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Suffer The Little Children

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SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

by

Iris Basta

A Thesis
submitted to
the Department of English
of
Carroll College
In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for academic honors
with a B.A. Degree in English

Helena, Montana
March 22, 1983
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated with utmost gratitude and love

to my sister, Karin, who understands;

to my friend, Rod, who made it possible;

to my children, Connie and Ron, who taught me more than I taught them;

and to my friend and teacher, Karyl, whose spirit sustains and lights mine.
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English by:

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March 22, 1983
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PREFACE

Most people take the goodness of childhood for granted. The usual childhood is a carefree period, a part of our heritage of being treasured, wanted, loved and cared for. Those who have been fortunate in having such a carefree childhood are often unaware of the child/adult whose heritage includes neither the security of being welcome, nor, sometimes, having even the basic satisfaction of food. Because most people have a memory of goodness in their own childhood, they are unable to see those thousands who, according to Dr. Leontine Young in his book Wednesday's Children, "...are neglected by parents too empty themselves to give to the life they have brought into the world. They cannot imagine children tormented by parents who see in helplessness a chance to hurt, not a need to protect. ..."

That is the enduring reality of child abuse: there is no memory or experience of parental love; there are no positive emotional patterns established within the child which will foster his own self-esteem and dignity or help him establish loving and supportive relationships with others as he grows into maturity. Such complex, positive emotional patterns are simply absent. Instead, an abused child grows to maturity an emotional cripple, if the abuse doesn't kill him first.
The abused child has difficulty putting his childhood behind him. He grows up, carrying his "dis-ease" with him. Unless he makes a tremendous and unusual effort, chances are, he will remain crippled his whole life, duplicating his destructive emotional set within his own marriage and his own parenthood. At best, the abused child/adult will be able to develop some insight into his own behavior and feelings in an attempt to alter his own destructive patterns and attain a degree of emotional peace, finally reconciling himself to living in an emotional world uninhabited by those who grew up more normally. At worst, he will end in prison after unleashing his aggression and hatred upon an unsuspecting society. Our prisons are full of men and women with a history of childhood abuse. According to a survey conducted at San Quentin prison several years ago, of 400 male prisoners who had been convicted of bodily injury crimes, such as murder, 100% had a history of child abuse in their own childhood. Such a loss to society is staggering. The anguish of the individual, first as a victim, then as a perpetrator, can never be recounted.

There is a discernible pattern to child abuse in the family, in the parents and in the child. The abusive home is not the "normal" home with its highs and lows, and its occasional anger and arguments disrupting the usual peace. Alcoholism and poverty may be present, but they are not the cause of abusive behavior. Hatred, fear and anger cause
abuse. However, all of us experience those emotions, but we all do not turn those emotions against our children. Most of us do not because we do not expect our child to solve our problems for us; the abusive parent does. He often expects his child to parent him, which, of course, a child cannot do. The abusive parent will also often pick one child out of several as his target. That child often reminds him of his own parent whom he hated, or he simply believes the child is "different" or is an "animal." The child becomes the battering target, ridding the parent temporarily of his anger, to the child's detriment and to the parent's anguish. The anger and hatred recycle themselves, appearing again and again.

While the parent may hate himself for his own abusiveness, he also does not know how to stop or control it. Because of his viewpoint of the child as being "different" or that there is "something wrong with the child," he acts out those feelings, attempting to make "right," through "punishment," what isn't even wrong. Because the child reminds him of his own parent, physically or emotionally, he works his hatred for that parent out of his system upon his own child. Because he may view his child as being like himself, whom he also hates, he tries to "straighten out" the child. Since he cannot differentiate himself from his child, or control himself, the abuse becomes uncontrolled. In this country, six children die every day at the hands of their parents.
There seems to be no way to break the mold of the abused becoming the abuser without teaching the parent how to parent differently. Yet, it is hard, almost impossible, to break the cycle partly because of the hiding mechanism which exists within abusive families. The parents are not only socially and emotionally isolated, lack introspection, blame others for their problems, feel defensive, and are subject to excessive feelings of subjectivity rather than objectivity, they also feel ashamed and guilty. They are ashamed at "being different," they fear "someone will know," that they are not "good people" or have not done "the right thing." Because of this shame, they rarely seek help, or refuse proffered help, or feel that "it isn't anybody's business what I do with my kids." The child himself colludes with the parent and blames himself as the cause of his own abuse.

With no way to break this cycle, the child is abused, and if he lives, grows up to become an abuser himself. How can he not?

The abusive pattern is hard to recognize because of the intense familial "cover-up" in which all the members participate; the abuse itself is even harder to understand. In attempting to understand the making of a child abuser, it is perhaps helpful to draw parallels between the abused child and our former Negro slaves or between the abused child and those people who have been victims in a concentration camp.
There are many similarities in the reactions of all these victims, because their emotional reactions are based upon the ideas of scarcity, deprivation, dependency (learned helplessness), the absence of love and trust, and the presence of fear or terror. If one can imagine the victim of a concentration camp being stripped of his human dignity, slowly and tortuously, or if one can imagine the fear and learned helplessness of the slave, then one can imagine how a child in an abusive home feels. Unlike the slave and the concentration camp victim, however, the child has never known any other lifestyle nor has he an opportunity to learn one. By the very nature of his humanity, he is born into dependency and helplessness; whereas, the other victims mentioned have been brought into an emotional dependency through their physical dependency and fear. The slave or the concentration camp victim also has a hope of escape. The child cannot escape.

Naturally, as a child, he needs and expects to be loved by and to be taught self-esteem and dignity by those who have authority over him. The child never has those expectations fulfilled. His own emotional and physical dependency are used as weapons against him in a war against his natural inclinations to obtain self-esteem and self-love. Like all children, he tries to please his parent, and, in the process, gives up part or all of his integrity as a human person to that parent. In turn, the parent, through
the use of terror or fear and deprivation, exploits the
child's dependency to fulfill his own child-like needs.
The child's potential, a God-given right, to become a whole
human being is thus destroyed by those very people who are
meant to be there to help him develop his humanity. In short,
abusive parents spit in the face of God through their hatred
and violence and through their destruction of God's gift:
their own children.

Some may condemn such parents from an ethical/moral
standpoint and become judgmental and unforgiving of them.
Others may attempt to understand intellectually. Neither a
horrified condemnation nor an intellectual understanding will
completely help the child. The problem is not one of simple
morality or of simply applying rationality to irrational
behavior. The problem lies within the negative experiences
in loving and trusting for both the abused and the abuser.
Both must be brought to a positive experience of love and
trust in order to establish new patterns of emotional re-
actions to themselves and to others. It is my belief that
without this experience, healing and change cannot take
place.

That long and arduous process of change requires
cooperation and a desire to change on the part of the abused/
abuser; the person who would willingly enter into this help-
ing process with an abused/abusing person would not only
need the patience of Job, but the love of a Christ. Such a
process would not be unlike that of a surrogate parent, an extremely difficult relationship with someone who looks and speaks like an adult yet who reacts emotionally like a destructive child. Despite the abuser/abused's appearance, however, the need to be reparented exists; he needs a tough/tender love desperately.

The fictional stories which follow are an attempt to awaken those who have been loved in their own childhood to an emotional awareness of the lack of love, the terror, the helplessness, the confusion of identity and integrity, and the struggle for a destroyed sense of self that prevail in those who have been abused. The stories are not pretty, nor are they intended to be. Child abuse is not pretty. They are, however, as mild as I can, with any sense of integrity, allow myself to tell and still not shock the reader into a retaliating horror against me, as a writer. I hope that the language does not simply offend your moral sense; I hope that it arouses your indignation into action on behalf of an abused/abusive person. I hope that the stories cause you to react against the hatred that is indigenous to child abuse, and, thus, bring you to an understanding of the emotional violence and anguish inherent in the destruction of the human soul.

I hope, too, to be able to offer these stories as my contribution against such degradation through my love of English and of writing and through that love, impel you to offer yours to those who need it so desperately.
PART I.

SPARE THE ROD

THE LIE

The massive, wooden door of Jake's Bar creaked as it hesitantly inched open, admitting a narrow shaft of glaring sunshine into the stale-smelling, dimly lit interior. A little girl squeezed through the small opening and stood, twisting nervously, a black wiggling shadow framed against the slender column of light.

"Uncle Cal! Uncle Cal!" she mock-whispered across the barroom, frantically motioning to a suave, cynical-looking man to come to her. Wearing a dirty T-shirt and a pair of faded jeans with a hole in one knee, the thin girl struggled stubbornly with the heavy door, pushing her full body against it to keep the door slightly open. A knotted mass of dark hair hung about her bony face. Her eyes, devoid of any childlike softness, seemed too bright, a feverish hardness glittering in their dark depths. Her manner was frantically intense, conveying an image of desperate hunger, like a newborn baby blindly searching for the breast.

"Hey! Ya little rat! Whataya doin' in here? Your dad's not here! You go on!" Uncle Cal boomed at her across
the room.

"Uncle Cal! Uncle Cal!" she shrilled. Her emaciated torso jerked in agitated energy; her head bobbed and danced anxiously, her face ecstatic. Releasing the door with a bang, she raced across the oiled floor and stopped at his knees, jumping excitedly up and down, pounding on his legs.

"Whaddaya want, little rat? Ya know you're not s'posed to be in here! Your dad's not here!" he alternately boomed and rasped. Swinging her up onto his lap, he beamed at her, breathing a brandy-inspired magnanimity into her sly face. She squirmed with delight, patting his chest with two fingers, smoothing his shirt and pulling on the snaps, repeatedly touching his face, his ring, his arms.

"Uncle Cal! Can I have a pop?" she wheedled, fawning upon him, her voice soft. Fluttering her long, dark eyelashes, she smiled coyly at him. Her hands caressed his coins laying on the bar. "Can I please, huh? Huh? PLEASE?"

They haggled over the pop, finally striking the bargain of exchanging one for her promise to leave the bar and to be a good girl. Triumphant, the ragged child scooped up the can, clutched it hard against her body and deftly popped the top. Slurping noisily, she minced toward the door, her nose and mouth pressed hard against the can's opening. Head down, she dropped her eyes momentarily and almost bumped into a pool player. Swerving away from his jabbing cuestick, she clutched the can hard against her,
careful not to spill a drop. Determinedly, she sucked the pop all the way to the door. When she reached it, she nuzzled the open can against her neck and with a practiced skill, she yanked on the big door one-two-three times, swung it wide and scuttled into the harsh sunlight.

Cal, chuckling at her persistence, commented loudly, "That sneaky little bitch! She knows she's not s'posed to come in here! She sees my car in front of the bar and knows she'll get a pop if she comes in--the little bitch!"

Getting no response from the other bar patrons, Cal pulled his stool against the wall and leaned back, watching the pool players knock the colored balls around the scarred felt table. Cal, tall and dark-haired, his features bearing the rugged look of the Marlboro man, seemed oddly out of place in the shabby bar. His dark western suit, complete with necktie, markedly set him apart from the others dressed in their faded bluejeans and rough plaid workshirts.

After quickly tossing down a few more shots of brandy, Cal announced loudly, "Think I'll go down to Bart's and see what that little rat's old man is doin' today!" He stood up and surveyed the barroom, pausing expectantly. Ignored once more, Cal peeled a bill off his thick wad of money and flipped the bill onto the bar alongside his change. The bartender off-handedly saluted his goodbye to Cal. Walking toward the door, Cal stopped briefly near the pool table and authoritatively pointed out a set-up shot to one of the pool players, delivering a barrage of instructions. The
player shot and missed. Cal, grinning as he opened the door, waited until the bar door closed behind him and then sarcastically proclaimed, "The stupid sonofabitch! He doesn't even know how to play pool!" Patting his polished LTD lovingly, he slid into the yellow car and raced it madly down the rutted road to Bart's trailerhouse. Stirring up a cloud of dust, he skidded to a halt in front of the trailer which sat on a barren, hard-packed square of dirt.

Kids poured through the doorway of the trailer as Cal stopped. The last boy out--a fat boy whose shaved blond hair made him look bald--let the broken screen door swing wide, banging it hard against the metal house. The three husky boys clamored for Cal's attention. Swaggering with importance, Cal loudly threatened to thump their heads if they touched his car. His polished cowboy boots made the two metal steps into the trailer ring, jingling like spurs. Not pausing to knock, Cal walked in and sat down in the kitchen next to the curved snack bar.

Inside the trailerhouse, the summer air sizzled like the interior of a small tinder box. The boys, who had followed Cal back into the trailerhouse, began to punch one another, wrestling in the small, over-furnished living room. Gaudy trinkets lined every available corner and space; an ashtray, flashily advertising "Joe's Bar and Grill, Fort Peck, Montana," sat neatly centered on a pink, crocheted doily. The windowsills overflowed with green plants. The trailer, although tidy and clean, was furnished with a
Victorian-like clutter of cheap bric-a-brac and massive, overstuffed chairs.

