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All the Subtle Grays

PRIZE WINNING SHORT STORY IN TOUCHSTONE '67 CONTEST

MELODIE BOWSHER

A gust of cool, fragrant air flowed through the windows—billowing the curtains like wraiths dancing across the floor, scattering the stack of papers on the desk, blowing the wispy auburn hair across the face of the girl lying on the bed.

She was not a beautiful girl, nor even a pretty one. Her hair was too thin, her body too slender, her teeth too irregular, her expression too intense.

When she smiled, she became beautiful. As Nick had expressed in awe, when she smiled her whole face looked as if someone had just lit a candle—her eyes became luminous, her mouth became sensuous, her hair glowed like red embers.

But she was not smiling. Disconsolately she inhaled her cigarette, savoring the harsh dry taste as it grated on her throat before she blew the smoke towards the ceiling.

As she smoked, a diamond solitaire on her left hand sparkled in the light of the dim desk lamp. Restlessly she rose from the bed and leaned gazing out the open window—a lithe, tanned figure in a clinging white slip.

It was summer and Sunday night and silent.

A train whistle whined in the distance. She listened longingly, wishing she were on it and wondering where it was going and not caring.

She put her cigarette out in an ash tray and closed her eyes. Damn Nick, she thought. Damn him for being so confident, so sure, most of all, always so right. She visualized him tonight somewhere in

Kansas City following a fire truck or a police siren or drinking scotch in a smoky bar while he heatedly discussed the political machinations with another journalist. Nick . . . tall, dynamic, his hard athletic body poised for whatever happened, his rapid gait with his hands held tensely at his sides instead of swinging freely as he walked, his eyes burning as he spoke tersely and quickly, brusquely impatient with ignorance and stupidity.

Wait two months, he had said, graduate and then we'll get married in August. You'll be twenty-one in August; I don't want anyone to think I'm robbing the cradle. You need this summer, baby, and he smiled at her wryly and somehow strangely.

Wait two months. Two long hot months of lectures from elderly professors, two months of constant deadlines and copy to write and pages to lay out. Two months of silent nights alone in her apartment and no chance to see Nick until the long summer was over.

She was tired of school, tired of endlessly writing only campus news that no one ever read, tired of waiting—the slow agony of two months suspended between one life and another, her life as a college student in the intense, intellectual, make-believe world and her new life as a part of the even harder reality. She was restless, and an undefined, unnamed force within her lay dormant. She was afraid of what lay ahead, afraid she might change her mind or that things might change. Brandy was not certain, not really certain; she loved Nick. She needed him, she leaned on his strength

and understanding. But love? And did he love her? She could not be sure; she did not understand him or her attraction for him. Uncertainty haunted her and she wanted to plunge ahead into her new life with Nick before she panicked. She sensed this and yet could not explain the inexplicable fear to Nick. Nick, who always understood her better than she knew, only waited.

It was almost midnight but sleep was impossible. Too long she had lived the life of a journalist, even if only a college one, when you stumbled to bed at four in the morning and with five hours of sleep faced the next day. She decided to take a walk and listlessly moved from the window to her closet. Taking a soft, white sundress, she slipped it over her head and deftly zipped it up. She buckled sandals on her feet, brushed her hair away from her face, grimaced at her own reflection in the mirror and slipped out her apartment door. The street was quiet except for an occasional car grinding past and she walked aimlessly in the direction of the campus. The trees whispered as she walked along the street.

. . . It had been a night like this when she had met Nick. A quiet night last June about midnight. She was working that summer, the summer before her senior year, at the **Kansas City Star** writing obituaries and other simple stories. The night had been hot and slow and she had worked late at the newsroom when the report came of a crash at the municipal airport. The night editor snapped at her, "Kid, go to the airport with Nick," and a tall man in his late twenties said brusquely, "Come on, baby." She followed him blindly and climbed in beside him in his black Triumph with the paint

peeling off. As he drove deftly but too fast, she studied his face . . . dark brooding eyes with thick heavy eyebrows, a long nose, gaunt cheeks, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, his hair drooping boyishly on his forehead. An impatient and cynical face, she had decided, and at once he repelled and fascinated her. On the way to the airport he never looked at her or spoke to her.

