1987

Bringing Robbie

Franklin H. Foote

Iowa State University

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Bring Robbie

by

Franklin H. Foote

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Dear Avonelle,

Hi Sweetpea. Got your letter. You worry me about Robbie's skin rash. Giving it my formal review.

Can't say my mind is sharp, daughter. Under the circumstances. Just got up from lunch. Lamb stew. You know how your mind dulls when you have gorged on a delicious broth? Afraid I did. Thought I might have over-salted the broth a trifle. Still, it was delicious. Sweetpea, think I'll nap, and resume this later.

Better! I nap often these days. What a challenge retirement is, even a forced retirement. Winters stopped by the other day. He's the new Iowa Porksters International chairman, the turncoat. His vote made it unanimous. When Porksters kicked me out, remember? Your mother said she wrote you. All my working life at the plant! A dozen years as chairman of the board. I ran it better than father did, and they kick me out!

Winters said he wanted to say "hello." That was a lie. He was probably snooping, probably wondering whether I was buying up Porksters stock on the sly. Is he in for a surprise. I have divested. While he probably was worried
about me using my stock for a power play at the shareholders' meeting, I was providing for your future, as usual. I admit I considered a proxy fight. I mentioned it to Tom Harbrace, who is still on the board. Harbrace has the stock for a takeover if he has an inclination. "Forget it, Harold," he scoffed. "You're fifty-four years old. Why take up the burden again?"

So I gave it a formal review. And agreed, under the circumstances. That was more than a year ago. And for the most part Harbrace was right. A dozen years as chairman of the board seems right.

Your Aunt Carla can't come to Iowa this summer. Her family. She just phoned. She interrupted my writing this to you. "I haven't talked to you and Edith in years," she said.

"Come see us," I told her.

"Bill and Kathy are too busy this summer," she told me.

"But they've never visited us here in Iowa. They've never seen Marton. They've never seen the Iowa River wind through farm country, or how the Porksters Plant I built sits just north of Marton, near the river."

"Older brother," she told me, "did I ever tell you that slaughter plant ruined the river for miles?"

"Phone your complaint to the chairman of the board," I snapped. Really, Aunt Carla was getting snippy. "Your kids will be grown. They have never visited us," I reminded her.
"They have swimming, little league, summer hospice camp, and soccer," she excused her kids. "I have the church council, my real estate agency, and I keep house for a husband who has just been elected president of the San Jose school board," she excused herself.

"Tell what's-his-name congratulations for me," I said.

"His name is Bill," she said, "and don't remind me, I'll remember to tell him education is going to hell in a hand basket for you. Really Hal, he enjoys his work on the school board. It takes his mind off his duties in the bank. He's a vice president now."

So they aren't coming this year either.

Winters didn't stay long. He wondered whether the multi-million dollar settlement didn't take the sting out of my early retirement?

"Of course," I shot back, "it's wonderful to finally get paid for my father's hard work, for all the years I poured into Porksters. When I left it was just the best processing plant in four states."

Made a discovery. Last spring. You know how I've always kept busy? Always had to be doing something? Well, I admit time was giving me trouble. And that one visit from Winters was the only business talk I had about the plant since my retirement party. So I kept busy, somehow. First I poured a cement patio along the north side of our house. You'll see it
when you visit. It's right under our picture window facing the back yard. That took care of April. Then in May I built a brick fireplace out of street brick. I was clever. I picked the bricks up free for the hauling. And I found a public park where they let you cut trees free of charge. So I had a mountain of firewood stacked next to the fireplace. Then I came home from the grocery store a little steamed. Produce prices are outrageous, and the meat counter! Horrendous. I never had that problem with Porksters. Not when I walked past the storage lockers every night on my way home. Right that day without consulting your mother I decided to dig a vegetable pit next to the patio. "I'll plant a large garden," I told Edith that night. "I'll show them how to manage food costs."

Robbie's rash bothers me, Avonelle. Are you getting sleep? Edith always fixed those things while I was busy running the plant. I stayed up one night with you when you were teething. That was after your mother died. Aunt Carla helped me with you until I married Edith. I don't remember what Edith did. I think father had his second heart attack about then, and we had to find a nursing home for him fast. It wasn't easy in those days. One day father was reminding me, "You'll never run this plant. You can't even manage the hog kill without botching it." And within days they were cleaning out his desk. I had his proxy vote by my power of
attorney to walk right into the president's office. That was
my father, Avonelle. He went quick. I remember the day I
stopped to tell him they elected me chairman of the board. He
was napping in bed. "Dad," I said, "I'm the Porkster's
chairman." Of course he couldn't talk by then. He lifted his
eyebrows, so I thought he understood. "I told them I'd raise
bloody hell. I'd close the plant, put four hundred
slaughterers out of a job if they didn't name me chairman."
I've always been happy I did that. Father knew about my
chairmanship before he died. He must have been proud.

Anyway, I hunted down my old golf shorts and my work
boots. Remember those hook and eye boots? You always
complained when I forgot and wore them home. Still got 'em!
Save a penny; never worry about a pound. Dug out my leather
gloves. They still had a crust of cement from the patio. I
propped the patio window open to catch the board of trade on
the radio, and attacked with a rusty spade. I had the blade
shining within an hour. Picked a sunny day. Marched out
there like a chairman of the board and was down three feet
when the Chicago markets reported a downturn in the hog
futures. Soil was dry, crumbly.

Just before he left, Winters asked if I was still angry
because Porksters named him chairman. "No," I said with
dignity. "The firm will lose money with you at the helm. I
netted $78 million for Porksters in a dozen years before the current recession." Winters choked.

"My God, man! Don't say that where a union steward can hear it."

"And you aren't handling the union right, either," I snapped. I think he caught my sarcasm. Now that hard times are here, they can still make a profit. "Cut wages to the bone. Slice the hog kill line back to a skeleton crew. Run affable Freddie out of the union presidency," I ordered him. But of course he ignored me. He's never been back to visit. "Just break the union." That's what I told my board for years.

Digging that pit wasn't difficult, you know? I got caught up in it, Avonelle. It absorbed my day. I felt young again. I didn't know my own strength. I was excited with the pit, if you can picture your former captain of industry that. That night when Edith came home, I had a pit four feet square and seven feet deep. All I had left to do was figure out how to build a cover for it.

I showed Edith. "That oughtta do it," I assured her.

"But Hal," she said, "our food bill has never been costly."

"That just goes to show you," I proved to her, "that I should have been in charge of buying groceries all those years you were raising Avonelle." She was tired from the nursing
home shift, so she agreed pretty soon. My muscles were sore, but Edith and I had a fine evening, just like old times. I told her about the vegetable pit, and she told me about her day at Restview Haven. The bedpan crew had a couple of probationaries. They dawdled with George Anson. You remember that old cuss? Maybe you don't. He was a foreman for me at Porksters for a while. Injured his back. Never gave me a bit of trouble. Anyway, he moved into Restview after you left home. So you probably don't remember. Anson held them up, and when they moved down that line of thirty beds, you can imagine what was waiting for them! Pure trouble. Those people eliminate on cue whether the bedpan gets there or not, Edith says. And some of them have an interlude of grace, she calls it, when they know they will die. They call an old friend to their room and give away a favorite trinket. Or they phone a relative they haven't seen. Sometimes they regain vitality they haven't had for years. Just before they die, Edith says. In two more years, Edith will have been chief floor attendant there twenty years. What a steady gal!

Do you think Edith should change the color of your bedroom? For your visit? I know you always had pale pink, but the room needs painting. What about Robbie? When you visit? Wouldn't the proper color be blue? For Robbie? Or a combination cream? For you both? When you two visit?
When I checked the pit opening the next morning, the most wild chittering greeted me. You could not imagine my surprise, Avonelle. A squirrel. Don't ask me how the little scart got in there. Ask it! Its chitter-chitter got on my nerves. So I made a decision fast. I was concerned that the noise would carry past our hedge. It might make the neighbors curious. And it was clawing up the sides of my pit, raking gouges of soil into the bottom which I had to clean out.

Just a minute. Doorbell.

I'm back. Two Mormon missionaries. Young men in gray suits. "I have three wives already," I yelled at them. "What is it to you!" They left quickly. I think my sense of humor is improving, now that I don't have the pressures of running a slaughter plant. Those Mormans arrive at our front door every four months like clockwork. I was polite the first time. Now I don't let them waste my time.

Whenever I stuck my head over the pit, that brown scart leapt at me. It was dirty. Shaking. Well, I can tell you, it leapt one too many times. Whacked it with the shiny blade.

I couldn't let that squirrel go to waste, could I? You know me. We had it for lunch. Threw the hide into the patio fireplace. Had an excuse to burn a few logs. Just an experiment, of course. Just for curiosity's sake, I burned the bones. I poked around in the fire pit. Found a few shards, so the next day I pulverized them and burned another
pile of wood. Sort of like a back yard cremation. After all, give the guy a decent burial, will ya? I told Edith I stopped at a wild game market. Told her the squirrel was less costly than pork. I found a recipe for broiled squirrel and brown gravy. Edith has collected many cookbooks during our marriage.

Think the Lincoln needs a tune-up. Yes, the same Lincoln you grew up in. Remember the trip to the Ozarks? And the time we drove to the Black Hills? Those were grand vacations. I won't take the Lincoln back to Preferred Garage. Those scolds took out my radio-phone, the color television, the wetbar, the radar buster, and my automatic cruise control. I thought I would have a heart attack when I went back to pick it up. Can you believe what they said? Winters ordered them to do it. They said Winters promised to yank the Porksters truck fleet if they didn't remove the company equipment. Said they had to charge me for the repairs now that I'm no longer chairman of the plant. I was furious. "You could repair the Lincoln for the rest of my life and never repay me," I stormed. "You made thousands of dollars profit with the Porksters repairs I gave you," I scolded them.

"But Winters said you don't run the plant now," they excused themselves. "He said the government auditors are threatening to slap a lien on our repair bills."
"Porksters made me install those gadgets, and Porksters can damn well keep them working." They wouldn't listen. Even when I shouted. That always got things done right at the plant.

Before I could build a cover for the vegetable pit, a stray dog fell in. What a mess. I had to clean the pit floor a second time. This time, I enlarged the bottom for shelves. A fat little white poodle. It was always mincy-sniffing around my fireplace. Thought it was so cute with its white curls and little red bow? A young couple, the Finsters, who live on the north end of our block, have never liked me. Since the time I took a public stand against neighborhood sidewalks. It would have forced me to tear out that side of the hedge. Anyway, now the Finsters have a German shepherd pup for their kids, and they keep all three of them behind a woven wire fence which they should have done in the first place.

Sweetums, just had an idea. They have those free health clinics in Rochester, don't they? Sure they do. Here's how I view it: take Robbie there. Explain that you don't have a great deal of money. Don't they have free medical samples which drug companies hand out? Sure they do. Save your money as your father has always done. Don't waste.

That poodle was juicy, I have to admit. At first, I couldn't think of a way to cook it. But after the squirrel
turned out so well, It was just a hop, skip, and a jump to trying something bigger. Since I have never cooked much, it had me buffafoed at first. Then I remembered an old manager's trick. Think in sections. I made a clear broth stew that Edith loved. Said it tasted like turkey. I waited a day, then I tried a roast. Told her I found a leg of lamb on sale. Added carrots and celery until it was smothered with vitamins. Little scarts better not jump at me from my pit. No sir. One of the most satisfying sounds that month was the chunk from the spade when I cracked that intruder just above its red bow.

Did you say Robbie was playing with neighborhood children before he sprouted his rash? This worries me. I thought about calling our physician to get his opinion, but decided he might think my interest too removed. After all, I would have to drive halfway across the country to deliver the medicine. Edith would miss work.

Kids from school have been cutting across our back yard, since the neighbors put up their fence. They sneak through our hedges. Guess even they know I'm no longer a power in Marton. What a shame. Youngsters need powerful men like me to look up to. But no, they do anything they want to. I've dropped out of Rotary Club for the same reason. I have no clout. I quit the Lions Club. The same reason. My bar account is closed at The Elks. They don't ask me to chair the Immanuel Brethren building drives any more. That's partially
why I built the patio. "My friend," I scolded myself, "for the first time in your life you can do something just for yourself." And I thought it might stop the trespassers from wearing a path past my patio. I was mistaken, but I didn't give up. I borrowed a pickup truck from one of my old friends at the plant and hauled home some more street brick. I built a brick tool shed directly across the gap in my hedge. Avonelle, your chairman may become a brick mason. We have the stoutest tool shed in any back yard in Marton. But they just wore a new path. It didn't stop the yard cutters.

I really didn't know how to build a proper pit cover, and this worried me for several days. How would I keep the lid free of ice in the winter? So I experimented with a temporary cover. And that's how my problem was solved for me. With no effort on my part. Just as a temporary measure, I broke up an old window screen I had saved in the basement. I thought the best way to keep stray dogs out of the pit was to disguise it. So I tied the screens together and flopped them over the opening. I scattered some grass over the screen and stuck a few twigs through the screen into the grass. I intended to buy a few boards at United Syndicate Lumber Yard the next day, to make the pit cover sturdy. Toward dusk that day, I was puttering in the house near the picture window. I noticed a little sclit straggling home. Enjoying his first day of summer out of school. You know the kind. The little
explorers that stop, and have to stare into your picture window? They have to climb on the saw horse beside your tool shed. They have to crawl under my Austrian pine tree. They have to stare into the grass at anything that crawls. Then they trot along the path to the fireplace to examine my logs. I must have watched him waste a half hour in my back yard. I don't remember the exact time because I was wearing the Porksters engraved wristwatch presented at my retirement party. I earned that watch, but I certainly don't have to use it. They served ribeye steaks for the party at The Elks. Can you believe that? "You should have broiled Iowa chops," I reminded them. I could see then that the plant would never make it without me. They didn't listen. Winters even tried to pass it off as a joke. "Hal is just reminding us of his dedication," he scoffed. "I tell him he should find a retirement avocation. Like my duck hunting," he told those present. Well, it got a laugh from the board members, even Harbrace. That little intruder drug his tennis shoes around my blue spruce. He splashed his hands in a pail of water I keep near the fireplace. He wandered back to the tool shed, and I was just about to hurry outside and send him packing, but he decided he could not force the padlock. I would have been out the patio door like a shot. No: I made a decision. Let the little intruder look out for himself just as I had to.
I even considered sliding the patio door open just enough to warn him about the pit. Ah, did anyone ever help me?

I haven't written much about Edith, since this is my first letter to you. It was difficult to get over your sudden departure. Certainly, you could have found a better man to marry than a lawyer. They rake the cream off a man's life. I thought the fees Porksters paid to settle National Labor Relations Board suits were outrageous. I admit I was able to open the plant again, but it was months before I turned a profit. This was an issue I never convinced even one board member to avoid. They turned from my leadership more and more that final year. I am sure this put an extra strain on Edith. She saw I was discouraged.

I almost missed it. I just happened to turn back toward the window as his feet slid out from under him. The screens snapped up to pin his arms to his sides. His mouth was wide open, but I never heard a sound! Couldn't have been much older than fourth grade. There was a glare on the picture window, so of course I had no way of knowing for sure. I think he saw me just as his head dropped out of sight, and then the strangest thing came over me, Avonelle. It made me shiver. For an instant, I thought it was Winters who fell into the pit. Now of course I knew it was not Winters. But his accusing look was like Winters telling me they had voted him chairman of the board! "Have your desk cleared by
quitting time," he said. Which is foolish, Avonelle, because Winters is a grown man and the boy was just a fat little boy. It was just an impression, you understand. It went away quickly. That temporary pit cover just didn't hold. The twigs broke off. I scolded myself for not getting to the lumber yard quicker.

The day Winters left my front door, he said: "I'm sorry, Hal. You've been like a father to me."

"You bet I have," I reminded him. "In a dozen years, you would have been my choice for chairman of the board."

"Then I can count on you for advice from time to time? Perhaps, after the labor strife dies down, after they realize you're no longer at the plant, we can arrange to hire you as a consultant? I haven't told the board about this. I wanted to ask you first."

At the time, I had just completed selling my stock in Porksters. I cut Harbrace in on some, and donated much of it to a university. The rest I sold through a stockbroker friend who knew how to lie to state auditors. It was the best business transaction I ever completed after my retirement.

"You can't even keep the plant scheduled for a four-day week, Jerry," I told him. "You won't make it, and the board won't make it. I'll stay out of it." That's all I said.

I told Edith I bought some domestic rabbits, as a trial run. I said I found a local hunter who had some wild turkey,
a lamb or two, a raccoon he caught in his garden, and a few odd sorts of meat he wanted to clear out of his freezer. I bought a meat smoker to set next to the fireplace. "Have you noticed our meat bills are lower, now that I have time to do the shopping?"

Of course Edith agreed.

We have dined on smoked rabbit. I broiled mild raccoon ribs. I ground turkey sausage that Edith found delicious. I salt-cured small hams from the lambs. The ham was probably too salty, like the lamb stew. But fresh vegetables extend a meat dish and soak up salt.

You know, Avonelle, I think that I have adjusted to retirement. Why, I can't tell you the pleasure it has been to write you. I hope you are not too surprised that I would write.

I filled in the vegetable pit. Too much bother. Planted a lilac bush. "I need an avocation," I told Edith. She agreed. I cleaned out the patio fireplace and worked the ashes into just a small square, just large enough for two tomato plants. The plants are thriving. I look out the picture window from my desk as I write this, and can tell you that we will have fresh tomatoes in a few more weeks.

I've decided to take up hunting. Even pay for skeet shoot lessons. Hang the expense. I have ordered two shotguns and intend to build a duck blind this fall at a marsh south of
Marton. I have located a perfect place. I think it was Winters who said the marsh is a great place to go duck hunting, to escape the pressures of business. I think he even mentioned his favorite blind. So one afternoon recently I drove out for a look at Swanson's Marsh. It drains into a lake by the same name. They have a permanent register of hunters who rent their duck blinds year after year.

Did you realize, Avonelle, that when you and Robbie visit, we'll be seeing our grandson for the first time? Edith and I are excited. Edith forgave you a long time ago. Even your quick marriage, I think I can forgive. Pick some week when that bum you married has to try a case before the state supreme court, as you mentioned in your letter. I just think that if I could scoop Robbie up into my arms and give him a big hug once, it would make everything right.

As for your father, he's looking forward to the fall hunting season. Yesterday, while practicing at the gun range, I had my first try at double targets. They whip the clay targets from both sides. I have to wait until they converge. If you time it just right, you squeeze and the clay explodes into nothing just beyond your sights.

Please come. Edith and I are sure looking forward to seeing Robbie.

