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GOOD WORK

by

Jocelyn Siler

B.A., Wagner College, 1969

A collection

of poems and prose

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

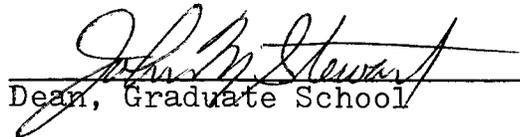
Master of Fine Arts

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1977

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Theft," and "Oh Pat" first appeared in KANSAS QUARTERLY; "Schooling" first appeared in GILT EDGE; "Slight Goddess" first appeared in DEKALB LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL; "The Crystal Palace" first appeared in NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW.

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PART I

POEMS

Good Work

We come in the morning
our paint in the tattered leather
suitcase. The one that Grandma left
in the cellar under the stairs. We open it
and take out gallons, squat silver cylinders
of paint, yellow, vermilion, kelly green.
Men are there already, tearing out walls,
but we start anyway, dipping our brushes
into the thick paint without stopping to stir.
This is a serious business.
We finish the back bedroom by ten,
and they break through, splitting laths
from the hall. By noon the upper story is gone,
and we paint our way downstairs, covering
the cluttered carpet with two coats.
And when it's over, and they throw their
crowbars into a pickup and drive away,
we sit on the silly stoop, a bulldozer
canted behind us, leaning, just slightly,
one shoulder against the other.

Theft

I was eleven
and I stole a cigarette.
Tiptoeing while my
tuxedoed
father buffed his
patent leathers
in the kitchen I
copped it off his
littered
bureau top.
Just the first little
rip-off in a finally
sprawling crime
that began with
hot dreams of
self-propulsion
and ended when I
laughed and pushed my daughter
head first
out between my legs.

Then it was over
and I had my
prime
spoil really
got at the expense of my mother's
menses
and my father's
tennis permit.

Oh Pat

We hung up the clothes together

The wooden clothespins were gray from exposure & bees
came and landed on their damp ends

I watched her face and it went from sun to shade when the
wind snapped the sheets out

We bent together and didn't say a word

Later when we made dinner I drained the beets & emptied
them into the star-patterned colander

We talked & I slipped the dull outside skin off the beets
mechanically without looking

But their slick wet phallus-feel sifted me suddenly away

And I was afraid she'd see the sink running with beet blood
& the thick hot beets in my hands

Schooling

In grade school I came home for lunch
running three long gray blocks
My hat in my pocket
My coat open in the coldest weather
the sides of it flying back
flapping behind my pumping elbows
My father always let me in
wearing a wine-colored woolen robe
But she was still in bed
smiling naked
the sheet to her shoulders
and her wheat-colored hair
blowing shine
so loose
And the cooling bed
was buttered with her clear perfume

Slight Goddess

Demeter at the cash register

with the gaudy labeled crates of
produce open all around

When she squats for penny candy

the grapes drape frosted behind
her shoulder and the ruffled lettuce and

brightly tissued pears look like offerings
Just because her hair is squeaky

straight and yellow like cornsilk
and her nipples are peachy orange

through the green gauze shirt
Oh but the squat delivery men call her
sweetheart like a fuzzy daughter

because they see those nipples as
unripened and that blond skin
really scrubbed too clean

There's awe there but they need a little
fat and grime to prime their pumps

Not me there I was heaping eggs and brown
bags of vermont apples on to her

marble topped counter when she turned away
her midriff was bare and her grooved
back was fresh and gold as new wood

Oh, I had to pull back my hand

forget my eggs and apples and leave
without touching that slim fecund flesh

I Marry You Every Day

This is the rift zone.
Lava dikes squeeze up
where ground is torn.
Salamander, flick my tail,
revel on smoking rock.
The farmer's horse
drops through a fissure, plow
dragged behind. Entrance to
the underworld, granite
runs yellow like casting iron.
I built the rig, my head the drill
bit, twisting magma, basalt
to the mantle where diamonds
shoot through pipes of steam.

Innocent

I'm the gingham school-marm
to your whiskey cowboy. You
slide from the barstool, dust
your chaps with a weathered hat,
and stand when I come in. One
June night you lifted me from
the buckboard, strong hands
around my waist. We sat on the
ditchbank and chewed sweet tips
of grass. You spun out pictures
like card tricks:

Wild night horses
with creamy flanks,
brown rivers that spread mud
on the summer pasture.

There were crickets,
and you bent to the creek.
I listened, and your stiff shirt collar
was bright against your neck.

And Was Made Man

Altar cloths, the discarded linen winding sheets.
The chalice cover, the napkin he took off his head
and threw into the corner because the headache was over.
The curate's hand was hard and cracked from too much wind,
pressing the body into my palm closely like a coin.
Roughened lover's hand that's dipped into the watering
place between a woman's legs like Thomas reaching
sheepishly into the wound to test the water and the blood.