Bart and his fat wife, a short, dark-haired woman, her smooth face marred by three large warts and a protruding bottom lip, were drinking Burgie beer at the kitchen table. They were arguing. Both acknowledged Cal with bland smiles and an increased volume in their bickering. Neither said hello. Having a fresh audience, the fat woman relished the chance to review and renew old complaints.

"Do ya know where that lazy, no-good bastard was last night? DRUNK!" she roared, exultantly smirking at her husband. Bart snickered at her fresh attack. Drawing himself fully upright in his chair, he grinned and winked broadly at Cal, some unspoken secret flowing between the two men.

"Ahhh!" he said proudly, "You're just a goddamned bitch! If you'd learnta shut your goddamned mouth once in awhile, I could get some peace 'n quiet and wouldn't havta go ta the bar!"

"He brought that goddamned gun out again, an' ended up sleepin' with it on the couch...threatenin' to kill him-self again...I shoulda let him do it...woulda served him right...the lazy slob!...Ya no-good bastard, what kinda man are ya?" she screamed back at him, all the while looking at Cal triumphantly and flirtatiously.

Bart, a slight, unctuous man, grinned broadly at her, exposing the gap made by three missing teeth. Gesturing
obscenely at his wife, he glanced proudly back and forth from her to Cal, leisurely commenting, "Ah, shaddup, ya fuckin' fat bitch! Ya ain't ever satisfied with anythin' I do!"

"Ya never do anything, ya lazy bastard! All ya ever do is go ta the goddamn bar and get drunk..."

"Ah, ya goddamn bitch! You don't know nuthin! You're so goddamn dumb..."

"I know a lot more than some lazy bastards think I do! I know ya got fired again, and I know you been hangin' in the bar all day, and I know..."

"Ya better shut your fat mouth, or I'ma gonna shut it for ya!"

"Ah! Shit! It'd take a better man than you are... You're such a goddamned loser, I wonder what in hell I ever married you for..."

"Ah! Ya stupid bitch! Ya don't even know a good man when ya see one..."

On and on the argument raged, grim and light, serious and playful, a jabbing prelude to the bigger and surely more violent battle waiting to be unleashed by the beer. The argument seemed as common as the bric-a-brac lining their shelves and reflected their normal, everyday exchange.

As the afternoon wore on, they continued to pick and nag at each other, both greedily sucking the beer bountifully supplied by Cal. Bart, surly and sour, would intermittently attempt a defiant, yet shame-faced humor, fending
off his wife's bitter attacks as best he could. The woman, glistening with a greasy film of perspiration, gasped for breath and puffed eagerly as she chain-smoked, sandwiching seductive comments to Cal between cursing her husband and his habits. Cal, exuding a smug superiority, enjoyed their vitriol and teased them both, egging them on with his snide comments, fanning the glowing embers of the couple's hostile fire.

The screen door opened. The little girl slid into the kitchen, her timidity at odds with her nervous squirming which unwittingly demanded attention. Inevitably, the girl's restlessness brought her mother's full force and power squarely upon the child's tangled head.

"Come and get the brush, and brush that goddamned mop!" she screeched at the girl. "If ya don't do it, I will!" Mother threatened, taking the brush from the nearby windowsill.

"NO!" shouted the little girl, "You HURT!"

The girl grabbed the brush away from her mother's outstretched, plump hand, deftly avoiding the other hand which grabbed for the girl's knotted hair. Temporarily ignored by her distracted mother, the child soon laid the brush aside. Hanging onto Cal, the child pulled on his hands and twisted the ring on his finger. Reaching into his pockets and sliding her hands up and down the sleeves of his expensive suit, she hugged and pestered him. Teasing, she grabbed for his soft Stetson hat. Scuffing her ragged
tennis shoes against his softly gleaming cowboy boots, she stood on his toes.

"Brush your hair, ya bitch! Do it, or I'll have Bart whack you! Cal, do you know what that sonuvabitch'n Bart and Smitty did last night? BRUSH YOUR HAIR! You boys! Leave that lamp alone! GODDAMMIT! Now you made a mess!"

Two of the boys continued to wrestle in the living room, ignoring their mother. The blond, fat boy wandered into the kitchen and hung onto his mother's chair.

"Did you drink all your pop?" Cal boomed gruffly at the little girl, holding her away from him at arm's length. Fingering his cufflink, the child avoided the question--

"Uncle Cal, what's this?"

"You know goddamned well what that is!" Cal grinned at her coldly. "Did you drink all your pop? What'd you do with it?" He grabbed her by the arm, holding her tightly.

The child pushed against his hand, jerking and pulling her arm to get away. Then, feigning a sudden interest in the television program blaring loudly from the unwatched set, she stopped struggling. When Cal's hold on her arm gradually loosened, she tried to leave the room. Cal would not be put off. He grabbed her arm again, "Did you share your pop with your brother?" She jerked and pleaded silently to be let go. He wouldn't.

Bart, glad for a target other than himself, squawked at the little girl: "Answer your Uncle Cal! Whaddija do with the pop he bought ya? Didja give any to your brother?"
Before she could answer, her fat brother whined into his mother's face in a mean voice, "She never gave me ANY! How come she got pop? She never shared! She drank it all herself! How come SHE always gets everything?" Running at his sister, he kicked at her viciously, exclaiming, "PIG!" Then, to his mother, "Can I have a pop? Can I have one, too? SHE GOT ONE! Huh? Huh? Can I?"

Mother screamed, "SHUT UP! You dirty little bastard! Shut Up! Didn't you share your pop with your brother? Ya little sneak! I bet ya snuck off and drank it all by yourself! You little bitch!"

Suddenly, four pairs of stern eyes focused harshly on the thin little body standing there mute, head hanging, one small tennis shoe kicking at a minute piece of paper on the floor. Bart's eyes glittered and he sat up very straight in his chair. He whined, his voice rasping and squeaking louder and louder, slowly perceiving his right to discipline and scenting the shift in the wind permanently away from himself. He scowled, his face growing darker. The strength of his convictions grew as he slowly comprehended the chance to vent his own anger as well as get himself off the hook.

"You sneak! YOU LIED. Did you share your pop? Did Uncle Cal buy you a pop, and you didn't share it? YOU LIED. GO GET THE BELT!"

The little girl's body stiffened and her nervousness disappeared. She reared her head haughtily, her back straightened, her nostrils flared. Irresistibly drawn into
the invisible undertow, she seemed to recognize that she was drowning. Caution became useless. Snarling and sneering back at them, she screamed, "I DIDN'T lie! He gets everything! Why should I have to share with him? Uncle Cal bought the pop for ME! I DIDN'T LIE!"

"You're nothing but a goddamned LIAR. That's what you are! A liar!"

"Liar! Liar!"
"Come here, liar!"
"You deserve a whipping! You're just a liar!"
"You sneaky bitch!"

The obese, perspiring woman—the fat, mean boy—the skinny, inept, drunk man, each took turns badgering her, their barrage following a rhythmical and well-rehearsed pattern:

"Pig!"
"Liar!"
"Bitch!"
"Sneak!"

They harangued her incessantly, round-robin fashion, until the little girl's body began to tremble, her defiance melting under the bullet-like battering of name-calling. Screaming and crying, hands held stiffly over her ears, elbows extended, she ran hysterically from the room.

"Well! What got into her?" the fat woman wondered, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Gimme that brush! I'll teach her a thing or two!"
The wiry, weasel-faced man bolted from his chair unsteadily, groping for the brush. "I'll teach her to lie to ME!"

"She always gets everything!" snuffled the fat boy as he wiped his runny nose on the bottom of his T-shirt.

The scowling, wizened man fumbled to hold himself upright against the walls and furniture as he stumbled precariously toward the back bedrooms of the hot trailerhouse. Cursing and muttering as he went, he hugged his anger closely, greedily. His twisted pride cried out to his drunken mind for one last, manly, dignifying act to redeem himself.

The silence in the trailer was broken only by the fat, perspiring woman who would talk, listen, talk, listen. Caressing the wet beer can with her fingertip, she shifted in her chair, thrusting her pendulous breasts toward Cal: "Shure is hot out today," she drawled, "Wonder how hot it got. Doya know?" A half-smile softened her face as the tip of her tongue slid over her upper lip.

Muffled voices drifted from the bedroom.

I DID NOT LIE.

"What did you do last night, Cal? Get laid?" The fat woman smiled, fluttering her eyelashes and demurely tossing her head.

The voice from the bedroom grew louder.

YOU SNEAKY BITCH.

"I went overtta Jean's today for awhile. Ya know, she's got that illegitimate grandkid. I think that's just AWFUL!" she breathed, her voice husky and intimate.
Hysterical sobbing filled the trailer.

"She lets that kid do ANYTHING. And the ol' man beats up on her all the time. Isn't it awful?" She leaned toward Cal with her head back, revealing her soft, curving throat.

SAY YOU'RE SORRY.

BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING, DAD!

YOU DID, TOO. YOU LIED.

"Ya know, I don't know how that ol' lady puts up with him! She's got that drunk ol' man, that bitchy daughter--she sleeps with everybody, ya know--and now a grandkid!"

The woman looked steadily at Cal, her shiny lips slightly parted.

Cal threw back his head and laughed raucously, his handsome face reflecting his amused disdain.

Turning away from Cal, the fat woman opened the refrigerator door from her chair and reached for the last beer. Angrily slamming the door shut, she continued, her voice harsh, "...And he hangs out in the bar all the time. I wonder where he gets the money...I s'pose she gives it to him."

The hysterical crescendo of sobbing rose in pitch, abruptly breaking off into utter silence.

"I s'pose she must. He doesn't DO anything, the lazy no-good bastard!" The woman fell silent and stared blankly out the window, looking past her flowing green plants up the rutted, barren road. Cal watched her closely, a knowing smile lighting his face.
I'M SORRY. I'M SORRY. I WON'T LIE ANYMORE, DAD.
I PROMISE.

Suddenly, the brush crashed into the hallway, slammed into the wall, and, skidding on its plastic back down the slick carpet, stopped in the darkening living room. The brush lay on the floor, unnoticed. In the flickering, ghostly light of the unwatched television set, the brush made only a small, dark stain on the floor.
PART II.

...AND HE SHALL NEVER DEPART FROM IT

A. ON A CLOUD I SAW A CHILD

Gunther Mann's little pig eyes narrowed. His round cheeks reddened as though suddenly daubed with spots of bright red rouge. Splotchy patches of color, a mottled pink and white, stained his thick bull-neck as though he had suddenly been afflicted by a measles rash.

"Bull-SHIT!" he shreiked at the roomful of women, his voice cracking from the strain. The ragged edge of sound splintered into fragments, piercing the tense silence like needle-sharp ice crystals shattering against the walls. The toot of a distant train whistle echoed through the stifling silence inside the room.

Breathing heavily, Gunther swung his massive head and barrel body from side to side, shifting from one cracked shoe to the other as he alertly scanned each woman's face, searching for the slightest hint of rebellion. Pursing his thin lips together tightly, Gunther maintained his belligerent stance, mutely continuing to glare boldly at each one of the gathered work crew. Four inches of his pallid, hairy belly hung exposed between the bottom of his dingy red T-shirt and the top of the crumpled, sweaty waistband of his
gray work pants. The black hair on his belly looked stiff like a boar's bristles. Fascinated, the five packing girls stared at his exposed, heaving belly, watching the round button navel flatten out as his belly distended and stretched taut with each puffy breath.

Sensing that the women's active hostility had become only a pouty defiance and knowing they would no longer openly defy him, Gunther sternly lectured the women, jabbing the air with his fat finger as he bellowed at them. Turning aside for a moment, Gunther did not notice Laurel, his office girl, as he called her, glide softly into the room and begin to fill her coffee-cup from the big pot kept continuously hot for the employees. Seeing her, he glowered at her intrusion and halted his puffing lecture, waiting for her to leave.

THAT BITCH, he thought, SHE'S THE INSTIGATOR OF ALL THIS! HER AND THAT OTHER BITCH, PAM!

Staring at Laurel with narrowed eyes, he watched the tall, graceful woman's movements, hating her grace, her inexplicable charm, the undeniable intelligence in her face. She seemed like a hawk to him, making him feel insignificant and hunted, as though he were a mouse dashing for cover from her sharp talons and her piercing eyes. He hated her for making him feel that way.

Laurel, nervous and uncomfortable under Gunther's unremitting glare, fumbled with her coffee-cup, spilling the hot liquid on her hand. Although she felt Gunther's
hatred, she didn't know what she'd done to make him not like her. She was beginning not to care anymore. Unsure of the source of his hostility, she had become more contemptuous of him with each passing day. Now, her stifled contempt congealed into words--acrid, savage words that would pierce his thick bully's hide and deflate his arrogant swaggering.