The End
The strange words emerged at his steam press, "Braynee braw tru," Jim spoke aloud, to himself, while inhaling the white hot smell of suits pressed flat. At first, the owner of Jim Cassidy's Commercial Dry-Cleaning & Laundry at 441 West Nevada Street, Marton, Iowa, thought his nonsense words sounded like the clothes press he operated. Cassidy shoved a double-knit suitcoat into the mandrel, tripped the foot pedal, the mandrel dipped down, smash, then a steady hiss of steam reassured his operator's ears that a knife-edge crease resulted. But when Jim tried to duplicate the maw's sound, when he tried to mimic the sound as anyone would, he produced, aloud, in a nasal voice, "Haynee haw whump." Ridiculous, he scolded himself silently. Yet, when the mandrel dipped again, the words emerged: "Braynee braw tru." They appeared with suitpants, "Braynee braw tru," they whumped with a sportcoat, "Braynee braw tru," and like a song that settles in a person's thoughts all day, so the curious words continued to distract him silently, Braynee braw tru. The charm irritated the laundry owner, who usually could make the clothes press function like an automatic car wash with wrinkled fabric entering from his left, and smoothly-flat suits emerging to
his right. His arms moved deftly. His foot tripped the floor-pedal as a pianist modifies the bass. With an hour until closing, he knew he had a weekend to rest a lower back pain caused from leaning over the mandrel—smash, Braynee braw tru—the unusual chant would just have to wait. He thought it odd, since during the pressing, his thoughts usually slipped to Myrna's unspoken fear that she would forget, that she would somehow harm Little John by oversight. What did the child abuse manuals say? That a parent when reacting without conscious thought produced the same abuse as inflicted—smash, Braynee braw tru—as? He couldn't concentrate. As done to them when they were a child? Was that it? A coatsleeve curled up as the mandrel descended and his left hand whipped out to flick it back just in time for the canvas covering to catch it and smash it flat. His thin legs were shaky from a six a.m. start that morning. A glimpse of Myrna entered his thoughts, of Myrna's black hair when she drew it across his arm in bed just before he left for work; Jim moved a charcoal suitcoat from the canvas hamper on his left; his right hand smoothed the coat pocket as his foot tripped the floor pedal, smash, Braynee braw tru, and though he no longer formed the words, they repeated themselves in his thoughts.

Cassidy the owner told Cassidy the press operator silently: quit making a fool of yourself. The proud owner of Cassidy's Laundry turned to see if Al heard his absurd mumble.
Al's brown hair, pulled into a pigtail, was pointed toward the solvent pipes overhead, which meant to Jim that Al's weasel nose was pointed down toward the solvent drum timer, waiting for the cycle to end. Al chewed his gum impassively, a sight familiar to Jim for several years, though he could see only part of Al's jawline. Al's jaw bulged and relaxed with the slosh of the eighty pounds of motel blankets he was cleaning within the stainless steel solvent drum. Jim saw no hint of surprise or curiosity in Al's posture, just the tedium of lasting until five on a Friday afternoon. Again the owner scolded aloud, "Gotta quit talking to yourself, Cassidy," and the boss issued stern orders to correct himself as an employee, quietly now, to prevent Al from overhearing.

"Cassidy, either get these clothes pressed or I'll call the employment agency and find someone who can do it faster, and better." A light-blue summer suit appeared in his left hand, smash, Braynee braw tru surged laconically forth, and Jim decided in frustration that the solvent drum slosh hid his nonsense. He raised his voice, "That batch just about done Al?"

Al raised one hand. He folded his fingers casually, once--ten more minutes. "Drain them and put in fresh solvent for Monday," Jim snapped. Al's hand dropped in exasperation, a gesture half in answer, half in disgust. Silently, Jim scolded himself again. Al always remembered to change the
solvent, when sober. And Al hadn't had a drink for almost a
year. He was almost caught up again with his house payments.
Jim had helped him get a bank loan while Al caught up once
again.

Jim hunched over the mandrel, inserted a light-gray
suitcoat, and tripped the foot pedal, smash. Braynee bravy
tru. Did he say it aloud? Silently, he resolved to dismiss
them. Forget them, he resolved, desperately, but slipped
again into exhaustion—remove pants, slip on hanger, yank
plastic down—ready to shove forward on plumbers' pipe toward
the front counter—movements that came automatically, almost
unconsciously, movements which required only his will to
complete the day.

He swiped at his nose. He glared at iron stains in the
canvas covering. The mandrel covering would be costly to
replace, and had been used far longer than he should have
allowed it. A button clacked in the solvent drums. The flat
snap against steel irritated him. "Get it Al!" Clack, clack,
clack. "Get the goddamn button, Al!" Yet there was no malice
behind his curse. The button continued to clack as Jim
wondered if his muttered charm matched the press just as
bootcamp chants accompanied their Fort Leonardwood marches
through Missouri timber, "Is your lover big and fat? No she's
never fat as that! Sound off! . . . !" Closer to that, he
decided.
His arms ached. In his thoughts, Grant Hendis, the gray president of Marton Commercial Bank, refused to extend his business loan again. "You're the soundest laundry in town, Jim," he sternly slapped the notice of refusal he held, "and one of our favored accounts. Either buy the building and expand, or get out." Hendis coughed, politely, and leaned forward: "It's either that, or I'm afraid," and Grant looked again at the figures on paper, "a competitor will give us a better deal. You'll never recover in time at a new location."

It was Grant's method of warning Jim that the only other large cleaning firm in Marton, a firm whose brash founder had twice expanded and several times blamed machine breakdowns on what Jim knew was faulty training of his workers, was again offering the Marton Bank more for the ancient tile building housing Jim's Laundry than it was worth. "I've stalled my board for two years," he tried lamely to justify the decision to Jim, "but, you must admit, you've known for two years now of this offer. I can't understand why you hesitate."

Behind Jim, Al began a new cleaning cycle. Jim swung around briefly, to calculate drying time, and turned again to the press. With no direction, his arms continued to fold and slide, to smooth and arrange. "... tru," he muttered.

Myrna's hidden panic, her tears the morning she rode home in the Volks with Little John just out of the maternity ward, the only time Myrna admitted she feared for their son's safety,
came flooding into his exhaustion. Myrna sobbed gargantuan sobs: "Then just, Dad."

They continued inside the house, as they sat on the sofa and Jim struggled to learn why. Little John was cradled in Myrna's massive arms. "I hadn't done anything." Myrna meant her father, Vaughn. Jim first understood that much. He patted her bicep, still not really understanding. "He just kicked my ass up the stairs," Myrna wheezed, and she stopped to clear the phlegm from her throat. In her husky voice, she continued: "I fell and hit my head on the landing. Bled like a fresh-caught herring. I was terrified!" And gradually, that day and that night, with their son home safe from the hospital, Myrna made Jim understand that Vaughn's abuse was swift and often during her childhood. Very often.

At the time, nearly four years previously, Jim tried to soothe Myrna. He patted her muscular shoulder awkwardly. He tried to put his arms around her and Little John, which he couldn't. "Okay Myrna, it's okay," and of course they knew it wasn't. The pamphlets told them that later. Myrna worried constantly that she would forget, that the pressures would build, and in a moment of anger, she would repeat the abuse of her childhood unconsciously as the pamphlets said abused parents repeated childhood crimes against them. They worried that inexplicably for Myrna, she would slap Little John "or something worse." Together, they refused to invite neighbors
"to see the baby" as they confided, worried for days. How to raise Little John? They explained: "It's nothing serious. The doctor said just wait a week, his lungs, pretty vulnerable now, . . . a week early, you know," which was the lie they decided upon in their shame.

Hot steam hissed into a checked double-knit, and Jim turned his head to avoid a hint of chloriform escaping from the fresh batch of clothing from the solvent drums. He cursed Vaughn silently. Vaughn! A tall man whose eyes shifted with his head from side to side as if he watched a tennis match whenever he spoke to Jim. Vaughn of garlic breath and herring boots. Jim disliked Vaughn prior to their marriage. After a decade of Myrna's refusal to have children, the evidence confirmed his first dislike. When Myrna admitted her fears with Little John in her arms, Jim avoided taking the baby to the West Coast to visit his grandparents. Vaughn once had slammed Myrna across the room with a shrug of his massive shoulders. "A drunk stupor," his wife hissed at Jim, "just drunk," she shrugged, in her Armenian accent. She dismissed her husband's death as Myrna and Jim and she met at the cemetery with a certainty as sure as Jim folded a pressed suit. They were near Vaughn's grave in a tiny cemetery near San Pedro. "I know that man," his mother-in-law glared toward the coast. "He just drunk and say 'this fisherman don't move for Maiden-of-the-Sea.'" Vaughn, on another drunken tear,
rammed a Japanese tanker registered as *Maiden-of-the-Sea*. His trawler sank as Vaughn, snagged by the aft net winch, cursed the Maiden for—they never did learn why. "Ahh," his widow dismissed the drowning, "dead is dead." She dismissed Vaughn with a hand wave, and urgently took the bundled Little John from Myrna's arms. She crooned to her grandson, a lullaby in Armenian which he didn't understand.

Jim's right foot missed the foot pedal. The mandrel paused from its steady rise and fall; Vaughn, he decided, probably yanked viciously at the winch cogs which snagged his safety harness. Probably, Vaughn yanked as the water rose over him, and he held his breath. Maybe, in the mists of Catalina channel, just maybe Vaughn realized the Japanese tanker was something he could not outshout in a kitchen, or pound into a silent, helpless hulk on a livingroom sofa as he once had brutalized Myrna before the police arrived. Maybe Vaughn realized the aft winch still held his net cable which would draw the net down over him, to gather the San Pedro boat as its last catch on the sandy bottom. The tanker radioed frantically for the Coast Guard. Lifeboats were dropped. "Leave him," his wife told the Guard. But the government pulled Vaughn out, and she had to bury him.

Jim locked the back door; his thoughts drifted as he left the laundry. In their Volks, he steered effortlessly. It was his customary route home. Ahead, a Marton city bus drew away
from the curb, and Jim swerved wide. A typical five o'clock rush to several thousand driveways made him anxious. He avoided the glazed looks of drivers in a hurry to spend a Friday paycheck. The blue Marton city bus fell in behind Jim like a dutiful elephant as he slowed the Volks to turn left at Centerlane Avenue. It was a dangerous intersection, particularly at rush hour. Jim waited before his left turn signal; the bus' massive front bumper loomed in his interior rearview mirror. Jim guessed that the bus driver was enjoying close revenge for Jim scooting ahead of him at the bus stop. The bus bumper inched forward. Jim refused to inch ahead. They continued their war of nerves while across the intersection, Jim realized that the driver of a yellow Camaro was already inching across the pedestrian crosswalk. He thought that she intended to rush the turn signal, to whip into her left turn before he did. Didn't she know that the signals were individual, that she would have to wait for his turn first? From habit, he nodded a friendly "hello" at the Camaro driver, a boss's habit of reducing tension at work. Her hands shifted constantly. Her tiny fingers squeezed the Camaro's chamois steering wheel cover. They released, squeezed, shifted, and squeezed. With one eye on the bus bumper, the other on the Camaro across from him, the heat of August bore down on the Volks' roof and baked him as exhaust fumes and hot asphalt mixed with his vent fan blades. Jim
felt trapped; helpless, caught up in what he did not understand, he waited for the green turn arrow. It flashed, Jim shifted, and steered wide left as the Camaro rolled forward at him. Still the Camaro advanced, and Jim shifted quickly to second and found a path to get his passenger door safely past the yellow front Camaro fender. He veered toward his left and made it!

She hit the bus! The bus driver, Jim guessed, still intent on crowding the Volks through his left turn, never saw the Camaro. A metal thud blew through the vent fan blades and Jim shouted, "Bullseye!" His chin dropped and his shoulders lifted: "My God! Did I want those jerks to collide? My friendly nod? Did she think she could cut in front of the bus?" No, of course not, he assured himself. A strangled mix of words emerged, "Buh-rainy braw tru!" They were back! The strange words were back. Again he winced, a guilty habit that Myrna often noticed and commented upon: "Now what the hell you been up to, Jim m'boy?"

Myrna. Should he tell her? Aloud, to calm himself, "A long, long Friday, Jim Cassidy," emerged in a falsely laconic voice that hid his relief at avoiding an accident. Again, as if they held a life of their own, the charm erupted: "Now that was clearly a case of the braynee braw tru."

What the hell did that mean! That he loved Myrna was evident; that she loved him and Little John, more so. From
that moment on the sofa, Jim and she had implemented an
unspoken agreement that shaped their waking life—a struggle
for their son's normal life. Jim was quick to babysit; Myrna
was quick to extend her patience. Jim was quicker to change
diapers, warm formula, to get up in the night over Myrna's
exhausted protests. She neglected her weights in the
basement. She read baby books avidly. She could not check
out child abuse texts because the Marton librarian was an
older woman who commented aloud as she marked the due dates.
Jim ignored the laundry expansion as he hurried to arrive home
early. They never spoke about it. It was there. Many times,
the Volks careened down Centerlane with Jim worried by a phone
call from Myrna. He worried that he would find bruises or a
swollen jaw when he walked into their house. Myrna always
greeted him with relief. "You'll take over for a minute, hon?
I need a break from that brat." But it was always with
affection, always, he told himself constantly. Little John
grew. Jim watched the two with sick worry, with fear his son
would have broken arms or unexplained accidents in their home.
Yet in four years, as Little John applied the "horrible fours"
to Myrna's Armenian heritage, their son was unscathed. They
had been too shamed to consult a physician about child abuse,
too fearful that Little John would be taken from them. You
were right, Cassidy, he congratulated himself. Privately, he
had considered taking Little John from Myrna. He wondered if,
Little John from Myrna. He wondered if, divorced, he could protect their black-haired, black-eyed Armenian American son from his mother long enough for a normal childhood. The one time he considered it, he rejected it with contempt. He could never live without Myrna, and probably, she knew it.

The Volks swept onto their concrete driveway. I wish, he told himself, that I caused that accident. I wish I had winked, and waved with my hand, and nodded and encouraged her to plow into that bus. Ahhh, forget it Cassidy. You can't go around wishing things like that. Should he tell Myrna? No, not Myrna, his short person who weighed one hundred seventy pounds in competition. She was a few pounds over that now, she told him. And generally serene between meets. Myrna hadn't broken a wall in years. Not since her second--and last--loss in Michigan. Jim's chin dropped and his shoulders lifted. Actually, Myrna was undertrained that week because he had just bought the laundry, and she was helping him that month during the frequent breakdowns, when they averaged a crisis a month. Actually, Myrna had struck Jim only once, years after their marriage, during an ardent moment. "You sonofabitch," she objected: "Don't do that! That stings!" Jim, in a playful mood, snapped her bra where it sank into her powerful shoulder muscles. Jim would have agreed instantly. But Myrna acted as she spoke. Considering Myrna's huge breasts, breasts larger than any "Go-Go" dancers they had seen
perform, Myrna's huge milk glands must have produced enormous downward pressure. Jim could have reasoned that out. Unfortunately, Myrna's quick uppercut to Jim's chest cracked several ribs, an injury which did not prevent him from working though. Myrna apologized as they drove to the hospital to get his ribs taped. "Sorry about that, Jim." For her, it was a contrite apology. He knew this now, as he locked the Volks and turned to walk inside. Myrna was sincere. She would never harm Little John, nor him, not if she had time to think. He considered shouting to the neighbors that she'd never do it! Braynee braw tru! His absurdity kept him silent. Jim Cassidy, lover, father, husband, laundry businessman, avoider of accidents, a tired man with an ache in a lower vertebra, the wise financier who successfully bested the brash young laundry competitor who possessed a business degree and a father-in-law on the Marton Bank loan review committee, sought his true love.

Instead, Little John called from the back yard: "Hi daddy!" John was absorbed in play with a neighbor's son, Kendall, whose tiny hands wielded a yellow plastic bat which he swung repeatedly against a maple tree. The hard maple offered shade which Jim needed. The afternoon sun burned against their white split-level and reflected off the driveway and made him close his eyes tightly against its intensity. Next to the back door, a muddy basin in Myrna's dahlia bed
caught his attention. A fort, he guessed. No, he decided upon a close inspection, it was more like a small boy's moat, or battleground. Jim was sure of it. "Unfortunate," he mumbled, as he often did in the laundry when a twenty-thousand-dollar solvent machine refused to clean a fifty-dollar, very cheap suit stained with armpit sweat. Myrna's dahlias were either trampled into the mud, each stem broken, or worse, their roots washed clean and left to fry in the sun. "Damn, damn, double-damn." He scowled at prone dahlias everywhere. What's the use, Cassidy, he admonished himself, you can't even swear right when it counts. His chin dropped and his shoulders lifted. He turned to hunt quickly for Myrna. Braynee braw tru. The charm emerged automatically, and this time, to his surprise, his strange charm sounded like a satisfying curse.

He found Myrna changing into a dry T-Shirt in their blue bedroom. Her sweat made a band of dark around the elastic of her white cotton panties, size large at the big persons' store in the smaller of Marton's two shopping centers. "Myrna," he hesitated, "Myrna," and when she did not turn nor answer, he ventured: "I think Little John ruined your dahlia bed. I'm sure of it. It's pretty bad." Still, Myrna continued shrugging out of her T-shirt. She was trying not to tear it as it scraped over her shoulders. Jim waited for her rage. "Myrna?"
"Harrumph," she said. Myrna threw aside the sweat-wet T-shirt, size large, which said: Regional Finals, Super Heavy-weights, Oshkosh, Wis., between her shoulderblades. Jim admired the crosshatched flush on her back, a flush defined by the straps of her bra. Her shoulders were a mottled deep red from the heat. Muggy afternoons were difficult for Myrna, much more than for his thin build, he reminded himself. His one-hundred and fifty pounds were mostly bone, tendons, with thin muscle development suitable more for a laundry owner than an athlete. While he tied his shoelaces, he tried to decide; he could say Myrna was just . . . . Jim wanted for once to decide exactly about Myrna: "Dainty?"

"What dear?"

"I said you are dainty."

"What dear?" She did not turn, and her husky reply was breathy, from deep in her lifter's throat. "What?" A clean T-shirt bulged over her breasts, and she worked it smooth around her waist. Across her front was: Barbells are made for Bouncers.

"Nothing," he said.

"I'm late gathering the garbage," she said.

Should he tell her he thought Little John was safe? Dainty for her size. Should they risk their business and buy the building? Yes, and with dainty habits. That was it! "I love you dear," he said. Dainty.
"Masfit!" Now actually, what Myrna said was very exact, "That's a pile of bullshit!" But with years between them, and his habit of thinking about her, Jim knew she did not mean exactly what she said. It was the true content that mattered, and when Myrna said masfit, she glanced away and pretended to smooth the bed sheets. Though he had to guess, the quickness of her masfit probably indicated that she was upset about something that she would tell him about later. And though she actually said, "That's a pile of bullshit," what Jim actually understood was a masfit that indicated her temper which meant quick action. Had he not been tired, he never would have blundered so quickly. At such times, Jim had a portion of his husband's reasoning process which--had he tried to explain it logically--would have heard Myrna say, That's a pile of bullshit. But he concluded she probably was thinking about the fall trials, and was trying to convince herself to start training again. He could not know for sure, but he did know surely that this moment was the wrong time. Probably, the T-shirt obscured whatever profanity Myrna actually assailed him with and from habit, Jim thought of it as masfit. Myrna swore with accuracy. The phlegm in her throat obscured her obscenities. Under special circumstances, Myrna's obscenities were astounding, such as when she won another weight-lifting trophy. Then she bought a case of Coors and celebrated. She was prone to stumble round inside their house as she tidied
and went over in her thoughts every lift she made during the trophy chase. Jim was accustomed to watching Myrna stoop to retrieve one of Little John's toys, or a wisp of lint, and mutter a masfit that helped her win the trophy: "Goddamn, shit-pasted judge; asshole-contusioned trainer," or something like that. Jim often told himself it sounded like masfit. Sometimes Myrna swore in Armenian. Jim learned to cope with it. It was never safe to ask, "What did you say?" or "Do I agree? No, I think . . ." because Myrna's intense pride blazed during such triumphs. "I strive," she often tried to explain, "to be ladylike." Jim's best solution to a masfit was instant retreat.

In the basement, he scrubbed the furnace housing. He pushed a soapy rag in wide arcs, and paused to dip it into a pail of soapy water, water still rocking from where he carried it to the furnace.