Hero

I talk to you
out of the side of my mouth,
sotto voce past a crooked cigar.
Slouch like the cornered greasers
of my childhood,
d.a. slicked back,
front coiled,
a fat sausage,
jelly roll.
I dance on one leg,
my back to the candy store.
Jester courting the cool
big rocker whose wit drops
monosyllabic,
breaks my laughter to the women
soft-shoeing with grocery carts.
Your irony wipes out prettiness,
beauty intact, solid as a fireplug.
My wide eyes narrow,
laugh at their lashes.

PART II
91ST STREET

Ian was a liar. He wore nice clothes and everything, but nobody liked him because he lied all the time. It was on 91st Street. I mean we lived there then, and I had a bedroom all to myself - the first one. But at night I used to leave the French doors open so that I could see the end of Robert's bed and his feet under the covers. Before 91st Street I'd always slept with Robert in the big pineapple bed in the house in Arkansas. But then we moved back to Brooklyn so that Daddy could work in the city because if you haven't made it in New York you haven't made it. That's what Mama said.

It was better sleeping by myself because I always twist around and tap my feet before I can get to sleep, and Robert would always whisper to me loud to stop it. But it was nice to sleep with Robert too because we ate crackers in

bed, and sometimes we took the flashlight under the covers, and Robert would say it was a grotto. But I slept alone after we moved back to Brooklyn, and sometimes I got scared, and it was nice to look through the doorway and see Robert's feet under the covers in the light from the hall.

When we first moved in Ian didn't live there. The Tucci's owned the house then, and they lived downstairs. They owned an ice-cream company, and Robert and I would always fight for who took the rent check down because we'd get ice-cream. I'd get nervous when I ate the ice-cream because Mrs. Tucci put the plate on the polished table in the dining room, and I'd have to sit there all alone and eat it. I never really liked it much because I felt stupid and alone, but Robert always wanted it so I tried to beat him out.

We moved in in the middle of the summer, and Linda DeGraw was my best friend. She had blond hair that went all the way down to her waist, and she had a leather pocketbook full of lipstick, and perfume, and old tissues. We used to go to her house, and one time she showed me her trench coat in a plastic bag in the closet, and another time we looked at the pictures in her wallet. The wallet was red, and it was all worn and old just like Mama's. It had little bits of paper, and ticket stubs, and a dollar bill inside.

When school started Linda went to McKinley, but I was only in 6th grade so I went to 185. I didn't know anybody there because all the kids on our block were older

except the Kasars who went to St. Patrick's. But I didn't like the Kasars anyway because Joanne boasted that they had a dryer, and Dickie always wiped his nose on the top of his sleeve.

Robert was in 7th grade so he went on the bus to McKinley, but he didn't go with Linda because he said she had skinny legs. And I went to 185 without knowing anyone, and they put me in the dumb class with the kids from the orphan home because they hadn't gotten my records.

Mrs. Schott was my teacher, and she talked about going to the bathroom all the time and pulled at the straps of her bra. On the first day there weren't enough chairs in our room so Mrs. Schott sent me across the hall to ask Mrs. Esquith if she had any extras, and right away when I walked in I knew it was the smart class. They jumbled up the numbers to keep the kids from telling, but all you had to do was walk in and look around, and you could tell which class was smart and which was dumb and which was in-between.

I told Mrs. Esquith about the chairs, knowing all the time that all those kids that knew they were the smart kids were looking at me and wondering who I was. And I started to feel hot because I was wearing last year's dress, and it was too tight, and it showed my breasts. I looked at Mrs. Esquith's desk and tried to think about the things that were on it - a bunch of roses in a V.8. can, some wilted snapdragons, yellow pencils laid out side by side.

Then Mrs. Esquith told a boy at a front table that Mrs. Schott needed a couple of extra chairs, and wouldn't he go get them from upstairs. She called him Charles, and he had on a white shirt and a tie, and the tie swung out from his chest when he stood up. I followed him up the stairway, not knowing whether I was supposed to help him or go back to my own room.

The third floor was completely empty and unused, left over from when the school had had a 7th and 8th grade. Charles and I walked down the hallway to a room with lots of chairs and desks pushed into it. There was an open step ladder standing to one corner, and I wanted to climb up on it and look out the big, naked windows. But I was afraid, so I just stood on my tip-toes and looked out over the roofs of the houses. I could see down the hill on 90th Street over the wall into the convent of the Visitation. It took up a whole block, and it was filled with big old sycamores and oaks. I could just see a bit of bright water shining between the trees, and I turned to Charles and said, "Did you know there's a pond on the convent?" He didn't answer, and I felt stupid and left the window to help him with the chairs.

I tried to think some more about the secret pond behind the wall and the big old trees, and about the nuns walking near the wall with the trees against it. And I knew that they wouldn't be talking because Joanne had told me that they had taken a vow not to. But it had all been

spoiled because Charles hadn't answered, and I felt stupid. We each took a chair and lugged them down the hall to the stairway. Charles went down the stairs first; he leaned the chair against his left hip and held the bannister with his other hand. He had nice square hands, and the back of his neck was smooth; so I could tell he'd just had a haircut.

