The Merchandise

Shawn Vestal
Bennett Ramsey woke up in his cot, bunkered behind cardboard boxes and mismatched draperies in the corner of the store’s balcony loft. He wiped drool crust from his moustache, and tried to identify what had changed in the air: A smell or a noise. Some new gradient of light. He couldn’t tell. It was ten days before the bank would take over; hours before daylight, and Bennett felt the seeping return of anger and his certainty that no one would ever again be so closely tuned to this place—this building, this square of earth, this merchandise. He tried to make himself feel philosophical: It was only his portion of the general wane and sunset of the world. But he dreaded the appearance of another day.

“Get up,” he finally said. He washed at the deep metal sink in the corner of the loft, watching himself in the water-stained mirror as he trimmed his moustache and drew a steady comb through his white hair. His face seemed thinner between temple and jaw, peanut-shaped, and there was a softness along his jaw line that seemed to be where his former face had settled. He walked to the balcony edge and looked over the silent shapes below, and then went down.

He paced the aisles. The change was in the merchandise. Some Doppler twang that no one else could sense or even believe in. He fingered fabric, checked every shoe for its match, listened to the floors groan. He became briefly convinced that someone had untaped all the corners of the window signs—Levis, $8.99!!, All Winter Stock Half Off!!—and retaped them exactly where they had been. Then he thought the sweaters had been restacked, the expensive wool cardigans that sat there, unsold. He was sure the navy blue cardigan had been moved underneath the lime green. As though someone had taken an ordinary color and replaced it with something brighter and more ridiculous, something to make him look brighter and more ridiculous.

He put on the lime green cardigan and looked at himself in the three-way mirror. “Good sweater,” he said.
Outside, a tiny bit of light snuck into the darkness, giving the plate glass a veneer of silver. He walked back upstairs, still wearing the sweater, and plugged in the coffee pot. He'd been living in the loft for four months. It was starting to reek of damp cardboard and potted meat.

Bennett woke up before dawn and walked a pattern through the store, along the plump, neat stacks of menswear on the shelves, back through circular racks of men's shirts and women's slacks, and then down the opposite wall, past the fabrics and the sewing section and the last of the women's wear.

“What is it?” he said.

Something missing. Not merchandise missing—something missing from within. Threads removed from fabric, maybe. Weft and warp adjusted. He walked his route again. Light bled into the day, and Bennett moved to different spots where he could stand and listen.

Maybe it was the girl. She came in every day at three, swishing the floors with her ridiculous blue jeans. Bell bottoms. Bennett had hated them at first, and he hated them even more now that all the kids wore them. He felt all young people were arrayed against him. He'd used his father's term for ladies underwear once around the girl—asking her to go check on something in the unmentionables.

“The what?” she had said. “Man.”

Walking upstairs, she said the words to herself again, sotto voce, enunciating with unmistakable scorn: “The unmentionables.” He remembered that now, and become sure that the girl was behind the strangeness in the goods. He wanted to make up an excuse and fire her. She'd be out of a job pretty soon anyway. He hadn't told her anything about the foreclosure. He hadn't decided whether he even would. He could just make something up. He'd done it enough times before. The clerks never worked out—they dressed dully or talked to the customers too boldly or chewed gum or smelled wrong. When his wife, Dilby, was alive, he would complain to her every night.

“These people and all you do for them,” she would say, standing behind his chair and smoothing his hair like she was frosting a cake.

Even though he knew she was right, he would say, “Oh, no, Dil, I don't do so much.”

Sometimes he thought he could hear Dil at the calculator late at night, when he was tucked into bed behind the wall of cardboard boxes. Sometimes he forgot that was impossible—forgot not that she was dead, but that she was never coming back. Other times he thought he could hear his daughter, Renata,
calling from the midst of the circular clothes racks, where she used to hide as a child.

A truck rumbled past outside, and Bennett came out of his thoughts. He decided he'd call Renata later in the day and finally tell her what was happening. Maybe she'd take him in. There was an outside chance. He imagined himself performing at a farewell show thrown by the town. Bennett wore a top hat and tails and he did a little tap dance. Just something he'd learned for the show. The mayor read a proclamation. Somehow Senior was there in the audience, applauding.

Bennett blinked, then walked to the men's dress shirts. He gathered every size fifteen and placed them into a bag—six shirts in all, two white, two navy blue, one tan and one pink.