PIG! Laurel thought as she lowered her eyes to hide them. Her lip curling with the effort, Laurel suppressed the other silent words, stuffing them back into her aching throat, forcing them into her stomach. Desperately aware that her contempt showed, Laurel panicked, half her mind screaming at the other half:

I CAN'T HOLD IT DOWN ANYMORE! I'LL LOSE MY JOB! I CAN'T BE FIRED. NO ONE WILL EVER BELIEVE IT WASN'T MY FAULT. BUT I CAN'T MAKE IT STAY DOWN!

Terrified and confused, Laurel headed for the door, determined not to look at him, fearing he would know. As she turned to go, Gunther, unable to contain himself any longer, began squealing in frustrated rage, stabbing the air again in short, sharp jabs, his thick finger extending from his hammy, hairy arm. As his fists doubled and clenched, little dimples showed where his knuckles should have been.

"Now! This bullshit has gone on long enough! Let's get our cards out on the table! You girls aren't gettin' along with Junior here, and he's the shift foreman whether
you like it or not!"

Outwardly calm, Laurel walked downstairs, the echo of that screeching voice pursuing her. The rasping, high-pitched sound grated in her ears, making her wish to plug them shut: "You're not cooperating with Junior here, and you're gonna cooperate or you can just go find another job! Now! Let's get the bitches out and start cooperating! CINDY! You start!"

Choking in an effort to swallow the big lump in her throat, Laurel grimaced at the sour taste rising from her stomach. Downstairs, Laurel jerked open the plant door with shaking hands, letting it bang shut behind her, whispering to herself:

**HIS FINGERS LOOK LIKE FAT, STUFFED SAUSAGES! GOD... HE'S SICKENING! HE LOOKS LIKE THE PIG DAD KILLED THAT TIME. THAT WAS SICKENING TO WATCH... THIS IS SICKENING TO WATCH...**

Glad to be able to escape the dreary, dirty room upstairs, away from the perspiring and sullen faces of the girls, away from Gunther, Laurel quietly slid behind her desk. Distressed at still being able to hear Gunther's muffled shouting above her head, Laurel poised her long, delicate fingers over the adding machine. As habit took over, her fingers mindlessly punched the buttons: one button, two buttons, three. Distracted by the shouting upstairs, her mind refused to concentrate on the long columns of figures before her. Disconnected from her mind, her fingers stood still in mid-air as she stared through her
open windows at the brilliant, jewel-like day. Her mind refused to integrate the sight of the bright sun and the sound of the cheerful, chirping robins coming through the window with the pounding, shouting noises of hatred upstairs. Her world seemed split, disharmonious, incoherent.

Struggling to breathe through her constricted lungs, muscles locked rigidly in place, Laurel stared outside, her mind blanking off and squeezing out all but the sight of the bird. The red-breasted robin had hopped into the graveled road, a long worm dangling from his beak. The bird cocked his head, listening, looking, focusing his sharp eye warily on the reflecting windows. Laurel watched him acutely and intently. "Silly, sweet bird," she whispered softly. The bird took another tentative hop into the open road. A sudden burst of disjointed shouting, the thudding of feet overhead and the distant slamming of a door startled the wary robin. Frightened, he flew away.

Laurel, wide-eyed in her concentration on the bird, sat trance-like, staring at the spot where the bird had been. Slowly, the pig took form where the robin had stood, filling the road with his white bulk, looming larger and larger, filling her mind's eye with pig fat and heavy-lidded slit eyes blinking white eyelashes. A black cloud pressed down upon her, engulfing, strangling her mind, now hearing only shouts tinged with doom. The sunshine and the clouds played with each other, dancing up and down, tumbling and drifting in and out of sight. The black, heavy hatred
lowered itself like a curtain inside her brain at the sound of the gun's report: short, sharp, thudding. The shouting and cursing, harsh, angry: blood suddenly spurting from the frantic pig's head, his eyes bleeding, his cloven feet scrabbling against the wooden floor. The pig squealed his high-pitched anguish and terror, SKEEEEeeeee...the sound burned itself into the floor of her brain.

The rigid woman at the desk shuddered as she remembered watching...hearing the pig squeal and grunt, seeing again the frantic bid for freedom as the pig charged angrily. The little girl saw only his eyes as he rushed past her, death itself on four short legs, blood spurting from his snout. The pig shook his massive head from side to side, a bloody slobber running from his open mouth, his sharp teeth bared like a snarling dog's. His sharply cloven hooves, a deathly white, clattered against the wooden planking as he turned. Charging again, vainly searching for an escape, the pig thudded against the slatted fence which the silent, watching girl hung on. Her blue dress with its wide white collar, her fifth-year birthday present, caught on a nail, tearing a three-cornered hole as she jumped off the fence as the pig hit it.

Stuffing her fingers in her ears, she had hit the ground running, running hard on her short, sturdy legs. Jamming her fingers harder into her ears, unable to bear the high-pitched squealing, she stumbled and ran behind the granary, puking up her breakfast.
When her stomach eased, she searched the ground, wrapping her arms around her aching sides, looking for a sweet grass stem. Finding one, she pulled the blade gently, expertly separating the jointed grass with one tug. She popped the white tender end into her mouth, greedily sucking its sweet juice.

Meandering down the hill through the soft, plowed field, she poked her bare, brown toes into the loose dirt, feeling its warm grittiness. Casually waiting for the imprint of the terrified pig eyes to disappear from inside her head, she flopped into the dirt, curled up and poked a hole in the dirt with a stick. An ant climbed over the stick. She watched him intently, snuggling her body closer into the sandy warmth of the earth. She watched the ant a long time, making mountains for him to crawl over.

Restless, she turned on her back, her brown hair streaming out into the dirt, head sloping downhill, and watched the fleecy clouds roll across the broad sky. Quietly, barely breathing, she stared at the clouds.

OHH! A RABBIT IN THAT ONE! THERE! A DOG WITH BIG EARS! A LAMB!

All kinds of animals floated high above her, all white and quickly changing shapes. The sky whirled in her vision.

WHY DO THEY TURN SO FAST? STUFF'S MOVING FAST TODAY. IT MAKES ME DIZZY LIKE BEING ON A MERRY-GO-ROUND...IT'S FUN TO RIDE THE HORSES...OHH! LOOK! THERE'S A PIG!

Pig. She had forgotten it. She listened. The only
sound she heard was the wind rustling through the distant trees.

THE PIG IS DEAD.

Raising her round body from the soft earth, she brushed off the dust, adding another layer of velvety grit to her bare feet. Wiping her sweaty lip, she trudged back around the granary.

The pig was hanging by his two hind feet from the block and tackle over a barrel of boiling water. A wooden pole stuck between his hind legs held his body open. His head was gone. Two of the men were scraping the stiff, hairy hide. The exposed layers of fat glistened, pearly and iridescent in the sunshine.

HE LOOKS SOFT, she thought.

The pig was empty, his guts heaped in a pile next to the big barrel. Tough wooden poles were stuck in the pig, side to side, like cross-crossed shoe laces. The white steam from the water floated into the cool air, creating a sweet, bloody smell. The pig hair stunk putrid. The steam rose to the pig, misting around the men, like a wispy, columnar cloud. The pig swung and turned on the creaking rope.

The girl, ambling closer to the dead pig, stared in awe at the height he hung from, raising her eyes to the top of the pulleys, fascinated with the glistening white fat, watching the bloody men. Tight-lipped, her dad scowled at her, jerking the words out the side of his mouth, "Stay
away from the sonuvabitchin' water! That cocksucker is hot!"
She nodded, watching the blood streak her dad's bare, hairy arms, running down his thick hands, staining his plaid shirt with red blotches.

She turned herself round and round, carefully watching her grim papa, gazing all the time at the pig, too, wondering at the hugeness of its stretched-out body. Around and around she whirled, twirling her blue skirt out, twirling until she was dizzy. As she turned herself, the world became a kaleidoscope of color: smooth white fat, blue sky, puffy white clouds, sticky bloody hands, white misty steam, and drip-dripping blood. Whirling faster and faster, she stumbled over a bucket, thudding to the ground. The dust puffed into her eyes and the tears started down her dusty face.

Dizzy and crying soundlessly, she lifted her head and stared, face to face, into the pig's blank eyes. His bloody snout, frozen open, snarled the silence of death into her horrified face. A fly crawled across one vacant, unblinking eyeball. An ear flopped towards the other eye. His other ear stood straight up. Dried trickles of blood streaked his white face, falling from his eyes to his jowls as though streaked with red tears. Horror-stricken, the girl scrambled up out of the dirt and ran to the barn.

Laurel's hand crashed onto the adding machine, punching all the buttons at once. The machine responded, whirring and clicking softly, printing the numbers and moving the paper up. She jerked, ready to flee, her hands shaking,
body drenched with sweat. Consciousness of the present struggled with the black cloud of the past.

The sunshine streamed through the glass. A bee buzzed close by the open window. Across the road, another fat robin was busily pulling a sleek earthworm from the dirt. The fleecy clouds tumbled and scudded across the never-ending sky.

Suddenly aware of her body, Laurel leaped to her feet, gagging. Running to the bathroom, she retched into the smelly toilet. She held her aching sides tightly, digging her fingers under her rib cage, gasping for breath, tears streaming down her face. She ached to feel again the warmth of the earth, to feel it holding her body, to watch the ants and the clouds, to suck the sweet juice from the grass stem, to lie on her back in the dirt, head downhill, buried in the tender cleanness of the earth. And not hear the pig squeal.

IT WAS MEAN! I HATE YOU I HATE YOU YOU'RE JUST LIKE HIM...HE ALWAYS HAD BLOOD ON HIM BLOOD UP TO HIS ELBOWS SHOOTING THE PIG POOR PIG DESPERATE TO GET AWAY THE PIG NEVER DID NOTHING...THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME HE'LL KILL ME TOO HE'LL CORNER ME LIKE THE PIG MY EYES WILL LOOK LIKE THE PIG'S EYES I HATE YOU FOR KILLING THE PIG...THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME I ALWAYS CRY I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO CRY. THE PIG DIDN'T DO ANYTHING I HATE THE PIG I RODE HIM AND PULLED HIS EARS...HE'S MEAN HE'LL EAT LITTLE GIRLS THAT SONUVABITCH'LL TAKE YA DON'T CHASE THE GOD-DAMNED PIGS, GODDAMMIT YOU DIDN'T WEAR ANY PANTIES WAKE UP I'LL THROW YOU TO THE PIGS IF YOU DON'T WAKE UP AND GET OUT OF THE CAR GO
TO BED, YOU'RE BIG ENOUGH TO WALK GODDAMMIT WAKE UP I'LL THROW YOU IN THE PIGPEN YOU CAN SLEEP WITH THE PIGS DON'T EVER GO WITHOUT YOUR PANTIES WHAT THE HELL YOU DOIN' ANYWAY EVERYBODY'LL SEE YOUR BARE ASS WHAT KIND OF A PIG ARE YOU YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO GO TO BED ALONE WHAT KIND OF A GODDAMN-ED CHIPPIE ARE YOU ANYWAY YOU'RE TOO BIG TO CARRY ANYMORE... THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME I AM BAD I HAVE TO TRY TO BE BETTER IT WAS NICE NOT TO WEAR UNDERPANTS IT FELT GOOD MY LEGS ARE SOFT THEY'RE FAT LIKE A PIG I AM WHITE UNDER MY BROWN SKIN LIKE LARD IN A PAIL SOFT FIRM FATTY FATTY TWO BY FOUR YOUR LEGS HURT CUZ YOU'RE TOO FAT YOU'RE FEET ARE FLAT YOU'RE TOO FAT YOU CAN'T PLAY WITH US YOU'RE TOO FAT... I'LL BE GOOD I WON'T CRY ANYMORE PLEASE HOLD ME CLOSE LIKE THE WARM DIRT DOES I'LL BE QUIET QUIET QUIET TO DEATH LIKE THE PIG WAS FINALLY QUIET HE DIDN'T SQUEAL ANYMORE I'LL BE A BIG GIRL BIG GIRL'S DON'T CRY...

The tall, slim woman rinsed her mouth out in the sink, eying the cold, white-tiled bathroom walls. Rasping, shuddering breaths filled her aching lungs. Wiping her stinging eyes, she looked in the mirror. Carefully, she rubbed away the streaked mascara and gently smoothed her facial muscles, patting her face. Fluffing her hair, she looked once more at herself and slowly went out, closing the bathroom door softly behind her. Face plastic and composed, looking crisply calm and self-assured, she walked out into the silent plant, her blue dress rustling softly in the ghostly quiet.

With all the machinery shut down, the empty plant
seemed hollow and the rasping of her shoes sliding against the wet concrete floor sounded loud to her. Searching the vast room filled with scores of tanks and vats, she looked for the clean-up man, hoping he'd have the production tallies she'd been unable to find before. Clouds of steam rose from several of the open vats. "He has to be around," she whispered to herself, "The vats are filling..."

