie said, patting at his wife's arm.

"Don't you 'now, Dahlia' me. How much did you pay for this stupid thing, anyway?" Claudie thought about it for a second, then told her fifteen dollars.

They ended up having to turn the car around to go back and pick up the
parasol in a ditch by the side of the road. Claudie looked everywhere in
the snow and grass for the little green bow, but he couldn't find it.
Dahlia started honking the horn while he was trying to flatten out the
paper, and he yelled for her to knock it off, but she obviously didn't hear
him. When a car came from the other direction, Dahlia was still leaning on
the horn, and everyone in the other car looked out at Claudie and the para-
sol; one little girl made an ugly face out the back window. When he climbed
into the car again, he kept the present across his lap.

"You are just about the biggest fool I ever laid eyes on," Dahlia said,
unsnapping her purse. "Your mama's lost her mind completely, and you don't
do a thing but encourage her." She pulled out a cigarette and lit it with
the dashboard lighter, leaving a few smoldering shreds of tobacco on the red
coil. "If I was you, I'd've bought her some long underwear, maybe," she
drew in on the filter, "or maybe a road map." She exhaled slowly. "Any-
thing to knock a little bit of sense into her. Instead, what do you do?
You go out and buy her a green umbrella. As far as I can tell," Dahlia said
and stared hard in his direction, "both of the two of you are just walking
right down the road from here to no return."

"Maps don't do a bit of good," Claudie said, rolling down his window
just a crack, so he wouldn't have to breathe any more smoke than necessary.
"I took her a map of the whole United State in October," he explained, "and
she kept right on talking about some morphodite, like I wasn't even there."
He paused. "Do you know what a morphodite is?"

"I don't want to know what a morphodite is," Dahlia said, blowing smoke
out the corner of her mouth.
"Well, neither did I," Claudie said, "and I even looked it up in the dictionary in the kids' room when I got home. There just ain't no such thing." He paused again, trying to breathe the air that sneaked in through the open window, so he wouldn't catch cancer. "But anyway, like I was going to say, I tried to get her to look at that map and pointed to where she was and all," he stopped for air, "and that's when she pretended to be asleep," he snapped his fingers, "just like that."

"And I would've," Dahlia snapped her fingers under his nose, causing him to jump and jerk the wheel, "just like that told her which end was up, too." Claudie knew that Dahlia was telling the truth about that. She was always telling someone which end was up. Just last night, she had stopped the new paper boy and told him which end was up about throwing the newspaper too close to her rose bushes, even if it was winter. Claudie hadn't told her that this morning's paper had been stuck right in the middle of the biggest one; he wanted her to be pleasant--as pleasant as possible--when she got to the home to see his mother.

Claudie leaned toward the window and nodded and breathed and almost missed the drive that led to Quiet Hills Nursing Home. He had to step on the brake too hard, which caused Dahlia to drop ashes on the skirt of her floral-patterned dress. She was still muttering about the carelessness of some people, when Claudie turned the car very slowly onto the unpaved road; he hoped that it wouldn't snow too much while they were inside and make the gravel all slick and bad to drive on. They slowed in the lot and pulled into a space right in front of the Quiet Hills sign. When they got out, they saw that the space was reserved at all times for ambulances, so Claudie
had to get back into the car and move it to a spot near the end of the long, gray building. Dahlia watched from the front sidewalk, hopping up and down and waving for him to hurry up. Clutching the parasol in one hand, he took a deep breath and walked to where his wife stood. When he was about five yards away from her, she put her face in her hands, her cigarette sticking out from between them like it was caught in an elevator door.

"Tell me that you're kidding," she pleaded, throwing her cigarette onto the sidewalk and grinding it out under the toe of her shoe. "Tell me that you aren't really going to carry that thing inside and make a complete and utter boob out of yourself." "Boob" was a word Dahlia had picked up from the ladies' club, and Claudie was not fond of it.

"I bought it," he said, "and she might as well have it." Dahlia rolled her eyes as he reached for the front door and pulled it open.

"Well, at least none of the girls are here to see what a fool you are," she whispered loudly. Claudie guessed that she meant the ladies. "I'd become just about the biggest laughing stock in the whole town of Burlington."

"Now, Dahlia," he said as they stepped inside the bright hallway, their heels loud on the wide tiles of the floor. Claudie had always been impressed with the quiet, clean, mediciney interior of the nursing home. It always looked professional, just like hospitals on television, and he didn't really mind his mother being in such a place. As he and Dahlia walked past the door of the lobby, he thought of the pictures of golden autumn trees that hung on the walls inside; he liked those pictures especially. He had decided, the first time he saw them, that they were clever and not the least
bit tacky, and he had been pleased with himself for understanding that they were symbolic, and not just any old pictures. Dahlia said that they looked like picture-paintings from the sale rack in the dime store; either that, or paint-by-numbers done by the deaf woman over in Stillwater. She said that either way, she wouldn't have one hanging in her house.

