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Brown, Judith R.
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by
Judith R. Brown
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Approved by

First Reader

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The Autopsy

It was that time—the brass green interlude in summer evenings between the last chirp of the going-to-bed birds and the first croak of the bass-throated frogs when there is stillness. Daylight odors hang in the lull: The grass smells wet and the locust trees droop with the burden of their perfume. The stillness breeds expectancy, a waiting for the frogs croak or the surfacing of a just-dived loon. At such moments one is certain the loon shall have a fish, a huge one that will be sufficient for almost forever. There is torment only after the time, when the fish is too big, and the bird lets go and loses it. Julie caught at the moment as she pushed the screen door of the basement-apartment closed behind her and stepped up the two crude concrete block stairs to stand at the highest spot in the sloping back yard. Beyond the fence, at the bottom of the splotchy garden were brambles, and beyond them a swamp before you came to the river. Luck had availed her, first with marriage, then with Ian's medical school in the epitome town of all cities and towns: Culture and country, it had both, even to a swamp like the one at home. And evenings here, like home, had a country, lyrical quality.

Once at home she had come upon this quietness when she and Tom were walking to the swamp to hunt frogs. Tonight the silence heralded more than a mere frog's croak. An autopsy had an adult enormity of frog hunt lacked, and it was
her husband rather than her brother whose tutelage escorted her to a brand new experience—one more for the collection—yet the bursting anticipation was still something to be nursed, drawn out. On the farm, when she and Tom had chased bullfrogs it had been after evening chores and they had walked out behind the barn across the fields a quarter of a mile to the swamp. It was this same pregnant time. But when he heard the first frog croak, Tom wanted to hurry and was angry with her for dawdling. It was not, as he'd taunted, her sheer stubbornness. She knew very well she'd suggested they go, but when they got there and hunted and found the frogs it would be all over and they would have to go home—but he walked faster anyway. He left her behind and when he got there she saw him from a distance wading in, pushing aside the rushes with ruthless thrusts, hunting out the spot from which the bilious lament came. When she reached the swamp she lingered at the edge listening to the hollow plooshes of the frogs as they dived. That was enough—she didn't need to see them; she didn't really want to. When Tom caught one, she was wretched. All the way home she had to stare at that ugly creature groveling and cooped in a jar deceived by the lucidity of the glass.

The door was being pulled shut behind her and she turned to watch Ian put the key in the lock. His bigness nearly filled the frame of the three-quarter size basement door.

"You ready, fledgling?"
"Yes, you can lock it." He took her arm and steered her over the sunken course of the cracked concrete walk toward the front of the house. Just as they turned the corner of the house she heard the first bullfrog.

"Ian, I know you think I seem callow, but this is a kind of first romp for me. It's exciting, like the excitement you get when you hunt bullfrogs. Mary Arnold fussed when I phoned her because Hal won't take her to one. He thinks they'd be caught."

"You'll remember now, won't you, for tonight, a body is just so much meat. Remember you begged to go." He pushed at his words as if she were a patient he was instructing.

"Yes, Ian."

"If you faint, it's as good as a published confession that you don't belong there--now remember that."

She could remember seeing only one other dead person--from across the street. She'd seen them throw a towel over the head of a man killed in an automobile accident in front of the veterinary hospital. The picture of the form and the towel had come back nearly every time she'd driven by that spot. There was another time when the wife of one of the Trustees of the church had died, and she'd snuck into the sanctuary to see her. She was all intact and powdered.

"Autopsies are different, aren't they?"

"Yes, you just remember that. They're different and impersonal. Then you did call Hal Arnold when I asked you?
He knows about it?"

"Yes, he said we needn't let him know about any more because he's already seen his twenty-five. How many more have you?"

"Two more after tonight, but I have two days. I can bank on two deaths in two days, at least I hope so."

She hadn't heard him. She was thinking of other of her inaugurations.

"Tonight makes me think of the day when I was eight when I crouched on the barn rafters and Tom climbed up and jumped down into the hay. He jumped over and over while I was working up to making my first leap. Each time he went I nearly followed, but when I watched from the rafter it was as if I had both the leap and the ecstasy of anticipating it all rolled into one ball which was me, right there on that rafter. There wasn't any need to take the leap. Do you know what I mean?"

"No, fantasy is a woman's prerogative. I would have jumped."

"It isn't a fantasy, it's real!" She pulled the corners of her thin lips down until bumps came in her chin, hoping he would see. Fantasy, imagination, was a woman's privilege, but men were just obtuse enough to think of it as nothing more than a flat prerogative.

There were four blocks, all a gradual uphill grade, to the hospital. As they walked, she strained to keep her pout
until he noticed it. But he didn't see it, and when they reached the door and he opened it for her it was as if the swing of it swept away her stalling peevishness in a surge of fulfilled expectations. The hospital odor swabbed out as far as the reception room like a clean rinse. There was hurry, but it was hushed, ordered, and in that order Ian seemed what ought to be. He was at least four years older than most medical students, the war having intervened, and his bulky, self-assured frame seemed geared to the curative side of the huge mechanism of a hospital. He was too fearlessly self-possessed to be a patient. The hospital in some sense belonged to him, and when she was with him here, by a vague osmosis it belonged to her.

They wound their way through a labyrinth of basement halls to the locker-lined corridor which was headquarters for the medical students. Ian opened his and put on his own white coat, then pulled out a second. He took her elbow and guided her to another quieter hall and stopped to hold out the coat for her to put on. Delight commingled with fear at the sneakiness of the venture bristled from the crisp coat as it enveloped her. While Ian's even, block-shaped fingernails creased the cuff he'd made from tucking the sleeves back on themselves, he outlined what she was to do.

"You wait out here in the hall--see that light blinking?" He gestured with an elbow at four colored lights over an arch. "That means 'autopsy in progress'. The door to the seats in
the amphitheater is kept locked, but I'll go in through the
doors to the theater floor itself and come around and open it
from the inside for you. You walk right in naturally with
me. Follow me down to the first row, so we can see well."

He left her and she leaned back against the bare wall
staring up at the lights. By partially shutting her eyes
she could focus on the colors so that their outlines blurred
and they blinked like a kaleidoscope moving to the rhythm of
a silently repeated chant: 'autopsy in progress, autopsy in
progress'. The door opened beside her and Ian's voice came
through the opening.

"Come on."

A rush of fear dispelled her bliss as she followed him
into the amphitheater and around the back two rows of benches
to the front one. They sat down and the sense of a low
ceiling and small dimensions suggested it was deception to
give the room the vast, hollow connotations of the word am-
phitheater. It was only a basement cubby hole. There was
one other student leaning as if the railing between the
theater itself and the first row of benches was the last
barrier between him and doctorhood. Ian borrowed the
Patient's Record from him. Julie, having avoided the
finality of a look into the theater, her hands in her lap,
kept her head lowered when she sat down. She entertained
the hope that somehow, with concentration, all the sensa-
tions from her whirring nerves could be centralized in her
hands. From there they could be scooped up and dashed to the concrete floor before she looked at what was happening out on the table. She waited. The strait-laced wooden bench was a solace.

When Ian said, "leukemia, nine years old," she raised her head. Her glance caught the surface of the light above the table first. It looked like a sheet of hot ice splintering its glint onto the instruments the two men were using. The light took her eye inevitably downward. On the table, between two pathologists was a small, naked boy, his chest cavity lay gaping and open, but the men were not frocked and muzzled as doctors were in the pictures of operations she'd seen. The room was too small, its atmosphere too intimate, to have sustained her pretensions to being a medical student. She had no doubt betrayed herself already and they couldn't seem to care less whether she were legally there or not. The casualness made the high-tension of her nerves incongruous. Nevertheless, on the table lay a stark, dead boy. His color was grizzled yellow, made more ashen by contrast with the green scrub suits the pathologists wore. His opened chest cavity was the red hue of the illustrations in Ian's medical books, its color so brilliant it hardly seemed dead. The man was cutting deftly at the edge of what she thought must be a lung, while the other man, equally facile, plunged two rubber-gloved hands beneath the organ to bring it up and out. A flare of panic throttled her when
when she saw he was bringing the great red glob to the table just below Ian and the other chap, and not four feet from her. Ian reached a burly arm below him to the table and picked up the clip-board with the measurement sheet attached.

"I'll record," he said.

The pathologist slapped the lung on a scale: three hundred twenty grams. He called out and Ian wrote. From there it was plopped about from side to end for measurements. She'd never seen a lung before. It was just so much meat. After the first seizure, a lung had never been anything else but meat to her. Its intricacy, its mass calmed and held her, and her thoughts about it carried no overtone but curiosity. When the lung lay placidly stowed in a great white enamel tray the heart arrived at the measuring table. There it was, the age-old seat of desire--dismembered. Of course, medically it never had anything to do with poetry or love. Julie wondered how much desire a young boy of nine had had. The disease, the history sheet recorded, had induced marked lethargy at the last. Ian's elbow nudged her gently and he nodded toward the table.

"Watch the extraction of the intestine--see how clean they are. They may look more casual than surgeons, but they're careful."

They were pulling up on the long rope of the intestine and another picture in her mind was becoming incarnate in the flesh. There were other organs she was less familiar with that
that followed: the stomach, liver, spleen, pancreas. As she watched the weighing of the kidneys, there was a shatter-ering noise and a choking odor came from the table. She pressed the back of her hand beneath her nose while she looked. One of the scrub-suited men was wielding what appeared to be a power-saw at the far end of the table near the boy's head. She clutched with her other hand at Ian's arm.

"What is it?" The odor made her gag.

"You smell burned bone. He's cutting a section of the skull off the top of the head so that they can remove the brain. It's all neat, don't be concerned."

Julie lowered her head. It wasn't to be watched. It was to be passed over if that were possible with such an overpowering death knell which took her thoughts from the detached organs back to the dead boy. The sawing stopped, but the thoughts were to be coped with. It was unfitting to think of a nine-year-old boy dead. His family, maimed as it was, must feel it so--upstairs somewhere. Leukemia gives warning, but he is still dead. Death is dead--absent. What would he have grown up to? His rounded hair line had looked like a choir boy's. Small boy's voices are pure, so pure its a pity they change, get throaty like frogs. He died before his voice changed. Died before, pure. He died pure, there's consolation in that.

"You'll want to see the brain." Ian's oral annotations
began again. The brain had arrived on the measuring table where the white enamel trays were now filled with the extracted organs, two heaped masses of variegated reds. She studied the convolutions of the brain wondering if he had had better than average intelligence. A choir boy likely would.

"Fifteen by twelve-point-five by nine." Both pathologists had come now to the table and had begun the sectioning of the organs. They appeared to be finished with the body and the diener was preparing it to leave for the funeral home. I am was making occasional comments to the men and they to him.

"Particularly marked effect on the liver--its enlarged and infiltrated." The return to medical matter-of-factness calmed--was welcome. "Look at the kidneys."

Julie glanced at the diener and felt again the mingled sadness and triumph of unsullied innocence. She was staring blankly, congratulating her own sense of control, when an orderly pulling another rolling table emerged back first through the two swinging doors at the side of the theater floor. There was something on the table he pulled, but it was not a body. It brought with it a smell: putrid, but hardly heavy. The table rolled closer. A heap of clothes...? No, bones! Bits of dry flesh hung to a shin bone projecting from a mass of dark rags. A beaten felt hat lay beside a skull with scrawny globs of hair hanging from it, its empty
eye-sockets dark as the nostril in the remaining bit of nose. Beside the heap at the end of the table lay a mouldered shoe.

The avuncular protection of Ian's hand came to press on Julie's knee.

"It's probably a medico-legal case. Med-students aren't supposed to see them. But for credit on the leukemia, I'll have to stay through the sectioning. You better go. I'll come soon." She scarcely heard. Another pathologist had come in and was gingerly lifting the shoe.

Ian was watching now, too. The other student had moved down to speak to the orderly. All but the two men sectioning were occupied with the new arrival and the pathologist working with it. How could he touch it, even the shoe?

The student edged back and spoke to Robert.

"He says it was found hanging to a snag in a swamp. They're to determine how long it's been dead.

A swamp. How can he handle it? On a snag, snag, even with gloves. One hand was still tight-pressed to her mouth, one finger growing anguine, colder. Her breath seemed to catch in her uvula and came out only when she consciously rescued it. The pathologist was bolder now, poking about. He tugged at something which required the use of a second hand. Finally dislodging it he drew up, like a snake rising to strike, a section of rope. The heaped body rendered indeterminate whether it had come from the waist, a belt, or the neck...

