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THE BUTTERFLY

by

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THE BUTTERFLY

As her husband sharpened the knife for the hog he would kill in the morning, Kyla looked out at the ragged vineyard where she knew Eddie Dodge lay waiting for her daughter. If Kyla took the pitchfork and walked out in the weeds she knew she would never find him, but if she closed her eyes and threw the knife into the vineyard it would probably fall through the center of his heart. Watching the weeds, the sound of stone against steel dancing through her bones, Kyla thought of water, of the morning she had seen the car waver in the distance. Far down the road she had seen it coming, blue, like water that could move on its own. As it passed the house, the white fence flashing along the fenders and doors, for no reason she had whispered, "Don't turn in, don't turn in," and the car had turned in. She had whispered, holding her hoe, "Be lost, be looking for town," and a blue door had opened, a man had called her name. Dropping the hoe, walking toward the car, she had said out loud, "Don't be my mother." On the back seat, wrapped in blankets, the old woman had slept in a red velvet dress. Now Eddie Dodge lay waiting in the weeds and Kyla couldn't stop him, not with a pitchfork or a gun, now not even with a knife
thrown over her shoulder. "Like when my mother dies," thought Kyla, "it'll just happen."

"It all started when the old lady came," Kyla said, still looking out at the field of ruined grape stumps.

"No," said Delmus, almost happily, head down, sharpening the knife. "It started before that, when Mrs. Watkins gave her the book."

"Book, what book?" Kyla said quickly, turning toward her husband bent over the grinder.

"Why the book hid with my whiskey over in the corner under the bale of hay," Delmus almost said, thinking of tomorrow when his friends would come to help him butcher the hog. "That book about animals," Delmus said carefully. "I think she gave it back though."

"Well I don't know about that," Kyla said. She frowned and looked back at the vineyard again. "Just some book doesn't make you act that way. It's the old lady that started it all. I don't know why I let her stay." Kyla thought that if she went out into the field with a pitchfork, stabbing the Johnson grass, jabbing the shiny prongs into the dry ground, maybe her mother would die in the night, the blood in her heart suddenly sprouting pins.

Sometimes, when the sun shone right, low in the mornings, Kyla could almost see the network of clear threads like some ornate spider's web connecting everything on the ranch. When she lifted the spoon to test the soup she could feel the slight tugging of the string that ran out of the kitchen
down the steps across the pasture to a tin can lid that flopped in the wind and suddenly shone, scaring the horse as Delmus knelt to trim its hoofs. In the bathroom bent over the tub, washing her dress, she had watched the pleats sway open and closed, like a flag waving in the wind, like the sea anemones she had once seen at the seashore. It had made her angry and quickly, as she forced the dress under, she had felt a sudden tension, maybe just the water, maybe the dress holding bubbles of air, but as she leaned with all her weight and felt her hands through the dress pressing the bottom of the tub, she had heard a scream as if her daughter were being drowned. One evening reading a book, Kyla had come to a page that looked strange, the words clear and hard as if chiseled in stone, and thinking that her mother might die if she did the right thing, she ripped out the page and set it on fire. But except for the ashes, circling each other as they rose toward the ceiling, Kyla sensed sadly that nothing had changed and went on with her reading. The next morning Mrs. Watkins knocked on the door, holding a girl's blouse she had found in her barn yard. Everything was connected with strings but there were thousands of them, maybe millions, and they didn't stop at the ranch but went beyond, like to Visalia where her forgotten mother must have felt a tug, maybe a shingle falling in the night. Sometimes when Kyla crossed the barn yard or moved about the house with a rag chasing dust, she became almost frightened, lifting her skirt and stepping high and clean to avoid
tangling in some unfortunate cord. Though it was all like a mad child's cats cradle, in the mornings, when the sun was bright and she stood at her sink, the strings stretched across the pasture like gold wire, Kyla's hands would tremble as she thought, "Oh, if only I knew which ones to pull."

"It's because she's really your mother but she's a prostitute but she's still your mother and you can't turn her out," Delmus thought as the light grew dimmer and he could see more sparks. "Look at the mountains," Delmus said. "You forget they're there, the coast range, until the sun goes down."

As he spoke, Kyla heard a quick beating of wings and as she jerked her head up, she saw a crow flying past her toward the house. The black wings excited her and for a moment, when the crow was past and there were only the wings, she thought of the dress she would wear to the funeral. Then she trembled and looked at the ground. Good came sometimes and sometimes bad and both for a reason but it was too much to ever figure out.

As the crow passed the upper windows of the house, the old lady tried to scream and shuddered in her bed. In the last light, low and aiming like a gun along the wings, the black feathers turned purple, blue, green, then red. To the old lady, the changing crow seemed to hover by her window, its wings moving not to fly but just to flash different colors, its eye white and steady with the sun. It seemed like hours that she lay shaking, unable to breathe, the wings
beating like her heart. She thought of picking up a bottle of perfume to throw through the window but then she thought, "No, oh no," and her mind struggled with her terrified body to get out of bed and rush to the window, to lift the sash and coax the bird in. But she couldn't move, her fear was like straps and now there wasn't time. When the bird was gone, the colored wings passing through the last lenses of her eyes, the old lady jerked up in bed and with her white arms moving like knives, not the speed of strength and power but that last sudden quickness before death, she pulled her nightgown up above her waist and stared at herself. With a sigh of relief, she lowered the nightgown slowly and gently and with a soft thud she fell backward on the pillow that smelled sweet like her hair.

All summer she had lain dying in the upstairs room, waiting for the butterfly to leave her. The air was thick and heavy and she could hardly breathe but she would not open the window because the screen was torn. She took all of her meals in her room because the house was a big place with doors and windows and here and there there were cracks in the walls and you could see outside. When her daughter knocked on the door with the plate of food, the old lady would hold herself beneath the sheet and then quickly, freeing one hand, pull the long string that led to the sliding bolt. "Close it please Kyla," the old lady would say, "the cold air bothers me." And Kyla, with a scowl on her face, her cheeks red as if the stifling air was full of a thousand
hands that were slapping her, would close the door and then
walk toward the bed, putting the plate down on the night

table.

"It's so hot in here," Kyla would say. "You'll never
get well if you don't get some air."

"No, no please," the old lady would say, grabbing her
arm. "The air is cold and dangerous for me. Each day I'm
getting better and soon I can go, just as long as I keep out
of the draft."

"I suppose you know best," Kyla would say, almost un-
able to contain a grin. "I guess some people like a warm
room." Then she would turn and walk to the door and then
close it after her, pausing for a moment to hear the lock
going back.

Once, in early summer, when her mother first came, be-
fore the old lady tied the string to the lock, Kyla had
smelled smoke. Thinking the old lady had been smoking in
bed and set fire to the room, she had run up the stairs and
thrown open the door, switching on the light. Shivering,
upright in bed, the old lady held a cocked derringer before
her, her eyes blinking to make out the face.

"Who is it?" the old lady said. "What do you want?"

"Mother, it's me," Kyla said, her raised palms shouting,
No, don't shoot. "Mother, put down the gun. I thought you
were on fire."

The old lady put down the gun and said hurriedly, "No,
no I'm fine but I smelled smoke too, I think it's the barn.
You better go see." Without closing the door or switching off the light, Kyla ran down the hall toward the stairs thinking of her husband drunk and sleeping in the flames. As she turned to go down, she looked back toward the light of her mother's room. The old lady lay panting on her back, staring at a mirror she held below her stomach. Kyla could only see the silver back of the mirror but the way her mother's eyes blazed and then jumped as her mouth began to smile, she knew the old lady was looking into fire, that her mother would foster some nascent catastrophe.

In the farmhouse, in her suffocating room, to anyone who might ask or hear, the old lady was named Mrs. Smith. Where she came from her name was Dolly Mable and she had air conditioning and a red velvet dress she wore even in summer because the air was cool and damp and when she awoke in the late afternoons she would smile and think she was by the sea. In the summer she had always smiled and been cool and though her house in Visalia was full of wonderful machines and life was easy, now and then she had remembered herself many years before when she was in love and each day at 11 o'clock six girls would come into her room and sit about her bed, giving her candy and flowers and holding sea shells to her ears. Beyond their honey colored hair and their necks sweet with perfume, she would smile and see a tall handsome man in a long black coat, doffing his hat and smiling too as he leaned for a moment in the doorway. He was good to her, he had always been good to her, and the one time she had
worried and doubted his love as he strapped her to the bed and motioned to the small man in a frayed collar and a strange tie, carrying a black bag, she had received the greatest present of all. "Lay easy, pretty lady," the small man had said with an accent. "Lay easy and dream of the earth like a star beneath your arms," as he lowered a cloth over her face, her tall man holding her head still, careful and firm as she breathed in something that smelled like death. Her eyes had turned funny and then her ears too and for a moment she had wondered what dying might be like, if it was anything like this. "Yes. yes, oh yes, no, not quite, yes this one," the small man said, lifting the colored bottles against the light, squinting at them with a tiny blue eye. Her tall man stood by the window, a tall shadow against the stars, maybe listening to the ocean or looking at the moon. Then he turned quickly, moving toward her, smiling, holding a razor.