Thinking the clean-up man might be hidden by one of the tall tanks, Laurel stepped carefully over the running water hoses, afraid of falling on the wet, slippery floor. A compressor turned on, its sudden power forcing thick, new clouds of steam into the air, filling the plant with a wet fog. The steam hissed and puffed; tiny rivulets of water ran down the sides of the cold, stainless steel vats, like tears running down a sweaty face. Laurel slipped and slid across the floor, occasionally touching the wet vats to steady herself. She turned the corner, feeling her way around the tall tank. The clean-up man was nowhere in sight.

Giving up, she turned back. Another cloud of steam puffed up in front of her, floating toward the ceiling, up to the high window overlooking the plant. As she turned, Laurel's eye caught a hint of movement in the window. Jerking her head up, her eyes met Gunther's, his heavy-lidded eyes staring down at her.

Frightened, Laurel clutched at the wet tank, seeking a firm hand-hold. Her hands slid across its smooth, slippery surface. Her fingernails screeched across the metal
as her feet slid out from under her, and she fell hard onto
the wet floor. Biting her lip to stop herself from crying,
she raised herself on hands and knees and looked back up at
the window.

Gunther stood there, framed in the window, his
thick hands folded across his fat belly. His whole body
shook with unheard laughter, his face lit with a sneering
delight. Another puff of white steam drifted past the
window. As Laurel stared at Gunther, his open, leering
mouth and vacant pig eyes froze into a rigid immobility,
like rigor mortis.

Turning on, the compressor forced live steam into the
air. The hissing steam and the motor drowned out Laurel's
high-pitched scream of terror and agony...EEEEeeeee...before
the blackness descended upon her mind.
A flock of sparrows settled into the sumac planted beneath the bay windows of the old, red house, causing the bare, red branches to brush lightly against the glass. The slight scratching noise and the fluttering of the small, gray birds caught Terry's sleepy attention as he slowly came out of the bedroom to make the morning coffee. Scratching his head roughly, he stooped and peered out the daintily curtained window, looking for the cause of the noise. Oblivious to the beautiful play of soft light and gray shadow in the quiet street, he complained softly to himself, "Gotta trim them sonsabitches again!"

Turning away, he padded across the deep carpet into the kitchen. Softly cursing, he looked vainly for the coffee, banging cupboard doors and wincing at their noise. His head hurt.

"Karla!" he shouted, looking directly at the blank cupboard door.

"Karla!" he demanded again, half-turning toward the bedroom.

"Karla! Where's the coffee?"

His movement made his head pound. Steadying himself against the kitchen counter, he stared into the open cupboard, directly at the coffee. "Oh," he whispered, sheep-
ishly, a flicker of amusement crossing his face. He hoped Karla wasn't standing behind him, watching. She did that sometimes. Voicing his thoughts, he softly told himself, "Ya gotta watch them women...they sneak up on a fella...gotta keep one step ahead of 'em all the time!" Sneaking a quick look toward the kitchen door, he was relieved to see she wasn't standing there watching him, after all. Satisfied, he chuckled grimly to himself.

While the coffee perked gaily, Terry poured a tall glass of water, swifly downing six aspirin along with it. Satisfied that relief was on its way, he stepped outside for the newspaper. Glancing at his perfectly clipped lawn, arrayed like a jeweler's velvet with millions of dew-drop diamonds, a diversity of rainbows reflected in each drop, Terry grumbled, "Gotta cut that sonofabitch today...Looks like a goddamned jungle out there!"

Returning to the silent kitchen, Terry spread out the newspaper and, slowly sipping his coffee as he read, scratched his head with the blunt end of his comb. His occasional groaning yawns and the soft shuffling of the newspaper were the only sounds in the huge house.

In the gloomy bedroom, Karla shifted in the tangled bed. Impassively, she had listened to Terry holler at her and had ignored him purposely, her eyes closed. She did that sometimes, too. Now, curious about the silence and bored with her three-hour attempt to sleep, she briskly thrust back the covers, quickly whipped a filmy robe over
her small, firm body, and strode determinedly into the kitchen.

"Cripes, Terry! You make more dang racket than anybody I know! You sound like a freight-train runnin' through the house!" she mock-complained. "Runnin' around out here, slammin' things around and hollerin' at me just cuz you drank too much and can't even see this mornin'! Jeez!"

Despite his throbbing headache, Terry chuckled at her cheery feistiness, enjoying the attention. He grinned at her, "Now-just-don't-get-so-excited! What we need around here is a little better service, woman! Layin' in bed all day'll give ya bedsores."

"Always gotta be showin' off, doncha? I'da thought you showed off enough last night that you'd be happy for awhile. Draggin' me outa bed in the middle of the night to come and rescue you again!"

"Sgood for ya! Keeps ya in shape!" he quipped.

"Terry! For all the times I pulled you outa that god-danged river, I coulda trained six Search and Rescue teams!"

"Well...Toots...you can't blame a guy for gettin' hung up on a little snag, can ya? We couldn't help it the damn thing turned over! Jesus Christ...that water was cold... and deep, too!" He giggled.

"Hit a snag, hah! The only thing you hit was a bottle, I bet! And if the truth were to be known, I bet you were standin' up in the bow, pretendin' to be Lewis & Clark and fell out!" Teasingly, she mimicked his stance; she propped
her foot on a chair, grabbed the broom and waved it around wildly over her head, like a gun in the air, and hollered loudly, "Forward ho! This way, booooys! Circle the wagons!"

Hilariously amused at her own joke, she burst into gales of laughter. With tears streaming down her face, she choked out, "Which one are YOU?"...She gasped for breath..."LEWIS?"...she laughingly screeched, "OR CLAAARK? AHA, HAH, hah, hah, hah!"

Pleased at her teasing, and laughing as hard as she, he launched into the stories of the night's escapades and their attempt to float the Yellowstone in the dark. Karla, feigning disgust and resignation, cheerfully wished aloud that she'd let both him and his buddy drown the first time they'd floated the river, 18 years ago.

"Terry, you're never gonna grow up!" she said aloud. But inside, she was pleased.

IT'S GOOD TO SEE HIM LAUGH. FINALLY. IT'S COST SO MUCH TO HEAR THAT...

His only childhood picture still hung in their hallway: a small boy in a sailor suit, standing alone, his well-formed features smooth, his face expressionless. His solemn, wide eyes were blank, impassive. The whole picture left the impression of a deeply sad child: he had the look of those haunted refugee war children the newspapers print. Except he had been safe in Montana, then.

SAFE! HAH!

The memory blacked out her teasing good spirits, her
bitter anger rising like a solid steel column. Her face darkened, her lips pinching themselves firmly together, as she recalled his step-father's cruel eyes and his mother's expression, always passive and as stolid as a wall.

THEM. ALWAYS THEM. AND THEY DARE TO CALL THAT LOVE...

Terry, sensing her sudden mood shift, immediately became cautious. Recognizing her sudden tightness, but unsure of the cause, he poured on all the boyish charm his hangover would allow, his tone changing to cajolery.

"Now...Toots...just calm down...Come over here, and I'll pat your little butt for you."

SONOFABITCH. SHE'S PISSED OFF AGAIN. WHAT?...I CAN'T SAY ANYTHING ANYMORE AND SHE'S OFF ON A GODDAMNED TEAR AGAIN.

"Terry! Don't patronize me!" she bristled, edgily perceiving his new tone and the charming manipulation.

I WONDER WHAT HE WANTS TO WIN THIS TIME. WHEN HE WINS, I ALWAYS HAVE TO LOSE...

"Toots, you know I wouldn't patronize you," he pleaded. "Say, how about a little breakfast around here this mornin'?"

"Quit tryin' to change the sub-ject. You always do that."

AVOID...AVOID. HE ALWAYS TRIES TO COVER-UP, PRETEND IT DOESN'T EXIST. SHOVE IT UNDER THE RUG.

"Well. Je-sus Christ! I thought we were talkin' about havin' a little breakfast!"

WHAT THE HELL GOT INTO HER? Terry's head started to pound again.
"You know very well what we're talking about."

"Well, let's talk about gettin' a little something to eat. Women are s'posed to cook the breakfast and keep the noise down a little around the place!" His tight-lipped expression belied his attempted light tone. His mincing words had jabbed at something unspoken, yet known, between them. The unexpressed was like a rattlesnake, sunning itself in the rocks, camouflaged and unseen, innocently dangerous.

YAH, she thought. I'M S'POSED TO DO JUST LIKE YOUR MOTHER DID WITH THE OLD MAN. SHUT UP AND KISS HIS FAT ASS. OTHERWISE, HE MIGHT GET MAD AND KNOCK YOUR TEETH DOWN YOUR THROAT. ALL WOMEN ARE JUST SUPPOSED TO SHUT UP AND CLEAN THE TOILET.

Blue eyes flashing defiance and anger, Karla yanked open the refrigerator door, grabbed two eggs, and kicked the door shut with her foot. Slamming the shiny electric frying pan onto the countertop, she broke the eggs open viciously and jabbed the yolks with her spatula, deliberately breaking them. Satisfied that the eggs were fried hard, which she knew Terry hated, she stiffly slammed the plate in front of him and stalked off back to bed. Throwing herself onto the bed, Karla flipped the tangled covers over herself, stuffed the rolled-up pillow under her head, and rolling her body into a tight ball, she closed her eyes, appearing to be immediately sound asleep.

As her mind drifted in the hazy, floating space
between sleep and consciousness, a litany of voices began to resound in her head. The words they spoke took shape, the letters of each word dancing past her, some rubbing sensuously against each other, some marching ramrod straight. The letters of the words began to separate, with each black letter holding a miniature sword. The black letters tumbled and fought with white ones, poking and jabbing them until the white ones bled. Their battleground soon became slippery with blood.

When a black letter defeated a white one, the black one was slowly raised by a little man onto a grotesque billboard held before her eyes. Below the billboard, to one side, Terry sat and watched, pretending he didn't see. On the other side of the billboard stood Terry's relatives, all thirty of them, milling around in a pack, like wolves readying to circle their prey. She stood in the middle. When a black letter was raised, his relatives would cheer, snapping and snarling at her with curled lips, their eyes narrowing and scowling. When the black letters had killed all the white ones, they set up a screeching howl and lunged for her. Terry's relatives grabbed her, holding her helplessly against them. Forcing her to look at the billboard, they tried to make her read it out loud. The letters were oozing a yellow slime which ran down the billboard and made her sick to see. When she refused to read, the letters shouted at her, over and over, WE HATE YOU. WE HATE YOU. YA BETTER WATCH OUT OR THE OLD MAN WILL KNOCK YOUR GODDAMNED
TEETH DOWN YOUR THROAT...

Then, suddenly, the letters grew silent, and it wasn't they who had spoken—it was the old man. The letters and billboard disappeared, and everyone was suddenly in her kitchen, instead. It was him. There was no mistaking the menace in his voice, his sneering lips and looming figure. He had said it, and the whole roomful of people knew he meant it and would do it.

The old man stood better than six feet, filling her small polished kitchen with his muscled bulk. The room had the tightness of fear in it, a fear of him that created the desire to tip-toe around him, to get out of his sight. His iron gray hair, shaved close to his head like a convict's, and his steel gray shirt, only slightly darker than his hair, made him look overpowering and cruel. The thick fingers of his huge beefsteak hands clenched and unclenched constantly, as though of their own volition they itched to squeeze something...anything.

The bunch, as they called themselves, was an accurate description. They had been there, visiting, for two days; this time it was the old man, Terry's mother, Terry's brother and his wife, Terry's sister and his grandma. Last weekend, it had been three days with the same people, except for Grandma who had stayed home. The weekend before had been four days because of Memorial Day, and then all of them had come. She had counted thirty people sitting in her tiny house at one time, most of whom seemed to sleep in her
living room all day long. She had been glad, last night, when they had all gone to the bar and left her alone with the baby. After they had left, Karla had searched her purse frantically, looking for the last of her grocery money. It was gone!

She went to bed, silently weeping her despair into the dark, the hot tears rolling from her wide-open eyes and finally gathering into little pools in her ears. She wondered how long the pancake mix would last...it was perfectly clear they would have only pancakes to eat until payday, ten days away. Exhausted, she had finally slept. They woke her up when they stumbled and roared into the house at three a.m. Terry came into the bedroom, loudly declaring she should get up and cook breakfast. The old man was hungry.

She got up. Mentally, she crossed pancakes off the list. The house blazed with lights. As she entered the kitchen, she blinked and rubbed her sleep-dazed eyes. When she could finally see, there they sat, gathered around the table, drunk, but still drinking beer, telling dirty jokes and laughing. The old man was very drunk. His little eyes narrowed even smaller when she entered the kitchen. The light glinted off them, creating the impression of hard glass. When the old man spoke, everyone became very quiet. She ignored his booming, unsmiling "hello" and reached into the cupboard for the pancake mix. He got up. She didn't look at him.