"Pink!" Bennett said, and he imagined what Senior would have said.

He carried the bag out back to his Pontiac and put it in his trunk.

His first customer of the day came in at 11:15. She bought a pair of nylons, nude. He closed for lunch, and when he came back at 1:30, Deputy Al Jensen was waiting outside, shifting from one foot to the other and looking past Bennett's shoulder into the store.

"Need to take a few measurements," Jensen said, blushing to his hairline.

"For the bank."

"You bet," Bennett said, feeling suddenly exposed on the street.

Bennett had sold clothes to the deputy's father. Had sold shoes for the deputy when he was just a boy, and then when he was a teenager running track. Bennett ordered the sheriff's department's uniforms from the wholesaler. The merchandise had filled all these lives. He watched Jensen enter the store. The deputy stood half a foot taller than Bennett, his face red and scratchy and his upper body beginning to fill out his tan uniform shirt evenly, like sausage settling into its casing.

Bennett stood behind the counter while Jensen walked off the square footage. He thought about what his father had said when he took over the store and started carrying clothing and cutting back on the staple foods.

"Fashions," Senior had said contemptuously.

"They're putting in two new grocery stores in Twin Falls," Bennett said.

"They're calling them supermarkets."

"Uh-huh," Senior said. "When things go shitwise and people get broke, you'll be in great shape."
Jensen's boots sounded on the wooden floors. He counted under his breath.

Bennett still felt that on some fundamental level he had been right and his father wrong. But for twenty-one years he had misjudged the taste of the town at every step, ordering youth fashions after they'd gone out of style, running out of work clothes every season. Now he was sixty-seven. When his father was this age, two years from death, he was greeted like a hero everywhere in town. He'd given credit to everyone, and he'd been patient about the bills.

Bennett haunted the streets like a man from somewhere else, dressed in the clothes he couldn't sell and the attitudes of outsiders. He sent overdue bills to a collection agency. He'd been to college and married a Californian. Dilby died ten years ago. Probably two hundred people went to the funeral, and almost no one came to the reception after. Now his daughter spoke to him only when he called, curtly answering questions and letting the line go silent until he asked her another.

Jensen came to where Bennett stood behind the register.

"Gonna need to take an inventory," he said, scratching his shoulder.

"I can give you that," Bennett said, wondering about the visible state of his face, alive with twitches and heat. "I've got it all in the books."

"Yeah," Jensen said. "Yeah, I know you do. But we're supposed to take another one."

"You bet," Bennett said. "Everything in order. Just let me know when you can do it—any night would be fine. Shouldn't take more than seven or eight hours."

Jensen looked surprised, and did a slow turn, looking over the merchandise again.

"I'm sure sorry about this, Bennett."

Bennett shook his head and held up a hand. No one would have ever doubted Senior, he thought. But then Senior would not have come to this.

After another pause, Jensen said, "We can trust your count."

Bennett felt he outdid himself, smoothly thanking the deputy, wishing him a good day, offering him a mint from the bowl on the counter, and smiling his most impermeable, tooth-walled smile until the door stopped ringing and Jensen's boots had stopped sounding on the pavement. And then he walked to the shoe section, selected two pairs of Florsheim wingtips—one black, one calf—and carried them to the Pontiac.

The girl came in and stood chewing gum at the register. Bennett felt an hour-long pang of absolute loneliness. He sat upstairs at his desk, and sent change
down to the girl in a metal cup rigged to a pulley, and she sent bills and receipts up to him the same way. Three customers came in all afternoon.

The girl chewed with hostile energy, leaning a hip against the counter. She wore bell bottoms that had been split at the seam and made bellier with a wedge of red calico. He thought he could detect her sour, smoky scent even upstairs. Her light brown hair was curled back in a column of ringlets, away from her face. Sometimes when he stood close to her, or glimpsed the skin along her collarbone or behind her ear, he felt a sexual rush, a distant echo of something he considered part of his former life.

She came upstairs before closing, stopped about ten feet from his desk. "I was wondering if I could get a couple of days off next month," she asked.

She shifted uncomfortably between the folded wedges of denim swathing her feet.

"Me and some friends are going to Boise for a concert."
"Some kind of rock and roll show, I suppose."
"You wouldn't know them. Foghat."