Can't handle this. Cold undulated from her extremities
to her knees and elbows. Wincing, she closed her eyes and slid along the bench sensing her legs would not obey her instructions to walk. The aisle forced her to rise, and reeling, she climbed the concrete stairs that heaved suddenly steep. The door's solidity as she leaned on it made her hesitate to find the knob. But the odor returned as she stood still, spurring her frosted hand until it touched the brass globe, warm only by contrast. She leaned on the door as it swung out. The blessed, the clean odor told her she was in the corridor. She dare not sink down. Order, she had to be ordered in the corridor. She stood bone-rigid against the cold assurance of a wall. Resting her head back, her closed eyes caught the glare of the blinking light. She closed her eyes tighter, but the blinker persisted. Each flash brought the image of the heap on the table. It wasn't a man; he'd never lived in her world, it was an effigy of a man, a rotted scarecrow. She strained to shut her eyes still tighter. Clogged, her mind was clogged with an old scarecrow. Too much to handle, pick it out, piece by piece from bog, not too much, piece by piece. It won't go, all, none. Loons take the whole fish or none. When he'll clog their throats, they let go. Let go. No harm... in letting a too-big fish go. No harm, if you don't want a too-big frog. Can't swallow a too-big fish. Scale-glint hurts eyes, scrapes lips. She opened her'mouth and let it go...

"Let go, let go. I'm all a right." The sound of her own
voice startled and roused her. Tan was standing beside her propping her up at the elbow.

"I'm all right. We can go." She began walking mechanically, trying to think. Ian's matters-of-fact would not do. Not do for her. They did for him—he was well off—not even death phased the shape of an opaque, substantially globed world. But what could be done with a transparent, pliant, hoodwinkable world... She would think about it, but not now, now they were outdoors again and the croaking of the frogs was all she could bear to cope with.
The Bide Awa Sun

The morning dawned with only a thin layer of clouds shelving the eastern horizon. The blue in the top of the sky would, with reinforcement from the wind, capture the whole of space for its own; and meanwhile the sun promised itself by giving a faint gleam to wet, flat surfaces. Nearly all the surfaces out of doors were wet and alight, for it had rained every day for two weeks. By eight o'clock the sun did break through along with a burst of wind, and together they caught the half unleaved trees to give their yellow-brown a dashing brilliance, a raucous denial of being more dead than alive. The bare, top branches, the very harbingers of deadness were alive now in the wind. Even the nothingness of the air gleamed with pure, wet freshness.

She stopped on the back stoop, startled by the rush of cold when she stepped out. Touching her finger to her tongue, she held it high in the wind. It was clear from the trees which way the wind was blowing, but she wanted to touch a finger to it anyway. She chilled herself standing too long gazing down the draw, reluctant to relinquish such loveliness. Yet when she turned to go in, she found the kitchen walls lit with the flickering reflections of the interplaying sun and shadow in the leaves, and it was as if the outside had come inside. Yes, today the wind would work with the sun, not against it, and the sun would win. Rain no longer owned the earth.
She turned back, reassured, to the cluttered breakfast table. There were dishes on two of its four sides. Durk had got up and taken his to the sink, leaving the third side bare. That was the way it would be -- she and Forrest left to themselves. She picked up Forrest's cereal bowl, resolved to suppress the irritation she felt at the "slop" he left. He never drank the milk left in the bottom. She supposed that was his privilege, but on top of that he tossed egg shells, prune pits, anything into it. Copiously she drained the milk off into the cat's dish. Now they'd be alone, as a new effort, a gesture, she'd try again to quell her irritation, since after twenty-six years she knew she could not quell Forrest. She bent over the cat's dish and let the white liquid trickle down into it. The milk of human kindness.

Durk was upstairs -- the creaking noises in the rafters indicated his movements around the large, partially finished attic room the boys had shared before Tad left. Durk wouldn't take all his things, of course, but he was packing them all this time. Since he'd come home from college almost every week-end to see Betsy, during those years his things had been left intact. But this was a real dismantling project -- the second the attic had seen. The last chicken as leaving the roost. That phrase made much too light of a woeful thing. Whoever used it first had seen the roost from the outside, not the inside. Yet, it was no good clinging to an ebb tide. What has to happen, happens. Hadn't her own mother had to give her
up when she was fourteen. Lately she'd been wondering if it had been harder or easier to give your daughter up to your sister. She'd not got back to Inverness to find out. It made her heart stop to think of her mother dying there all alone.

Children have to live their own lives. She was luckier than some; he had been home so much through college. And wouldn't she puff with pride at each letter's tales of the good he'd be doing these next two years. And since the rest of Indian Lodge didn't understand his idea of good, even if it was straight from the Bible, her support --

Forrest banged into her thoughts kicking at the back door where the moisture had made the casing swell and it stuck at the bottom. At last it burst open. His head appeared inside the door while he wiped his feet outside.

"Maud," he said, "the north flood gate's sprung. Too much rain. Will ye make me a lunch to take up there. And I'm fearin' you'll have to drive Durk to the train, come afternoon." He took off his jacket and fumbled in the tight pocket of his jeans for his cigarette-making paper. "It'll take a good day to get the damage cleared up; not sure we can do it in that." He rolled a cigaratte and walked about the kitchen while he lighted it. His wiry hair fell over his forehead, having been freed from under the hat which he'd tossed on the table. "He upstairs? I'll say goodbye now while I'm waiting on my lunch." He went through the door that led to the stair-
well and the heavy knock of his boots sounded on the stairs.
What did he say at a time like this? She knew what he'd said
to Tad, but he'd been proud of Tad. Tad had entered the Air
Force, he'd stood up and protected his country. She cocked
her head to hear, but he'd shut the door to the stair well,
and she could hear only the sound of voices. He wasn't up
long. She'd just finished wrapping his sandwiches when he
came down again.

"There be Indians going with you, be there?"
"Yes, five."
"Pray, you'll be stuck for sure if ye go in on that road
in the jeep."
"It's all part of it, Maud, ye know that. We'll just
dig out."
"I'll be back ahead of ye, for ye'll be stuck for sure.
Godspeed ye now."

She watched him cross on the bumpy path to the shed. He
ought to get rid of that old hat. She hated its unsightly
sweat line just above where its band used to be. But it didn't
nip him any that she hated it. They were still two people
going what amounted to separate ways just as they had when
they'd been cousins living in his father's house in Spokane.
She'd been grateful when she was so new to have someone close
to help her get started at high school, but she was sent because
she was the smartest, and it didn't take long. Someone, she'd
forgotten who, had said to her when they began to think of
marrying that besides all the dangers of marrying your own 
blood cousin, Forrest wasn't strong enough for her. He was 
only a lad to load her affection on. Children'd come and 
eat up her affection and she and Forrest would have nothing 
left. Whoever it was, was wrong. Forrest was too strong, not 
too weak. He was strong enough to be stubborn, and she was 
strong enough to be obstinate, and the road their marriage 
had taken these twenty-six years lay in two ruts running 
perpendicular, not parallel, like roads should. Tad had been 
on the way on their wedding day -- she had never been sure 
how much difference that had made, for they surely would have 
moved anyway. She didn't know she had jumped at the chance to 
leave town. Forrest had been offered three positions, two 
right in Spokane where they were married and one with the 
Indian Service which required a move to the Flathead Reserva-
tion in Montana. Perhaps that was the heart of it. She had 
hustled a scandal out the front door, but irrigation and 
Indians marched right in the back door and took Forrest by the 
nape of the neck leaving her with nothing but her children. 
Indian Lodge had no cultural life. It hadn't even another Scot.

From the window above the sink she watched the jeep 
bounce onto the first stretch of the three miles out to the 
county road. A longcast winter shadow bumped along with it. 
Tad was gone, Durk was going, but Forrest took less strong now 
to his Indians. She ought to be hot to the very ends of her 
hair, so chagrined she was at all the differences she'd never
smoothe~

over with Forrest. Even after he started college, Durk was no farther away than Missoula and the next weekend, and Durk seldom differed. There'd been neither the inclination nor the need to iron out differences with Forrest until just now, when the exultant bounce of that jeep in the sunlight had caught at the top of her head, snatched away the shame, and made her hair tingle with new expectancy. There was a new start brewing.

She turned from the window and picked up Durk's stacked dishes fondly, but without ceremony. It was the last time she'd be lowering them into the dish water, but wasn't it a canny mother who let last times with her bairns pass easily? She lifted a wet hand from the water, and with its dry wrist brushed a wisp of her hair back to catch on the knot in back. It dropped again. Exasperated she shook the water from her hand and manipulating with moist fingers tucked the lock more firmly into the knot. Ever since he'd been to school, Durk had teased her that her knot was a school teacher's knot. Just yesterday he'd been telling her that it was a good thing she got it after she was married, because there never had been a pretty Scotch lass and knots like that made her that much more plain. They scared the men away. A lot thought about what he tossed off! His own Betsy, with her long hair would be twisting it into a knot before the year was out. And what finer use of a woman's talents was there than school teaching, anyway? She herself would have trained to be one. Strange how a body's need for affection takes over young and eats out all
your dreams. And yet, wasn't it for a fine morning like this to stir up dead dreams? She, Maud Hendersen, wasn't she fit to finish college? She was! He'd never let her go to Missoula, but these days they had correspondence courses. A certificate might take three or four years, but wasn't a wind-fresh morning the Lord's very trumpet call to reaffirmation? What she wanted to do enough, she could do.

The facts of her morning ritual: the rest of the dishes, the bread kneading, the sweeping of the kitchen floor, the straightening of the living room, and even the cooking of the last lunch for Durk, were mere hazy backdrops for vivid mental scenes in an imaginary classroom. One misunderstood boy continued to recur in her pictures. She saw his spattered, determined face below tousled sandy hair clearly. The whole school, and all his other teachers had pounced on him for stealing a raw raw-hide notebook he'd had one day. She was alone in believing his story. He was a canny lad and she had faith in him. And her faith was vindicated. Later, he proved he had bought it. He was always a trouble maker, but he always had reasons, and often they were tied to some small injustice. He confided in her, but trusted no one else, and she believed him because at bottom she knew he was good -- misunderstood, he was.

"Durk, my mind's made up." He came downstairs and into the kitchen and she began as if he had been there all along. "I've settled on taking correspondence courses to finish my
degree. I'm going to teach school. The superintendent will know what it takes to qualify and I'll stop at his office this very afternoon. Why they're nigh begging for teachers." She stopped when she saw he was shaking his head.

"It takes something you can't claim, mother: ideas like everyone else's." He made the gesture of hopelessness she had come to dread from him. "People don't want crack-pots teaching their kids. We know what the town thinks of me, and we know they know you and I are cut from the same cloth."

"But they're fit to go ignorant for want of teachers." Her tone was indignant. "Mark me, it'll take some powerful power to stop me. There's no draft board over me."

"But there's the school board. They'll fix you. What did you quote me yesterday, straight from the Bible, about Christ looking for someone to have pity on him, 'but there was no man,' you said, 'neither found he any...'?" The bitterness in his voice startled her.

"Well...." she tossed her head, feeling again like a young girl arguing with cousin Forrest, "we have to give them the chance to change. We have to make them feel they're pitiless. They have to know what they have not. That's our job. You haven't tossed it in yet; why should I?" She poured his chowder from the dipper into a bowl and set it down decisively, as if to end the matter. "What time do you want to go?"

"My gear'll be packed in about an hour. I promised Betsy I'd spend the rest of the time with her, so let's go right off."
A faint wince ran along her nerves. She looked at him and he was eating as always, rapidly. He hadn't a clue of what talk like that did to her. She felt the old tremor of an ache to go back of his chair, throw her arms down and around his chest and rock gently back and forth, as if he were still cradled. Oh, it was all so clear, so shamefacedly clear to her, and she couldn't help herself. Things had held steady this far. He would be away now two years. Things could happen in those two years. If Betsy was just a snip, it wouldn't last. If she meant it... that needn't be formulated as yet. Two years of work abroad would give him perspective. He'd see how small the Indian Lodge world is, and he'd not be content to marry a girl this town's bred. Even Tad was beginning to see that. The Air Force had done something outside of swelling his pride.

"I'll make you a lunch for the train," she offered.

"Betsy said she'd make it. Thanks anyway, Mom." He carried his dishes to the sink and took a toothpick from the cupboard. That lunch hadn't had a particle of anything that would stick in his teeth. Toothpicks were a nasty, Indian-like habit, plain crude they were, and he'd picked the trick up from his father. Two years could break him of that, as well.

"Thanks, Mom, good lunch." He tossed the phrase and his toothpick from between his teeth and went on upstairs. An hour later they stood in the front hallway ready to leave. The sun cast a sharp brilliance, long and narrow, in through
a sliver of a window in the front door while he took her coat from her and held it for her to put on. He stood still a moment behind her, then squeezed her shoulders between his two hands. "I'll miss you, Mother." It was a staccato phrase. She stood without moving so as not to break the mood waiting for him to go on. But she sensed he'd lost his pose, and it was awkward.

"You'll be missed here, too, son. But as my mother told me on that fateful day I left Scotland, 'Ye're no awa to bide awa.'" Her voice fell to a low mutter and tears flecked her eyes so that she was thankful she wasn't facing him.

He picked up the duffle bag he'd leaned against the archway, slung it over his shoulder, and took her arm to guide her to the car. By walking deliberately, she forced him to slacken his pace. She looked upward, eager to catch the sunlit magnificence so rare of late in the coulee. The clump of cottonwoods beyond the shed shone green-white. They were the last trees to turn in the fall; yet, except when the sun lit them, their green seemed more worn and lifeless than the yellow and brown of other trees. They were loveliest in the flurried brightness of summer moonlight. She wondered if fall had spoiled their night-silver. She would look tonight.