In the airport parking lot they met the **Star's** photographer and Nick spoke to him briefly. She watched him as he questioned airline officials, a stewardess, a police officer and some passengers. His eyes were always dark, alert and aloof. After he phoned the story in he turned to her abruptly.

"What's your name, baby?"

"Brandy—Elizabeth Branden." She smiled at him.

He raised his eyebrows and looked her up and down, as if appraising her. His face was inscrutable and she could not guess what decision he had made.

She glared at his arrogance and he smiled.

"Did you learn anything, Brandy?" and not waiting for an answer, "Let's go." He drove across Kansas City, sliding through all the yellow lights and turning the corners sharply. Stopping at a tiny dingy bar called "The Keyhole" he got out of the car and held her door open, smiling mockingly.

They drank Michelob beer in that smoky, ugly, little bar with peanut shells on the floor until four in the morning. At first she was wary of this bewildering, dynamic stranger named Nick but as he talked, she sensed a certain sameness within them, an intenseness and love for writing they both shared. Nick talked

first about the newspaper and then about himself and his ambitions. He had a strength and magnetism that compelled her. Brandy talked to him as she had never talked to anyone before. When he took her home he kissed her brutally and his hands roughly caressed her body. Fighting for control over her own mounting excitement, she pushed him away. He leaned back and looked at her.

"A virgin, little Brandy?" and she flushed. He didn't touch her again.

Each day she spent every spare minute with Nick. They watched the police drag the river for a body and drank scotch and talked until two in the morning. They drank martinis at the senator's press conference and argued morality until five in the morning. They watched the police struggle to get the body of a dying man out of a mangled automobile and argued about Nick's driving all the way home. They covered an art show at the Nelson Art Gallery and they argued about op art over a lobster dinner. Her mother frowned as they argued over politics and religion and whether Hemingway was a poor journalist and what television show they would watch.

Slowly Brandy cared for Nick; hesitatingly she loved him. She did not understand him but she needed him. She longed for a certainty that did not exist. At the end of the summer Nick said, "When are we getting married?" and Brandy answered, "Next summer." In September she went back to college and took the train to Kansas City every Saturday morning and back to college every Sunday night. At Christmas he gave her a diamond and they toasted the future in champagne . . . and argued about the year.

Nick was right for Brandy as no one ever had been; he had a strength she needed, a decisiveness she lacked. They brought out the best in each other. He tempered her naivete and she mellowed his cynicism. Together life was more vital, full of wild and exciting people and ideas, always changing. He never took life too seriously and somehow it made it all the more real. Through her he rediscovered the wonder of being young and enthusiastic. But occasionally Nick spoke in riddles she couldn't understand. He spoke about how he had lived his adventure and she had to live hers, about not the black and white of life but all the subtle grays, about never being able to face or write about reality until you lived it, about how you could never appreciate the wonder and joy of life until you understood how cruel and bitter it was.

Nick did not kiss her frequently. He did not like to play games, he had told her—"I don't want to build up to a let-down. When you're ready to become a woman, you won't need to be seduced. It's the big decision that seems so important to every girl and after it's made, so mystifying that it ever seemed important."

Brandy had shut her mind then and again now to his words because she could not understand them. . . .

Her sandals scraped the brick sidewalk as she turned onto the campus walk. The wind gently blew the tree branches and an overhanging cobweb brushed her face. The moon was hidden behind the clouds so that only the dim street lamps lit the sidewalk. She gradually became aware of the sound of a guitar and a male voice singing, singing an achingly sad ballad, "I left her far behind me, And now I'm

lost, so very lost, not even God can find me.' ” In the light of the old-fashioned street lamp she saw a young man strumming a guitar at the top of the library steps. He was dressed in cutoffs and a sweatshirt. A half-empty bottle of cheap wine sat beside him. He saw her figure in the dark and called, “Halt, who goes there? Friend or foe?”

Brandy smiled to herself impishly. Here was someone to talk to and perhaps flirt with a little, someone to make the night less lonely. A chance to be a little mischievous and play a witty little game to interrupt the monotony of the silent night.

“Friend,” she called out, laughing.

“I have no friends,” he answered solemnly. “What’s the password?”

“Thirsty.”

“Advance, thirsty friend, and be recognized.”