When she awoke she felt sick and her legs felt torn as if every room in the house had another door and a thousand men up different stairways had come to her in her sleep. The small man sat beside her on the bed, the shirt beneath his arms and the vest black with sweat, his collar open and his tie gone. His face looked thinner than before, almost haggard, and there were spears of white stubble in the creases of his neck. "Awake, pretty lady," he said again. "Time to wake up." She jerked her head away from him, remembering the straps and not wanting to see what he had helped to do, but her arms were free and with fearful expectation she sat up. Eyes
exploding outward on spokes of colored light, she tried to speak and then touched her throat. Very softly, almost whispering, Dolly Mable asked, "Is it real? Can it fly?" She thought it had just landed on her or come from within her, that it would fly away and the pain was something it was doing or had done to her. Forgetting the pain, any pain she had ever felt or might feel in the future, she lifted her hand very carefully, slowly, as if to sneak up, reaching to touch it before it was too late.

"Oh think," said the man wistfully and yet without self-pity, interrupting her hand, "Oh think of the lucky men who will leave the earth on the back of a butterfly." Gently, not wanting to hurt and yet unable to resist, he touched her knees softly, slowly moving them back and forth, the great wings starting to beat. The small man smiled and closed his eyes as if comparing the wings to something in a dream. "Many men will leave the earth and when you die, you will know, it will fly away," he said. "What a wonderful way to die."

Dolly Mable had never thought that she might die but she was not disturbed, even that sounded so beautiful. She looked at the cracked blue of the small man's eyes and said, "Thank you, thank you very much."

"Thank you, pretty lady," the small man said as he got up and put on his coat and then took his bag. He pointed to a little clear bottle on the table and said, "If the butterfly gets hungry. He will at first." Dolly Mable clenched
her teeth and bowing her head, she moved her legs to make the wide wings move. When she looked up the small man was out in the hall smiling, looking at her, but before she could shape her face into a smile he had closed the door. Clutching her knees with her hands, she was bending forward for a closer view when the door opened and her tall man came in with a vase of flowers. He came to her bed and kissed her on the cheek as if she had been ill and now she was well, as if she had done something very hard and difficult like having a baby. "Oh thank you," she said as she drew him toward her and he kicked off his boots.

Living by the sea with long nights of stars and the window open for the wind, the butterfly worked its wings and though it was different for the man, Dolly knew that, even she felt as if she were riding away from the earth. Sometimes, when she felt the wind and stars rush through her hair, she felt the night slide past her like water and she could hardly catch her breath. It was then that she sensed that it was all not just leaving, that there was something beyond the night she was moving through. It frightened her and made her very happy and she opened her mouth to breathe and never remembered what the small man had told her. When her tall man was killed she remembered and for days she lay on her bed, waiting for the butterfly to go, each day hoping that it would but it never did. Then the money was gone and with what girls who would go, and the red velvet dress, she had moved to Visalia to start a new life, to go into business for herself.
In her life, the butterfly had left her three times. Once, when she lay on a bed having Kyla, after hours of heaving and sharp screams, she had felt cool air across her face and looked up to see the butterfly, grown much larger, fanning its wings in wide circles above her. For a while it was very large and then it got smaller, the circles tighter and tighter as it rose toward the ceiling and she could hardly see it. Moving her hands to the frame beneath the mattress, her mouth tight, her eyes hard like iron, she had pulled and pushed and stared until she made the butterfly stop and then slowly, patiently, she brought it down, made it grow large again, large enough to cover her like a blanket and then smaller and smaller until Kyla was born and it was back again. Twice, in Visalia when a man's wife ran up the stairs and pulled a gun and with a woosh she had heard the butterfly go, not even seeing it but feeling her heart and lungs and other organs sucked along by its wind. But the gun misfired. With the woman screaming, throwing the gun and then running toward her, she lifted the dress to see the butterfly. Then smiling, lowering the dress, she had waited for the woman's assault knowing nothing could hurt her. Three times, in Visalia, at the beginning of this summer when she felt the tremor along the insides of her legs, she had thought she was dreaming of the old days and closed her eyes but then she felt her heart and she knew she was about to die. With all her strength she reached for the bottle on the table and as she did, she saw the butterfly standing on a
hand mirror, its wings flexing calmly as if it were looking at itself. Quickly she closed her eyes and took a long drink but when she looked up the butterfly hadn't moved. She took another drink and then another and when she looked she could see its thin legs twitch on the glass. Frantic, she took many more drinks until she felt the whiskey rising in her throat. She took one more. When she looked again, the butterfly was gliding, very slowly, back toward her.

"Dinner," Kyla called through the kitchen window, her face close to the torn wire screen. "Dinner!" she called again as she watched her husband standing, looking at his knife, and felt her words were falling slowly in pieces like snow, that after awhile Delmus would look down and then shuffle toward the house, just feeling the wet whiteness on his shoes. "Dinner!" called Kyla, "dinner!"

When she called the fifth time, Delmus looked up, startled, as if he had been awakened from a dream, Kyla thought. She was about to call again when Delmus moved and the knife caught the light. She winced, raising her hand to shield her eyes. It was blinding, hot with needles, and as Kyla looked away toward the green of the vineyard, she wondered how Delmus could hold the burning blade. Everything on the ranch seared white before its brightness, for an instant the knife was the center of everything. Now, if Delmus ran to the fence and stabbed the hog, certain things might happen. Now, if Kyla held the knife. "Delmus," Kyla shouted, dropping her hand, "Delmus, go--"
"I'm coming," said Delmus, not very loud, almost to himself as he slipped the knife into his back pocket and started toward the house. Four times in thirty yards he stopped to take out the knife and look more closely, but the blade didn't shine and Kyla looked away, going to the stove to get the chicken.

There were mashed potatoes and fried chicken and gravy and biscuits and honey and corn but Delmus didn't eat. Though there was still last light, the evening star was not up yet, Delmus smiled and stared along the blade as if past his wife and the kitchen's steam he could see to the next morning. He didn't hear Kyla drop her fork against her plate or his daughter rising to help clear the dishes but went on holding, looking at the knife.

"Delmus, Delmus do you want coffee?" Kyla asked. "Do you want coffee? Delmus put down that knife and answer me." Delmus didn't look up and Kyla wanted to grab his arm, to make him listen, but she was afraid of the knife if she touched him suddenly. "Delmus, you didn't eat your dinner and now it's cold," said Kyla but Delmus didn't move. "Delmus!" she shouted and then, "Be that way. Nobody talks around here anymore."

Squinting, his cheek against the wooden handle, Delmus had looked a long time when his smile grew wider and he blinked and looked again. Whether the barn yard was full of drunk men yelling and waving bottles and Delmus was in the middle of them with the biggest bottle, laughing and dancing...
around the hog, or it was quiet and bare and he was just admiring the shiny sharpness of the blade, sighting along its smoothness, Delmus saw a patch of white to the left of his aim, over by the peach tree.

It floated in the air, still, just the white dress, as if it had been lost or stolen and now the wind had taken it. "It's just air," thought Delmus, "nobody's inside," but he felt excited by the dress as if he could imagine a body making it bulge. Though the dress was stationary, full and steady like a sail, maybe snagged by a peach branch at the neck, something seemed to move inside it like a naked statue behind a sheet, the breasts, the belly, the sloping hips covered yet oddly exposed, the dress darker where the flesh pushed against it. For a moment, Delmus thought the dress was about to fall, that somehow a naked torso would rush toward him. But then there were white, bare legs and long hair on the white shoulders and to the side the arms held something the way you hold a baby. Putting down the knife to look with both eyes, Delmus felt a rush of clean blood like snow water. The girl was facing toward him but she was looking at the sky, maybe looking for stars. With her head tilted back, he could see her throat, the whiteness beneath her chin. "Look lower," Delmus almost said, "look lower and to the west." Without the knife, as he looked at her longer, waiting to see her face, his ears began to roar, he felt the grind of something like sand and old leaves flushing from his veins. He thought of his arms around her in the night, of
her lips whispering to him the way he sometimes whispered to himself. Suddenly Delmus felt certain that all things were possible, that many wonderful, unhoped for things might be waiting for him yet. The girl lowered her head and smiled, looking back toward the house with hair across her face, and Delmus started to get up as she glanced down at her bundle. But quickly, as if she had forgotten what she held, the girl thrust it sharply away from herself, tossing it toward the black oil drum beside the peach tree, and Delmus realized it was his daughter taking out the chicken bones.

