"It's Not So Easy to Write a Dirty Novel" and other stories

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IT'S NOT SO EASY TO WRITE A DIRTY NOVEL
AND OTHER STORIES

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IT'S NOT SO EASY TO WRITE A DIRTY NOVEL

Yesterday I blew out the 24 candles on my cake and wished I would write a dirty novel and make a lot of money. Today I'm writing.

Howard is in the living room watching TV. It's eight-thirty at night. He didn't like it when I closed the door between the kitchen, here where I'm writing, and the living room.

"Whadja close the door for?"

"What? I can't hear you."

Obviously I could hear him, because you see I wrote down exactly what he said. And I wouldn't even have had to hear him. I knew he was going to ask what I closed the door for. So why did I ask him what he said? I don't know. Maybe I just didn't want to yell it right out through the door.

So he came over. Clump, clump, clump. He never wears his shoes in the house, partly because the apartment is on the top floor and he's a very considerate man. And he doesn't mind that his socks don't come clean either. Sticks his head through the door.
"How come you closed the door? You allergic or something?"

"Howard. The TV bothers me and I want to think. I'm writing a letter to my mother." I smiled at him. Is a smile a lie? "It's OK."

"Since when you gotta think to write a letter to your mother?"

"Ha ha, Howard. Ha, ha, ha. Maybe you should go on the TV instead of just looking." I smiled again. "Go watch your program. I'll come in later."

So he did. He's a good man. He went back in and put his feet on the table again, I could hear the ashtray. And here I am waiting for the coffeepot to finish gargling and warming up for this dirty novel.

Or even a short story. There's a man at my bus stop, we talk every now and then, he told me the movie about the two girls who were supposed to be queer with all those chickens and Kier Dullea came from one short story. The Fox by David Herbert Lawrence. But I guess he also wrote novels, so maybe that's why they took just the story for a movie. I told Mr. Davidson, the man on the bus, that I'd sure like to write a book that would make a movie like that (I went to see it on Howard's bowling night) except I said it like I was joking so he wouldn't think I really meant it. He just laughed and said be sure to make it dirty. That's what literature is these days, he said.
I didn't know that. I remember even when I was little I wanted to write stories, like about a wild horse out in the West before they were all caught, where the hero catches him with his wild mane whistling in the wind and they're the best friends there ever could be on this earth until they get shot. Or about dogs. Or then I wanted to write mystery stories like Nancy Drew, except with a different name. Nancy Hunt, mine was going to be.

Of course I didn't think about the money part of it then either, but Mama did. She said the one thing any girl needed who really wanted to be a writer was good secretarial skills, so she could work until she made enough money from the books, or maybe she got married. And besides, she said, think of all the money you'd save typing your own things. So I took the commercial course in high school, which meant Business English all the way through instead of literature. But I thought that was all right because my stories would come from real life.

It's not that I blame Mama. I'm sure she didn't know any better. Or maybe, now that I think about it, maybe she knew that literature was dirty books and she didn't want me reading it. There was that big stink in the ninth grade when Miss Bishop taught The Catcher in the Rye in her class. Would Mama do that?

"You want some coffee, Howard?"
"What?"
"You want coffee?"

Clomp, clomp, clomp. The door opens. He's been sleeping.

"Yeah, that sounds good." He pours some. "You want some more?"

"I would've brought it to you, Howie. Why didn't you just yell?"

"Why don't you come on in and watch TV with me? It's a good show. Not bad."

He's not sure about whether he's going to sit down at the table or not, so he reaches over and takes a cigarette from my pack and the matches. Leans against the sink after all.

"What's so much you've got to tell your mother for two hours?"

What am I going to tell him? "Nothing. You know. I'll be in after a while."

"Well, maybe I'll go on to bed."

Now that's a bad sign, kind of. It's like he just tasted a little tiny grain of curry powder in the potato salad. Not enough that he doesn't like it, just that he knows something is different but he's not sure what it is. And he wants to.

That was last Tuesday. I didn't go to bed, but I didn't start the novel, either. If there wasn't a letter
ready for my mother in the morning Howard would have smelled a rat, so I wrote after all. I almost asked her what she knew about literature, but I didn't.

It's funny because for all the time I wanted to be a writer I never wrote anything. In my head I did a little, but not on paper. So now that I really sit down to do it I don't know the first thing.

Once I filled out one of those quizzes in the magazine you can send in and they'll tell you if you have talent or not. There was this picture of a man and a woman standing on a pier or a dock, or maybe it was a kind of boardwalk, looking off into the ocean, and there was a seagull standing on the railing right beside the girl. There were buildings in the background, like a city. You were supposed to tell what's happening, all in about ten lines on the paper. I didn't send it in. If it were Nancy Drew she'd be sending a message on that seagull's leg to George, her friend, to follow the seagull back with the roadster and rescue her because she thought the man might be a spy or else a newspaper reporter.

But if it's a dirty novel I don't know what to say is happening. That's the trouble. I thought I could write books from real life, but if they're going to be dirty books I guess I just haven't had that real a life.

For instance, Mr. Davidson mentioned Portnoy's Complaint when he was talking about modern literature, so I
got it out of the lending library and put the Joy of Cooking cover on it, and read it on Howard's bowling nights. Now how could I write something like that? I didn't even know what masturbating was until I was nineteen years old and almost married. I frittered away a whole childhood in my mind with horses and Nancy Drew. That rules out writing any Portnoy's Female Complaint.

I thought for a while maybe I could write about somebody else's experience after I talked to Ginny Hopfsteader, one of the girls who works in the same insurance company I do, because she was talking about it one day at lunch and seemed to know a lot. And I guess she really does. She said her brother told her all about it when she was three years old and she didn't waste a spare minute from then on. I'd feel funny writing about it, except if Philip Roth can write about doing those awful things with a piece of liver I can certainly write about Ginny Hopfsteader and the summer sausage. Or about the time she read how in the old days the boys used to put pepper on the floor at barn dances so that after the girls had scuffled around in the pepper dust for a while they'd feel more like going out in back of the barn with them, so Ginny took a little bit of pepper up to bed with her that night and screamed so loud she had to tell her mother she was having nightmares.

Still, it doesn't seem right to make a story out of somebody else, not if it's supposed to be made up. If it's
a true, non-fiction story that's OK, like Eloise Darlkind's nephew, who was her niece before, who let somebody from the magazines write his story for having the first interracial penis transplant operation. But that's different.

Here's another week gone by and not even a page written of the novel. I tell myself it's because I can only write on Mondays and Thursdays when Howard is bowling, but I can't think what I'd write if I had all the time in the world to do it.

Yesterday we were over at Howard's parents' for dinner, like every Sunday. Howard's brother Ed and his wife Lou and the baby came over too, and everybody who's not fat already -- that's Lou and the baby -- try to catch up with the rest of us. They'll never make it.

"More potatoes, Howie?" said his mother.
"Gotta save room for the pie," he said.
"Always room for pie," said Ed.
"Can't let them go to waste," said I.
"Pass the gravy on down to Susan, would you Daddy?" said Mother Elsie. And around we went again.

Imagine living in a family where everybody knew you were writing a dirty novel. Think of it. I wonder if Philip Roth ever has dinner with his in-laws?

"Will you have some more potatoes, Philip? And how's your latest dirty novel coming along?"

"Yes, thank you. Fine, thank you. I finished another
forty pages just last night."

My father-in-law is a piano tuner, like Howard. He's sixty-one years old, fat, kind, cheerful, and he loves his home. He's been married to Elsie for thirty-seven years and she's just like him except fifty-eight and tone deaf. They've lived in West Chester, Pennsylvania every day of their lives except for three weeks in Rehobeth in the summers, and Howard's grandad built the house they live in. Ed is putting up his house at the other end of the property, where Elsie used to have the vegetables, and they might still be thinking Howard ought to build there, too. There's room. The only time I ever heard any of them say anything about sex was when I lost the baby three years ago. Elsie said maybe we could try again.

They're happy, too. What's wrong with me? Why do I think I want to write a dirty novel?

When we got back Sunday it was about ten. Howard took his bath and put on his J. C. Penney's flannel night-shirt and bathrobe and moved the TV into the bedroom. He made a big bowl of popcorn while I was taking my bath, and when I came to bed he seemed to be pretty far into the movie, and the popcorn.

You see in the mattress ads that an ordinary double bed, which is what we've got, isn't even as wide as two baby cribs put together. Howard is six feet tall and he weighs 235 pounds. I weigh 170.
"Oink."
"Huh?"
"Do I get to lick the bowl, maybe?"
"Oh. Have some popcorn, hon." Howard makes really good hot buttered popcorn. He also gave me my pillow back that he was propping up his head with.

"Susie? Has anything been bothering you?"
Watch it. "Like what?"

"I don't know." His toes moled back and forth under the covers. "Just sometimes you don't seem happy -- like maybe you were worried about something."

"Well," we were getting down to the burned kernels, "I was thinking about whether or not we could paint the kitchen pretty soon."

"That's all?"
"Unnm. Maybe lavender?"
"Ick. I couldn't eat."
"Or maybe white again but with the cabinets rust colored."

"Dust colored cabinets? That's what we've got now." Heh. Heh. Heh. He shook, when he laughed, like a bowlfull of soggy popcorn.

But then he started looking serious again.
"Remember when you wrote your mother?"

Trouble again? I sat up and pulled a foot out of the covers and started looking at a toe.
"When do you mean, Howie? Did you ever have an ingrown toenail?

"You know. A week ago. When you had the door closed."

"Uhmmn...?" He sounded so troubled I almost turned around. How could I?

"You could tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Tell you what, Howie?" I've had ingrown toenails all my life. Comes from biting them.

Not a sound of popcorn. "Are you going to have a baby?" he said.

"Oh, How." I turned around. "Is that what you thought? I'm sorry." I could see him stop being worried, but I think what happened next was disappointment. "I'd tell you," I said. "I'd tell you that. Did you think I wouldn't?"

His sweet, big, fat face had wrinkles on it I'd never even seen before.

"I thought, after what happened before ... maybe you wouldn't want to say anything until ... for a while." He put the popcorn bowl on the table.

"I'd tell you, Howie."

He tasted nice when he kissed me, all salty and buttery. And he even decided he'd rather have me, for once, instead of the end of the horror movie. And it was nice. I like it when we sleep together. He's very sweet. Maybe sometimes I wish he'd wanted to be a pianist instead of a piano tuner. Maybe he did? He never said. I love him.
So why did I do what I did Monday? There I was sitting in the kitchen again, watching the chives grow and waiting for inspiration when the phone rang. The phone's in the living room, in the dark, over by the stuffed chair. I let it ring until I was all comfortable in the chair.

"Hello?"

"F - F-F-f-f-f-f-f-f-f-ffffffffffffff........... ."

Just the way my uncle's beagle used to fart, except you could tell it was a man trying to say something. Then he just breathed for a while. Maybe he's allergic? Emphysema?

"Take your time. You'll get it out. It's OK," I said.

"FUH-fuh-FUH-FUHFUHFUH!"

breathe BREATHE breathe BREATHE breathe BREATHE ... all through the room I could hear it. breathe BREATHE breathe BREATHE Louder and louder. Stronger.

Jesus! An obscene phone call. What a godsend!

"Mister. Have you got my phone number written down? 779-4382?"

"wh-what?"

"My phone. It's 779-4382. Call me again. Please call me again. Thursday. Thursday or Monday nights -- my husband's bowling. You could really help me solve a problem." I was just about stuttering too, trying to talk so fast before he hung up. "Please call back. I'll listen. I'll really listen."
"L-luh-lady...."

He hung up. But maybe, maybe, maybe he'll call back, I thought. My heart was thumping, I could feel it all over me pounding. I had to sit there in the dark a long time before I could let the house sounds back, the refrigerator starting up, the television downstairs, the furnace and the little pushes of air moving the curtains.

Finally I went back into the kitchen and made fresh coffee for when Howard came home. The light hurt my eyes and my thoughts hurt my head. Put away the notebook. What do I think I'm doing? There was a real person on the other end of that phone. Don't be stupid. Be careful. It's what you wanted, isn't it? How do you expect to write anything if you're scared to even talk to somebody on the phone?

But that wasn't the worst. Tuesday I took Ginny Hopfsteader to lunch at The Corner and asked her if she'd ever had an obscene phone call.

"Oh sure," she said. "We used to make them all the time when we were kids, for jokes."

"Make them," I said. "For jokes?"

"You know -- call up some friend of our Mom's, or just anybody, and breathe at them for a while. Mostly they'd just hang up, but sometimes it was pretty funny."

I couldn't eat a mouthful. What if it were somebody I knew, and me babbling out the phone number and how I'd listen, I'd listen. Oh God.
When the phone rang Thursday I almost couldn't answer it. I'd sat in the chair waiting for a while, then waited in the kitchen, and then the chair, back and forth. Finally around 9:30 it started ringing and I just looked at it.

"Hello?"

"F-ff-F-FF...fffffffff..."

"Hey ... if you're a friend of mine playing a joke would you tell me?"

There wasn't any answer for a long time, just breathing. Breathing so strange it sounded almost like crying.

Finally he said, "L-lady, it's no joke." A nice voice, only pulled too tight. "Believe me, it ain't no joke."

"Do you call a lot of people?" I asked.

"If I c-could do it!" he said. "I always m-mess it up." Another long silence. "P-people l-l-laugh. W-who could help it?"

"I didn't laugh."

"Th-that's why I called you back," he said. "Why didn't you?"

"I don't know. Just didn't think of laughing."

We waited a while.

"Would you want me to help you?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well -- you could call up and practice, and I wouldn't laugh. Maybe you'd get better at it."

"Lady, are you crazy?"
I thought about it. Insurance Company Typist Offers to Help Stuttering Stranger Practice Obscene Phone Call Technique on Husband's Bowling Nights. Put it that way and it does look crazy. Aspiring Novelist Does Research on Real Life by Telephone. Is that any better?

"H-hey. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"That's OK," I said. "You didn't. It's just, I'm trying to write a novel. A dirty novel. You know — literature. Only I don't have anything to write about and I thought maybe you could help me."

"Oh, lady," he said, "I am a dirty novel. I just can't get the words around it."

So we've talked, these last three weeks. He f-f-f-ff fffs for a while, and then we talk. And he's told me a lot. Not what I expected, but a lot. He's a janitor. He works from seven at night to three in the morning cleaning offices in the Arcade. He works alone with a cart for his trash can and vacuum and brooms, and he has a radio. They don't have a floor scrubber yet, he says, so he mops and waxes all by hand.