"Jim," Myrna asked from the basement doorway, "any more down there?" Myrna filled the light in the doorway. She rolled forward on the balls of her feet. She held two filled, massive plastic garbage bags, triple-strength—one in each dainty fist.

"Huh?" He stared up at her, the bank president slapping his loan refusal hovering in his thoughts. "Any more what?"

Myrna cleared her throat. "You cleaning the gun cabinet?" She stopped rocking.
Jim turned to consider the gun cabinet. "Yes," he said, "no," he corrected his plans. "I was going to, but the furnace was dusty." He heard no logic in what he said; no truth, either. He had filled the pail, and started wiping the nearest object, while the day's events streamed through his half-conscious thoughts. "I will pretty soon, Myrna, the cabinet, wash it."

"I forgot," she replied, "I did already." She disappeared. The back door opened. It thudded shut.

Did what? Probably, Myrna meant she already had emptied the basement waste basket. Sure. And he could clean the gun cabinet, but the furnace was closer to the basement spigot. The garbage cans! Two metal garbage cans sat next to Myrna's dahlia bed!

"Rowuhrrr, masfit!" Now again, had Jim tried to produce the muffled stream of obscenities he heard from outside, it might not have been exactly: Rowuhrrr, masfit! That Myrna was furious was clear, probably for a block or two within earshot. He heard her husky call across their back yard: "Little John! You little sonofabitch!" Yes, those were her marching orders, heard clearly through a basement window locked shut. "You get your tiny butt over here, and just see what you've done now!"
His chin dropped and his shoulders lifted. No time to rush outside. Only make matters worse; Little John, all two-foot-ten of him, there was no—

"What'samatter Mommie," Little John's high-pitched voice tinged with fear piped through the window as clearly as had Myrna's eruption. "What'samatter, don'tcha like my fort?"

Their son was terrified.

His ankles were wet. Jim felt the soapy water soak into his old oxfords. He saw the overturned pail resting against the furnace. He had picked the pail up, and had intended—what?

"Bad boy!" Outside, Myrna's rage had dropped several degrees if Jim understood the lowered shout, the absence of masfits. He listened tensely for the scrape of garbage cans bounding across their neighborhood street. He waited for the wood siding to splinter. Myrna's voice, her exact masfits, were no longer recognizable though Jim strained to open the basement window. It was rusted shut. He could not pry the latch loose.

The back door slammed. The cellar steps protested, and Myrna arrived, spent. Her face was beaded with sweat: "Jim, you know what that son of yours did?"

"C'mere, you hot broad," he ordered. "No," he advanced cautiously across the soapy water which ran slowly toward their basement drain near the gun cabinet. "You mean, Little
John? I thought he was playing next door." His shoulders lifted as he ducked automatically, but Myrna thought he slipped on the soapy floor. He neared her with the wet rag and swept it up against her breast.

"Harrumph," she backed away. She turned aside, to avoid his groping hand. "See you finally decided to mop behind the furnace, you worthless . . . ."

"Uh, Myrna," he interrupted her search for an accurate masfit, "are we going to Muscleman's Tap tonight?" Cassidy, he congratulated himself, you are an expert at leading your wife away from her rages.

"Bullshit," Myrna turned toward him and yanked at the rag, which had trailed down with his fingers to wet her thigh--"Don't do that Jim. The neighbors--" She grabbed it and shoved it toward his groin, squeezed water with amazing gentleness against his crotch, "Here, if you want to make the neighbors think I just wet my pants swearing up a storm." She pulled his jeans away from his belly and slipped the rag inside his Penny's shorts. He gasped. "So how do you like it, huh fella, you making a play for my groin?"

"Myrna, that's not in the weight-training manual. There's no--" and he grabbed the bar on her shirt front. Myrna was standing in the soapy water and could not pull away. She flushed.
"Bullshit," she stumbled, and gripped his wrist: "I know you heard every word, Jim Cassidy. I was shit-pasted. Now what do you think of that, you spineless blob of..." her feet slipped. She released his wrist long enough to regain her balance. Usually, she chose an affectionate term for such matters, such as melted glue or cholera epidemic, or an Armenian curse with obscene debris in it, but he was already pulling at her T-shirt. She was yanking at his belt buckle. "Little John plastered mud next to the basement window. Dug a hole. Pulled out most of my dahlias," she let go to wave her arm.

Jim slid closer, gliding like an ice skater. "They were so pretty," he slobbered against her neck, sucking on the red heat she brought in from outside.

"I work all summer on that bed," Mryna yanked her T-shirt off while he held her upright, both hands on her tiny waist, "and tiny butt mutilates them in five minutes."

"A case of the braynee braw tru," he replied smoothly, too smoothly, before he knew what he intended to say. She pulled the shirt off with a rip, "This one has bounced for the last time," and yanked it downward over his head.

"Just a case of the braynee braw tru," he answered.

"Whaddaya mean!" Her Armenian heritage flashed, and her tiny hands which had been unbuttoning his shirt paused: "D'jou say something? D'jou just say Meister Brau Brew?"
"No dear, you hate it. This T-shirt stinks!" He yanked to get it off. It caught on his ears. She had pulled one of her sleeves over his head! "Maybe I'm just blue." He waited for her hands to continue their progress up his shirt.

"Myrna, let's make another son."

She cleared her throat, and he didn't catch which masfit it was, but it was in Armenian, he remembered that later.

The End
SHORT GRASS

They were average, Ben and Alice. And worse, hum drum. Ben and Alice, our short grass neighbors. Tidy. Understand that we never were close, not truly. Casual, might be the proper term. But Ben and Alice lived in their white ranch house when we moved in across the street in our new short grass neighborhood. The character of a short grass neighborhood? Where the front lawns are not used. Rather, each front lawn had a clump birch or a fat evergreen shrub trimmed over the years to resemble most a deflated beach ball. Here and there, they were joined by a blue spruce for dignity or a hard maple which distributed leaves evenly throughout the neighborhood. In the thirty years we lived across the street from Ben and Alice, the shrubs and trees...grew, I suppose. I considered them normal, Ben and Alice, I suppose. No. Probably back then I termed them subnormal. Yes, it would have been likely of me then, when I was ambitious. Estella had her good years still ahead. My law practice seemed sure to ease the only other firm in town out within a decade.

A short grass neighborhood is where each occupant rushes mindlessly out at the first roar of a single-piston motor and
calmly hurries to cut grass equally too short before his neighbor finishes so that the entire neighborhood can be proud of matching lawns cut too short. Our local real estate agents drooled when they found a house to sell in our development. They could drive anxious prospects past our lawns to join a short grass existence with Ben and Alice. On a Tuesday just after our weekend mow, I remember because my partner and I won our case before the Iowa Supreme Court, I uncharacteristically mixed a double Manhattan, something I never did before sundown on a weekend. I carried my success into the garage and found myself firing up my old Garner self-propelled, acquired during a foreclosure. I raised the blade so it would not cut the grass. I followed that worthless old piece of junk up and down our front lawn and by dinner at six had perpetrated five other cases of lawn abuse. They mowed too short grass which they had mowed three days previously without reason. The sound of mowers further out in the development haunted me until the drink wore off. The mowers were pushed by equally confused occupants who weren't sure either why they were mowing, but heard the commotion started by the Garner. It was their habit to respond.

In a law office, I discovered, I gained satisfaction from solving a problem rather than causing it. My colleagues of the bar association assured me that my maturation was normal. It meant I had won enough cases and accumulated enough wealth
that I could now turn to what drew us to the law in the first place—that justice be done.

Our weekend mowing resumed its normal sequence, triggered by a retired safety inspector, Harris, from the far end of the block. Harris never lost his erect bearing. He personally saw to it that he began mowing first each Saturday. And Harris personally saw to it that he inspected every back yard project at his own prompting. Harris reminded you of the mutual zoning code and offered you his opinion of your work at which he usually exploded alone with the clipped bark of a military captain. But Harris, the ass, lived at the far end of the block, and I maintained that buffer zone, never once invited him down. Harris seemed content as the leader of our mower response complex. I bought all but the income tax portion of the oldest law firm in Marshtown and immediately became the target of three new law firms established over the years after mine. My turn was approaching. In those days, Ben was sometimes my focus on justice because he never became foreman of the line crew at Marshton Power and Electric. Ben was too short, plump, and too cheerful a follower. Maybe he never was promoted because his vague grin over his plump jaw did not hint of leadership. From across the street, I surmised that Ben simply completed his day shift and drove home to Alice in their white house and . . . existed. Alice, in the same light, was sweet and quiet and short as was Ben.
but her hips widened first with the births of their three children and later as the blue spruces gave dignity to the front lawns. As we all neared fifty—the year Ben died of a heart attack—there was no accurate way to describe Alice kindly by her physical proportions. She was as fat and dumpy as was their life. Just as mine was frenetic. Our computer income tax service drew customers away from even the youngest law firms. My oldest partner appeared before the United States Supreme Court. I liked his presentation before Justice Douglas of my research on land rights. I preferred the research, and he was the court orator. We won our point: all residents of a watershed have equal rights to water, and not one drop more may be used to irrigate than is returned each year by nature to the entire aquifer. We are stewards forever and can own land only briefly in our sojourn here.

Early—when Stella was still alive—sometimes Stella and I invited Ben and Alice over for a holiday meal but gave it up when our kids arrived. We liked each other, the four of us, and tried to maintain our visits but . . . we were just different. From those early years, I concluded Alice would never have an exquisite Christmas dinner. Her meals were always plain, ample. My Stella set before me peaches steeped in cloves, peaches which burst when you crushed the pulp and the cloves found the back of your throat. Always, an exciting spice dish was served for our holidays with Stell near me. I
remember, I felt no need for heaven with a turkey and our children and Stella seated proudly at my right, "Ross, Ross? Carve the turkey, love, and let's feast." My Stell. Her's was a death called muscular distrophy. Our children pulled me through and kept me occupied through their high school years. Then they were off to college and started their own families. Finally I found time to watch the blue spruces grow austere, even haughty, hiding part of the front of a house. The spruces offered shade to the too short grass which turned brown each August because our lawns were too short, and the sun burned into short roots under clipped stems.

Ben's first grandson arrived with his daughter from North Carolina just before Ben's heart attack. The grandson discovered Ben's collection of bells just as I had years earlier, and I watched Ben introduce each bell with the joy he had evidenced to me. His was a worthless collection by authentic standards: cheap bells on twisted ropes purported to be from Ceylon, or sitting alone everywhere in their house. He collected tourist bells sold at any gift shop: fake bells of India on fakier ropes, yet unique; dull brass bells that could not have cost more than a dollar or two—none matched. I admired each, when I understood. On their kitchen counter sat an obvious misfit, a cut glass bell which Ben never rang for fear of shattering its crystal. The crystal offended Ben. His frown appeared only when he held the crystal bell, and in
time he confided that his daughter gave him the bell long
before she understood the nature of his collection. He held
the crystal bell up before the kitchen window to catch the
light from the front lawn and complained, "She must have paid
fifteen dollars, maybe more." He sniffed disapproval, "She
didn't understand. A waste." In time I understood and agreed
with Ben. His bells were metal and inexpensive and unique
because they functioned, and their tone was clear. Once I
collected a bell from a coffee table, another from his
downstairs family room, one from their living room and one
from atop their refrigerator and rang them. They were
harmonious, though Ben had selected them on different
vacations in different years. Ben had an ear for the one that
rang true. Alice told amusing stories about Ben distracting
sales clerks by his furtive nature as he sorted through
tourist junk to find a bell that spoke quality. I watched Ben
conduct his grandson through the house--Reuben. I think the
baby's name was Reuben. Reuben's fat baby hand grabbed for a
cheap bicentennial bell reproducing the original crack in the
liberty bell. It was an outrage to a purist. An eagle with
outstretched wings perched on a liberty bell? Crass. Yet
Ben's choice was melodious as were the rest scattered around.
Ben had no organization, no expensive display cases with
glass. His bells were within reach, meant to be held. Ben
would pick up a bell near the sofa table and shake it and hold
it up for Reuben until the sound died. Or Ben would grab a handful as I did once and ring them together and Reuben would stare at the shaped metal in Ben's stubby fingers. Curiously, Ben had a bashfulness which I remembered often after his heart attack—the attack was unexpected, massive, and after the funeral I had a recurring memory of Ben playing with his grandson in his kitchen, a game with Reuben that took them from a three-bell dinner bell at the doorway to wind chimes hanging over their sink. Ben held Reuben in his short, fat arms while he took mincing steps, quick steps that hinted of running while together they rang the bells. They rang the dinner bells, then the wind chimes while Ben's protruding stomach pushed over the sink edge. I watched from the kitchen table as Ben and Reuben disappeared into his hall, and I heard Ben, "Here Reuben, this is a school bell," he solemnly told the baby. "Some day you'll go to school." Soon, I heard them ringing a hotel desk clerk's bell—a treasure that Alice found at a yard sale and Ben quickly added to his collection. His bells were scattered within a baby's reach. Back they came into the kitchen with Ben breathless: "Ring it, boy, ring it!" By now, Reuben had seen enough to know he could swipe at the dinner bells. Ben held the baby out so his hand pawed the dinner bells and they chimed; then to the wind chimes over the sink, back again, and they took me in their excitement to my last year at Northwestern and the campus. Ben hurried back
and forth vigorously, slightly winded, as if he wanted Rueben to know what it was like to feel running, and Reuben could not reach out far but Ben kept urging and made his grandson think he was swatting the bells as they rushed back and forth. Reuben's arm knocked against the wind chimes, the dinner bell cord, and I remember going home to Stell and remarking, "You know? Ben's playing his bells for his grandson. Remember Northwestern's campus, Stell? The bell tower? Remember, we decided to pick a Midwestern city and go it together, forego the Eastern boardrooms because somehow, you knew I would never fit? If you could see Ben and his grandson at this minute, they are like how we felt. Go over and say hello." Of course we got involved in something else that morning, and then our neighbor was dead and Stell was dead. At Ben's funeral, what I remembered was Ben and his grandson, "Listen Reuben, I'll do this just once," he told the boy, and then Ben would ring a bell and the baby would murmur and of course Ben would ring the bell again in joy that his first grandson understood. Again at Stell's funeral I found myself thinking of Ben and his grandson, and the odd thing was that in my grief I followed them. I knew which bell Ben held out and what it sounded like though they were in a room away from me. A dull-brown bell with a square handle warned of mountain goats on a steep incline. A bronze, square bell the size of a Campbell's Soup can had a rich tone. Down in the family room
a squat bell no bigger than a golf ball told of secrets found
in a bazaar in Singapore. A school bell was—once again I
walked a mile daily to first grade in the Freelove School, a
rural school since demolished while others were moved to
county fair retirement. My mind wandered to the Freelove's
merger with the forgotten districts of Rhodes, Clemons,
Melbourne, St. Anthony, LaMoille, and State Center to become
the West Marsh County Consolidated School. For a moment at
Stell's grave, my older brothers and sisters were ahead of me
down the gravel road to the Freelove School on a chilly autumn
morning, and I hurried away from our farm to catch them. The
Freelove bell told me I was late, and Miss Whitlow would be
firm, but she would understand.

My doctor ordered me to shift the load to my younger
partners and in time I agreed. I moved west to be nearer my
grandchildren, to play with them as Ben had taught me. I
finally settled on a tiny lot just a couple states from the
young ones. Red dirt in Utah. It was on an empty slope
across the valley from growing neighborhoods with irrigated
lawns and short grass. I didn't think of Ben and Alice often,
but at times had to return to Iowa on business. On my final
visit I drove to our neighborhood to see our old home. Its
brick was still square, and the mortar freshly tuckpointed by
my renter who was anxious to prove he wanted to buy it. A
clump birch by our front door was mature though I had watered
it seldom. My renter had torn out the old sidewalk. He paved a sloping rock walk to the street opposite Ben and Alice's white house. On close inspection, I saw the rock walk had been installed with care. I knew I could sell our home and sign over the last portion of my firm. The house where I lost Stell. Time now to give up that.

His bell was across the street. Ben's tower bell was the oldest, the biggest, the most unornate tower bell ever planted on cement in a front yard and painted with black stove paint. If I knew Ben, he acquired it for the price of moving it. The price was hard labor. I walked across the street to investigate. Up their sidewalk. His bell had traditional lines, a fluted bottom. Its massive arms were welded to iron beams jutting up from the concrete base. Its peak was level with my tie pin. The afternoon sun was hot, so I took off my suitcoat and stood with my back to the street and wondered how to sound the bell? Some time passed; I don't know, maybe Alice saw me from their kitchen window. She interrupted my thoughts. "Ross, is that you?" Alice stood near me in the yard and while she was the same I was not. Had I been standing there long? Did Alice think me a helpless old fool? "The bell," I said, but could not continue.

"When I finally cleaned out the garage," she began and turned to watch the school children, "it was there under a piece of canvas, under boards I thought Ben brought home for
an addition. He wanted a second garage for our retirement. He thought by then we could afford, each of us . . ." She waved at children who waved back, "I think Ben meant it for our anniversary, so that's when I had them install it. The children come over in summer. We ring it." She turned back and saw that I watched her, "Why don't you ring it?"

"Well Alice," and I stepped closer and studied the bell. I wanted to blurt that Ben should be here to ring it, that his life was wasted. I needed Ben to show me how to ring it. "Alice," again I couldn't continue. I cleared my throat and brushed at my shirt cuff, "I don't see that I can. Its arms are welded to the beams." She did not answer. I thought I must have confused her also, because she stepped back as if she knew I could not strike that massive iron housing hard enough with my fist to make a suitable ring.

"In back," she said, "pull the rope." I stumbled around, found a rope like a hay rope in our barn and yanked it awkwardly. We stood as the tone carried down the street. The school children stopped to turn and wave again. Then I knew Ben had not failed me. If I knew bells, then I knew that silver was added to the pour when this one was cast. In Ben's way, he either guessed so or heard it so and bided his time. He wrestled the treasure into his garage secretly, unknown to Alice, to recognize thirty years of marriage. Not even thirty years, I realized. Their's was cut short by two. Alice said,
"I have time to make a cup of coffee." I saw her face was flushed from the sun as was mine. I wiped at my cheeks and nodded.

"Alice," and I noted that I could speak calmly, "is there some way? I could ask you? Would it be possible, to hear Ben's collection?" I continued, and found again my courtroom manner, "I want to hear each one."
Landry will ask Hilary to marry him this morning, ask her right now, or, after they dress, it's as long as he'll wait. He stands with one foot on the sofa armrest and bends to tie his "Hilary," no answer, "Hilary?" shoelace. She's bent over his hallway rug shoves an arm through a sleeve and pulls the black dress down tight over her hips her head emerges and he sees the line of white scalp where her hair parts and hears black nylon brush the door as Hilary staggers back against the ivory paint and slides her hip across the recessed door panel and reaches behind and grasps the doorknob to keep her balance. Hilary's Bahama Magic Number Eight permeates the room, "Sometimes Hilary, it's awkward, difficult for me. The darn things, they just pop out," still no hint that she hears, "just when it's the most, the worst, I'm prone to spoonerisms." Landry yanks the lace tight and exhales, ties the other lace, there, he does not say spone to prunerisms as it sometimes happens but Hilary slides black bikini panties up over her black nylons and squirms to work them up under the tight waistline "I found them Landry," she answers him, "did you find my shoes?" in Hilary's way of rushing and then her impatience flashes "Hurry Landry, I'm late." A thoroughbred
dancing from the paddock sideways, hooves cuff the track not for support merely to confirm that gravity exists, the turf spongey soon to rush underneath, a point of reference so betters will know how swiftly it races around the track.

