

OUT FROM UNDER

It drove her crazy how Thad used the highway centerline for a guide. He just sat back, head and left shoulder dropped to one side and ran the front tire right along that line. She could never just enjoy a drive. Every oncoming car spelled a potential collision. And it wasn't even nice driving among their own neighborhood streets because if she didn't stay constantly alert he'd drive right on by every turn.

They were on their way to pick up Thad's brother's grandson, Ted. The ride to the airport could be a nice trip, if passed in peace. Sheila sighed, forcing herself to look out of her own window at her own view and to have more than a sixty-second thought of her own. If a pie truck ran up the side of the car, so be it. She was ready, all sins long since enumerated and finally regarded as unimportant. Her sister always bawled her out in letters about her constant carping at Thad, said she should understand senility. It wasn't senility to her, just calcified laziness--the last collapse after a lifetime career of self-absorption, now with benefit of medical prognosis. Put the lug in a car alone and he could thread his way sixty miles to a high school hockey game. But if anyone was with him, he couldn't back out of the garage without being told to put the car in reverse.

It was a two-hour drive from Columbia, Missouri to the airport, and now it was almost over. Luckily the airport, named after heroic Lindbergh, was outside of St. Louis. No city traffic for Thad to contend with. Sure enough, though, he was going to drive right by the exit.

"This is the one you take, Thad. Remember? Airport Exit?"

As always, he appeared surprised. "Oh? That's right." He rolled an eye at her with a mischievous twinkle of assumed complicity. His defense against her righteousness, and a maddeningly good one. "Seem to remember you told me that."

"Uh huh. A body has to be told the airport exit's called 'Airport'?"

"Now, now."

Somehow they found the correct terminal and there was Ted waiting out front with his new wife. Trish she was called, Sheila remembered. The youngsters stood in the center of piles of luggage.

"Hi, Aunt and Uncle!" Ted said cheerily into Sheila's open window. It was autumn. Dry leaves had made it all the way to the airport pavements. When Trish came forward for introductions, the leaves rasped under her small feet.

"Ted's been telling me all about you," she said.

"Ho ho!" said Thad. "I'll bet."

"What's there possibly to say about us?" said Sheila.

Trish looked flustered. "Well, your nice house..."

Lord, thought Sheila, that again. Thad's single life coup--the purchase of a heat-eating monster during the depression, gouged from the life of an unfortunate family and the corners still gray with the ghosts of their misery.

"Can I call you Aunt and Uncle?" Trish added nervously.

"Sweetie, you can call me last week's newspapers if it suits you." Sheila had already gotten out of the car and up the curb to the sidewalk, her short legs no help, and now took the young woman in her arms. She could smell cinnamon, or something spice-like, in the girl's crisp red curls. She felt herself hugged back gratefully.

Thad, meanwhile, was simply staring down at all the bags.

"You might want to start loading those," said Sheila.

Ted came over and brusquely hugged her. "I'm sorry there's so many. We took the maximum in luggage because the UPS bills were getting so big."

"I can guess. Your boxes have been coming in regular."

"I hope that hasn't been much trouble," said Trish.

"Not a bit. We just keep telling them to stack them in the garage. Let's get these in the car."

Back on the road again, Sheila turned to the back seat as far as her stiff bones would allow. "Did Alex have any luck with that moving company for you, Ted?" Alex was Thad's brother. He owned a moving company in San Francisco and had vowed to use his connections in the couple's behalf when they'd decided to move to St. Louis.

"Nothing yet. I'm hopeful though."

"Yeah? Then you know something I don't."

"Why do you say that?" Trish asked.

"Still owes us money, for one thing. We helped him set up that business twenty years ago and he tells us it still isn't making enough to pay us back."

"Now that might be true, Sheila," said Thad.

"Oh? What's he been eating for twenty years? Unclaimed furniture?"

"See?" Trish said quietly to Ted.

"See nothing," Sheila heard Ted say in return.

Ted, she could see, was looking away out the window. Trish watched him, one hand resting tentatively on his wrist.

"Well, I don't think Ted should wait on anyone," said Trish suddenly. "We're going to need jobs right away."

"Rent is high in St. Louis now," said Thad.

"High everywhere, isn't it?" said Sheila. "That why you kids left San Francisco?"

"Not really," said Trish. "It's just too crazy there."

"Very tight, employment wise," said Ted. "Things are pretty sewn up if you don't know a lot about tech. And still you got to know somebody."

"I heard *you* were doing all right, Trish," said Sheila.

Ted laughed stiffly. "If you call working in a dry cleaning shop doing all right."

Trish laughed too, and when she did Sheila forced her body around for a closer look at the girl. Her eyes were large and blue and the earlier impression of extremely smooth and lustrous skin was further confirmed. Trish was striking in a way--skin smooth and pale as candle wax, a reddish tint borrowed from her full head of hair.