He's forty-six years old. Twenty years ago he almost got married, except she married someone else. He started making phone calls about a year ago, from different offices each time. I asked him what if they traced the calls with him the only one in the building, wasn't he scared of getting caught? He said he was. The first time he called me
he'd sat for half an hour pretending to be the president of Homestead Finance Company. He thought it would give him confidence.

One of the offices has a kitchen in the back, so he cooks a frozen pie around midnight for his lunch. One night he told me there were twelve peas, thirteen carrots, and seven squares of turkey in his pie. He knew because he couldn't stand to read the paper through another lunch. So he itemized a turkey pie.

He asked me to meet him Thursday night at eight. Said he'd call in sick. I said I'd go. I don't know if I really thought I would or not.

It's not like you think. It's different on the phone. I told him things about me I'd never told another soul. Nobody. Some things I didn't even know myself until I told him. Like I don't want another baby. It wasn't even born, and I was sorry, but I don't want one now. I didn't even know.

I didn't go. Not because I thought ... you know. I mean, he wasn't .... He was just lonely, and what could I do about that?

The phone rang right before eleven. He said, "Fuck you, Susie," just as clear and soft. Then he hung up.

Howard says he'd rather get a bigger bed than paint the kitchen.

I'm not going to write a dirty novel. There's more to
it than I thought.
This is a story about my old landlady's father, Adam Stein in West Philadelphia. 426 S. 42nd Street, to be exact, where we moved in August. That landlady, Emma Perlmutter convinced us that the fourth floor was a bargain, really. Ninety dollars a month furnished and utilities and the exterminator once a month and she didn't mind about the cats as long as Papa didn't find out, he'd be disturbed about them. And we wouldn't even notice the stairs after a while, she said.

Viewing the apartment with Emma was something like the last stop on a historic city tour. Some other city, like Strip Mine, West Virginia. "That desk, honey, I know you'll be careful. It's the last thing my husband ever gave me."

And so forth -- the living room the last thing he'd ever painted, the bathroom floor the last thing he'd ever laid. We wouldn't believe the trouble she'd had since her husband died, she said. It's terrible without a man, except Papa, of course, and he's more trouble than anything. You know how old men are. She never had a minute to herself, what with having to go to the shore every weekend to see about her houses there (see about = collect rent) and caring for those
less fortunate than herself. ("Every Wednesday, you know, I pick up the blind and take them to their meeting at the VA hospital and that takes so much time because the blind, you know, can't see of course and I have to go into their houses and get them and take them to the car and everything. But the blind need exercise just like everybody else, don't they?") In heaven there's a blind with his harp all tuned to sing, just for Emma, God damn your eyes.

At any rate, she lived on the first floor herself, she said, and that was an advantage. She said.

The first time I met Papa was the day after we moved in. I was coming home from Miss Violet Ray's laundromat with a fat bag of done laundry on my back. In winter you can hold the bag in your arms and rest your chin in the top and it keeps you warm all the way home, but in summer when you carry it that way all you get is a little brook of sweat running down between your breasts so you carry it on your back which throws you off balance and you get home dizzy and so hot you think your flesh is probably going to start oozing through your pores like Gerber's strained beef for babies. That's what it was like when I met Papa.

Emma had one of those platform swings on the porch with a big splashy flower plastic cover on it, just like every other porch in West Philadelphia, and Papa sat there like some bitch Cerberus in heat. He was built the way they show you how to draw rabbits in kindergarten, all circles,
only three dimensional, and a lot of teeth which were all showing when I came up the stairs.

"HO HO," he said. "You look like sandy claws."

"Ho ho," I said.

"HO HO," he said. "Yah." Patting his knees, shining his teeth with his tongue, grinning, grinning, grinning. And me grinning, grinning, grinning right back with my Platex Living Face. All elastic, lasts years.

"Yah, that's what I thought when I see you coming up the street, you look like sandy claws. You come from the laundry? HAH! You come from Cleveland!"

Conversation with Papa is something like being last man on a crack-the-whip with one skate untied.

"Emma tells me that." His face began to pucker between the eyebrows and under the nose, like a large, pink baby having its feet tickled. "Maybe you know my cousin in Cleveland?"

A large, pink, mad baby. "Well, ahhh, it's a pretty big city . . ."

"Sure, sure you know him." Papa was giggling. "He wears brown shoes, ha HO!" He rocked and smacked and snorted. Oh and so did I, so did I. "He always wears brown shoes, my cousin. You know him? Ahook, ahnk, nkhn, hhha."

"Oh, him," said I, grinning like one of the gargoyles on the dental school at 40th and Spruce. "Is he your cousin?"

"Sure, and a blue suit, you know?"
"That's the one," I said. We tossed it around some more, like two porpoises playing water polo with a brick. At least that's what I thought it was like; he seemed to be enjoying himself. I think. Finally I said something about having to get upstairs with the laundry.

"Yah, goodbye," he said. "You better get a start if you want to get up those stairs before lunch. HO HO."

"I'll see you," I said.

"Oh sure." His giggle trickled after me into the hall. "Better you come down the chimney, you know? ha HA ho."

I knew. But those stairs were always a new experience in spite of Emma's lies. I thought of those ninnies in Little Women who did this sort of thing for fun. The four-year-old on the second floor had just been worked over by Daily Vacation Bible School. He was doing the DVBS hall patrol with a plastic tommygun to the tune of I singa songa the saint sagod.

"Hey," he said. "You look like..."

"Never mind."

I don't want to talk about the two dental students and their electric saxaphones who live on the third floor. I got home shaking like a bowllfull of jelly, but it wasn't from laughing. My roommate looked at the bag.

"All right," I said. "Get it over with. Who do I look like?"

"What color shoes have you got on?" she asked.
Papa spent his days on the porch. Probably he had to, because Emma used her place as a store house for all the furniture nobody upstairs wanted. The apartment was stuffed with tarpaulin shrouded shapes. That may have been what happened to her husband. At any rate, there was no room for Papa. All morning he waited for the mailman ("I tell him give me all the bills, you know? Give me everybody's. I just throw them away. Save everybody lot of trouble.") and all afternoon he waited for the tenants to come home from work. There was no back door to the house and the fire escape ended twelve feet from the ground, so I saw a lot of Papa. Some days I would plan in advance and arm myself with a few packages of frozen food on the way home so I would have to "dash up and put these in the freezer." Other times I would nod shortly and march straight by, which meant I couldn't stop at the mailbox either. Every time I felt like a weazeling nogood.

Papa taught me something about the people who wrote epics, too. I expect they were all lonely and clever enough to figure out that a story begun in _medias res_ is hard to get by.

"Then they ask me if I smoke cigarettes, you know?" My foot was scarcely on the bottom porch step.

"Did they?"

"In the old country when I went into the army. And I don't know why I said yes. I never smoked a cigarette in
my life. So every week they gave me ten cigarettes, you know? I was popular on those days, you bet."

Or a surprise question, like "How are the cats, ho ho."

Or, one day, "Say, I been thinking. You look just like a schoolteacher, I think."

I don't know what kind of response he expected from that. As it happens I'm a librarian and look it. Being reminded is no pleasure. "Is that so," I muttered into the mailbox. "Is that so."

And the summer burned itself out. By mid October Papa wasn't on the porch at night, and first I was relieved, and then guilty about that, and then I started to forget it altogether, and then one crisp day I made lamb stew. The canned peas turned it green and the too much flour solidified it, so it sat in the bottom of the refrigerator until I identified the smell and threw it out. Or, not out exactly, as that would have meant all the way down the stairs and all the way back up. I threw it in the toilet.

Which was all right, it disappeared and everything, but when I tried to flush the toilet again several hours later the water, as in all my childhood nightmares, rose, and rose, and rose, up, to the very top, and then sank. Slowly. I took immediate steps.

So when my roommate, Hepzibah, who is not nearly the sneak I am, yelled from the bathroom a little later: "STOP!" I answered, as clearly as I could through the unmelted
butter in my mouth, "What's wrong?"

"The toilet's broken. We need a plumber."

"No! I mean, Emma wouldn't like a plumber. I'll get the plunger."

"Hurry."

"How'd you break it?"

"What do you mean, me break it?"

"Well?"

Emma kept the household plunger, along with the fire extinguishers and an old refrigerator, in the front hall. I meditated all the way down and up those stairs that I was doing a dirty thing. Yes sir. And it was only a fruitless afternoon of lunging, and plunging, and sponging that wore the truth from me.

"Do you think it could have anything to do with the lamb stew I threw down it?" I asked from the corner of the bathroom where I was resting.

"Oh, come on," said Hepzibah. "Do you want another beer?"

I heard the refrigerator door open. And close. She came back into the bathroom and her mouth moved aimlessly for a while until the sound came up through her throat.

"I don't believe it. I do not believe it."

The hell she didn't.

"No sane person in his right mind would pour a vat of lamb stew into a toilet."
"Why not," I said, though you'd think the reason was obvious enough. "It's just squidgy potatoes and lamb gravy and stuff. I'm sure that didn't do it."

"Because, dear heart," she said, in a thin, thin voice, "of the bones."

The bones. Oh sweet Jesus the bones. I'd forgotten the bones.

"Somewhere in this house," she said, "there is a lamb's knee, and I don't think there'll be any discussion about which of us is going to tell Emma, will there Miss Sneakery?"

Shall I tell the whole story? No. Let's just say that after ten fingernails and the rest of the gin, I called.

"Never mind about the plumber," she said. "I'll borrow the snake from next door."

"Oh, grand, Mrs. Perlmutter. But don't you bother. We'll do it ourselves. We'll be right down to get it."

"Never mind. I'll be up. What caused it, you have any idea?"

"None. None."

And before long up she came, with the snake, and a worried face, and a stomping on the stairs behind her. "Never mind, Papa," she yelled at the stomping. "He thinks he can fix everything and I just have to say yes Papa and ignore him. Now he thinks he can fix..."
"EMMA!"

"Don't worry, Papa," she screamed. "He thinks he can fix it with the plunger."

"PUT DOWN THAT SNAKE!"

"We've been plunging for hours, Mrs. Perlmutter. It's impossible."

"I know it's impossible but he's eighty-four years old and you have to humor an old man like that. I don't know what to do."

Papa appeared at the top of the stairs, each white hair visible against his boiled scalp. "I tell you I fix it with a plunger and I fix it with a plunger."

"But Papa..."

"Papa me nothing. Where is the plunger?"

Papa led us, like reluctant iron filings, into the bathroom where he assumed a meaningful stance in front of the toilet.

"Plunger."

"Don't do it, Papa. Easy Papa. Let me do it. Use the snake. Please, Papa. Oh, Papa."

Hepzibah handed it over. I didn't want to watch. Old men have heart attacks when they do things like that. I didn't want to see him fail. Old men cry. Papa aimed the plunger, lowered it carefully, and pushed. "Uhn," he said, and his bottom jaw protruded a full inch in front of the upper.
Sploosh.
"Papa don't."
"GnhhUh," said Papa.

Splook, the toilet replied. Papa rocked back against the wash basin.

"HGATHOO!"

SPLKOOSH. Papa flushed the toilet and spat neatly into the eye of the obedient whirlpool. "What did I tell you," he said. "Goodbye. I will carry the plunger."

Thus Papa left. Sceptered. Vindicated. Epic.

When I took the January rent check down to Emma I asked her, "How's your father, Mrs. Perlmutter. He hasn't been around."

"I send him down to Florida for the winter," Emma told me. "You know how those old folks are. They just like to sit in the sun." She said.
THICKEN, THICKEN

Spiders hold the world on, leaf to twig, grass to grass to ground. Their reward, what they can get. And keep. Wind, brooms, shufflers and browsing cows are not seined out of the solid world for spiders.

Those two hikers, for example, the first ones on the trail. The sun's well up, thanks to whatever escapement keeps the whole business ticking. Aspen are shivering in the warming air. The river, glittering and babbling above its treasury of ordinary stone. From where we stand we see the leader flapping in front of him. Is he conducting music? One of the more erratic modern symphonies? How many spiders worked all night to catch a bit of breakfast, not these humpbacked, heavy-footed, cursing human beings.

A man and then a woman, judging from the sizes of their backpacks and their styles of headgear. His pack has the glitter off, his boots well broken in. If we move up ahead here just a bit we'll see his face. Fairly well weathered. The onetime archepeellagos of freckles have slid their boundaries, nudged into one another. Those ears might not hold him back in wind, but then they might. A pleasant face,
wouldn't you say? Boyish? though he must be thirty.

What's worrying the girl? Her brand new boots? The tickle of her unsprayed hair? A very pretty girl she is, though not quite at her best, perhaps, outdoors so early in the morning. With that brown hair and Jersey eyes shouldn't her skin be more like old piano keys than mottled egg shells? She's wobbly.

What's he to her, friend Hecuba, or she to him? Him to himself, or hers to her? Wife and husband, lovers, cousins, things-in-law?

Don't be modest. They're what we make them. Listen as they go past.

"Why shouldn't you pay for all of it," she says, puffing at his back. "You're not going to have to let some defrocked dentist poke some vacuum cleaner thing up your insides."

"Don't worry," he says. "We're going to do it right."

Now, if we'd kept our distance we'd have missed that bit of nastiness on such a lovely morning. And why should we notice those two things of all we see? Why not the spiky, greybarked bushes along their path. The fleshless, soft veins of lichen growing on each one. They're rake bushes. The fog comes folding up this valley from the ocean, drawn from the sea salt water full of weeds and flowing things. These bushes rake out patterns from the blind, wet air and hold them. These two walking things don't notice. Nor do
they see the anise-scented clitocybe, the honey mushroom, or the man-on-horseback along the edges of the woods. The blacktailed doe, at rest between her flight and fear. The woman listens for two things only: snakes and bears. The man notices the things that hit him in the face.

"Damned place is full of spiders," says the man.

"Are you sure you want to get all the way to that Twin Lake shelter place today?" she asks him.

"Yes," he says. "It's plenty early. You'll make it fine," he says.

"Don't bet on it," says the omniscient author.

"I know a short cut later on," he says.

Why should we plot their topography? Who care when what he said to girls became just that? Or why two of the fingers on one hand web together? Or when his freckles hatched? Or if his mother favored beets? Or what he felt the week his father died with one small plastic tube stuck up his nose, another from his penis to a bottle?