When she had climbed the kitchen steps and felt the chill wetness of concrete through her tennis shoes, the girl waited for a moment with the handle of the screen door in her hand, afraid that maybe the stars were really cold, sorry you couldn't share personal things, not even with someone as close as your father. All through dinner she had watched him smiling, happy that he was happy. Tomorrow was a big day for him, he was looking forward to it, but as Delmus stared along the knife and smiled and didn't say a word, ignoring his dinner, the girl had begun to wonder what he saw. The way his skin wrinkled at the corners of his eyes and the way his smile seemed wide and high-reaching, as if after a while it must hurt if you noticed the pain, the girl had supposed what made Delmus smile might make her smile too, that maybe he saw the thing that she had seen first, that image growing clearer and clearer until she could almost touch it. She realized she wanted to tell him what it was, what hopeful
dream had confronted her for weeks as she swept the floor or sewed or put the clothes on the line beneath her mother's watchful gaze. The girl wanted to tell Delmus, to share the same happiness, to talk of the thing that was so real and beautiful to both of them. But she was afraid. Hardly an hour before she had danced wildly in a red velvet dress, pounding the floor above her mother's head, but now she couldn't talk with Kyla at the table. She sighed, she coughed and made signs, but Delmus didn't answer, smiling to himself as he looked along the knife. Later, as she came back toward the house after taking out the scraps, hoping Kyla was gone now and he and she could talk, the girl could see her father gripping the knife, cutting at the air, slicing close to his chest, and she was relieved she had not spoken to him. She could see that now he frowned and was sad, that all the time he had seen something else and not Eddie Dodge and her in her own bed in her own room on their wedding night. But Eddie would come, he would be here soon. "We've got each other," thought the girl, and as she opened the door, the metal handle seemed warmer to her touch.

Above Delmus and his churning blade, in her room, the old lady lay on her bed thinking of the crow that had looked like a butterfly. By now it was near Bakersfield, sleeping on a telephone pole, or in a huge cottonwood with a whole flock of crows. "Maybe it's dead," she thought, "maybe it was sick or poisoned and that's why it changed colors." Patting herself through the sheet, smiling, thinking of crows
she had seen once in Mexico, of stuffed crows at the museum, she wondered if the small man with a black bag had been famous in his time, if somewhere a dark, beautiful woman had just died. She imagined the woman looked like herself except for the hair and the eyes that were black and large as night. As if she had liked the sun and often swam and her suit was sharply scalloped like the wings of a bird, the crow's white shadow would lie across her breasts.

Below, in the kitchen, Kyla was banging plates, cleaning up the dishes before she took her mother's plate out of the oven and brought it up the stairs. Kyla always waited until supper was over and the dishes were done, not wanting to miss anything her daughter might say to Delmus while she was gone. Kyla often imagined that important things were being said just out of her hearing as she went to the stove to get more biscuits or took the water pitcher from the refrigerator. At the table the girl seldom said a word but Kyla would watch her closely, the way she held her fork, how small she cut her pieces of meat, the way she held her glass as she drank or looked through its clear crystal. Kyla imagined she could tell what her daughter was thinking by the way she ate, and once, when she forked a tiny piece of meat and slowly brought it to her mouth, holding it out in front of her, Kyla had hardly stopped from slapping her, thinking of Eddie Dodge out in the weeds and all the things he had told her.

As usual, as the dishes banged below, the old lady heard the first steps on the stairs and then a door opening and
closing next to hers. She could hear the girl walking back and forth across the boards of her room. She thought she could hear the little thuds of her clothes falling against the floor as she tossed them off and thought of which dress she would wear tonight. The old lady always imagined the girl throwing the blouses and pants and brassieres nonchalantly over her shoulder, not turning to watch their high floating arcs as they crossed the still air of the room. She waited for the dull bounce of the blue canvas sneakers, for the sudden, clear report of the red dancing shoes. Soon the window screen would creak and open and the girl would climb the rose trellis down the side of the house. A minute later, if the old lady sat up in her bed, she would see the girl running out across the field, her dress blown behind her as she ran. The old lady would often try to guess which dress the girl would wear, the blue one or the green one or one of the white cotton dresses. Though she had never been in the girl's room but only heard the clothes falling and the wire hangers scraping on the pole as the girl tried to decide, she knew every dress the girl had in her closet. A few times, especially lately, the girl had run across the field dressed in something new, not an ugly dress but something a little different. At first it would bother the old lady but then she would smile and think that the girl was so young and so very much in love and it didn't matter what she wore or that she wanted to wear all of her dresses so each part of her would know her lover, even the strangest and
saddest dress she once loved but never wore anymore.  

Like a night-blooming flower, the old lady had always waited for the dark. Though she loved the dancing and the swirl of red velvet she knew it was all just practice, preparation, and each sundown she wondered which dress it would be. What the girl wore, whatever the color, it always seemed a perfect ending for the day, as if each day had a personality like a child and it could be called by only one name and within that name the whole day was embodied, like a girl who looks and acts like a Cathy or some man whose name must be Bill. When she saw the color of the dress, the old lady would smile with relief, with self-satisfaction, thinking, "Yes, yes today was blue or green or lavender like the dress." Then she could feel the darkness settling softly like feathers and she knew the butterfly would not leave her in the night but wait until morning to try to escape. Lately, when the girl wore dresses she had never seen, the old lady was troubled for a moment and thought of the butterfly but it would be still and she would think, "Yes, today was like that, the way the clouds hung low and the light was funny, sort of giving you a little headache." Then she would fall back and wait on her pillow for the other footsteps, heavier and more certain as if they stepped in the same footprints again and again, and it would be Kyla bringing up her dinner.

The first time the girl had tried on her red dress, the old lady had been asleep. It was when she first went to meet Eddie Dodge and the old lady's door was still kept unlocked.
Kyla had told her daughter not to bother Mrs. Smith, that she was sick and needed quiet and to be undisturbed, but the girl would often knock at the door and then close it quickly behind her so Kyla would not know. The girl would ask how she felt and hope she was getting better and then slowly, looking about the room, especially at the red velvet dress that always lay across the end of the bed, she would ask where the old lady came from. Kyla had told her not to talk to the girl and the old lady was careful, spinning lies about herself, thinking Kyla might be at the door listening. They were boring lies and after awhile with the girl not listening but looking about the room, the old lady would begin to talk about her own life, speaking of herself as someone she had once known or heard about or tried to help, sometimes dividing herself up into two or three people. She talked about the lady who had lived in San Francisco and given her the red dress or the woman who had a tall lover who came once a day with flowers and candy and kept her in luxury in a beautiful house. As she got excited, she would speak of the lady with a butterfly and how men from miles away would hear it mentioned and run to see for themselves and even when the woman was old young men still came, hearing about it from their fathers. "Of course I don't know if it's true," the old lady would say as she finished, and the girl would smile and stare again at the red velvet dress and then, slowly, begin to talk about herself, how she met this boy and he seemed nice.
One day the girl had knocked and gone in but the old lady had been asleep, her breasts rising and falling beneath the sheet, the red dress sparkling and shining, changing shape as the woman turned in her sleep, moving the springs. The girl stared at the dress and then at the woman and then at the dress. She wanted to put it on but she was afraid the old woman would catch her. Quietly, she slipped off her blouse. If the old woman awoke she would say, "Something's scratching, can you see where?" Then she unzipped her pants and took them off and if the old lady should wake she would say, "There's a tear here, do you think I can mend it or should I cut off the legs and wear them as shorts?" Carefully, she picked up the dress from the bed, watching the old lady, and then she slipped the dress over her head. Through the velvet she whispered, "When I came in you were asleep and I didn't want to wake you but I've been looking at a dress like this in a catalogue and I wanted to try it on to see how it felt before I send off for it." Then the dress was on all the way and she did not think about the old lady. She looked at herself in the mirror, at first standing straight and then at angles as if she weren't watching herself, and then straight again, facing the mirror, her hips swayed and one arm bent out, her hand resting on her waist. She went to the window and looked at the vineyard, seeing only her hand where the cuff started, and then a bit of her wrist by accident. Slowly working up the arms, she looked at all of herself, at her shoulders, her breasts, her stomach that was tight and
glittering, at her rear to see that the dress was still behind her when she faced ahead and could not see it. After looking at herself in the dress, pretending to run, walk, embrace a lover, fend off an attack, lift her hem to refasten a stocking, she was still excited but she had done everything and she was tired of being alone with the dress. She thought of going back to the window but the house was a long way from the road and passing cars and anyway she was shy and did not want strangers to see her. Suddenly she remembered the old lady and quickly turned, ready to explain, but she was still asleep. She walked over to the old lady and bent down, watching her lips, letting sun reflect from the stones of the dress onto the old lady’s face, but still the old lady didn’t wake up. She thought of touching her, of falling into her by accident or maybe knocking something off the nightstand, but the woman might think she was disturbing her things and forget about the dress. The girl stood back from the bed and then approached it quickly with one hand raised as if she held a knife or was going to slap the old lady, hacking at the air above the old lady, but still she didn’t wake up. Finally, the girl walked to the middle of the room and throwing her arms out, tossing back her head to get the hair from her face, she began to dance, at first softly with her hands and hips suggesting movement more than moving but then faster, harder, her feet rocking against the floor, her arms lying limp at her sides as she moved herself in a frenzy, her own eyes dazzled by the sparkling gown. She
made little moans and said, "Yes, yes," as she danced, at first speaking to wake the woman but then just for herself as she closed her eyes and felt that a man was touching her. The old lady began to snore in the hot air of the room and the girl became hot and tired in the heavy dress and after a while she stopped her dancing and took the dress off, laying it carefully across the end of the bed. She put on her clothes and let herself out, turning to watch the old lady still sleeping as she closed the door, giving it a little bang.