Brandy walked to the foot of the library steps and looked into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Blue like the sea or the sky or a little girl’s dress. As she smiled, he looked at her in surprise and then drawled, “Well, well. And how will you earn your drink?”

Brandy looked at him flirtatiously through her long eyelashes, “A kiss, kind sir?” and she mockingly curtsied.

“Advance to the throne and earn your taste of nature’s nectar.”

She walked up and leaned over to kiss him quickly on the mouth. But his lips were warm and gentle and all her frustration and loneliness seemed to melt as her lips clung to his. The kiss deepened and she lost all sensation of anything but his lips until he released her. Shaken, she backed down a step; it had not been the casual, playful kiss she had intended.

Brandy wondered what Nick would think if he saw her; she wondered if he would care. The folk singer’s blue eyes seemed to caress her as he asked, “What’s your name?”

“Brandy.”

“Exotic, vibrant, rich and full of life—intoxicating—it suits you . . . ‘And lately, by the Tavern Door agape, Came stealing through an angel Shape, Bearing a Vessel on her Shoulder; and She bid me taste of it; and ’twas—the grape.’ ”

“Omar Khayyam,” and Brandy quoted, “‘Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough, a jug of wine, a book of verse and Thou, beside me singing in the wilderness.’ ”

He grabbed her hand earnestly and said, “You’re wonderful, will you marry me?” And they both laughed, long and low, and the night was no longer silent and empty.

Brandy felt warm and gay and relaxed. This whimsical young man would make the previously bleak evening fly. She sat down on a step lower than his and leaned against a pillar.

“Don’t I deserve to know my fiancé’s name?”

“It’s David, David Abrams. A little Jewish boy like little David with the slingshot.”

“You don’t seem very biblical, little David. And who am I, Goliath?”

“Oh, no, you’re Saul’s daughter and my first wife,” and he winked.

“Only your first wife? That doesn’t seem like a very good basis for a marriage.”

“But so much fun,” he grinned, and she had to laugh.

He handed her the wine bottle, “Take your drink, thirsty fiancée. I’m sorry but

all the champagne goblets in the palace are dirty . . . we had a ball last night and they aren't washed yet."

"I know, my dear," she mimicked in a high voice, "ISN'T the servant problem terrible?"

She took a deep drink out of the bottle. It was warm and sweet and stimulating like his kiss. She remembered Nick's kiss—strong and sophisticated like the scotch he drank—and she wondered idly which one was better. Nick had always said that you gulped wine greedily but scotch you savored.

"What do you do, David? I've never seen you before."

"I am part of a large organization engaged in an important and heroic mission," he said satirically.

"You're in the Army."

"I am a member of the armed forces, that great organization of the 'incapable leading the unwilling to do the impossible with the wrong tools—too late.' I am going off to war to fight for my country, you and Mother's apple pie."

"When are you leaving?"

"Rumor has it that we leave sometime this summer. Would you like to see me off at the station and cry and wave your handkerchief and say brave things?"

"It's the least a fiancée can do," and she tapped her fingernail on his guitar.

"Sing for me."

"What do you like?" He adjusted the strings.

"Anything."

"Let's see," he mused, "I don't know that one—oh, yes—anything, ANYTHING, anyTHING, ANYthing," and then softer, "The Cruel War is raging, Johnny has to fight, I want to be with him from morning till night. I want

to be with him, it grieves my heart so, won't you let me go with you? . . . no, my love, no."

As he sang the ballad their witty little game ended and a mysterious bond seemed to stretch between them, linking them in their separate lonelinesses. The silent night was filled with his voice singing husky ballads and the red wine and the fireflies flickering in the dark and the dusky street light and his blue, blue eyes. Brandy was lulled into a sleepy ecstasy by the night and the wine and David.

When he walked her home—or did she glide over the sidewalks?—he kissed her very carefully and tenderly at her door. It seemed right and part of the hypnotic spell of the evening.

All the next week she thought about David and mentally cursed herself and did it anyway. He was like a misty dream fulfilling all the fairy tales she had ever woven in her mind . . . gentle and romantic and poetic with blue, blue eyes. She wanted to see him and hated him for it. Had it been a dream, would he be the same in daylight? She told herself it was her journalist's curiosity but she knew it was much more. That hidden anticipation that she had so feared seemed to have swollen. She did not understand, so she tried to dismiss these thoughts from her mind. She tried all week but she did not succeed.