Who made the girl trust freckles more than smooth tanned skin? From which, if either, parent did she get those hot fudge eyes? Did she foresee these bleeding blisters when he bought her boots? What does she pray to? When? What does she sing?

We follow these two, like it or not, because somewhere about them, in their packs, or heads, or shriveled in their hearts, or sloshing in her grudging womb, they're carrying
the plot. And plotless stories, like unkempt graveyards, quickly run to weed and unknown bodies. What's wrong with that? It bores. And in this story that's the only answer going. Those people, that trail, the mountain they're moving up, the narrow path they're coming to so far above the valley floor, the smallest gnat in that ecology, they're the trellis for a rich, green vine of words to stretch on, sun itself, with fortune, flower. What else?

"Be careful," the man said to the girl, as they scrambled up a very narrow ledge far up the slope. "This way cuts off a lot of time but you've got to watch it on the shale. Don't look. It's a long way down."

Down is the river. Light splashes between rock and trees. Elk in the woods, invisible. Across the valley mountains higher than the trees still shielding snow in some hard folds of rock. In little countries that lie between mountains and the sea each child would have this image of the ends of earth. Postage stamps from those countries would always show the same ridged profile cut across a sky in any color ink. Even their rulers and great would stand engraved against the background of the sky and rock.

Way down along the river and the valley sides was green, rain forest green, greener than County Carnivoorn itself, where Blessed Riddlepate the eremite span out the sixth and final argument for God's existence. The scatological. If, as is rumored, reasoned Riddlepate in his cell,
the world is round and spinning through black eternity with countless others of like shape, we may deduce that somewhere in heaven, in some back garden, there's an outhouse. That all the vast, black space we see surrounding us is just a stretch of that one hole in heaven. And that every day (whatever that may be there) some glorious being, some god, indeed God himself shits galaxies. Alas, poor Riddlepate was heard by his Bishop whooping out thanksgivings to Father, Son and Holy Goat. He burned him with his books -- a nasty consequence of taking one's own fantasies to heart.

Meanwhile, our valley's filling up with night. Our traveller, on the mountain's shaded side, is lost. He hasn't reached the trail he hoped for, and he knows better than to try to find his way out in the dark. He makes a cold camp, hunched inside his sleeping bag beneath his tarp. He's eating bacon bar and apricots and cheese. No hot, strong coffee. No warm soup. No fire to keep him warm.

"Every God damned match," he mutters. "She had every God damned match."

The stars are out. It's clear, and very cold. Why have we come here? Why do we stay, crouched farther up the hill, cold, motionless, and watching this man neither of us wants to know? Was that a bear? The snakes are in. Something is weaving us to earth. By morning we'll find the spiders have made us the faithless anchors for their pale
and silent webs.
There was war in Baldwin, Ohio. 7½ River Street, upstairs. All summer the rats swam the river. They fought them, Michael with crossbow, Judy with slingshot, Julia with millends, Prudence with gig, Nancy with old tin cans. Louise handed cold beer and fresh peach shortcake and other things through the kitchen window to the others on the narrow porch, and Clytaemnestra, the cat, patrolled wailing the porch overhanging the river. The other cat did not acknowledge rats as a way of life. Feckless they battled, late morning through dark, Michael with crossbow, Judy with slingshot, etc.

That wasn't all they did, of course. Prudence, who was nice and fat and red-faced and occasionally jolly worked nights at Tom-Tom's all night drive-in and laundromat. She worked very hard and always showed up and stole quite a lot of food. The rest of the family had parents whose sense of duty to their children included enough allowance to keep them out of the welfare office almost indefinitely. Since each set of parents believed that its child shared the apartment with only two of the others, and Michael's parents had stopped asking him where he lived, they had no worries about
money.

Their parents still called them students. Their parents frequently discussed, with friends, the animals in the forest, the deer, the bear, the possum, and other legendary creatures, and how these animals supported their offspring until they could survive on their own in the wilderness. They agreed that civilization was wilder, harder, and that no kid could survive without at least a college education in this world of today. They frequently wrote to their children, also, bargaining, threatening, and in other ways suggesting that they (the children) were going to have to grow up and recognize that they had to live in the world, etc., and what were they going to do?

Not that the children were idle, by any means. They read quite a bit, though rarely for their classes. They cultivated a herb garden, of sorts, in window boxes along the porch railing. They worked on their tans.

The biggest project, aside from the rats, had produced an unexpected sideline. Every morning Judy went out with her camera, tripod, and a bundle of handmade cloth pouches to collect stones and rocks. When she found a rock she wanted she set up the camera and photographed the rock, along with a few square feet, or inches, of the surrounding driveway, or streambed, or whatever. Then she removed the stone, put it in a pouch (which she labelled with the number of the exposure and the location of the site) and then re-
photographed the area without the selected rock. The rock went back to the porch where Julia and Nancy painted WORDS WORTH SUCKS on them with airplane colors. The photographs were so the rocks could be replaced exactly, but Judy had started making 2' x 3' enlargements of the pairs and had already had two one man shows in the city. Michael had some plans to develop the project into a correspondence course for turtle painting.

That summer there were in the same city Jehovah's Witnesses, keeping watchtowers in circulation among the people. The night of the Misses Snively's and Sieger's first visit was hot enough to keep the rats under water. Michael and most of the women were smoking on the back porch, surrounded by enough citronella candles to satisfy a greedy plaster saint. Louise installed the visitors in the living room with lemonade and cookies. The ladies nodded and clucked to each other, pleased with their reception.

Young woman, began Miss Sieger, with hope and goodwill in her blanched almond eyes, are you familiar with the wise and foolish virgins?

Why, ah, not very, Miss Sieger, answered Louise, with sudden interest in the lemonade pitcher.

Surely you remember the lamps and the bridegroom and those foolish girls who forgot to buy oil? Miss Snively enjoined.

And you don't want to be a foolish virgin, do you?
Miss Sieger chimed.

Well, I...no, I would not like to be a foolish vir-
gin.

Of course not! they chorused. Young woman, you've
made the right decision.

Yes, Louise replied. It's a decision I came to sev-
eral years ago, and it's one I've never regretted.

My child, said Miss Snively.

Miss Sieger produced a large Bible from her sturdy
shoulder bag. We have come, she said, to show you how to
get some of that oil. For these are perilous days when
everyone must be prepared. Prepare! We know from right here
in the Gospel that No man cometh unto the father but by
me, that is, by the Heavenly Bridegroom, and again -- she
flipped to the next paperclip pagemark like a rosary bead --
Johnfifteensix, If a man abide not in me, but of course that
means a woman too, not in me, he is cast forth as a branch
and, um, and men gether them up, and cast them into the fire
and they are burned.

Oh yes, broke in Miss Snively, the day is fast appro-
aching when the wicked shall blaze like faggots in the fire.
Do you want to be a blazing faggot? No! She stood and
straightened. No, Lord. Prepare the day!

Miss Snively glowed fervor like July heat. She gazed
rapt at the vision her invocation had called to the oppo-
site wall. On a cloud whiter than plaster the Lord stood
surrounded by those in white robes. The meek in heart, the
tired, the poor, the huddled masses of the righteous.
Crowned with gold brighter than lemonade they stood, cooled
by the wings of angelical hosts rustling, rustling.

These pamphlets, said Sieger, as she fingered the
crisp papers, you may have, and the Watchtower for which
there is a ten cent charge. She struggled out of the basket
chair, stuffing pamphlets into parcels, composing copious
arms and bosom.

I want you to pay special attention to the pamphlet
about the Last Day, she said at the door.

Oh yes, breathed Miss Snively, when Michael and his
angels shall stand on high and do battle with the creatures
of the deep.

I can almost see that, said Louise reflectively.

Two weeks! they called up from the street. We'll be
back in two weeks.

Louise pushed open the porch door. The sunlight
slithered down her long, fine hair, also her long, fine
nose, her long, fine legs, her long, fine 10½ feet. My
friends, she read, the day approacheth and is wellnigh al­
most here wherein the third trump shall sound and the third
part of the fish shall perish. The day cometh wherein no
man can work. Bretheren, work now or pay later. Be fish­
ers of men. Once God has you on his hook he'll never let
you go. Get hooked, and fish for others. Cast your bait upon the waters.

Oh, Miss Sieger. Oh, Miss Snively. Can you see the change in these five sinners when they hear that welcome word? See those ten eyes lighting with quiet wonder and synchronized joy? Five minds which had been sore troubled concerning those things that, even in the dazzle of the summer sun, live with impunity in the darkness directly under the porch — those minds have seen a great light.

Amen, said Michael.

Hooks, murmured Prudence.

Bait, the others echoed.

And twenty pound test line, said Nancy, on her way to the hardware store.

All was prepared for the ladies' next visit. A large pitcher of new orange peel flavored Tang cooled in the ice box. The six warriors kept vigil on the porch. Michael fingered his crossbow and perused a well-marked copy of the Watchtower. Julia embroidered a rock-gathering pouch. Louise perched on the railing and scanned the water and opposite shore for enemy activity, while Prudence read pamphlets and periodically jiggled one or another of the five fishlines which ran from the railing down to fresh, delectable bunches of produce on the water below.

The doorbell whined. This time Judy went to answer it, while Nancy collected the propaganda, and Tang, and
joined her in the front room.

The Misses Sieger (fubsy) and Snively (attenuate) reintroduced themselves.

I'm afraid Louise is busy today, Nancy explained, but we've all read this literature and we're eager for more battle instructions, so to speak.

All? Miss Sieger snatched the word. Miss Sieger, suspended, pendulous above the basket chair, looking with righteous greed at the two girls. How many of you are there? How many of us? said Nancy.

Six, answered Judy, and scraped the table with the cookies across the floor. Three of her and three of me.

I beg your pardon, piped Miss Snively.

The rest aren't here, as you can see, Judy repeated. Ah, of course. Snively relaxed. The basket chair gasped.

You won't mind if I just take a few notes for the others, will you? Nancy asked.

Even Miss Sieger was speechless for an instant.

Go right ahead, she said.

It's not often that we're so well received, Miss Snively added shyly.

Nancy looked at the floor.

Today, began Miss Sieger, we're going to talk to you about current events. She burrowed into the audio-visual aid pouch. That's a subject of interest to every one of us,
isn't it?

Um, said Nancy.

Unnh, said Judy.

Of course it is. Just look at this headline, Miss Sieger continued, holding a newspaper at arms' length toward the girls. UNREST IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, they read. Miss Sieger allowed a suitable period of silence.

Do you know what that headline really says? she whispered. Do you know -- crescendo -- what every day's headline really says?

No, said Judy.

What? said Nancy.

JUDGMENT DAY IS COMING! Thunder. Fury.

The horsemen are riding through Asia today, Miss Snively said, perturbed. Conquest and warfare. Warfare and conquest. Oh my.

Miss Sieger leaned over her paper. Four folds of fat closed over glittering eyes, eyebrows furled above. And you know what comes after warfare, she added darkly.

What?

Pestilence, the Misses hissed.

But then there is a brighter side, Miss Snively suggested after an uncomfortable pause. Over in the left column here it says that little Orlando Beare, 3, of Firbank, Tennessee, fell into an unused well. The opening wasn't large enough for an adult to go after him, and he was too
little to hang onto a rope, so his brother, only seven years old it says, volunteered to go down into the deep, dark well and bring him up. Imagine that. Titus Beare, age seven. A brave, brave little lad. They tied a rope around him and lowered him into the water. Both were saved.

Imagine that! said Judy.

Truer love, truer love, said Miss Snively, hath no child.

Well, well, said Nancy. That is something, isn't it? Yes indeed, Judy answered. Miss Snively, thank you. We'll remember that.

Miss Sieger fidgeted. Will you do as well on Judgment Day as Titus Beare? she asked.

Perhaps we could have some more pamphlets, Judy suggested.

Miss Sieger looked benign. More pamphlets! she said coyly. I see you've underlined those others. It's such a pleasure to have them appreciated like this. You just don't know.

I think we're sewing on good ground, said Miss Snively as the ladies got into their car.

Some weeks later the family brooded on the porch as the sun drowned in the horizon. Judy rebaited the lines with potato peelings and waffles left over from dinner. Michael haggled aimlessly at an ingrown toenail while he read one of an impressive accumulation of books and pamphlets,
not all of which, interestingly enough, were of Jehovah's Witness distribution. Louise prepared to lower Clytaemnestra, resplendent in a homemade rubber lifejacket, into the river. The other cat, whom they had finally named Peter Orlovsky, haggled at his own toenails. Julia read from a notebook.

**Hailstones big as mountains and fanged lightning.**
Rivers shall freeze as stone and the stones fall down upon the unglad people. All the sunstruck stars of heaven will splatter down upon the wicked. Sinners shall fry.

She closed the notebook. Here endeth the commination. The cat cruised languidly along the far bank, occasionally glaring up toward the porch. Prudence made paper airplanes out of some of the earlier pamphlets and flew them at the cat.

Well, said Michael, that doesn't really sound feasible.
More limp silence.
What about the pamphlets? asked Louise. Maybe there will be something new in those.
No more pamphlets, said Prudence. They said we'd read them all.
Are they coming back?

Julia closed her eyes. Are they coming back, she asks. Does the sun rise and set in Orlovsky's food bowl. They're coming back in two weeks. In saecula saeculorum.

Oh God, said someone.
I had a dream last night, said Nancy. I saw Miss Sieger floating down the river in a shiny, black wet suit. Miss Snively was perched on her back like a thin little kid on an overinflated water toy. Miss Snively had on glowing, golden water wings and she was beating on a tambourine. When she started singing Bring Them In From The Fields of Sin all the rats came out and followed them downstream until every one of them disappeared inside the water treatment plant.

We may have to move, Prudence pointed out.

Besides, said Nancy, the rocks are never the same when I go back.

My friends, said Michael, picking up a weighty book, I think I have a plan.

Well, well, Miss Sieger said coyly at the door. Someone I've met before.

You're going to meet all of us today, answered Louise. Good afternoon, Miss Snively.

Oh splendid, said Sieger, pulling herself up the stairs. She lurched back at the sight of Michael, but after only a momentary setback, recovered. The introductions were guarded.

I didn't realise ... that is, I thought you were all, ah...

Miss Snively. Miss Sieger. This is Michael, and I think you've met all the rest of us.
I'm pleased to meet you, said Miss Sieger, who was not.

Miss Snively just said Um, and looked worried.

Michael had combed his beard for the occasion. His shoulder length brown hair was squeaky clean. He looked as dignified as any barefoot patriarch. He sat down beside a small, book-laden table.