"You make that vest?" Sheila asked her. She was referring to a woolen five-button garment that Trish wore. The darts, neatly stitched, blended perfectly with the pattern of the material. The darts tipped Sheila that it might be handmade; the ready-made companies didn't bother with them anymore.

"I did, yes." The girl's pale hands brought her coat a few inches closer around her. "Is anything wrong, Aunt Sheila?"

Sheila's eyes flicked up. "Not a thing that I can see." And with that she turned back around to watch Thad fender-fence with a passing car.

Back home at the big house in Columbia, Trish helped Sheila get supper together while Thad and Ted inventoried the boxes in the garage. These, stacked up high against the back wall, were so many that they forced a tight fit for the big car.

"Why so many things?" Sheila asked Trish in the kitchen. "One'd think you'd want to start out lean in a new place."

Trish, her hands in flour from biscuits she'd insisted on making, looked up with a self-conscious expression. "I guess I would have thrown out more things, but a lot of the stuff is Ted's."

"What, clothes? There isn't any furniture out there."

"No, no, his projects mostly. Like clocks. There's some boxes of broken clocks from thrift stores and such. Ted's taking a mail course in watch repair."

"Well now."

As Sheila sliced scallions, her arthritic knuckles flinched with tiny sharp pains.

"And electronics stuff. Ted wants to get into electronics too, so we've got some broken cell phones he's going to rewire or something."

"What else does Ted want to get into?"

"Oh, a lot. He's so good with his hands."

"And what kind of job does he want in St. Louis?"

"Most anything--just to get us started."

"Yep. You kids've got some savings, I imagine."

Sheila gazed out the kitchen window and saw Ted and Thad having a smoke out by the back fence. Thad had his pipe this time--no cigars allowed around the house--and Ted a filterless cigarette. Each had a leg up on a cross piece. They were gazing into the next door neighbors' yard, Eastern Europeans who'd put in another large garden this year. The garden was going down to autumn. Dried tomato and bean vines held a few leaves yet, the tomatoes yellowing from the bottom up to where the last green fruit bunched. When the Parkovs had first come over, more than twenty-five years before, they'd planted the front yard too--in potatoes. For a decade they would not believe in their good fortune and always feared famine. Sheila had

always wanted a garden but never had one. Thad never got around to turning the earth for her. One year, many years ago, she'd gone out to do it herself, but the sight of this very small woman working with a shovel had evidently angered Thad, because he'd come out and wrested it from her and dug furiously in the earth for a few hours. That was the first and last time.

Over dinner Thad broached the subject that Ted had broached with him earlier. "Ed wants to use the car, Sheila. They want to go into St. Louis and do some looking for jobs and apartments."

"The boy's name is Ted, Thad."

"We'd pay, of course," said Trish. "I mean gas and wear-and-tear."

"We'll skip the wear-and-tear," said Sheila. "We don't use the big thing that much anyway. Thad's retired and I just got my little girl to watch--which I do right here."

"Little girl?" said Ted.

"Daycare, you might say. I take care of the daughter of the Simmons woman upstairs, our tenant. Her husband ran off years ago and left her with a little girl to raise on her own."

"Emma," said Thad. "She's a cute little thing. Almost like our own, I'd say."

"A little ball 'a fire I'd say first. You kids'll meet her on Monday when her Mama and she get back from their weekend trip. She's here every weekday from two-thirty to five."

"Oh, how nice," said Trish.

"Anything to fill up these big rooms."

"Then I guess we're helping out too, then," said Ted. He grinned broadly, displaying handsome teeth.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we're filling up some space for you."

"For the time being," Trish added quickly.

Sheila reached for the biscuit basket, which Trish had arranged so nicely with checkered napkins. "These are sound biscuits, young lady. Where'd you learn to cook?"

"You know, my mom, my aunts. We're second generation Irish--still pretty traditional.

"Nothing wrong with that."

On Sundays Thad stepped into the big newspaper like some people do into a hot bath. He'd be away in it for hours, at times muttering or sighing about indications of political liberalism, and then spend the evening dozing off and on before a football game. But the TV went on long before the evening hour, a fidgety Ted at the controls. Thad fell in with it, sucking on his pipe with an expression of curiosity as he confronted the droning spectacle of a road race.

"They just go round and round like that, Ed?"

"Oh, there's more to it than that. It comes down to a battle of split seconds--when to downshift, when to accelerate into a curve."

"But we can't see any of that." Thad drew thoughtfully on his pipe.

"You can feel it though, right?"

"Ted knows an awful lot about cars," said Trish. She sat on the rug with the want ads spread out before her. She had a big towel wrapped around her hair, and her skin looked scrubbed and pink. "Here's one for a counter person at a donut shop," she announced. She took up a pair of scissors.

"A donut shop?" said Ted. "Come on, there has to be better than that in big St. Louie. You'd only be getting minimum wage."

"Well, it's a wage anyway. What do you get without some kind of big degree?"