Durk, too, seemed aware that the landscape ought to be savored. He nudged her gently and pointed to a spot just below the top of the hill on the opposite side of the coulee
from where she had been looking. Four antelope, having
seen the man and woman moving below them stood poised,
their heads erect. Then, as if by some silent signal, all
at once, they bounded up the rock-scattered slope, their
white rumps catching the light in one rounded leap as they
conquered the arch of the hill.

Durk hoisted the duffle bag into the trunk of the car.
"It's an odd mismatch -- a guy like me going to help set a
country back on its pins with his gear stuffed in a surplus
bag from one of the armies that made the mess."

"You can just be glad it's surplus -- that's what all
army equipment ought to be."

The car started down the three miles of their own road,
which was no more than two deep ruts running to the county
road. To steer it was the first and last feat of any ven-
ture to town. She leaned forward to help him watch for
sharp stones and soaked-mud obstructions, and nothing more
was said until they reached the county road. When he pressed
the gas pedal at the county road, it was as if he were
squashing away each of her prized minutes. But she caught
herself up and squelched such a burst of self-pity. They
had just passed the Palmer's cottonwood row when it came to
her what she'd like to say on this last trip.

"You'll like working with the Quakers. The Quakers are
next to the Scotch Presbyterians, and they're right next to
God, so you'll be in good company. I didn't know one Quaker
'til college. Inverness, of course hadn't any. Goodness is woefully slow-going. Neither the Presbyterians, nor the Quakers, nor even the Hound of Heaven himself could go fast enough to check me and my mistakes, but...."

Durk interrupted her, reaching over to poke her knee playfully, "My mother's no ordinary God-lover, she's a crack-pot peace-lover," he teased.

It was plain she ought to have stuck to the Quakers and let her own old mistakes be. She sang his sing-song straight back at him, "And my son's cooked in the same cracked pot."

Then his chin set square as a Scotch preacher, and he was serious again. "Ya know, I would have gone to prison if old man Watts on the draft board hadn't had a Quaker Aunt he liked. That last time they called me in, when they were all lined up stern as sepulchers ready to sentence me, I remember I met them straight on. I told them the Quakers had accepted me in their service program and the government had accepted the Quaker program, and the minute that word Quaker slipped across that table, old Watts began to nod his head, and that afternoon the tide turned and I got my classification."

"Durk, I don't like saying it, but you ought to know Sarah Jones really did it." She had spoken quietly, turning her head so as not to look at him. "She wants to get you out of here in the worst way, so's she can get Betsy married off in the meantime. But Betsy told her you'd go to prison before you'd carry a gun, and just in case her schemes should
go awry, she couldn't abide having her daughter married to an ex-convict, so she used her influence with Watts. Sarah's powerful, harry you fear." Her voice had grown gradually louder. "She swung Watts, not some dead Aunt. You got to face facts, son."

"Come on now, mother," his voice snapped and she saw the cords of his neck tighten, "she doesn't hate me that much."

"No, but she's ashamed of you, Durk, and Betsy clings too close to her family to throw all that over. Once you'd marry her she'd start boring away at all your ideas. She's just snagging you now. She's got neither the faith nor the gumption to be on your side."

"Mother, that's not fair!" Durk was shouting, too. "You don't know her like I do. There were times this summer I would have thrown it in without her. Just don't talk like that, mother. You make me think you're jealous."

His words seemed to cut the connections of her body and she fell back limp. She might as well have said outright, I want you, I won't share you with that wanton little snip, you're mine. Because there it was, that bedeviled word -- jealous -- had slithered from her thoughts right to his lips. As he drove the sunlight was in his hair and it had a reddish tint. His profile had the indistinct facial lines and set chin of youth. He was young, fresh, she told herself, and he had a right to a young, fresh girl. She had betrayed herself. There was a phrase from Paul that said something about the
'good that I would do, I don't, and the evil which I would not, that's what I do.' There was no more apt phrase in all the Bible, and the gall of its aptness bit at her.

They reached the top of a knoll and she looked down into the town. Indian Lodge was a sprawl of wooden-frame houses with cracked paint and scraggly brown grass between. It looked like a scatter of boxy particles from some ugly, broken pot. Yet Betsy's house had fresh paint. Maud left Durk there promising to pick the two of them up later and drove off down the hummocky road toward the one office building. It was the only building in town that boasted four stories and an elevator. The directory announced the superintendent's office was on the third floor and she stepped inside a fragile cage of laced iron work and was reading the directions for going up when a young lad ran out of an office on the first floor calling to her that he was on duty, if she'd only wait. Benignly, she stepped to the back of the cage while he clanked the door shut. The cage passed upward through a dingy, lifeless, second story, and on the third floor she walked out onto creaking boards that smelled of the oil rubbed into them. The girl behind the desk in the office she entered wore a huge white collar suggesting the expectation of offspring. It reminded Maud of a white lace collar she had worn at "that time," now yellowed and frayed. She was savoring a touch of nostalgia when the girl, who was a stranger, startled her by calling her by name. When she requested to
speak with the superintendent, she was ushered into his office and asked to take a seat. He was on the telephone. Although he was younger than she'd remembered, he wore a suit cut for an older man. She waited, distracted by his watch chain as it rose up and down on his brown-vested, protruding middle.

"Well now, Mrs. Henderson," he had put down the phone, "What brings you to the office?" She began to speak but apprehension paralyzed her expression, and when the phone rang again she stopped eagerly to lean back and compose herself. "That'll no doubt be for you." She said it eagerly and afterward chastised herself for seeming to make his decisions for him.

His office had just one window. A table at one wall, cluttered with stacks of papers and odd books, appeared to keep the file case it was against from toppling out of its corner. She looked back at the superintendent; he was turned facing toward the window, but the bobbing chain as he breathed upset her own breathing and she turned away again. The paint on the window frames was chipping.

He put down the phone. "Now, again, Mrs. Henderson."

She began again, guardedly. "I'm not sure you knew, sir, that I've had two years of college." She straightened herself in her chair. "Well, I have. And now my son's leaving I'm thinking I'd like to be taking correspondence work and make up the credits I need in education so's I can teach. I'm counting on you to know just what courses I need -- that is, provid-
ed you think there'd be a place for me."

He leaned back in his swivel chair in a pose she thought mocked reflectiveness. "Well, now, that's a mighty fine ambition, Mrs. Henderson. Are you very sure you're not being too ambitious?" He wrapped a pink finger around the chain. "Now, I don't pretend to know how old you are, you know, but I know you know Mrs. Samson here in town. I'm just kind of warning you, you know." He began drumming another finger on his middle. "She felt, you know, that even when she'd had experience teaching as a younger woman that the kids were too much for her. Her health broke, you know." He shook his head as if he'd warned Mrs. Samson, as well. "And I'd hate that to happen to you." Maud thought if his middle rose once again, or he said "you know" another time, she would have to get up and leave. Mrs. Samson was ten years older than she. He didn't really mean to compare them, surely.

"Well, Mr. Topping, Mrs. Samson is Mrs. Samson, and I'm Mrs. Henderson."

"Ah yes," he struggled one shoulder and in horror she thought she caught his meaning, "you're Mrs. Henderson." Now his tone made it unmistakable. "But of course the decision's up to the school board." His voice had a disparaging quality. "Don't let me discourage you. We do have a list somewhere of the courses you can take by correspondence. Nowadays there's a lot to make up." He made no move to hunt for the sheet, he simply sat, the cheap gold jogging
faster now, up and down, on his paunch. The word weahing bit her tongue, but she swallowed it. They both knew what he was, she needn't tell him. He was Pilate ceremoniously washing his hands of the affair -- a hypocrite, too jelly-like to come out from behind his front. He hadn't the courage to be honest.

"Well then, Mr. Topping -- I'd like the sheet." She'd show him she had courage, she'd press on, she'd not be cowed! He swung himself slowly from the swivel chair, went to the table and after rustling ineptly, found two mimeographed blue sheets to hand her.

"Thank you, and good day." She walked curtly from his office, wishing she had a hoop skirt to swish in his face behind her, for they, apparently, were as out of date as she was. She despained at the thought of the snippy elevator boy, and turned to walk downstairs, tears again flecking her eyes.

She reached the street thankful that no one had seen her, but it was scarcely private sitting behind car windows. Just then a sense of ordinariness seemed akin to a sense of privacy, and she craved to do something routine. She would drive to the grocery store. Once inside, she took a basket and walked wheeling it quietly in front of her up and down between the aisles, occasionally dropping a can or a carton into the basket. Familiarity and the straight aisles slowly returned her sense of control, but she continued to walk up
and back hardly aware of what she was taking, until the

clock gave her just forty-five minutes before Durk's train

left. When she went through the check-stand she saw she'd

picked up things she hadn't tried before, and indifferently

paid a greatly swelled bill. When she got to Betsy's, Durk

and Betsy were sitting on the low cement stoop at the front
door waiting for her. They rushed to the car as if they

were being pelted with rice from behind.

"Where you been, mother; you must have forgot I have to

buy my ticket?" He sounded more peevish and upset than her
delay warranted. The two of them got in the front seat.
Betsy was a chatterer. Her bright, nervous chatter was a
part of Durk's attachment to her, Maud was certain. And she
did know enough to stop before it wore its pleasantness out.
Now her chatter set warm, and lightly like a feather quilt.
Beneath its shelter the three of them cast about for ways of
coping with their own private desolations. Whether Betsy
was conscious or unconscious of the ministry her volubility
rendered, Maud decided that, in fairness, she ought to have
credit for it. She had an unembittered buoyancy. For her,
it was possible.

"I've been telling Durk about my plans, Mrs. Henderson.
I've made arrangements to go to Missoula beginning in February.
And guess what? Mr. Topping tells me that one semester should
be enough more credits to teach in the fall." She turned

kittenishly and caught Durk's elbow with her two hands." By
the time you're back, I'll have a whole year's savings in the bank for our backlog." Durk showed no sign he had heard her, he only stared aimlessly out onto the curbless thoroughfare. "He's the strong, silent type." Betsy turned to Maud to make the excuse for him.

Maud felt the same pang of shame for his sullenness she knew Betsy was feeling, and as if to make up for it said more enthusiastically than she might have. "A back-log's a bonny good thing, pet."

With Maud's encouragement, Betsy's tone grew more intimate. "You know, I've got to have something to occupy me up here," she gestured toward her head, "while my heart's away. What ever'll you do Mrs. Henderson?"

"Me? Why this morning Betsy, when I stepped out in the sun on the back stoop and looked at our coulee, like a bowl cut in the hills, brimming with lowliness, I said to myself, 'well, my last bairn's balked and gone and now I can burst out and live'." The memory of that moment came to her now, and brought a new abandon. At that, the same sun was still shining. The clouds that threatened only made the sky more alive.

The station, a box of a building surrounded by blacktop and track, was at the bottom of Indian Lodge's main street. The one daub of color it offered to travelers was the magazine rack at the counter just inside the door. Maud stood in front of it while Durk bought his ticket thinking
what a false brilliance it was since there were only three covers with anything behind them but pulp. Betsy bought an issue of one of the better ones.

"It's strange," she said to Maud, "how when they're going away it feels all at once as if nothing is enough for them -- there is only the time ahead when you can do next to nothing." Her chatter had faded and she spoke pensively. "I'd like to buy him a world -- but all I muster is a magazine."

Durk came back with his ticket and the three of them walked out again onto the sunlit platform. He leaned his duffle bag against his leg, put his thumbs in the pockets of his heavy jacket and looked up at the sky. The women looked up as well. There was a bank of gray cloud forming to the west. He looked at his mother. A wisp of her hair had fallen from her knot and caught in the rising wind, and was shining in the winter sun's smoke-light. As if she were suddenly a child, she stirred in him that same wave of tenderness he had felt in the front hall as they had left. "Mother, the minute the train's gone, promise me you'll high-tail it home. There's a storm coming and a bad one will fix you for sure after you leave the county road." As he spoke, as if to reaffirm his words, a cloud banked the sun and the shadow ran swiftly along the rails of the yard. There was a train whistle, and then the giant steamless diesel came into view and passed them as it pulled to a stop. There was a flurry at the last minute as the three of them ran down the platform looking for the right car. They found it and he threw
the duffle bag up to the platform and turned to Maud. Wordless, like his father would have been, he pulled her to him in one great, rough hug. He turned then, still saying nothing, kissed Betsy, unashamed of his own show of passion, and boarded the train. The train drew out and the bilious gray clouds loomed across the tracks once more. Betsy said she was sorry about the storm because she'd hoped to have Maud stop for supper. But as she let Betsy out in front of her house, Maud thought of Sarah Jones' mean mind and was almost glad of the storm.