We have followed your talks with great interest, he began.

Oh? said Miss Snively.

So it seemed, said Miss Sieger, heavy on the seemed.

They have been, he continued, helpful, to a point. However, on the basis of your literature, and, of course, the Holy Scriptures, I can't help but notice certain disquieting inconsistencies.

Is that so? Miss Snively asked.

Is that so, said Miss Sieger.

For example, said Michael, picking up a Bible, the hundred and forty-four thousand who are to be saved, according to the little hardbound green book you sold us for a quarter.

Far less than printing costs, Miss Snively said.

Young man, Miss Sieger interrupted, I have no intention of discussing the population explosion with you, or whatever else you might be leading up to. I'm sure you know far more about that subject than either of us cares to. We
only know that the Lord's ways are mysterious indeed, and if he says one hundred and forty-four thousand that's precisely what he means. She plunked her purse down beside her chair and dug in for the battle.

It's not the number I'm really worrying about, continued Michael, though I did imagine heaven could be more spacious. That doesn't bother me nearly so much as the fact that the book of Revelations rather explicitly states that all hundred and forty-four thousand saved were going to be male Jewish virgins.

Only the ice cubes shivering in the Tang marred the silence.

My, you certainly have been reading, said Miss Snively. That won't do much to save the situation, Bertha, Miss Sieger snapped. It's the spirit that counts, as you well know.

Judy smiled, guileless. Miss Sieger, she said, have you ever heard of Joseph Smith?

Who? No.

Well, Louise continued, he lived back in New York state over a hundred years ago. That's where he was when the Lord favored him with revelation.

Revelation about what happened on this very continent years and years ago, chimed Prudence. Back when the Jews were conquering their Promised Land.

It was all written on gold plates, Julia added, and an
angel showed Joseph Smith how to translate the writing with a little machine that wouldn't write or move on down the page until he got the message exactly right.

Isn't that exciting? said Nancy. Joseph Smith was chosen to tell the world his revelation, and to found the church.

Church? said Miss Snively.

What church?, said Miss Sieger.

That's what we want to share with you today, said Michael, as he reached for another Bible-like black book. Because the Lord favored our founder Joseph Smith with visions and knowledge we are assured that saints aren't only people of the distant past. That's why the church is called the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints.

They watched the hope in Miss Snively's eyes congeal. Miss Sieger's voice curdled in her throat.

Mormons!, she squealed.

Oh dear, quavered Miss Snively, the LSD, er, LDS.

A new and hideous idea dawned in Miss Sieger's heart. She looked around the room. Bertha, she whispered, these people are Living In Sin.

The family stood up. The women looked shocked. The man looked stern. Nancy looked at the floor.

My dear ladies, said Michael, Joseph Smith had more than one wife. Brigham Young, the courageous founder of Salt Lake City, had thirty-nine wives. They felt it was a
matter of their principles to have several wives. And so do we. We call it Living the Principle, which is far different from what you called it.

Agatha, Miss Snively murmured, perhaps ... that is, it is their home.

Blasphemy, thundered Sieger. Joseph Smith to blazes. Miss Sieger!

You pentagamist! she screamed.

Miss Sieger, Miss Snively, Louise implored, won't you stay to hear our message?

Hear you? she answered. I'll pluck my ears out first. She puffed to the door, trailing Miss Snively in her wake.

Miss Snively turned at the door. Perhaps you'll read the pamphlets again? she said.

Come, Bertha! echoed the stairwell, and don't look back.

Grin like a dog, said Judy at the window, and run about through the city. Psalms.

When lo, a wail from the porch came among them, and they were sore astounded. They ran to the place where the armaments lay, Michael to crossbow, Judy to slingshot, Julia to mill ends, Prudence to gig, Nancy to old tin cans, Louise to the cat who wailed on the porch overhanging the river. And they looked, and they saw that the water was troubled. The rats on the river, swimming. Swimming in faultless
formation downstream. Vanishing into the water treatment plant.
CRY CHANCE

Light entered the room, slowly, dissolving the dark. Objects resisted it. Night old bowls full of chili and dark night old cups of black coffee and black night folded into blankets full of more dark than finally they would be able to hold. The child standing at the foot of the bed resisted it. How long he had stood there his mother didn't know. Since before she had turned awake, anyway, towards the man's voice beside her. She lay on her back, not watching either of them, while the man tried to talk to the boy.

"Hello. Hello, little kid. Where'd you come from? Hey, happy New Year. Are you that little New Year kid? Or are you too big for that? You're a big boy, aren't you? Will you say something?"

She stopped listening, and the boy just stood at the end of the bed with his mouth open and his eyes open. The man got dressed and went away.

When the door slammed they waited for him to become less than footsteps, and when those had finished they waited. In the kitchen, where the boy's bed was, light that had gathered the strength to burn through the city scummed window striped the air. It was nine-thirty under the clock's glass
Dust flowed in the bright air. In the other room they waited for the man's going to settle. The heat had gone on early and the air was stiff with it, the whole room heavy. The dust dropped, invisible, down in the dark in the cups onto the black cold coffee. The day fell heavy on her, and her son's silence. He was waiting for her to move, she knew, to begin the day. She hesitated to make the necessary motions. She didn't know them.

Elaborate stretching and swimming maneuvers with her arms above her head. An extravagant yawn. She tried those. "Happy New Year, Jim. Climb in?" She sat up and held her hands out to him. Nothing doing. Younger, she remembered, he had been more easily beguiled. She patted down a place in the blankets in front of her, using his own language of gesture and touch to invite him. He didn't move.

"You know," she said, "I read that the cave men, or somebody, invented language because they couldn't lie without it. What do you think of that?" Nothing. "So I've got to get up, is that it?" She did. "Just because you got to bed at half past seven last night," she said. "Just because you're four years old. Toad." She raked around in a drawer where there might have been some clean underpants. "Just because nobody used your mouth to put a lot of drinks and smoke in all night long." There were Levis on the floor. Hot as it was in the room the little rivits chilled four spots under her skin. "Come on and get your bath," she said.
to his back.

She turned the gas on under half a pot of coffee she didn't remember making -- last night? Did she wake him making it? Turned on the water in the tub and went back into the front room to pick up dishes.

He hadn't moved. Try again. "How come we always start the new year with all this laundry and dirty dishes, huh Jim?"

Yeah, she thought, and how come you always start the year in bed with some God damned stranger, that's what you're thinking, isn't it? She turned him by the shoulder and poked him into the kitchen, his feet moving mechanically under him till they got to the bathroom. She set her cup of coffee on the floor, turned off the water and began to undress him. Pajamas with feet, rubber pants, layers of wet and stinking diapers.

"Christ, if you're going to act like a store window dummy I wish you had some of the advantages. You'd think that anybody with such a fine moral sense could learn something about toilets, wouldn't you?" They stared at each other. Moral sense. What she was doing to him rose in her throat, filled her mouth, her words broke thick as blood down over her chin. She retched, dizzy, urine, wine. He stood still naked, the fox beneath his cloak.

It subsided. She kissed the white space between his ribs that went up and down with his breath. "I'm sorry. OK? I am sorry. I didn't mean to bring him here." Oh Jesus what
sort of thing is that to tell a baby? Inside her something wound another notch tighter around its core. "He won't come back." His face, bent above her, stayed dead, cold. That heart of her twisted. "I'm just sorry, that's all. I am sorry." You always are, her Jim voice said.

She swung him into the tub and tossed a ferryboat in after. It docked above the drain. "You go ahead and play for a minute," she said. Play, ha. She ran the wash basin full of hot water and put her face down into the steam, which opened caves and caverns in her head behind her eyes and cheekbones. WHOOOO LIVES IN THAT CAVE? she called. WHoooo lives in that cave? ANOTHER FUCKING ECHO, she answered. Another fucking echo. STOP IT NOW. Stop i.....

She shook her head hard and pulled the drain plug. "OK, you're mad, but you might as well get over it. Don't just sit there. You look like a wet, pink pig." He sat there. She tried to comb her hair but the rubber band that held it back was so snarled it had to be cut. Scratching through the sediment in the medicine cabinet for a razor blade she found a sample cough drop which she ate instead of brushing her teeth. Her hair, freed, writhed across her shoulders. "Do you want to go down to the river and see the boats this afternoon?" She had to cut a lot of hair out to get the rubber band.

"Jim. It's a whole new year." As if you knew. "Maybe this year we can take the boat around the island. Would you
like that?" She sat down on the floor and started brushing her dark hair. The cough drop made the coffee taste like IvyDry. "It takes three hours and they put the drawbridges up for you and everything. Like this." She pushed the little boat around the island of his feet. "Would you like that?" His eyes were almost focused, watching very carefully inside his head. As though the pupils and the deep brown irises she could see were painted on the backs of his eyeballs, the fronts turned toward another vision. "This afternoon we'll go to the river for sure."

He had liked it even when he was a baby, had stared at Jersey City as though it were the City of God. But then she had taken him out onto the old ferry slip at Hoboken and he'd acted the same way, so it wasn't New Jersey. Down near the deep slow river for just a moment he remembered who he was. She told herself, and him, it was the boats he liked. "We'll play boat now, OK? Play boat?" She soaped him all over, grasped him firmly just under the armpits and pulled him slowly down toward the end of the tub until his stiff legs stopped him. "Row," she sang, "row (pull) row your boat (push) gently down the (pull) down the stream. Lord you're getting to be a heavy boy, Jim. Grab my arms, you're slippy."

The old fashioned bathtub was long and deep and he was heavy. The work of pulling him back and forth awakened her, and she began to sing louder and push harder than she wanted...
to against the child's inertia. Both of them ripped the air into their mouths as though tearing it out of something solid. He held rigid, clutching her arms at the elbows to keep from falling sideways. ROW ROW splat ROW YOUR BOAT MERRILY MERRILY His feet struck the end of the tub, the force through his stiff legs pounding involuntary sounds from him. She smashed his back into the curve of the tub sending a geyser up behind him. Back. Forth. GENTLY Her knees bruised between bone and tile. DOWN THE Screamed the song. His eyes filmed over, all his attention driven inward to the pain. LIFE Almost no water left in the tub, the whole room glazed and running. IS BUT A DREAM His hair wet flat to his head. Both drowned, exhausted. With all the water she couldn't tell whether he was crying, or not.

There are some trees on Hudson Street, in front of St. Luke's. City trees. They squeeze their leaves out in the spring and unfasten them at the first chance. In November Jim had noticed a greener than leaf parakeet in one of them and they had tried to lure it down, knowing it couldn't cope with the city by itself. Jim had looked for it since then, to his mother's surprise. He picked one tree or another and peered up into it. This afternoon he didn't look up at all. Walking beside him, holding his mitten, she couldn't see any of him, just the top of his head and the legs of his snow-pants scizzoring along.
They went down to the river on Christopher Street. No one around. When they got to the edge she let go of his hand. "You play your game, Jim, I'll play mine." While he stood staring at the sunslicked water she nosed up to the scruffy black prow of a tanker, squinted her eyes behind her sunglasses and started to back up, slowly, to make the ship back away from the pier. Dumb game. Should have brought a book or something. Back.

Back into someone. It took a moment to focus on the intrusion. Whose intrusion? Hers, backing into him? Or his for standing there? She remembered the jacket first, it was like her son's. Green, with a hood. And she remembered the muffler. He had stuffed it into the sleeve when he came in and had had trouble with it in the morning in his hurry to get out. She remembered the corduroy pants in the basket chair. The face she didn't remember. She started walking back towards the boy.

"Don't go away," he said. "I'm not following you or anything. I just saw you come down this way."

"And followed," she said. You look sorry about it, too, don't you, she thought.

"OK," he said. "I'll go away." He didn't. "You want me to go away, I'll go away." They kept marching down the wharf. "Is that what you want?" Nothing. "There's nothing simpler. All you've got to do is say something."

"Why?"
"Why what? Why say something?"
"Why did you follow us down here?"
Why did I? he thought.
"Maybe I'm sorry about this morning? I am sorry about this morning," he said. The heat like water around him, the little kid and his evil eye at the end of the bed, her like a corpse. "I mean, I know you told me not to come home with you. But then you didn't seem to mean it either." Not that you noticed much. I felt like a necrophiliac. "You didn't say you had a kid. I was surprised, that's all. I didn't know what was happening."

She didn't answer.
"I mean..."
She turned. "And now you do."
"What?"
"Now you know all about it. You know what's happening."
"Yeah, right," he said. "Right." He kept on walking. Stopped. She came up behind him.
"I could have said something," she said. They turned together and walked back toward Jim.
"He's a big boy for his age, isn't he?" the man asked.
"What's his name?"
"He's not big for his age, her just can't talk. He's an idiot," she said. "His name's Jim."

Why don't you just walk off the pier, you crazy bitch, he thought. He remembered morning, shouting at her, which
is why he'd followed, bitch. I know why I can't breathe in here. Inside you're solid dry ice. You breathe out pure CO₂. Christ. Which was no way to start anybody's year, even hers. To hell with it. He looked sideways without turning his head. The sunglasses threw bruises onto her eyes and she had taken the string out of her hair so it was tucked inside her coat.

"Won't he ever talk?" he asked.

"What do you mean? Will he ever be able to, or does he always act like this?"

"Both, I guess."

"He'll never learn any more than he knows right now," she said. "I don't know. I don't know what he understands any more. I talk to him all the time. Maybe like a dog -- the tone of voice. But more than that." Her shoulders hunched, she looked at the cement in front of her.

"How can you keep him? What kind of life is that?"

"It's like talking to myself," she went on. "It's like he wasn't born yet."

She's crazy, he thought. "But he'll grow up. How can you take care of him?"

"We manage," she said. They turned again, like sentries.

"They know better, in the places. How do you know he wouldn't like it better, if you gave him up?"

"He wouldn't give me up. If it were me. If he were..."
Forget it. I'm not giving him anywhere."

"Your whole life? Why blow two lives?"

"Well who wants an idiot bastard? His father didn't."

She stared in his face. "This is the way we're happy."

"You are not."

"I am too. He is. He's just like this with strangers. It's you."

Curl up around the kid and die, he thought. Who needs it.

He said, "Why don't we get some dinner. He'll get used to it. Give him a chance." But just to dinner, that's the end.

They slowed down, looking at the boy. He'd pulled his hood down. His black hair curled like any boy's might. This man had black hair, too, she saw.