Landry buttons his shirt in the bedroom looking for her shoes he'll ask Hilary right now and she calls in to him "I remember hon, I kicked them off in the Dodge last night. Be a sweet and get them, will you?" Her request is a demand. Landry fumbles at his necktie hurries past Hilary the Bahama Magic is fresh and trots down the cement apartment steps and Hilary's black spiked heels with wineglass stems are up under the dash and he takes them back she meets him at the door they are late his proposal is lost.

In traffic to the Fashion Center, the coal-tar asphalt is wet, muffler exhaust residue, Landry searches for just the right words he loves friendly face or Happy Holidays because no matter how hard he tries to twist them they always come out right Landry searches for just the right phrase and it hits him marry me he'll ask Hilary right away she twists the rear-view mirror to her side and applies makeup expertly "Hilary?" she's lost in it "Not now Landry" the Fashion Center is she does not have to tell him again simply the largest most exclusive department store in Muscatine the oil light flicks did he put in a quart before their dinner last night he didn't. Hilary is intent on her makeup is exquisite Landry
reaches across to unlatch her door at the Fashion Center her muscles gather when his arm brushes her stomach the door handle back "See you tonight? Hilary? Shall we go to the Casino?" He has been saving this it's the Casino Royale but Landry has trouble with that so he just says Casino serves wonderful French cuisine Hilary fumbles in her purse. Long ago Hilary in a pretty pout hints "I love to go to the Casino Royale" only now he knows she's been there once and this second tugs the hem down above her knees "No," impatiently, "not tonight, Landry. Can't see you tonight. In a hurry. Call me tomorrow? Be a pet and call me tomorrow?" She's out of the car canters left to avoid a sidewalk grate Landry wants to object call her back ask "marry me" her slim legs under the black hem disappear into the revolving door of the Fashion Center.

Before he edges the Dodge back into traffic, Landry ties a Windsor knot, stuffs the small end inside the first button down, he forgot a tie pin still he should get the spare tire fixed stop for oil ask Hilary to marry him right now, after he gets to work, after the tests are finished, as soon as he can. Last night carries Hilary up because it drizzles the walk is slippery she says pretends to bite his neck at the base pulls a fold of skin between her teeth rolls it in her mouth gnaws the fold how to ask Hilary to marry him distracts Landry as Susan finishes measuring the plastic syrup and he writes down
the results—twenty-three percent. Can that be? He remeasures sure enough Susan was right the last millimeter of gray syrup and empties the graduate into a cardboard box lined with green plastic garbage bags, "I'm going out to get a breath of fresh air," there, he does not say bet a greamth of fresh air. He did yesterday and Susan giggled neck tingles where Hilary bit him words twist when he's under pressure thinks fast, funny face now there's a neat term what the hell he's learned to live with it why is he turning to Susan? Did he say funny face aloud? Susan smiles down at their morning's work his scribbles but won't answer him "out there" he says and jabs at the fire escape door "a minute" but his tone is vague, preoccupied, and Susan knows he's probably thinking of something else and won't answer him won't look up to see where he points Landry's collar burns where Hilary bit Susan leans closer to his horrendous scribbles she says make sense a neat transcription for Hi-Tech Plastics president's report. In her white lab jacket, Susan is round and ill-defined a tenacious researcher like him not unlike a slug yet when she arrives each morning and reaches up for her jacket she "Never mind" he tells her more vigorously than he points. He pushes the door open onto the iron lattice grill. Landry moves out against the cool railing releases the door swings shut behind him otherwise stand and hold it. The door wedges on loose cement washed there by last night's drizzle the latch does not
ku-chit. Often, the latch ku-chits and locks Landry out he pounds for Susan to open it from the inside. And before Hi-Tech hires Susan to help the fire door a constant annoyance, it ku-chits and Landry climbs conspicuously down the iron ladders to the sidewalk in his white lab jacket upset looks ridiculous pedestrians think he's a daytime industrial burglar in perfect disguise and espionage a constant threat in our business the boss always says back up the wood stairs in the remodeled brick warehouse needs to be tuck-pointed to Landry's third-floor lab which he now shares with Susan his assistant for Hi-Tech Plastics of Muscatine. Deep breath, air escapes in long hiss through his teeth not wait call Hilary this morning apartment empty, lonely, before noon, now! He slips fingers around pries door open Susan looks over as he returns, "What's it like outside this morning?"

"That kind of morning," he shrugs, "the churds are burping." The birds are chirping! He makes no effort to correct this slip but retreats to crowded tiny office warm shadows off the lab dials Hilary's number at Fashion Center jewelry counter, safe behind closed office door with a window see Susan finishing their transcription. Breath, very deep breath. Hilary sells only the most exclusive fashion items "I don't know why I go out with you," she curls under his arm, "you always get things twisted so strangely" only the most fashionable accessories though she personally refuses to wear
only the sheerest bracelet and no gaudy rings they distract
from the slim look of her glamour her secret she explains in a
fit of pique when he gives her a charm bracelet of Kentucky
Derby champions miniature stallions which she accepts and
never wears "Ugh, I can't stand animals, are these horses? So
Treshe" in her French for trashy. The phone is ringing Hilary
answers, "Fashion counter," in her low voice of cultured
fashion "Hi Hilary, it's me" but she hangs up! I'll die!
Landry sits in a blue funk wondering if he should go back into
the lab, work is done, the phone rings "Landry? I'm sorry
pet, I hung up on you." Hilary's voice drips regret she has
none, "I had a customer for Blue Voodoo Magic Number Four
Hundred but knew you would understand, it went with a gold
necklace. Call me tomorrow? Didn't I say? I can't go out
tonight." Landry rubs the phone cradle and licks his upper
lip and draws on courage to offer his proposal right there on
the phone "I'm going" she interrupts "to the hair dresser's"
and Landry holds his breath "after work. You don't have to
take me, my assistant manager will, are you okay?" Landry's
breath flows like a tire pump hose forcing air out past the
phone receiver "You know, he's the cute one I was telling you
about, so oo-la-stunning. Then I want to go home and soak and
maybe watch a late movie. Okay hon? Call me tomorrow?" She
hangs up before Landry can say he's okay stop his breath from
hissing into the receiver protest or say "Marry me?" He was
about to. He says "Marry me?" to the office door but can't
make a sound so he practices the syllables silently to say
them fluently with his lips marry me, marry me, marry me.
They work fine silently without a sound and Oh God Susan looks
over into the office window does she see?

In the lab, he'll take no further chances with a phone
but will find a place to ask Hilary he'll have to wait for the
right Susan wear perfume? Not to a lab, surely. "Outside"
Landry tells her and points "just a minute" which is
unnecessary on the grating he listens for the ku-chit and the
fire door ku-chits but no matter he'll pound for Susan in a
minute a station wagon inches forward cheating at the corner
traffic signal Landry should think of as beautiful the green
shoots on little trees below him in holes carved out of cement
sidewalk but Susan's neck under blond hair the color of cream
lab walls her scent not the hot gray plastic as she leans to
their transcription and the air is moist the trees just little
green sticks on a spring morning. Landry grips the railing
why Hilary a winter of confusion discovery last night silver
cortisone splashed warm laces up his spine should pound on the
fire door sweat thigh burned when he pulled away Hilary's
furious scramble for a hairdresser's appointment with no hint
of regret? Not a hint of regret.

"Landry?" Susan interrupts and her voice is a contralto
pouring coffee and she holds the fire door did she hear the
ku-chit? "The boss is on the line, John Lowry. Are we ready?" Landry nods to avoid a spoken blurp John Lowry makes him nervous. In his office, Landry tries to arrange his desk neater before John Lowry arrives the president of Hi-Tech Plastics of Muscatine strides into the lab he never walks from the executive elevator brings exhuberance sheer magnetism into the lab "I want to see it work!" John Lowry delights always tingles with the power of getting what he wants. Landry twists a round switch on his electric frying pan and Susan pours petroleum pellets into the pan. Lowry stands near Susan pretends he understands the process he never does. Landry's improvised lab oven melts gray pellets into syrup flows into bicycle air pump cylinder through a glass tube into Landry's newest injection mold which clamps out gray tie clasps perfect for a necktie, or a bow tie, it makes no difference. Permanent-knot neckties with plastic clasps are the rage now though Landry knots his own and President Lowry is rich the leader of tie-clasp suppliers nationally he is fond of saying thanks to Landry's innovative clasps. President Lowry taps his fingers and makes small talk with Susan while a dozen gray clasps cool and Landry paces by the lab table and Lowry picks the first out of the mold and twists a shred off where the mold did not clamp shut entirely Landry forgot to tighten a spring and Lowry works the prongs open and closed, open and closed, holds it close to his bifocals and stares intently,
open and closed. Landry and Susan hold their breath the
prongs don't break and Lowry directs really pours magnetism on
Landry "This is lighter, stronger, much stronger," in his
terse clipped way "like you said. It'll require less
plastic," his tone rises with suppressed excitement.

"Yes," Landry is calm, confident, "I think twenty-three
percent less plastic."

"Are you sure?" Lowry smooths his mustache in a quick
gesture and looks at Susan and beams because he knows Landry
knows.

"Of course," Landry confirms what Lowry knows "we
finished the tests. This morning. Twenty-three percent
less." Really, in the dry lab air Landry sounds impersonal,
precise, accurate, his voice a resonance that rivals Lowry's
assurance.

"That's significant, Landry, big bucks," Lowry turns his
magnetic gaze on Susan, "It means quite a savings. For
Hi-Tech. A whopping savings. Some of which we'll pass on to
the industry of course."

Landry nods confidently, "Twenty-three percent less
plastic." The words jump out clearly and Susan watches him
with a curious "We just finished the tests, thanks to Susan." Landry blows softly through his front teeth the air whistles
keep the passage clear.
Lowry scoops a handful of clasps into his brown suit pocket "Can you spare these?" He turns again to Susan "I'll introduce them at the next director's meeting. I'm calling one immediately. Landry, I don't know, but I have a hunch. About this clasp." Lowry releases Susan from his mesmerizing focus and considers Landry "Maybe I should wait. No I don't want to." Susan jumps, her attention is gone she rushes to turn off the frying pan and Landry rushes to pour solvent into the bicycle hand pump so the plastic syrup does not solidify he's afraid to check probably has already solidified back again to the hardware store already out of bicycle hand pumps but another order in and he should check to see if they have arrived.

"It'll work," Landry assures Lowry, "and this mold is better. It doesn't take the clasps as long to cool. In production it's faster," he breaks into a pleased smile triumphant as Lowry solemnly steps near and pumps his hand "We have the test results" why does he think that Lowry is plump "We have the results" that's even more foolish just overweight the boss is overweight but has Susan finished the transcription? Lowry quits pumping Landry's arm it's distracting "Don't we Susan?" There, he almost said son't you Dusan! Relief floods his chest there's a kind God answer Susan please say something.

"Yes," she says.
Lowry grabs the transcription from Susan and opens the last page first and Landry will have to go to the hardware store and Lowry says "I'll get this to cost accounting fast. Landry, you'll find a pay increase in your Hi-Tech check. Is twenty-three percent right? Eh?" He directs his super-gaze on Susan "you too, Susan. Eh? I planned it coming up in the elevator. Whatever you're saving the company. Landry says he's way ahead, you've organized the lab. Isn't that the thing? Direct action?" Lowry vibrates positively shivers with the surprise his announcement creates and spins to "That okay Landry? You're pretty quiet this morning."

"Of course, yes," Landry hurries to agree, he's doing just fine, "I mean, fat's thine." Lowry is chubby, overweight and jerks his head back in surprise as Landry felt it coming if he could just have spoken slower a pay increase the lab echoes a silent fat's thine which flits to the ceiling and carooms off to clip the far wall and ricochets back to slap the lab table and bounce off and Landry breaths deep as it flies past and inhales fat's thine deep into his lungs where it explodes into his stomach and a pink flush creeps up under his lab jacket and gathers in his neck, "that's fine." He wants to cough violently.

"Mr. Lowry?" Susan's query fills the pained silence and sounds squeaky and she clears her throat "will you send me up a copy, of our transcription? Our progress report?" She
smiles as Lowry turns to listen to what she asks in a bemused way he's trying to understand "I haven't had time to make a copy" Susan explains. "Will you send me a copy?" She regains her contralto coffee.

"Of course!" Lowry is glad leaps at a chance to act and strides to the executive elevator a chance to escape Landry pours his relief out in a silent long sigh and his shoulder bumps Susan's another pay raise who turns and her nose is tiny and clipped like a Chinese pagoda and her arms are around his neck strangely and his around her waist uncharacteristically he hugs Susan and under the lab jacket Susan's breasts are not tiny but cushion his chest against her's and quickly Landry releases her "Let's get some fresh air." They stumble out on the fire escape neither says a word glad to move around and stare intently down at the traffic, blue lamp posts. The sun warms his lab coat, a pay raise, twenty-three percent. The fire door does not ku-chit. "Susan?" Yes he's positive the scent is not the fresh air. His lips are dry.

"Yes?" She is intent at the pavement.

"It's a celebration, right?" Landry slips his hands from the railing and turns so he can place a hand on each shoulder under the lab jacket he can feel firm muscle sliding under a cotton weave "Would you care," it comes out slowly and carefully, royal-gray eyes why hadn't he seen them "to go to"
just a gentle breath "the Casino Royale?" There, he said it
the whole damn thing!

"Of course" Susan's eyes widen in flecks of gray wonder.

His grip tightens on her shoulders "Tonight" he repeats
it, savor's it, "the Casino Royale." Casino Royale rolls off
his tongue with an ease that tastes of hot coffee laced with
thick French cream but Susan does not notice. She inches
closer and preoccupies Landry in a non-lab research project
that forestalls talk and feels warm and close just right and
they lean against the fire door it ku-chits and "Ooops" she
murmurs her lips next to his but does not pull away they laugh
at the same instant they are locked out. A morning when
churds burp has to be, demands to be, is much better even when
it's a long climb down to the sidewalk, he is sure, shared.
"You can have that old Holstein," Jones told Mean Ed McFarland. The sun must have blinded Mean Ed. What else? He and Jones had dickered for an hour. Jones kept looking the sorry nag over, from raw gums to a whip broom for a tail. Mean Ed was busy counting scars on an old holstein. Said later, he counted twenty or more scars, but then, "I missed the significant ones."

"This cow has been busy," Jones assured McFarland. That much was obvious.

Mean Ed shifted to the other leg, and carefully brushed his pantleg. He wore his best black wool suit, his trading suit. He had led the sorry nag to Jones' farm a quarter mile from his. Their farmsteads were tucked into the southern end of Marshall County up in Iowa. Ed's chaw shifted to the other side of his cheek, to balance his one-legged stand, and the warm spring afternoon drew the season's first horse flies to his boots. He ignored them. "Wild?" He meant the holstein.

"Not that I know," Jones answered.

"She kick?"

"Not when I milk her."

"She fresh?"
"I just weaned a bull calf. You can see him in the pasture," Jones motioned with his straw hat, his "tradin'" hat, so to speak. Jones was the best trader in Marshall county. He was accustomed to neighbors arriving at his farm lane to trade. His acumen was known for two counties, which was further than most people drove a horse and wagon in those days. In the pasture, a black-hided bull calf with a blunt rump nosed at the long grass.

"That's an angus calf," Mean Ed objected.

"What I had in the lot," Jones countered. He meant the angus sire.

So in half an hour more, the trade was completed—Mean Ed's nag for Jones' old holstein. Of course, each trader thought he made the best of a bad bargain.

A few years previous, Jones had traded what he called a "yaller cow" to Mean Ed, a trade that went sour. Though Mean Ed knew the cow had a stump of a tail, he took her for other reasons which he later regretted. She broke his leg. He swore revenge, which explained why he arrived leading the sorry nag. The nag faltered less than a rod from Jones' gate, but was revived with a nip of turpentine Mean Ed hid in his suitcoat. The bottle label said White Rum, but that was just Ed's ruse. Revived, the nag had stepped lively up Jones' farm lane. Behind Ed and the nag, the Iowa hillside rolled gently toward the Mississippi about seven counties off. The western
sun encouraged Mean Ed to keep the tip of his black trading hat low on his forehead. Maybe it was the heat and the flies, or the sun sinking lower, because Mean Ed handed Crazy Jones the bridle. He picked up the cow's halter, "Aint this rope rotten?"

"No more than that twine you call a halter," Jones complained. But Jones refused to let go of the twine, and edged the old nag toward his shed. "Gotta water this thing before it keels over."

At which point Ed hurried the holstein down the lane. He explained that it was time to be home for milking. The cow followed meekly; her udder swayed with the quick pace Ed maintained.

"Whatever you do, don't shut that cow in a barn," Jones yelled from the safety of his unpainted horse shed. The shed was no more than a few boards covered with tin. A hand pump was nearby. A wood trough led to a round, wood, watering tank, which was surrounded by springtime mud, or leaks from the wood slabs held together by an iron rod round the tip. The round tank looked much like a whiskey barrel held together by iron bands.

Of course, Mean Ed couldn't decide which way Jones meant him to blunder. But he had been warned truly. As he trudged the driest mud ruts to his eighty acres, he thought about the warning. His was a dark frown that would have frightened a
timber wolf, but none was hunting that spring in Marshall county. The river groves were too sparse; the land was too evenly cleared for corn fields, and hay. Was it another trader's trick? Ed considered his chances. Should he put the Holstein in his barn? Or was Jones throwing a false scare! Did Jones think a township scandal would spread that Mean Ed milked only in his barnlot, never in his barn?

Ed milked her that evening by his well pump, a long, black pump stem near a leanto he called a house. And the next night he milked there, and the next, and each morning at six a.m. he milked by the pump, while the old Holstein produced three-quarters of a pail each milking. If Jones meant to kill Mean Ed from exertion, he failed. Ed was rock hard, a willow hard hill man from Kentucky.

The cornfields were ankle-green the night Ed returned to his well to milk the black and white Holstein. She was as big as a pony, and resembled a calico horse. No rider could have saddled the bones over which her hide clung. Everything she ate turned to milk. The old cow stood contentedly munching white clover from Ed's haymow. His red barn, built by the previous owner, was filled with two seasons of hay crops, oats, fresh straw. The barn had stood vacant through the winter. After he shot the yaller cow, Mean Ed decided to heal his broken leg before he bought another milk cow. The previous farm owner had milked several cows. He had owned a
Brown Swiss and two Herefords. Ed knew by the hair rubbed off on the barn stanchions. Then that spring, when an itinerant cobbler stopped to ask an unusual favor, Mean Ed decided to act. The trader, who wore a floppy white jacket over a peddler's suit, unhappily unhitched his team: "Do I have your permission to shoot my horse and bury him near the road? He's twenty-two. I've had him since a colt. It's his time to die."

Instead, Mean Ed acted rashly: "Don't bother, friend. I have an empty pasture. Let him die there. Maybe the poor thing needs a breather. Your mare will get you to Alden. It's four miles. The road is mostly flat." The same day, Mean Ed led the cobbler's nag to Jones' farm, and returned with the Holstein. Immediately, his larder was vastly richer. Now he enjoyed cream and skimmed milk, and cottage cheese. He was soon very fond of the Holstein. He had no churn for butter, but intended to trade for one later. His pigs grew fat on a brew of oats steeped in milk.