"I'd keep looking."

Sheila, hands on hips, took in the scene from the kitchen doorway then turned on her heel as nimbly as bad feet would allow. Curse those bad feet. Curse them and forget them. She'd seen Mrs. Parkov puttering around in the tomatoes, so she put on her red University of Missouri sweatshirt, a gift from Mrs. Simmons, and went out for a chat. Damned long walk for a chat, she thought as she walked across the large back porch, down its stairs, then over the flagstones along its length. A porch big enough for a grand hotel in the Ozarks, but for her just a long interruption between the kitchen and the back fence.

"Mrs. Parkov!" she called out, careful of her feet on the lumpy ground. "I found you a pickling recipe in today's paper."

Mrs. Parkov straightened up and waved from the rows. She bent her broad back with one hand on the small of it and called back to Sheila, "How kind, but I saw it too!"

The two women met at the fence, both smiling in anticipation of the pleasure these little meetings gave them. "So, you're buying the paper now," said Sheila. "I guess my preaching has had an impact!"

"You are right as usual, Mrs. Walsh. We cut coupons and are saving the money. And now I see that you have your company with you."

"Yes, my grandnephew is here--and his new wife too. But look at those carrots you've got there! Aren't they too big?"

Mrs. Parkov held up the carrots as proudly as a hunter a brace of ducks. "These are for soup. Or stew. You boil them for the base. Smaller we use for just themselves alone."

"Ah, I can see that."

Sheila regarded Mrs. Parkov's garden with good-natured envy. The furrows were cut so deeply, each one straight and true, and the well-worked earth was yielding yet--squash, various tubers, the last tomatoes.

"I saw today the garden of my son-in-law's father," said Mrs. Parkov. "It is a strange sight, I must tell you. The whole thing was so crowded, almost like a salad but still in the ground."

"That's the rage now."

"So he himself told me. But I could not understand this, Mrs. Walsh! Surely the vegetables cannot breathe, parsley choking the tomatoes." Mrs. Parkov breathed deeply then clutched her throat with her free hand. "And even flowers growing there too. Marigolds and...what are those others, you know them?"

"Sure! Nasturtiums. Bugs don't like them, so they tell me."

Mrs. Parkov shook her head. "Some new ideas are good, but others are very crazy." She sighed. "But now I should tell you, my daughter has a new apartment now and she will move out."

Sheila dropped her eyes and nodded with gravity. This was grim good news. The two women shared the dark details of a local scandal involving Mrs. Parkov's unfortunate daughter, Losha. The girl had become abruptly sullen about two years ago, worrying her parents with her furtiveness and increasingly more unhealthy pallor. The big girl grew stouter and walked about hunched and withdrawn. Mr. and Mrs. Parkov tried everything to force her to see a doctor, but the girl only pretended to keep the appointments.

Then one night Mrs. Parkov heard her daughter crying in the bathroom with the door locked. The crying grew to an unnerving wail. Finally, Mr. Parkov burst in the door, and there he and his wife found their daughter in the dry bathtub giving bloody birth to a baby. Sheila remembered the night vividly--how Mrs. Parkov, hysterically alarmed, had woken her and brought her to Losha. Sheila herself finished delivering the child. Gradually, the family crawled from beneath the stultifying shame of the episode. The father was found and duly induced to marry Losha. The daughter continued to live at home with the child until the couple got their footing, and now it appeared that the final phase of this dark event had come to pass. The scandal had been unconcealable, but the Parkovs themselves talked only to Sheila about it.

"I'm glad she's got her own place," said Sheila. "Will they be close by?"

"Oh, yes. My son-in-law will work for the university. In the greenhouse there."

Sheila banished some unbidden thoughts about Losha's husband, how once he'd gotten used to the idea of marrying the girl he'd made himself quite at home around his in-laws' place. He was forever throwing an arm around Mr. Parkov, always a beer can in his free hand. Sheila did not want to make hasty comparisons between that boy and Ted, but if there were lessons to be learned from the Parkovs' challenges then she wanted to apply them incisively--not with the dark, fussy histrionics of her Old World neighbors.

"You know, Ted needs a job," she thought aloud. "I wonder if they should be going all the way into St. Louis for it."

"He then has a big job in mind?"

"Nothing at all in mind that I can see." She pulled her sweatshirt tightly to her body. The quickly lowering sun entangled itself in the surrounding trees, the limbs

filtering its warmth. "They just need incomes, period. I think they had to scrape too much in San Francisco."

"It is difficult everywhere. You are thinking perhaps that St. Louis may not be so much better?"

"Just now, yes. Why does everybody have to rush into the big cities? It strikes me as darn pathetic how they do that. We aren't starving here."

"Not at all!" said Mrs. Parkov, and lifted the carrots.

A short while later Sheila hurried in against the chill. She thought to herself how fortunate that Ted and Trish were married rather than just in trouble or shackled up or something. One should count one's blessings.