The next Saturday afternoon was hot and humid with a scorching sun—a purging God. She sat at her desk typing, barefooted, wearing brilliant red shorts and a sleeveless V-necked top and her hair pulled back behind her ears to show tiny gold earrings.

She was waiting. At two o'clock he came.

"You look just like a gypsy," he teased, "like Brandy," and the words caressed her. Nick never complimented her.

David was driving a friend's old green Ford held together with "love, curses and luck—like a woman's love," he told her, and she smiled, looking up into his blue eyes.

They drove to the lake and lay in the sun. He rubbed suntan lotion on her back and legs and his fingers sensually massaged her body. They drank Bali Hai wine—Rotgut, David called it—and chewed on French bread which David jokingly condemned as definitely not kosher. He was tender and teasing and he made Brandy feel both desired and protected—like a woman who was loved, instead of an automatic story-writing machine that could be shelved for the summer. She was illogical and she knew it but the world seemed upside down. David made every moment seem precious. He kissed her on the neck and arms and mouth and his tongue gently made the inside of her mouth tingle. Her body ached and she surrendered herself to her sensations. David made love to her and she cried silently but she did not resist. When he took her home, they stood wordless on the porch before he led her upstairs to her apartment.

David left at four o'clock in the morning. Brandy didn't leave her apartment until one o'clock in the afternoon. She walked to the news office and to the grocery. Everyone she saw she wanted to shout to, "Don't you see, can't you see I'm different? I'm a woman, I have a lover." But no one knew.

Yet she glowed as if suddenly free

from a terrible burden. The long protected, little understood thing—her virginity—was gone. It seemed like an evil trick on Nick and yet, she rationalized, he had left her alone this summer. After all, HE wasn't a virgin. And did he love her?—was the question that still haunted her. Whom did she love, what did she want? The day before and David seemed like a dream from which she would awaken at any moment. It was not she doing these alien and inexplicable things. It was some Brandy she did not recognize and of whom she did not entirely approve. But David loved her, surely it was right?

David hitch-hiked in from the fort at six o'clock the next evening. They drank beer on the porch in the twilight and he played his guitar. Brandy cooked steaks smothered in mushrooms and laughed as David taught her to swear in Yiddish.

He did not leave until five o'clock the next morning. Brandy woke up at three o'clock in his arms and rubbed her hand against his chest. This is my lover, she told herself, and she consciously tried to make herself feel shame or guilt, but she felt none. She only felt wanted.

David came to see her almost every night. Sometimes he stayed all night, sometimes he went home early "to show you, love, that sex is not the most important thing in our relationship." She and David never argued. When they disagreed, he didn't listen to her; when she lost her temper, he ignored her.

As the weeks flew by she knew his mother's middle name, that "mzal tov" means congratulations in Yiddish, the lyrics to every song he could play on the guitar and how to cook bagels. As the weeks rushed by he knew the name of her pet dove that died when she was ten,

how to analyze a news story, how to make a sandwich with hamburger, chili, cheese and hot dogs and that there was a New as well as an Old Testament to the Bible.

Brandy wrote Nick frequently. She wrote him about the heat and the newspaper and that she missed him. But they were strange letters, somehow disjointed and void of emotion or conviction. As she wrote them, she could visualize him wondering what was happening and resisting the temptation to see for himself. She could picture him crumpling her letters and throwing them in the wastebasket and, after lighting another cigarette, turning back to his typewriter with a scowl of concentration. He would give her this summer, he owed her this summer and he would not weaken at any cost.

A week remained before Brandy graduated, a week before she went to Kansas City. Within a month she would be married. Within a month David would be in Viet Nam. She wanted to drag her feet and stop the clocks but it was inevitable. Brandy made no decision and by making none, a decision was made. She only waited. She visualized that last week as an idyllic moment suspended in time.

But it was not that idyllic. The first day passed and David didn't come. He didn't come Monday or Tuesday. On Wednesday she was alone in her apartment smoking as the cool, fragrant air blew the curtains and the newspapers and her hair.