As he hoed the corn, as he borrowed a team of horses to lay the spring corn by with an ancient, two-row, corn plow with blunted tips, Ed worried the thing out. Should he barn her? Jones, he decided, had lied. His old Holstein was the meekest, gentlest, most docile cow in Marshall county. So he decided then and there, while pulling on teats the width of his hands, to barn her. Because Ed was a cautious man, he
waited until the corn was knee-high. Ed was cautious because Jones once trained a stallion to return to his homesteaded eighty acres. Jones bragged later it was his only homing pigeon stallion, and that he traded the stud several times before he made a mistake. Jones sold the homing pigeon to a Missouri tracker, who followed the stallion home. The tracker drew down on Jones, "With a horse pistol bigger than a cracker keg in the Alden general store." Jones, with some relish, would relate the matter: "So that's when I learned how to untrain a homing pigeon stallion." He never did say how this was accomplished, but since Jones bore no bullet wounds, most folks in the township took him at his word.

Mean Ed, who harbored more revenge than most farmers in Marshall county, knew all this about Jones. He was occupied with Jones' final warning when he led the old Holstein into his red pole barn. The barn had three milking stanchions, and a leanto shed for a team of horses, should Ed ever afford a team. The Holstein jounced near Ed's bib overalls. She nosed his blue cotton shirt affectionately. In two months on Ed's farmstead, she had become more like a pet dog than a milking Holstein. Ed never bothered to tie her because she refused to run away. Any Iowa farmer considered such a Holstein a gem, as did Ed. He figured her bony pelvis and scarred hide made her at least nine years old, possibly older.
And she was gentle! Never once had she kicked as he placed his milk stool near the well pump and sat to squeeze out a frothy one and one-half pails of milk a day. She had such skill with her tail—and such consideration—that often she flicked a horsefly off Ed's hunched shoulders with the light touch of a violinist drawing the last note of "Sweet Bye and Bye" at a tent meeting, just before the benediction.

Of courses, there was the April afternoon Ed forgot and left a chaw on a tree stump. The holstein ate it, and ruminated nicotine from her four stomachs for a week. Ed's pigs refused their oat brew that week. But the tobacco worked out of her system, and except for an unfortunate lapse when she found some fresh onions Ed had cleaned at the pump, their relationship was what any minister, or neighbor, or friend of Ed's would have termed cordial.

She even tried, with her eagerness to please her new owner, to follow him the four miles to Alden one morning. But Ed wired his lane gate shut. She lowed mournfully that morning, until he returned with his dry goods for the month, salt, sugar, corn meal, flour, vanilla. After that, he sent most of his orders to town with neighbors, who had plenty of room in their wagons amongst their children to haul Ed's meager wants back to his woven-wire farm gate. Ed always paid promptly. In fact, it was rumored that he was wealthy, that the Alden bank was founded with money Ed brought with him from
Kentucky when he arrived to claim his eighty acres. He purchased the eighty by mail from a widow with several children, whose husband died in a prairie fire.

Ed's new milk cow was noticed. That spring, the Glen Grove township neighbors were heard talking. They said Ed and his cow were "a thing," which was of course no account. Of such harmless things did neighborhoods talk in those days of church socials—which Ed never attended—and school box lunches, which since Ed had no children, or a wife, he never went to either.

Other stories about Mean Ed abounded prior to the cow, of course. Mean Ed chewed Old Souse, which made him the only farmer able to spit with deadly accuracy in Marshall county. Ed's accuracy was due to his chew. Old Souse, if you missed by less than four inches, could kill a beetle by its odor, a fact not known to most tobacco spitters since they could not tolerate its bite, nor the aroma of anyone who chewed it.

Ed led the holstein inside his stout barn onto railroad ties, which he purchased, legally, from the M & St. L Railroad when a spur was extended past his eighty over the Iowa River to Alden. Ed hurried back to the pump for his milk stool. He never reached the well. A stanchion post whistled past his ear. A red siding board propelled by a bony holstein's hind leg sailed over the pump and veered toward Ed's leanto, but missed it. Square nails screeched as they were pulled from
studding by a milk cow loose in a barn. Pegs splintered as a roof pole bent, then collapsed. A gaping hole in the wood shingles appeared above Ed's former milking parlour. The ridge pole gave way about the time the old holstein galloped past Ed. Her knuckles snapped with the strain of lumbering far from the plummeting haymow door behind her to avoid another scar on her rump. Ed grabbed her tail and was flung with her toward his pump as his former barn collapsed upon mowed hay. Her tail saved his life.

She didn't allow him near her for a week. She lowed with miserable betrayal. Her bellows resembled a wife who found a mistress in Ed's bed. Her walk was painful; her carrot-sized teats were swollen. Ed couldn't touch her. Finally, after much coaxing with a half package of Old Souse, Ed persuaded her to return to their old milking routine. He threw away the aromatic milk while she worked it out of her system. Ed was known to be patient, though mean.

He refused to untie the lane gate the day Crazy Jones, who everyone knew wasn't the slightest bit crazy, rode by that May on what appeared to be a young colt. Jones hailed Ed from the road, something about "a nag you sold me." But Ed ignored the best trader in Marshall county, so Jones rode on to Alden to spread stories about "Mean Ed McFarland and the meanest cow in Marshall county. He's finally met his match!"
Next to Ed's collapsed barn, during his second hay crop and on through threshing oats, a new barn arose. A crew built a white milking barn, very stout, next to Ed's former hay repository. The carpenters were from Mason City, which was reachable only by rail, and Ed's farm neighbors never traveled there anyway. The crew spoke to Ed only. He superintended the arrival of milled lumber from Alden, white barn paint from Nevada, iron hardware from Waterloo, and a churn-shaped box from Iowa Falls, which was just past Alden. The new barn was ready when Ed shucked the last ear of summer corn--almost a foot long--from his best field, a patch of bottomland cleared by the former owner, Harold Halstead, north of the Iowa River. The debris from the old barn was cut into kindling for winter. Those few poles and red siding still in one piece were used again for the new barn, transformed into a handsome white barn with a full oatbin, and red clover and timothy piled in the mow.

By now, the stories had spread past the Marshall county line that Jones acquired the old holstein while trading in Wisconsin. They said that she was known as a barn buster, that the holstein had destroyed several proud Wisconsin barns before the last owner traded her to Jones, for a butter churn. But those were just stories that Jones told, the type of outrageous lies which gained him his nickname. Nobody believed them.
Mean Ed studied his holstein pet intensely. He pretended to ignore how she watched the builders, or how she skirted her pasture as the ridge pole was raised, or how she sniffed at each board. She patrolled the pasture fence as carpenters nailed the shingles flat. She approved how they raised a lightning rod with a rooster proudly arched to crow. Ed was driven by a mean-hard spite that kept him farming year after crop-failure year. He meant to barn the holstein. His wife and son died of pneumonia the spring he bought his farm by mail. He figured it was chance that he had acquired the holstein, the nearest thing to a female he would ever want again. He never spoke of his beloved wife. He never to anyone's knowledge mourned his son, or the baby daughter they lost at childbirth. But when he and his young wife moved into a leanto high in a Kentucky valley, it was said, a love blossomed rare among man and wife. It was said in those Kentucky Hills that Mean Ed was the gentlest hill husband that ever loved his town bride that ever climbed a Kentucky trail; that they lived an entire Kentucky winter in a half-cave fronted by a leanto while Ed built with his hands a cottage for his bride, Lenora, and that theirs was a marriage rich in laughter, and warm feelings. Then she died. Those stories never reached the Alden General Store.

Consequently, Ed was alone the evening he picked up his milk stool. The old holstein turned in surprise. Ed walked
toward the milking parlor door and opened it. His bib overalls disappeared into the dark. The Holstein's knuckles popped as she fled the well. Her udder flopped as she trotted to the barn.

Gradually, in the years that followed, Mean Ed built his milking herd to seven stanchions. He refused to milk anything but Holsteins.

The End
The Rev. Al Williams picked up his saucer, "Alicia, that was tasty," he complimented his shy wife. The Rev. Williams, considered an affable man with his congregation, rose and carried his saucer and coffee cup to their parsonage sink. Alicia's coffee cake, half-eaten, was dumped in the garbage bag under the sink. The minister rinsed his 1962 Lutheran Church Centennial cup and placed it exactly three inches from the edge of the drainboard. The saucer lined up comfortably, he thought, with their plates and silverware--also rinsed--from their evening meal. He turned, and glanced with what he intended as considerable charm: "I'll collect my sermon notes. Perhaps for a half hour. Probably then, we can discuss the rest of the week's schedule." He pulled his lips up slightly, a smile which he knew made his round, placid face appear pleasant. That was how his parishioners thought of their minister, pleasant if stern at times. His communication complete, his mouth dropped to its not unpleasant firmness. His lips were held shut with purpose, under his black, horn-rimmed spectacles. His round nose and ears were slightly too far apart from his cropped, black hair. The eminent
Rev. Al Williams, a young minister of note, was spending a pleasant Monday evening with his wife.

Alicia looked over from their coffee nook to indicate she heard, though she gave no response to his affable comradery. "Your husband," the parish wives confided after services, "is a treasure. We do so enjoy his ministry." This advice came most often from the elderly women in the congregation, those of considerable bulk. They occupied the most prominent pews in the rural church northeast of Marian City. They led the church socials; they ordered the instructional material for Sunday School. They helped Alicia oversee the Parochial School program, though after many years of serious religious instruction for their youth, the program really needed no supervision. Everyone knew what the church required. They provided it, as their duty called them. The only serious controversy in three years at Oswego Township United Lutheran Church involved the building committee chairmanship, and that was now in the firm hands of Mrs. Alfred Rangenschneider. She—Mrs. Rangenschneider—had pulled Alicia aside only that morning on the steps of the church. "Please thank your husband for resolving the matter for us," her rather broad, plain face peered down toward Alicia's.

Alicia blushed, and tried not to back off the sidewalk to avoid Mrs. Rangenschneider's broad bosom: "Of course, Mrs. Rangenschneider. I'll tell him. He will be pleased." Mrs.
Rangenschneider nodded. Her lips were pinched tightly. "I told Al, Rev. Williams, that I will teach the class myself until a suitable replacement is found." Mrs. Rangenschneider hurried toward the church parking lot.

Alicia admired the bulky woman's dexterity, the ease with which the most vocal congregation leader opened the door to an enormous Buick roadmaster and folded herself, and her brown winter overcoat, behind the steering wheel. Alicia shivered, and hurried across the frozen lawn to the parsonage. Al was in his study, his face pale from the previous week's exertions. "Dear," she interrupted his Bible meditation: "Mrs. Rangenschneider approves of your decision. She just offered to teach the class while you find a replacement."

Alicia knew nothing of the cause, though in the church bulletin her name was among those on the school advisory board.

Rev. Williams closed his Bible with precision, his thumb inserted between the pages so he could flip it open again after Alicia delivered her message. He would find a replacement quickly, he knew, because the teaching post offered money for young seminarians desperate to augment their tuition scholarships. Mrs. Rangenschneider had helped him reach a decision rather faster than he intended, though he agreed that the young seminarian was inept, incompetent. He had rather hoped the young student could struggle through
until the end of the semester, when he would have been quietly encouraged to find a summer job elsewhere, perhaps working for Mrs. Rangenschneider's wealthy husband, who owned several farms in the church neighborhood, as did their relatives. The Rangenschneider's were always charitable, always eager to help a young man of faith with his school finances. They studied their young farm workers assiduously, always searching for the one with the most promise. That was how Rev. Williams was called by the congregation, through the support of Mrs. Rangenschneider's taciturn husband. Al had worked three summers for Mrs. R's husband, a bulky man like his wife, who smiled less than she did but never spoke. Mrs. Rangenschneider filled in his silences during meals with her observations. "The synod is lowering its standards this year for missionary support. What a shame," the heavyset woman would remark. Her husband would reach for another mound of mashed potatoes. Al would nod somberly while munching on homemade wheatbread, which Mrs. Rangenschneider purchased weekly in a christian ploy to put money in the bank account of a young, struggling member of their farm clan.

Alicia stared at her husband, and thought him pondering a religious issue of great importance. His eyes were staring at the clean, freshly painted wood doorway where she stood waiting for his reply. He was lost in thought. She padded quietly down the stairs and hurried to vacuum the livingroom,
which was still tidy from the small Bible study group her husband conducted, affably, each Sunday night in the drafty parsonage. A window pane rattled as she attached the sweeper hose to the old church electric vacuum. She hurried to the kitchen, tore off a corner of a breakfast napkin, and hurried to the window. She tucked it into the bottom corner with a screwdriver, as Al had taught her. Window panes that rattled made him irritable.

She had planned a balanced noon meal, which he ate earlier that day while reading the synod newsletter. She offered to ride with him for their grocery shopping, but he avoided it by reminding her he would also call on a parishioner, and she would have to sit outside in their outdated Ford. "It's a building committee matter, dear," he explained kindly, if somewhat briskly.

Alicia prepared pork chops with saurkraut for their evening meal, and worked long in the kitchen to get the spices mixed correctly for bread stuffing. During the meal Al noticed that his waistline was spreading, and complained that her mashed potatoes were too frequent, too tempting. He ate silently while considering whether to prepare an informal suggestion for the next synod general meeting. He thought contributions toward foreign ministries should be expanded, not reduced.
Alicia baked the coffee cake later, as a surprise when Al returned from his study, which was really a converted upstairs bedroom which they did not require. He disliked her coffee, and the cake was left half-eaten when he carried it to the sink and dumped it with--she noticed--disgust into the grocery paper sack which saved them purchasing plastic garbage bags which were now the fashion.

She bathed while Al retired to their bedroom, he to methodically put on his cotton pajamas and purple bathrobe. He was quite distinguished in the plush, velvet bathrobe, which he wore only for her, only on Monday nights. It was, they agreed, the only night they could truly relax, and enjoy the bliss of married cohabitation.

Alicia soaped her slender arms in the bathtub. She fluffed the bubble bath which Al found during a church retreat at Des Moines, and brought home for her. She splashed water around the high, enamel sides of the wrought iron tub which was "An antique, really, and so perfectly preserved!" Al exclaimed that when they moved in after he returned to their hometown south of Marion City three years earlier, to attend her high school graduation. They had courted that summer and were married when the congregation extended its call. A draft from the tiny bathroom window--carefully curtained in white--kept the edge of the enamel chilled. Again she splashed bathwater to warm the sides. "Summertimemmmme," she
hummed quietly, thinking of their love-making during courtship.

Their embraces in the ancient Ford, then their first attempts at intimacy persuaded them to schedule their wedding quickly. Their honeymoon was estatic, if a trifle amateurish, they agreed. And they settled quickly into the rural life centered round the church and its connections with a rich past. Too comfortably, Alicia decided during her bath. Al resented her gentle approaches at love-making, her insistent nature. "I want to be touched, here," she dropped onto his lap in his study, "feel those buns." She blushed. Al was offended. He held the Bible closed, with his thumb inserted where he intended to resume his studies. While "buns" was not exactly profane, Alicia had heard the off-color word in high school. She thought it quaint. She hoped for a time when her husband would say to her "Nice buns, hon," as she had overheard in the school corridors once. It came from a member of the football team, a gross person whom Alicia never would have dated, though he never asked. It stirred in her things which her mother hinted at, yet never quite explained. And then Al came that summer to take her to a movie, which she thought delightfully wicked. Never had she seen the Bible portrayed so vividly, though Al objected to its theology. Nevertheless, when the waters swept aside so the christians could escape the Egyptians, they had been thrilled. That was
the night he first fumbled inside her brassiere while she was at once halting, yet eager for him to continue pinching.

"We've known each other all our lives," he urged. She was the happy-go-lucky blonde who was impossible to control on the school bus that carried them to Marian City United County Schools. He was the older, serious scholar known for his religious nature, deeply so. That had been evident even as she admired his progress through high school, and then he disappeared to a seminary near Dubuque, too far away for her to see him frequently.

"Mah mamma done tol me," she hummed, "when we were in knee pants," her voice was soft, sweet. Her modest breasts, for which during high school she wore padded brassieres even as a senior, hung in a disappointing fullness when she bent forward to find the Ivory soap hidden under the froth near her toes. Al always reassured her: "It's better, Alicia. It sets a fine example for the young women who notice everything you do. They copy you." Which was true, she thought proudly. She always wore simple dresses which accented her almost boyish figure, her flat chest, her trim shoulders.

"Alicia!" Al's yell accompanied a gentle knock. "Aren't you done yet?" He rubbed his hand on the solid door paneling. "Can I come in there?" He was never comfortable when she bathed.
"Not yet dear," she said. She always felt tiny when he lumbered in to perch on the lip of the tub. His clumsy attempts at caresses spoiled her mood. Al could not see that the bare lightbulb above his head made him look plumpish, prematurely bald. His face was left in a shadow as he looked down to the bubbles, making him seem grotesque more than a loving husband.

He yelled again: "Are you my nightclub singer? Did I hear my sultry siren humming a song of the streets?" He was only joking of course, as he often explained.

"Mah, Maaaaama done tol meeeeeeeee!" When she tried to force the words through the paneling, they seemed bent, not at all inviting. Behind the door, Al was silent.

"I think I may just go on to sleep, Alicia," he called with some regret.

Alicia splashed the enamel side, and soapy water slopped over the rounded lip onto the terrycloth towel waiting for her. "Just a min," she called. She climbed out hastily, the lip cold to her thighs. She reached for the hand towel, and held it modestly to her breasts as he opened the door.

Al's back was to her. He turned, the purple belt tied snugly to hold his waist uncomfortably snug, so that fat bulged above and below the belt.

"I think our church could contribute two thousand dollars next year to missionaries, Licia. You think so?" He slipped
past to brush his teeth at the wash basin. Alicia dropped her towel and stood beside him. "Nice buns, hon," she said, and patted his rather large posterior which was made broader as Al bent to rinse his toothbrush.

He patted her as she did. "The same, Licia. You think we could? It would mean a concerted effort, probably led by Mrs. Rangenschneider." He hurried out the door. "C'mon hon, I have to get up early. Didn't I hear my nightclub singer a moment ago?"

She slipped into her pale green cotton pajamas and hurried after him. He was so bulky, so important! His robe was thrown over the foot of the bed. He was propped up, reading notes for the next church bulletin. She slipped off her tops and bottoms and snuggled under the blankets.

"Just a few more notes, Alicia," he promised. But after many minutes, he continued to make prodigious notes which Alicia never understood, since most of the church bulletin information was the same each week, and the rest of the items came from the church calendar which she kept in the church vestibule.

She sat up and searched through religious literature on her side of the bed. She kept a glass of water there which she always drank just before going to sleep. She poked her finger into the water. It was icy, harsh. Among the books were several prairie stories, of brave young pioneer girls who
withstood fierce winter storms or smothering summer prairie fires. She read quietly, the heavy comforter pulled tightly around her shivering arms, which had rough "goose bumps" which always amused Al. He put his notes down and watched her.

"You about through, Licia?"

She sighed "We don't have winter storms like the pioneers experienced. No winter blizzards where we were cooped up alone in a sod hut our first year on the prairie."

"No we don't hon," he agreed. He slid off the squeaky spring mattress and padded to the doorway to yank the light cord. Their room was plunged into soft winter darkness. "Not quite nine. I'll be ready for the week tomorrow," he remarked affably as the springs crunched and squeaked. "I'm sure glad we don't. Have a gas furnace; nice gas stove, even if it is outdated." He snorted at something amusing.

Alicia waited. Her thoughts were filled with primitive blizzards, of pioneers snowbound in Iowa for weeks at a time: pioneers huddled miserably under cowhides, under coarse horse blankets. "I'll have to get up early," Alicia announced. "I could go outside and cut firewood, Al. I could do that."