Bennett didn't know them. He looked at her standing there, having moved no closer. For some reason, he was struck by the fact that she was as tall as he was, and that she was, really, a woman, even though she was only seventeen—her breasts pressed her knit sweater-vest outward, and her waist was slender and smooth, and whenever he watched her walk away from him he found his eyes resting along the movement of her hips. Noticing was simply a matter of lifetime habit. He hadn't had an erection in fourteen years.

"Let me just see," he said.

He opened his calendar to the next month, and pretended to scan the empty white squares.

"Oh," he said. "Oh no. I'm afraid I can't let you go on those days. We have inventory."

"Oh, man," she said. "Really? Please?"

Bennett had never taken inventory in his twenty-one years at the store. But she'd have the rest of her life to run off to rock and roll parties. She wouldn't even miss this one—by the time it rolled around, she'd be free of the store forever. By then, she'd know. Everyone would. So the hell with her. Let her ride with him a little while. Feel the vertigo up here at the top of the roller coaster. She fixed her eyes on him, and he realized she had become beautiful, had transformed completely, a flush on her face and a brightness in her eyes, breathing like a wondrous, alert beast. Bennett thought she was doing that for him, changing herself, but only to trick him, to make him stop looking
for her betrayal among the merchandise. He uttered a single, harsh note of laughter, and she spun and left.

Bennett watched her go. He imagined himself having sex with her, but she wasn’t naked, she was wearing all her clothes, her body had become her clothes, and he really let her have it, it went on and on, and then she thanked him for all he’d done for her.

Bennett decided not to open. He put up a sign on the front door—“Closed. May return.”—and drove to the ice caves in Shoshone. Sixteen miles away and he’d never been.

He drove the twelve-year-old Pontiac down the gray highway, the smell of hot vinyl and dust stubborn even in the rush of air through the windows. He turned at the sign and drove down a bumpy dirt road. A fake log cabin sat beside two enormous statues of an Indian man and woman around a fire. It was surrounded by a treeless landscape, chunky with lava rocks and sagebrush.

“I hope you brought a jacket!” shouted a rotund, smiling woman as Bennett approached the log cabin.

He looked down and realized that he was again—or still?—wearing the lime green cardigan.

“This’ll do,” he said.

She smiled like she knew better.

He paid $2 and went in with a tour group, descending wooden steps and then moving along a walkway underneath a string of lights. The cave was dark and cool. The guide explained why the ice never melted, but Bennett didn’t listen. He crouched and put his hand on the ice floor, burning cold and frictionless. At one point, the tour guide turned off all the lights, and Bennett felt he was exactly where he wanted to be. Even the other people in the cave couldn’t see him. By the time he emerged he was shivering violently, and the heat of the Pontiac felt like a bath.

He wondered why he’d never brought Renata here. He thought, It’s a human mistake. Like so many. Why not let fathers have a test run? A practice kid? Renata was his practice kid. He thought he’d done all right with her, if you looked at it a certain way. Not great. Not criminal.

Renata never called him, and she never came to visit. When she had told him she was a lesbian, way back when she first came back from college, he had refused to believe it.

“You are not,” he said. “That’s ridiculous.”
She'd left him alone then, completely, for seven years. At Dil's funeral they had a chilly reunion, and she began taking his calls again. He'd called her six months before, when he finally decided he had to sell the house and move to the store—the move that he thought would save him. He was afraid she'd be mad.

"You know, I'm selling the house," he told her.

"Finally," she said.

Two days in a row, Bennett returned to the ice caves, all for that moment when the lights went off. He wished the tour guide would stop talking and leave it dark even longer. Sometimes kids squealed or laughed, spoiling it. Even a cave, he thought, a simple hole in the ground, can't be right.

The girl had left him a note after the third day he closed the store, handwritten in a loopy blue script and folded into an envelope:

"Dear Mr. Ramsey, I hope everything is alright. Do I still have a job here? I hope so. I need the money."

Bennett kept the note folded in his pocket, and he took it out and reread it often. He felt that he needed to read the words again and again to understand her meaning. Friend or foe. Truth or dare. He prowled the store all night, certain she'd gotten in somehow.

Bennett began his final inventory. He started by taking all the wool cardigans and piling them into the trunk of the Pontiac. Then he carried out two sewing machines, and three bolts of the most expensive fabric. He loaded his arms with toys. He might still run across a child he needed to charm. His trunk was full. The merchandise spilled across the back seat.