It was silent and she felt a strange aloneness. Aloof and afraid like she had in June. For the first time since the night she had met David the sound of the

train whistle whining in the distance pierced her consciousness.

She listened longingly, wishing she were on it and wondering where it was going and not caring.

She didn't want to see David and yet as she heard his footsteps on the stairs, she knew she had been waiting for him. She opened the door before he knocked.

His penetrating blue, blue eyes scrutinized her.

"Hello, Brandy, my love."

"Hello."

He flung himself in a chair and began to idly strum his guitar, "No wine for a thirsty traveler?"

"How will you earn your taste of nature's nectar, thirsty traveler?" Brandy mocked him.

He rose from his chair and held her face between his hands, studying it before he gently kissed her. It was the first kiss and the last kiss and all kisses—it was David.

When he released her she bit her lip and turned away.

Their private little world of unreality was shattered and she knew it. Everything they both had never mentioned lay heavy in the air.

He picked up his guitar absently and began to sing huskily, "Some say that love is a gentle thing, but only has caused me pain, for the only girl I ever did love, gone on that midnight train."

"STOP IT," she snapped, "David, TALK to me."

"All right, what shall we talk about? The ring on your left hand? The trip to Kansas City you'll make next Friday?"

"I could stay till Sunday if you wanted me to."

"What good would that do? Postpon-

ing the inevitable. As my old bearded Jewish father would say. . . . Better we get it over with."

"David, I love you."

"I love you, too, sweet Brandy."

But they stood like strangers across the room from each other.

"Brandy, I'm a lover, not a fighter, a poet, not a journalist, a dreamer, not a doer."

Helplessly he added, "What we had, love, was precious but not for good."

"I know, David."

After I get back to the states from Viet Nam, I'll go back to Pennsylvania and work for my father and marry some sweet, young Jewish girl who lives only to be the mother of my children."

He walked across the room and put his hand on the back of her neck.

"But sometimes I'll drink a little wine and sit on the porch singing folk songs and thinking of a sweet little gay girl who loves Omar Khayyam and me. And I'll wish a little that things could have been different."

She turned around and buried her face in his chest. Tears trickled down her face. For once she was at a loss for words.

"That song ends, Brandy—"there's many a change in the winter winds and a change in the clouds behind, there's many a change in a young girl's heart, never a change in mine.'"

He removed her arms from his neck and, picking up his guitar, walked to the door. His blue, blue eyes twinkled at her as he added, "Never forget, love, that Jesus was just one of our boys who made good."

She laughed irresistibly and he was gone.

Brandy stared at the door reflectively and then, steeling herself, she walked thoughtfully to the cupboard and drank a shot of the scotch that had been untouched all summer. Wine you gulped greedily but scotch you savored was the only thing she could remember and it whirled through her mind like a nursery rhyme. With a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, she began to pack up her apartment—the books, the dishes, the clothes. When she finished at three in the morning, sleep came very quickly.

Thursday's and Friday's tests came and were quickly over. Friday night the train whistle whined and Brandy listened to it from the open window of her passenger car. As the train clacked along the track she thought about David and she was not sorry or glad. It had been the right time and the right circumstances and she had loved him. It had been bitter and sweet and it was too late to question the wrongness or rightness of it. All the subtle grays, that was what Nick had said, and she suddenly understood what he had been trying to tell her. She and David had clung to each other in loneliness; Nick and Brandy were the two matching halves of the whole. Nick loved her because she argued and talked and thought and wrote—and loved. Perhaps someday she would tell him about her summer. Not now. But somehow she sensed he knew as he had known about everything else. She was a woman now, confident and capable of facing the future and whatever it held. Nick was ahead; this train had always been thundering towards the right future. She had never really been off the track.

The Nature of Snow

MARTHA CRANE

"Please open your books to page 117." Margaret waited patiently for her students to scramble under their desks for their textbooks and to flip through the pages until they reached page 117.

"Your assignment is Exercise 11. While you are doing this assignment, I want you to watch for words in the sentences which are descriptive adjectives. As we have already discussed today, descriptive adjectives will add color and emphasis to a sentence. Tomorrow we will grade our papers and will write some sentences of our own. As a start, you may try describing the nature of the snow outside. This should give you some practice in using descriptive adjectives. You may have the remaining part of the period to work on your assignment."