Again he snorted at something amusing: "For what! We don't have a fireplace. We can get all the firewood we need from the Rangenschneider's woodpile. They have an old cookstove, for holidays."
"And I could carry feed to the cows, Al. I'll bet I could do that." Al threw back his side of their covers. She made her voice innocent, halting, as she would have spoken when a child of nine. "I'll cut firewood tomorrow, Paw."

The affable Rev. Al Williams turned to embrace his wife.
KNOCKABOUT

The frail woman's question emerged in the theater lobby, "Do you know when the last bus arrives?" She pierced the calm with her throat-dry, ancient query: "Do you know when the last bus arrives?" Jack Locum ignored her urgency, which was more a frantic semaphore for help.

His back was to the urgent busser. He turned to see if anyone responded. A chenille scarf, ugly pink, was pulled tight across a shrunken head of wispy brown hair bobbing anxiously just above the shoulders of the theater patrons. She turned her head this way and that, worrying the patrons for an answer. Jack turned back to his wife, Ruthann, and in a calm sotto voice, concluded: "She's a con."

"Do you know when the last bus arrives?" She was at it again! Really! Jack turned to stare; why didn't someone help? He saw a bulky man who edged through the couples toward the pale, pink scarf. "Just a minute, madam," said the heavyset rescuer, the manager, apparently. "I have a schedule here." He waved a multi-colored bus schedule. The lobby patrons edged aside reluctantly.

"Do you have a—"
"-It's nine o'clock," the manager interrupted the frantic pleader. "And I have a bus schedule. Yes, here's the schedule. In an hour. The last bus is at ten."

Jack turned away to pull out his cigarettes.

"When does it-"

"-At eleven madam. The show ends at eleven." The man's voice was patient, impersonal, brisk.

Ruthann smiled at Jack's discomfort. In the shorthand of a longterm marriage, her amused nod toward Jack's cigarette produced another from his vest pocket. She waited for him to search for his lighter, a pipe lighter advertised to withstand gusts from any duck blind, from any shift in the wind. Ruthann guided his hand toward her cigarette.

Jack enjoyed the pressure of her fingertips on the underside of his wrist. "It's obvious," he repeated it, "if she stays to see the rest of the movie, she'll have to walk home. It's brisk tonight." He shifted to look again at the frosted panes next to the sidewalk entrance. "Now some sucker is supposed to offer her a ride home. Then she can see it."

Ruthann's amused smile was brief. At forty-six, she had liberal splashes of gray which she refused to tint black, though she was a hairdresser. Jack encouraged her natural coloring, just as Ruthann said she preferred his slower walk, his more frequent grunts as they slid onto a car seat, or into bed.
But Ruthann, now that their four children were grown, knew her husband. "There, there," she patted his shoulder indulgently, "don't worry dear. She'll find a ride." Her attention was drawn to the women's lounge entrance. "It's shorter now." She raised the cigarette to carry it over the fall coats, the furry winter jackets. "Hang in there, tiger."

He watched her moving through the crowd. Ruthann was graceful, gentle. He knew he was blunt, clumsy. Climbing telephone poles for the Essex Rural Generating Plant required a cautious man able to work by himself during winter ice breaks. His tanned face lined with black weather creases, his crewcut in an era of blow dry, even his formal, three-piece wool suit with flared legs, made Yocum feel conspicuous in the lobby. He leaned against the frosted lobby windows. Moisture dampened his navy-blue suitcoat, yet he did not pull away. He preferred popcorn at home near their television. He complained to Ruthann that at movie theaters the popcorn was always chewed in the seat behind his right ear. She did not understand his acute hearing, the ease with which he mounted a pole while analyzing the transmission by the tone of the power lines whistling in an ice storm. It saved him time; the company money. Though Yocum knew he had earned the right to foreman a crew of three, Essex continued sending him out alone, summer and winter. Though he complained, his boss, whose right hand was minus two fingers which shortened his
tenure as a pole climber, offered no solution: "You are better than a four-man crew, Jack. Why should we throw bad money after good? What's your bitch! I approved your raise."

And because the man could always outreason Jack in an argument, he withdrew his formal application to become foreman, as his seniority card said he was entitled to. Ruthann told him to apply again.

"C'mon Jack, we haven't been to a movie in years," she urged when he told her that evening his application was denied. It was The Color Purple, worth leaving their snug livingroom. Ruthann had been right. On the screen, a cruel black man's abuse of his ugly but sainted wife held them enthralled. Ruthann forgot her impatience at his clumsiness. Somewhere in the darkened theater, Jack lost his disappointment at failure, again, to be a foreman. Ruthann clutched Jack's hand. He shifted uncomfortably at the black male's dominance. Ugly abuse shaded with purple bruises held them rigid, lost in private spats. Magical warmth mixed with lavender flowers. Ruthann's touch broke his reverie: "Did she find a ride home?"

"No," he said, uncomfortable that she knew him so well, that he unconsciously was interested in the lobby mini-drama, "No," his grin was abashed, "I didn't hear any offers." Damn, he regretted admitting it to Ruthann. She knows me that surely!
They entered the theater again. Jack searched the lobby, across the theater as the lights darkened. There was no scarf pulled over wispy hair. By now, he thought of the woman as an "ice cream" widow, his term for the frantic ones who panicked at a storm. They screamed frantically into a phone for Jack to restore their power line. They were like his children when they screamed for an ice cream cone, whether warranted or not. Before them, the screen abuse shifted, and melted to new human tortures. Jack could not remain still. Ruthann noticed. She nudged the shoulder dampened by moisture, and drew back in distaste. Jack leaned to explain, "I'll be right back."

Ruthann watched the screen as letters were found secreted. She groped for his wrist, squeezed it.

From the marquee, Jack saw a figure move. He strolled toward the bus stop sign. He had forgotten his new overcoat. The chill Iowa night crept through his suitcoat, his vest. He plunged his hands into his flared pockets. While still a safe distance away, he ventured: "Madam?" She was crying. He heard sobs, and she talked as she huffed little girl sobs. "Young lady?" He guessed her age at past fifty, past the whisk broom age of a spinster with no more hope for romance, children, a home. They were now a few feet apart in the streetlight gloom.

"Yes," she huffed, a combination of a sob muffled by her hands which in her grief she pressed against her face. "I
didn't want-" and she hid whatever she meant to say, her face pinched into a muffled cry, silent.

In the scant light he could see the round form of a parka, the inexpensive parkas sold with fluffy, abundant fur collars. "Were you just in the movie theater?" His voice was firm, confident, very male.

"Yes," again she sobbed as his young daughter, Luann, sobbed through the rejection of a senior prom tragedy. It was the night Luann's boyfriend fell in love with her best friend. Again the tiny woman tried to choke back a sob. "I didn't want to miss the bus."

She had the pinched face of a prune. She was exactly as Jack had pictured her with his back turned in the lobby. She tightened the scarf again, and huddled within the bulky parka.

"It's much too chilly tonight," Jack began, casually. "My wife," he grunted, "and I thought you could ride home with us? Then you could see the movie."

She hesitated, politely, as Jack's daughter had silently groped for the checkered handkerchief he offered when she returned from the prom too early. Her body shook as had Luann's. "Yes," the tiny woman said, "that would be wonderful."

He stiffened. He expected her to say, "You're so kind," and then he would know he was once again conned. But she turned to march toward the lobby. He did not feel kind, just
that his and Ruthann's special night together was interrupted. It would be his fault again.

"It's so sad," the woman explained, "the movie. That's why I was crying. It's a very sad movie."

He was surprised that she bothered to explain. He did not intend to ask. "We agree," he assured her. They approached the marquee. "What is your name?" Perhaps if he could give this ice cream woman a name, he would feel less like his evening was lost.

"Estelle," she said, "and yours?" She sounded to Jack littlelike, birdlike.

"Jack Locum," and, after some thought, he added: "My wife's name is Ruthann." As they walked her head kept bobbing up to his shoulder, and then out of sight. Her scarf hovered there, just out of his vision, yet she seemed to ride a teeter-totter as they walked. His solution-prone mind answered as they turned into the lobby. Estelle walked with a pronounced limp, as if her right ankle were stiff.

"Are you sure I won't bother?"

So she knew! She was smart enough to realize that! "Of course not," he silently cursed his lie. It was enough to put an edge on their short conversation. Was she just another shrewd old spinster? Jack was convinced now she was a spinster, a type before which he was helpless, unable to cope. Ah, he scolded his second thoughts, at least she's polite.
Jack slid back into his theater seat, and Ruthann whispered, "Did you find her?"

"Yes," he said, resigned, "what have I missed?" He enjoyed her indulgence, her instinct for knowing exactly what he had done. They fell once again into the story. The saintly, simple women forged her own life; she found her children, tragically, who were torn from her arms at birth. "The End" flashed on the white screen at eleven, as promised by the manager, and Estelle, who was crying again several seats in front of them, joined them as they milled out onto the sidewalk.

"Such a wonderful movie," she greeted Ruthann.

And you're a charming old prune, Jack thought, as they passed under a streetlight toward their sedan. With Ruthann seated beside him, and Estelle chattering brightly with his wife about the merits of the abused wife, Jack forgot his resentment at having to share Ruthann with a stranger. He needed Ruthann tonight. After all, this woman's bus had left years ago.

"I offered," Estelle rambled, "to take Louise to see it." She confided, more to Ruthann than Jack, "But when I stopped at her apartment, Louise was gone." Her scratchy voice continued, "Actually, I thought she was still there. I thought she was entertaining a man."
Her arch comment amused Jack. Love at the spinster's hotel? Arch jealousy perhaps. He wanted, very much, to know exactly why Estelle thought Louise was "entertaining." Just what did that mean to a spinster?

"They were watching a rerun of 'Love American Style' because Louise says that . . ."

Jack braked to join several cars lined up before them. Estelle was directing them. "Mr. Yocum," she interrupted her story about Louise, "could you stop for a minute in the next block?"

He wondered if she needed a restroom, since the block ahead was a city park, brightly lit. Had they closed the restrooms for winter? He saw no diplomatic method of finding out.

"This Louise," Ruthann continued their chat, "what I mean to say, Estelle, is I wonder how old she is?"

"Sixty if she's a day," said the ice cream prune, with evident satisfaction. "I'm fifty-five. Actually, I wanted to take a new resident, but he called and said he couldn't. His heart valve wasn't clicking right."

"Oh," Ruthann's response indicated surprise.

"Oh," Jack's surprise matched his wife's, "is that serious?"

"Don't worry," said Estelle, happy to calm their alarm, "it's just a little ball that clicks up and down. You can
hear it if Art puts your ear next to his chest just right."
She was quiet. Ruthann nudged Jack's vest, her signal for a cigarette. "He lets everyone," Estelle observed, "listen to it." Neither Ruthann nor Jack understood what she meant.

Often, Ruthann entertained Jack with snatches of stories brought home from her styling salon. Estelle's directness at providing information about Louise and Art startled the Yocums. Jack could think of nothing appropriate, nothing casual to say. He pulled alongside the park curb, and Estelle opened her car door: "Arthur knows the bus system better than I do." She marched into the park, her right ankle stiff, unbending.

"Shall we stop for a cup of coffee?" Ruthann nudged Jack with her elbow, never turning, studying Estelle's progress toward a cluster of bushes.

"What's she doing?" Jack leaned forward, so that he also could see Estelle. No restroom was near; he had guessed wrong.

"I thought she turned shy, there, while she chattered away," Ruthann murmured. "When she mentioned Art, whoever he is."

"I don't want to stop for coffee," Jack decided. He wished Estelle, who was bent over a bush, prodding with something, would hurry.
"She seems genial, but a bit lonely, Jack. What do you think?"

Estelle straightened and now hurried, almost skipped, back toward them. Ruthann pushed the car door open. "Everything okay?"

"Sure," Estelle said. "I wanted some dirt for my philodendrum, before it freezes. I just took a handful." She patted one of the bulky pockets on her coat. "You didn't know you were giving a ride to a thief." She smirked at Ruthann.

"Oh! Louise," Ruthann snorted dramatically, "and you seemed like such a nice person!" They laughed and began to consider the care of house plants, while Jack watched street signs for Estelle’s apartment address. They approached a Long John Silver’s seafood restaurant.

"Let's stop for coffee," Ruthann decided, and by her sudden declaration, Jack knew she decided so for Estelle's pleasure more than her own.

"No," said Estelle, as Jack slowed to signal his turn, "but, could we have hot chocolate? Art took me for hot chocolate once, but not here." She leaned forward, to peer happily at Jack.

"Sure," he agreed, pleased with Ruthann’s intuitive guess that Estelle would enjoy a small theater party. They would chatter happily about the movie.
Estelle left the parking lot ahead of them, marching ahead much as Luann had when she was a youngster. Ruthann put her arm through Jack's dress coat. "I think she's enjoying it," his wife whispered her pleasure. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," he lied cheerfully. "Actually, I still have designs on your lovely white—"

"-Jack," she squeezed his arm, "not with Estelle so close." She squeezed it again, firmly, her promise which needed no words tonight to provide him with white breasts and warm thighs, with their rich, uninterrupted nights of love behind a locked door, and grown children taught to call before ten o'clock at night. Ruthann pointed with her free hand at Estelle: "She's spry, more like an unlicked ice cream cone than one of your ice cream spinsters."

So Estelle knew his impression of Estelle that easily! His wife of twenty-four summers. His blood surged, and he removed his arm to hug her.

Ahead of them, Estelle yelled: "You, Art! Louise!"

The Yocums stopped, while Estelle confronted a woman in a heavy, blue winter coat staggering against a spindly, mustached cowboy with a ten-gallon stetson and a long, sheepskin overcoat. Art was braced against the blue wood entrance, while Louise was bent forward, staring intently at the wood planks. They neither could remain upright, yet
precariously weren't ready to release their grip on the other. Art clutched Louise's blue sleeve while she clung determinedly to a leather flap on his coat.

Estelle chattered at them: "I saw the whole thing. It was so sad, Louise. These people are driving me home," she waved toward the Yocums, who remained a dozen safe feet away.

"We should leave," Ruthann turned to Jack.

"I want to see this," he said, and ignored her tugs on his elbow. Ruthann turned to watch also.

"I've been to the movie," Estelle blocked the sidewalk, the wood steps that Louise and Art were trying to negotiate. "I saw it without you, Art."

This triumph made no impression on the studious Louise. Art pumped his adam's apple and swiped at his mustache, but had no response for Estelle. He gripped Louise's sleeve firmly, and tried to pull himself away from the blue restaurant siding. He couldn't.

Louise mumbled, "Estelle . . . Estelle move. Move out the way." She bulked under the heavy overcoat, a drunk, spry woman of at least two hundred pounds. Next to her, Art was shrunken, a pipestem of less than one hundred forty pounds, but tall, much taller than the short Louise.

"I saw the whole thing," Estelle persisted, "and now we're stopping for hot chocolate." She motioned again toward the Yocums.
"Move . . . Estelle." The motionless Louise erupted. She carried a black purse with long straps. She swung the purse, which slid over the wood planks. Louise swept her purse arm forward like a Saturday night bowler and the black missile exploded against Estelle's parka, "Whoof!"

Estelle staggered back as Jack rushed forward. But she caught her balance and staggered erect, unaware he stood behind her with arms outspread if she fell. "You slut!" Estelle stomped her stiff ankle. "I knew he was in there with you. I heard you two! You're not my friend, Louise!" She pulled away from Jack's hands, which were tugging at her parka. "I saw the whole thing! I would have taken you!" She screeched, and the force with which she yelled made her cough.

Louise, distracted by the beauty of her purse as a weapon, stood with her head down, watching the black purse swing innocently near the walkway. Arthur groped toward the purse strap. "Louise," his mouth worked foolishly open and closed, "Louise!"

"Whoof!" The purse became a weapon again. Louise turned and swung in one motion and ripped Art's sheepskin against the blue siding of Long John Silver's exit door.

Art doubled over. He released his grip on her coatsleeve. This freed Louise to bend over the bulky wood railing, which held firm.
The Yocums were across the parking lot when Estelle caught up. "I'm sorry," she limped quickly as the Yocums opened their car doors, "I didn't know."

Jack backed the sedan carefully with Ruthann next to him. Estelle rolled down the passenger window and leaned out, her head turned toward Art and Louise, who were once again trying to negotiate the plank steps. "I'm going to call the police, Louise! Art, the doctor said no more drinking. Louise, you're nothing but, you're a," the car turned into the street, "You're a knockabout!"

They drove in silence for several blocks. Estelle filled the front seat with rapid breathing. Ruthann reached over, gently patted Estelle's coatsleeve.

Jack, who had braced himself for Estelle to shout whore, slut, prostitute, bitch, turncoat, traitor, or worse, was confused. Knockabout?

They parked in front of her apartment hotel. "Thank you," Estelle sweetly thanked them, as if they had been for a short ride to a grocery store. "I'm sorry about my friends." She limped across the street.

Jack turned the car around, and asked Ruthann, "What's a knockabout?" Ruthann was silent. He said, "What's that?"

"She was going to say bitch, but remembered she was with us," Ruthann explained. "She's a lady."
Jack snorted. "She's a dried up prune. I liked her spirit. She can't swear right though. She needs a few lessons swearing."

The sedan fled toward the city park.

"And Arthur," Ruthann slid toward the passenger door, "what a jerk! Estelle introduced them, I'm sure of it. Telling her his heart valve wasn't clicking right, then drinking all evening with Louise. A jerk." She cranked the window closed. "I think he should be evicted."

"What?" Jack looked at her briefly. "Do you know the apartment owner? Is that one of your customers?"

Ruthann replied with her enigmatic look. Over the years, it was an open declaration of maybe she could, and maybe she couldn't, and Jack would never know.

"What?" His quiet evening with Ruthann had dissolved. He felt brutal, a helpless destroyer of innocent females.

"Are we supposed to go drinking? What!" He pulled to a stop opposite the city part, across from where they waited for Estelle.

"What are you doing! Will you violate what she buried there? Jack!"

His fists clenched, he strode across the thoroughfare; ignored an oncoming taxi which slowed to avoid hitting him. He heard Ruthann call, after the taxi passed, "And what about Widow Cather! That was your fault too!"
He swore violently. The Widow Cather! She remembered the lonely bitch who hired him to connect her television antenna tower, and found old courting dresses which allowed her pendulous udder to hang over the windowsill as he balanced outside on a ladder while attaching the cable. Thirty-seven times, the damned widow repeated her tragedy. "I had an accident you know," and blathered endlessly. A real tragedy, of course. Her auto had been hit from the rear at an intersection. Widow Cather spent months in a hospital. Jack was sympathetic when she first hired him, first told him of her "tragedy," hinting at deep, dark mysteries of a tainted nature. He hurried home to tell Ruthann, who was amused. When she repeated it, and repeated it, until Ruthann woke him and asked him, deep into the night, "Jack, you were screaming, 'The brakes! The brakes! Don't hit her!' Jack, what's the matter? Are you working too hard? You've never had an accident. Jack?" And he subsided into a mumbled incoherence, nursing a hatred for the Widow Cather with breasts like over-fertilized gourds.

He turned around to shout. "All I wanted," he screamed as Estelle had, "was a quiet movie! Then I wanted to strip your pants off." Stunned, he swung round to see if the park held late-night strollers. He bent over a bush curled to the ground. He found the freshly disturbed slice in the soil. He kicked at the mound. With the tip of his polished shoes, he
scuffed away the dirt, and bent to pull out a small plastic bag.