The girl began coming more often to Mrs. Smith's room and, as if the old lady had not really been asleep but had seen her dancing in the dress or maybe just noticed the way the girl stared at it as they talked, now and then touching the folds, they got along easier. The old lady no longer talked about the women her friends had known but about one friend of her own she had known very well who had a butterfly tattooed to her, "Well, well you know," the old lady would say, raising her hand to pat the sheet. She talked more and more about the butterfly, how she had even seen it once when she came to visit and the woman had been dressing. It had purplish-blue wings, long and delicate, that reached from her knees, scalloped outward, cut in, reappeared even wider, expanding, rising past her stomach where the black antennae angled out and began to curve backward making tight perfect curls about each breast. And all of it, though each part was beautiful in itself, each part something to look at, pointed
inward and downward to the body of the butterfly. Her arms and hands drawing arcs in the air, the old lady told how every man was in love with this woman and how after they had ridden on the wings of a butterfly their eyes changed and you could recognize them on the street.

"I'd like to have one," the girl said, twirling one finger in the red dress. "Not so much for myself but to give to the men, to one man I suppose." She began to talk about Eddie Dodge, not by name at first, and how she met him in the vineyard after dinner.

As she sat on the bed, speaking almost in whispers, the way everything was different when she was with him, even the wilted leaves seemed sharp and greener, the old lady looked at the girl, at her long brown hair, at her smooth face and strong arms and remembered this girl was her granddaughter, how it was almost herself. She noticed that the girl seldom looked up or only now and then to express something important, as if she had just read it in the rhinestones of the dress.

One day the old lady said, "Isn't that a beautiful dress? It was given to me by a close friend but I seldom wear it since I've been ill. Would you like to try it on?"

"Oh may I," said the girl as she jumped up and began to lift off her blouse, the idea of wearing the dress more exciting than it was the first time because the old lady had been asleep and not seen her.

"Here, let me help you with the zipper," the old lady said. The girl leaned down toward the old lady's face,
smelling her sweet hair and her powdered cheek, and the old lady zipped up the back and then patted her shoulder.

"You look lovely," she said as the young girl stood before the mirror. "Turn around so I can get a good look at you."

Shyly, the girl turned and stood before the old lady, anxiously watching the old lady's face.

"You look just like my dearest friend when she was young, just like her," the old lady said. She could almost feel the tight sleeves about her own arms and the tapered front against her own breasts.

As the old lady looked at her and smiled, the girl became a little embarrassed. "Could I play some music?" she asked.

"That would be lovely," the old lady said. "How about 'Mona Lisa.'"

The girl sat down on the bed again, listening, both of them looking at the dress and at each other and then at the dress again. The music was sweet and a little sad and the girl felt strange sitting on the bed with the old lady, both of them just listening and looking. "What should I do, I should do something," thought the girl, and as she looked up quickly she thought she saw the old lady nod in approval. The girl got up, gracefully and deftly as if in the dress she were a different person and then standing still, as if acknowledging a bow, she began to dance with the air in her arms, not loud and frantic but smoothly, surely, moving in
an easy waltz. As the old lady watched, her face rocking like a cradle, the girl imagined Eddie Dodge in her arms, both of them on their feet and nicely dressed. When she finished, smiling widely, turning many quick circles until she was a blur of red, slowly coming into focus as she slowed like a twirled flower, she went back to the bed and the old lady hugged her and patted her back. "That was wonderful," the old lady said. "You must be in love. And the dress was beautiful when you were dancing. You should wear the red shoes." The old lady smiled and the girl watched her but the old lady kept smiling and the girl felt unafraid though a little shy. "Could I dance again, Mrs. Smith?" she asked and the old lady said, "Oh fine, that would be lovely. It makes me so happy." She would always dance twice, sitting and talking with the old lady after the first dance. In the second dance, Kyla would call or it would be dinner and the girl would go a little longer and stop. Then she would walk to the bed and bend down for the old lady to unzip her. She would fold the dress and put it at the end of the bed until the next time they talked and she might be asked to put it on.

The old lady had heard the near door lock, the screen window flap closed, and she had seen the girl running into the field in an orange dress much like the day that had been warm and overcast, much like sleep, when Kyla started up the stairs with her dinner. Kyla was bringing her mother two eggs on toast. As she climbed the stairs, she stared at the eggs, at the one perfect and yet hard from sitting in the
oven, the other with a broken yolk. She thought how they had looked fresh, even the broken one, before she had put them in the oven to stay warm because she did not want to miss anything. Now the eggs looked strangely old as if years had elapsed between the time she cooked them and when she took them from the oven. They looked somehow threatening, like eyes, like the eyes of a dead animal that still seemed to stare at you even when the eyes became dull and clouded over, and the pepper was like specks of dirt. For a moment, Kyla shuddered and thought she was bringing the last meal to her mother, that somehow, without knowing, she had cooked the eggs a certain way. "But I've been wrong every time," she thought, "it's just two poached eggs." Kyla tried to avoid looking at the eggs as she climbed the stairs, turning her head from side to side, squinting to make the plate a vague fuzz but she heard her own breathing and her shoes on the stairs and she knew she was being watched. Kyla stopped and bending her neck, she looked down at the eggs. Wary, closely examining her mother's dinner, her arms began to tremble and without wanting to, without knowing, her face lowered as the plate lifted. Staring into the eggs that stared back at her, her eyes moving toward the eyes on the plate that were getting closer, the eggs growing larger, Kyla let out a muffled cry and with all her strength she threw back her head just as her face was about to press into the plate. Breathing heavily, relieved, as if she had just evaded death, Kyla started to throw the plate over the bannister. Then she
stopped and looking down at the eggs, she began to smile. All the things she had seen or thought in her life were basically true. She had only made slight miscalculations, she had always been right and all of her disappointment had been somehow planned, carefully ordered to increase the pleasure of her ultimate understanding. Like a girl who has suffered all the pains and agonies of waiting before marriage, Kyla was finally going to be rewarded. Now she was bringing her mother her death, the eggs were obvious, and with a sudden illumination, as if at each moment Kyla's vision broadened and she saw more of the whole, Kyla knew her mother would read the eggs too, that she might think her an accomplice. After years of sadness, Kyla realized that destiny and her fondest hopes were walking in stride like a pair of matched horses, that the way the world was and the way she wanted it to be were one and the same. As she climbed the stairs with her mother's dinner, she stopped once more. With a sudden new joy, sharp with a glint of danger, Kyla remembered the derringer.

Kyla knocked on the door, waiting for the string to pull the lock free. When the door swung open, Kyla almost staggered with the closeness and the heat. Then she stepped in, holding the plate in front of her, closing the door with her back.

"Thank you, Kyla," the old lady said.

"You're welcome," said Kyla. "How do you feel?" The plate trembled in her hands as she looked at her mother.
Against the stained pillow her face was puffy and white, streaked with red powder. Like an extra blanket, the red velvet dress lay folded at the end of the bed.

"Oh, ok," said the old lady, "but the weather's been funny, sort of makes you tired."

"And sleepy, it makes me want to go to sleep," Kyla said. "Sometimes it makes me dizzy, like my heart's going to fly away."

As Kyla moved toward the bed, a spark flashed through the old lady's spine but then she remembered she was frightened by certain words, their definitions different, more significant to her than to other people. "Oh," she said, almost bored and yet avoiding them, "you should take it easy, Kyla. Your heart's a delicate thing." She raised herself in the bed to see what Kyla brought for dinner but Kyla held the plate high, as if it were a cake.

Kyla frowned deeply, trying not to smile. "It doesn't kind of flutter, like it's got little wings? I mean your heart. Mine does when the weather's like this."

These words are different for me, the old lady thought, without mentioning them, listening to them echo in her ear. Though Kyla was a few feet away, she began to reach for the plate but Kyla held it too high, almost keeping it from her.

"Sometimes," Kyla said, "sometimes it's like my heart is an egg, like it has a little egg shell and there's this beak pecking to get out." She paused to lift a curled finger, moving it back and forth as if tapping on the air. "Sometimes,"
said Kyla, "like now with this weather, it's like it got out, I can feel this wing. It keeps hitting and hitting against my chest. It hits so hard I think it's going to raise me off the ground. Like this," said Kyla, "like a wing and a hammer." Her hand clenched in a fist, Kyla waved her arm up and down at her side.