He said, "You shouldn't let him do it. It just takes getting used to."

"He hasn't made a sound all day."

She walked up slower to him and laid her right hand on his ear, rubbed the side of his head and pulled him up against her hip. He was wound tight. "Come on Jim. We're going to get some dinner with this man." She remembered. "With Paul." She turned him from the edge, reached for his hand.

He screamed. From all the wasted spaces in his mind and from the turnings of his blood he tore a cry of perfectly
articulated pain. A needle in the city. He screamed again. He screamed again. It pierced them both.

He stopped to take breath. Pulled it into him, like water. It filled his lungs, overfilled his throat. Too much. When he closed his throat to keep it in it pushed up, up. Click. Pushed the little trapdoor shut again up in his head and latched it.

The breath leaked out without a sound.

She put his hood up and they took his hands. Walking with him between them they couldn't see him. Hood, hands and snowpants. Not his tears. He made no sound.
Emily's mother's house squatted halfway up Two Vulture hill, overlooking everything. Below it the road made a tidy dorsal line through the valley. The creek arched down to meet it at the crossroad, and the railroad followed the creek like a row of stitches.

Emily's mother spent a lot of time at the dining room window looking for evil. She found it. When she did she made a stink. One month there was an accident on the hill every Saturday morning with blood and screams she could almost hear even that far away and opportunities to call the State Patrol. Hello this is Edna Zink. I live... Yes, we know, Mrs. Zink. There's another accident on the hill. Thank you Mrs. Zink.

Emily's father was always sent to the scene with coffee. He lived in Emily's mother's house, too.

Emily spent a lot of time under her mother's thumb, when she could get that far. She was a strung out, boney kid with bushy brown hair and speckled brown eyes twice their size behind pink plastic rimmed glasses, and never allowed to wear dungarees to school like the other kids. Her mother had hopes she would develop into something if she would only
stand up straight, stop mumbling, stop biting those fingernails, and let her mother give her a pretty permanent instead of being satisfied to look like Harpo Marx all the time. Emily had never seen Harpo Marx, though his name was mentioned daily. Emily had seen her mother's baby book, and fostered no hopes for her own future. Mr. Zink hadn't hoped for anything but a freak accident for years.

The schoolbus stopped at the crossroads, in plain view, and Mrs. Zink watched Emily all the way home, as any concerned mother would. Edward, the neighbor boy, had long since given up punching Emily, and vice versa, because they were both so sick of hearing about it. Edward, for the most part, had given up walking with Emily altogether. At least while the schoolbus was still in sight. They walked, severally or otherwise, correctly down the left side of the road, facing the traffic, and well onto the shoulder.

The Green kids walked down the tracks. They lived on Polecat Road, the dirt cutoff along the creek. By walking the tracks they eliminated a quarter of a mile. There were seven Green kids in school.

One day the principal called an assembly. A State Patrol appeared. Now some of you kids are on the safety patrol, he said. You see that kids get off the bus and cross the road OK. But what good is that going to do if once the bus is gone you start in acting foolish? Like walking down the railroad tracks. We've had complaints that some of you
kids are walking on the tracks. You ought to know better. Emily knew better. Emily Knowbetter Zink. She walked home down the center line. She punched Edward right in his fat face.

What do you think you're doing, young lady? It was you who called the State Patrol to come to school, wasn't it. Wasn't it.

Um.

You don't even care if everybody hates me, do you? Don't be silly, Emily. IT'S NOT SILLY.

Go to your room.

Emily went to her room and wrote in a book. Someday when she had a little girl she'd read it so she'd remember how it felt. Not that she'd forget, but just in case growing up did that to you. One day she found all her spelling errors underlined in red and "You would do well to use your time constructively." written on the last page. She burned the book.

One Saturday Emily and Edward and Carver Green were walking on the tracks, around the hill where even Mrs. Zink's bird watching binoculars couldn't see. Her mother thought Emily and Edward were out in Biff Gordan's back pasture and the woods looking for mushrooms. Carver had a package of Lucky Strikes rolled into the sleeve of his teeshirt, and he was smoking one in long, deep drags. Every so often he'd
french inhale and a thick ribbon of smoke, like a movie of a waterfall running backwards, travelled up over Carver Green's big, livercolored upper lip and split like two tails into his nostrils which were spread out beside his nose like flying buttresses. He looked so cool, so casual, so in control Emily couldn't stand still.

You'll tell your mother, Carver said.

No I won't Carver. No I won't.

Yeah, you will.

I won't.

Ha, said Edward the Treacherous, who knew as well as she did that the chance of Emily's telling her mother she had walked down the railroad tracks begging George Washington Carver Green the Third for some of his Lucky Strike was about as likely as her growing a full set of feathers overnight.

You let Edward have some.

That's different.

What's different about it?

Carver picked a tiny shred of tobacco off his tongue tip with his little fingernail.

He's a boy.

So?

And he don't have your mother.

Besides, Edward said, I'm older.

That little shit. His birthday was in July, hers in
September. This was August.

You're only ten, he said. And I'm eleven.

Big deal, thought Emily. Eleven and your ears stick out, and your first pimple festering on your forehead. Edward came to Emily's ear. He had hair like overcooked weed leaves, last year's, limp all over his head. His mother liked it long, so his ears wouldn't look so stupid. He wore glasses and braces both.

So what, said Emily. You're only in fifth grade. I'm in sixth.

This was a daily antiphon, as regular as Harpo Marx. G. W. Carver Green the III was fifteen and in the fifth grade with Edward. He also had the Lucky Strikes. And even if I give it to you, he said, you wouldn't know what to do with it. Haw, haw. Isn't that right Ed?

Haw, said Edward obediently.

I've smoked a lot, said Emily.

Haw, haw, replied the boys.

Emily jumped up onto the rail and walked along like it was nothing, like it was Christ on water. Edward and Carver smoked ostentatiously, ignoring her.

Funny thing, said Carver.

What's that, said Edward the Straightman.

For a girl whose mama thinks she's too good to walk the tracks, that there girl sure does a job of walking down the rail, don't she Ed?
Funny thing, said Edward.
You want some cigarette? said Carver.
Emily hopped down.
Dumb, too, said Carver.

Edward nearly split his britches laughing and honking and slapping himself. Emily regressed several years for misery.

You little rat, she said. I'll never play with you again.

Who needs it, said Edward.
You can play with me, girl, said Carver. Any time.

Edward looked incredulous, betrayed for a moment before his face slid into a pudding of furtive and lurid excitement.

Snick, snick.
They walked along a while.
Where you going now? asked Carver.
Nowhere.
Just out taking a walk.

They all three passed the path that cut off through the swamp to join the road. Polecat Road curved off away from the tracks at that point and the Green's house was another quarter mile up the road. Carver would have turned off if he'd been going home. Neither Edward nor Emily had ever been to Carver's house.

Why don't we go to your house, said Edward the Pre-
sumptuous.

Oh yeah? said Carver. Why don't we go to your place?

That was the end of that subject. Not that it was totally out of the question. Carver's sister Josephine, age 15 then, had spent practically the whole summer at Emily's house the year before. That was because Emily had been sick in bed with a boring, painless disease and Emily's mother had hired Josephine to come take care of her. Two dollars a day, on the condition that she would arrive bathed and dressed in a clean dress. There was, of course, no running water at the Green's house, but jobs were scarce.

Mother you CAN'T. She's in my CLASS at SCHOOL.

Don't be silly, Emily.

The two girls spoke an average of thirty words a day. Their closest bond, aside from their mutual deep desire to pretend it wasn't happening to them, was a summerlong scheme to outwit Mrs. Zink on the subject of books. Edward's cousin had loaned Emily two large crates of them -- Nancy Drew, Carolyn Keen, Tom Swift, every book in every series -- but Mrs. Zink was sure that more than a book a day was harmful to the eyes. Therefore, every hour and a half or so Josephine would sneak down and slip the day's first book's cover onto a new book and weasel back up to the bedroom. They both would then retreat into embarrassed isolation.

Josephine's sixteenth birthday had since dawned, cloudless and schoolfree.
Emily wanted to ask Carver what had happened to her since she went to live in Chester with some cousins, but more than that she wanted not to remind him of that summer, so she didn't.

They kept on down the tracks. Alongside them the skunk cabbage flourished, gleaming like philodendron with their leaves freshly Wesson oiled. The swampground, like a full soaked sponge, barely kept its surface above water. Things lived in it. All Emily had to do to make her throat clutch at itself and her body forget to breathe was think about having to leave the safe, dry gravel hump of the railroad right of way and step into that damp and sucking swamp. Her fear of the things that lived in swamps, tall grass, thickets and rock walls was even stronger than her shame to be afraid. She just hoped Edward wouldn't remember it. She tried not to think of it herself, because if she couldn't keep from thinking of it he was sure to bring it up.

Just before the tracks curved into the hills they crossed the creek. The trestle wasn't much -- the kind with two black sides like ice trays, or like a Howard Johnson's hot dog roll around a single track. In summer this was where some people swam and dived off the trestle into the deep part only four or five feet below.

I'm going across on the outside, said Edward.

This required sidestepping along the shallow ledge they stood along to dive while hunching outward because the
upper ledge was lower than your head. The metal partitions, like the five short separations in an egg carton, posed technical problems long since solved by these three.

I gotta pee, said Carver, halfway across.
Me too, said Edward.
Emily, last, said not a word.
Two arcs of urine fountained off the trestle.
Too bad Emily's a girl, said Edward.
I don't even have to pee, Emily said.
Wesley Timmon's sister can do it standing up, said Edward.

Oh yeah? said Carver.
She can not, said Emily.
I've seen her, said Edward.
How, how, how? thought Emily.
Wesley Timmon's sister is trash, she said.
Neah, neah, said Edward, zipping up his pants.

Around the hill the track got up on better ground and swamp gave way to woods. Lots of underbrush in the woods, but some trails and paths, and some little clearings back in the trees. Sometimes you could think it was a forest.

Let's play Indian, suggested Edward. We can go down those paths and scout around. See what's in there.

I already know everything that's in there, said Carver.

This here's my territory.

Well, you could be the leader then, said Edward.
Hupf, said Carver.
And you've got matches. We could have a campfire and maybe cook some stuff.
What stuff?
The stuff we find.
Edward, are you crazy? asked Emily.
Well Indians did, said Edward.
I mean the fire, said Emily, wholly shocked.

Three years before the two of them had asked for lunches to take on a hike. Their mothers fixed them. The two adventurers trudged off over Biff Gorden's field, over the crest of the big hill, and stopped to make a camp. That was about ten minutes after they'd set out. They each had swiped a half a dozen matchbooks from their homes. Emily wanted to build a little fire on one of the large flat rocks, but Edward went ahead and lit a tuft of grass. It was in August. They threw the milk they'd carried on it and stamped and slapped but it got away and all they could do then was try to beat it home. The wind was blowing up the hill, so neither smoke nor flame was evident to Mrs. Zink from her dining room window outlook. She could see Edward, inside the fence, gasping and gaping up the hill.

Please, please call the fire truck, mother. There's a big fire up there.

My little girl says there's a fire, reported Mrs. Zink, still less than half convinced. FIRE! FIRE!
The wind had changed and smoke and full grown flame crested the hill at once.

FIRE! FIRE!
Where, lady?
FIRE!

The firemen came, but first they brought the house truck, judging from the call that flames must have been lapping at the lady's feet. They had to go back to town to get the field truck, and by that time the field was gone and fire was in the woods.

Edward and Emily were down at Edward's house, under Edward's bed. They'd never play with fire any more. They'd never build a fire again. They'd never touch a match.

Their mothers were up at Zink's, watching the fire.
Any idea how this fire happened? asked the fire chief.
None at all, said they.

Later, Emily told all. Weeping and cowering all the afternoon. She had been instructed to meditate on the texts "Wait until your father comes home, young lady" and "what will he think of you?" Waiting for his key in the door, his birdcall whistle, his daily cry "Where's my Emily. And how's the kitchen Zink?" He'd never speak to her again.

You're crazy, Edward, said Emily.
Aw, I know how to do it now, said he.
I'm going home, said Emily.
Oh no, said Edward. Oh no you're not.
He grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back. Looks like we got a captive, said Carver.
Let me go you fat old faggot.
Edward twisted harder.
Haw, said Carver. What's a faggot. I bet you don't even know.
I do too.
I bet, said Edward, giving little pulls on her arm. It's a bundle of sticks, said Emily. So let me go.
Edward didn't think that sounded exactly right, but he wasn't about to commit himself.
Jesus Christ, said Carver.
They pushed into the woods along a little grassy path, Emily first.
We always make the captives go first so they'll step on all the snakes, said Edward the Hidfous. Isn't that right, Carver.
Finally there was a dark little clearing full of mouldering leaves and horrible small rustlings.
Stop here, said Edward, swiping at his forehead with his free arm. We've come a fur piece today.
We'll tie the captive to that tree, said Carver. He dug a piece of string out of his blue jeans and gave it to Edward.
A fur piece.
What kind of Indian talk is that, said Carver. "A fur piece."

Well, it's old time talk anyway, said Edward.
Shit, said Carver.
I told you, Edward, said Emily. I'm not playing.
He tied tighter.
Ow. I don't want to be the captive. I'll play if I can be something else.

Edward went back to the center of the clearing and started scraping a spot free of leaves.

Don't even know what language that captive is talking, do you? he said.

Hard to tell, said Carver.

Come on, you guys, said Emily. I'll even be a squaw.
Let me be something else but captive.

Don't know what kind of tribe that could be, said Edward.

It sounds like Greek to me, said Carver. Know any Greek Indians in these parts?

Squaws were all right, too, you guys, said Emily. Look at Sacejewea. Look at Pokahontas.

Sack o what she say? said Edward.

Something about poke a hot ass, said Carver. Maybe she want to play some other game.

Edward got that half-cooked look on his face again.
Snic, snic, snic, he said.
Carver sprawled out on his boney back in the center of the clearing. The leaves were dry and soft this late in the summer. He lit another cigarette, which drew Edward like a moth.

You going to pass that peace pipe? said Edward.
Maybe, said Carver, but didn't.
Silence.
We better get the fire going, said Edward, after a while.
We don't want no fire.
Sure we do, Edward explained.
I don't.
Well I do.
Carver drew in on the cigarette. You got any matches? he asked.

Edward ignored the question. Carver blew beautiful, round smoke rings. There was a long rich pause in which Edward considered going home, Emily figured alternatives, and Carver relaxed.

