Rationale

M. J. Miles*
“LONN, Marcie’s here.” Mrs. Ballentine opened the bedroom door and stepped back so the girl could enter. “I’ll bring you up some coffee later.” She turned and went back down the stairs.

“Thanks, Mrs. Ballentine.” Marcie’s smile was too bright as she threw her purse on the over-stuffed chair, and flopped down.

“Hello, you old blighter! Fine time to get the flu. Me home for a week end, and you can’t even be up and about to take me out for a beer.”

“Uhhh! Don’t mention that word.” The boy rearranged the pillow behind his head, tugged the covers to the right position, then leaned back with an exaggerated moan. He wasn’t very sick, as long as he could tease with her.

“But how the heck are you anyway? Had the flu yet? Every able-bodied person should get it, you know.”

“Nope, only children get it,” the girl bantered. Lonn was 20, only three years younger than she. But she enjoyed teasing him about being “younger”. She bowed her head over her purse looking for a cigarette, then for a match.

He gets sick the same way other people do. Seems like he should look different, or act different. She found the match and leaned back against the soft chair again.

“You’re Mom said your temperature was down, so you’ll live, I suppose. How do you feel?”

“Oh, great. At least with this kind of flu you don’t barf, so it’s not so bad.” He lit a cigarette, then made a face as he blew the smoke out quickly. “God! Someday I’ll quit—maybe.”

“But how’s things going in the big city? Job still okay?” he asked.

“Oh, Lonn. It gets better all the time. I got another raise last week, and Jud is actually letting me do some minor
designing.” It was so easy to talk to Lonn. When she found out about him, she thought she could never face him again. Yet the next time they were together, it had been the same as before — except for the little ball of fear that rolled around inside of her. Fear — of nothing except what the future would do to this man, her friend. He didn’t see it, and he didn’t find out that she knew. They had fun together, as they always had.

“He didn’t even say a word when I wanted to leave early Friday to catch the train home.”

“Small town girl makes good!” He laughed easily, and she laughed with him.

“Hey, is that the new hi-fi?” She jumped from the chair and did a little dance step over to the big cabinet by the bed.

“Man, oh, man! Superb! How long have you had it?” Lonn, who had always liked the same music she had. Lonn, who had not laughed at her childhood efforts to compose. Her heart tugged and she wanted to turn to him and cry. She pushed open the top of the hi-fi and peered at the turntable inside.

“Just came about the first of the month. Want to hear something? The records are there on the floor. Maybe next year I can afford to buy a cabinet for ‘em.”

She sat down on the floor and started going through the records. The man in the bed coughed and reached for a glass of orange juice. He pulled thoughtfully at the corner of the cover. Then, slowly, “Hey, Marc. I got a surprise for you.”

She kept on studying record covers. “Um? What now?”

“Four more weeks, one more day, and I’ll be working in California.”

Marcie’s hands stopped, her head came up slowly. No, Lonn. Not California. Anywhere but there. The little ball of fear flattened out and grew into a stiff agony inside her.

“Lonn.”

“Well, don’t look so dumbfounded. Yes, really.” He nodded his head vigorously. “I’ll be writing features for the Los Angeles Star. See, you aren’t the only one in this hick
town with brains. I’m as smart as you are.” He winked at her, then saluted her with his glass of orange juice. “Here’s to success. Your in Minneapolis, and mine in California.”

She pushed the fear down and came to life.

“Oh, Lonn! I’m so happy for you. It’s just that I didn’t know you’d been considering California. What made you decide?”

“Oh, that office is getting unbearable. It’s too small, Marcie, and everybody has his nose in everybody else’s business. The minute somebody turns his back, they all start scratching. And anyway, I’ve learned all I can from the Trib. It’s time for me to get out of this town.”

“Well, I’m glad you realized that. And California does have lovely rain. Tell me about the paper there. How’d you get the job?”

“Time for coffee?”

Marcie jerked around. She hadn’t heard Mrs. Ballentine come up the stairs.

“Um, that smells good. And brownies! Hey, Lonn can get sick anytime if you always feed his visitors like this.”

Marcie had spent a lot of time in this house. There were the record sessions, and stopping in for coffee with Mom and Pop Ballentine after a movie. There were the childish duets they’d played on the piano. Long talks. Dreams spread open, examined- some discarded, some ridiculed, and some filed away as possible. Laughter. Together, laughing at the foolishness of their conceit, but always understanding.

Mrs. Ballentine smiled. “Well, anytime you want food, you just traipse around, Lonn or no Lonn.” She carefully placed a thermometer under Lonn’s tongue, then felt his forehead. “He hasn’t had any fever all day.”

Lonn surrendered to the mothering and grinned lopsidedly around the thermometer to Marcie.


Marcie got off the floor and went to the dresser to pour coffee for the three of them. She mustn’t think about it
here. Lonn might sense it. But if she just hadn't gone to see Aggy last summer. Marcie wasn't in this town often enough to hear all the gossip. She probably never would have found out if she hadn't gone to see Aggy.

She hadn't seen Aggy for two years. She used to work with her in the drug store and listen to her talk all the time about her boys. Marcie didn't really like Aggy. But it happened— the night when she didn't have anything to do and didn't want to stay home. She had backed the family car out of the garage, driven through the quiet streets, and up to the other end of town to Aggy's house.

Aggy had been glad to see her. She always was. They had gossiped about the people they both knew, and Aggy had talked about the boys. They were sitting at the small kitchen table drinking coffee while the boys watched TV in the next room. Marcie had mentioned Lonn. She couldn't remember why.

Oh, she mustn't think about it! Marcie turned quickly and handed Lonn a cup of sloshing coffee. She was shaking. She couldn't let them see.

"Here, old top. Drink it while it's hot. That's doctor's orders."