She had driven three miles of the county road when the rain began to fall in great sheets of water. The ragged blur of the water on the windshield receded only in the instant following the wipers. The longer it rained, the worse the road into the house would be, so it was folly to wait for the vision to be better. She kept going, which, she admitted to herself, was folly as well. Gusts of wind brought more water dashing across the windshield to arrest the wipers. It was nearly dark now, and the headlights penetrated to nothing but water ahead. The ruts on their own road, as she had expected, were worse. The mud clung to the wheels and the car skidded badly. She anticipated and drove through two of the worst spots. But a mile from the house, although she was in the protecting hills of the coulee, so that the rain came less gustily, she ran onto a new low draw filled with water. She scarcely saw it before she was in it, but there was no way to go around it
if she had seen it. The mud clogged the wheels before she could drive out and rather than forcing it, she decided to wait. The rain was slowing. The clouds had loosened and it was growing a shade lighter. Soon she could walk, or perhaps before that Forrest would be along with the jeep and chains to pull her out. She dropped a hand to turn the key. The motor stopped and in fits and starts the quiet faltered back to the cab of the automobile. She leaned forward, folding her arms to rest on the steering wheel, her head dropping on her arms. The wind grew languid, having spent its bluster. The mist made no sound. The storm over, a clean strip of air lay above the horizon shelved by the black rim of the clouds that bowed the remainder of the sky. The sun, just above the rim, cast sidewise gold rays down to the impenetrably dark hills of the horizon. It would, momentarily make one last smoke-balled appearance. Maud's buoyancy had arched up and back with it, and now was burned out.

When the sun did appear in the clear space, its red-hazed inertia ate into her. When it hid itself behind the metal side-piece of the windshield, she did not move to watch it. This morning it had drawn her to the back stoop to celebrate. This morning the same sun that shone on the draw was shining on the river and the trees that bowed over it in green Inverness. It had shone on the gray-mud Korea, Durk would help to reconstruct. It had even made bright the stone church in Spokane where they
had been married. The world had been warm; its scatter of pieces had been drawn into a sphere. But now she knew better.

The emptiness pressed in with the dark. She shifted her head at last and caught sight of lights up the coulee at the house. Forrest had come home first. She would save him coming out and catching his death if she walked back. But the road was nothing but mire. A walk, fighting the mist and mud, had the attraction of forced exertion and forgetfulness. But the presentness of the emptiness of a stalled car drew her more sharply than the nothingness of a lighted living room, with a mist purified walk between. She saw again the four antelope as they had been -- triumphant in their arched leap over the hill and out of the coulee. Now they were somewhere bowed under a natural shelter, waiting out the storm as she was. But nature never looses her own battles. She waits and wins. Only man cannot fight her. She cracks the paint and wears away the vitals of his outer shelters, while inside his own nature is betraying itself.

She sat on, waiting, without knowing what it was she waited for except, perhaps, the sun that was biding away.
The Lifeboat

Mother, wherever you are, I wish you were here. Chiamo te. I wish your sibyl arms were here.

The crewman in charge of our boat lifts a megaphone to his mouth. "The boat is overloaded. We'll drift 'til we're picked up. Passengers will have to work out a rotation system for the seats. No one should crouch over an hour. Those crouching, crouch low." I follow instructions, crouching low.

A grizzled, scarred woman in her sixties with a profile like a streak of lightning, shouts above my head to the woman facing her. "I'll tell ya, it's good to see a familiar face, and we can bless the Lord any of us women is here. Like I says, them men was so busy saving their own skins there weren't no time for no one else's."

The woman she speaks to is English. "Now if there'd been a Georgie --."

"No, these days ain't no one got time for heroics, not even your blessed Englishmen."

"Well it's a good thing we was on the same side in the war. I don't want to be goin' on blamin' each other 'til we get picked up about whose godf Murdoch'd laid that mine and why they hadn't brung it up again."

"If we get picked up. Like I says, it's a trick to keep us calm, and the story's fake as Pa's teeth."

"Eeee, you mean you think we'll just drift 'til we run
outta food?"

"And this boat's so chock full, that won't be long, neither."

They fall silent and the people near who have been listening in gape-mouthed, half attention return to their own thoughts. I have been listening as well; there is no escaping what goes directly over my head. Only yesterday I could escape, leave idle chatter. I did. But today I am trapped.

I left that lunch table and slammed my napkin down. I was angry and wanted something to maul. My napkin was the softest, most available thing, so I used it. It was their talk of shipwrecks that piqued me, and by the second meal bored me as well. Out on the deck the sun was at full sail and there was a blinding glare, but when I could see again, I calmed down. It was as if the rain of the night before had polished the sea and left it shining. My gaze centered upon the horizon. Whoever hit on "sky-blue" hadn't looked where the sea and sky meet. The sea is bluer, it has more mystery; the sky's too shallow. Should be "sea-blue". I was thinking about a way to use the distinction in my current chapter (non-fiction is an art, too) when we hit the mine. I suppose none of us knew it was a mine then. But we knew enough not to be calm. Quiet turned to chaos as irrepressibly as the sun goes behind a cloud.

It had been an ordinary voyage until then. At the first meal I saw there was no one even languidly interesting at my
A middle aged American couple sat across from me -- the woman was dumpy about the jowls and her husband was a backslapping business man -- the sort father deals with -- but this man had about slapped himself out. Lust, that's what it was. Those two pounced on their complaints as if they lusted after them.

A fidgety plump Italian had the third place opposite me. He wore a cheap suit copied after the cut of those smooth, expensive gabardines. He was going home to prove to his mother in Genoa -- You took me to show me off, didn't you. Boys sense things. I was too small to give a hang about seeing Rome -- that her son had made a success of himself. The nurse -- she was mid-fortyish -- at the end of my side said not one word until between the soup and the entree when someone asked her what she did. She must have been posed, waiting. She flipped her bosom up like an arched fish-tail and announced she was a pediatric nurse. Her chagrin nearly matched her wonder that the ward where she'd worked for some fourteen years was functioning without her. Her companion beside me, so close a roll of the ship would have sent my elbow crashing into her breast, was clearly one of the ubiquitous, a traveling school marm. Yet a certain self-awareness made this one more affable, than I expect of her kind: She was as conscious of her own timidity as Lottie is of a dirty window. She said it had taken her sixteen years of mishapless traveling on land to collect gall enough to venture on the sea. She'd been terrified as a child
by tales of the "unsinkable Titanic" sinking. Her confession spurred a long conversation about all the sea disasters the table's collective minds could muster. "That woman, Mama, that woman up there's like you. Is it you, Mama, is it?"

Jumping up and down.

"No, Michaelangelo made that woman, painted her long before I was born. She's a sibyl, a prophetess."

"What's a prophetess?"

"A woman who knows what's going to happen."

"Like you, Mama. Just like you." It was endurable at the first meal, even somewhat ominously attractive, like an ocean swim on the first warm spring day, but when the next day at lunch they began on it again, that's when I plunked my napkin down and left. I banged that garbage can down and...

"Your father and I feel you ought to have some home responsibilities, Michael. On Lottie's day off, we'd like you to empty the garbage."

"Yaaah, I will, I will." Either give me something important or leave it go. I did it once, but...

"We're sorry son, you're unable to carry through." Give me something worth doing.

"Sorry, disappointed in you."

Well, then punish, punish, don't stand there all soft and disappointed.

When I heard that explosion, I stopped thinking and went wild. A voice, it must have been my own, said: "Young
man, you're not ready to die." It was as if I were a child in the old Rolling Bay Post Office and instead of having just our box to open I had the key to all the others and no time to open them. All my unfinished research, my book, marriage. What I had opened was my own empty box with its "nobody" name on it. Mediocre. There was no time for serenity. I grabbed at time. First, my manuscript. I started toward my cabin. The ship was beginning to list. For an instant I was lucid, above it all, and seeing all those passengers, me with them, thick and writhing like sand fleas when the rock protecting them's upturned. I wanted the quickest way to my cabin -- through the dining-room and down the stairs. The empty dining-room had half-eaten food on plates and no waiters to have served it. Pompeii must have looked like this. I rushed faster. The ship lurched just as I reached my cabin. I was thrown against the door and it burst open. My head hit the chair beside the door as I fell in. I lay daed until the cold linoleum against my face roused me. My eyes opened and I lay staring at my unmade bed, wondering why I wasn't in it. The lampshade was awry over the bed and the floor slanted, but I didn't remember why until I moved my head and just visible on the top of the chiffonier was my manuscript, white, glowing. The sight of it was almost palpable. Its familiarity was like recovered solidity, rock; and I worked my way upward holding the drawer knobs until I could grab it. Once I had it, I had
a new rush of energy and stood up. Shoving it tight beneath my arm, I started cautiously over the raised door sill. The woman who had sat across at table, her dumpy jowls now quivering with fright, her bosom bloated with a life preserver, swayed past my open door. It was then I remembered a life preserver. Me, I ought to have one. It must be in my closet; it was and I put it on.

Something had snuffed out the electricity, and when I got back the corridor was dark. For a few feet light shone from my room's porthole. I felt my way slowly until a voice spoke from just ahead and below me.

"Who is it? I've got to have help, I can't walk?" The woman had managed until the light gave out, then she had collapsed. "I've fallen on my ankle." She whined. "It's just too painful. I can't walk. It's just too much. Oh why didn't we take the plane. I told him, I told him. I just can't walk. I've got to be carried. I'll make it good to you. Try, oh please. My husband will make it worth your while."

I did try -- out of decency, Mother, I made some effort.

I didn't downright abandon her. But when I got her on her feet to support her, she claimed both ankles were painful and dropped down again, insisting I carry her. I left her to look for her husband. I doubt I could have carried her alone, even if I hadn't been knocked about myself. I turned and felt my way back along the other passageway, fully in-
tending... but when I reached the deck the ship was listing badly. I knew enough to know the angle would prevent launching most of the lifeboats. It wasn't exactly a question of that woman or me, but I started for the nearest loading point. The ship's speaker system called for attention and explained we'd hit a mine. It said there was another ship that had radioed it could be in the area within three hours. Then it began on the fugue it was still blaring out when we drifted out of hearing distance. In varying voices it called for calm, reassured, instructed. But it was ridiculous to call for calm when in one great wave over a thousand people had a premonition of death.

"People face death in the way they face life: Grabbing, pawing, mauling, paralysis, only a few calm, even fewer heroic." Well, your son, then, is a mauler. I'm a mauler, mother.

The glint on the sea turns the color of unpolished brass and the bloated sun drops nearer the water. It is colder. Over-crowded lifeboat: Crammed with mediocrity. She wasn't mediocre: Like one perfectly patterned seashell in a hodgepodge of mottled, maimed ones. Had she got off?

I met a good girl, mother, the kind you marry. Odd, the way I met her, through Father. Father told Bryant Flaherty I would be on board. Father has a habit of speaking to everyone but me about me. Anyway, Bryant had a niece he asked me to escort. I felt trapped and angry. Any young lady sent
to Europe with relatives is sent that way to be over-protected. She'd probably be some emaciated darling sent to absorb culture. Americans are all alike: Think culture is cultivated like corn -- head high in a season. I took my time about getting back to the dining room where I'd promised I'd join them. It had been converted to a ballroom, but the smell of fried food hung stale in the air. A band sat on a platform where tables had been, and they had cleared a spot on the floor for dancing. My first view of the young lady was from the arched entranceway. Their table was on the far side next to the wall. Bryant saw me standing there and motioned. She was scrawny, I'd guessed right. She sat framed by the white table cloth and the oak paneling and had a portrait's air of expensive simplicity. Her wine-colored dress, as well, had the rich folds of a painting. I went toward them winding around tables and rolling with the ship, careening like a heron with only one leg. I felt crude and makeshift. She began to look more petite than scrawny. I arrived at the table and while I stood Flaherty introduced us. When she smiled her upper gum nearly eclipsed her teeth; otherwise, she was good looking enough. Her name was Margaret Bartwell. Always the array of civil questions. Yes, I was going to Oxford, would do research in Old English manuscripts, finishing up a book. Yes, she was touring France and Germany again this summer.

"Through the winter I'll be studying at the University of Leyden -- my field's anatomy."
So she was studying. Anatomy didn't fit her, but a
girl redeemed herself better for an evening like this with a
field rather than without one. "Redeem", Mother, that's one
of your words.

Travel talk, ours was mostly about Paris. "If you like
churches," I told her, "don't miss the eleventh century tower
in the church of St. Germain-des-Pres. Don't be distracted --
most people are -- by the apartment just opposite of Jean-
Paul Sartre and his mother."

Without looking at me she ran her finger around the rim
of her glass. "Thank you, I'll go there." She was clean cut,
definite but delicate, like the glass she fingered.

"It's small and you don't hear much about it, but I
think you'd enjoy the Rodin Museum. I don't know how you
feel about sculpture, but if you're an anatomist you should
enjoy the work of a sculptor who knew the human body like
Anthony knew Cleopatra."

"I've been there...but I had hoped to go back this time
since I've read more now about Rodin's influence on contempor-
ary work. At the time I was there, I didn't know much about
Rodin; I know contemporary works better. I thought perhaps
now I could trace a bit of his influence for myself."