Carver? said Emily.
Hmm.
You let me go and I'll be the squaw.
Carver stood up. Slow. Slow. Walked so cool and tall over to Emily's tree.
You know what, little Emily?
What?
It look to me like you are the squaw, and tied or untied it ain't going to make no difference.

Emily couldn't think of anything at all to say, except so what, and she couldn't get any conviction into that. Carver held out his cigarette for her to smoke. She did. He walked on over and squatted down beside Edward.

We don't want a fire, you see, because we don't want the other tribe to know where we are, he murmured.

Oh yeah, whispered Edward.

Don't that make sense?

I guess so.

Carver unrolled the cigarettes from his sleeve again. He shook out two.

There's something else we gotta do, he said.

What's that, said Edward, leaning over to get the light. That squaw. We better get her initiated into our tribe. That way when the other tribe comes along she'll be on our side in the battle.

Yeah, said Edward, doubtfully. How we going to do that?

You're the Indian expert. What did they do?

Edward thought. His brain produced an instant replay digest of Daniel Boon programs and seven hundred comic books. They made them run the gauntlet, he said.

What's that? asked Carver.

That's when the captive runs between rows of Indians
who beat on them with sticks. If they made it to the end then they were in the tribe, or whatever they were trying to prove. Or we could make her do the fire walk.

We'll do the gauntlet.
How can we with just two of us?
I know how. You just go find some sticks, said Carver, standing up.

Emily overheard "sticks". What for? she yelled.
You'll see, said Edward, heading into the trees. We're going to burn you at the stake.

Carver ambled over and cut the strings around Emily's hands.

What are you going to do? she asked.
Just get you in the tribe. Nothing to worry about.

Edward came back with two sumac poles about two inches in diameter.

What you got to do, Carver continued, is run the gauntlet around this clearing three times. You can't go in the woods, and you can't try to run away. OK?

Edward started a little hopping, jiggling war dance around his sumac pole. His hair flapped up and down from his head like part of a machine trying to get him off the ground.

Or do you want to go on being captive?

Ha, said Emily, and took off around the circle.

Edward dropped the fancy stuff and leaped away like a
scared toad. WHAP. His topheavy pole missed her by a foot, and he bounced across the circle to intercept her.

Come on, Carver, he yelled.

TYHWAK. The wood connected, but didn't slow her down. Edward veered off on another arc to try again.

THUDK. Carver's stick snaked out and caught her foot. The ground kicked all her air out, and Emily's teeth sank into her bottom lip. Blood all over.

Hey, said Edward, stopped. Hey don't hurt her.

Oh dearie me, squealed Carver. Heavens to Betsy, Oh don't hurt her.

Emily didn't have enough breath to cry or do anything at all but lie on the ground and try to keep the blood from getting on her sweater.

How come you whacking away as hard as you can and then all of a sudden it's don't hurt her? Carver said to Edward.

He moved over in front of him and drove the point of his stick into the ground half an inch from Edward's toe. Edward didn't say anything.

You know how come? said Carver. Cause you're a cracker. Cause you're a little white cracker.

Wha? Edward felt he must have missed a turn somewhere. A cracker?

What's a white cracker? he asked.

Carver spat on the ground. You're a white cracker, he said. You and her both.
Emily was up on her knees and one hand, wiping her chin with the other. Her enormous lip felt like an inner tube to her tongue.

Youb a grab cragr, she said.

What?

Thed you're a graham gracker, I said.

Shut your mouth, said Carver.

Yeah, said Edward, you're still the captive.

Emily was too dizzy to think straight. You guys cheat, she said.

Edward chose his side and did not mention that he had not cheated. Besides, maybe tripping was fair in gauntlets even if he hadn't thought of it.

Why don't we tie her to the railroad tracks, he said.

What for, said Carver.

She didn't make it into the tribe, did she?

Yeah, OK.

Nobody was really interested in keeping up the game, but nobody said let's just go home. Carver and Edward each took one of Emily's wrists and marched her back toward the railroad.

Emily wasn't making any deals. No conversation. No trust. No nothing. She'd play the real game. Stoic. To hell with them. They wouldn't hear a squeak out of her no matter what they did.

Lie down.
What happened to the string?
I cut it off back there.
You want me to get it?
No the pieces are too little anyway. You just hold her feet and I'll hold her head on this rail.
Wouldn't matter if we really tied her, said Edward. Train would never come down here now anyway.
Oh yes, said Carver. There'll be a train.
He crouched down, lower down on the gravel than the track, so his head was just about a level with Emily's. His hand twisted in her hair kept her neck tight against the metal. He started a crooning little story, almost a lullabye, a charm.
Train going to come. Big old train. Freight train. All the way to Ellensburg fulla mushroom soil or empty cars or cows. Lotsa trains along here, night and day. Day and night. No wait at all. Train train train.
Edward started making noises. Chhooka-chooka-chooka-chooka-WOOOooOOO.
Just look at the TV, continued Carver. All you gotta do to get a train is tie a lady on the tracks. Old train come puffing right along regular as ambush at the creek. Oh yeah here come the train, train.
After a few minutes the rail started tingling under Emily's neck.
Carver, I think a train is really coming, she said
Sure it is, said Carver. Yes indeed it is.

No, really.

All aboard, said Edward. Tweet tweet.

The vibrations thumped harder into her neck. Carver I'm not kidding. I can feel it.

Emily could see Edward's face when he felt it too. All the color disappeared and stranded the freckles.

Carver, he said, the train's coming.

Course it is.

I'm letting go her feet, said Edward. He slipped off down the gravel to stare up, Emily imagined, like he'd waited for the fire to come over the hill. She tried to squirm around with her feet released, but Carver had her down by the shoulders.

HOOOT. The train. Its brakes scraping metal, screaming, whistling, honking, bell clanging.

He let her go, of course. Even pulled her off the tracks. But that was twenty years ago, and they were country kids. They all ran home, by different routes. The train went on, conductor cursing, engineer sweating and trembling, fireman taking a drink. Even Emily's mother never found out what happened.

And then they all lived ever after. Edward grew up and joined the Navy. Stayed in twenty years. The only battle he ever saw close was in Orlando, when the farmers
brought ax handles into town in truckloads to beat the niggers. Sailors were not permitted to participate.

Emily left home early and travelled far. She finally enjoyed a long career as one of the meanest local organisers of the ladies' liberation movement.

Carver retired to Chester where he is, presumably, alive and well.
Cousins, as a matter of fact. Fact. Evelyn Mayflower and her cousin Beatrice MacIntyre.

But before that. Two brothers came to River Bridge in eighteen forty-something, found farmland, planted orchards, and spewed the seed of four small generations of pig headed people. They also found an uddershaped meander in the river and a hill of land, furred with new grass, and sloped down to the water gentler than the softest curve of a girl's backside. They each took half and both built houses from one plan, just alike, and only about a hundred feet apart. Frame, with gingerbread and tall, banistered porches around three sides. Four bedrooms upstairs (now three and a bathroom), downstairs a parlor, big kitchen, dining room, pantry. No hallway. Nothing grand. The brothers intended to be comfortable. Both were Yankees.

When war came Everett went and Nathan didn't. It was none of his business, Nathan said, to go a thousand miles away to shoot somebody else. Anybody wanted to fight him could come to River Bridge. He told his brother not to be a fool. Furthermore, he said, he'd always known him for a quarreler who didn't know how to mind his business. He had
a wife and child and no time to go looking for adventure, which is all it was. When did Everett ever care about a nigger he'd like to know? As for himself, if any black wanted to come farm in River Bridge that was fine with him, but he didn't intend to go and get him. If they want their freedom let them take it just like everybody else. Nobody gets anything handed to them, and if they do they can't hold onto it.

Everett said "coward" and the brothers started planting. The last thing the Moreheads did together was plant a row of poplars down the middle of the hill, between the houses from the road clear to the river. Their wives had never got on anyhow. Don't talk to them, each brother told his family -- one wife and son apiece.

Everett came back after all, a Colonel with gold braid from here to there. His son was ten years old and proud. Next door Nathan's son was dead, drowned in the river. But he had a girl who knew not to go in the water by herself and not to go through the poplars no matter what. When Nathan choked on a hard boiled egg and died in town one night and Everett took him home the people thought that would be the end to it. Not so. He'd hauled him in the house, upstairs to the bedroom shaped just like his own, said "judgment" to his wife and child, and walked home by the road, not through the trees. The families never spoke again.

So. In those two houses the families begat, begrudged,
and wore down the floorboards until now there's one old lady left in the downstream house -- Everett's -- with no son or daughter and a rented couple to take care of her. She lies up in her bed upstairs where she can almost see the river and the poplars to her left, and see the shadows shrink all morning. (Nathan's had the sun all morning, Everett's afternoons.) A stroke selected tongue and legs, arms, everything almost, except enough to look at her small world, watch television, and listen to the strangers downstairs rearranging more than sixty years of life. Husbands died early in the houses.

Next door, if that's not too neighborly a way to put it, Evelyn Mayflower still had her family. Hadley, her forty-three year old son who taught high school mathematics, and Marion, the astonishing young wife he'd brought home from summer school three years before. She taught art at the schools. Why did they still live "at home" when Hadley was forty-three years old? When Marion had no taste for wicker tables full of jungle violets and fern, nor wallpaper, nor for her husband's mother's kitchen with or without the new things they'd bought for it? God knows. Also Lucy Sampson, Postmaster's Assistant and schoolmate to both cousins, could offer, and did offer, speculation. There were, so far, no grandchildren, which, in Evelyn's opinion, was just as well.

Her one son's sudden marriage to someone almost half
his age was one of the few things she did not judge, at least out loud.

MacIntyre was one of the few words that never moved Mrs. Mayflower's agile tongue at all.

Enmity, it seems, is something laid down at the roots of houses, in the dark, for someone's children's children's children to bring out, aged, perfected, vintage to be savored. A heritage to make grandchildren hold up their heads because it's there. In this family there wasn't need. Each generation brewed its own.

For instance, Evelyn and Beatrice had once been friends, pledged to let no family difference come between them. There aren't so many children in River Bridge that any could afford to do without a like-sexed playmate less than a year off his own age right next door, especially with the added incentive of having to sneak. The two girls met in first grade, by fourth had learned Morse code and signalled from their bedroom windows on leafless winter nights. Both were denied riding horses. Together they flirted with conversion (sneaking again) at St. Mary of the Angels Roman Catholic Church, and with the soldiers their male friends suddenly grew into. One was MacIntyre.

The one, as it turned out, slender, brown-eyed soldier with a brave moustash both of them chose. And he chose both of them. Chose, and re-chose, and chose again. What friendship could withstand it?
Married the same week, one became MacIntyre, one Mayflower. Mayflower? A reserve, called up in time of need. Both husbands left within a month to fight the war to end all wars. It ended all of theirs', at least.

The widow Mayflower produced an heir, with time to spare. The widow MacIntyre did not. And if the dark haired little Mayflower had MacIntyre brown eyes? God, again, knows how that happened, and even Mrs. Sampson kept her mouth shut.

One June morning Evelyn woke up dead, but didn't know it. The river still ran slow as soup around the bottom of the yard. Petunia beds, laid out like flags, flapped in the breeze. The asters, zinnias, the new peace roses -- Evelyn read them off the lawn just as she read them from the catalog in winter. The grass must have sprung up an inch just overnight. She hadn't thought it was that long. Hadley would have to get right to it after school. The poplars weren't throwing any shadow, so it was morning.

Peaceful, to sit here nodding and rocking in the window bay. She must have been dozing. But why was she sitting in the middle of the morning? The question floated past her mind in a small red rowboat, one of a row of them. Pretty things. No hurry. They all seemed weighted about the same. Since Hadley was a baby, rocking, nursing. Both of them napping in the chair. Mother in the garden. Summer too. Such a tiny baby. Fur on his head, thick, soft, fine fur. Like the cat's chin. Short. Soft, quiet, gentle baby. In
her arms. Rocking. No hurry. Time to rock.

But something pinched her, in her ear. On her ear. She unclasped her hands, reached up. Earrings? Her pearl earrings on a Tuesday morning? They must be screwed half through the lobe. The peaceful water carrying those boats stirred up, scattered them. She looked at herself. Getting stout, no doubt of it. The blue crepe was definitely stretched across her stomach, but perhaps it was only the way she was sitting. It was not the way she was sitting it was fat. Not exactly flab. Something firm and well packed that made her dress pull snug over, and made the navy belt the only indication of where a waist should be. Her good blue dress on a Tuesday morning?

If she'd been someone else Evelyn Mayflower could have called out for someone. "Marion?" she could have said, "What's this? I've put on my good clothes and can't remember why! I must have been in a daze all this morning. I can't remember a thing since I went to sleep last night. What do you think of that?"

But Evelyn Mayflower had never shown a weakness in her life. Or hardly ever. She listened. No one. Hadley was teaching summer school. It looked late for Marion to be in bed, but it was possible. Indeed it was. Evelyn removed the earrings, thought better of it, put them on again. I am the captain of my fate, she thought, my fat, my rowboat. What? What? There must be something loose inside my head,
she thought.

Not a sound. Where was Marion? Not in the river. She would swim, and alone. "It isn't dangerous," she said. Oh no? How many times had Evelyn's own mother told her about the brother drowned right off that point? She'd see.

Twank. She had been unwary. Had followed one of the thoughts she knew better than to run out after. It slipped along its well worn route, Evelyn nimbly behind, and then the trap, herself deep in the smooth dug pit with leaves still drifting down. The catechism.

She'd see. How would she see?
By drowning.
And if she didn't drown?
She wouldn't see. She'd think it isn't dangerous.
But it is dangerous.
Yes.
And she should see.
Yes.
So she should drown.
No.
But you know it's dangerous.
It is dangerous.
But she doesn't drown. Therefore she's right.
She isn't right.
She'll see.
How will she see?
Evelyn knew there was no climbing from that pit. The only way out, she'd found, was to be somewhere else. No getting there, just being there, and she'd amassed a catalog of places, of situations to be in. From the Marion-swimming-river pit she went to Maui. The breeze of heavy, scented air, a dining room, smiling people at her table, the flowers, music. TV commercials had helped quite a bit. Sometimes she had to edit them -- for instance, it wouldn't do to have a dancing girl in Maui switch her back to swimming Marion.

She'd gotten so facile at substituting scene for scene that sometimes she found herself in a place without noticing that she'd been near a pit at all. If she found herself in X she knew she'd been chasing Y.