I had trouble going down because I tried to hold the chair in front of me with both hands, and the front legs of it caught on the metal stair and almost made me fall. Charles waited on the landing and looked back over his shoulder. And I got all hot again. I could feel my hair sticking to the side of my face. "It's easier this way, he said, so I shifted the chair to my hip, and the legs of it scraped against the notched metal and made a terrible noise. Charles turned around the stairwell, out of sight, and I went down, holding the chair, bumping it on every step.

Charles got to my room ahead of me, and when I came in there were two boys fighting in the back of the room against the radiator. Mrs. Schott was screaming at them, and I wanted them to stop so that she'd stop screaming. But they didn't. So finally she had to go back and pull them apart, and they sassed her. Charles was still standing in the front of the room in his neat blue tie, and I felt sick because I knew my face was all red. I put the chair down and went to my seat at the table and took a pen out of my case and started drawing in my notebook.

Linda wasn't my best friend anymore after school started. She had another friend from McKinley named Vivian who was tall and had big breasts like a woman. She wore a cinch belt, and she had hair like Kim Novak. They always sat on the stoop, and I felt funny hanging around them. They didn't play hide-and-seek or anything, and it seemed like I was always standing around with nothing to say.

One time Linda told Vivian and me a story about a boy who'd kissed her in the street. She said she didn't know him or anything, and that he'd just run up and kissed her hard and run away. And I knew that she was lying because I used to daydream about the same thing. At night I would lie in my bed and turn my face to the wall so I couldn't see the end of Robert's bed, and I would always think about the same thing - the boy running toward me down the street, and I knew that he was going somewhere. He wasn't just running to me. Then he would stop and kiss me. He was older than I was, and he had thick brown hair. Then he'd turn away and keep on running, turning again only once at the corner to look back.

After Halloween the Tucci's sold the house and the MacArthur's, Ian's parents, bought it. And right away nobody liked Ian because of the lying. The first thing he told us was that he'd been kidnapped and buried in a coffin and that his parents had found him and dug him up. But he didn't even try to tell it like it was true. We were standing in front of the house, and he was laughing, and he

just said it like you might say anything.

When we played hide-and-seek Ian always followed me. One time when I was in Mrs. Moore's back yard he came up behind me and put his hand up under the back of my sweater. I was mad that he followed me because Mrs. Moore was the old biddie on the block, and if we made any noise she'd know we were there and come out and yell at us. But when he put his hand on my back like that it made me really furious, and I kicked him in the shin with the heel of my loafer. I could tell by the way that it felt that it was a bad kick, but I didn't feel bad about it at all. I ran down Mrs. Moore's driveway, and Robert was 'it', and he called me out. He was wearing a white shirt under his sweater, and the collar was bright in the dusk.

I ran to him and hugged him hard around the waist. I think that's how you know when you love someone - when you want to hug them hard. That's the way I felt about Robert's friend, Ronnie, in Arkansas. He used to make his dog, Jiggers, dig in the yard. He'd say, "Dig, Jiggers, dig," and little Jiggers would go crazy with the dirt flying out behind him. And I always wanted to put my arms around Ronnie's waist and grab my wrists and hug him. But hugging Robert was different. Ronnie was silly, and I wanted to hug him because he was so funny. But Robert was always the king of the block or the school yard, and his brown hair was so thick, and he was always looking out for the little kids.

Once we were down in the park by the water, and Walter Cosby and his friends had caught some bats and were going to stomp them. Robert pushed Walter down against the iron fence, and even though he was older, I could see that Walter was afraid of Robert. He scrambled up and ran away, looking over his shoulder, and he cursed at Robert from the other side of the fence. Then Robert and I picked up the bats, holding their soft, little bodies, and they wrapped their wings around our hands. We kept them in a cardboard box in the downstairs hall and fed them apple juice from Robert's penknife. But when Mama found out what they were, she made us let them go.

Robert caught all kinds of things, and they never died. We would keep them for a while and then let them go. We had a praying mantis that climbed on the curtains in the living room. Robert found it on the Kasar's hedge, and even Mama liked it. It's folded wings looked like dry leaves.

When I was little I thought that I could marry Robert. Then Mama told me it was against the law, that brothers and sisters couldn't marry because their children would have things wrong with them. But once when we were sitting in the car, waiting for Daddy to come out of the bank, Mama told me about a brother and sister who'd gotten separated when they were little. They'd moved to different states, and when they grew up they met each other and got married without knowing. Then somehow they found out,

and they went to the minister, and he told them not to tell anyone. I asked her if they'd had any children, and she said she didn't know, and I wondered why they didn't make a law that brothers and sisters could get married if they promised not to have any children.

Sometimes Robert teased me, and we would fight. Once in the car he punched me in the nose. Mama and Daddy were in the A & P, and we were waiting for them in the car, and we started fighting. Robert punched me, and my nose started bleeding, and the blood got all over my shirt. I went into the A & P, and the meat man gave me some paper towels. Then Daddy came down the aisle, and he thought immediately of Robert. But I said, no, that I'd fallen out of the car onto my nose because I knew that Daddy would have killed Robert.