He tore the plastic off and held up a pair of cotton stockings, with the store label still on them. Men's socks. Fat and wooly and probably Art-fucking-cowboy boot size exactly. He strode back to the sedan. Inside, Ruthann stared at the prize which he threw on the dash before her.

They drove toward the suburbs, toward their not-so-snug livingroom. He clenched the steering wheel. "You wanted to stop for coffee."

"I didn't want coffee. I just felt sorry for her. She wanted a date with Arthur."

"Art? That old cowboy? He's got a hotel full of lonely old maids, and you're angry because he hurt Estelle? What are you blaming me for?" Ruthann yanked the prize off the dash and stuffed them inside her coat pocket.

"Slow down, Jack!" In his silent cursing, he drove rapidly through a yellow light. "You let Aunt Helen twist you around your little finger, every summer! That damn rose bush trellis. Why did you have to build that trellis!"

"She wanted it!"

"And your mother, and my mother. All they have to do is whimper, and there's Jack. All-American Jack dangling from another ladder, staring up at the Widow Cather's boobs!"
When she calmed; when he calmed; when the sedan slowed to a non-speeding ticket pace, he said: "Throw them out, Ruthann."

She removed the socks from her coat. She tucked them neatly into her purse. "I'll bury them tomorrow, before Estelle changes her mind."

"You what?"

"I'll put them back!" She slid again to his side. "Luann's prom night, remember? She came home, and I was over at the neighbors, waiting for Luann and Charles. It was Charles, wasn't it Jack?"

"No it was Harrison. He was a jerk." But the sedan was creeping along the block to their driveway. He watched her, as they slowed and stopped. "And Harrison arrived at the all-night prom party with Luann's best friend hanging on him."

"So I rushed home, and there you were in the back yard, digging that terrible hole! Jack!"

"I buried that son-of-a-bitch's carnation a yard under the grass, and Luann was laughing at me, and you were yelling at me, 'The neighbors, Jack! The neighbors! Come inside!' And I wouldn't until I filled the hole back up!"

"Then Luann and you cleaned up--"

"And we marched right back to the prom party. Luann said later . . . ."
The red light interrupted them. The officer waited as Yocum rolled his window down: "Sir?" Jack buttoned his vest. "Mr. Yocum," the officer said, "do you think you could pull your car off the street? Hi Mrs. Yocum. A neighbor called. Said she thought there was a burglar. Just checking." He nodded, and ignored the middle-aged couple behind him, a couple embracing with their turn-signal on in the middle of a quiet neighborhood street. He hoped that Mrs. Cather, who lived on the corner, saw him respond promptly to her frantic phone call.
UNCLE HARRY NOT THE PIG

Uncle Harry he's a hopeless old neer'-do-well, but the winter's cold and Dad's gone to Chicago on the cattle train, and the sows begin to farrow early so Uncle Harry comes to stay. Dan's too small and Dad's in Chicago selling our cattle. We miss him. The winter's long. It's no fun in the house. The sows are farrowing early.

So Uncle Harry who us kids think is queer stamps snow off his boots on the cellar landing and thumps into the kitchen to us kids at the kitchen table and tells us, "Ha-ha-ha! See look what I've got here!" Does it right in front of Mom. Uncle Harry pulls a burlap sack out of his blue denim greatcoat and shouts, "Old sow laid on him!" Uncle Harry shouts a lot when he isn't chuckling. He makes a peculiar "Hee-hee, ha-ha-ha....ha!" Like he forgot something. He's queer that way.

"Whaddayoo gonna do with that?" Mom wails and stands on her tiptoes and aims for Uncle Harry's right ear the good one.

Uncle Harry fumbles back the burlap where a pink snout peeks out, "Oh, he'll come round, I think!" He yells like he's shouting into the back of a haymow, real high so his
voice will carry. "He's only a day old," Uncle Harry tells
Mom, "if we give him a chance to heal!"

"What!" Mom folds her face, "What? Whaddayoo gonna do!"
Mom pulls at Uncle Harry's coatsleeve to hold him still but he
keeps jumping around the table to show us kids the pig.
"Uncle Harry, cut that out. Jo, put that pig down and finish
your oatmeal." Mom's a worry wart when Dad's gone. We never
have any fun. Jo gives Uncle Harry back the pig.

"Don't worry, Edith," Uncle Harry tells at Mom, "I
spotted some movement in his hind legs. Here, hold 'im." He
shoves the baby pig at her but Mom backs away, "They just may
be pinched."

"What?"

"His legs," Uncle Harry tells her, "I don't think he's
stiff for life!"

Mom wipes her apron, "Get that pig out of my kitchen!"

But Uncle Harry doesn't hear. He bends over the cupboard
counter and sniffs applesauce cake for dinner. "What's for
dinner? Edith?" His bad ear is toward Mom, "This for dinner
Edith?"

Mom stamps to the cupboard, "You gittaway from there with
that pig! Uncle Harry! What's wrong with him!"

"Hind legs are stiff. Old sow laid on him." And why he
aint dead Uncle Harry not the pig I don't know. His hair is
white and his face cracked and he walks funny. Uncle Harry's
wife is dead and he lost his farm, I heard my folks say, lost it in a depression. Since he can't see too well I'm not surprised. I think it would be awful hard to lose something as big as a farm, maybe, he just forgot where it is. Why, Uncle Harry can't even hear Mom's yell and that's a mistake I don't make. But he sure can eat and roar, and he's a hero, because us kids have never seen Dad bring a porker into our kitchen, Dad's mean to us that way sometimes.

"Whooo's gonna clean up after himmmm!" Mom hurries around to yell in his good ear but Uncle Harry turns away just as fast and I follow him to the sink and he winks at me, "Here Frank, hold this thing while I clean up." He grabs our water bucket for a trip to the pump, so I get to hold the baby while he tricks Mom into letting a pig in our kitchen. Its hair is flat against pink skin and warms my chest. He doesn't wiggle. Judy comes over and says, "Here, I'll hold him."

Mom stands at the door, "Clean up after six kids and a Chester White pig," she yells, "I won't!" She turns around and all us kids are around the pig. Of course now she has to.

We find some rags and a cardboard box and I can tell you, there's no more fun than six kids and a Chester White pig in a winter kitchen. Something to do. A grown hog like a black Hampshire boar is a thing to fear, to keep a fence between him and you. But a pink Chester White? With ears that hug his head and sleepy eyes, a quiet baby that never says oink and
looks sad cause he can't walk on his hind legs only the front, well, he's a thing to love. He needs a lot of milk with pancake syrup mixed in cause we don't have molasses. It makes me glad to push a baby bottle with syrup milk in his snout and when he's done wrap an old baby diaper around him to keep him warm in his box by the oil burner. We're all happy to do it, all of us kids except Dan who says, "I'm too big" and that's a lie because Joleen is bigger and she helps with the pig all the time. Anyway, we all whisper, "Won't Dad be mad when he comes home and finds a pig in the kitchen?" Mom arches a little and sniffs a lot, but little pigs on an Iowa farm are life and death to your pocketbook, even I know that. Sure, Uncle Harry is old but he's the best help we've got and us kids are excited and the sows are farrowing just fine, Uncle Harry says, so Mom washes the pig bottle and we hope Dad will stay in Chicago a long time.

Uncle Harry calls us kids cream cans--Jo, Dan, Judy, me, Myrt and Carla--little cream cans. If I don't watch out, he sneaks up behind me and grabs me and swings me way up and shouts, "I'll throw you on the creamery truck!" I've never seen our kitchen ceiling up close like that before. It has cracks in the plaster, around the bed in the upstairs bedroom where we play "Bombs Away!" every day. It's too cold to go outside and the snow is too deep on the roads for school and
we can't wait for Mom to finish her afternoon nap--so we wake her up.

"I believe," Uncle Harry says, "what that pig needs, is a walk!" He says that in the kitchen. But we hear him clear upstairs in the seed corn room where we can't play but we are. We hurry down after a week of no school and no Dad, having fun feeding the Chester White and petting him and he's starting to take an interest in life.

"What he needs," Uncle Harry tells us, "is a boost!"

When Uncle Harry says "boost!" he makes it sound like a bull bellow. Uncle Harry thumps into the cellar and us cream cans, me and Myrt and Carla, spill down the steps after him, but he's stamping back up already! Uncle Harry's out the back door in his blue greatcoat to the cobhouse and Mom grabs our coats away, "No you don't! You can't go out because it's too cold, I don't want pneumonia. He'll be back." She's worried because I had pneumonia but that's all over. I got a penicillin shot where I sit. I know something else, too. Mom puts our old furniture out there on top the cobs where I found a bull snake once hunting mice and yelled for Dad, and sure as anything, Uncle Harry will ask for Mom's old rocker or offer to saw a new leg for the old kitchen table we broke the night Dan yanked toward the sink and me toward the oil burner. It was too small anyway. Well, Mom blamed me and Dan ran and hid
and I know Mom just isn't about to part with her wedding furniture, not yet.

Gosh a day flies with Uncle Harry, in the basement, finding things. Uncle Harry finds a piece of galvanized tin and cuts a piece that looks like half of a coffee cup without a bottom. And two pieces of Number 9 wire—that's stiff. I can't bend it. He hollers up to the kitchen, "Do you think you have a pair of pliers, Edith?" Mom sends Dan down with the new pliers she hides behind the gas stove clock on the window sill behind the brown shade where we couldn't find them—and now we can. Uncle Harry punches the Number 9 wire through two cobs on the bench by the coal bin, and he bends the wire to holes in the tin, so the tin with the wire makes a pig cradle that rolls on corn cobs.

"Well?" Uncle Harry holds the pig cradle down for us to see. "Well?" By now Myrt and Carla and Dan and me have the giggles and nudges, because it won't work. Jo clumps down the cellar steps in Mom's old shoes and asks, "What's that?"

We yell, "A pig cradle!"

Jo stops on the steps, "That thing won't work." Even Jo knows that.

Uncle Harry laughs, his queer "Hee-hee-hee, ha-ha...ha!" He straightens up over us, "Well?" He's so fierce! "Git him. GIT HIM!" Uncle Harry chases us cream cans up the steps and moans, "Bulls out! The bull's out. Quick! Find the pig
before the bull gets you!" He chuckles when he isn't groaning like our bull and bounces his chuckles off the cupboard door glass but Mom hasn't any fresh pies today because she and Judy are making custard. Uncle Harry throws back his head and roars, "Moooooooo!" Deep up from his belly, and Mom hides her face with her apron and "Whienk" the pig squeals because now he's excited. Jo stands in the door to the cellar and I'm by the sink and Uncle Harry sets that little pig down in its tin cradle, "Stand back," he roars, "get a little room here," and hangs the pig's hind legs over the back of the tin. Myrt and Carla pull chairs against the window sills and Judy's under the table closest to Uncle Harry and Dan's on the table! That's not fair! Mom just told me this morning, "if I ever catch you up there again, it'll be a spanking." Uncle Harry ties rags round the pig's belly to the tin and bedarn if that little scat doesn't start pulling with his front legs, "Whink! Wh-wh-wh-whink!" Pulling and scrabbling across the linoleum right at me! And Uncle Harry hunches over and grunts like a sow and pokes at the pig cradle, and us kids are screaming, "He's walking! Uncle Harry, he's walking!" Uncle Harry snorts and we think he's talking to the pig, "You gotta talk to him," he snorts again, "talk to him!" Uncle Harry grunts and pokes at the pig cradle. So we grunt and scream and go "Whink, whink, whink!" Mom's laughing fit to bust and crying and that pig pulls himself all the way to the sink! Well, I
don't say bedarn, but when Dad gets home that night and stands by the sink hugging Mom, us kids find the pig and get the cradle and "Whink!" him across the lineoleum. Dad's face gets the look like when he says, "Bedamn!" Except he never says that unless we sneak around in the barn when he's prying manure out of a crack in a railroad tie floor and he breaks a pitch-fork tine, on his best pitchfork. Dad stands there hugging Mom a long time watching us kids and the pig. Finally, he asks, "Don't you want to know if I brought you anything?" Then we know the pig can stay!

Mom says I can wear my blue suspenders to supper so I clip them to my back pockets and pull them over the shoulder straps to my front pockets on my pin-striped overalls.

During supper, Dad asks, "Where's Uncle Harry?"

"Gone," Mom says, "after you called from town. He wanted to leave before dark. The roads are okay now. They'll have school tomorrow."

Jo and Dan and Judy and me groan. "We want to stay home with Uncle Harry," Judy says.

Dad holds his coffee cup with both hands, "Everything go all right?"

"I told Uncle Harry," Mom passes the custard dish, "this spring, he can have the old kitchen table, out in the cob house."
"You did?" Dad puts down his cup and takes the custard dish. It's vanilla custard, his favorite. He keeps looking over at the cardboard box, where just before he left, Uncle Harry helped Dan and me cut a hole in the side, so the pig can stand and look out.
The White Rooster Cafe trapped moisture carried in on raincoats and its bright yellow walls offered mid-morning cheer to coffee drinkers, who stamped on the rubber mat just inside the door and commented, "this drizzle, it's miserable." The first arrivals crowded around the Rooster's horseshoe counter and "drizzle" was the chief topic. It wasn't a drizzle, but a blown mist under a dark overcast. Motorists drove with their lights on until they wound around Marian City Park and found a diagonal parking slot. The block-square park was ringed with autos and brick buildings. The mist worked through the tree trunks and blew across the street to shove against the Rooster's red brick front and plate glass windows—double-plate windows to protect against Iowa winters. When the counter stools were occupied, the late arrivals drifted to the tables around the walls. On one of the aluminum chairs Max Hill considered his fate. Hill's blunt nose was aimed out the plate windows. A real estate agent and former Marian City mayor, Max Hill was in a grim mood. He had not sold a property that spring. Hill kept his puffy cheeks turned toward the park, and did not join the comments at his table which consisted of "gloomy day," and "I know, couldn't
get anything done in the field, so I came to town with my lights on." Hill studied the park, perhaps a scheme to get title to it for a high-rise apartment building. Apartments were at a premium that spring, and Hill was a resourceful man.

Hill stirred his chubby shoulders and turned to the horseshoe counter, "Here comes Bud," he said, "now when he gets inside, everybody stop talking." He spoke at a moment when the chatter was subdued, so that his remark was heard and forwarded around the horseshoe.

No longer was Hill sullen. A grim smile puffed his cheeks, and he resumed his sentry's duty at the window. Bud Kemp was known to the Rooster's coffee drinkers. Kemp was an iconoclast, the keeper of Marian City parks. Kemp also was shrewd enough to notice Hill's intended insult. Hill offered progress reports on his victim:

"He's across from us now." Kemp, a tall man with long arms, stopped in the false dark to glare at the cars parked across from the Rooster. "He sees all the cars." Kemp did not want to risk a crowd. "He figures the Rooster's crowded." But Kemp did not like retreats and those in the Rooster knew it. Not the Bud Kemp who stormed and planted two trees each time a vandal snapped off one in his parks. And most of the customers were in the Rooster because like Kemp, the next cup of coffee meant walking three blocks further off the square.

"He wants that coffee bad!" Hill broke into a satisfied grin.
An iconoclast does not retreat. Kemp hunched his camouflage jacket forward and stepped off the curb toward the cafe. "He can't see," Hill chortled. Mist condensed on Kemp's thick glasses and he chose each step with care, though the pavement was not icy. The lanky Kemp reached the sidewalk and Hill said, "Okay now, get ready!"

Kemp entered the street door and removed his glasses. He pushed the inner door open with his shoulder and fumbled in a pocket slit on his coat. He produced a lump of tissue and halted on the rubber mat, the tip of his long nose close to the black eyeglass frames.

The conversation died. The cook, who was not informed of the joke, slammed a wire carrier holding thick mugs into the dish water. Water drummed against the aluminum housing. But the pulse could not hide a lack of conversation. Someone began to stir his coffee. The spoon clinked and the stirrer stopped. In the hush, the lack of a spoon clink became obvious.

Kemp quit rubbing his damp lenses. He looked up, stiffened. He shoved the black frames back against his nose and whirled on the front tables, "Whatever it was you were saying," his voice was shrill, "you can say it now, to my face!"
The Rooster erupted. Guffaws, jibes, laughter. The damp

gloom was forgotten, "A joke, Bud! We meant no harm!" A
red-faced merchant slapped Kemp's shoulder.

Kemp's jaw muscles bunched and relaxed, bunched again to
pump his cheek hollows out and back. He turned to include the
horseshoe in his injured stare. A flush began up his long
neck and turned his black whisker stubble and year-round tan a
darker brown.

"Here Bud," said the merchant, "let me buy you coffee."
And a salt salesman just elected to the Marian City council,
so that technically he was Kemp's employer, directly, assured
the lanky Kemp, "We weren't picking apart anything scandalous
about you," and when the councilman's remark was repeated
around the horseshoe and they thought about it--Kemp was too
harmless to make a good scandal--they laughed harder.

Now Kemp searched for an empty stool. His cheek hollows
pumped faster. The counter was full.

They howled. Hill tried to swallow coffee and choked. A
man at the table behind him turned and pounded Hill's back.
Kemp pumped his cheeks as fast as his pulse. "Here Bud," said
the councilman, apologetically, "take mine, I'm leaving."
Unsteady from his laughter, the salesman pounded shoulders
along the stools to the cash register. He waved his hand at
Kemp's gruff "thanks."
Only when Hill's lungs cleared and he recovered from his choking fit, did he go to the counter stool and lean over and confess his role. Only then did the flush begin to lessen. Kemp stirred his free coffee and stared at the spoon handle sticking up between his large knuckles.

Wayne Chip did not witness Kemp's discomfort. But it was the first item of talk that afternoon when the news editor stopped at the Rooster. Chip was amused. Kemp was an easy victim. It was Max Hill's way to relieve his frustration when he could not sell a property.

By five that afternoon, the sun had burned away the mist and dried out most of the moisture, and the trees in Marian Park revealed a fringe of green at their tips. Wayne drove to the Marian Country Club to photograph the first tennis champions. He was calm, unhurried. A few golfers were sprinkled across the fairways, but it was a weekday, too early in the season to be crowded. Wayne hurried into the white clubhouse, a long building in the shape of an "L" and took the wide steps to the basement dining room. On the rear lawn, three new tennis courts behind high wire mesh fence were empty. The courts had been built the previous fall and christened that spring with a first-ever women's tournament. "Hi Wayne," a dozen women in tennis outfits greeted him from the bar across the dining room. "You're on time. Here, get
one of me at the bar." Pleasantly drinking, he thought. In
their casual fog, Wayne guessed they had met an hour earlier
to decide exactly how he would take their picture.

"In the dining room," ordered Beaner Combs, the club's
senior champion. It was Beaner who had called Wayne to
arrange the photo. She was a small woman with brown hair and
an accurate forehand. Beaner led them to an open area in the
dining room. Tables and chairs were pulled away from the
wall, and while Wayne waited, the tennis players arranged
themselves in four rows, "How about it, Wayne, can you get my
legs from here?" They assembled into a row standing on a
bench from the locker room, another row standing, one sitting,
and one kneeling. They corrected each other, "Not that way,
Carol," who was a little woman, the wife of a salt salesman
just elected to the Marian City council. Carol, who knelt and
held a shiny trophy on her tan kneecap, was advised, "turn the
other way, like Jean and the others." Carol aimed her knees
in the other direction like the others. Wayne realized they
knew his photo routine exactly. He watched, amused. Their
trophies shined; their noses didn't. He took several
exposures and afterward, when he had their names in sequence
and their division titles linked, the tennis players drifted
out of the room, "Bye Wayne, thanks for coming." And "put it
on the front page, Wayne." Again, it was harmless banter
since they knew they were destined for the sports page. The
room empty, Wayne straightened the tables and picked up notes left by Beaner. Her statistics were neat, printed, he noted. He grabbed his camera and notepad and saw Beaner returning. He looked over, expecting Beaner to add a detail. She trotted toward him.