"Well, hello, Karla!" he hissed at her again, moving
across the room towards her. As he glided past her, he bellowed at her, "Well! I guess I just have to go see how my granddaughter got along without her grandpa tonight! Maybe she's a little more friendly than her mother is!"

He disappeared into the baby's room, emerging with the six week old baby dangling from one massive hand, her little head drooping over his arm. He bounced her and jiggled her, making her little head flop around as though she were a rag doll. She began to cry. The old man bounced her into the air, cooing at her. She cried harder. Karla looked at Terry, pleading with her eyes for him to stop him. Terry didn't look at her.

She stopped stirring the pancake mix, spoon in hand, wondering what to do. The old man jiggled the baby again. The baby was sobbing. Karla could see the old man was getting mad as he bounced her harder, trying to shut her up. Dropping the spoon, Karla walked to him, holding out her arms for the baby. The old man jerked the baby away, almost dropping her. Karla hesitated, looking at Terry again, pleading, begging.

"Dad." Terry said, "The baby probably oughta go back to bed."

The old man ignored him.

"Dad."

The old man roared in shocked disbelief: "DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO! I'LL PUT HER TO BED WHEN I'M DAMN GOOD'N' READY TO!"
"Give her to me!" Karla demanded, reaching again for the child.

"YA BETTER WATCH OUT OR I'LL KNOCK YOUR GODDAMNED TEETH DOWN YOUR THROAT!" he snarled at her, his face evilly contorted with rage. Still clutching the crying child, he lurched into the living room.

The whole room was deathly silent. Karla's teeth chattered. She ran into the bathroom and clutched the sides of the sink. Her whole body trembled and quivered. She clamped her teeth together, grinding them hard. When she straightened up, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The face that stared back at her didn't look 19 years old.

Still shaking, Karla took a deep breath and, as calmly as possible, walked into the living room. The old man was sprawled on the floor, snoring loudly. The baby lay beside him, asleep, breathing little sobbing gasps of breath, her little face still pink from crying...

Karla stirred, rubbing her toes constantly against the sheets.

HE'D HAVE DONE IT, TOO, she thought. I COULDN'T EVEN PROTECT MY OWN CHILD FROM HIM. I WAS AFRAID...IN MY OWN HOUSE...HE'D HAVE MURDERED ME, TOO, AND NEVER BLINKED AN EYE. AND NOBODY...NOBODY WOULD HAVE LIFTED A FINGER. HE'D A DONE IT JUST LIKE HE BEAT THAT MAN IN THE BAR, BEAT HIM BLOODY...SENSELESS...WITH THE BARSTOOL. IT TOOK FIVE MEN TO GET HIM OFF THAT GUY. HE ALMOST KILLED HIM. FOR NOTHING.
THE GUY NEVER DID ANYTHING...HE JUST HAPPENED TO BE THERE.
THERE'S NEVER ANY REASON FOR IT...NONE. JUST LIKE THEIR
FAMILY GET-TOGETHER IN FORT PECK. THERE WASN'T ANY REASON
FOR THAT FIGHT EITHER. HE JUST WANTED TO BE BEGGED...TO BE
PLEADED WITH. HE STARTED THE FIGHT ON PURPOSE, JUST TO
SHOW EVERYBODY HE WAS BOSS. HE BEAT THAT WHOLE FAMILY SENSE-
LESS...THERE JUST WASN'T ANY BLOOD ON THE FLOOR THAT TIME...
HE WON, TOO. AND TERRY ENDED UP CRAWLING TO HIM ON HIS
KNEES, IN THE DIRT, BEGGIN' AND PLEADING FOR THAT OLD
BASTARD NOT TO LEAVE...IRENE JUST COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. I'LL
NEVER FORGET THE SOUND IN HER VOICE--PURE ANGUISH--SHE KEPT
SCREAMING AT TERRY, "GET UP...GET UP...FOR GOD'S SAKE,
TERRY, GET UP"...OVER AND OVER. BUT HE DIDN'T. HE CRAWLED
ON HIS KNEES ALL THE WAY, THROUGH THE MUD AND THE DIRT,
CRYING LIKE A BABY, TEARS STREAMING DOWN HIS FACE, BEGGING.
BEGGING THAT OLD BASTARD NOT TO BE MAD AT HIM. THERE IS NO
REASON FOR IT. NONE.

Lost to her thoughts and her memory, Karla didn't
hear the lawnmower start.

The heat had sucked up the dew-drop diamonds and had
chased away the wispy, clinging vapor which had drifted in
from the nearby river that morning. Terry didn't notice
the alert squirrel watching him from the leafy tree as he
began his mower rounds. The sweat ran in tiny rivulets
which followed the deep lines in his face, finally dripping
off his chin. He worked with a furious possession, as
though pursued by another ghostly vapor which the sunshine
and heat couldn't dispel.

GODDAMNED HARD-HEADED WOMEN! THEY DON'T FORGET A GOD DAMN THING! YA DO ONE THING WRONG...ONE THING...AND YOU CAN NEVER LIVE IT DOWN, NO MATTER HOW HARD YA TRY. SHE'S GOT A MEMORY LIKE AN ELEPHANT. I'VE TRIED AND TRIED AND TRIED...AND I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE WANTS. SHE'S GOT EVERYTHING...EVERY-THING...ANYBODY COULD EVER WANT, BUT SHE JUST WON'T LET IT BE...

When the lawn was finished, Terry found the clippers, trimming the sumac away from the glass, peering into the house briefly to see if Karla was up.

LAY IN THAT GODDAMNED BED ALL DAY. LAY IN THE DARK AND BROOD! PROBLY WRITIN' ANOTHER LIST OF EVERY-THING EVER' MAN EVER DID TO HER, STARTIN' WITH HER DAD...BUT BOTH OF 'EM...I THINK BOTH HER AND IRENE HATE MEN. BY GOD, I THINK THEY DO. HE WAS PRETTY HARD ON HER, THOUGH, I GOTTA ADMIT...AND THEIR MOTHER, SHE WASN'T ONE BIT BETTER...BUT JESUS CHRIST, SHE'S GOTTA FORGET ALL THAT STUFF, LIKE I DID. AND EVERY TIME SHE GOES DOWN THERE TO VISIT, SHE COMES BACK LIKE THIS...AND LAYS IN BED AND BROODS ABOUT IT ALL DAY...

"WHEN YOU WERE 14, WHEN YOU WERE 10"...JE-SUS CHRIST, THAT'S ALL THEY EVER TALK ABOUT. I'M GETTIN' SICK OF LISTENIN' TO IT...

The last time they had gone together to visit her dad had been like that--and the time before, and the time before. The visits didn't start out that way, but they always ended that way...
Karla and Terry had joked and laughed in the car, enjoying the sunshine which was turning the countryside green. The soft April air made Terry feel light-hearted, like he was on a Sunday date. Karla felt it, too; she had flirted with him, sitting close to him, her arm resting around his shoulders as he drove. As they pulled into the driveway of the farmhouse, the place seemed deserted. Terry honked the horn, feeling boisterous like a teen-ager.

Down the little hill which sloped away from the house, her dad stepped from his shop and halloed, waving a chunk of metal in his hand above his head. Even from a distance, his square, solid strength could be seen. A short man, he gave the appearance of a rock, sculpted in human form. His coal black, wavy hair had become merely a gray ring around the back and sides of his head as he aged, leaving a shiny bald-spot on top and a straight wisp of hair in front. A handsome man, his features were finely chiseled with a straight, proud nose and a firm, clefted chin. He looked like a Roman centurion. His eyes added to that impression; they were blue fire and ice, giving him the fierce look of a hunting hawk, even when he was laughing, which he rarely did. His movements were usually slow and deliberate. He walked with a stiff, lumbering roll that was somehow graceful, first swinging one side of his body ahead and then the other. His apparent slowness was misleading, however. Terry had seen him move with all the suddenness and speed of a rampaging bull and Terry knew he was as unpredictable
as one.

Karla jumped out of the car. She disappeared into the house, the screen door slamming behind her loudly, like the sharp WHAP of an over-sized fly swatter. Terry went down to meet her dad.

Wiping his greasy hands on the sides of his denimed legs, her dad reached out to shake hands with Terry. His face lit up with pleasure, his brow lifting in surprise, a half-smile softening the fierce, scowling eyes. "Well... I'll be damned!" he greeted Terry, squeezing his hand hard. "Well, I'll be damned!" he repeated. "Did Karla come along?"

"Yah, she went in the house to talk to Mabel."

"I gotta put this fuel pump back in, and we'll go up and have some coffee. Com'mere, I gotta show you what I built..." Proudly, he led Terry behind the shop, explaining his new contraption, his voice trailing behind him, "I'm havin' a little trouble figurin' out how to get the track on the sonofabitch...mebbe you know..." Terry liked that.

After they had inspected the invention, they went into the shop. While her dad worked putting the fuel pump back into the 1940 Plymouth pickup, they talked about the crops, the weather, the cows, the market prices. When he had finished, he washed his hands in a pan of oily gasoline, wiping them slowly and deliberately on a rag blackened with gear grease and flung the rag onto his grease-encrusted workbench. Motioning with his head to Terry, he said, "C'mon, let's go see if Mabel's got some coffee."
Karla sat on the kitchen countertop, dangling her legs down the faces of the cupboard doors, talking and watching Mabel wash bread pans. The smell of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls and bread filled the big room, making it seem cozy despite its size. The coffee perked merrily. As Terry and her dad came in, stamping the dust from their boots, Karla was waving her hands in the air, just finishing her sentence, "...you KNOW that's true." Her dad, looking suspiciously at Karla, began to scowl.

"What the hell's going on in here?"

"Nuthin'," Karla responded, her eyes wide, surprised. "Well. Yah better not be gettin' smart with Mabel."

"I WASN'T. We weren't talkin' about nuthin'."

"Nah," Mabel said, "She was just tellin' me about the kids..."

His scowl relaxed. "Oh. I thought you were pickin' on Mabel again..." His apologetic half-smile momentarily made him look silly and sheepish.

Terry knew the remark upset Karla by the way she flung herself from the counter, ignoring her dad, swiftly gathering coffee cups, and abruptly pouring the coffee. She moved too casually and quickly, roughly slamming the cups down too hard, conveying the impression of carelessness and inattention.

As they sat around the table, idly talking about the farm work, the doings of the neighbors, and the latest events in their community, Karla sat quietly. Mabel, trying to
mend fences and smooth things over a little, listed all Karla's old high school chums, itemizing each bit of news about each one.

"Well, let's see...oh...Carol was home to visit her folks a couple weeks ago. She brought the kids along, and they drove on down to see the old house...and Jan was here to visit us. They're gonna have another baby, would you believe that? She's gettin' pretty old to be havin' babies...I just never expected her to be a mother, anyway. She just don't seem cut out for it, and here she's got four all grown up and startin' all over again...She never seemed to like little kids much...Course, Irene didn't either, and that didn't seem to stop her...How's she doin'?...Have you heard from her?"

"She's doin' all right. Said she got a raise the last time I talked to her."

"Sure didn't ever think she was cut out to be a mother, either...Course your maw never seemed like it either, though...never seemed to give a darn whether you had the things you were s'posed to have or not...and wouldn't give you a darn thing! I remember one time she had you girls in the old cafe downtown, and we were in there for coffee, me 'n Fern, and she was sittin' up there at the counter, drinkin' a malt, and you kids were both beggin' her for a little sip, and do you think she'd give you one? Well, she sure didn't! She set there and drank that whole thing all by herself! I thought at the time, 'Why, you HO-GG! Won't even share with
your own kids!"

Calling someone a hog was Mabel's strongest epithet. Her tone and the word together clearly and precisely designated the degradation some folks would sink to...

"...Why-y, I never seen such a thing in my life!"

"Oh, hell!" Karla's dad butted in, "That ain't nuthin! She sent 'em some clothes one time...sent 'em C-O-D! And another time, they were up visitin' her one summer, and she bought 'em some underpants and brassieres--she sent me the goddamned bill for that!"

"Didja pay her?" Karla asked, amazed.

"He-ll NO! I ain't no god-damned fool!"

"Well, we sent her money every month you kids were there," Mabel spoke up, defensively. "She was s'posed to buy you kids what you needed out of that." Her voice rose in anger and irritation. "She thought he was s'posed to pay for everthing, and that she didn't have to do nuthin' for yah. Just like the piano...here they were, takin' lessons, and needed somethin' to practice on, and she comes and gets it, and takes it away from yah...scared I was gonna get it, I think! So, I saved up the egg money and bought you another one, and by that time, you didn't care much about it anymore. It wouldn't hurt her to leave it here for yah. You girls needed somethin' like that to do, insteda layin' upstairs in yer rooms, readin' True Ro-mances. That trash wasn't any good for yah...why-y-y, lay up there and read that junk for hours, and throw the books in heaps on
the floor...why-y-y, ya never did pick up a thing! Why-y-y, when you were fort-teen you lived in the biggest pig-sty I ever did see! Couldn't get you to even make your bed! Till we took your boyfriend up there one time to see the mess you lived in! HA, HA. You sure didn't want him to see that, didja?" She laughed, gleefully remembering the screaming fits Karla had had, trying to keep Clark from seeing her room.