Waiting to open, Bennett smelled something rotten. He walked the store, sniffing, peering under things, opening the stockroom door and walking through. There was no backroom stock anymore. He went upstairs and found the smell—it was coming from his corner of the loft. The garbage, filled with empty potted-meat cans, swarmed with flies. The bed smelled stale, sour and unfamiliar. He saw with a start that his fingernails had gotten long and dirty, black half-moons under each nail. He couldn't believe it—he was never this messy. He went to the water-stained mirror above the sink and looked at himself. His hair was disrupted on one side, and he was unshaven. He was wearing the lime-green cardigan.

Bennett gathered up newspapers and food packages and jammed them into a trash bag. He pushed the bed sheets and his laundry into another
two trash bags, and then he hauled it all down to the Laundromat. He shoved the garbage into the metal can outside the Laundromat and started four loads inside.

He walked across the street to the town's one motel and rented a room. Inside, he left off the lights, turned on the shower and undressed. He looked at his body in the full-length mirror. His shoulders and knees looked knobby and frail, and his skin had taken on fine, papery wrinkles. His stomach pooched, giving his chest a sunken look. The gray head of his penis sat in a nest of black and white hair, like the bud of a dried flower. He remembered when he could get an erection just by wanting one. He didn’t think he’d get one now if Sophia Loren put it in her mouth.

He stayed in the shower a long time, emerging pink and wrinkled. He lathered his face and shaved, and then shaved again. He dusted his body with talc and dressed in brand-new clothes. He left the room key on the dresser and went back to the Laundromat and got his clothes.

He drove to the store, and parked in back. The girl hadn’t arrived yet. The air inside was sweet and cool, untouched by the day. Bennett walked around the store, examining the merchandise, reminded, almost, of how good it was, until the girl came and he left the main floor to her and went upstairs. He sat there and tried to let his mind drift into the middle distance. There was almost no time left. He had no idea what he would do. He took the cash box out of the safe—it sat in the bare middle of the metal vault—and counted out the bills. Seven hundred and forty-seven dollars, and thirteen cents. Theoretically, the bank was supposed to get that too.

His sister lived in Arizona, with her husband and their adult son who had Down syndrome. He supposed he would drive there and arrive unannounced, check things out before he asked for anything. Or he would drive to Eureka and see Renata. He knew she was sticking with the lesbian story now. He supposed he could handle that, as long as he didn’t have to walk the streets of Gooding with them. He examined a map and imagined a meandering trip south. Arizona or California. He’d decide on the way. Alone on the road, unknown to everyone he saw.

Bennett woke to the sound of the calculator running, the sound of Dil doing the books, a constant subtraction. Even as he sat up and rubbed his face, he heard the sound, the clicking of keys and the mechanical flourish of the sum. He looked out onto his desk, where the calculator sat unmoving in the morning dimness.
He cleaned up and walked the store. Now he knew the merchandise was changed—he'd changed it, taken it—and so he had a harder time feeling what might be wrong out there. Was she simply taunting him? Was she stealing? He wondered why the girl hated him, given all that he'd done for her, and he decided when she came in that afternoon he would fire her without explanation. Change the locks. Set everything on fire.

The clacking of the calculator ran quietly under the surface of the day. He began to feel as if Dil were just upstairs waiting for him, waiting to give him the bad news the way she always had, with a healthy dose of comfort. He stood at the counter for hours, growing calmer and calmer. Frank Getchem, the editor of the weekly newspaper, came in, found the two cheapest shirts in the store and bought them. Then a mother and toddler daughter came in who Bennett didn't know.

When the woman came to the counter with a blouse from the sale rack, Bennett said, "Ma'am, that particular blouse has just been marked all the way down."

He folded it neatly, wrapped it in a sheet of paper, and tucked it into a paper shopping bag marked Ramsey Mercantile.

"Today," he said, handing the bag to her, "this particular blouse is free."

The woman seemed more confused than happy. Bennett plucked a mint from the bowl and leaned over toward the little girl.

"Please," the woman said, "let me pay you."

He held up one hand, closed his eyes in a slim smile, and shook his head slightly. He wanted her to remember this.

When the girl came in, she looked nothing like herself. She had become radiant, peach fuzz and cashmere. She smiled at Bennett. She appeared not to hear the calculations. He forgot that he was going to fire her. He wanted to thank her for all she'd done for him.