The old lady's legs clamped shut and her hands started for the sheet but as she looked at Kyla's eyes, her nose, her thin mouth, the chin that rose and fell with her arm, she saw it was only her daughter and not some stranger in disguise, someone who knew and spoke her private language.

"You should get it checked," the old lady said. "Are you eating well?" She looked up at the plate which was high as Kyla's head.

Now, thought Kyla, almost screaming to herself, now. No longer able to contain her excitement, almost throwing, almost dropping the plate, she lowered it suddenly for her mother to see.

"Oh, eggs," said the old lady.

Kyla rocked the plate back and forth so the eggs made yellow streaks, then held it still so they were like spots. "Here's your dinner, Mother." Kyla handed the plate to her mother and then quickly stepped back, waiting for her to scream.

"Thank you, Kyla," the old lady said. She balanced the plate on her lap and picked up the knife and fork, bending her head down. "These eggs sure look good."
Kyla was a little disappointed that her mother did not throw the plate against the wall or earlier had not pulled out her gun. At first she thought it might be some trick but the woman ate and smiled, enjoying her meal, and Kyla began to doubt the death she had read in the eggs. She felt a sudden urge to rush toward her mother and grab her by the throat, not so much to kill her but to force her to decipher the words that were before her, to acknowledge the thing that Kyla already knew. In her exasperation, while her mother continued to eat, Kyla looked quickly about the room for some corroboration of the thing she had seen and understood. The red dress was folded on the bed, the trunk in its place, the air was heavy and thick with perfume. The window was shut as it always was and Kyla, desperate for support, looked out the window past the branches of the elm, to the night black and deep with stars that neither spoke their names nor formed letters in the sky but slowly blinked at random. In the depth of her despair, her surest certainty an illusion, Kyla wanted to sob. In the closeness of the room she shivered, her face turned chill, her forehead cold and moist, and as she turned back toward the window to hide her grief, the elm branch swayed back and forth in a breeze that couldn't enter the room. Kyla wanted to shout but she only smiled, like an initiate, as if she were in league with the wind and the stars and all other things that knew but did not care.

The little breeze that Kyla had felt in her mother's sealed room, before she saw the elm tree, eased across the
vineyard, down the vine rows, rattling the leaves, and the leaves moved against one another in a low surging hum. Though the wind came from the west as it always did, the elm tree caught the higher wind the vines could not reach and creaked and moved, swaying in the wind. If you stood in the vineyard amid the wild murmur of the leaves and then looked up the long rows toward the house and saw the elm swaying, its black branches like the sleeves of a conductor, you might think it was the tree who had heard and then told, passing it along the vines.

It's like winter, thought Eddie Dodge, it's too cold for August. His shirt was wet beneath his arms and down his back and the package in his pocket felt heavy and cold as a stone. As he drove through the vineyard down the alley way toward the house, the weight of the package seemed to grow, to bend him forward in the seat. With the sound of the wind and the long canes of vines rising and falling, the broad grape leaves turning over like hands, Eddie began to worry, to wonder what present he was bringing. It was dark in the car, he could only touch the package. It seemed larger, the same shape but larger or maybe just heavier. While he bent forward to reach for his wallet, to search his pockets for change, had the clerk replaced his gift with a rock or a piece of old steel, maybe inserting a padlock as he paid and she wished him good luck? Pressing the wheel with one knee, he opened the door. With the dome light he could see the paper the woman had wrapped the box in as she smiled and told
him about meeting her husband. It was blue with white ribbon and Eddie Dodge thought of Christmas as he closed the door and the car went dark.

As he got closer, through the branches of the tree, Eddie saw the girl standing at her window. He started to honk but he wanted to see her see him on her own, the moment when she saw his car, the movements she would make as she lifted the window, maybe throwing back her hair before she turned backwards and put her legs out the window to climb down the trellis. From the grass, she would run up the alley way, her dress blowing back, straining against her shoulders and breasts, her moving hips, as if at any movement it might tear away. Though she ran she would be careful of her shoes, trying to skim the ground and not let them sink into the dust. Eddie let his hand touch the cold, clean side of the car. Now he could smell the summer in the dust and the cool wind rattling the large leaves of the vines, in the dew that did not wet the dust but made it cool like water. Above the lighted window, behind the roof and the branches of the tree, the sky glowed orange. Eddie switched off the engine and let the car roll to a stop.

Eddie whispered, "I love you, I love you baby," as if the girl would hear or feel his presence. When nothing happened he smiled and knew it was just for fun. After a few minutes, he lifted his hand and then waved but the girl didn't move. He whistled once and then again but the girl didn't hear, she stood still in the window. Eddie was about
to honk when he realized that the lit window was not the girl's room but the one next to hers, that the girl in the window wasn't the girl but a woman, maybe her mother. Her face was a dark disk that didn't move but stared forward, looking out at the vineyard. "What's she looking at?" Eddie thought, "Does she know I'm here?" Eddie jerked his head and looked behind him and then quickly looked back at the house. By now they should have been down by the river, the rough blanket stretched over the grass, the girl's dress blowing like a flag from a branch. But he was late, he had been late before but tonight he was late and for a moment he filled with hatred at the thought of the special present he had bought in Reedley that had made him late. What was the woman looking at, her face pressing against the window? Where was the girl, had she grown tired and frightened from the waiting and confessed everything they had done? In her fear, had she made up things that hadn't happened yet? Where was her father? Was he sneaking through the vineyard with a gun, the cold barrel like the nose of a dog, cold and a little wet with the night, ready to press against the back of his head? As always he had driven with no lights but he thought about the dome light. If she had told, they were watching, and that was enough to give him away. Eddie Dodge sat in the darkened car staring at the window and the black circle of the woman's face, at the orange sky above the house, listening to the leaves that rattled in the wind.

"Hey Handsome."
Eddie Dodge jerked, grabbing for the hands that covered his eyes.

"Where you been, Handsome?"

Eddie felt something cold against his neck and he went rigid, waiting for the blast. But then, suddenly, the cool circle pulled back.

"How'd you get so handsome?" said the voice, almost playful, muffled, close to his head. "They ought to put you in jail you're so handsome."

Eddie smiled and when he felt the pressing against his neck he began to turn very slowly in his seat, turning his head so the wetness, almost warm now, moved across his neck, through his sideburns to his cheek to his lips and the hands had let go. He kissed the girl long and very deep, her whole body moving toward his lips until her feet left the ground and she tried to move through the window of the car.

"I love you baby," Eddie said. "Did your shoes get dirty?"

"Oh I love you, Eddie," said the girl, hugging his neck. "You were so late and then I saw the light."

"I have a surprise," said Eddie Dodge and with his arms he let her down and then watched her run around the front of the car. Now the woman was gone from the window and behind the house, as if something were on fire, the sky burned brighter, almost red.

"What is it?" asked the girl, moving very close, turning sideways on the seat.
"It's in my pocket," said Eddie. "You can have it if you want."

"Do I?" said the girl. As she reached toward his shirt, one hand slipping between buttons to rub across his chest, the other moving in his pocket for the gift, Eddie was unsure which she wanted more. He could smell and feel her hair against his face, her bent head moved with her hands. Now he could hear the crackle of paper. Forgetting the house, the leaves, the gun that was a mouth, remembering her white legs inside the dress, Eddie reached around her to start the car. When he found the key, he looked up and then pulled back as if shocked by the car. Gigantic and orange, huge above the house, the round moon stared like the face of revenge. Smaller and yet bigger, toward morning it would be red and pasted to the back of her dress as the girl worked her way through the vineyard back toward her bed, now and then stopping to admire the clear stone.

"Oh it's beautiful, Eddie," said the girl. "Oh I love you, Eddie."

Eddie noticed his right hand was dyed orange and his arm and he wondered if his face showed orange too as the girl kissed him and he backed the car down the dirt road away from the moon.

Below the old lady, Kyla sat by a window with her sewing in her lap. "You and I, you and I," she whispered as she stared at the moon. "You and I."