"Well. You girls ab-so-lutely needed sum-buddy to teach you some manners," her dad agreed.

"Well, I'm a good housekeeper, now!"

"You sure weren't when you were a kid!" laughed Mabel. "And the way you girls washed clothes...Why-y-y...they'd put their dad's shorts in with his overalls...guess they thought there was somethin' wrong with 'em or som-thin!"

"Well, Mabel," Karla pleaded, "we didn't know...We didn't know any better...I don't do that NOW."

"She is a good housekeeper," Terry said.

"Yah, I guess she is. But she sure wasn't headed that way when she was fort-teen. I had to work like the devil to get her to do anything around here!"

"For Chrissakes!" her dad said firmly, the disgust sounding in his voice, "All she ever wanted to do was stand around and talk on the goddamned telephone or go to town, like their maw. I thought you were gonna grow up to be just like her." He grinned.

"Wellll..." Mabel continued, "they were always so
sloppy about everthing...If anybody'd ever seen 'em...

"...and so gotdamned brassy..."

"Why-y-y...you shoulda seen Karla the day the minister come to visit...I was so ashamed, I nearly died. You know," Mabel lowered her voice, confidentially, "you really did embarrass your dad, Karla. Why-y-y, there we sat in the living room, and you know how old Norvelt was...well, he was so prim and proper anyway...here we's sitting visiting with him, old Reverend Norvelt, and here comes Karla and butts right in...sits down on the piano bench and sits there with her legs spread...why-y-y I justa-bout died, and so did your dad!" Mabel looked at Karla, triumphantly disgraced. "I kept tryin' to get her attention, and give her the high sign, but she just kept right on a'talkin' and wouldn't pay me no mind at all! Ha! Ha! Finally, your dad had to say somethin' to ya...I don't remember what..."

"Mabel, I wasn't doin' anything wrong! I had my jeans on!"

"Well! You did not! No lady's gonna sit around like that anyway! Sittin' there braggin' that the cuckoo clock was yours! Why, your gramma didn't give that clock to you--she gave it to your dad and me!"

"She was pretty god-damned pushy! Always tryin' to take over everthing!" her dad agreed.

"Well, I thought Gramma gave the cuckoo-clock to the family."
"She did NOT! She gave that to us!" Mabel bristled, seemingly ready to leap up and defend the clock as though Karla had been caught in the act of stealing it.

Shrugging her shoulders and tossing her head, Karla brightly forced out a small laugh. Looking at the floor, she kicked her toes against the heel of her other foot, watching them with great interest. "Well! I don't want the damned old thing! If I wanted a cuckoo-clock, Terry makes enough money to buy 15 of the buggers! I don't even like them!"

"Why-y-y...that's a NICE clock! They're really expensive! We never could get it to work right, though... the weights always seemed to get off kilter, and your dad had to hang an extra one on the one side all the time..."

In the car, on the way home in the gathering dusk, Karla had sat quietly, staring out the window, her nose pressed against the cold window glass. She didn't say anything all the way home...

SHIT! Terry thought, SHE WOULDN'T TALK TO ME FOR A WHOLE WEEK WHEN WE'D GET HOME. I'D SAY SOMETHING TO HER, AND SHE'D JUST LOOK AT ME AND NEVER SAY A WORD. I NEVER COULD FIGURE OUT WHY SHE JUST SAT THERE AND TOOK ALL THAT CRAP...SHE SHOULD'A FOUGHT BACK, STUCK UP FOR HERSELF A LITTLE. AFTER AWHILE, WHEN SHE'D STOP TALKIN', WHY, I JUST GAVE UP. A FELLER DOES AFTER AWHILE...

Terry worked on, silently and grimly, into the hot afternoon.
Becoming restless and bored, Karla got up at noon. Watching Terry through the kitchen window as he began to pour concrete, Karla cleaned the cluttered kitchen, loading the sink with dirty dishes. The sunlight poured through the window, turning the soap bubbles into miniature rainbows. Karla dipped her hand into the bubbles and blew them gently toward the open window. The bubbles hit the screen and burst. The mini-spectacle in the sink became invisible as the sudden tears blurred Karla's vision.

HE WORKS SO HARD...HE THINKS THAT'S GOING TO MAKE PEOPLE LOVE HIM. AND IT WON'T. HE'LL DO ANYTHING FOR ANYBODY. BUT IT WON'T WORK. I'M MARRIED TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD HANDYMAN...FIX MY PLUMBING. SURE. I GOT THE BEST DANGED PLUMBING IN THIS WHOLE TOWN. BUT I DON'T HAVE WHAT COUNTS. AND IT AIN'T HIS FAULT. IT'S THEM. THEY CrippLED HIM. WHEN THE OLD MAN HELD HIM UP AGAINST THE COOKSTOVE AND BURNED HIM, HE BURNED MORE THAN A LITTLE BOY'S BODY...NOBODY WOULD EVER BELIEVE THAT. NOBODY. ALL THOSE FINE, UPSTANDING MIDDLE CLASS PEOPLE I KNOW..."MY DADDY TUCKED ME INTO BED EVERY NIGHT AND READ ME A STORY"...THEY COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND THAT. HAH. THEY HAVE NO CONCEPTION. I HARDLY BELIEVE IT MYSELF, EVEN AFTER SEEING THEM IN ACTION ALL THESE YEARS...

...WHAT'D I READ? "IT IS EASIER TO BUILD A BOY THAN TO FIX A MAN." WELL, I CAN'T FIX IT. I TRIED, AND HE'S BETTER, MUCH BETTER, BUT I CAN'T DO IT ANYMORE. I CAN'T FIX HIM AND ME BOTH...
...BUT HE WORKS SO HARD...

The anguish welled into Karla's throat.

Terry stomped into the house, his shirt and hair gray with cement dust. Sweat trickled down his face, mixing with the dust, forming dirty streaks that looked like tears.

"Sonofabitch's hot out there! I see ya finally got up. What time are we s'posed to go to the Elks tonight?"

"I'm not going."

"You're not? Well, why not? We said we'd be there."

"No. You said you'd be there. I didn't"

"Well, how the hell you think that's going to look—me showing up by myself?"

"I don't give a damn HOW it looks! I don't wanna go."

"Well, why not? Seems to me it wouldn't hurtcha to put yourself out for other people a little bit, once in awhile—Jesus Christ! You ain't done nuthin' all day but sleep!"

"I'm tired."

"Aw, shit! You're always tired! You oughta get your blood-sugar checked again. You know your dad..."

"Piddle poop on Dad! Jesus, Terry! Every time I get tired, you tell me about Dad!"

"Well, why don't you want to go? You never wanna do anything or go anyplace anymore!"

"I don't want to! I got no interest in sitting there all night listening to that self-righteous middle class bigot tell me how I oughta treat you! Poor Terry has to put
up with me. He sounds just like your mother. Everybody's always so worried about poor Terry! You take plenty good care of old number one without him babysittin' you all the time."

"Well, that's what friends are for...to stick up for you!"

"Against your own WIFE? He should keep his nose where it belongs cuz he don't know what he's talkin' about anyway. I treat you plenty good...better'n you ever treated me, and you know it! I don't need my friends to stick up for me against YOU. Seems like he's your friend, not mine!"

"Well, maybe you oughta think about why people like me better'n they do you! You always sit around and hold the whole town's hand when they feel bad. And that's nice...it really is...but you never tell anybody your troubles, you never tell anybody anything! Maybe you oughta learn to approach it a little different. The way to make friends is to be there to give 'em a hand, tell 'em a couple jokes, make 'em laugh, let 'em think they're doin' YOU a favor--and they think you're a good guy!"

Terry lectured her close to an hour, telling her what she was doing wrong. At first, Karla argued with him. Then slowly, as his words pounded against her, she grew quiet and sat like a chastised child, head hanging, looking at her feet, nodding and biting her lip.

WHAT HE'S SAYING IS TRUE. PEOPLE NEVER REALLY DID LIKE ME. I WAS TOO MOUTHY, DAD ALWAYS SAID--A SMART-MOUTH,
BRASSY AND BOLD. HE DIDN'T LIKE ME, THAT'S FOR SURE...
LIKE ME! HAH! HE HATED ME! HE EVEN SAID SO, LIKE THE
TIME HE PICKED ME UP BY MY NECK OFF THE PIANO STOOL AND
HELD ME THERE, DANGLING LIKE A DOG, AND SHOUTED IT IN MY
FACE: 'I HATE YOU!'... OR THE TIME WITH THE BOXING GLOVES
AND HE PRETENDED WE WERE ALL PLAYING...

Her dad had been unusually jovial that night. The
three of them sat in the big, bare kitchen eating the
supper she had cooked; they talked. Well, actually, she
had done most of the talking, but he hadn't told her to
shut up once. Or scowled at her, either. Although normally
serious and stern, he seemed to be in a good mood; he had
looked at her as she talked, instead of hunching silently
over his plate. While she and Irene washed the dishes, he
had stayed in the house, instead of going back to the shop
to work. He sat by the table, stirring his coffee and
watching them clean up the kitchen.

Feeling light-hearted and gay, Karla danced around
the kitchen with the broom, pretending in her twelve-year-
old heart that it was a tall, handsome prince. Just as the
prince bent to whisper some magical words into her ear, her
little sister Irene, who was frantically slapping at
millers with the flyswatter, stumbled into the prince in an
escape from several dive-bombing millers. They both crashed
to the tiled floor, arms and legs tangled around one another.
Embarrassed, the prince dashed into a corner and turned
himself into a broom. Irene whined about the millers getting
her, ducking and covering her head in case of attack.

Karla scooped a miller out of mid-aid and waved it before Irene's terror-stricken eyes. "Don't be such a baby! They won't hurt you!" Karla teased. Letting the miller go, she flicked Irene's arm with her fingertips, pretending she still had the miller.

Irene pushed her away, yelling, "Kill him! Kill him! I hate him!"

Still sitting on the floor, Karla grabbed her, intending to keep on teasing, but Irene, certain that the diabolical insect was still in Karla's hand, kicked at her and punched her angrily. The sharp whip of their dad's voice brought their wrestling match to an abrupt end.

"SETTLE DOWN!" he bellowed, loudly but not angrily. "If you guys wanna fight, I'll show ya how to do it!" He walked to the broom closet, reached in, and took down his old boxing gloves. Delighted and diverted, Karla and Irene clamored around him, jumping up and down in eagerness to finally get to put the gloves on.

Patiently, he untied the gloves, separating the two pair, giving one set to each. He helped Irene put hers on, standing behind her and lacing the gloves as tight as they would go. They reached almost up to her elbows. Karla laced hers herself, slipping them on her hands afterwards. Karla's pair slid up and down on her forearms; Irene's kept falling off completely. Karla showed Irene how to keep them on by grabbing the cloth inside with her fingers.
Their dad sat back down with his coffee, watching them dance around, poking and jabbing each other with the floppy gloves, giggling when they fell off Irene's hands. He shouted directions at them, excited and grinning. The old house became warm with their gleeful, hooting laughter.

They scurried around with the gloves for awhile, poking one another, trying to imitate how they had seen their dad box, but Irene kept having trouble keeping the gloves on, which brought them both into paroxysms of giggling. Their dad, dissatisfied with the ineffectual attempts, began to show them stances, how to move their feet and legs and how to hold their arms. Being naturally coordinated, Karla caught on to the movements quickly and her jabs became more effective. Irene, who was slow and clumsy, concentrated on keeping the gloves on.

Directing Karla to stand in front of the table, her dad told her to hold the gloves up to protect her face. Standing behind Irene, he grasped her arms, moving them for her. Hollering directions at Karla, he poked Irene's fists at Karla, sharply, quickly. Karla could feel the difference in the jabs. They began to hurt.

Confused by the sudden painfulness of what had been fun only minutes before, Karla lowered her gloves and stood still. Still holding Irene's gloved forearms, their dad threw several feinting punches at Karla, dancing Irene closer and closer to Karla, moving Irene around as though she were a human shield. Hollering at Karla, "Get your
gloves up, get your gloves up!" he and Irene danced closer.

Obeying, Karla brought her gloves up before her face, leaving only one wide eye to see the punch that landed directly in her stomach. Only one wide eye registered the evil, leering hatred spread across his face. Gasping and choking for air, Karla felt her body double up like a jack-knife, landing on her butt. She slid underneath the table, skating on the cold tile, stopping only when her back smacked into the wall...