But mostly Robert was nice to me. He always had good ideas, and he'd take me along with him. Once, he asked Daddy if we could take all the bottles back to the store and keep the money, and when we got to the candy store on the avenue Charles from the smart class was inside buying baseball cards. He smiled at me, and I felt good because I was with Robert.

I saw Charles a lot at school because he was a door monitor, and when I walked up the stairs at school he'd always be on the landing at the 2nd floor. Once when I had my daydream in bed I made the boy who kissed me be Charles. It seemed like it was wrong but I did it anyway. Then

Robert called out to me from his bed in the middle of it. And when I turned over and saw his feet under the covers I felt like I'd been doing something dirty, and I shivered. It was the night before Thanksgiving, and Robert wanted to talk about the food. So I got in bed with him, and we went through the whole meal. Robert liked the dressing best, but Mama always put little bags of nuts and chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil next to our plates, and I liked them.

The next day everyone was dressed up because it was Thanksgiving, and we played stickball in the back yard in our good clothes. Even Linda played, and she was wearing stacked heeled shoes and nylons. Robert hit the ball over the garage into Mrs. Moore's yard, and we all just stood there because Mrs. Moore was the old biddie, and we knew we were in trouble.

We walked around to the front of her house and Robert started down the driveway with Ian MacArthur following. The rest of us just hung in front, watching. When they got near to the back of the house Mrs. Moore ran out her kitchen door and snatched the ball up out of the grass. It was a Spalding, and she looked silly standing there, holding the ball in her old, white hand. Then she started screaming at Robert and Ian, yelling that they should bounce the ball instead of hitting it with a stick. That they might break a window or hurt someone. Robert smiled at her and tried to explain, and she screamed even more then and told them to get out of her yard.

She watched until we left, still holding the ball at the end of her skinny arm. Robert was mad, and he said Mrs. Moore was an old bitch, and Ian laughed and started jumping around in the street. "Let's get the old bitch," he said. Robert went to the stone planter in front of our house and got a handful of mud from down near the roots of the dead geranium, and we all walked back to Mrs. Moore's and watched while Robert smeared the mud across the stucco wall next to the stoop. Then we all laughed and made a lot of noise and ran away. We ducked behind cars parked on the street, and Mrs. Moore came out of her driveway and saw the mud and looked down the empty street. I know she couldn't see us, but she yelled out anyway, "I know who did it. I know where you are."

The next day none of the kids seemed to be around, and after supper we went to the movies with Mama and Daddy. Daddy always let us get popcorn and candy, and I got juju fruits because they last a long time. The picture was "The Shaggy Dog" - all about a boy who drinks a potion like Dr. Jeckyl and turns into a talking dog. We sat in the balcony, and in the middle of the movie Mama said, "There's Mr. MacArthur." I stopped looking at the screen, and Ian's father was walking around, peering down the rows at the people in the seats. I'd never done that before - stopped looking at the screen like that - and all the people looked strange, laughing with their faces so white and round. Mr. MacArthur was bald, and the light flickered on his shiny

head when he stooped to look down the rows. Then he went out the exit at the side of the balcony, and I looked back at the screen. The boy was a dog again, and he was being chased by a policeman down a street at night. He yelled and jumped over a white picket fence and got away.

The next morning the bell rang at 9:00 o'clock. Robert and I were watching cartoons in our pajamas, and Mama and Daddy were still asleep. I ran down right away when the bell rang because I didn't want it to ring again and wake them up. I looked through the window and it was Joanne Kasar. I opened the door and told her that I couldn't play, and she said, "Wait till you hear what happened last night. Ian MacArthur stabbed Mrs. Moore. She was sitting out in the back yard in her chair, and he came up behind her, and stabbed her through the slats. Then he laughed in her face and slashed her throat."

I didn't believe it. I thought Joanne must be lying, and it made me angry. Then I remembered Mr. MacArthur in the movies, peering down between the rows. Joanne was still talking, "Then she came to our back door, crawling along the back of her house. There's blood all over, and she banged at the door, and my Daddy brought her into the kitchen and called the ambulance. Ian ran away, but then he came home in the middle of the night."

I just stood there, and Robert came to the top of the stairs and squatted down so that he could see us. It was cold in the hallway with the door open like that, and I

hugged myself. My pajamas were nylon, and when I squeezed my arms around my waist the thin material was suddenly cold against my skin. Then Joanne laughed and pointed up at Robert. "I can see your weenie," she called. And Robert clapped his thighs together, closing the gap that his fly made in his striped pajamas.