But at dinner that night Ted fought the idea of finding work in Columbia. "There can't be as many opportunities in this little town."

"Your uncle's worked here most of his life," said Sheila. She helped herself to another biscuit. While she'd been outside with Mrs. Parkov, Trish had slipped a second batch into the oven.

"Sheila's right, Ed," said Thad. He cocked his head in his slow way. "I had two careers, first as an engineer and then as a building supplier."

"We didn't starve. Not at all."

"I'm not talking about if there isn't any work or not. I'm talking about the *kinds* of work."

"Well, what kind of work do you want?" Sheila shot at him.

Ted fussed with his fork, and Sheila regretted her tone--hemming in the boy like that and making him defensive.

"I'm not sure yet," he said. "Something where I can use my talents. Not something boring. Doesn't seem like too much to ask." He shrugged his nice square shoulders.

Sheila could see that she'd struck a nerve. Sadly she realized that the young couple had already embarked upon a predictable course--small failures overly weighted, secret debts, patterns of distrust. She grabbed another biscuit, a pattern of her own this eating, as if problems could just be gobbled down.

"We go back and forth on this," said Trish. "I keep saying that something short-term for both of us would give us enough income to get set up at least."

"Sure!" said Sheila, forgetting already to go slower. It was her feet. They hurt again because she had stood too long out back on the cold ground. The pain made her impatient. To think that she'd once wanted to be a dancer! That was before cheap hand-me-down shoes had done her feet in. "Get some money together first, and then you can just take your time finding what you really want."

"That's a trap," said Ted. "That's what happened in San Francisco. We never made enough money to save because our wages were so low."

"That's not *exactly* what happened," said Trish.

"Hey, I know what happened."

"Honey, what happened was we never *did* save. I mean, a lot went into your correspondence courses and materials."

"That was an investment!"

Trish ducked her head and stabbed at something with her fork. "Okay, okay. I just thought I'd point something out."

"Well, I've always thought that investments were a good idea," said Thad.

"This house, for example..."

"Yes, well, we all know about that," said Sheila.

All this talk, almost purposely off the point, brought her down. It reminded her of that Parkov girl. Lord, how people let things happen to them! Not a shred of sense, and less and less of it around as time went on. Sheila didn't want to talk anymore and she wanted the others to hold their tongues too. Tomorrow was Monday, and little Emma, her sunshine, would be down for the afternoon. That would make her feel better.

The next evening when Ted and Trish came driving up, back from a day of scouting in St. Louis, Sheila and Emma were sitting together with a book on the back porch. The day had been wonderfully bright, and the two of them had moved their chairs with the sun for the last hour.

"Say hello to Ted and Trish," said Sheila.

Emma, slight and blonde, slipped farther back in her chair. "Hello to Ted and Trish," she said.

"Hello yourself," said Ted. He shifted a bag of groceries in his arms.

Emma lifted her arms. "You have brought gifts."

Trish laughed. "Sort of. Food."

"Healthy food?"

"That's your mother talking," said Sheila.

"Nooo. It's *me* talking."

"Does your mother do your hair?" asked Trish. She had dipped down to put herself on a level with Emma and was surreptitiously observing her. Emma, dressed in a cotton pilgrim's dress and her hair done up in a bun in back, was an intriguing sight.

"Sure she did. And she made this dress for me too."

Trish reached out and slipped her fingers beneath Emma's collar. Sheila could see how Trish's long fingers ran almost lovingly around behind the girl's neck. Did she need to be shown that Emma could be touched? She took the little girl by the shoulder and gave her a shake. "Come on, now. Sit up straight in that chair."

"Yes!" said Trish. She slipped her hand behind Emma's back and, with a warm smile, pushed on the girl's stomach with the other to bring her up straight.

"Just like mommy," said Emma in wonder.

"Emma's mother is a very capable person," said Sheila. "She sews and knits, she raises her daughter here--and she's going blazes in her job. Isn't that right, Emma?"

"Yes, Sheila." Emma clasped her hands under her chin. "Mommy is going simply ba-lazes in her job." Abruptly she leapt out of her chair and came clatteringly erect beside Trish. "And who does *your* hair?"

"It doesn't need doing. It just grows this way."

"Wow. Come on, I'll show you something."

Emma grabbed Trish's wrist and pulled her off the porch. "They're off to see the grapes," Sheila said to Ted, who'd been standing a bit apart, unable it seemed to

find a way to participate. "One of my neighbors has a terrific old arbor, just loaded with purple grapes, and you can just go over and snip off bunches any time you want."

"Gee, I'd like to see that myself. It'd bring back memories of the Napa Valley up around San Fran."

"Another time. Those groceries must be getting heavy so let's get them inside."

Sheila had expected to be unpacking canned goods and fresh produce, but the bag proved to be filled entirely with sorry-looking vegetables. There were lots of very small ears of corn, almost too small to be worth shucking. The big bunches of green grapes would have to be eaten soon, their skins exhibited so many discolorations. Small apples, hard feeling--early Macs, but the too early kind.