"Goddamn you," moaned Delmus, "goddamn you to hell." He
looked at the moon too, not up and to the east but down into a pool of glass and spilled bourbon. Tired of the knife, he had gone out to the barn, just to check on the folding chairs he had set out for tomorrow. In the darkened barn, quiet and like a church with the chairs set around, he had grown excited and gone toward the bottle beneath the hay. He often drank out in the barn at night but tomorrow was the party, it was kind of like a party, a men's party whatever they called it, and he had planned to save everything for tomorrow. But there in the barn with the chairs silent and empty and yet more crowded than if men had sat there, noisier, wild with the waiting, as if everything that would happen lay already in the wooden grain of the chairs, he became excited and began to drink. He sat on the hay, not wanting to sit on a chair as if he might take something that was saved for the party. He thought about taking out the book Mrs. Watkins had given the girl but he decided not to. Though he had looked through it a thousand times, he would bring it out tomorrow for everyone to see and with all those eyes and bent heads and the murmuring, slowly turning the pages, he would see it for the first time too. Beside him on the hay, the knife was still and dark, dull-looking against the straw. On the way from the house to the barn the knife had shimmered with the stars and he had thought of the white dress by the peach tree, how it looked before he knew it was a girl or his daughter. He wanted to pick it up and wave it through the air, let the blade sparkle with the lights from the house,
but he held his hand away. He thought of the hog he would
kill in the morning, how someone would shoot it between the
eyes and with the knife he would cut its throat and let the
blood pour into a bucket. When the hog saw the men, it would
run to the gate thinking of food and let them touch the rifle
to its head. They would put a hook in its mouth and raise
it on a tripod and he would slit the belly and the innards
would fall out, two men holding the legs so the hog wouldn't
twirl. Then they would lower it and take the brains and the
tongue, scrape the meat from the head until only the eyes
were left in the skull. Maybe tomorrow they could get some
women, maybe the old lady knew some girls they could call.
Sitting in the empty barn and thinking of the party was al-
most better than the party in the way that the thought of
something, looking forward to it, is better than the thing
itself when it finally comes. This made him sad, and not
wanting to ruin the next day and the party that was already
waiting in the barn, he stood up and taking the bottle he
crossed the barnyard toward the house where he would sit
beneath the elm tree. He had passed the window where Kyla
sat sewing, doing needlepoint. The way she smiled he thought
she might be sewing her mother's epitaph and with a groan he
hurried on, a little frightened and yearning to lay his back
against the trunk of the tree and think of its roots beneath
the ground, beneath the house and its pipes as he drank and
looked up at the stars through the branches.

Almost running, he could see the place between the roots
where he would sit when he tripped and the bottle left his hand and floated out in front of him, the bourbon red and unbothered, the label clearer than when it sat on the shelf in the store. He thought about reaching for it, to take it back but then it was falling. "It's just dirt," he thought, "soft dirt, it won't break," and in his mind he tried to make the dirt softer but the dirt was hard and the bottle popped as it hit, breaking in the middle. He stood there, looking at the pool that wouldn't sink in, that just sat there as the moon came up and he saw it in the whiskey. He got down to see if there was a cupped piece of glass, maybe a corner, that might hold a little, but there wasn't. "Goddamn, goddamn you to hell," Delmus said, not knowing to whom, maybe the moon, but then the bourbon soaked in and the moon was gone and still he said, "Goddamn you to hell," and he was talking to his mother and his car and to Kyla and the vineyard and the house and the sharpened knife out in the barn and to the elm tree he was going to sit under, to everything that ever was that wasn't what it had promised.

His chest heaving, his cheek against the fine grains of the dirt, Delmus heard something creak, something trapped in a case or runner, and then a sharp, clean slam, something falling with the surety of weight. Delmus thought of those cleavers the French had, cleavers in a big door frame that they lift and then let fall like a window, the thing that kills you not really somebody but just gravity or the weight of the heavy metal blade, not even its sharpened edge somebody's
doing but just some sharp thing that happens to fall. Mildly curious, Delmus looked up. Before him was the bourbon bottle back again, right in front of his face, and he thought, "It's still falling," and he grabbed it quickly and held it to himself. When he had held it long enough to make sure it was real, feeling its body against his chest, he held it out in front of himself and saw that it was a different and better brand and that there was a cord tied to its neck. He looked up at the cord that went up the side of the house, to the old lady's window where she smiled and held her nightgown closed, lifting a bottle to toast him.

Happy and drunk, Delmus woke up at first light. He put on his pants and his shirt and then hurried through the kitchen down the steps where he leaned against the side of the house to put on his hip boots. He could hear the first honk far down the road and quickly, his world very clear and interesting, he ran across the barn yard to greet his guests. There were pickups and cars, even a tractor, and as they headed up the driveway, Delmus stood against the side of the barn, not waving or returning the shouts of his friends but standing very still as if counting to himself. Then, with quick sure steps, Delmus marched to the center of the barn yard and like a parking attendant and then like a toreador and then like a dancer, taking long smooth sidesteps, his eyes almost closed, his arms wide, embracing his partner, he directed the cars into tightly parked lines.

"Man, that was wonderful, Delmus, that was really good,"
said Will Otis as he got out of his car. "I got to have a drink on that."

"Me too," said Earl, "That was great."

"Try this," said Bud Walters, "I've got more in the car."

And so, before the tripod was up, before the barrel was full of boiling water, before the hog was called to stand by the gate and nuzzle its forehead against the barrel of the gun, the men stood in a wide circle passing a bottle. They shook their heads, laughing, urging Delmus to do it again.

"Oh no, no," said Delmus, shaking his head, looking down at the dirt. "We got work to do." But then he would look up, catching someone's eye, and his head would begin to sway very slowly, as if it were pulled by a cord or very beautiful music only he could hear, as if at any moment he might act like an opera star or chase a long fly ball.

"I got a rifle to shoot the hog," said Bill Woody. "Is it ok if I shoot the hog, Delmus?"

Delmus straightened up, hitching his pants, and said, "Sho' Billie, if yu thank yu cud hit him."

Somebody slapped Delmus on the back, everyone was laughing, even Bill Woody who pretended he had a limp as he walked toward his car.

"Let me see that thing," said Lang. "I got to test it first." Lang put it to his shoulder and shot a tin can off a fence post. "Seems good enough to me but I think Earl better try."
"Yeah, give it here, these things are tricky," said Earl. Very carefully, taking his time, he shot the barn.

Then someone else took the gun and like two racers who were kind and friendly, the bottle and the rifle went around the circle. Maybe the bottle went a little faster as some of the men took a long time to aim and the bottle skipped by them. After everyone had fired and everything was shot, the barn, the cloud, the walnut tree, everything except the hog and the house, someone asked, "Where's your wife, Delmus? She inside?"

"Yeah," said Delmus. "I guess she is." Everyone felt a little embarrassed, everyone except Delmus who wanted things to continue, not the shooting, that was all through now, it was done, but whatever they did could be the same, each new thing just as wild and funny like they were kids and they could be anybody they wanted.

"I guess we better get the hog," said Earl, who had shot the barn.

"Yeah," said Bill Woody, holding his gun, and then, "Delmus, could I have the antlers?"

Delmus felt a spike of joy run through his spine and laughing, yelling with everyone else, he listened to the laughter and the yelling and thought it was almost as good as before. With a little sadness and an earnest hope, he slapped Bill Woody on the back and gave the back of his neck a squeeze as they went toward the corral to see the hog. Once, when they were almost there, without warning, Delmus
raised his right arm and made a few goosesteps.

"That's a good-looking hog," said Lang.

"Yeah," said Will Otis, "that's a good-looking hog."

"That's a goat," said Lang. "Over here's the hog."

"That's a horse," said Will, "you can't ride a goat."

"It's a goldfish," yelled Earl.

"No, it's a turtle," said Will. "Look at her tits."

"It's a trout," said Lang, hitting Will on the back.

"Give me that bottle." He took a drink and then smiled, trying not to laugh. "Delmus," he said, "that's a good-looking hog."

"Thank you," said Delmus. "It came from overseas."

"It's made in Japan," said Bill Woody.

"Does it drink?" asked Earl, lifting the bottle to his mouth.

"No," said Delmus. "It only eats fish."

Earl coughed, spitting whiskey, closing his eyes as he handed the bottle to Delmus.

"How you want to do this," asked Lang, laughing, pointing at the hog.

"Oh, let's let Billy shoot it," said Delmus. "You shoot the hog."

"The goat too?" asked Bill Woody.

"Next week," said Delmus. He smiled. "Let me get my knife."

"Here comes Bud," Will yelled.

When the men came, which was about once a year, Kyla
always felt an urge to go into town but her daughter would not go and anyway she did not want to leave the house empty with all the men there. Today, the shouting and even the gun didn't bother her, she didn't try to shield her ears from what the men said. The commotion seemed somehow fitting and she thought of it all as a part of what she would remember of the day when her mother died. When she went to bed the night before, as she lay waiting for sleep, she had begun to doubt the meaning of the eggs on their toast, the eyes that would drift apart on the wide seas of death. Often when she lay down on her bed, the events of the days, all the secret meanings, the hidden signs, seemed somehow false or unimportant as if no matter what happened or what might come she was lying on her bed and she would lie there the next night and the night after that and each day would be like something stoppered in a bottle as she fluffed the pillow and turned back the sheet. In the night, depressed by her doubts and then by the sadness of all things whether true or false, looking back with sadness and ridicule on her spurt of confidence, she had gone to sleep and dreamed of the eggs, the yokes burned black and the whites gone blood red. They were the eyes of a horse turned crazy, running across the fields breaking through fences, crashing through the windows of houses, its hoofs and teeth flashing white and the eyes black on red as it tried to escape the great barn that it pulled on a rope and the gaping mouth of darkness opening and closing, a black wind fanning as the
unlatched door swung open and shut. Kyla sat in her chair, rocking and listening, her smile wide as if every sight and sound wore a little black veil and beneath the veil was her mother's death.