Robert and I got dressed and went to see the blood with Joanne. Mrs. Moore's chair was still there - one of those deep, old wooden lawn chairs, and there was a thick splat of dark blood in front of it. We could see where she'd leaned against the side of the house, and another place where she'd fallen, with smeared brown hand prints trailing down the clapboard wall. Joanne kept saying, "Ick, isn't it horrible," and holding her stomach, and I wanted to go home. It wasn't that the blood made me sick or anything. It was just blood like when you fall down or get cut. There was more of it than I'd ever seen before, but it was still just blood, and it wasn't horrible. It wasn't even horrible that we could follow the trail and imagine what had happened. I mean it didn't scare me or make me sick. I don't know why but I felt that we were doing something bad - that it was wrong to be there, and being there with Robert and even Joanne made it worse because now there was no way to pretend that I hadn't been there. I wanted to be like Joanne. I wanted to point at the blood and say to Robert, "Ick, isn't it horrible," so that he wouldn't look at me and think that I was bad.

The next morning Daddy took a bucket and he and Robert went out and washed away the blood. I couldn't understand why they did it, and I kept thinking, "It isn't horrible. They don't know it isn't horrible." There was a play on television, and Daddy and Mama kept switching the channels back and forth between the play and a football game. Robert and I were doing our homework at the dining room table, and I could see the television from where I was sitting. I didn't understand the football game, and the play was dull and confusing. I didn't follow it too well, but there was a girl in it - an older girl, older than Linda and Vivian. At one point somebody said that she was her brother's whore, and I could tell by the way that everyone acted that it was worse than just being a regular whore. I knew what a whore was because one time we'd seen a girl in the park, and Linda had said that everybody knew she was a whore. She was with some boys, and they were teasing her, and she was cursing at them. Then one of them started talking to her, and they walked away together. She had her head bent and he put his hand on the back of her neck under her coat collar, and they walked away like that.

Mrs. Moore came back after Christmas. Robert saw her light on one night, and Mama told us that she'd come home. Ian kept on going to school. He didn't have to go to jail or anything, but he had to go to a doctor, and he didn't play much with the other kids. Mama and Daddy decided that we should move. They said that Daddy needed

an extra room for a study, and they found an apartment not too far away on 74th Street. Robert would still go to McKinley, but I had to transfer to 102.

The day before we moved Robert and I went to get some boxes with Daddy, and when we came back Mrs. Moore was out in front of her house, talking to Joanne and Dickie. We walked up to see her. She was smiling in a funny, stiff way. There was something wrong about the way she smiled, and it was ugly. Then she took Dickie's ball from him, and said, "You should bounce the ball, like this. Don't hit it with a stick." She bounced it on the sidewalk and caught it and bounced it again. Her voice was funny too. It reminded me of the man on the Chastain's barn in Arkansas. He was fixing the roof, and Robert and I walked by on our way to school. He called out to us, and we looked up, and he had a hole in his pants and his penis was hanging through it. He started to talk to us, pretending that he didn't know that it was hanging out. "Well, where are you kids going?" he said, and Robert and I just stood there for a minute, looking up. Then Robert pulled on my sleeve, and we turned and ran across the field toward the school.

Mrs. Moore gave the ball back to Dickie, and when she turned her head I saw the scar. I hadn't thought about a scar at all. Of course I must have known there'd be a scar, but I hadn't thought about one. It was horrible, just the way the blood hadn't been horrible, and I felt sick. It was thick and red, and it ran down her neck and

under the collar of her black coat. It made me feel sick to look at it, and I turned away.

The next day we moved to 74th Street. I had my own room again, but there weren't any French doors, and I couldn't see Robert's feet under the covers. Mama took me to 102 on Monday morning, and the principal said I'd be in 6-3, and that my teacher was Mrs. Goetz. There was a boy in the office named Eric, and he took me up to my room, and the minute I walked in I knew it was the smart class. Mrs. Goetz gave me a desk, and there was a map of South America hanging on the wall. It had coffee beans, and lumps of sugar, and copper pennies pasted on it, and I knew that I'd get to learn which things came from where.

* * *

PART III

THE ABDUCTION OF BABY JIMMY

The old man died in his sleep on the tenth day of one of those heat spells that always seems to hit New York at the end of August and take up the Daily News headline as long as they last. I'd seen him the night before and he just paced up and down the whole time with his shirt off and a wet handkerchief around his neck cursing the heat. It was almost like he died just to get away from it.

Well, as a whole, the family wasn't exactly grief-struck. I mean they all came charging, with Grandma in the lead like Teddy Roosevelt, ransacking his apartment and trying to get their hands on a little spoil. Then there was the usual backbiting round with everybody trying to get whatever they could for themselves without anybody else getting it first. But it took a team effort of Grandma,

and Alexis to really give it to the rest of them good.

Grandma, who hadn't spoken to the old man in eleven years, was at the funeral greeting people chattily and pointing out the blanket of lilies covering the casket in gold paper script, "To My Beloved Husband". She was what you might call a diversionary maneuver, keeping tabs on everyone while Alexis was giving the old man's apartment one final sack. And if anyone could thoroughly sack a place, it was Alexis. You'd almost believe she could smell what things could be exchanged for the greatest amount of money. She sure as hell couldn't of told by looking, but she could tell -- always seemed to know. I always imagine her sniffing her way around the apartment that day. Jesus, she must have enjoyed it. I mean, there she was with her own private treasure hunt. Now she could follow up on all her ideas about what might be hidden where without tipping her hand to anybody.