...HE WASN'T PLAYING. HE MEANT IT. HE GOT TO HIT ME FOR FREE. OH, HE PRETENDED, ALL RIGHT. HE SAID HE WAS SORRY AND ACTED SO SOLICITOUS. HE EVEN CRAWLED UNDER THE TABLE TO SEE IF I WAS ALL RIGHT AND TO HELP ME GET OUT. BUT HE WANTED TO HIT ME. I SAW IT ON HIS FACE. HE HATED ME. HE PRETENDED HE DIDN'T, BUT HE DID. MA PRETENDED, TOO. I'D BEG HER AND BEG HER TO COME AND SEE ME, BUT SHE ALWAYS SAID SHE DIDN'T HAVE TIME--MAYBE NEXT TIME. BUT SHE HAD TIME FOR EVERYTHING ELSE. SHE ONLY PRETENDED SHE DIDN'T HAVE TIME...IT'S EASY TO SAY STUFF. IT'S EASY TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY OR THAT THERE ISN'T TIME, BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT TRUE...

Terry's droning voice stopped abruptly. He didn't know exactly what he'd said to convince her, but he knew that she would go. He knew he'd won. He suddenly felt good. Very good.

At the Elks that night, Karla looked especially dainty and fragile in her blue-trimmed, little bo-peep dress. The
dress complemented her silvery blonde hair and sharp, blue eyes perfectly. Terry, too, looked suave and debonair. His dark dress pants contrasted with his body-conforming white knit shirt, setting off healthy, tanned skin. The shirt showed off his flat, muscled stomach, his narrow waist making his shoulders look even more broad. His electric brown eyes danced with merriment and the deep, leathery lines in his face seemed less severe as his teasing, boyish deviltry surfaced. They looked the perfect couple, both trim, both small, both beautiful.

Terry was proud and glad. He was aware of how they looked together. He liked the envious and admiring glances cast at them. He felt powerful, successful.

HELL! I AM SUCCESSFUL. I MADE IT. IT'S A LONG WAY FROM CARDBOARD IN THE BOTTOMS OF MY SHOES, AND RAGGED HAND-ME-DOWNS, AND BEGGING THE GROCER TO GIVE MY DAD CREDIT JUST ONE MORE TIME, OR LISTENING TO THE BOYS JEERING AT ME, 'WE KNOW WHAT YOU'RE EATIN' FOR SUPPER TONIGHT!' A LONG WAY. I FIXED HIM, THOUGH. I SHUT OL' TULLY UP THAT TIME...I FIXED HIM REAL GOOD...

That night had been much like all the rest. He'd left basketball practice early to hurry home through the cold, snowy street, shivering in his thin jacket against the north wind blowing down the plains from Canada. The snow coming down felt like needles pricking his face as he headed home. He stopped several times to readjust the fraying cardboard which covered the holes in the bottoms of his shoes. The
cardboard was soggy and wet. He figured he'd better replace the one piece—it had a hole, now, too.

He had hated to leave so early. It was his first year in basketball, and the coach had told him that for 13, he was doing pretty good. The coach was always saying nice stuff like that, but then he would scowl when Terry told him he had to go home early and see to the little kids. He'd ask him questions, like where his mom was. Terry didn't like lying to him, so he'd say she was sick or something, which wasn't a very big lie. One time when he'd said she was sick, the coach commented that she was sure sick a lot. He didn't like to lie, but it wasn't any of his god-damned business, anyway, what his mother did.

The house was cold when he came in. The fire in the coal stove was probably out, which meant she'd been gone nearly all day. The little kids were still in their coats, gathered around the table, waiting for him to come. His littlest brother was playing on the scabbed linoleum floor, chugging in circles with the toy train Terry had made him for Christmas. Terry was real proud of that train. He had made it from old coffee cans. He'd scrubbed them up real good, cut them in half and punched holes in each side for the wheel axles. Then he'd scrounged around and found some old toy wheels and attached the cans to each other with wire and rubber bands. And just like that—a train. It was fun to watch his brother play with it.

No one spoke or looked at Terry as he went to the stove
to see if any coals were still alive. Getting a coal fire going again was hard. This time, Terry was lucky. After filling the stove, he had automatically gone to the cupboards to check—just in case—hoping something to eat may have magically appeared while he'd been at school. The empty shelves stared back at him again, just like last night.

The three little kids had turned to watch as he opened the cupboard doors, one at a time. They didn't look at him as he laced his wet shoes back up. His little sister walked over to him, patted his leg gently, and asked, "Whatta ya goin' to get us tonight? Could you get us some soup tonight, Terry? Please?" Her big brown eyes plainly showed she thought he could get her anything, if he only wanted to. Terry tried not to look at her. Muttering, he got up and went into the cold.

Walking to the store through the snow, he tried to think what he could say to Mr. Peterson tonight. He tried to remember the joke he had heard. Maybe if he could get the old guy laughing, he'd soften up a little and let him charge some soup, too.

The little bell tinkled as he opened the door of the grocery store and went in. Warm and cheerful, the store smelled good, too. Mr. Peterson was behind the counter, putting groceries in a box for Mrs. Allen. He was smiling at her while he talked. Terry hoped that meant he was in a good mood. They both paused and said hello to him. Terry gave them the biggest smile he could with chattering teeth.
The sound always reminded him of those toy beetle-clickers. He'd had one once, the only real store-bought toy he ever had. One of the big kids at school had taken it away from him. Remembering it made him smile, though.

Shivering and hunching his shoulders, he leaned against the counter and enviously watched Mrs. Allen's box fill up. When she opened her purse, he could see her money, watched her hand the $10 to Mr. Peterson and still have some left. Allen's always did have a lot of money though, Terry thought, even though Mr. Allen was a mechanic, too, like his own dad.

Mrs. Allen finally left the store, and Mr. Peterson turned his full attention to him. "Well," he said, "I s'pose you're in here looking for another hand-out, huh?"

"Ah," Terry mumbled, looking at the soup cans lined up on the shelf behind Mr. Peterson, "Ah, well, my mom sent me down to see if she could get some milk. She's makin' this pudding, and ah, she run out of milk."

"Yah, and what else did she run out of?"

"Well, she thought as long as I was comin' down, maybe I could get a loaf of bread, too. Maybe some day-old stuff, she thought."

"Tell me, boy! How long is this here thing gonna keep going on?"

"Well, she's been sick, ya know, and she's finally gettin' a little better. She hasn't been able to work much since she's been sick."
Crinkling his face into his most winning smile, Terry tried to side-track Mr. Peterson. As he talked, he finally remembered the joke. When he came to the punch line, though, it had disappeared, just like that. He stood there, looking at the floor, desperately trying to remember, wondering what to say next. Impatiently, Mr. Peterson slapped his hand down on the counter. Grumbling and muttering, he complained, "Well, boy. You go get that milk and a loaf of bread. This one time. But you tell that old man of yours I want some money on account by Saturday, or there ain't going to be no more chargin' in this here store. You tell 'em. Now, your maw might be sick'n all that, but for a sick woman, she spends a lot of time in the bar with him, beltin' 'em down. And you tell your old man, boy, that I know payday's come'n'gone for the boys downta the shop, and I want some money. I got bills to pay, too! And I can't be feedin' the whole damn county for free! Now, git!"

Relieved and ashamed, Terry walked as fast as he could to the milk case, wishing he could take two. Grabbing a loaf of bread as he went by, he returned to the counter. He eyed the soup cans.

"Ah, could..." he started.

"NO. No more. You tell him. You tell your old man! Saturday!"

Terry stared at the soup while Mr. Peterson scribbled the charges on his order book. Terry signed the order and scooted out the door.
Tully, Glenn and Danner stood outside the store, kicking at the ice with their booted toes and eyeing each other. They'd been peeking at him through the store windows. Waiting for him. Pulling his collar up around his ears, Terry grasped the sack firmly and started for home, trying to ignore the three boys. He walked fast, hoping the cardboard stayed in place. The three of them trailed behind him, mimicking him and jeering. Tully started it.

"Hey, Fisher! Whatcha got in the sack?"

"Hey, how come ya never share with us?"

"Hey! He's ignorin' us! Whatcha got, Fisher?"

"I bet I know! I bet he's got a steak in there, whaddya say?"

They all laughed uproariously.

"Naw! I bet he got a chicken. Whatcha got, Fisher, a chicken? Or are you the chicken?" Tully sneered, laughing.

"Haw-haw! I bet we know what you're havin' for supper! Chicken! I bet you're eatin' chickenshit! Haw-haw!"

Terry put his head down and kept walking. The cardboard slipped, edging out of the hole in his shoe. He ignored it. A chunk of iced snow whizzed past his head, then another. The cardboard slipped out of the hole. He walked on without it. Tully saw it. He picked it up out of the snow and started to laugh.

"What the hell is this, Fisher? Huh? Hey, chicken Fisher, you lost the cardboard outa your shoe!" He ran up
behind Terry, grabbed the back of his coat collar and dropped the cardboard piece down Terry's back. Terry felt the cold, soggy thing slide all the way down to his belt. He jerked away from Tully. Tully grabbed his sack, ripping it to the bottom, spilling the bread and milk onto the frozen ground. The milk carton broke open, its white liquid gushing out into the white snow.

Enraged, Terry caught Tully square in the stomach, putting everything he had into his doubled-up fist. Surprised at Tully's gasping for air, Terry hit him again and again and again, his fists pounding like two pistons. He hit him in the nose, in his eyes, again in his stomach. Tully fell down, rolling in the snow, choking for breath and holding his belly. Terry glared at Tully's buddies for a moment. With the bread sack swinging from his bloody hand, Terry trudged on home.

The next morning when Terry woke up, he lay quietly in his bed, thinking about his fight with Tully. With his hand hurting so badly last night, he had put it out of his mind, then. But now, his hand was numb, and the worry of what to do when he got to school nagged at him. He didn't know how to act. He didn't know what the others kids were going to say. But most of all, he wasn't sure what Tully would do to him now. His muscles felt tight. He stretched several times, trying to relax, but within seconds, his muscles were bunched up tight again. The feeling made him wish to move, to punch, to kick something. He felt jumpy.
He got up.

His brothers lay in bed, breathing softly, dead to the world, as though nothing had changed. As he dressed, Terry watched them, envying their peaceful sleeping. He went out into the kitchen. From the kitchen, he could see his dad sprawled on the floor in the next room, face down and arms stretched out over his head, fully dressed and still wearing his boots. His huge hand clutched an uncorked whiskey bottle, its open neck dangerously close to the floor. Terry tip-toed in to look at it, thinking how mad his dad would be if the whiskey spilled. The bottle was empty.

Terry continued on into his mother's bedroom, looking for a blanket with which to cover his dad. His mother lay asleep, too, her mouth slightly open. She stirred as Terry came into the bedroom, turning her face toward him. One side was swollen, a black and purple color. Terry stood, looking at her, wondering what she had said to him this time to make him hit her. "She never seems to know when to keep her mouth shut," he thought, "women sure are dumb."

They must have had the fight before they got home last night; Terry didn't remember waking up and hearing anything. He was glad, too. The last time they had come home, and his dad had taken a swing at his mother, Terry had stepped in front of her, trying to break up the fight—and his dad had hit him instead. Terry was sure he hadn't meant to hit him, that it had been an accident. His mother, to make up for it, had secretly bought him some chocolate—
covered raisins, his favorite treat. "She really had had that one coming that time, though," Terry thought, "she probably did this time, too." His dad, being drunk, probably didn't realize what he was doing. As he stood looking at his mother's face, Terry's jaw worked, clenching and unclenching. Finally, he turned away, taking a blanket off her bed, leaving her the other, thin one.

Trailing the blanket behind him, he tip-toed toward his dad. Pausing, he stared at him for a long time, listening to him snore. Terry dropped the blanket in a heap at his dad's feet, unable to make himself cover him.

Getting his coat, Terry went outside into the cold. Aimlessly, he walked around town until it was time for school. Remembering the best part of that day, he felt elated again, re-living the joy of the different treatment the other kids had given him. He never had quite figured out what that feeling was, but it was there, and he liked it.

The kids suddenly, surprisingly, seemed to see him differently; they acted more respectful, he guessed the word was. Even Tully, with his swollen eyes and broken nose. Terry had chuckled silently about Tully's eyes--and his face; it had looked like a hunk of raw, red meat. Terry had felt good, for a change, to see him hurting, to see him sneaking around like a whipped dog, to see him act ashamed. This time, it was Tully who had lost, and he had won.

SERVED THE SONUVABITCH RIGHT. I SURE TOOK CARE O' HIM. THE SONSABITCHES. SURE FIXED HIM. EVEN IF I DID
BREAK MY GODDAMNED HAND. MA SURE WAS MAD ABOUT THAT. BUT I WON. AND IT WAS WORTH IT. AND NOW IT'S DIFFERENT. I EAT WHAT I WANT. ANYTHING I WANT--WHEN I WANT IT...

Exultantly, Terry patted his stomach, slowly, firmly, with satisfaction. It was a good feeling. It was good to eat.