He took the coffee and smiled thanks.

"Marcie, why don't you play Respighi? Play the "Pines" side. That's quieter, and I feel like meditating." He puckered his mouth and starred at the opposite wall, mimicing an old man lost in thought. Marcie and Mrs. Ballentine laughed.

"Thank you, audience." He moved forward in a half bow, then caught himself just as the saucer in his lap started to slide off. "Damn, just can't be a gentleman while you're in bed."

Marcie set her coffee down and picked up "The Pines and Fountains of Rome." She didn't want to listen to music now. Usually she liked to listen to music in this house, because there was respect here, and people didn't keep chattering through the music they wanted to hear. But now if they didn't talk, she would think, and she didn't want to think.
She turned to Lonn. "But aren't you going to tell me about the new job?"

"Oh, I can tell you about that later. Anyway, Mom has heard it a dozen times, and she probably doesn't want to hear the glories of California again."

Marcie put the record on, picked up her coffee and a brownie, then carefully sat down and sank back into the soft chair. The light, intense music filled the room. Such happy, carefree music. Marcie glanced at Lonn, caught his eye, and they both smiled. Mrs. Ballentine hummed softly to herself.

Marcie stared at the record player, but she didn't see it. Aggy, as she had looked that night. Marcie couldn't forget. Aggy, the kind-hearted. The one who didn't tell stories that weren't true. Aggy leaning across the kitchen table, shielding her mouth with her hand so the boys in the living room wouldn't hear. Aggy, hate in her eyes as she whispered with a rasp, "He's queer!"

Oh, no, no! Marcie squirmed in her chair and concentrated on the floor. The music was solemn now. The dirge of the pines near the catacomb. "He's queer. He's queer."

He had made advances to Aggy's brother Andy in a movie. Andy had gone to the manager, then the police. And the doctor. His mother, crying, asking over and over, "Why did you do it, Lonn." "I don't know, Mom. I don't know, Mom." And Iowa City. Eight long months in Iowa City, while the doctors pried and poked into a man's mind and couldn't find the answer. Marcie had thought he was in Kansas City with his uncle. All of his letters had come from Kansas City, and he had talked about the town, what he did, the places he went, the job he had. How could he lie to her for so long? How could he make it sound so real? And to come home, the riddle not solved. "They couldn't cure him. They couldn't cure him." Aggy's words echoed through the dirge of the pines, and Aggy's hating eyes glared from the carpet.

Mrs. Ballentine set her empty cup on the tray and lifted the cover of the record player. "Got to get back to that kitchen, or dinner won't be ready for the tribe. Sure you
won't stay, Marcie?" She set the needle off the record and turned off the player.

"Marcie smiled up. "Thanks, but Mom would have a fit if I weren't home, since Uncle John's are coming."

Mrs. Ballentine moved out the door and down the stairs. Well, now you can talk about California." Marcie kicked off her shoes and curled her feet under her.

"This is funny, Marc. I heard about the job down at the office. Bert got a letter from the managing editor out there. I guess they're good friends, or something- anyway, this guy told Bert that he needed a feature writer."

Lonn's voice was quiet, but excitement showed in his eyes. Yes, he would make good in California. Only 20, and already the best feature writer in the area. Marcie listened to the dialogue, but part of her mind kept repeating, "California. California. No."

But maybe it would be best for him there. She didn't know who had said it, but she remembered the statement. "Homosexuality is legal in California. Boy, I'd never bring any kids of mine up there!" But would you let a man go there won't be cured? A man! My friend!

Marcie heard the clock chiming down stairs. "Holy smoke! Five already! I've got to run, Lonn. Mom'll be about knee deep in pie crust right now, and cussing her daughter for never being home to help."

"Gee, I have been rattling, haven't I? Wish you could stay, but I won't beg. Say, Listen. Why don't you come home one more week end before I go. We can go out and tell the old hick town 'Good bye' together."

"Will do, Lonn. I'm taking the night train back tomorrow, so I'll stop by tomorrow afternoon for a few minutes. Take care of that flu bug." She picked up her purse, turned to him and smiled. "Bye now."

"See you tomorrow, then. Bye, Marc."

The girl walked slowly down the stairs. She called a good bye to Mrs. Ballentine, then let herself out the front door.

Outside the house Marcie moved slowly down the walk, opened the car door and slid under the wheel. She turned
the key in the ignition and sat quietly while the motor idled. She couldn’t go home just yet. Mom would have to manage the pie by herself. She swung the car around and started out to Wesson Park on the lake.

A cold wind met Marcie as she stepped out of the car on the bluff. Waves churned against the rocky shore below. No, the lake wasn’t frozen yet. About another month. She shivered and forced her head up, her face into the wind.

California. Send a man there who can’t be cured. Marcie felt the ball of fear spread out and seep through her, becoming a load of defeat. Yes, send a man there who can’t be cured, so the law will protect him. Even if he is your friend. Even if you don’t want him to be this way.

Yes, about another month and the lake would be frozen.

M. J. Miles, Sci. Sr.

... And Sitteth

on the Right Hand of God...

Fade in.

ROLLING across the floor is smoke or fog or some other substance which will give the effect of the tops of clouds. The background is light blue and appears to extend forever. A man is walking slowly, his feet swirling the tops of the clouds. He is clad in a long white garment similar to a robe. His hair is long and needs combing and his beard is the same. As he moves along he is approached from the rear and to one side by a man wearing a three-button ivy-league business suit. The man is about forty years old, with brown hair and eyes. He has the definite beginnings of a paunch in front and a middle-age spread in back.

Business suit. “Hey, just a minute.” He hurries toward the man in the robe. The man in the robe waits. “What is this place?”

Robe. “You must be new here.”