The girl sat on her bed in her room singing a lullaby her father had sung to her and that someday soon she would sing to her own children. As she sang, she moved the ring back and forth on her finger or moved her hand in different positions to look at the ring. As the time came near when she would go to the window and throw down her bag and then climb down the rose trellis for the last time, she took off the ring and held it before her eye and through the circle of gold she looked at everything in the room. She loved her room and her chair and dresser and the cracks in the wall and the water stains on the ceiling and the scratch on the metal bedstead and her own knee and one by one, aiming through the ring, she looked at everything piece by piece, to isolate it, to keep it always. Then she put the ring close against her eye and she could see everything at once. After she had it all within the ring she put it back on her finger. She wanted to speak to her father before she went but this was his day too, it was both of their days, that seemed fitting, and later she would send him a letter. She got up from the bed and gripping her suitcase she placed it by the window. She looked at herself in the mirror and the room behind her that seemed old and foreign now, just a room as she had already taken it away with her ring. Then
she picked up a little jar covered with paper and went to say goodbye to the old lady.

With the loud laughing, all the cars, the barn yard filled with so many men, drinking and telling wild stories that carried to the house, the old lady became excited and brought a bottle from beneath her bed. She looked at her red dress, sparkling in the bright light, and she felt anxious for the young girl to come and put it on. For the first time in months the old lady had an urge to put on the dress herself and maybe, with the young girl helping her, she could dance a little. Drinking from the bottle, lying in the light, listening to the jokes and the laughter that reached her almost before she could laugh too, the old lady felt the butterfly stirring beneath her nightgown. Always, since she became sick, the butterfly's movements had frightened her but today she felt it did not move to fly away but instead, like her, was remembering tall men and better times, yearning for a man to bear on its back. When the young girl knocked at the door and the old lady pulled the string, she felt suddenly that today she would tell her true story and Kyla's story and the young girl's and at the end, she would lift her gown to show her the butterfly.

"How are you?" asked the young girl, smiling, in a white cotton dress. "I have a surprise. I have two surprises." The old lady thought it strange that the girl had put on her dress so early but she was very happy and since the dresses were like the days and white was a good color
and today the girl had put it on early, the old lady knew everything would be all right. She began to sit up to help the girl into the red dress but the girl said, "Look, look what I have," and she put her hand in the old lady's lap, showing her the ring. "Eddie and I are going to be married today."

"Oh, it's beautiful," the old lady said, happy for the girl and yet disappointed too, thinking she would not come anymore and even today would not be the same. But she opened her arms and the girl bent down to hug her and the old lady thought it would be a wonderful day with its own strange and mysterious motivations, better than she could have expected. With the girl in her arms, saying, "Oh, I know you'll be happy," the old lady was about to tell her that she was her grandmother and after that to give her the red dress. The girl would put it on and dance and as she ran through the field toward her lover the old lady would see her and it would be almost as good as if it were herself. Maybe the old lady would put it on first and then the girl, both of them dancing arm in arm. "Oh, and then," thought the old lady, "and then I'll show her the butterfly."

"Darling, get the dress," said the old lady and as she spoke, she reached to unzip the young girl's dress.

"No," said the girl, backing away, giving the old lady a momentary fright. "First I have to give you your surprise." She walked back toward the door and got the round package wrapped in pink paper. "Here, Mrs. Smith, here's my present
"But I'm supposed to be giving you a present," the old lady said. She was very happy, and thinking of this present from her own granddaughter, she thought of all the presents she had been given in her life, smiling as if this was the best, as if all of them were wrapped together in the pink paper.

"What can it be," the old lady said, "I have no idea." She was excited to see as she unwrapped the gift and not at all sad because after she saw the gift there would be others, one right after the other. It felt like a vase. It was solid except for one end that seemed to be open, covered only with paper, and there were little holes as if there was perfumed soap inside and the girl had made little pin pricks to let out some of the sweetness.

"I hope you like it, I got it myself," said the girl, anxiously waiting. "You're cooped up in here and never get out."

As the old lady smiled and the last bits of paper fell across the bed, the old lady let out a scream, and trying to place her hand over the jar, it dropped onto her lap and then rolled and fell to the floor.

"Catch it, catch it," screamed the old lady, lunging upward from her bed. "Catch it, you fool, hurry!"

The young girl leaped backward in horror at the old lady's face turned wild, animal-like. Then, as the old lady grappled with her arms, trying to swing her legs over the
bed, she felt a great pity and with a sudden jump, she lurched for the butterfly that had landed on the window sill.

She was too slow, the butterfly rose up in the air, climbing toward the ceiling, making scooped dives above the old lady's head and reaching arms.

"Catch it, don't hurt it but catch it," the old lady moaned and the girl chased it around the room, overturning the night table, sweeping the perfumes and the hand mirror from the top of the dresser, falling across the old lady in a futile dive.

"The door, close the door!" the old lady screamed.

As if the butterfly had heard, it turned sharply in the middle of a wide slow glide. Its wings swept back, almost tearing off, it shot through the old lady's arms as if she were making a hoop for it to fly through, then down, through the legs of the girl and out the open door.

"Chase it," the old lady said, "Hurry, before it gets away," even she on her feet now, ready to follow. The girl was out the door, running down the hall, but as the old lady glanced toward the window, to the blue sky as if to check on an enemy, she saw the butterfly through the branches of the elm tree. It made a wide flat circle, its wings enormous and flat, great sheets of purple and blue, spots of red and yellow. As it turned back toward the house in its long slow sweep, maybe three minutes wide, the old lady imagined she could see its eyes, tiny and hard and yet perfectly round,
like pearls, like the heads of long hat pins. She tried to lift the window but it was stuck, it wouldn't move, and then standing back she broke the glass with her hand. Stretching out her arms, forgetting the jagged shards, she reached for the butterfly that was big as a hawk. It was so big she did not know if she could pull it down or if it would lift her, taking her away. She could see its face, the tight skin, the black spears of velvet. Almost jumping out the window, the old lady lunged to grab the wings that were thick, that would feel like wood between the raised vein-bones. Her hands brushed against its back legs, one bloody hand against the deep blackness of a leg that was curved and sculpted, fragile-looking but hard like a pipe. She saw her hands white, raised in the sunlight. Then her head fell down and half in, half out of the window, the glass cutting her stomach through the thin nightgown, the weight of her pressing down against the glass, she could feel a wind across her face, in her hair, rising and falling, up and then down, then at an angle, as if she were in a wave. She could hear the loud creaking of the wings, the singing gears beneath the arms, in the wingpits, the straining of the struts. She could feel tons of air expanding and contracting under the wings but she couldn't look up, she could only see the huge shadow running across the ground, the circles getting wider, the shadow getting smaller and less sharp as her hair began to settle and grew still. Her head down, dangling heavy from her neck, her eyes cocked almost back into her head, she could see a
barn far off across the fields and above it a little sliver of blue sky. But as if the butterfly knew she was hurt, that for her the sky had become small and very narrow, Dolly Mable saw a glint of light far in the distance at the top of her eyes and then something small and dark, almost black, coming down, entering the open hayloft of the barn and then much tinier, blacker, only a speck rising against the mountains beyond the barn's tin roof.

With her chest hanging downward and her stomach tight against the window, the old lady could hardly catch her breath. Her stomach felt warm and wet, sort of sticky, and she could see drops of blood splashed in front of her against the side of the house. "Like the butterfly," she thought, "like the spots on his wings." Pressing with her palms against the peeling planks of the house, her fingers digging into the grooves between them, she moved her hands like feet on a ladder until she could see the sill and the window turned red and the middle of her meshed with the glass. With one hand and then the other, quickly fighting the weight of her head and chest, she grabbed the lip of the sill and counting to three, with a loud grunt, she thrust herself up, the glass slipping easily and cleanly from her body. Almost falling, not looking at herself, she staggered to the bed and then turned backward, looking at the glass. She stood there for a moment, very calm, her shoulders not heaving, her eyes almost sleepy. Then she fell backward on the bed, her legs dangling over the edge of the bed, her bare
feet a few inches above the floor. With her bloody hand, disinterested and sad, as if lifting a sheet from a dead person's face, the cloth sticking and peeling from her stomach like skin, the old lady lifted up the gown. Grimacing, raising her hand just enough to see past the bunched gown at her breasts, she looked lengthwise down her body, to the strange white place where the butterfly had been.

As the girl came down the steps, breathing hard and about to scream, Kyla heard the troubled feet on the stairs. Jumping up from her chair, whispering, "She's dead, she's dead," she ran with a smile straight toward her daughter. Her face was as wild and contorted as the old lady's had been and thinking now Kyla had gone crazy too, rushing toward her as if to tackle her, the girl gripped both bannisters and turned herself in the air, running back up the stairway. Kyla was just a few steps behind her, almost trying to pass her to see the dead woman first. "She must have stumbled in there and died," Kyla thought as the girl passed the old lady's room and rushed for her own. "She must have got up and gone in there to die." Running and yet not there yet, she could already see the room and the old lady slumped across the girl's bed or a chair, her arms and the ends of her fingers hanging limp as if she were trying to cast a spell on the rug.