But even given Alexis' nose for valuables, it's still amazing that she knew enough to take the Bible. I suppose she'd heard about it sometime, heard the old man talk about it, but not as something that could possibly be changed into dollars and cents. I kind of think it was the way it looked, its being so old and all. She must have been to a museum sometime, going with a grade school class, scuffling in an echoey lobby with other kids, only to have a teacher shush them and a guide lead them past rooms and glass cases full of antiques. Well, I guess she must have

remembered and realized from its look that the thick book bound in what might once have looked like leather belonged more in one of those roped-off rooms or glass cases than it did in the old man's dirty Danish modern living room. Anyway, she took it.

So then it was just a matter of selling it, exchanging it for some nice useful cash. I can just see Alexis in some dark, rich-paneled rare book dealer's office, her big head shoved into a purple pot hat, listening slyly because slyness was her one born talent, and like any good Puritan she had increased her God-given gift, honing it until it had become not an attribute, but the core of her personality. And then, without a word, leaving the office, book in hand and hitting in turn every dealer in the city until she had a good idea just how much she could get. And getting every penny of twenty thousand for it, not because it was old, which it certainly was, but because of some fluke, some mistake by a fool printer of one word that made the difference between ten dollars and twenty thousand.

With their big asset liquidated they could go, leave, take the sudden windfall and head west for California. After all, this had been the summer of the Watts riots and L.A. had gotten a lot of fine T.V. coverage. Besides which, wasn't California where Hollywood was and where George Murphy was senator? So they gassed up the old Cadillac with the "Impeach Earl Warren" sticker and would have been off, except for Baby Jimmy, and of course they

had to take Baby Jimmy along, the three of them making such a good group and all. They hadn't told him about the move, not just because they were afraid he'd tell some other member of the family who'd demand their share of the Bible sale, but mostly because Baby Jimmy'd be sure to bolt on them at the last minute and spoil the whole deal. It wasn't really that he wouldn't have wanted to go. It's just that's the way it was -- he'd try to run away and mess things up, and Grandma and Alexis would try and catch him and force him into their line. It was just part of the way things ought to be, and once he'd been caught fair and square he'd always give in right away.

So by three o'clock the only problem was Baby Jimmy. He'd either been gone all night or had gotten up awful early because nobody had seen him at all that day. All the time Grandma was gathering up her stuff she'd been hoping he'd come on home where they could catch him easy.

We were living out in Flatbush then. Ma and Alexis had decided to go into real estate (mostly Alexis but with Ma's money), and they'd bought two ramshackle houses side by side. They were covered with hexagonal brown roofing shingles and surrounded by a common concrete yard and a five-foot high cyclone fence. The old man had always called the place the "Compound".

So they loaded up the car in the narrow space between the two houses as quietly as possible and went out in search of Baby Jimmy. Well, they had a pretty good idea

of where he'd be. For the past couple of days he'd been out in the Mill Basin swamps, and he'd almost always stay in a place a few days until he really got it played out good. So they headed out in that direction.

I was just coming home from work, getting off the Avenue U bus when they drove by. The Cadillac was accelerating so it was really thudding away. Alexis was talking hard, shaking her head, and she had her hair pulled back into a fat little pony tail. They didn't see me, and I walked on home wondering where in hell they could be going on a Friday afternoon when I hadn't even brought home my paycheck.

They went on out Flatbush Avenue past the Farmer's Market with Grandma driving and Alexis scanning the marshes. They were almost to the parkway when Alexis spotted some kids way on over near the inlet. So Grandma just pulled off the road where she was sure he could see them and blew the horn for a few minutes. If they'd gotten out and gone after him he would have known something was up and run, so they just played it cool and waited. Finally after about twenty minutes of honking and waiting Baby Jimmy's curiosity got the best of him, and he came up through the angling grass.

He had nothing on but a pair of gray chino's and one moccasin. When Grandma saw that one moccasin she almost blew everything because she'd just got the pair the day before at the Farmer's Market special for the trip. They just sat back in the front seat kind of casual and asked

him if he'd like to go to the Yankee Diner for some ham and eggs. Now if there's one thing Baby Jimmy really loves it's a big greasy plate of ham and eggs served up in a nice smoky, hissing diner. So old Baby Jimmy hopped in and off they went. There was a lot of junk in the car -- it was just different junk this time.