Instead of beginning their homework, the class of seventh graders noisily picked up their books and zippered their notebooks. Margaret sat down at her desk in the front of the room and began to put away her pencils and papers. She methodically reminded the students to pick up any extra papers from the floor while she closed the cover on her daily lesson plans.

"Kent Miller!" she said sternly. "Sit down!" Kent quickly turned from the frost-covered window by his desk. A mark was left in the center of the windowpane about the size of a young boy's nose. The snow had started to fall early

in the morning, and the students had been restless all day. Margaret had not been able to interest them in adjectives, for they were constantly turning around to look at the fresh snow outside the windows.

Margaret noticed that, as usual, Tim and Greg were sitting on the very edge of their seats, each propping himself up from the floor on one fist, in expectation of the final bell. As the bell rang, Tim shouted, "Yea! It's over! Meet ya by the bike racks, Greg!" as they crowded out the door of the room.

Margaret overheard Kelly and Jane talking as they were leaving the classroom. "Come on, hurry!" Jane said impatiently as she coaxed the slower Kelly. "We've got to find the cleanest snow in the yard or Mom won't let us make it!" Margaret knew that the girls were planning to make some snow ice cream, for they had been trying to decide upon a flavor before class started.

Margaret stood by the door and watched the children merrily crowd out of the classroom. Their eyes were wild with the anticipation of playing in the new snow, and she knew that in a few minutes the school rule of no snowball throwing would be broken.

"Aren't you going to come out and play in the snow, Miss Hayden?" inquired a small, high-pitched voice behind her.

Turning around, Margaret saw Chris-

tie, the smallest girl in the class, looking up at her with big, round, brown eyes.

"No," answered Margaret with a slight laugh. Then realizing that Christie was disappointed in this answer, Margaret said, "No, Christie, I haven't played in the snow for years. Now you run along and have fun." She gently pushed Christie through the door and called after her, "Don't get in the way of any snowballs—you might get hurt!" The little girl hurried down the hall and out of the front door of the school.

Margaret looked at her watch. It was 3:35 and she had to be at the funeral by 4:00. She quickly erased the blackboard and then locked her desk. On her way to the coat closet she glanced out at the snow. "I hope that the roads won't be slippery," she said to herself. While putting on her coat and hat, Margaret glanced in the mirror to see if her hair looked all right. Her mirror was speckled all over and she had to look in it in only certain places to see her image. The mirror had been in the classroom since she had started teaching school, and that had been twenty-four years ago.

Margaret hurried to the door of the room and on the way stopped to straighten a picture on the bulletin board. She reminded herself that tomorrow was the day to put up another bulletin board. Grabbing the new sample textbook she had planned to read that evening, she glanced once more around the room to be certain that everything was in its place, and then she closed the door. Once outside the school she hurried to her car. After dusting the new snow from the windshield, she got in and started to drive downtown.

A few minutes before 4:00 she arrived

at the mortuary. She never had known Miss Carver very well, but she felt she should attend the funeral. Before Miss Carver had retired from the school system, she had been the principal of Margaret's school for nine years. Margaret always thought she had been too set in her ways and did not let the teachers try enough new ideas. Miss Carver always had seemed to be so wrapped up in the profession that she never allowed herself to be very friendly or interested in other people. All of that is in the past, thought Margaret, as she marched through the snow from her car to the sidewalk. She tiptoed around several icy patches on the walk before she reached the large, white front door of the mortuary. To open the door, she had to press all of her weight against it. When it opened, she felt caught between the cold, fresh outside air and the warm, close, rose-scented air of the mortuary. After signing the remembrance book, she was directed to the chapel door.

Margaret quietly slipped into a pew close to the door. The organ had already started playing and the minister was sitting down next to the pulpit. She guessed that she was not alone in her feelings toward Miss Carver. The lady had been a person who had never opened up to people. She had been a principal for nine years, yet Margaret never had felt as if she could talk to her about anything but ordering a new textbook, or the discipline of one of the students. Apparently she had no family and few friends, for only Margaret and a few other teachers had come to the funeral. "Old lady Carver," thought Margaret. That was what the school children had always called her. It was too bad that people

didn't know her better; she had always seemed to be a rather nice person.