"We stopped at a roadside stand," Ted explained. "Everything was so cheap. We wanted to stop at a grocery store, but it was getting so late."

"Uh huh. How did things go in St. Louis?" She elected to store the corn in the cupboard. Thad came into the room, sleepily; the commotion had roused him from his armchair.

"St. Louis was nice, but it wasn't nice to us. We really miscalculated on the amount of money we're going to need to get set up there." Ted stood scratching his head. So did Thad. "Everybody wants first and last month's rent, of course, but now it's *two* months security deposit, pretty much."

"Rents are awful these days," said Thad.

Trish and Emma came in, flushed from the chilling air. Emma was laughing breathlessly. A few bits of orange and yellow leaf clung to Trish's curly hair. "We've come back with grapes!" she announced, raising up a clump of dark, plump fruit.

"How did you reach those?" Sheila asked in astonishment. Those bunches in reach had been claimed long ago.

"I sat on her shoulders!" Emma cried.

The brusque, exuberant entrance of the two females filled Sheila with secret delight. The way Trish had held up those grapes, just like Mrs. Parkov her carrots. "We hold up our blessings," thought Sheila, "and gaze at them for hope." Maybe things would turn out all right for this young couple after all, she thought. As she

rummaged in the pantry to make room, she shoved the bag of corn far to the rear where she hoped the depressing influence of its niggardly size would be lessened.

Over the next few days the discolored grapes went in tentative little mouth-popping pulls; the early Macs went into a Brown Betty, baked by Trish. The forays into St. Louis remained unfruitful, however, and began to hang a gloomy issue in the house. Despite her tendency toward sharp reactions, it was Sheila's way to mostly trust people--so she ignored for the most part the edge of discomfort to Ted and Trish's shy entreaties.

"We'll make good on our share of the food," Trish might say.

"I'm not keeping track," Sheila would answer.

What she *was* keeping track of was the continual balancing of faith and fret, hope and setback. True, St. Louis loomed more each day a walled city promising nothing and asking all in the minds of the two young guests, but in and around the overly large house in Columbia little events were occurring that pointed to a fecund resourcefulness of life even full enough to keep a busy mind like Sheila's occupied.

For example, Trish and Emma had become inseparable. Sheila observed them together with a full heart. The two girls were in the kitchen often, a territory Trish had gently claimed, by inclination but also for reciprocation, and where now she held impromptu cooking lessons for Emma, who always stood on a stool at the counter beside Trish. Sheila could not get enough of their rich give-and-take.

"Emma, don't pour that in yet! You have to let the yeast completely dissolve, otherwise it'll never rise."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Not even, like, in a hundred years?"

"Well, by then it would be green and rotten anyway."

"That's okay with me. *I* won't be here to eat it."

Each evening when Mrs. Simmons came down to retrieve Emma, there was a full quarter hour of quiet, minor grieving in Trish--before she dove more forcefully into the meal at hand. Sheila would be reduced to kitchen helper. Fine with her. More and more she got to put her aching feet up on the ottoman in the front room,

slip on her bifocals, and read the paper. Thad wasn't adjusting so well. The big lout seemed always to be snoring away on the couch, then coming to just before dinner to ease back into the world of the living with the six o'clock news. In the mornings before lunch, he could be found puttering around the house muttering crossly to himself--especially if he came to the bathroom door and found it locked. The downstairs bathroom's extra use had rendered him constipated.

At bottom, the new situation required nothing new of Sheila. She'd always been part arbiter, part advocate in that big house. When she'd been younger she'd run an upper floor full of roomers, most of them university graduate students. Near the chair which Ted most often frequented she would leave the St. Louis want ads face up, and now those in the local papers too. She whispered to the guests to maybe use Mrs. Simmons's bathroom while she was away at work (permission priorly sought and granted, of course), and every morning she sifted a tablespoon of Metamucil into Thad's coffee. He slurped down the sediment in the bottom of the cup, oblivious of it.

One evening, scrubbing away at scorched milk that Ted had left in making hot chocolate, Sheila looked out the window in the back door and saw Trish, Emma, and Mrs. Simmons standing together on the porch. It was a quiet tableau, both grave and sweet. The two women stood face to face with arms crossed, quietly chatting, while Emma hung onto her mother's elbow and patiently swung her small weight back and forth on her heels. It was a sight that Sheila had hoped to see in some form or other. Mrs. Simmons had joined the ranks of abandoned mothers many years back, and Sheila had seen her through that. More to the point, it hadn't taken the woman long to adjust. Within a short time she'd been back in school on loans and now she had a good position at the university library. Sheila didn't much like the new stiffness that informed Mrs. Simmons's manner--the no-nonsense, mostly humorless approach to even, say, hosting a party--but she assumed that this was only the manifestation of a necessary and temporary phase. Trish could learn a thing or two from Mrs. Simmons.