"Yes, at least have a go at it...Would you care to dance?"

"If you don't mind, I wouldn't. I don't care for a
dance floor that's already rocking. If the sea is calm later,
I'd be happy to... What are the details of the research you're
planning. Surely you're not another "Piers Plowman" scholar -- or have I remembered right? Is that the manuscript they've done so much work on?"

"You're right about the work, but "Piers Plowman" is in the Middle English period. My work is in Old English. At the moment it's Caedmon, the little man who got converted and burst into song. He paraphrased the Psalms, you remember. If you're really interested I like talking about it, but we ought to take a stroll so we don't bore Bryant and Mrs. Flaherty." Flaherty laughed as if he didn't believe what he was laughing about and boisterously pronounced us excused.

"We shant be gone long, I won't run the risk of boring Miss Bartwell, either."

"I'm told adolescents outgrow summer houses. I should think you'd be bored. Are you sure you want to go to Rolling Bay this year?"

"How could I be bored? Sea life, sea air, and you, mother. Ah no, never bored! My pleasures are unique, mama!"

There I was, parading a woman on deck acting the part of an artist raging with the conception of his masterpiece. She listened through all the things that will distinguish my book. Her comments were intelligent, calm.

"I've been working just long enough to be at the point where the unique factors begin to be evident." I heard myself say it, but it was only trumped-up bravado. They say certainties totter on thresholds. Suddenly, I wasn't at all sure
that the people who had confidence in me -- Deenstra, Black, Delano, had good judgment. And there weren't as many as I'd like who had it anyway. How often do important things happen in my field? I'll not be remembered. Self doubt, you always claimed I relished it. But it was more than that. It was like the day I climbed up and pressed the thumb tacks into father's portrait. I felt defeated before I began.

We had climbed to the bow and stood leaning on the rail watching down into the night-dark water, while the prow cut brilliant arches of spray out of it. But it was too cold for standing, so we moved on until we found a bench sheltered by the position of a lifeboat behind it. We'd sat only several minutes when a great roll nearly shook us both from the bench. She caught the edge with her two hands and when the lurch was over stood up. "I feel like a tiny steel ball in a child's puzzle toy -- buffeted about from hole to hole. It's too rough to stay put. Let's go in."

"Yes, of course." I took her arm and steered her back to the ballroom. A gentleman would have suggested it first. Gentlemen don't go off on romantic flights, either... Nobody was at ease on his feet in the ballroom but the waiters. Mrs. Flaherty became ill soon after we got back and her niece left the table with her. Bryant and I were left alone. Flaherty's like Father -- both executives -- both sensitive enough, although Bryant drinks his liquor with the grunts and gusto of a walrus. But men like them squander their sensitivity on all
the wrong things. They waste a keen sense for the world around and all their intuition on American business and a gadget-mad culture. I had been lucky, damn lucky, to have a father who made enough in business to send his child to good schools and give him cultural advantages, but the sacrifice of personality involved was a bloody shame. I wish I could get you to admit it, mother.

Flaherty leaned back, satisfied. "She's a good girl, isn't she? You were cursing me when I asked you -- I could tell -- but I knew she'd vindicate me. Yes sir, her father's managed to raise a good girl. My brother-in-law's been in the academic world, a heart specialist, but he teaches. She's had a good environment. Not pretty, just good looking and an independent little cuss. I like her." We finished our drinks and left the table ourselves.

Back on the deck the wind had died and a mist was drifting in, and I headed toward the stern before settling in. I was ambling easily, thinking of nothing, when the muffled voices of a man and a woman came closer behind me and I drew to the rail to let them pass. To watch them was distasteful, they clung to each other like the two serpents of Aesculapius, but at last the mist closed in on them and their voices died away. Flaherty was right. She was a good girl. The kind that wears well, that you even think about marrying. Marriage, however, is a matter of timing. You meet lots of women you could marry when the timing's off. The one you finally marry is the one
who comes along when the time's right. Would be two years yet before my time was right. Marriage responsibilities cut into the important things. But in pockets of time which hadn't any relation to the rest of life, like a ship passage, a good girl was a kind of bonus. You didn't know how much you counted on her until you had her. That was a clever metaphor she'd hit on.

I'd had one of these kids' puzzles. It was a desperate feeling -- inadequacy -- it gave me. I'd get one tiny ball shining and proper in its groove, then I'd try tricking it, anything, to control it, to keep it in place until I got the other fixed. But it would dislodge itself each time before its made was in place. I'd get angry and run to Mama. You'd soothe me. Your arms, these warm, solid arms. Chia mo te. You were always good at soothing. Life on shipboard, all the impermanence of it was rather like these balls. Life's like that. Two balls, want both, but can have only one. Either service or intellectual pursuits -- one or the other -- you can't have both. But, Mother, you're a born Kierkegaardian, everything is "either/or" for you -- just not sophisticated enough to see the shades. But sophistication isn't what you want in a woman anyway. Tonight I had hoped to get Margaret off alone, somewhere where it was warm. Known both frigid and eager intellectual women. Which? God, if this were drama, I'd laugh at the irony of it all. The only physical sense here is cold. Except for one feverish elbow. "I know, I'm not blind. "Everyman for himself" is the strongest force in today's world. I know most people elbow their way through life. It's
just that..." It's my elbow, Mother, mine that's had the work-out."

After deciding to try for a lifeboat, I grabbed one of the ropes for tying infants to their mothers and tied my manuscript to me. There was a crowd milling on deck above one of the ladders leading to a lifeboat, and I joined them. In spite of the loudspeaker's please for calm and its reassurance that other ships had radioed they were near, the idea of a paucity of lifeboats because of the ship's listing got abroad, and the jostling and mauling took on life and death momentum.

The school marm was in the same crowd. She looked as if she had come straight from the lunch table. The ruffles on her sheer blouse tossed about in the wind without restriction from a life preserver. Nor had she a wrap of any kind as she poked about the periphery of the crowd looking for a weak spot in which to begin working forward. When she saw me, she came toward me.

"Young man," she said, when she'd gained a position beside me, "two push better than one. Hook up with me and push." The veins bulged in her bare greyish arm as she clamped it around mine and thrust the two of us forward. That woman had a rock-ribbed zeal to live. Either there was some pupil or a man. At any rate, some fulfillment depended upon reaching that ladder, and she reached it. "Fulfillment lies in justice and mercy, son. Most of all mercy. Italians have a tradition
of mercy: St. Francis.""

"Your man, Mother, not mine."

We got to the top of the ladder just as they started blocking the way. The boat below was already overcrowded. We both dove forward. She pulled and clawed until it felt as if she had eight arms, at least four of them wrapped around me. Finally I thrust my elbow into her breast and pushed her back while I mounted the ladder. I was the last. She didn't get here and my elbow feels as if it were still embedded in the mass of her breast. It's a jellied mass of warmth. God, I'd cut it off. My legs feel numb. But, for them, I can stand up. I recognize only one face. About ten feet toward the bow from me, crouching, is the fidgety Italian. There is no Margaret, no sign of Flaherty. The Italians eyes are black voids and his mouth hangs sharp and hungry like a young bird's. I feel my elbow sharp against her softness as I crouch again. Oh, God, please get her on another boat. Good God, a prayer. Mother, you've got your way. Like Pavlov's dog. "Persons in crises often return to long unused conditioned responses of childhood." Stop that smile, no triumph. Prayer is still weakness. I, like anyone else, dread responsibility for someone else's death. I want that woman to be in a lifeboat somewhere. Fanatic she was about teaching. Denial of self. Pouring everything you've got into other people's children. "I know you consider biography kid stuff, but read just one more. that's all I ask: The
finest of all in our Italian heritage. Read St. Francis' life."

"Your man, fanatic, not mine."

A woman is retching over the gunwale about five feet from where I crouch. The boat floats so low in the water that twice while I watch a wave dashes her face. Someone ought to hold her forehead. The others near her sit unmoving, humped into self-contained huddles, shoulders tense, eyes preoccupied with nothing. Someone ought to hold her head. If no one..."

"Laddie, didn't you hear the crewman say 'stay low'," the Englishwoman chides.

"Young man, you're standing on my ankle." Little people in a lifeboat, still think little thoughts.

"Excuse me, sir."

I reach her and the woman continues to sit with her elbows jabbing the air, her hands on the gunwales, and her head held high. She is tense, afraid of being dashed again, and she retches without results.

"Perhaps if I hold your head, Madam." She looks at me with no expression. Then she begins to moan and leans again over the side as if she assented. I hold her head and turn my own so as to avoid watching until I remember that without watching I can't see to lift her head when the sea rises too high. I watch.

When it is over, I sit in the spot where I'd been kneeling to hold her. Someone has made room. The sun is down. The dashes of cloud above the sea lose their brilliance. Even-
ing shades that give edge and lowness to the horizon from the beach, threaten now above a barren sea. A breeze rises and it grows still colder. My elbow goes on burning. I peer back for one last look at the looming hulk of the ship; It will be sunk by morning. I had seen only one other lifeboat set adrift from it. Oh God, where's that rescue ship? It's a myth. It will have to arrive soon if it's to remove all the people from the ship. It would have to wait til morning now anyway to find the boats adrift. The water dashes over the gunwales more often now. With the precision of a whale-spout it douses first one person near the rail, then another. Just after it catches me, I feel the first fever flash.

"Wrap up warm, Son."

"Aw, you're ruining me. Bundled mam's brat. Lay off" -- Chia me te -- "will ya." Your sibyl arms, wrap up arms.

There is no hiding place in this boat, no refuge on the earth, no erasing the sea. For cowards, no escaping. No place to lay down bones, elbow bone connected to the head bone. Elbowed her to death. Coward. No hiding place. Everybody grabs life like they had unfinished books.

"Life's neither intellect nor art. These aren't primary. The only nobility is selflessness."

"No, Mother, nobility is intertwined with talent. Nobility is exploiting one's talents. My talent is not selflessness. Too much me in me. Other people are incapable of what I am. They haven't unfinished books, haven't anything."

Stop pulling lady. Stop saying "stop". I'm not feverish.
Know what I'm doing. Stop lady, stop. Let me get over.
Let me be a woman, better rid my weight, better rid my stomach, my elbow. Water ice... icy... Chia mote. Blue-blood veins -- bare, noble boxes. Wrap up, mother, mother wherever you are.
The Unlighted Vigil.

As the fire died under it the kettle produced only limping puffs of steam. Mattie Jane Shoecraft went right on rocking in the sleepy hollow rocker opposite the stove. The steam's murmuring was the only sound in the kitchen and since it was dying out, it seemed to be hinting it was time she went upstairs. But she would just have to show how determined a body can be. When the washing up was done she had sat herself down with her knitting near the window. The August sun had only just cast its long slanting shadows through the fire beyond the fence on, the westwardside when she'd begun her vigil. Since that time she hadn't moved but once, to light the lamp, for which she had waited as long as she dared. Oscar called her parsimonious, but that word made her think of persimmons and they were the very last things she cared to be associated with. Anyway, her real reason was that she felt it was a pity to mar all that violet-colored light of the sunset. A lighted lamp, no matter how dim, spoiled it. What'smore, she needn't be idle, she hadn't need of a light to see her knitting until she got to the narrowing of the toe. Peter was a growing boy and should have his socks knit a bit long to begin with, anyway.

"Oscar Shoecraft," she said suddenly aloud, "if you be waiting up there, you may as well just braid and unbrad your beard to bide awake, cause I'm not coming."

Deftly she gathered her skirt and held it cupped so as
to keep her knitting from falling out of it when she got up. Then, as if to prove her words, she went to the woodbox, took a piece of alder, and chucked it in over the coals in the stove. She waited to watch it flare up, then added a second piece.

"I can bide every bit as well by night as I can by day," she mumbled assuringly. She wondered as she sat down again how long it would be before he stopped chopping wood and made her chop her own. But then she could pay a heavier price than wood-chopping, by a good measure, to get this business settled. She'd thought it was settled when they reached Seattle and came out across the lake to farm. West of here there was no more frontier to give him itchy feet. But trust Oscar, he'd stake a claim in the middle of the Pacific, and plunk her and the house on a raft, if they'd let him. It just wasn't like him, this new hankering. Who ever heard of Oscar wanting to trek Eastward and to the Middle West of all places. Why he'd be mooning around like a cow wanting to be milked inside of two weeks. Oscar Shoecraft may have been a stranger the day she married him, but she'd seen him now wanting to move on in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Worcester, Ohio; Waterloo, Iowa; and Rock Springs, Wyoming; in that order: That had been real restlessness. This now was just old age. He was just moping that he couldn't take life by the horns any more. If she'd let him trek backwards, back East, it was giving in to old age too fast, like a whole wheel flying off
a wagon, and Mattie Jane Shoecraft knew Oscar Shoecraft well enough to know he'd better give in a couple of spokes at a time, because if the whole wheel went at once, it'd take the axle with it. And if he didn't know what's best for him, well she did, and she'd just have to sacrifice herself to show him. That was what God joined man and wife together for. She'd a'had it come when she was a mite younger herself, if she'd been choosing. But this first night would be the worst, she'd get her sleep in the daytime after tonight.