In her fifties, Beaner covered the distance quickly. She threw her arms around his shoulders and squeezed his neck to press an exhuberant kiss on his lips.

Wayne was rigid. He could neither pull away nor press back while Beaner prolonged the embrace.

She drew her head back slightly to stare up with satisfaction while she hung there, and he braced his back to keep from toppling forward. She hung there.

He stared back. Beaner's cheek was tan, what he could see of it. She did not need cosmetics. Until this moment, he knew she was the wife of a lumber yard owner and the club's senior champion, he knew that. But while he remained rigid to keep from falling forward, he decided Beaner weighed one hundred twenty pounds. Firm pounds. Beaner wanted him to know? Her body was hard and her breasts small. A girl's body. She wanted to tell him? Menopause, no, not this late. A fling? Ridiculous. He didn't want her. Wayne could find no reason why he stood much as a skier finishes a run near the chairlift, with his arms apart and legs bent slightly,
where the slope levels and you straighten to grab the next chair.

She stared up, eyes wide.

He stared down.

Finally, Beaner slid down his shirt front and stepped back.

He gripped his notepad and camera. Neither spoke. He knew he looked startled, puzzled. Impulse. Wayne was about to--he never did know--because a voice, "Beaner," connected to a white tennis outfit worn by Beaner's doubles partner, Margie Shortly, arrived from the hall, "You done?" Margie stopped and waited for Beaner to join her, "Need a lift home?" Margie gave no hint she saw anything amiss, to Wayne's relief. "But I drove you out here," Margie said, "of course you need a ride home." They walked out, Margie's arm around Beaner's shoulders, mildly drunk.

Wayne lit a cigarette. He straightened the chairs. He sat and finished the cigarette. When he was sure they had driven off, he took the cement steps to the front entrance, preoccupied with Beaner's steady advance over the dining room carpet, "Oh," his way was blocked by the junior singles champion, "Are you done?" Pamela tilted her brown eyes at Wayne and leaned against the door.

He was not about to mess with her query. Pamela blocked his flight. She slipped or staggered against him. "Oops,"
she said. Low, throaty, and drunk, Wayne decided. Much softer than Beaner. So they had planned it, he decided.

He pushed the door open. Pamela leaned on his arm so they got through it together and on the wide steps, she did not release his arm. A bet from the bar? Wayne wondered if the tennis champions had a bet going. It was the only explanation for Beaner's steady trot, he decided.

Pamela leaned or swayed against him down the steps and held his arm with both her hands, with small fingers whose pressure he felt through the cloth of his suitcoat sleeve. Wayne became acutely aware that Pamela was coordinated, that each step she took was connected to a rounded body now determined to walk him to the parking lot. Pamela walked rhythmically, the top of her breasts pushed over her sleeveless blouse and argued for his attention with her brown shoulders. A dark tan. Her fingers pressed through the cloth and his arm felt warm. Pamela was lush. She tripped and clung tighter. Did the bet extend to his car? Wonderful girls, I'm flattered. Wayne was worried now. Pamela had carried the joke too far. He turned to look back at the club entrance, to see which tennis player stood there to confirm the bet's success. The entrance was empty. Pamela's breast pushed into his arm. Her brown hair brushed against his shoulder. "Sorry Pamela," he said, and resumed walking toward his car.
"What?" Pamela's fingers pressed through his sleeve. Wayne searched the parking lot and again found no spies. The cars were empty and he did not see humans. He was safe! They were funny! What a joke!

He laughed, quickly, "This is funny," he said, "you girls are marvelous. How much is the bet?"

"What?" Clearly, his question puzzled her. Pamela hung on his arm as they neared his car. Wayne was acutely aware that her breasts were too full where they pushed under the top, too much for the hidden part to be fake. Pamela spent the winters in Florida to sharpen her tennis. Her husband's death of a heart attack left her rich, and Wayne could think of a justifiable cause for that heart attack. When they sold his insurance agency, Pamela was richer, but he had died several years ago, plenty of time for her to find a lover. Wayne wondered if Pamela had a lover? Pamela squeezed his forearm at the car door, so he lifted both arms and rested them on the cartop, still gripping his notepad and camera. She let go. He leaned against the car and stared at the third tee, near the driveway exit. He hoped desperately that no golfers approached; he did not need to fend off gossip. The tee was empty. Did Pamela sway against him now? "Yes?" Low, throaty, the answer to a man's best fantasy.

Wayne did not answer her. He had not spoken. An extra ten bucks if I drive you home? He wished now that he kept up
on gossip and clubhouse bets. He was supposed to drive Pamela home, he guessed that now. "Well," he said, and waved his notepad, "get these to the office." So he was not a gentleman. Pamela allowed him to open the car door and in the seat, his camera next to him, he grinned up at her. "I thought it was a good group, a good picture. Congratulations." Pamela stared down. Wayne wanted to sound relaxed and calm. He doubted that he sounded calm but grinned up at her anyway.

Pamela did not answer. She turned and negotiated the slight incline to her car on the other side of the lot. He watched her in the rearview mirror and regretted the impulse, because Pamela's buttocks jutted back at him rhythmically and he felt a sense of loss. Pamela bent to unlock her door and he started his car and backed out and drove forward with misgivings. He wanted to stop, to offer her a ride home. God he hoped she could drive!

Across Marian City into his driveway, he argued his choice violently. But he knew his worth; Laura taught him that. Wayne never had to decline sex offers, much to his chagrin. There were none. He knew his eyes were too close set, his nose too long. It did not take a photographer's eye to tell him about his thin lips, narrow chin, rounded shoulders, a paunch which rolled out over his belt. He was not designed to hurry a woman off to bed. And Laura reminded
him frequently, reminded him of acid smells from the darkroom fix, ink stains from the Citizen. He knew his brisk gestures, the nervous energy he called upon most days. He knew. No doubt he wanted to. Early in his twenties, the idea of refusing an affair seemed to him noble, exhilarating. He wanted to drive Pamela home and explore her brown shoulders and remove the tight shorts, to discover just how each thigh was connected to her round waist and how warm the curve of her neck was. Since he couldn't, he was furious. The bar. How much was the bet!

He shut the motor off and noticed his hair was mussed. He had news ink along his jaw. They had seen it at the club; they had to see it! His paunch pinched a roll of flesh against the steering wheel when he leaned forward to look in the mirror. His armpits were soaked. That was it! They wanted to make him sweat. They won.

Later, after supper and the kids were in bed, after a bath which he disliked because the tub was too small, either Laura wanted to end her campaign for a new rug, or she could thank the tennis champions. Wayne was never sure later, which way it happened.

He knocked on the door while Laura was still bathing.

"Is that you Wayne? In a minute, I'll be out." That was Laura's signal to stay out.
He heard the water splashing. He decided that Laura's tone was neutral, and yet, their sex had been frequent all week. Laura was campaigning for a new rug. Then Pamela when she bumped her breast against him sent Wayne back to the varnished door to knock again, "Go away," Laura said, "I'm not done." This time, there was no mistaking her mood.

On the couch, he could not focus to read. Again, he saw Beaner Combs trotting across the country club carpet, an indoor-outdoor carpet scuffed by cleat marks. Beaner? Don't do this to me. Wayne opened the back door but the yard was deserted and the street light lit Todd's tricycle where he had pulled it next to the steps. He wanted her now.

He returned to the couch. Laura found him there. She wore a green negligee, mint-green, "Will you help me tie this?" She stood before him shyly, forever a raw-boned farm girl almost as tall as Wayne. "Not here," Laura said as he knew she would, though the drapes were closed, and she led him to their bedroom. Under the mint-green top, her back was wider than Wayne's and it sloped broad, a fullback's build. "Early summer," she began, and locked the bedroom door.

Wayne piled pillows against the headboard for another trip to Swanson's Lake. "Remember?" Laura waited for him to settle against the pillows, and laid next to him with her head on his chest. "Remember how blue the lake was?"
It was slate-gray. Wayne did not say so. Idly, he wondered if they could find a new lake, or a mountainside. But with the urgency tapped by Pamela at the club, he said, "A night like tonight."

Laura turned her head. Her chin pushed against his ribs as she continued, "You finished your last exam at noon. Had to stay on campus, for graduation." She thought aloud, "Mine were over at three." They thought they were in love.

"We met at the Union," Wayne said, to hurry her past her recollection of how the tests went, "and you wore your white blouse and green skirt, pleated, so you wouldn't have to wear that girdle."

"Hummm?" His mention of the girdle puzzled Laura. She loved to be dainty. And girdles were out of style now, he knew, so he presumed Laura wanted girdles eliminated from their trip to Swanson's Lake. "You told me so," he said, "no girdle, then you giggled."

"I didn't!" Still, Laura was not easily distracted. "There was nothing to do, it was a perfect day, no bugs, so I suggested a picnic." Again she stopped to reflect, "We drove to the store."

"Didn't we stop to neck behind the fountain?" Wayne never suggested that. Laura, the mother of two children, hated to be reminded she giggled, or that she indulged in necking. Wayne could not understand why he persisted tonight,
but now he was sure of it. They had stopped to neck behind
the little man with his penis showing. The penis distressed
many of the students at their Christian college.

"We did not! We drove to the store," Laura turned so her
jaw moved along his ribs instead of digging into them, "and
they had barbecued chicken in a little oven by the meat
counter."

"We did," Wayne agreed. They drove in a 1935 Plymouth
Coupe with a Nash engine that even to the store was giving off
hints it would throw a rod later than month, after graduation.
But Wayne decided against mentioning the blown engine now,
"Remember the coupe?"

"That thing?" she said, and allowed Wayne to slip her
negligee top off. She folded it and dropped it on the floor
by the bed. Her little breasts hung down full for a moment
when she leaned to rest again on his chest. The breast
available when she turned sideways flattened, and he covered
it with his hand. "The dust blew in all the way to Swanson's
Lake." Laura twisted up to look at his chin.

"But we liked the way the road twisted, the curves, and
the feeling when we dropped over the crest and saw the lake
between the trees."

He knew her forehead wrinkled, "You never mentioned
that." Laura was quiet, and he guessed she was considering
whether to include it in future trips to the lake.
"I parked near the picnic tables," he hurried her on. He did not want to spoil her intent, "and--"

"--I said let's go further down the slope," Laura said. They walked to a dip that took them out of sight of the gray lake and the roadway, but Laura didn't care. The grass was green and they found a level spot. Still, Laura worried they had not found a secluded spot, "Suppose someone else comes," she remembered now, "and you said 'I don't think so.' And you were right." She settled against Wayne's chest.

"I carried the picnic basket and you the iced tea. We didn't drink then."

"We need a blanket," Laura said. Wayne remembered the Indian blanket in the Plymouth's sloped trunk. An enormous trunk, as he recalled now. "I'll go get it," he said. He climbed the half mile back to the parking lot and found the dusty blanket. He pounded it on a picnic table, pounded the wool blanket until dust no longer rose when he slammed it on the green tabletop.

"When you got back," Laura resumed their trip, "I had the chicken ready and we had circus cups, paper cups with blue elephants, to drink the tea." She rubbed the top of his toes with her heel. It was supposed to be a caress, he knew, but a callous had dried and pulled away from her heel and its sharp edge cut the soft skin at the base of his toes. Wayne moved his foot down gently, but Laura's heel followed it.
"Was there a moon?" He should not have asked. Laura never mentioned a moon.

Her heel stopped its back and forth chaffing and jammed against his ankle. The corn lodged in the hair and pulled the skin away from the bone when she resumed rubbing his toes with her foot. "I don't know, what's wrong. Why did you bring that up?"

"Sorry, I can't remember," he said. "We didn't need it." Laura squirmed. Wayne removed his hand from her breast, "There should have been. Maybe, a quarter moon?" He moved, as if to roll off the pillows and go look, "Lemme go look, maybe it was a quarter moon."

She pushed him back against the pillows and pressed her lips under his chin, "quit."

They laid motionless and silent. He guessed she was waiting for his frequent departures to fade. He freed an arm and rubbed her back, "I pushed the wicker basket off the blanket," there, he had just skipped the ice cream and a brief trip to the lakeshore which was muddy, and their walk back arm in arm, "while you unbuttoned your blouse, the one without sleeves, so I could peek inside the slits when you leaned over."

"I did not!"

"Okay."
"Did you really peek?" Again, he could feel her turn up to look at his chin.

"Laura, that's why girls wore them. I was supposed to peek when you kept inventing excuses to bend over in front of me." His hand stopped on the point between her shoulder blades.

"You shit!" She hissed it quietly, so the sound would not carry to Wendy and Todd's bedrooms. "What's got into you tonight!"

"Then you pulled out a boob and said let's screw."

Her heel swept past the ankle and jammed into his calf.

"Ow!" He pulled his leg out of danger. The corn had grazed his shinbone and again caught in his hair when he pulled away. "Sorry Laura," he tilted his head to kiss her hair, "I don't want to be mean."

She slid down a fraction of an inch and did not answer, so he said, "You unbuttoned your blouse."

After a silence, long enough to let him know she was considering ending the trip, she said, "And I unhooked your belt and pulled it out, clear out, and threw it by the basket—No moon! You shit!" This time her voice was loud enough to carry, "Now you have me thinking about the moon. There was no moon, remember? We couldn't find your belt afterward, in the dark. We searched and then you stepped on the buckle."
"No moon," and he remembered now, recognized the satisfaction in Laura's tone. The belt buckle punctured the skin between his little toe but in the dark at Swanson's Lake he had not known. The wound bled enough to soak the end of his sock, a fact he discovered later when he took his shoes off in the dorm.

"No moon, our first time." She declared it.

Technically, it was their fiftieth. Wayne decided he was not about to mention it in their bed. In a tiny bedroom at the rear corner of their corner lot in Marian City, Laura regained the mood which drew Wayne to her on the Indian blanket.

It scratched. Its fibers worked into the skin along his spine and tormented the backs of his arms. Wayne could not keep his legs still, kept moving his ankles to avoid the torment of the wool fibers. A residue of dust poked into the pores by the tiny wool fibers mixed with sweat and reacted in a potent compound that made him rake at his back to ease the torment. "I remember," Laura said, "the wool tickled your back, so I scratched for you." Wayne hated wool with a frenzy, refused even to wear a wool sweater over a long-sleeved shirt. The Indian blanket chaffed a round spot raw against his hip bone, where his cotton shorts normally protected him. And the next morning, his skin had been pocked with red irritation marks from the blanket. So Wayne turned
their first mutual effort on the Indian blanket into a missionary journey. Laura bore his weight on the blanket, on the lumps pushing up from the hard soil.

On a fresh cotton sheet in Marion City, they did not talk. Wayne entered her and sought why an old woman trotted across a country club room toward him and why Pamela, drunk, swayed against him at the car and refused to release his elbow so that later, when he reached down to squeeze the door button, he had pressed his elbow against his ribs to avoid the warmth coming from her shoulder. He wanted Pamela to stay even as she coordinated away, pushed off with her left heel and brought her thigh under her round waist to tilt up across the parking lot. Wayne wanted Pamela to stay even as he wished she did not turn sideways to unlock her door and he saw her silhouette against the trees of the ninth green and he could not drive her home. Laura squeezed her eyelids shut. Sweat found the cut in Wayne's leg and burned. His hip rubbed against Laura's bone under her wide waist and he shifted and pushed up on his elbows. Still, his paunch rested on her stomach. Their skin was beginning to dry together, and she said, "You said the world moved."

That much was true. On a cotton sheet wrinkled and damp, Wayne climaxed and slumped down. Laura moved her hips so that his penis slipped from inside her. "You're staring," she said.
It was dark. How could she know? "Huh?" He raised his shoulders, "I do, sometimes," and touched the tip of her nose with his lips.

"You're heavy," she said, "can you move off?"

He rolled off toward his nightstand, careful not to bump the inside of her legs, which bruised easily.

The bed rocked and Laura stood, "I'll go and repair the damage." He heard her unlock the door and pad toward the bathroom. The hall light glanced into their bedroom. Laura did not take her robe.

Damage? What happened to passion, he wondered. He turned on his back and pulled a pillow under his neck. Then he remembered the shag carpet. Laura thought it should be a green shag to match their drapes. Soon, he heard her slippers on the hallway and when he squinted, he saw her negligee bow was tied.

"I studied rug samples today." Laura straightened their bedspread, "found one, a mix of greens and browns, mostly green. It'll match our sofa and the drapes, but will pick up any browns or golds if we buy new furniture."

It meant their first withdrawal from savings just started that winter, thanks to Laura's first job. "Why don't you order it?" He turned to watch her.

"Really?" She sat on her side of the bed, and leaned to brace her elbows next to his shoulder. Under the negligee,
her skin was dark, a burnished gray. "You agree? We'll do it?" Laura's face tipped toward his on the pillow, and she cupped her chin with her hands. Her black hair swung forward and covered her long fingers.

Her eagerness was obvious. Her pretended surprise angered him. He had agreed from the start. To remind her now would cause a fight.

"We can afford it?" Laura could not hide her eagerness, and again she asked a question she knew the answer to, "Are you sure we can?"

"I just said so!" Wayne could not mask his irritation. "Laura," impatiently, "you worked hard for that money. Sure, I told you that." His irritation would not last. He loved her. He loved this large-boned woman jamming the bedspread against his arm. He risked a half-truth, "I want one. I said so, when we moved in the house." That much was true.

"Thanks, Wayne," she kissed him, pressed the bedspread across his chest so that he was pinned while she kissed him long, intently. He moved to free his arms. She pulled away, "Oh no you don't," and he heard her breath suck in quickly, "I don't have my diaphragm." She flopped back against her pillow.

I want you again? Impossible. Am I transparent, Laura? "Uh," he grunted, "I'll catch you later, on the carpet." It
was their fiction. Wayne never attempted sex twice because Laura could not hide her disgust.

"I've invited Joyce for the weekend," she said, "her apartment is being painted. I told you? I didn't."

"Why not," he said. "She coming to the party?" He was wide awake, wanted a cigarette.

Laura yawned. "She'll help with the party." She wiggled into her pillow, "This summer, Joyce and I want to get to know each other better."

Laura's new shag rug was installed the next afternoon. She called Wayne at the Citizen, "It's installed, Wayne, in time for the party. I called this morning, before their truck left the warehouse. Weren't we lucky?"

Wayne looked at his desk calendar, Friday. Laura's campaign had lasted a week, a week since she handed him his morning coffee, said, "We need a new rug."

Wayne agreed. He waited for the coffee to wet his tongue, for its warmth to work down his throat, "Lets get it."

Silence. Wayne expected surprise from Laura, an excited reply. They had discussed a rug many times in their years in the house, but Laura did not answer. He looked up; she wasn't there. He turned from the kitchen table, but Laura had silently padded across their thin living room carpet out of sight. He heard her waking the kids.
And when he arrived home from the office that first Friday, Laura had the house clean and a baby-sitter waiting. They ate at Pilot Springs and danced, and she wore the green negligee that night and after they made love, they talked about a new rug.

He was delighted with her fresh discovery of sex, and had allowed her to campaign. He had been willing. Each night it was to Swanson's Lake.