"I have something I need to tell you," he announced, once she had settled behind the cash register. "I've been diagnosed with something."

"Diagnosed?" she asked.

"I'm dying," he said, and the look of concern that flowed onto her face shocked him, made him feel a little happy. "Any day now."

"Oh no," she said. "Oh no."

"But here's what I wanted to tell you. I'm leaving the store to you."

She looked confused, like he'd spoken Spanish.

"I'm leaving the store to you," he repeated.

"The store?"

"And the merchandise."
He walked toward her and opened his arms. Uncertainly, she let him wrap her in an embrace. He closed his eyes and pictured her clearly—she looked like Lana Turner and then Tippi Hedron and then Dil and then Sophia Loren. She placed her palms lightly on his back and gave the barest squeeze. Bennett smelled crushed flowers and berries. Talcum powder. She let go and began to step away, but Bennett held her. The spring in her flesh vibrated against his skin. Bennett felt a stirring where he hadn't felt any stirring in a long time. He was highly aware of her breasts, of their soft, exact location against his ribs. Then he noticed that the girl was pressing against him with her forearms. Maybe had been for a few seconds.

"Mister Ramsey," she said in a harsh whisper.

He thought she would certainly turn ugly again when he stepped back. But he saw that she was more spectacular than ever, with the unblemished skin of a child and the flaring nostrils of a predator and the walled eyes of an enemy and some overall quality he couldn't describe, like the way water finds a simple path downhill or like the soft modulation in the color of the sky when you tracked it from the horizon straight up to the point above your head. She was trembling. She hadn't moved.

"You don't have to thank me now," he said. "I know you'll take good care of it."

Bennett slept late, until 8:30. He dreamed deeply and woke up feeling that he'd been through something to which he hadn't quite measured up. For the first time in weeks, everything in the store felt fine. Nothing amiss. He cleaned himself up, shaved, dressed in new clothes: white polyester slacks, a blue shirt with a field of white polka dots open two buttons down on his chest, and a pair of brown loafers. He looked at himself in the mirror, and through the scummy haze he felt satisfied, at last, with the image he presented.

He looked around. He'd have to open in a few minutes. Everything felt comfortable, somehow, in its right place. He walked through menswear and selected a few more items, and took them out to his car. He would have to adjust the inventory, he knew that, but he didn't feel too bad. Broke is broke, he thought. His only remaining fear was what people would find out. His shame would now be his father's shame as well—his father, who had come West from Illinois and opened a store on thrift and competence. His shame was his dead wife's shame, too, and his sister's and daughter's and that of all the people who had never known what a failure he was. He felt all this with a calm acceptance.
He opened the store right at nine, and after no one came in for an hour, he locked up and walked to the coffee shop. When he entered, he felt the eyes of everyone shift and go hooded, he felt the energy of everyone turn toward him and try to hide itself. No one spoke. Bern McCutcheon, standing at the cashier, lifted a hand in greeting. A table of farmers, all known to Bennett, glanced up together and nodded. Bennett took a seat at the counter and the waitress poured him a cup of coffee.

“How’s the world treating ya, Bennett?” she asked.

“Jim dandy,” he said.

He looked over the menu. He knew it by heart—knew the hash browns would come undercrisped and oily, the eggs would have crunchy edges, the toast would be soaked through with something yellow like butter. He ordered eggs, sausage, hash browns and toast. While he waited, Deputy Jensen walked in and saw him sitting there alone. Jensen came over and placed a ruddy hand on the counter beside him.

“Who’s minding the store?” Jensen asked.

“It’s minding itself,” Bennett said.

Jensen nodded, embarrassed. Bennett wondered how many people he’d told. He wondered how many people working in the sheriff’s department and the bank had told their wives or drinking buddies. If seven people knew about the foreclosure in an official capacity, maybe they’d each told three people. It would take about a week for every soul in the goddamned town to know his business. It made him dizzy. What if he’d spent the entire last month worrying about what people would think, when they were already thinking it, even as he walked among them?

Bennett said, “You need anything else?” and Jensen looked shocked. He said no, and started to leave. Bennett called him back, beckoning with his finger until Jensen lowered his large head close enough that Bennett could speak directly into his hairy ear.