At dinner that night, Thad launched into one of his occasional diatribes against the university, which came up in connection with Mrs. Simmons's work there.

"They're behind every harebrained piece of legislation in the city," he began. "And state!"

"There you go," said Sheila. "We weren't even talking about the university."

"It would suit me if we would. I'm hearing a lot of talk these days about pushing these two kids here to trying their luck at getting jobs there."

"It's one of the biggest employers around!"

"I wouldn't take a position there if they paid me."

"You mean you'd work for free?"

"You know what I mean. Make fun if you like, but they're the ones behind all the liberal welfare legislation that's bleeding us dry. And Mrs. Simmons is always right up there in the front line. Getting signatures, passing pamphlets around..."

Sheila put down her fork with a clatter. "Now, Thad, darn it, I won't have you passing all this junk off as facts. We've been all through this before. The next thing you're going to say is that black folks bled us dry on welfare and that isn't true."

"Then who did?"

"White doctors in white hospitals!--by fattening up Medicaid bills, so fat that the country's sinking in debt."

Sheila's pink face was now red with anger, but Thad was riled beyond noticing. He pointed his fork at her significantly from across the table.

"And who told you that? Not a certain woman who lives upstairs by any chance."

Sheila got to her feet. "No, she didn't tell me that. It's in the papers for you to read, if you care to! And I won't have you dragging that woman down again. You've got me so upset I don't even want to eat now. You've got some nerve wagging a finger at Mrs. Simmons, who had less to go on and did more with it than anyone we know--including you, Thaddeus Walsh."

With that she turned and stomped to the back door, carrying with her a dim image of Ted's and Trish's startled faces. A fine example these old folks were! Still, she pulled the nearest wrap from the coat hooks and clattered out on her tiny swollen feet, across the porch and on across the back yard.

"Mrs. Parkov!" she called to the lit back window of her neighbor's home. "Mrs. Parkov, are you there?"

Presently the back window slid up and Mrs. Parkov's head emerged. "Mrs. Walsh, is that you?"

"Let's go to Big Boy's for a sundae," said Sheila, shivering with anger or cold. "I could eat two banana splits!"

Thad's way of making up was to hang at her elbow like a big soft balloon tied to her wrist. He fussed silently with dishes, made as if to pull wet clothes from the washer, peered helplessly into messy rooms needing straightening up. All the while, Sheila, a pinkish streak with artificially silvered hair, would flit between his hands and around from behind his back.

"Sheila, Sheila," he whined, finally. "I'm sorry about last night. I'm just out of sorts with these kids underfoot all the time."

Sheila let it go. "I know, Thad," she said, more quietly than she'd said anything in a long time. "But I'm extra mad at you because you're encouraging Ted to keep doing nothing."

"What? I'm not doing anything."

"Are you listening? That's what I'm saying. You've got connections all through the building trade. You're a member of the Kiwanis, a senior member, and have you thought once about lifting the phone for that boy?"

"But he doesn't want to stay here. They're heading for St. Louis, Sheila."

"Uh huh. Well, just take a look around. The writing's on the wall, Thad. Those kids don't have the money to get into St. Louis yet. Ted's there now learning that for the tenth time in two weeks, and getting a few beers under his belt in the bargain. Trish knows it, but she keeps down about it because of Ted. She's listening, though, when Mrs. Simmons talks about getting her part-time work at the library."

Thad took the pipe from his mouth, started to speak, then stopped.

"Which means," Sheila continued, "that sooner or later it's going to come to them that they have to make it here first--in Columbia. And we'd better be prepared,

because if they're going to do it they're going to have to get steady jobs both and live here for a while to boot."

Thad's eyes widened. "Where, here? In this house?" He seemed to be envisioning months of constipation.

"Maybe the third floor. We can make it up for use, short-term."

"Oh my, my. It's a big house, but..."

"It's what big houses are for. Not for show, but for people. I say we offer it to them before they have to humiliate themselves again by asking."

"Well, if that's what you think is best." Thad ambled off towards the couch.

Sheila followed him. "And I don't want to hear your tripe about the local builders again. The boy's good with his hands, he could make it all right with Joe Burstyn and your buddy Fred."

"Oh, leave me alone about them. You're asking too much."

It had been more than thirty years since Thad, then the owner of a small contracting firm, had been double-crossed by partners. It had tainted everyone in the trades for him. He still could not speak more than fifteen words on the subject.

"You still see those two," she said.

"Only socially."

"Uh huh. Well, we'll see."

Mrs. Simmons offered Trish a job doing a short-term project at the library and Trish took it. Ted had fought the idea, then relented, but he and Trish could be heard arguing about it at times in their room.

Trish came home tired most days.

"Well, I'm getting the hang of it," she announced one evening to Sheila as she fell straight into a kitchen chair. She spent most of her day packing up books to be moved to offsite storage.