After awhile, death not coming yet, the old lady had got her feet up and straightened herself on the bed. Propped on her pillow, she held the derringer in front of her but
she could not get a good shot as the two blurs, one white, one yellow, rushed past her door. She held the gun ready with her finger on the trigger, the hammer cocked. They would probably try to sneak up on her, little by little, to take her body.

Kyla stopped herself at her daughter's slammed door, trying to control her excitement so she could completely savor what she would see. With her hands, she pushed back her hair and then straightened her dress. Her heart still jumping in her chest, only faster now, her eyes wide to see the first moment it was possible, she turned the door knob and walked in.

There was nothing. She stared across the floor, to the corners of the room, to the chest of drawers, at the bottom of the bedspread for a hand that might stick out. Nothing. She looked at the whole room again, piece by piece. Still nothing. She looked again, swiftly as if she had looked too hard and missed the obvious but nothing still. She started to shout, "Mother! Mother, come out!" but then she remembered her mother was dead. She was about to look through the closet but suddenly realizing her daughter had entered the room and was not there now, she rushed to the open window.

"Where is she, where is she, Kate?" Kyla yelled to her daughter who was stepping from the last rung of the trellis. "Did she fall out the window?"

The girl looked up at her and then with a quick jump she ran toward the snowball bush.
"In there! She's in there!" Kyla yelled, thinking the girl was leading the way. As the girl bent down, plunging her arms into the leaves and then leaning back, pulling on something, Kyla lifted her leg toward the window to go down.

"Here, I'll help, just a minute," called Kyla, but the girl lurched backward, almost falling, and in her hands was the suitcase. Without looking back at Kyla, the girl got to her feet and ran out into the vineyard, the heavy bag banging against her legs.

"Oh no, no, come back!" Kyla screamed. She was out of the window and climbing down the trellis four rungs at a time. "Come back, come back," Kyla cried as she hit the ground and ran after her daughter, breathing the dust her daughter had raised.

"There goes your wife," Lang said.

"We're out of bread," said Delmus, turning the pages of Mrs. Watkins' book, then lifting his head to smile.

"What?" asked Lang.

"Out of bread! Out of bread! Hear that?" cried Earl. "Delmus's wife is running through the field like a rabbit and Lang says, 'There goes your wife,' and Delmus says, 'We're out of bread.'"

"And milk," said Delmus.

"And milk! They're out of milk too! Hear that?" shouted Earl, "Huh?" and everyone laughed and as it waned, someone, usually Lang, would say, "Out of bread," and it would start again but finally it died and things seemed
quieter than before. The hog was down from the tripod. It lay on a heavy table where two men went over it with razor blades and Delmus's knife, scraping the bristles, talking. The others sat around in a circle, looking at the book, smoking cigarettes, a few of them asleep. There was a pile of empty bottles towards the center of the circle. Earl had hunted through his truck and Ed Strong beneath his car seat. Though Bill Woody had brought a half pint from a lunch box right when it looked like there was nothing left, and Delmus found a little in a bottle stuck up in the rafters, they had come to end of the bourbon. Some of the men talked and now and then laughed but the whiskey was gone and soon the first person would get up to leave.

"I shoulda brought another bottle," said Earl. "I almost did and then I didn't."

"Yeah," said Bill Woody. "And a loaf of bread."

"Yeah, and a loaf of bread," said Earl, but the laughter was low and tired and Delmus felt sad, as if something very wonderful was about to end. He looked back at the house and its door, not thinking where Kyla was running, just knowing she would be back and everything would be like it was before, and he could hardly keep from crying.

"What about that old lady," someone said. "I heard she used to be pretty wild."

"Shut up," said Bill Woody, watching Delmus look toward the house, remembering the pat on the shoulder.

Delmus's face and shirt and pants were covered with
blood. He had slit the hog's throat with his knife and then helped hold up the hog's head but Lang let go and the blood spurted and missed the bucket. To Bill Woody, it looked as if Delmus had been in a horrible fight and that now, exhausted and demoralized, he looked toward the house for comfort.

"I heard she's a pretty nice person."

Delmus sprang from his chair and turned on his heel, bloody and looking at Bill Woody.

"I'm sorry Delmus, I didn't mean nothing," Bill Woody said, afraid now of Delmus.

"You're right," said Delmus, his face serious and yet gentle under the blood. "Last night she gave me a bottle of Wild Turkey. She's got a case under her bed."

As if at command, everyone in the circle rose to their feet and watched Delmus run across the barn yard toward the house.

The old lady breathed calmly and lay patient on her bed, her legs propped up to rest her arm as she aimed. Kyla was surely taking her time but maybe she would wait until dark, thinking the old lady would fall asleep and then she could come in without danger. She can wait all she wants, the old lady thought. Though the butterfly was gone and she would die, nobody would take her body without a fight. In her mind, she had visions of the butterfly not flying straight but making wide circles miles in circumference, surveying the whole country, maybe seeing the ocean, before it completed
its vacation and came back to her.

Delmus could already see the old lady smiling, softly nodding her head in approval. Maybe he would put the box in her arms and then lift her from the bed, carrying her out to be with the men. As he ran up the stairs, the rungs in the railing passed like wagon wheels and the steps rippled. When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw that the old lady's door was flung open but the door frame was tilted, leaning to the north. Without hesitation, ducking his head, he went in.

The old lady saw the face and shirt covered with blood, the hands thrown outward, palms up, to take her. Delmus saw the spread bare feet and the legs open like a window and beyond them the butterfly with shyly folded wings, dark blue and purple, the suggestion of spots, the long antennae partly hidden. Though Delmus had not seen his daughter naked for years, he thought that somehow he had entered her room by accident. But instead of looking up, of saying "Sorry" and easing back through the door, Delmus stared at the wings that were starting to move, unfolding like exotic, beautiful flags, and he stumbled forward. "Stop! Stop!" screamed the old lady but Delmus didn't stop, if he had his whole life to think and consider he couldn't stop now, all the sad years rushing toward their purpose. "All my life, oh all my life," Delmus whispered and ran toward the butterfly as the old lady screamed "Stop!" and waved the gun across the wings.

"Oh no, no, it's the opposite of that, I'd never do to hurt--"
Delmus said as his arms and hands came forward to touch and the old lady saw beneath the blood that it was Delmus smiling, that he wanted her, that somehow the butterfly had come back. But to open her arms to hold Delmus upon the wings, to take him away, she had to drop the gun and in the fury of love saving her from death, her finger clamped once against the trigger.

Kyla went stiff in her tracks, rigid, her shoulders hunched as if her mother had shot her from behind. When she didn't fall or feel the pain, she thought, "They don't feel anything when they get hit." She watched her daughter run off into the distance, lengthening her lead, heading toward the orchard that looked green and cool. Kyla stared after her, at the white dress blowing, each sweep of the hem clear and hard like ice, and the brown head bobbing and the white dust rising like columns of men. As the seconds passed and she did not crumple to the ground, Kyla remembered the men and the shooting. She was running again, her mouth full of dust, when she saw the blue car pull from the orchard, someone driving fast with a door swinging wide. "It's my mother!" thought Kyla, "It's my mother taking Kate!" Then she saw a boy with black hair lean across the seat, reaching for the suitcase, and she knew Eddie Dodge had come for her daughter. She watched them race along the alley way ahead of the dust, the car a blue line above the green vineyard, then out on the pavement with a squeal of tires. Tired and without hope, her dress dirty and torn, hanging from her arms like a tattered
web, Kyla turned and started back toward the house.

The old lady was up from her bed, slumped against the window as if she had been wounded, as if someone had shot her through the window. She picked bits of glass from the window. She stepped back until Kyla could not see her and then something flew out the window, something red. "She's jumped," Kyla thought, "She's put on the red dress and jumped." But the body, after the first violence of the dive, began to float, the arms going out and bobbing like sleeves and when it hit it hit flat without a sound and Kyla realized it was just the dress. The old lady was back at the window and with her hands on the sill she stared down at the dress. She looked at it for a long while, just standing there. She turned her head back toward the room, as if to leave the window, but then slowly, her head turned back. She looked down at the dress once again and then carefully, stretching her arms as if they were wings, the old lady fell forward out the window.

Eyes wide as worlds, constellations in her veins, Kyla cried, "Delmus, Delmus come look." In the dust, Kyla stood still, afraid if she moved her mother would get up and run back into the house. Across the plowed ground, on the grass, her mother's body looked large and unreal, like something that would change when she got up close. "Delmus," shouted Kyla, "Delmus come quick." Beside her mother's body, the red dress glinted white, shouting with the sun, and now, like a chorus, beyond her own voice, Kyla heard other voices
calling Delmus too. "Delmus," cried Kyla, "Kate's coming back, Kate's coming back." Already Earl Bonner leaned out the window, pointing with his hand, he and Bill Woody looking down at her mother.