Karla, who took eating for granted, had barely noticed her food. She concentrated on not doing or saying something that was brassy, bold and pushy. Trying to look pleasant, she held her smile in place until it became brittle. Her face ached with the effort.

The three couples they joined after dinner had been acquainted for years, yet Karla felt comfortable and intimate with only one of the women. She loved her friend dearly, but she never revealed anything very personal to her, either. Her friend commented on that once, and Karla had told her very brightly, "There's really nothing to tell!" She had laughed it off lightly, dodging the issue, but she had thought to herself, NO, THERE REALLY IS NOTHING TO TELL... THE WAY I GREW UP WOULD ONLY SHOCK YOU TO DEATH. YOU HAVE NO IDEA ANYBODY WOULD EVER DO OR SAY SUCH THINGS TO A GROWN-UP, MUCH LESS TO A KID.

SHE'D NEVER BELIEVE ME, ANYWAY...AND IF SHE DID, SHE'D THINK IT WAS ME--THAT IT WAS MY OWN FAULT. THEN SHE'D KNOW THERE REALLY IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME. DAD ALWAYS SAID PEOPLE GET WHAT THEY DESERVE...I DON'T WANT HER TO NOT LIKE ME ANYMORE...I COULDN'T STAND THAT...
Karla was sure she would lose her friend. She always lost.

As the music played, the liquor flowed and the group gaily laughed, joking and exchanging recent news, Karla began to relax. Her resolution to be a quiet, dignified lady began to slip away. She began to cut-up and clown, enjoying her own witty verbosity and her own slapstick jokes. She felt good when she entertained others and made them laugh. And they always did laugh. She began to tell their stories—the stories of life with Terry that had become their own special comedy routine. He played the straight man, she, the comic wit. Whatever she forgot, though, he always filled in.

"We were driving down this freeway, going to Spokane, and here we are, on a six lane highway, going seventy miles an hour with cars all around us—two dumb hicks caught in the big city traffic—and Terry, wouldn't you know, what with his weak kidneys and all the beer he drank, has to go potty. And no way can we get out of that mess! Well, when he's gotta go, he's gotta go NOW. And that idiot, he can look so danged innocent—he says to me, 'Jee-suss Chrisss-t! I gotta pee!' and he reaches down on the floor of the car, grabs my pop bottle and pees in it. So here we are, with 6,000 people driving all around us, and Terry's sitting there, grinning and winking at all the cute girls driving by us, flirting—FLIRTING would you believe—and waaa-ving at them, all the time he's peeing into that dang pop bottle!"

"Oh! I had a helluva time! That pop bottle wasn't
near big enough either! Haw-haw! But when ya gotta go, ya gotta go! Hah! Hah! But at least, I don't stink the place up like that ol' Karla does! You shoulda seen her one night! The stench was unbearable!"

"Oh! you! Terrrr-y! Don't tell that!" Karla started to laugh, shreiking and gasping for breath while she whooped, "He sprayed my butt with the garbage spray! He did! At three o'clock in the morning!"

"Well, I had to do somthin' about that rotten stench you were makin! Plain rotten!" He wrinkled up his face as he laughed, enjoying having pinned a good one on her.

"Ohhh, you always exaggerate so much! I did not! At least, I never flushed my false teeth down the toilet! He was so stinkin' drunk he never even missed 'em till morning! A $200 set of false teeth floating down the sewer into the Yellowstone...and we were sooo broke. He had to go without teeth for two months! He sure got sicka soup!"

"Well, if you were any kinduva wife, you'da fished 'em out for me! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"He's so danged funny sometimes, I can't stand it! Just like the other night, he gets all dressed up...shines...shaves and stinks himself all up with shaving lotion...he's going out, he says. Never asked me to go with him. Saturday night, and I have to stay home by myself. HURT! That's what I was--HURT. Ha! Ha! Ha! So I told him, that's all right, you just go out and leave me here at home all by myself--but when you come home, it's MY turn...the
punishment is SEX ON DEMAND. And no way! is he gointa get out of it, I told him, so just ferget it...So, he never says nothin' and left. Well, I went to bed, finally, and at two o'clock in the morning, here he comes. He makes so dang much noise, he's sing-ing and throw-ing things aa-round, like he always does, turns on all the lights and wakes me up. He is the noisiest critter! Well, anyway, he doesn't say a word, takes off all his clothes, throws back the covers, and lays down on the bed, spread-eagles himself all over the place, and just lays there. Just starin' at the ceiling with all the lights on. I said 'Jeez, Terry, fer cripes sake, turn off the lights. I s'pose you think I'ma gonna get up and do it for ya.' He just lays there, staring, and finally, he says, "I'm ready." Just deadpan like. I says, "For what?" and he just lays there, so serr-i-ous looking, and he says, "I'ma--red-dy--for--mah--torr-ture!" I about cracked up! Most of the time, though, he just giggles and giggles and then expects me to come and rescue him from some waterhole somewhere. You'd think I was the U. S. Coastguard or sumthin'!

Amidst the noisy laughter at the story, Terry's remark was missed. But Karla heard it. Suddenly, seriously, looking directly at her, he said, "Well...you were good, but you weren't that good."

The punch landed squarely in her stomach. She felt like the child again, gasping and choking for breath. No one noticed the beginning of her constant swallowing or her
smile becoming a grimace of pain. Quickly looking down, Karla noticed a small hangnail on her thumb. She picked at it, rubbing it raw. She didn't notice when it began to bleed.

BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING. WE WERE ONLY KIDDING.
AND HE KNOWS IT, TOO. WE'VE DONE THAT FOR YEARS...I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING.

The voices began to beat against her, all shouting at once, meanly and viciously...

WHY, YOU GODDAMNED FOOL!
GODDAMN SHOW-OFF, THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE! I'LL TEACH YOU.
YOU'RE AWFUL GOD DAMN COCK SURE OF YOURSELF, AREN'T YA?
THINK YOU'RE SO GOD DAMNED SMART, DONCHA? WELL,
YOU'RE JUST A GOD DAMNED BIG FROG IN A LITTLE PUDDLE!
THE TROUBLE WITH YOU, YOU'RE JUST TOO GOD DAMNED BIG FER YOUR BRITCHES!

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?
THINK YOU'RE TOO GOD DAMNED GOOD, DONCHA?
YOU AND YOUR GOD DAMNED HIGH-FALUTIN' WORDS!

Feeling helpless and unable to quell the voices, she gulped her drink. One after the other, she swallowed them, as though each glassful were only a tiny sip. Terry joined into the conversation and merry-making which continued to wash around her. Suddenly, he was the life of the party... in charge of the group.

At closing time, Terry bid everyone good-night, shouting last minute one-liners as they crossed the street to
their car. Alone in the car, Terry chattered happily to her, telling her of the new cattle-profit formulas the men had discussed, what he agreed with and why. After they pulled into the driveway along side the darkened red house, he opened his door, and turning to her, commented, "You sure got quiet all of a sudden. What the hell's the matter with you now?"

"There's nothing to say."

"Never knew that ever stopped you before! Goddamn women never know when to shut up! Come on. Let's go in."

Terry got out, leaving the door open, signaling her to slide out his side. Locking her own door, Karla slid across under the wheel. She re-started the car.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he shouted at her, turning back to the open door. He reached into the dimly lit car, grabbed her arm, dragging her from the car. Karla hung onto the door frame.


"I don't want to. I don't wanna go in there."

"Come on. Let's go to bed." His muscles felt tight, and his jaw worked. Her resistance made him feel panicky.

"I don't want to." She clung harder to the door. Pulling her, and pushing on the door, Terry twisted Karla's arm, leaving red finger marks printed on her fair skin. In the darkness, they looked like they were playing tug-of-war, with Karla's arm the rope.
As Karla resisted his pulling on her, an icy cold fury crept up his back. It took every bit of control he had to keep from hitting her. He didn't want to hit her: he was afraid if he ever started, he might not be able to stop. Instead, he talked, trying to convince her that she should come in the house with him. As his panic and fear rose higher and higher, he talked faster and faster, saying whatever came into his mind.

"Come on, Toots," he said again, pleading with her, gently. She looked at him stubbornly, her eyes saying "no". He tried again, trying to reason with her, "Jesus Christ. This is stupid to stand here and argue about nuthin'! For God's sake, why doncha act like ya got some goddamn sense for once? You're actin' like a goddamn dumb woman...and that's pretty dumb. Why doncha ever use your goddamn head and think a little bit...?"

Karla's eyes flared in anger. Her anger infuriated Terry. Losing all control, he attacked, "You're actin' like a goddamn fool! Who the hell do ya think you are? Christ Almighty? Well, ya ain't! You act like ya think you're so goddamn smart, and got the answer for everything...Always gotta be actin' like a smart-ass, thinkin' you're so goddamn cute...Sit up on your goddamn pedestal and think you're better'n everybody else...well, ya ain't! You ain't got any goddamn manners a'tall. You get so goddamn brassy and so goddamn sure of yourself all the time...Why doncha start thinkin' a little before you start runnin' off at the mouth
all the time?..Jesus Christ...I heard you talkin' to Mrs. Wurth...You sure made me look good! Haw! What in hell do ya think people will think of me? And ol' Ramsey... flirtin' with him like some cheap bitch! He sure was laughin' up his sleeve at me...givin' him the come-on all night like some goddamn whore...who the hell do you think you are? He sure was havin' a good horse laugh on me. He ain't interested in you...who'd ever want you? You really think you're hot stuff, but you ain't so goddamn good...Nobody'd ever want you...You think you're so cute, you and your sexy nightgowns and your stupid dancin' around with your flimsy scarves...thought you were real cute the other night, didn'tcha?...Well, you made yourself look pretty goddamn cheap..."

Karla stood, clutching the car door as though she had turned to stone. Abruptly, as though he had said nothing more than that she should come in the house, Terry broke off his tirade. "Well, piss on ya!" he said, "I ain't gonna stand out here all night and freeze! I'm goin' to bed!"

Letting go of Karla's arm, Terry pushed her roughly into the car and slammed the door. The solid steel frame bit into her squeezed fingers, still clutching the car door. Karla screamed in agony, fighting blackness, frantically searching for the door handle with her free hand. Terry stormed angrily into the house, ignoring her sobbing voice and her anguished cries.
Karla sat in the dark car for a long time, vaguely hearing the smooth vibrations of the idling motor. Her head drooping, she stared at a thread hanging from the heavily-scented, shapely-lady air freshener. She absent-mindedly lifted the lady from the radio knob where it hung and slowly wound and unwound its string-hanger around the lady's neck. Under the constant pressure, the lady's cardboard head snapped off, falling unnoticed to the floor.

The eastern sky began to glow a fluorescent pink. Still she sat, moving her gaze to the steering wheel. As the sun lightened the sky, she saw the cloudy vapor that had floated in from the river, wrapping itself eerily around the old trees. Karla shivered.

A bird twittered in the cold dawn. One flew from the big tree, fluttering gently to a perch on the fence. Karla, seeing him, stared. He was yellow. IRENE SAYS THAT YELLOW BIRDS ARE FREEDOM. She watched the bird fluff and preen his feathers.

She stared at her hand. A mottled purple and black, the hand didn't seem to be hers. It didn't hurt anymore. Silently, Karla turned off the car key. She looked back to see the bird again, her hand still on the key. It had flown away.
PART III.

LEST YOU BECOME AS A LITTLE CHILD

THE CROCUS

As cruel December carves in ice
Its deadly, barren sovereignty,
And wind becomes a whistling scythe,
The earth hides from that tyranny.
   No movement but the drifting snow
   While beauty's bud sleeps deep below.

As aged winter wades through snow,
His icy hand hoar-frosting trees,
The whipping wind turns deadly foe,
Uprooting rigid trees with ease.
   While buried deep, an amber bud
   Answers light's magnetic tug.

March puffs in; the sun strides high:
Warmth honeycombs the frozen tomb.
Redeemed, the trees wave their good-byes
To winds that flogged earth's struggling womb.
   Silently, the buds arise,
   Reaching up, they seek the sky.
While April dons her filmy robe,
December wanders nude and cold.
The spring breeze whispers, "Tree, have hope
For at your feet lies petaled gold."
Despite the cold, through patchy snow,
The dainty crocus blooms and grows.

The beleaguered tree, in shadowed maze,
May conquer, too, the wind's cold flight:
Enlightened, wooden hearts can blaze
Like buds that bloom in meadow's light.
The light that sets all beauty free
Seeks fragile bud and mighty tree.

The child of woe, a battered tree
Buffeted by every raging wind,
Cries and struggles to be free
Of torture for another's sin.

But mystery-light invites and flows:
Calls him to blossom, too, in snow.

Though violent winds of cruelty
Destroy and break a brittle tree,
To transcend that brutality
A crocus he must learn to be:
Responsive to the mystery-light
Which transforms death into life.
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