Sheila had taken on supper by herself again, and that might be the way it would go for a while. "I bet it'll get easier as you go along."

"It already is," Trish sighed. "Ted's not back yet, huh?"

"No, not yet."

"He didn't call, did he?"

"No, but he might later."

It saddened Sheila to have to relay these bits of news. Ted came back later and later from St. Louis each night, and then slept in and suddenly rose and bolted off. It was developing that the mere mention of his name gave Sheila an eerie feeling; the boy never seemed to be there, even when he *was* there. Too often Sheila had seen the two young people together in the same room but miles apart, Trish asking perfectly rational questions and Ted replying in evasive monosyllables. Sheila pondered that boy, but he remained this handsome but insubstantial thing in her mind.

She was working on another idea in the meantime. She had begun to wonder if having the old folks around was cramping the young folks' style. Maybe she and Thad should take a trip or something.

Dinner was a quiet affair that night. Sheila's lackluster cooking didn't elicit the happy comment of Trish's fancier variety. Thad mulled and Sheila was lost in her plans. Ted was blithe in a hollow-sounding way. After dinner, when the younger couple had gone off to their room, Sheila sat Thad down.

"Thad, I want to talk to you about getting off and leaving these kids alone for a while. Winter's coming and Margaret's been asking us to come visit her for years now." Her sister Margaret had a lovely Florida home with a big garden full of vegetables and house borders full of flowers. "Why don't we drive out and stay on with her and come back after the cold weather? The kids here can work things out for themselves in the meantime."

"That's a lot of driving."

"We've done it before. You got that big car because you said it was good for the high roads."

"I did say that, didn't I?" He mused at this distant memory.

"So let's give it a whirl. I'm tired myself. I could use some Florida sunshine."

"It does sound nice," Thad concluded, staring off into pipe smoke.

Sheila became so excited about her plans that she had to go out for walks in the evenings. She ignored her painful feet and took to the residential streets, kicking at the dry leaves like a schoolgirl. On this particular evening, she'd been reviewing her plans, which had gradually become accepted--at first tentatively, now excitedly--by

the young couple. Joe Burstyn was willing to give Ted a shot at some shingling work, but the boy wouldn't give the final okay just yet. He continued to make the long drives to St. Louis, a piece of him holding out for something better. Now, all around and above Sheila the sky glowed with the peculiar violet intensity of certain autumn evenings. A lifetime of autumns told her that she'd have fifteen minutes before the sky shut down with darkness. She turned and hustled home.

Cutting through the side yard, she was stopped by movement beyond the partly raised shade of the front room, now Trish and Ted's. She saw Trish through the opening. The girl's bare back was to her, lit by the single fixture on the wall. Sheila stared, moved by skin so perfectly white and smooth, fresh like a broad flower petal. But the back was hunched and the young woman's movements slow and dreamy with fatigue. As she watched, a nightgown fluttered down around the girl. Then sounds from the back porch suddenly distracted Sheila. It would be Ted back from the city. The footsteps were clumsy--much clattering and some self-conscious throat-clearing. He kicked the screen door accidentally in opening it.

Sheila turned back to Trish, a strong heart in such a tender body. A terrible pain began to bloom in the older woman's breast. Would the boy come in now and encounter the dewy, sweet-smelling girl in their borrowed room? Would he run his coarse hands, stained with tobacco, all over that fresh skin? Would he scratch her with his nails, breathe his beery breath into her brushed curls? Would he want her, then and there, and make her pregnant in his hurry?

Sheila walked away towards the back porch, pressing back her fears. Trish, so blindly happy but unknowingly sad, so very pleased and fortunate-feeling to be married, would definitely suffer many heavy, heart-rending blows in the years before her. Her Trish--face it, the daughter she'd never had--might very well, in the face of her persistent trying, be prevented. Nothing specific, just generally prevented. Had not she, Sheila DeCourcy, been brought forty years before, her feet already ruined, to the hospital with an inflammation in her womb and left without it and all the rest of it? They cut it out. Some doctor, a man, said it had to go--something that other women even then were getting a simple injections for--and so go it went. Well, she

was fighting all that now. Trouble was these were lessons she'd paid dearly for--and which, try as she might, could never simply pass along.

At any rate, the trip plans continued to unfold in good form. Sheila took to merely standing by when she could, a sort of figurative holding of her breath. Margaret wrote her an elegant note (probably right at the little table in her sunny garden) to come ahead and to stay as long as she liked. Mrs. Simmons told her in confidence that Trish was well liked at the library and that she would probably be offered more hours before long. Ted drove in one evening from St. Louis, still empty-handed, and after a long, loud "discussion" with Trish in the bedroom announced at dinner that he'd like a crack at the shingling job.

"There's still another month or two in the season, Ed," Thad told him, "and if you do well there'll probably be a good deal of indoor work during the cold weather."

"Sounds good, Uncle."