“You just keep your goddamned mouth shut. That’s all. Just keep it shut.” Bennett could not control the shaking of his voice. He turned it into a hiss. “I remember you when you wore shitty diapers and cried all day long. Don’t you forget that.”

Jensen turned and walked out, the skin on the back of his neck bright red. The waitress put an oval plate before Bennett, glistening and steamy, and he had to wait a full five minutes before the smell of it stopped making him sick and he could eat. He felt every eye in the restaurant trained on his back.

He finished his breakfast and walked out stiffly.

He returned to the store, went around back and got into the Pontiac.
Driving down Main Street, he noticed all the places that had added up to his life for so long: the state school for the blind, the elementary school, the blocks of small, clean houses, the glassy new Safeway. He counted them up like an inventory. He drove out the end of Main Street and onto the highway to Wendell, where he filled up a two-gallon gas can at King Brothers Fuel, turned around and drove back home.

Inside the store, he sat at the back of the store with the gas can at his feet. The girl didn’t show up. Two customers tried the door and left. He waited until darkness, and then until midnight, and then until 2 a.m., waiting until the bar lights went off across the street at the Mirage, and then waiting another twenty minutes, and finally splashing a pathway of gasoline through the aisles of the store, creating a route for the flames to sneak between the merchandise and climb up into it, up the shelves and the wooden columns to the high, tin-stamped ceiling, up the stairs to his office and to his cot in the corner. Yes, he thought. Burn with the rest of it. When he and the merchandise had gone, the void of them would be eternal. He struck a long wooden match and watched as a yellow flame unfurled, and he placed it on the ground, where it caught and hovered, a ghostly light-blue that trickled uncertainly down the aisle toward the center of the store and began to spread among the merchandise, never touching the floor, not even when smoke began to rise from the clear, wavering spaces underneath the ghostflame, and the merchandise would not light, it would not move as the fire surrounded it, inhaled the air, consumed the shelves and rained ash and spark, the merchandise unburned, the goods intact, and Bennett wondering whether to run or stay, whether to test himself among the merchandise or return to town and assume his human form.

Bennett Ramsey died. He died from burns suffered in the fire. He died of a rare strain of Bulgarian influenza. He died when he was struck by a Ford Fiesta while jaywalking.

He nearly died of food poisoning suffered at a retailers conference in Boise. He injured himself stepping on a rusty nail behind the Merc. He burned himself when he lifted his arm to protect his head from a falling timber in the store. He cut himself shaving. He fled in his Pontiac for Arizona. He stayed and signed the papers, shaking everyone’s hand like the gentleman he always
strived to be. He went to the Shoshone Ice Caves and pressed his naked body against the walls. He accepted the Presidential Medal of Honor in a ceremony at the White House. He became a law of physics unto himself: Everything is possible. He took to the sky and flew in long, gradual spirals over the town, gliding through the hay-scented air.

He woke up to the sound of a banging on the back door. He was sleeping in a chair at the back of the store, gas can at his feet. It was Deputy Jensen at the door. Bud Fitz from the bank. When Bennett let them in, he realized that they'd walked right past his car, loaded with the merchandise. Neither said anything. Jensen gave the gas can an appraising look. Bennett blinked once, picked up the can, walked outside and poured it into the Pontiac's tank while the deputy and banker waited. Some of it splashed on his hand and the ground. The sun was beginning to shine and Bennett tasted something awful in his mouth. They signed the papers. Bennett handed over the keys. Bud asked Bennett what he planned to do. "Whatever I want," Bennett said. "I'm free as a bird." Bennett went back upstairs to gather the last of his things, and he took $300 from the safe and tucked it into his wallet, while they waited downstairs. He would drive to Eureka. He would knock on Renata's door, unannounced. He would tell her how wrong he had been. How small his shame had become, smaller and smaller with every passing mile.

He woke up to a loud banging on the door, and was surprised to find the store unburned. His fingers smelled like gasoline. At the door was a man dressed in a tuxedo with tails and a cravat. He rested one hand on the silver knob of a walking stick and spoke words Bennett couldn't understand, in a voice like music. Then Bennett was back in the store and it was alight with new merchandise of the most amazing colors, a ravishing garden, and beside him was the girl, who was beautiful and who was his wife, and they had a daughter, a six-year-old who played the piano and designed her own clothes. The week after her seventh birthday, Bennett was elected mayor.