Now the Yankee Diner's in Bay Ridge, and the Belt Parkway exit for Bay Ridge is right next to the exit for the Verazzano Bridge, which is the gateway to Staten Island and points west. So Baby Jimmy didn't really think much about it when Grandma said she'd taken the bridge exit by mistake. There was just a hint of a squelched laugh in her voice that gave him a funny feeling at the back of his neck, but there was a bag of hard peaches on the back seat, and he was mostly thinking how good a peach would taste. So he took one out and started slowly squeezing it all over to soften it up and get the juice running. When Grandma started passing exits on Staten Island, Baby Jimmy began to wonder, but it wasn't until he saw the Bayonne Bridge that he knew he'd been had. There it was, rising like a fan over the buildings -- they were just too far into Staten Island for it all to be a mistake. So he just started grinning a little. Grandma and Alexis had been watching him, and they started grinning a little, and he slid down in the seat and stretched his legs out, squeezing the peach all the time and grinning more and more.

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PART IV

THE CRYSTAL PALACE

It was the smell, I said. Allen got out of bed to ask, and I said it was the smell I noticed most, the smell of pencils and chalk and country kids and the floor. The floor smelled old and dusty, and the bathroom smelled like pee and pine soap, and the brown crackly towels smelled like pee when they got wet. And Allen was shaking and grinning, but I had a green dress with a lace collar to wear, and Mama starched it so the skirt stood out. And Allen was going into first grade so he asked what I noticed most.

The next day he came out into the school yard holding a crayon picture tight by one edge so that the paper wrinkled. And he said, no, it was the noise. The noise of kids close together, feet moving, echoing in the

bathroom, papers and pencils being dropped, and kids yelling at recess.

We came home down the alley with Mark Turner, and when we got to the holy roller church Mark picked up a rock out of the dirt and threw it at the back wall where they were building on. Then I threw one, and Allen started yelling that he was going to tell and that Daddy said it was wrong. A man came out of the side of the church in a white shirt with his black hair all slicked down, and Mark and I took off down the alley. We didn't stop until we were in the back yard on the other side of the garage behind the cherry tree. We could hear Allen crying away down the alley, and he came into the yard and threw dirt at us. He'd fallen down and knocked the scab off his knee, and the blood was running down his leg into his blue sock. Mark and I kept laughing, and Allen was screaming because he was so mad.

After supper we played hide and seek, and Judy Cook came across the street. She was barefoot, and I wanted to take my shoes off because it was getting dark and the grass was cool and long against the hedge. But Mama wouldn't let me because of the hookworms. Daddy left for work carrying his violin, and his formal shirt looked blue in the twilight. He worked at the hotel, and we all went on Sunday nights to the concerts. I liked to go because people always looked at Mama she was so beautiful. But Allen hated wearing a suit, and he stiffened his back and pulled

at the knot of his tie. The hotel was owned by the railroad, and it had columns like the white house, and President Eisenhower came there on week-ends to play golf.

After Daddy drove away Mama sat on Shanklin's steps with Gordy, and talked about Korea being over. But Gordy was still afraid of being drafted. Chopin played in Shanklin's flower beds under the rhododendron bushes. He always acted insane, chasing his tail or clawing back over his head at moths. Sometimes he would jump out at things he thought he saw in the grass.

Then Mr. Shanklin drove up in the old hearse he used to pick up the dead people at their houses. He got out, and he was carrying a milk bottle, and the thick glass lip shone under the street light. He shook it at Mama on the step, and he asked her if she could guess what was inside. And he said it was a man who'd gone to sleep on a plastic-covered sofa smoking a cigarette and got burned up. He shook the bottle and it flashed in the street light. All the kids laughed and crowded around, and inside it looked like the hard cinders from the side of the railroad track.

Allen and I had seen dead people another time. That was in Brooklyn, before we came to Virginia. The Rosenbergs. They'd been burned up, too -- in the electric chair. Except they must have been burned up inside, because they still looked like people outside. And Daddy and Mama had taken us so we wouldn't forget. It was hot, and inside there was a red persian rug just like Nanna's.

Daddy said they'd been killed because they wanted to have one world, and that's what he and Mama wanted, too, and that's why he'd fought in Spain.

The next day at recess I had to walk with Tommy Phillips as a partner, and I didn't want to hold his hand because he smelled funny. He wasn't a country kid, but his mother put wet stuff on his hair. I could see where the comb had gone in little lines, and it smelled like the creek behind the alley. One of the toilets in the girl's room had overflowed, and the gray floor was all wet. The bare-foot kids walked in the dirty water, and it made me feel cold and dirty. The window was open just a little bit, and I put my forehead against the bottom of it so I could look out. Way on over beyond the white high school, I could see smoke on the mountain above Colored-Town. Miss Trestle had told us there was a forest fire on Cate's mountain, and I could see little white puffs. It wasn't much, and I was disappointed because I thought there'd be more smoke.

When we came out of school all the kids were talking about the fire. And one of the Reed twins said the Van Deemon kids had started it. They didn't have any parents, and they lived in a shack all made out of old doors nailed together. We used to pass it on the way to Roanoke. Some of the doors were all glass panes, and it always made me think of The Crystal Palace that used to be at Coney Island. It was a maze, Mama said, and it was all made of glass so you couldn't tell which way was right, and you kept bumping

and having to turn around.