When they reached the front desk, there was no one there to help them, so they waited until a woman in a blue uniform came out of a back room, her large hands filled with files and loose papers. She didn't see them at first.

"Uh, we're here to see Mrs. Lyla Rose," Claudie said, trying to catch her attention. Her head turned sharply, then she looked down at the files in her hands. "She knew we were coming this morning," Claudie went on. The woman eyed them for a moment and turned her back to them.

"Do you know which room is hers?" she asked, setting the files down on top of some others on the desk. One sheet of paper shot out of the stack and floated to the floor.

"Room 122," Claudie said. The woman squatted to swipe up the paper, paused to look at it briefly, then stuffed it in the pocket of her uniform. It made a stretchy bulge in the double-knit material at her hip. She turned her back to them, again, and began writing in the top file. Claudie and Dahlia looked at each other.

"Hmmm," Dahlia cleared her throat, and it sounded to Claudie something like a lawn mower motor. The desk attendant looked back at them over her shoulder.

"Well, just go on back," the woman said, her eyes narrowed and her mouth
twisted at one corner. "Are you waiting for an escort?" She gave a short laugh and turned back to the files. Claudie and Dahlia looked at each other again as they moved away.

"Well, she certainly wasn't real friendly, was she?" Claudie asked under his breath, touching Dahlia's hand. Dahlia snorted and looked back at the attendant over her shoulder.

"Someone," she said loudly, "needs to tell that woman exactly which end is up." Claudie hurried his wife the length of the hallway; 122 was the last room on the right side. When he knocked on the door, there was no response.

"Mama?" he called out softly, sticking his head inside the door. The room was dark, but he could see the outline of where she was propped up against the pillows on her bed.

"What's she doing in the dark?" Dahlia whispered as they stepped into the room. Claudie gave her a grim look and put the parasol down on the empty bed across from his mother. The woman who had been there had died several months back, and they had never moved another woman into the bed in her place. They had, instead, asked Claudie to pay for a private room.

"Mama, it's me, Claudie," he said, squinting. There was no response. "Didn't you know we were coming out today?" He cleared his throat and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. "I've got Dahlia with me and everything, Mama."

"There's got to be a light in here," Dahlia said, looking around. Claudie walked back to the door and ran his hand up the wall until he found a switch; he flipped it on. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling buzzed
and grew into a glow. His mother turned on her pillow to look at him.

"Well, that's better, I should think," Dahlia said from across the room. "No wonder things are the way they are, sitting around in the dark all the time." She tilted her head and raised her eyebrows at Claudie, shrugging out of her acrylic fur jacket. For a moment, she looked over at her mother-in-law, then she sat down in one of the two orange plastic visitor chairs. Claudie gave her a quick frown and walked toward the bed.

"How've you been, Mama?" he asked. He tried to smile and thought how terrible she looked—terrible and weak and old. Her lips were sunken into the hollow of her mouth, and her eyes registered only dim recognition.

"Don't you think it'd be nice to open up the blinds a little bit, here?" His mother only continued to stare at him. "Don't you think that'd be nice, Dahlia?" He turned to look at his wife; she had taken out an emery board and was filing away at her thumb nail, which she thought was always a little bit crooked, even though he could never see any difference.

"Oh, that'd be just peachy," she said with a little snicker, never looking up from her own hand.

"Mama?" He turned again, only to find his mother still staring at him. Now he knew what the doctor was talking about. He moved toward the window, wondering how much longer she could live like this.

"Did you drive or fly?" his mother asked suddenly, stopping the hand that reached for the blind cord. Her voice was high and breathy. Claudie shook his head. Across the room, Dahlia was trying to catch his eye; when he looked at her, she made a swoon face and bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. This time he shook his head at her, and she reached into her
purse for a cigarette.

"We drove, Mama," he answered softly. "It's not that far from Burlington." He raised his hand to the cord.

"Have you seen the ocean yet?" his mother pursued further, her voice still breathy, but much higher than before.

"No, Mama, we haven't," he said, looking over his shoulder at her.

"Everyone should see it, the ocean. Everyone." A note of panic had come into his mother's voice, and he turned back to the window, his hand gripping the cord of the blind. His mother leaned forward; one bird-like hand fluttered from her thin hair to the space between her and Claudie.

"Leave it!" Her voice was a screech, tight and shrill. "Leave the blind alone!" Claudie's hand dropped, then, and he turned back to face the bed. His mother's hand came to rest on her pale mouth.