The minister gave his meditation, the organist played another selection, and then the funeral was over. Margaret made her way outside the chapel and pushed open the front door of the mortuary. The crisp air of the winter season struck her face and her thoughts turned from Miss Carver to the drive home on the icy streets.

The next day Margaret received a letter from Gilchrist and Nevins Law Associates. The letter stated that their firm was "closing the estate of Miss Anna Carver and requesting the presence of Miss Margaret Hayden at the law offices in order to receive a part of the estate."

Margaret stood dumbfounded with the letter in her hand. She glanced at her watch. It was 4:30 and she should be able to drive to the law office before they closed at 5:00. She slipped into her gray coat and quickly walked out to her car.

As she steered the car down the slushy streets, she asked herself over and over again "What would Miss Carver leave for me in the estate? Why I hardly knew the woman! She was no more involved with me than any other teacher in the school. What could she be leaving to me?"

Margaret arrived at the office just before 5:00. She walked into the modern entrance hall and quickly introduced herself to the secretary.

"Oh, yes, Miss Hayden," said the secretary. "Mr. Gilchrist has already left for the day, but he said that you could pick up this brown envelope at any time. I must have your signature too."

The secretary handed Margaret a large

brown envelope that was rather lumpy.

"Please sign here."

"Oh, yes, um-hum, here," mumbled Margaret, signing her name.

Margaret opened the envelope carefully and inside she found a beautiful gold locket. She instantly remembered it as being the one which Miss Carver had always worn. With the locket there was a note which stated, in Miss Carver's handwriting, "For Margaret Hayden."

Taken completely by surprise, Margaret did not know how to react. The first question that came to her mind was "Why did she give this to me?"

Absent-mindedly she pushed through the front door of the building and walked to her car. The snow had started lightly falling again. Her mind was in a complete turmoil as she clutched the envelope in her hand. She got into the car and started the engine. While waiting for the car to warm up, she automatically opened the side window to keep the windshield from fogging. "Why did Miss Carver want me to have this? I never felt close to her. This locket must have meant a great deal to her, too." All of these thoughts raced through Margaret's mind until suddenly they were shattered when a snowball, hurled from nowhere, struck the open window. Chunks of snow fell inside the car and wetted her coat and legs. "Boys and snowballs!" she thought with anger. And then she heard a boy's voice call excitedly "Beat it, guys! It's old lady Hayden's car!"

The words crashed on Margaret's ears as her hands instinctively clutched the steering wheel. Her glance fell on the brown envelope in the seat beside her. The envelope was water-spotted with a piece of the snowball.

The Plucked Leaf

NANCY BARTEL

"Here's your medicine. It's good for you. It will make you well."

Then the white mass turned and left the room.

"Sure it'll help make me well," thought the old man bitterly. "How can it do anything else when I'm not sick to begin with? It's just that I'm old. I'm not sick."

"Maybe I am sick—sick with old age. But I'm healthy. I haven't had a cold for months. I feel good. If I ever get out of this rotten room, I'll feel young again."

The old man leaned forward in his rocker, his elbows resting on his knees. He hated the ugly room. The gray walls seemed to sigh with despair. Against one of the walls was an old faded dresser which had been white at one time. Its mirror which had once reflected clearly now reproduced a crackled image. Beside his rocker was a scarred end table. The high ceiling made the room seem more like a well than a place to live.

"Here's your medicine." In an over-sweet, coaxing tone he imitated the nurse's voice.

"What does she think I am, a child? I'm at least fifteen years older than she is. She treats me like I'm in my second childhood. But I'm not, and never will

be—unless she and all the rest of them drive me there.

"It's time for your breakfast.

"Take your medicine.

"It's lunchtime.

"Take your medicine.

"It's supptime.

"Take your medicine.

"It's bedtime.

"Take your medicine.

"Doesn't she know anything else? It's a recording she plays every day; even handing out the medicine like a machine."

Slowly, he pulled himself up out of his chair and looked around the room. Moving the chair so that he could get by, he walked over to the tall, narrow, sparsely curtained window. On the window sill was a plant. He didn't know what kind it was, nor did he care. It was something living. He felt the earth in the pot; it was dry. Picking a cup up from his dresser, he went to the bathroom to get some water. While he was watering the plant he noticed a leaf that was beginning to wither.