If he'd come on serious less sudden, she would have prepared by taking an afternoon nap. He'd been talking about it for near five weeks and she'd let him know what she thought each time and that had been that. But tonight something had got his goat. He'd come in heaving like an over-heated horse and announced he'd go alone if she wouldn't go with him. That meant there was just one thing to do. Quick as a hawk drops she had to show him what life alone was like. It would have been easier if she had somewhere to go. But you didn't just up and move in on your daughter without a reason. Spats like this were private matters where you didn't ask the family to take sides. No, this plan she'd got up was best. Necessity was the mother of invention: It sure enough brought out her ingenuity. Them that say your wits shrink up along with your body were wrong, at least in her case.

The kettle sung no longer, the only sound was an occa-
sional click of her knitting needles. The rocker's even rhythm, back-up, back-up, made her sleepy. Cold water would help. The pump groaned loud and biliously as she pumped water into a glass at the sink. She drank dutifully. She didn't care for water at night, but hot things put her to sleep. Still it was about as senseless as a bat in daylight to sit up all night, at least this first night? Her work was done, she was sure she'd sleep in the rocker, and she was only wasting coal oil. On her way back to her chair she snuffed out the lamp and found her way in the dark. She felt a tinge of bitterness as she pictured Oscar, sleeping undisturbed flat on his back, his beard pulled out over the counterpane. She sat rocking, watching out at the moonlight where it fell in great white swashes of purity over all the forest and the clearing, until her eyes grew tired. She turned her head to where it seemed comfortable for sleeping and caught sight of the moonlight again where it shone inside onto the warped floor boards. They spoiled it. She fell asleep.

It was daylight when, awakened by the tramping sound of heavy boots descending the stairway, she started and jumped up. Where could she go? This was the trouble with falling asleep. She was too late to get to the parlor because to do that she'd have to go through the front hall at the bottom of the stair well. The back door was her only out. Once outside, she'd stay there until Oscar came out to the outhouse, then duck back in the front door and go upstairs to the spare
room, which she'd planned to fit out for herself for as long as these antics were necessary. Yes, antics they were; think of it, a full-grown man making a woman chase around the corner of a house so as to avoid him.

When the tramping sound was reversed that second night and Oscar came up the stairs and into their bedroom, Mattie Jane shot downstairs, eager to be uncouped from the spare room. Day-time sleeping never had set well with her. She reached the kitchen and stopped short.

"Well, I declare if this place doesn't look like bedlam; it's as strewn as Oscar's tool shed." His dishes lay assorted across the table, in the sink, and on the work table; forks, spoons, knives every which way; a bit of egg on one plate, a part of a piece of bread on another. The milk waited in a bucket beside the door.

"Oscar Shoecraft," she said aloud, "this is exactly what I expected, but I'm going to wait on you. God just didn't cut them lush Egyptian slaves and me from the same cloth." Still she knew she wasn't going to be able to sit idle all night while the milk soured. She had some conscience. But first she had to have a fire, and, true to her calculations, there was no wood. The gall of it. She took the axe and a lantern and went outside to the wood-pile. Cedar burned too fast, but it split more easily, so she chose it. She hoped the sound of her chapping woke Oscar. She'd chopped two pieces into some half-dozen smaller ones and looked up as she stopped
to rest. The firs above filled up the sky with their dark splotches; there was scarcely room for the stars. There was just enough breeze to make a low moaning sound in the tree-tops until a flurry of sudden wind blew the lantern out. She had enough wood for now, she'd go back, she thought hastily. She started back in the dark on the path, feeling her way with her feet. But the moan of the trees rose to a roar. Someone was behind her. Just a dash away, run! She reached the back door, slipped through and slammed it shut behind her. As she leaned against the door catching her breath she knew Oscar would be laughing if he was still awake up there. Let him laugh. He'll have to cut the woods a half-mile back and down to the water before I feel safe out there. She left the lantern in the back hall and went into the kitchen with her wood. When the fire was built, she took out her milk skimmer.

"A body's got to have a routine to stay comfortable," she said aloud. Slowly, meticulously, as if she were skimming for the first time, she drew the cream off the milk. The next step was to roll the butter churn from the back hallway. She'd churn the butter and hide it until enough had accumulated to sell to Ella in the village. She could sneak in sometime when Oscar was out of the clearing down at the fields. A body had to have pin money. The gentle sound of the churn, plush, plush, up, down, with
all its usualness, lulled her into nearly forgetting it was night. By the early hours of the morning her day-time routine had become her nightly routine, just as if she'd got up in the morning and pulled the shades down and worked by lamplight. The next evening was like this, and the next and the next.

By the end of the week Oscar's dishes had piled up so that there were no more clean plates. She had hid her own clean ones in the bottom drawer beneath her table cloths. Oscar would have to do something about his despicable litter. She laid her place with her own dishes and went to the cooler for an egg. There were none. He hadn't gathered them. She went to the bread box for bread, and again there was none. Well, if that doesn't top them all, he's gone and hid the very bread I baked. She tugged the high stool into position and climbed up to feel the top of the cupboard. Her hand brushed down a cloud of dust, with no bread in it. She looked behind the door. Would he have so little brain as to hide it in the heat behind the stove? She began opening drawers. At last, in the second drawer, beneath her tea-towels she found a half loaf of bread.

"I'll play dog and hide my own bones from here on, thank you," she said as she jerked it out. "Oscar, you're plum shameless." He was getting ornery in other ways, as well. He knew the nights were not as long as the days, and
he took to coming to bed even later. Mattie Jane, then, had to find things to do up in the spare room. Seventeen hours was too much to sleep. In a week and a half she had knit up all the yarn she had on four pair of socks for Peter.

One afternoon she woke at a quarter to one with the sun pouring through the cracks at the side of the green window shades and a fly buzzing somewhere at a window pane. She got up, rummaged about until she found a piece of paper suitable to roll for a swatter, and lifted a shade to find the fly behind it. Her swat missed the fly, but as she brought the paper down the noise attracted Oscar. He was headed out of the clearing on the foot-path, but when he heard the swat, he turned around and caught sight of Mattie Jane. What's he got his good hat on for? Suddenly she realized she'd let him see her for the first time in almost two weeks. She clamped one hand to her hip, but the other almost uncontrollably made a half waving gesture as she reached up to pull the shade. Half-heartedly she chastized herself for such softness. The room was again semi-dark. She wished for any kind of light but this green-tinted dreariness. Everything looked tacky. The flounced dust catcher hanging from the spread to the floor was mussed. Her spread, the wedding ring pattern quilt she had taken such pride in, looked faded and soiled.
The uneven stitches in its quilting glared out at her.

"Well," she said aloud as she got up and marched to the door, "I can't abide one more full day in this tomb. If Oscar's a going, I'm a going too." Chills of pleasure came as she rattled about the whole house in the daylight. She whipped her rag about as she dusted in the parlor. The china clock on the mantle had slowed to a stop at eight minutes past eight—how many mornings ago? It could have stopped in the evening, of course. Whose side was time on? She wound and reset it, but it wouldn't go. "Oh, bother, now its wound too tight and will have to wait til Oscar fixes it."

Perhaps this was the day to go to town. The butter could be packaged up, and it would bring the money to buy yarn. I'll parcel up Peter's socks, too. A little tike gets a thrill from a package all his own in the mail. If I wait until Oscar and I get in the waggon together and go I may be waiting 'til Judgment day.

When she had walked along the same path Oscar had taken out of the clearing and through the woods for a quarter of a mile, she came to the fork, and it suddenly struck her to wonder which way Oscar had been going. One fork led the short distance into town and the other went along the lake shore and eventually came out at their daughter, Roberta Sue's. It was far enough, so that when
Mattie Jane went they went the back way and took the wagon, but when Oscar went by himself, he walked. But why would he be going there today? Henry had said his oats were late. He wouldn't be harvesting yet, and Oscar wouldn't go just to visit -- unless he was aiming to leave for the East. He could have spilled it all to Roberta Sue. Family pride wouldn't curb him, not Oscar. She'd help him get ready, he could talk her into anything.

"That scalliwag, he's setting up to desert me, sure enough." She said it aloud, but she didn't really believe it could be true. Her anger quickened her pace. A cobweb brushed across her face and confirmed her suspicion that he had taken the other fork. She walked on until she came out on the road leading into town. It was just another quarter of a mile. She sized up the ruts, and decided the left-hand one was smoothest and crossed over to walk in it. The road took her into the village of Kirkland, the heart and outskirts of which were one and the same. There was a general store and post office in one building on the left-hand side, and two houses on the other side -- the first one belonging to the general store owner, the second to the blacksmith who kept his shed out behind his house. She went directly to the first house to deliver her butter. Just as always, she went around the back-way and rapped on the kitchen door. A woman came to the door wiping her hands on her apron. She was pink and round in the face with the rims of her eyes protruding.
"Well, Mattie Jane," she said holding open the screen door, "Thought you were never coming. Come on in. There's nobody can pass by here without seeing my new stove!" She gestured toward it with a rounded heavy arm. "We ordered it months ago and you'd a thought it had to come around the Horn, they took so long. Gas is the new thing in Seattle, but land knows when we'll have mains on this side of the lake, so we decided on coal-oil. And it's mighty nice and speedy, I tell you." While she spoke Mattie Jane moved on into the kitchen and stood in front of the stove. Its white bulk loomed before her and she stepped back and lowered her head to look at it.

"Looks fine, Ella, but I wouldn't have it in my kitchen -- I'd think I was sittin' with a big old white ghost every night.... I brought your butter."

"Wait just a minute 'til I get my pocket book and I'll pay you." She went into the adjoining room and Mattie Jane left alone, stood looking about the kitchen. There was nothing fancier about this kitchen than her own, except that stove. The general store owner did no better than Oscar.

"Well, here you are, and thank you." She pressed the coins into the palm of Mattie Jane's hand as if it were a gift to charity.

"Thank you." Mattie Jane was curt. She would have liked to have given the money back and said, "I'll have none of your charity," but Oscar was right: She had a plaid
streak from the tip of her hair bun to her lower back ("lower back" was her euphemism for Oscar's label) and this was her only chance to sell her spare butter. Everyone else kept cows. Now that she had money she went across to the post office.

"'Bout time you fixed that squeek in your door, eh Lyle?" She had a puzzling way of teasing with a playful face.

"Aw, Mattie Jane, ain't I told ya? That's so folks like you don't catch me with my suspenders slack." She held out her parcel and he went to the post office corner of the store. "Now what, and to who, could you be mailin?"

"I'm sending four pair of socks to my grandson, Peter."

"Well don't little boys have all the luck. Us big'uns don't ever get nothin' but cuffin' from the ladies."

"You supply the yarn, and I'd be tickled to knit you a pair. Don't Ella knit?"

"Well that's an offer for you." He tossed her package into the outgoing bag and walked straight for the yarn cupboard. His boots sounded heavy on the bare boards. She watched him from behind. His hips were still narrow so that his shoulders tapered to them in a becoming line, even though he was getting on. He shoved the glass door to one side and pulled out a skein of a rich dark brown color.

"How many you need -- I'll pay you for the labor?"

"No, I'll knit them out of friendship. I need two skeins. I wouldn't think of letting you pay me." She felt
flustered and a bit piqued, as if she were courting and her best beau had offered to pay for the socks she knit him. "And I want some more to knit a bed-jacket for Roberta Sue -- four skeins of heavy baby blue. She'll be having her baby in a month's time. The baby's got everything. It's the mother, folks forget about."

"I hope somebody said that back when Roberta Sue was born, Mattie Jane." She was startled by his sudden genuineness. He said it as he laid the coin she'd given him back down on the counter near her hand. She looked at him, and when their eyes met, she knew she was not to protest, and silently brushed it off into her palm while he wrapped the yarn.

"I'll have those socks so fast you'll think the millennium's come." She looked at his boots. "About size ten?" He nodded. "Well, it'll be a real nice pastime. I like your choice of color. Goodbye now."

Once out on the porch, she stood wishing that she had more errands. She sometimes went back for a cup of tea with Ella, but today, well, she'd snapped at Ella when she left. She could think of nothing to keep her from dropping into that left hand rut and walking back home. And at home, there was more nothing. She ambled languidly along the path, stopping to put her fingers beneath ferns that caught the sunlight, touching their delicacy. Lyle was a lady's'
man, Oscar said. But he was just spiteful because he acted like a bull in a china shop when ladies were around. She played up the bull part, but he never would own up to that. She'd been right, he hadn't been to town. She remembered again that he might be getting ready to leave. But he wouldn't. Not Oscar. When she got home, if he weren't there she'd stay downstairs awhile and act like things were normal again. She came into the clearing and saw the barn doors were open, and stopped to listen for the sound of Oscar's moving about. She heard nothing. Cautiously she snuck up to the barn, and poked her head around the door. Fresh droppings in the stall indicated the team had been harnessed that afternoon. He'd evidently gone off and come back for the team. For the first time it came home to Mattie Jane that Oscar might actually have carried through on his threat and gone East without her. She leaned against the door, weak at the very idea, but the door gave with her weight and she had to catch herself.