But she never, ever confused the two. One was the world she lived in, the other merely a practical device to make it possible to sail on with an even keel. She always knew where she was. She wasn't the kind of person who stood helplessly in the upstairs hall trying to remember what she'd come up for.

Yet here she was, washed up on a June morning in the sixty-third year of her life, dressed to go out, and no idea where she was going, or how she'd gotten that far.

Very peculiar, thought Evelyn, cautiously. Very strange indeed. If I'm not careful they'll think I'm not all here. Sit tight, she thought. If she were Hadley she
would have thought something else. Except that if she were
Hadley she probably would have called out. Guileless Had-
ley, thought his mother, and then found herself crossing
the Delaware with Washington.

Eventually she rocked herself up out of the chair and
into the dining room. Good God, she said.

The table was pushed back against the wall and layered
with things to eat. Cakes. Nella Donat's chocolate nut
fudge cake, it looked like, and orange macaroon. Sand-
wiches with Saran Wrap over them, and pie. The good dessert
plates. Evelyn sat down again and stared and stared. Po-
tato chips.

I'm dressed up for a party, she thought. A surprise.
I loathe surprises. She made a point of keeping all the
corners of her life cleaned out just so none of them could
harbor a surprise. There had been two of such nastiness
she'd never rested easy since.

Potato chips. Still no sound from anywhere. A sur-
prise party? For her? Why was she here then? Where was
everyone? Had they drugged her? Impossible. Hadley would
never. How else explain it? And someone must have dressed
her. Good God, again. She'd wakened up too soon.

Impossible. No one who knew her could think she'd
like it. Was it a joke? She wasn't dreaming.

Potato chips. She wouldn't have them in the house.
Flakes of grease. Slices of thin cooked grease. They gave
Hadley pimples. There hadn't been a potato chip inside the
house for more than thirty years, yet there was her big
bread bowl full of them. That was what they were, wasn't
it? Where were her glasses?

She went over and poked into the bowl. Potato chips.
She ate one.

Just one. No one would notice. You could hardly tell
the difference even if you knew one was gone.

She ate another.

You really couldn't tell the difference. The whole
bowl looked just the same. Such raucous cruching, though.
Evelyn stored up saliva to muffle the next one. Amazing.
The whole bowl looked untouched. But perhaps it was being
so close without her glasses.

Evelyn sat down again because her bones seemed to be
sweating. She knew from the potato chips that whatever was
going on wasn't something that would be explained away. She
did not choose to have potato chips in her world.

Then she took the fork, and Mrs. Mayflower understood
that there would be no comfortable explanation for anything.
A simple action, picking up a fork. Just reach out, close
your hand around it, up comes the fork. Sleek in the light
like a stylized fish, or a little silver tree. The fork
lay in her hand, obedient.

But it lay on the table, too, part of the uninterrupted
row of forks laid out by someone she didn't know for a party
She didn't know about. I'm crazy, she thought, and when someone comes they'll take me away. If I'm not careful. She put down the fork again at the end of the row, but then there were thirteen where there should have been twelve. When she picked up the same fork no duplicate stayed on the table, and she found that she could nest her fork with the original and they stayed together. She felt like she wanted to hide, but she knew her own house too well. Somehow there weren't nearly enough pins in her hair and the long gray braids dragged down her neck. Furthermore, all her underwear seemed to have gone awry.

Hadley's car in the driveway. Too late to fix her hair. Evelyn scuttled back to the rocker. Scuttled. She who had gotten through sixty-three years with scarcely a break in stride. She never lifted a foot from the ground without knowing where she was going to put it down. She would, this time, pretend to nap in the chair until their conversation told her what to do.

Footsteps on the porch. The screen door. Marion's purse hitting the table. The familiar noises did Evelyn good. And then nothing, almost imperceptible shuffling sounds. What were they doing?

"Well, it's over."

"Marion," said her husband.

"I'm sorry. But you know what I mean. It's been so hanging."
"We didn't plug the coffee in," said Hadley. "And here comes Lucy Sampson."

"Damn," said Marion. All the nice, well bred girls in River Bridge, thought Evelyn, and he chose the daughter of a corn flakes machine mechanic from Battle Creek. Red sunset boiled across Lake Michigan and all the pretty sailboats flowed home to the music of her mother's powder box.

"Knock, knock," said Lucy Sampson.

"Come on in." The front door of the house was on the river side, so people usually used the kitchen door, which faced the road. "We forgot the coffee," Marion said.

Lucy plugged in the pot, and opened the refrigerator. "Let me do something," she said.

They don't seem too concerned about the noise, thought Evelyn. If it were a surprise you'd think they'd... She quieted her own analysis to hear them better. Unusual.

"Cream poured yet?" said Hadley.

His mother kept her eyes closed. More footsteps, the refrigerator, dishes. Then Hadley's footsteps coming through the double door, straight to her, stopping right in front of her. Now she'd know. They'd just been ignoring her until the proper time.

"Honey, what about these violets?"

"What about them?" from the kitchen.

"Should I water them, or what?"

"Whatever you think. I haven't watered them."
"I watered them!" said Evelyn, out loud. "I watered them two days ago." She rocked forward and poked her finger into the zink tray the pots sat in. No water. "Hadley, what is going on?"

He stood right beside her, above her, looking down into the violets. She peered up at him. "Hadley?" He was a tall man, too, beginning to spread out around his middle more than she liked to see. The parallel lines across his forehead showed clearly now, and the two channels working up into his hair. No grey, yet.

After a long time she understood that Hadley didn't hear her, and he didn't see her, and her mind did its maneuver and she was sitting in a lawn chair down by the water looking up at John MacIntyre who was looking at the ground at his feet and wouldn't look at her. "How can you be marrying Beatrice," she was saying, "when we..." He'd said nothing. He'd said he couldn't help it. He'd said he hadn't meant. He didn't even stand on both his feet, only fidgeted on one and then the other. She saw how badly he wanted to get away and kept him there while the cold running stream of bitterness flowed up in her. She saw him from a long way away, sweating miserably into his soldier suit, afraid even to say goodbye and walk away. He hadn't meant. He couldn't help. Watching him, she knew she'd die before she said that. She stood up without another word and left him there.

More people came. Hadley forgot the violets. More
people in their good dark clothes. Evelyn sat and watched until Willa Nogaret almost sat on her. Then she wandered through the room like a fish in a rocky stream. More people came. Half the town in her downstairs. Soon there wasn't room for her to stand still without someone walking through her. Through her. She wanted to walk backwards down the telescope, be small and still and distant.

Finally she wound up sitting halfway up the stairs, as she had when she was a child to watch her parents' parties. In an hour or so she learned, time and again, that she died peacefully asleep, that she hadn't suffered anything, that she would have wanted it that way. According to Mary Green the secret of perfect raspberry preserves was lost forever. Unexpected. Shocked. Never would have thought. Never sick a day in her life. Evelyn felt weak, like water in her veins. Could do anything she really put her mind to. Evelyn agreed, from habit if not present conviction. Will moves mountains, faith molehills. From where she sat, far back in the stairs with her eyes half closed, the two roomfull of people surged and bubbled like a dance. She was the music. Evelyn's dying, and their fears of theirs. Who would have thought? The freckled top of Guy Pratt's head appeared beside her. A closer view than she'd ever wanted of Guy Pratt's bald head top. The strangeness of this world since her awakening rose like water up the stairs. She did not swim. She went upstairs.
In her room everything was just about the same, except for the scum of dust she wouldn't have allowed. To dust shalt thou return, she thought, indeed. The heavy crocheted beadedspread was almost in place. On the dresser her mother's heavy-handled brush and comb and mirror. She realised she was afraid to touch them. After her mother died, too, she had hesitated -- to claim, to intrude, to take over objects that had been someone else's private things. They were, themselves, forbidding. Gradually they had become hers, along with the room, the house, everything. Now they were no one's. At least no hers. How could anyone possess a thing? She picked up the brush and, as she feared, one weighted her hand, substantial as ever, while another remained motionless on the dressing table.

She looked into the mirror behind the table. Four brushes. Two of them held by an almost tall, pale-skinned woman with gray braids coming unfastened behind her back. Eyebrows still dark, still bright brown eyes, good firm jawline without even much of a double chin. Not for her age, anyway. A strong face. Composed. The face she chose to wear.

Evelyn put up her hair. Laid all the hairpins in a row, as usual, and stuck them in the braids one by one. When she had picked all of them up there were none left. She realised, before she hid time to circumvent it, where all the originals must be, and laid her self, or whatever it was,
down on the bed.

From downstairs voices still ran in currents through the house. Melanie Oakshot's babble. Albert Scale's rock rolling rumble. An occasional descant from Genievieve, his wife. Someone's small plane above. Next door the piano had started up again. And the singing. Thirty years of piano lessons and now this, thought Evelyn. Downstairs the screen door squealed and closed, squealed and closed. The voices droned and swooped.

She woke to silence, again. Then voices in the kitchen. Dishes clacking. Cleaning up. The shadows had moved several hours along.

Coming down the stairs she thought it might have been a dream, but the dining room table was still against the wall. Hadley and Marion and Lucy were cleaning up.

Hadley had tied the yellow apron around his waist. He always had been an unselfconscious, helpful boy around the house. She had sometimes been surprised that he'd never seemed to mind. Apparently he hadn't been teased about it either. At least not that she'd ever taken notice of.

"Why don't you let me wash now, Hadley, while you put away," Lucy said. "You're so nice and tall you don't even need a chair. And you know where things go."

"All right," said Hadley. "You can have the apron." He tied it around her waist, and she still had one, Evelyn observed.
"Lucy, you've got to take more than this little dab," said Marion. A painted pieplate stood beside Lucy's purse, wrapped in transparent plastic. Lucy was the kind of person who wrapped most of her things in transparent plastic — her lampshades, her car seats, even herself in the rain.

"No, no," she said. "There's really not much left. You and Hadley won't have any trouble polishing it off tomorrow and the next day. Such a crowd!" She splashed happily in the dishpan. "Your mother had so many friends, Hadley."

Had she? thought Evelyn. She knew a lot of people. How could you help it in a town like this? But who was she close to?

"I think everyone respected her," said Hadley.
"Of course they did," said Marion.
You always were accurate, my boy, thought Evelyn.

"She was a strong willed woman," said Lucy, rinsing out the sink. "I still say she'd be glad to go like this. She'd hate being helpless like Beatrice."

Evelyn spatred across the room and stood beside Lucy. "Be quiet in my house," she ordered. Lucy opened the cupboard right through her legs and reached for the scouring powder.

Silence. Then Marion asked, "Do you see her?"
"Not often."

"Be still," Evelyn shouted. She grabbed Lucy's arm.
"You look at me, Lucy Sampson." Nothing happened. There were no two Lucys. Just the one who, unperturbed, continued.

"Not for several months now. I should stop more often. The last two times the people said that she was resting, though what else she could be doing except resting is a mystery to me. I didn't stop."

"What's wrong with her?" asked Marion.

"She had a stroke," said Hadley.

Evelyn realised she was crying. She never cried. No one ever said that woman's name in her house. Hadley didn't even know a thing about her. In her own house! That Hadley would talk about her just as though she were someone he knew.

"I know. I mean what did it do to her? Can she still talk? Or what?"

"Oh, no," said Lucy. "She can't talk. She's completely paralysed, almost. She can still see and understand, but she can't seem to make herself understood any way."

Or maybe he did know her? Maybe they had talked about her all the time when Evelyn wasn't there. Maybe Beatrice was a part of their lives. Maybe they ate potato chips every day behind her back. Maybe they'd built a fence all around old Evelyn and she had sat inside it like a baby in a play yard using all her strength to do amazing feats like dropping clothespins in a milk bottle. And everybody else lived on the outside.

The curtains she had ironed blew gently in the breeze.
She could see all ther things going, one by one. Someone else would wash the curtains, and she couldn't say the last time they'd been done she'd done them. Someone would wax the floor. The dishes were gone already, and what else? Some day there would only be a few things left -- the rug to be shampooed, the banister to varnish.

"Who goes to visit her?" asked Marion. "Does she have many friends?"

"No, she doesn't. Beatrice never did go out much after she lost her husband."

Evelyn screamed at her. "Shut up! Shut up!" Stood right in front of her yelling into her pleasant, unconcerned round face. Evelyn was not a person who lost her self control. She cried and screamed. Like water off a duck's back.

"I always thought it was a shame that she and Evelyn never made it up. They could have been such good friends. They used to be."

"They did?" said Hadley. "When was that? I never knew they were friends."

"That was before your time. But not by much."

"When they were growing up?"

"Yes. They were forbidden to, of course, but they spent quite a bit of time together all through their childhood. At school and so forth. Everyone expected that the houses would get back together from it, but then it all blew up."
"What happened?" said Marion.

Lucy sprinkled scouring powder into the sink. "Something about a boy friend, I think it was," she said.

This was hell. Evelyn had never been so far out of her depth. Completely powerless. Or maybe it was a new kind of infancy. Maybe there were things she could do that she hadn't yet learned how. Small comfort. She found herself sitting in the dining room on a straight chair by the kitchen door, listening helplessly, tears plopping quietly onto her dress. She was so unlike herself she couldn't tell if she really was unchanged, only in a different kind of world, or if there had been some basic alteration, loss, about her self as well as in her body. There did seem to be a difference between them after all.

"Mother wasn't lonely," said Hadley. "She was always doing something."

What did that have to do with anything, Evelyn wondered.

"I think Beatrice must have been," said Lucy, stuck on the subject. "She took care of her own parents, you know, until not too many years ago. And, of course, the piano lessons."

"I used to ask kids who went there for lessons about her," said Hadley. "It was hard to believe ordinary kids just walked in and talked to her. They said the house was just like this one inside, too, except the furniture, of
course. I was fascinated by the whole idea."

"Didn't you ever go over yourself?" asked Marion.

"Yes."

Evelyn thought she would be sick.

"What happened?"

"It was when I was about nine or ten. I sneaked over one afternoon on my way back from school. Sliding down that row of trees. I couldn't walk along this side without mother seeing, so I had to go the whole way in their yard and hope nobody was watching out the window."

"Were they?"

"I guess. She caught me, anyway. I was standing right outside the living room, looking in the window. They even had a table with a tray top for plants, just like we do. She popped around the side of the window and there she was about six inches away from me. She stared for about a lifetime. Funny colored bright blue eyes she had, really light. I felt like a fly after the spider stings him. Finally she said 'Don't you ever come back here.' And I never did."