"Well, it's good you made your decision now," said Sheila. "Strike while the iron's hot, I always say." She said many similar things, perhaps too often and with too much of a told-you-so tone, but damn it she couldn't always be containing her delight.

And it was that delight that made her curious to hear what Trish and Mrs. Simmons were saying in the yard as they passed beneath the kitchen window beside which Sheila was sitting one pleasant evening. She was at the table, cutting coupons for herself and Mrs. Parkov, and became aware that she could hear them. It was her new state of percolating excitement that pitched her hearing to their words.

"...always stirring him up," Trish was saying. "It'll be better when she's gone."

"She does have a way of landing on one's soft spots," said Mrs. Simmons.

"Yes. Poor Ted. He's trying so hard, but he won't be able to do anything until he gets out from under her."

Then the voices quieted, as if the speakers had noticed the open window--normally closed, but thrown open recently by Ted during some nervous pacing about. On her side of the curtain, Sheila sat stone still at the table, scissors aloft above a partially severed rectangle brightly announcing a bargain on pork shoulder. Stone still then, and nearly so later before the TV. The actors and actresses carried on

loudly over trifles, and the audience howled with laughter than sounded strangely desperate.

During the final two days she kept busy packing, making arrangements, tacking down everything loose, managing to seldom meet anyone's eye. Mainly she kept away from others, especially Trish. The kids would pay the utility bills. Fine. She had only one quick chat with Mrs. Parkov--about Emma, whom the kind neighbor would take over during the afternoons after school, and only too glad to now that her grandson was out of the house and much missed.

She almost got away with it, Sheila did, but then on the last night she had a dream. It almost wrecked her, it was the kind of dream she knew she'd have someday. There were no events to the dream, just a situation. She was in Florida, and her sister's house was hers. She sat in the big garden under a broad, rustling locust with the sun pouring down on all the flowers and bits of it filtering through onto her hands and lap. Trish was in the house somewhere, out of sight but happily humming as she worked at some chore. Emma was outside but not in sight and calling out something about a puppy. There was a riveting conviction that all of them constituted some kind of permanent gatherance, floating freely apart but bound as tightly as a family. Sheila did no mending, no reading. She had only to sit under the broad tree and consider these precious knowledges, and then awake to the illusion's bitter trick.

It was Monday morning, and she had to contend also with the reality of her pending departure. Though she had been insisting on an early start, she found it difficult to get out of the bedroom. She sent Thad out to manage the bags, remarking that she didn't feel like any breakfast. Once she darted out to the bathroom and ran into Trish in the hallway.

"Oh, still here," said Sheila.

Trish seemed surprised. "Yes," she said.

Sheila pulled on the younger woman's hand and managed to land a fast kiss on her cheek. "Well, be good," she said, and got back to her bedroom. Fifteen minutes later she listened at the door and heard nothing but an occasional grunt from Thad.

That was good, because she had exhausted every stalling device anyway. She came out with her last bag, and there was Trish standing in the kitchen.

"My word," said Sheila.

"What's the matter, Auntie? Aren't you ready yet?"

"Trish...you're going to be late for work."

"Late? Auntie, I'm seeing you off."

"But how are you going to get to work?"

Mrs. Simmons came out of the living room and Sheila stared at her in shock.

"Sheila, what's the matter with you? We're all seeing you off, of course."

"Oh, well, that's nice."

"Emma's inconsolable. I doubt if she'll even come down."

The three women went out to the back porch. Mrs. Parkov was there. With glistening eyes she pressed a plump brown bag into Sheila's hands. "For the trip, Mrs. Walsh. Some very good apples--and Mr. Parkov's ginger snaps, the ones you like."

"Oh, now, isn't that nice."

Ted took the bag from her. "I'll put these in the car," he said quietly.

Emma suddenly burst through the screen door and with a wail threw herself against Sheila. "Don't go, Sheila," she cried. "Please!"

Several of the adults mewled sympathetically at the child. Sheila had to bend awkwardly to Emma in the center of the porch, its ridiculous size nearly appropriate with all these people. "Mrs. Parkov will take care of you, honey. And Trish is here, remember."

"You have to call me every day!"

Ted was shaking Thad's hand. He stepped away and came toward her and she felt herself helped up by his strong grip. And then there was Trish, before her, smiling and crying and wringing her hands to beat the band. Sheila felt herself swiftly enfolded against the young woman, her cheek suddenly wet from the other's tears.

"Oh, Auntie, have a wonderful, wonderful time," Trish whispered huskily against her ear. "You deserve it so much. You're like my own mother, do you hear? My very own."

"It's just for a few months, now."

"Might as well be years..." The girl turned away.

Then Sheila was drawn back and away and somehow in the big car, Thad managing to back it away without her help, and the porch full of waving people, all waving and Sheila at least wagging a hand at them, and then the car rolling forward and away with Thad already hunching into his customary driving posture.