What would she ever do—on a farm—one lone woman? Eve without Adam, not that it had been Paradise, but... She went into the house and sat down in the rocker. It felt solid, substantial, beneath her and things seemed more normal. She sat rocking, thinking about what she actually might do. She might be able to work out a plan with Lyle where he did the man's work and she did more herself and
and they shared the profits. She thought out details until the sun's rays angled through the firs low enough to warn her she'd better make her supper if she wanted to eat in the light, and she was as hungry to eat in the light again as she was to eat. She ate from a tray, sitting by the window so if Oscar came she could run upstairs. But he didn't come.

The cow came and stood groaning at the fence waiting to be milked. Mattie Jane got her jacket and took the bucket and went out to lead the cow into the barn.

"Poor old girl. That makes two girls neglected by that deserter-owner we got." It was pleasant to speak aloud, even to a cow. She milked and brought the bucket in to let it sit while she did her dishes. He didn't come. She skimmed the milk, and finally sat down to knit. A brown skein fell out of the parcel first. She tossed it over a straight-back chair to hold it while she wound it into a ball. Time was more pressing on Roberta. She's bed jacket, but socks knit up quickly. She'd put a cable in them, something special.

Oscar came into the clearing driving the horses, without his good hat, the next evening at twilight. Mattie Jane scampered to pick up and get out of the kitchen when she saw him. Even to herself, she wouldn't admit she felt a little mixed. She'd had the plans, but it was vaguely relieving that they hadn't come to a test. And Oscar.... well, she
wished she hadn't done up all his dishes. She had wanted them out of the way, but this way he'd know she was afraid he wasn't coming back. She sat upstairs in the tiny wooden rocker, scarcely rocking so that she could hear his movements and know what he was doing. He came up to bed early. She thought she'd give him a scare that she was gone and not go down until near the end of the night.

When Oscar came downstairs just as a fog-enshrouded dawn broke, she felt more reluctant than she had in all the three and a half weeks to return again to the spare room. She liked to walk in fog, she even liked doing her chores in fog. When she went out of the house to wait for Oscar, she ran her fingers up through it. Upstairs she left the shades up and knit. The fog lifted, hour by hour until at last through the trees she could see the unruffled grayness of the lake. She sat dreaming a moment until her eye was taken by someone coming off the path into the clearing. It was Lyle. Her hand flew to her unkempt hair while a cold fear ran along her nerves. What if he came in, she longed for him to, but if Oscar caught them chatting. Of course, it was all innocent, so far as he was concerned. Yes, he could come ahead. But her hopes were dashed when she heard him call.

"Hello, Oscar," and Oscar called back from the side of the house. He was evidently working in the vegetable garden. "Mattie Jane around, I got a letter for her." She
listened to the sound of her own name. She ought to have dropped the Jane on it when she was married -- it was too girlish for a matron like herself. She'd had three chances since, each time they moved and folks didn't know her, but she just hadn't been able to bring herself to part with that second name.

"No," Oscar was saying. He paused and with the pause her fear returned. Suppose she should tell Lyle all about what she was doing. That would fix it. He might not even accept her socks. Suppose he told Ella, sharp-tongued Ella. Oscar'd do it, too, just to spite her.

"No," he repeated, "She's here, but she's a bit under the weather -- just a temporary thing."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that now. She's always so chipper, I can't fancy her any other way. Well, I'll just leave this and get back then."

"Those narrow hips are mighty tasty" she mumbled, as she watched him walk out of the clearing. What was the letter? She'd have to wait until evening for it. Trust Oscar, he knew she'd overheard, and just to tease her he'd come to bed later than ever. She had settled back to knit and wait when she heard Oscar come into the house. He was coming upstairs. The sound of his boots trampling up the stairs terrified her. What would she say? What could she? Since he hadn't gone off East by this time, he probably
wasn't going. But more than likely if he had made up his mind to stay in these parts, he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of telling her outright. He wouldn't cheat her out of her misery. He'd leave her up here suffering until she swallowed all her self-respect and came down of her own accord. When he stopped outside her door she was trembling as if she had a spasm. What nonsense, Mattie Jane, he's just your husband, she told herself. But that was no balm. Oscar grunted as if he were moving unnaturally, and then a white envelope came sliding beneath the door. His boots tromped halfway back downstairs and she could wait no longer. Running to the door, her high-top black boots flew nearly as fast as hummingbird wings. The handwriting was Roberta Sue's. Had she really dreamed it could be anyone else's? She opened it more carefully. It had been written the day before, Wednesday.

Dear Mama;

Peter wants to thank you for his socks. They are wonderfully warm and only a little too big. He'll be able to wear them all winter. Since you did not send a letter with them, I am wondering if we should not come next Saturday for my birthday/celebration which we talked about when we were there in July. Unless I hear from you, we will be at your house about ten, because it's been so long since we've seen either of you. I'll bring two chickens to fry.

Your loving daughter,

Roberta Sue.
"Well, now, I am in a pickle," she said aloud, letting both arms drop with the letter to her lap. "If I say I'm ill, she'll come anyway to take care of me, and I can't say I just plain don't want her. I'm plum forced; my coming-out party, Roberta Sue's birthday party. Bit backwards, but...

It would take every slack minute knitting to finish that bed jacket by Saturday. She put down the brown socks and went to the bureau and took out the baby blue yarn and her large needles. The parts of it would go fast. Weaving them together would be ticklish. She hung the skein and wound a great soft ball.

Saturday dawned with a heavy fog. Fog in the morning means sun in the afternoon, she reminded herself, but it may delay them. She was standing outside leaning against the weatherbeaten cedar shingling of the house waiting to duck in. That shingling had been Oscar's pride while he was splitting it. He'd only finished putting it on this spring, and here he was talking about leaving. Oh, the look on his face when she appeared. It was a task to wait. But she needed sleep. It had taken the night to do the cake and finish the bed jacket. And the house still needed at least a lick and a promise.

At a quarter past ten, Henry drove their wagon into the clearing. She went to the door and stood waiting to call to them. Oscar must be down at the barn. But all during
the noisy greetings he didn't arrive. There was nothing to do but bundle Roberta Sue into the house and send Henry and Peter off to the fields to find him. Things were all crossed up. His surprise at seeing them would betray her, and what 'shore they'd tell him she was down and she'd miss his face. Might have known he'd foil me, she thought bitterly as she took Roberta Sue's arm.

"Be back for a one-o'clock dinner, now, won't you," she called as Henry and Peter went off.

At five minutes to one, while Roberta Sue was mixing the flour and water for gravy, she moved to the window and caught sight of the men. "Here are the men-folk. Daddy's looking spry."

Mattie Jane dropped her potato masher and went to the window. She saw Oscar and shot her hands beneath her apron to cover their trembling. Now Mattie Jane, she spoke to herself, don't give him the satisfaction of knowing you're befuddled. The men knocked the mud off their boots in the back hall before they came into the kitchen. Oscar came last and said nothing. He went to the pump at the sink, and washed his hands as if it were a normal day, nor did he speak to Roberta Sue. When his hands were washed he walked toward Mattie Jane, still without saying anything. Oh, help, she thought frantically, what is he doing? When he came close enough he caught her up in a great bear hug. Then he kissed her hard as if he were thirty again and turned to
Roberta Sue, and said: "How's my big girl?" and hugged her as well.

Mattie Jane felt weak. It was true what she used to say -- A kiss without his mustache is like a potato without salt. She sat down as unobtrusively as she could, got her breath, and went back to mashing potatoes. Dinner was finally on the table.

"Got twelve bushels to the acre on my oats this year," Henry was saying. He had harvested already, after all.

"Hi say that was pretty good. The beginning of the week I was helping Berg Decock with his oats and he was only getting eleven, so I reckon you're lucky. Berg's a good farmer, too." Aha, so that's where Osaar was. "I figure mine'll be ready the beginning of the week, but mine aren't so good. I'll get mighty little. That reminds me, I keep forgettin' to tell you, Mattie Jane; Berg'll more than likely be here for dinner and the night at the beginning of the week." Now what would he have done if she'd kept on standing out on him?

Henry was saying something about Seattle's new electric plant. "They're rebuilding it one of the first things after the fire, and they're swamped with orders now while it's still unfinished. Can you beat it? They're charging $1.50 a month for a sixteen candlepower lamp burning from a little before dusk until ten-thirty. My guess is it won't
be too long before there's power on this side of the lake."

"Well, by golly," Oscar said, "maybe lights would change the picture. Mattie Jane and I had thought maybe we'd go East again and settle for our old age where things are less primitive and crops are better." Mattie Jane laid down her fork and bristled up straight. "Would you spare that much for lights, Mattie Jane?" He looked at her as if he expected a genuine answer.

"Oscar, I haen sparing all my life. Habits a pretty strong tug -- but I reckon I could get a bit wreckless once."

"Well, I'd guess then it's worth staying just to see that ol' plaid streak fade! Them lights'd bleach it right out."

By late afternoon, Roberta Sue was speaking about going home. Mattie Jane couldn't persuade her to stay to supper, so she packed a lunch and sent it off in the wagon with them. She fixed supper for the two of them and called Oscar. When his mouth was cram full of bread and milk and apples, he looked up at her and smiled crookedly. A bit of apple dropped from one end of his mouth.

"Been just waiting, Mattie Jane, for the first feast with you. Don't mind saying I missed you and was wanting to know how in the name of heaven I'd get you down again."

Mattie Jane looked across at his awkwardness. He'd just never be as smooth as Lyle. He'd always be hopelessly rough just when he wanted to be most pleasant. Well, he'd caused
her a lot of trouble, but... us women, we adore to punish
ourselves.

"Well," she said, "you know, Oscar, there are a lot
of things I'd do for my family that I wouldn't do for my-
self."

Oscar Shoecraft settled in again at Kirkland. Each
time he railed at settling his wife would remind him he'd
promised to wait for the lights. And the lights were ten
years in coming.
Houses and Children.

And don't you think it hasn't been a joy to cut and set your hair all these years, dear. Watching you come up's been like watching m' own daughter. And I honestly do swear to daylight, that each time I talk with you, you grow more like her. Why, hearing you talk of college girls, I may as well be hearing her, to the very words. She was born at home, you know, and from the day she was born feet first, she'd been different. And when she went East to college, (don't think her father and I didn't cut a lot of hair to keep her there) she found, not quite as she'd expected, that not only was she different from what she called the "gauche" westerner, but indeed she was very unlike the easterner. She came home that first vacation and reported that eastern college women were no more "so-plicated nor aspiring than their Western counterparts." On Saturday nights in the dormitory after closing hours, she would sit listening to the talks of "the flirts" (that's what she called nearly every girl in the hall) who had had dates. She would set herself down, plucky as a parakeet, cross-legged on their beds while they pulled off their stockings and chattered. They told her all shapes of talks, wanting her advice. You see each summer at home her father'd help her with styling her hair so she looked
all chique and under-fed because she claimed that was the look they respected and copied. And yet to us she called them all cat-brains, and said their questions irritated her. There was not a one of them that considered herself anything more than a baby factory. Some wanted short snappy careers before they settled quiet-like into the suburbs; but every one of them, when it came to it, wanted nothing but children and a home. Poor things, they were maddening, but she decided finally they were more to be pitied. None of them knew "The sheer joy of a harp arpeggio, nor the excitement that comes from the flowing out of a harp accompaniment to an orchestral movement." Ah, but she did! She had her plans to be a brilliant harpist -- for her, there was no more solid, satisfying companion than a harp.

And the little scalliwag, when her father 'ld ask her whom she 'd marry, she 'd give him a lecture about how marriage could sometimes fit in with a career, but certainly none of the men one met in a "homogeneous, circumscribed, college atmosphere" like that one, were marriageable. The men there neither thought enough for themselves nor were self-assured enough within themselves to accept and appreciate a girl with independence. When she came back to Portland, she told him, she 'd move with her own kind of crowd -- Bohemians in a way -- then there 'ld be men who 'ld date her for just what she was -- a talented woman. The
cosmopolitan atmosphere, that's where she'd be appreciated. In the meantime she'd go on perfecting her method.

And you know, she was right. Gay as a gadfly she was, her first year back in Portland. She had plenty men toady-ing up to her willing to cart that frail harp from performance to performance, so's they could spend the evening after the concert with her. She was in the Portland Symphony, you remember. She dated some of the men in the symphony itself, too. But there was a twinge of competition in her relations with the symphony men, and she felt there was something too dogged in the manner of the harp-carters, and she didn't really love any of them. The harp held on as her best beau, and she was as happy during the portion of the evening when she was performing as when the performance was over and she was off on a date.

Her mind that year was chock-full of harp arrangements. She said arranging appealed to her "sense of order"; and while I can't say as I know much about that, I do know arranging was part of what made her so "ripe" for the contract she was offered the next year. She had a chance to join the only traveling harp quintet in the country. They were on the road, arranging and playing all through the winter except for three weeks out at Christmas. It was the luck of the lawless that child had; by the end of the year she'd have her reputation all established. "Ah,
how magnetic a thing is talent," she told me, "deftly, surely, it draws the world to it."