Max and Gerda came for dinner. Max played the piano at the hotel with Daddy. He'd been in a concentration camp in Poland so that sometimes he stuttered and sometimes he didn't. Gerda was beautiful and she laughed with her head tilted back. They brought us boxes of chocolate, and all the pieces in my box looked like sewing things, scissors and thread and thimbles, and all of Allen's looked like tools. Daddy made drinks, and they sat in the living room on the flowered chairs, and we had to sit with them, too, for a while to be polite. I had on new socks and I kept looking at them. They looked so nice and white, and they folded down neatly without ruffling or anything. Allen was blowing spit bubbles and pointing the toes of his brown shoes. Daddy started talking about politics, and I knew it was alright for us to go out on the porch. We got the swing going really high, but we could still hear them inside. Mama was mad because Max didn't care, but Max said he didn't have to because he'd been an instrument so that a lot of people like her could be comfortable and care in a far-off way. And he said the only reason Daddy'd fought in Spain was because he'd been young, and it was an adventure.

Chopin had been lolling on the porch with his tail twitching, and he jumped up and bolted off the steps on one of his hunts. They were still arguing inside, but Max wasn't angry. He never got angry, and he said: "Don't talk to me. What about the people you smile at when you

buy eggs, the ones who burn crosses and walk around in white bed sheets. What about the trench between the town and Nigger Town. I'm like you, I just want to be comfortable."

A man was walking by the sidewalk, and all of a sudden he started hopping and cursing, and we knew Chopin had jumped out of the hedge on to his leg. It was getting dark, and Allen and I got off the swing. We went out to the street, and looked up at the mountain to see if we could see the fire, and it was like little triangles of flame. I thought it would be one great big fire, but it was just a line of little bright teepees on the mountainside. Then they all came out of the house, and Mama said it looked like the grinning mouth of a big dragon above the town. Max said that they needed people to fight the fire and he asked Daddy why he didn't volunteer, and Daddy said he couldn't because of his hands and the violin. Max laughed and asked if Daddy had done a lot of thinking about his hands when he was in Spain, and if that was why he was still alive.

The next day Allen acted crazy at breakfast because Nanna was coming on the plane from New York. He kept laughing and he spilled his apricot nectar, and it ran down the wall in the breakfast nook and all over his corduroy pants.

Mama told us we wouldn't go back to school in the afternoon because we had to meet Nanna at the airport in Roanoke. She said we'd have to hurry and that we'd stop for lunch at Eagle's Nest because it was on the way. I liked

Eagle's Nest because once I'd seen a snake come out of the pond there behind the kitchen.

When we got to school Miss Trestle said that some of the houses in Colored-Town had burned in the night, and that the state police were trying to get men from the town to fight the fire. Everyone was excited, and all the kids were running around in the school yard and laughing. Martin Watkins' father was the marshall, and he'd been up all night with some other men on the mountain. We used to see him sometimes when we went downtown. He wore a gray work suit and a cowboy hat, and he was always leaning on the rail at the creek bridge smoking a cigar. Everyone was crowding around Martin, and he said that his mother was scared, and that she'd sat up all night on the sofa with a robe around her knees waiting for his father.

Allen and I ran all the way home at noon. Daddy was in front of the house checking the oil in the Pontiac. It was new and it was the only car on the street, except Shanklin's hearse, that didn't have a running board.

The main road east was closed because of the fire, and we had to take the old road that ran out of Colored-Town around the other side of Cate's Mountain. We went past the school and Mark Turner was fooling around with Johnny Morgan on the corner. I yelled out that we were going to Roanoke and that we'd probably get to see the fire. They stopped swatting each other, and I leaned out the window until Mama told me to sit down. We went out

Mountain Avenue over the wooden bridge that crossed the gully separating the town from Colored-Town. The streets in Colored-Town were all dirt, and there were no street lights or electric poles. I looked to see if there were any big cars because Judy Cook said all the colored people had big cars even when they didn't have any lights or floors in their houses. But I didn't say anything to Mama or Daddy because I knew they'd be mad. We weren't allowed to say nigger or call Colored-Town Nigger-Town like everyone else did.

There was smoke lying low around the shacks further over toward the fire, and Daddy turned the car until he found the paved road that ran along the side of the mountain. There kept being more and more smoke the further we went, and Daddy said maybe we should go back. Then there were some men in the road stopping cars, and the smoke was all red and flickery. I told Allen that they must be asking the men to get out of the cars and go with them and help. And he didn't say anything. He just held on to the back of the front seat tight with his eyes shut. One of the men came to the window of the car, and Allen opened up the door and jumped out. He ran down the road crying, and his arms were hanging loose at his sides and jiggling as he ran. Mama went out fast after him, and when she caught him she held on to him tight. Daddy didn't get out or anything. He just sat there looking tired, rubbing one hand over his eyebrows and then down over his mouth and staring at the

floor in front of the seat. I could see Allen's twisted face through the red smoke out the back window.

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