"It's just about Christmastime, Mama, did you know that?" Across the room, Dahlia lit her cigarette with a match. His mother turned to watch the flare before she looked at Claudie.

"In Florida, it don't matter about Christmastime," she said. "You never know the difference." She lifted her hand and motioned for Claudie to come forward; he did. She pointed at Dahlia. "That woman is smoking over there," she said.

"That woman is Dahlia," Claudie said, smiling over at his wife.

"That woman is smoking," his mother repeated, louder, "and I want it stopped. This is my condor," she went on, "and that woman can either quit or she can just flat get out."

"Your what?" Dahlia whooped, jumping up from the chair.
"My condor," Lyla Rose said again, frowning. Dahlia whooped again and bent from the waist to slap her thigh.

"What's wrong with her?" Mrs. Rose asked Claudie.

"Your condor?" Dahlia asked. "Your con-dor?"

"That's right," his mother answered, avoiding Dahlia's eyes.

"Dahlia," Claudie warned.

"Don't you 'Dahlia' me." His wife looked at his mother. "The word you want is con-do, Mother Rose, con-do." Suddenly, Dahlia's face grew serious, as though she suspected that half of the ladies' club was at the door listening. "The thing is, Mother Rose, it's about time you realize that this ain't no con-do or con-dor or anything else but a nur-sing-home. This silly Florida stuff is just getting all out of hand, here." Dahlia paused and looked over at him. "You tell her, Claudie."

"Mama," Claudie started. He looked to the middle of the room where his wife stood with her hand on her hip. "Dahlia, can't we just have a nice--visit here?" Dahlia continued to stare at him. He felt his mother tug at the sleeve of his white dress shirt, and he looked down at her.

"I want you to know, Claudie, that I have enjoyed Florida," she lay back against the pillows and closed her eyes, "so much." She breathed out deeply, and for a moment, Claudie thought she had died, and for part of that moment, he decided that it was for the best, after all. When he saw the frail bone work of her chest rise with her next breath, he thought for an instant about placing his hand there, just placing his hand there and--pressing until all the air was gone. When he swallowed, the sound of it was so loud in his own ears, that he was startled.
"You are letting this happen," Dahlia informed him from where she stood. Claudie looked up and met her eyes.

"Dahlia, please," he said, shifting his gaze in his mother's direction. "These beaches," Lyla Rose murmured with her eyes still closed, "have given me more pleasure than a lifetime in Missouri." Claudie patted her foot where it stuck up under the covers.

"Don't you dare stand there and humor her," Dahlia shrieked. "Next thing you know, she'll be talking about morphodites and parasols again, and if she does," Dahlia pointed one finger at Claudie, "I swear to you that I am going to scream bloody murder." His mother opened her eyes slowly and leaned toward Claudie.

"The only morphodite I ever knew was Libby Morris," she said with a quick, drifting smile. Dahlia's finger fell from mid-air, and she looked at Claudie with the beginning of a swoon face. His mother stared at the far wall. "Houseton Dyer tried to save her, but she didn't want to be saved, Claudie. She didn't want no one to save her." Lyla Rose paused and smiled softly. "She liked being a morphodite, she said. She said that to me herself. Houseton would have probably even married her," she finished.

"Mama," Claudie said, groaning.

"Mother Rose," Dahlia said with a smirk, "could you kindly explain what a morphodite it, pray tell?"

"Sometimes," his mother said, looking over at Dahlia, "sometimes," she turned back to Claudie, "a person just wants to be a morphodite, I guess, no matter how bad it sounds. Sometimes, a person has to be a morphodite
or it just kills him." His mother paused and smiled. "Do you understand, Claudie?"

"Mama, please," Claudie said.

"Listen to me, Claudie," his mother went on, "sometimes being a morphodite is the only thing that's left. Do you understand me?"

"Mama, you're talking foolish again, don't you see?"

"Are you telling us you want to be a morphodite, now, Mother Rose?" Dahlia asked, choking on a snicker. Claudie frowned in her direction.

"No, I don't want to be no morphodite," the woman in the bed answered calmly, turning to watch Dahlia's antics. "But as soon as you learn some manners and put that cigarette out, I'll be perfectly happy right here where I am, in Florida, thank you very much." Dahlia looked down at the cigarette burning forgotten in her hand. Small piles of ashes dotted the gray tiles of the floor. Dahlia looked at his mother, then, and the younger woman's eyes narrowed; Claudie took one look at his wife and put a hand over his face.

"Would you like to know what your trouble is, Mother Rose?" Dahlia snarled, throwing the cigarette onto the floor to mash it out under the toe of her shoe. "Your trouble is that no one has ever bothered to tell you which end's up about this whole Florida nonsense." Dahlia walked toward the bed. "And since your son here don't see it as his duty, I suppose I better make it mine." Dahlia leaned toward his mother, and the older woman pulled back slightly. "Someone has to do what's right."