"Hmmm," said Lucy.

"Were you scared?" said Marion.

"I'll say. I thought she was a witch, or crazy or something. You'd have to have seen what she looked like."

"It sounds like she's just a poor old lonely lady now, anyway," said Marion.
"Maybe."

"What about those people with her?" asked Marion.

"Who are they?"

"Who knows," said Lucy. "That new public health nurse found them somewhere. From Chicago, I would imagine, through the Welfare."

"Can you hear the music?" said Hadley.

"Can I!"

"She's good, though," said Marion. "Gospel, and blues. Really good."

"If you like that sort of thing," said Lucy.

"I do," said Marion.

"She could have kept that thing about 'When Jesus Led My Mama Up the Stairs' under her hat this afternoon," said Lucy.

"That's true," said Marion.

Hadley looked disconcerted. "I guess I missed that," he said.

"Oh, Hadley, I'm sorry," said Lucy. "I wasn't thinking."

"That's all right."

Lucy hung up the dish cloth and changed the subject. "I don't know if Beatrice would welcome company or not," she said.

"We won't be visiting, if that's what you mean, Lucy," said Hadley.
"Oh, I didn't..." Lucy adjected her teeth. The sink slurped and belched.

Get out of here Lucy Sampson, said Mrs. Mayflower. And, not long after that, she did.

It was too big a day. Too long. Evelyn had nothing to do. There was no usual comfort to be found in setting the house to rights, and Evelyn had not ever found it easy to sit and watch. And where was she to go? Hadley and Marion moved back the furniture in the dining room. They stood right in the middle of the living room with their arms around each other. In the living room? Is that what they do? she thought. Is this what they would have done all along except for me? What am I supposed to do?

Evelyn went to her room.

During the next week she learned more than she cared to know about a kind of freedom she had never wanted. She had nothing to do. She had to do nothing. And other changes on the theme. Whose service is perfect freedom? Not her own, apparently. Some people would have found all they wanted in her circumstances. She didn't seem to need to eat, though food tasted just the same. She had no responsibilities. But then, she never had had any except those she made for herself. Now, all the same things needed doing in the house or yard, but someone else was doing them. Or wasn't doing them. After half a lifetime of seeing the house done her way or not at all Evelyn spent quite a bit of time in the
Alps with wild flowers, in New Orleans at Mardi Gras, en route by boat along the Inside Passage, and even a while with Nanook of the North.

There was some talk of a cleaning woman, but that came to nothing. Marion suggested moving, or even tearing the old place down and putting up a house she would design on the land. Hadley wouldn't hear of it, and Marion didn't dislike the house, essentially, so that notion died quickly too.

For the most part Evelyn stayed in her room, packing in preparation for the day when all her things would be sorted out and sent off to the poor, the Goodwill, the Salvation Army. Wherever. It wasn't too long before she began to think naturally of the peelings of her things, the dresses that came out of the closet while their duplicates hung unmoved on the rack, as her own, and the others as Goodwill's. The strangeness wore off quickly, as though she had learned how to walk on the moon.

The day arrived. She spent it out of doors. Late in the afternoon she came inside to find everything, every thing but the wardrobe gone, and Hadley in a cloud of steam peeling the paper off the walls. The bed and dresser she found dismantled in the attic. Within a week her room was painted white and filled with Marion's painting things -- drawing board, easle, tubes and squirts of paint. There soon appeared an upstairs speaker, connected to a large new pho-
nograph in the living room, and music the likes of which Evelyn had never been subjected to. The Marshmallow Fudge. Ratsbane. The Painted Egg Blues Troupe. The sound track from 'Love for Three Grapes; or, I Am Curious: Purple.' Evelyn moved her things into the spare bedroom.

Followed by Marion's sewing machine and a sluggish series of unfinished projects strewn around the room. Finally she moved to the attic where things were dirty, but they didn't move around so much. She thought of the pagan people who kept a place in every home for ancestors, who left them food, and welcomed them.

Finally, one day in August, Evelyn walked into the town. River Bridge wasn't much. A one bank town. A Saturday town for the orchard country around it. Business didn't get past the main street, which was called Main Street. A J. C. Penneys, a 5&10 that smelled like wood floor sweeping compound and popcorn, catalog stores for Wards and Sears. Beverly's Shoes. Randa's Beauty Salon. Eunice's Dress Shoppe. Kiddieland Klothes. A new shipment of work pants at Penneys just about finished the men's fashion scene, although the younger people did dress up. Summer and winter women's clothes ran heavily to bright, sometimes florescent colors. Evelyn had grown up before that generation, but she did find day-glo chartreuse and vanilla houndstooth laminated dresses more appropriate than some of the outfits Marion saw fit to slouch around town in. It's not as though they
were farmers, after all.

After one turn around Main Street Evelyn sat down on the bench in front of Barstone's. If it's a precious stone it's Barstone's. Barstone Jr., to be precise, now that Barstone had passed on. Overhead a small plane. Skywriting. Evelyn watched it all across the cloudless sky. TRANQUEEZE, it said.

She'd gone two months now without talking with anyone. She stared at the people walking by, some even holding hands. Some loitering. She'd never loitered. I've gone half a lifetime, she said, and no one contradicted her.

And where was Barstone? she thought. Why wasn't he sitting in the sun on his own bench? Was she the only person who'd ever died in River Bridge? Where was everyone?

Hardly be able to find the others, anyway, for all the strangers. Travellers. Cars pulling foil colored and painted trailers. Main Street looked like a circus parade all summer long. Trucks with campers hunched over their cabs. Some things that looked like milk cartons. Gypsies. Good for business, she allowed, but messy.

Finally she stood and moved on down the street. It was close to two, the afternoon breeze just starting up.

In front of Jones' Hometown Hardware she stopped again. Hard to see in the windows in summer with all the sidewalk display of garbage cans and rakes and shovels, rototillers, lawn chairs, and so forth chained in a row. There wasn't
much in the window anyway. But inside, everything. All the nails and staples in their proper bins. It spoke to her condition. Only stationery stores had ever been more congenial to Evelyn. Toys, guns, fishing things. Tools for fixing, building, patching.

Evelyn went in. Not many people. She cruised up and down the aisles. A bacon decurler. What good is it, she thought. Heard an echo, recent, from the funeral. "Evelyn was always asking 'What good is it?'. I can hear her say that everywhere. She had no time for foolishness." Why was Ann Archer's approbation such a chilling thing? Flimsy. Flimsy. They had sturdier choppers at the Goodwill, thirty years old and better than this thing would ever be.

New tea towels. Good ones, too. Evelyn picked up the top one. Linen. Good bright colors. She stood looking at the towel in her hand and its double on the counter. By the time her mind had said "I can take this. I can take anything I want." the idea had started through her body in a hot red blush. And as she stood staring down the aisle, incredulous, guilty, a copper enamel ashtray disappeared under the bagging sweatshirt of a skinny, poor-looking woman about ten feet away.

Didn't it? So quick. Could it have been her own thoughts and a random twitch of the woman's?

Who was she? Gypsy, of course. Evelyn followed her down the aisle as she meandered along looking at this and
that. Out the front door into the sun.

Washed-out red hair, or it had been, frizzed around her face. And bones, bones. She had a pair of the kind of pants that end just below the knee, and poor pale legs down to thin little sock and grocery store tennis shoes. And the enormous sweatshirt. She stood in front of the store for a minute, tempting the manager to come and get her, deciding which way to walk.

Evelyn followed her back up the street the way she had come. Fascinated. She had never seen anyone shoplift before. What if it had been three months earlier? Would she have stepped up behind her, tapped that knobby shoulder under the wornout sweatshirt and told her to return the ashtray before she told the manager? Or would she simply have informed the clerk. She certainly wouldn't have been following the woman down the street like a baby's pull toy on the end of a string. She felt like she was rolling on little wheels, effortlessly floating down a magnetized track.

Where was the woman going? None of the trailers parked along the street was hers. None of the campers. They went straight out Main Street and down the River Road, as though Evelyn were going home. She did go home. The woman walked right into Everett's house.

Evelyn sat in the lawn chair. What to think? Her hands fidgeted with the good, bright tea towel in her lap. The caretaker woman. The caretaker woman. Evelyn climbed
the stairs into the attic where she lived. The poplars were higher than the house by half again. She had a swift urge to tack the tea towel to a stick and fly it out the window. Why not? she thought. What do I need a tea towel for? What good is it?

After that, Evelyn watched the road. Every day the woman walked into town. She started out around half past noon and was back in the house by three. No music came from the house while she was gone. She always wore the baggy sweatshirt. Evelyn didn't follow her.

One day, down toward the river, through the poplars, Evelyn watched the husband cutting grass. He looked like her idea of a tenant farmer, which wasn't too far wrong. Skinny and boney like the woman. He was almost bald on top, with puffy waves around the side. They looked poor, all right, she decided. A kind of poor there wasn't much of around River Bridge. Pale, towhead, runnose, pinkeye poor. Classic rural poor, like the magazine ads for save-a-child. Did he know about the things she stole, or did she hide them away? Maybe she'd never done it before either. Evelyn doubted it.

One evening, almost in September, Evelyn went all the way over to the other house. Music came from there. Piano chords so rich and thick you could put them on bread and live on them. Singing about you left me, you been gone, don't know the way home, Lord, Lord, do what you gotta do. And
more. Evelyn hid outside the window as though they could see her, sweep around the corner to discover her visible and guilty after all these weeks.

Half the dining room was taken up by an old square grand piano, and the woman sat at it. Her back was toward Evelyn and she moved with the music. Or else the music moved with her. Beyond her the dusk of the outdoors flowed unobstructed through the house, as though they all were under water.

The couch was covered with a blanket. The armchair was covered with a blanket. A blanket lay beside the last stuffed chair, which the man was disembowling with a long knife. Piles of old stuffing lay around him, and he removed more from long slits in the upholstery. After that he wadded the stuffing back into the chair and covered it with the blanket. He came over and stood beside the piano, leaning on it, tapping the palm of his hand with the knife blade.

"It's not there, either," he said.

She had stopped singing, but kept playing an accompaniment to the conversation.

"It ain't nowhere, Harry."

"Now now," he said.

"Well it ain't."

"You know it is, Lavinia," he said.

She played a single row of notes with one long finger.

"Oh no it ain't."
Harry leaned farther over the piano and started drawing invisible lines with the knife tip on Lavinia's face.

"You know it is," he repeated.

"We've been over it a thousand million times," she answered.

"I know we have. I know we have, dear Lavinia. That's why I'm surprised you don't believe me yet. All these old ladies living in big houses this way got money somewhere. All we got to do is find it."

"How come the welfare pays her doctor, then. And us."

"Because she hid it, dear Lavinia," he said, patiently. "They all do that. Don't you even know? They hoard their money so as when they die it turns out they weren't poor at all. Don't you know nothing?"

"I know it's the finest house we've ever lived in and all you want to do is tear it down. And they'll find out. You'll see. We'll go to jail." She wasn't playing any more, just sitting slumped down and empty on the bench.

He came and sat by her, but facing the other way, like on a loveseat.

"You'll see," he said. "They won't catch us. I'll fix it. We'll find the money and go off and build us the biggest, finest house you ever thought of. New. All new. Not old and dried out like this one."

He leaned along the piano keys, stretching his arms along the keyboard with the knife still in his hand. She
leaned over and put both her arms around him and rested her head against his chest.

Very slowly, like a statue leaving a cathedral after centuries, Evelyn took herself home.

Empty. Hadley and Marion had bought a gypsy trailer and taken off for a trip before school started. Marion had wanted them to ask the neighbor man to do the lawn, but Hadley found a boy from school instead.

The next day Evelyn went back to Everett's, earlier. She was there at the window when Lavinia came back from town.

"What did you get today?" said Harry.

"Nothing," she said.

"Nothing!" He stared at her, then shrugged and went on with his tapping on the walls.

One morning, when she got up very early, when the light was just beginning to come, Evelyn found Harry moving very slowly back and forth across Everett's long lawn, as patient as a farmer, carrying a metal detector.

Finally, in the last days of Indian summer, Evelyn went upstairs at Everett's. For days she had watched Lavinia go up the stairs with trays of food. Small bottles of strained baby food. Mashed table food. There had been talk of diapers and bed baths.

At noon she had watched Harry and Lavinia eat lunch at the kitchen table. She had sat by the door on the extra
"I cut her hair today," said Lavinia.

"Yeah?" said Harry, around a chicken drumstick.

"It's just too much, all that combing and braiding and washing. I wish I'd cut it off four months ago. She don't need it."

"Cut those big braids all off?" said Harry.

"Chopped them all off. I'll bet she never had her hair cut in her life."

Probably she never had, thought Evelyn. Nor had she.

"What did you do with it?"

"Dumped it."

"Huh. We could have sold it."

"Huh."

They ate.

Evelyn walked around them, way around them, and went upstairs.

Bird bones, breakable as breath. Twin sticks laid under sheets. Hands side by side, arranged for dying. Skin like boiled milk. Eyes, no eyes, closed, statue eyes, bare staring balls. Hair haystaked on her head. Dead? Evelyn moved almost close enough to touch before she saw the slender movement of the sheet.

This is no one I know. This is nothing to do with me, thought Evelyn. Then Beatrice opened her eyes, and it was, after all, Beatrice.
"I would have done it, too," said Evelyn, before she knew she'd thought it. She hadn't thought it. In all that life of time she'd never once considered that she would have married MacIntyre without a second thought. Beatrice hadn't known she was going to have his baby. She hadn't known herself at that point. Evelyn just stood and looked.

The next day when she went over she sat next to the bed and held one of the hands. It didn't move away. She talked, and Beatrice didn't refuse her.

Every day she went. Sometimes she stayed the night, sleeping or waking in the rocking chair by the window. After most of a lifetime at arms' length from the world she wanted more. This is what she could manage.

When she found out that Harry planned to burn the house she did what she could. She battered at the world with any thing she knew of. Hadley and Marion, back in school, continued cheerful and oblivious. Marion had tried to interest Hadley in the sick old woman in the house next door, but he knew better. Lavinia made music. Harry slept, all night, placid and undisturbed while Evelyn crouched by his head, bargaining, threatening and pleading, but powerless to move in dreams as well as life.

And when the flames poured up the stairs she was still there, still sitting with Beatrice, still holding the hand. Could she die twice? she thought. And then what?

"It won't be long," she said. What good is it, she
thought. What good is it?