And that year on her three week stint back in Portland, she up and surprised us. She met a solid, sure-to-be-successful corporation lawyer and she fell in love with him. He hadn't a straw of interest in the harp because "that instrument in its present form was not present in the scores of Mozart," and his passion was that composer. No matter how much he listened or studied, he never got his fill of him. Before he came to his corporation he'd spent a full year living in Salzburg, or wherever Mozart did, just to "absorb" the atmosphere where "his" genius worked. Yes, back on the road traveling with those four other women harpists, all hell-bent on careers, she felt there was something different about her feeling for this corporation lawyer. She thought it might even be different enough to be love, so when she got back, she married him.

There was just one matter to be reckoned with. He insisted she give up road engagements. But in return, she talked him into taking an extended leave of absence to caravan south where those beggars sat on bags of gold in Mexico. They hummed it all the way. In a month's time, they had brushed up their Spanish and were jabbering like natives with all kinds and classes of Mexicans.
"Ah, Mexico," she wrote, "the seat of a true aesthetic. That poignant combination of the feminine principle in religion -- Mary mother of God -- and brilliant earthiness in art. It's an atmosphere flourishing with the creative spirit. It strings up each unique tendon in my frame. It is my 'true' atmosphere." And she must have meant it, for not long afterward she conceived and brought out her first composition for the harp. But, you understand, to go bum-ming, a harp is much too delicate, so all she did had to be done with nothing but the memory of harp sounds. And for all that, it was a dandy composition.

Now my dear, do you think that's enough off this side? I declare your hair does set down so chique and smooth.

Well, she went on writing, but, you understand, there just wasn't the time in one spot to write, especially when she agreed with him that the point of caravanning had been to move around, to "feel" the country.

They came on fine until one night, when their money and their tempers and the tide were all at low ebb. They spent 'tili midnight looking for a sheltered place to bed down in, and when they didn't find one they flopped out on an open, deserted beach. They clean forgot it might not be so bare in the morning. And sure enough, they woke on a beach all cluttered up with lounging men and nursing mothers and crawling children. A child throwing sand to bury the
hump of his sleeping bag woke him up. He woke her, and she thought it was all a corking good joke. But while he worked to get his pants on inside his bag, he decided he'd had enough. They were starting back to Portland that very day.

So after six months of "utter abandon" she found herself plunked smack down in Portland to stay without so much as the solace of a road trip. She felt jerked from her right environment and left desolated -- a sword out of its sheath. She found only a scattering of her own Bohemian friends, and his friends were mostly corporation officials and their wives. She claimed she was in the very doldrums of social life. Sharp against it, she was again -- she was different. In the company of their husbands, and no doubt, she felt, in their ambition-packed private lives as well, corporation wives expressed great interest in the inner workings of the corporation. But among themselves they talked of just two things: Children and houses. She would sit again, listening to women, chafing with irritation. She hadn't even the comfort of a cross-legged pose. She felt more trapped, as well, because she could see nothing ahead except these doldrums. There was no way to "tear out of a purposeless, rooted, existence," And her past was fading -- no one wanted to hear about Mexico, and playing as she was each noon at a tearoom in a violin-harp combination was surely not comparable to having a career. No harpist restricted to one city ever
had a brilliant career. She practiced nearly all her mornings, trying to compose whenever playing to four walls just didn't satisfy her. But it didn't come too well. No, Mexico had been the atmosphere for composition, and they hadn't stuck it out there near long enough for her to hit her stride. How that rankled! Poor dear.

His solution for her restlessness was a baby. Like all men, nothing would have been dearer to Clement's heart, than to have a boy who would, of course, in this case, be likely to become something akin to a modern Mozart. But baby's were what everybody had, and they most certainly could not be had along with a career. And all her career needed was a properly isolated, properly unique atmosphere for composition and arrangement. But Clement was an A-number-one rooted gentleman now and was not to be budged.

Thanksgiving day that year, I invited his family to dinner. I tuckered myself all out making a lot of special trimmings -- oysters in the dressing and all the rest. She asked to be seated at the table next to her father-in-law, because he knew next to nothing about children and cared for houses only when he wasn't living in them, and always had tales to tell. Well, that day he reminisced about his boyhood summers spent in Montana. He worked there for a family friend who was a sheep rancher. Went on at a great rate, he did, about how he didn't know as he'd ever seen any stupider bunch of animals than a flock of sheep. "Except
maybe," he said, "a flock of humans following a bum leader -- but they sure raise'em in nice country." He told about how he got so attached to the Montana ranch country that later, when he had money, he bought up fifteen sections of land for speculation. "Always thought me, or one of my sons would get out there to ranch some day," he said, "but guess we've all muffed our chance. Got the land leased, though. It was a good investment."

And for her next to him, the tale was the germ of a new idea. She saw a whole new beginning, if she connived right. The little schemer, she decided there was nothing so unprecedented, so exciting as life on a ranch. If it was thirty miles from nowhere, it was all the better for harp composition. What she'd have to do was convince Clement that first of all, the quieter life of a ranch afforded more time for Mozart. Then she'd have to convince him that Mozart from records was far more live than live Mozart in the "stagnant cultural atmosphere" of Portland. He wasn't so attached to law. He wanted roots, but he seemed willing to sink them in a place instead of a profession. No, law wasn't the problem. She prided herself on having had judgment enough to marry a man with some spirit of adventure.

Clement's sense of decency kept him from walking out directly without winding up his business for the corpora-
tion, and at any rate the current lease on the land didn't expire until the next summer. During that year Wanda waited. She felt frightful when she was alone at home, but when she saw people and they all exclaimed at what a "fascinating" life they would lead -- a real ranch-style house, and such a grand place to raise children, she puffed up like a pigeon and let them go on at a rare rate. They didn't need to know she no more planned on children than she planned on abandoning her harp.

Arrangements were finally complete and Wanda, Clement, the harp, with Mozart records and books trucked off to Montana. "Ah, Montana," she wrote. They would build there a "small island of culture in the midst of a philistia. And if philistia chose to flock after their cultural example, well they would be happy to lead the way: Always wary, of course, against being lowered themselves. Montana cannot clutch us down."

The house on the land they leased had been built gangly, with two stories thirty years back, and stood in a coulee near one of several sparse clumps of trees. Before they could live in it decently, it would have to be renovated. But what money they had the first year was better spent on cattle; they needed a start on building up their herd. They had thought at first of raising sheep. But since to them both, sheep were "the very incarnation of stupidity," they decided on cattle instead. Wanda, poor dear, found her days
strung out in long successions of old-fashioned household rituals, beginning with heating all her hot water on a wood stove and washing dishes at a sink eight inches too low. Life took too much time, just for living. It wasn't that she was unhappy, there was no time to be unhappy, but she wrote she was looking forward to next year's remodelling, for surely then she would have time to return to her composition. In the meantime friends arrived from Portland, and it was all so different and new to them and to Wanda that she lived quite contentedly collecting the glow of her own singularity. It was in November, when the weather got bad and no one came to see them, that she began to grow restless. Clement still had indoor work to do in the barn and tool shed, and Wanda was left sooner than she'd expected with time to play her harp and compose. Long hours were ahead, "filled with the resonance, the depth, of harp tones."

"My technique has slid in these months," she told Clement, "but it will pick up." But poor dear, technique was not the problem. Her playing seemed to have lost its edge again. There was no "sheer joy" from one arpeggio. And her composition and arrangement couldn't progress well with no one but herself to judge it. She had no musical friends. In fact, she had no friends. She fixed her mind on the fact that thirty miles from nowhere was not actually nowhere. And she supposed she did need friends, so finally one bright day when the sun had dried up the roads, she drove thirty-
seven miles to Roundup because she'd heard the lawyer's wife there had at least been to college. She was, in truth, an Eastern girl who had met her husband at college and consented to follow him to nowhere. But she hadn't had one twitch of loneliness because four months after they arrived her first baby came, and two more had come along since then. Had Wanda children? No. Well, she'd find they'd be grand company when they came. Did she like to cook? Oh,... yes. Well, she had just tried the best recipe for cream cheese salad and would love to give it to her. (Wanda hadn't been much for cooking, but she began calling it by some fancy phrase like "an outlet for creativity", and that done, she enjoyed it.)

The recipe was a good one, and Wanda never got around to regretting she'd gone because not long afterward, she received an invitation to the women's club in Roundup, and bless their hearts, they insisted she play for them at each meeting. And when she told them that a harp was much too delicate an instrument to travel with over Montana roads, they voted to defray the cost of renting one to keep at the club for the season. And although they didn't know how a harp ought to sound, they appreciated the way it did sound and the edge came back to Wanda's practicing. She would come home from such meetings, her groceries banging about in the back of the pick-up, her head laden with recipes and full of cattle talk. She could always pick up a few facts Clement
found useful, and she herself was becoming both well-informed and enthusiastic about cattle breeding.

At last, in the spring, Clement announced she would make plans for remodelling and at the next two meetings of the women she made inquiries of several women who had recently remodelled, for like I told her, she ought to have the very most convenient kitchen. And all during the time the workers were there she was much too distracted by their banging and their confusion to either practice or compose, but she didn't really miss it because it was so heartening to watch the progress. A modern kitchen was a means, not an end, she insisted; but nevertheless she felt now she needed the freedom at the end of the means. She would stand in the doorway of her kitchen gazing at the gleaming counters and pure white appliances. It was a great joy to think that when their musical friends came from Portland this summer, they would be struck not only by the uniqueness of the ranch itself, but by the comfort and freedom one could achieve on a ranch.

When the remodelling was finished the workmen left and guests began arriving. With Clement's new hired hand Oscar at the table, intellectual conversation was somewhat dampened, but city people always seemed interested in ranch talk. Then, of course, there were the tales of the remodelling -- how one of the workmen spilled a whole bucket of plaster in her laundry tubs -- and other anecdotes.
And when the company was gone for the summer and all those long kitchen-spent days over, there were left great empty blocks of time, in which she could return to her harp. She'd practiced only bits and pieces all summer long. Just enough to keep two numbers ready for when her visitors asked that she play. But now she was all in a flurry about expanding her repertoire, because there was a new idea brewing. Clement had calculated it would take about four more years to get well-established. Then, come mid-winter, the two of them would go off to New York City each year. And, for Wanda, New York was the harpist's haven. "Oh the theater season, the opera." You begin to see how I could say you remind me of her. And here I am finished setting your hair before I'm finished the story. It won't take but a minute more, and I wouldn't have you miss the ending. At any rate, she wrote us her days were "arpeggios of excitement. How could one harpist from Portland have been so lucky as to marry a man like Clement?"

It was in September that Wanda discovered she was going to have a baby. Children -- she might as well have dropped smack into a big black pit. They'd ruin everything. The little scamp, she didn't tell anyone and said she had a sudden need for the stimulation of the fall air and colors and did nothing but ride horses. But none of her shinnanigans worked, the baby kept right on coming. Innocent as an
apple I was, when I went over to visit, and while I was there she told Clement and me. He made her plum disgusted, he was so overjoyed. "Can't you even temper your feelings a jot, for my sake," she was angry, I'll tell you. "Your freedom isn't even nicked, but think of mine!" So Clement calmed down and Wanda played her harp like she had a fever. But in that condition, and with that future, it only drained her energy. One night she spoke out bold as brass. "The mother cow is dying for lack of the strength drawn out of her by her calf. A harp can suckle no offspring."

The winter came on spring, and in May, Clement took Wanda seventy miles to where there was a hospital and left her there waiting. The baby came early and two weeks later he found himself driving back for his first view of his son. I flew over. Compared with his mother, all depressed, the baby was red, lusty, and healthy. "He looks all froggy, just like all the other babies," she moaned.

"Ah, but this one will love Mozart," Clement reminded her. She didn't choose to reply. She only lay in bed, hollow about the eyes and sunken in the cheeks like her room-mates, but less smiling.

Soon we could take Clement Wolf (short for Wolfgang) home and I stayed on because almost too soon Wanda found herself with summer visitors. Not only the family and their
close musical friends chose to come this summer, but soon word had spread of the baby and even some of the corporation friends stopped through just long enough to see him on the ways to or from vacation trips. By the end of the summer Wolf was a real corking charmer and friends were expressing genuine "oh's and ah's" when Wanda told them now soon his eyes had focused and tickled him into a smile.

At last, one evening I heard words worth hanging on. I'd gone into the pantry to get coffee while Clement was watching Wanda change the little tyke.

"I'll have to admit," Wanda remarked, "that it must be more than hormones that endears this little boy." I heard her give him a brisk pat on his little buttocks.

"Harps may be the mint sauce, but children are the lamb."

When I came in she was looking at Clement. She was a family woman now, but she'd no more fears of harp failures. And he, well, he was a full-blown father at last! I notice these days she still has a kind of pinched meager look through her chest. But she likes lamb.