"Dahlia," Claudie said through clenched teeth, "will you just for Heaven's sake behave yourself?" Dahlia refused to look at him; instead,
she kept her gaze focused on the woman in the bed.

"You see, Mother Rose, you ain't nowhere near Florida, do you get that? You are right here in Missouri, and it's snowing outside and Christmastime, whether you like it or not." Dahlia rushed to the window and swept the blinds up with one forearm; wet snow spattered against the glass. Claudie watched it with fascination. "The whole truth of the matter is that you ain't ever even seen an ocean, and you'll probably never see one, if you want to get right down to it." Claudie glanced down at his mother; her eyes were shut, and the line of her faded lashes trembled slightly. "There ain't a sign of an ocean in these parts, Mother Rose, do you get that?" Dahlia's voice rang loud around the silent room, and even after she had stopped talking, Claudie was almost sure he could still hear her.

"Dahlia," he said, when her words finally quit sounding in his ears, "I'm going to slap you right in the mouth, if you say one more word. I swear I will, Dahlia, I swear I will." Dahlia let the blinds fall against the window behind him; the noise startled him, and he jumped.

"Oh save it, Claudie," Dahlia said, walking over to pick up her purse and jacket from the orange chair. "You ain't about to slap no one, so don't go on about it and make a boob out of yourself." Claudie didn't look at her, but he knew she was right. He walked over to the empty bed and reached for the white package. Dahlia turned to look at him; her mouth tightened, and she shook her head.

"Well, well, I do believe I'll wait out in the hall," she said, "until you and your mama get every last ounce of this loony stuff just worked right out of your systems." Claudie kept his eyes on her back as she walked
through the doorway. He kept them there even when she paused to speak over her shoulder. "Don't expect me to wait out here all day, either, Claudie Rose, do you hear me?" Before he knew that she had finished talking, Dahlia was gone, and the door was coming to a kind of slow-motion close behind her. Claudie swallowed and stepped toward the bed.

"Mama," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "Mama, I brought you this for your Christmas present." His mother did not move. "Mama, it's a parasol, just like you asked for." He fumbled with the tissue paper, trying to make it smooth again. "It's green, Mama. It's even green. Isn't green your favorite color?" Still she didn't move. "Mama, I'm just as sorry as I can be that Dahlia had to go and show out that way. She just don't understand, Mama. Mama?"

His mother's eyes came open slowly, and she stared into his face without blinking. For an instant, she was so frightening, what with the skin hanging loose from her cheekbones and her eyes sunk so far back into her head, that Claudie had to look away.

"Here's your present, Mama, right here on the bed next to you," he said, but he heard a voice that didn't sound quite like his own.

"Claudie," his mother said, her hand floating up to poke around in her thin hair, "you understand, don't you? About Libby Morris?" Claudie looked toward the window and nodded a quick nod. "And you understand why she had to be a morphodite, no matter what?" For a moment, Claudie didn't answer, and her hand clutched at the sleeve of his shirt. "Claudie, you know what I mean, don't you? I want for you to know what it is I mean. You do know, don't you?" Her voice sounded very tired.
"Mama, I wish--" Before he could finish, he had forgotten what it was he wanted to say, exactly. He looked at the door; Dahlia was waiting in the hall. "You bet, Mama," he said, finally. "Sure, I understand." He stepped away from the bed and the hand that still held his arm. "You bet I do," he said, suddenly aware that he had backed halfway across the room. He turned, then, and walked the rest of the way to the door. "You have a Merry Christmas, Mama, you hear me now?" He hesitated a second before he flipped the light switch and sent the room into darkness.

"Thank you, Claudie," his mother muttered, turning her head on the pillow to look at him. "Do you hear the ocean, Claudie? Do you?" Her voice had thinned out to a thread of sound. Claudie's hand fell away from the light switch, and he turned his head; then he opened the door and stepped through it. As it closed, he thought he heard her call out his name, but he couldn't make himself open the door again to find out.

Dahlia was leaning against the wall, filing her thumbnail and humming snatches of a Christmas carol. When she saw Claudie, she shook her head and shoved the emery board into a side pocket of her purse.

"Well, I for one am glad as the world that that's over and done with," she said, walking ahead of him. Claudie looked back over his shoulder, as though his mother might be coming after him, somehow.

When they walked past the front desk, a different woman in a different blue uniform was sitting there; she smiled as they went by. Claudie looked back, troubled. Before they reached the front entrance, he stopped to stick his head inside the lobby, afraid that the pictures of the trees might have changed, afraid that the golden leaves had been replaced with lush greenery, and that stalking jungle animals wandered there.