Figuring that a change of scenery might do him good, the old man walked down the second floor fire escape and then to the sidewalk. He didn't have

too much of a choice where to go. The town was small. In fact, he went through no decision-making process at all. His feet just knew which way to go. Slightly hump-shouldered and with a far-away look in his eyes, he headed toward the town's only general store.

He loved a walk outside. It made him feel free and sometimes even young again. There were no white masses, at least, not usually, to mar this feeling of life.

Then he remembered what happened a few weeks ago. He had wanted to go to another nearby town. No one would take him. Since it was a nice day, he had decided to walk for awhile and then hitch-hike the remaining distance. His return trip followed the same pattern. A familiar car stopped to pick him up. Behind the steering wheel was the familiar mass of white.

"What are you doing here? Don't you know where you belong?"

He had remained silent, looking straight ahead with a fixed, glassy stare during the ride back. His mind was whirling. "How could God let something like this spoil the out-of-doors? The old woman follows me wherever I go!"

But he wasn't going to think about that now. He had gone for a walk to get away.

When he reached the store, his feet automatically turned to go in. Being in the store gave him a feeling of satisfaction. He could buy what he wanted to. After making his purchase of apples, oranges, potato chips and cookies, he left the store. Instead of going back, he continued down the sidewalk.

The town had changed a lot since he was young. Here was where the black-

smith shop used to be. He could remember bringing in his plowshares to be sharpened. He had always prided himself on his well-kept farm equipment. Although he had never been rich, yet he had provided quite adequately for his wife and three sons.

"Then I was worth while. They depended on me—but now—."

He remembered the small, white frame building where he had attended school. Now in its place was a big, brick high school. He could easily recall the bitter controversy about whether or not to build it. After a lot of persuasive talking by him and his friends, the vote had finally carried in favor of building. How glad he had been.

"Then I really amounted to something in this community—but now—."

By this time the man was almost at the edge of town. He pulled his watch out of his overalls pocket, looked at it, then squinted at the sun to check it.

"Must get back," he said to no one in particular. "It's almost time for 'It's lunchtime.' I'll have to sneak my food in past her, or she'll ask 'Don't you get enough to eat at the table?'"

As he was walking back, he noticed a young boy riding a red bicycle. The whistling boy seemed so happy, free, and alive. It reminded him of when he was young.

"Brown, that was the color of my bike. I could go where I wanted to on it. Fishing line, worms, lunch bucket, and my bike. That was the beginning of a perfect afternoon. I could ride almost a mile without touching the handle-bars. Better than any other kid in school."

He climbed the fire escape steps to the second floor. Holding his sack of fruit

underneath his old brown double-breasted suit coat, he shuffled hurriedly down the corridor to his room.

"It's lunchtime," the mechanical tone echoed down the hallway.

He walked down the creaky flight of stairs to the main floor. There he joined the stooped, gray-haired, shuffling procession to the dining hall. He found his place at the table and sat down. He observed the usual abundant supply of food. There were bowls of vegetables, a big platter of meat, a salad, bread and little dishes of peaches. Mealtimes were all right: the food was good, and the atmosphere was a little different. It was a change from chair-sitting.

After a few mumbled words, the food was passed and people started eating. Three aproned white masses came to pour the coffee. The old man always looked forward to this. Even though they didn't have time to speak, he could sense a feeling of concern coming from them. It was as though their recipes had as two of their basic ingredients, concern and appreciation.

Except for "Pass the potatoes" there was no conversation during this meal, or any other meal, for that matter. The only sounds in the dining hall were the clanging of silverware against the pink-rimmed dinnerware, the slurping of hot coffee and the clicking and chomping sounds of false teeth. After everyone was through eating, a few more words were mumbled, and the folks began shuffling back to their rooms in the same irregular rhythm patters.

After everyone else had left the dining room, the old man drank the last of his coffee. He waited until the aproned masses came to clear off the tables,

thanked them, and then went up to his room.

"Take your medicine. After such a long walk this morning you should take a nice, long nap."

The white form turned and left the room.

With his wrinkled, high-topped, black shoes still on, the old man lay down on his bed, but sleep wouldn't come.

"Take a nice long nap"—blah. I'll take a nap if I want to. She doesn't have to treat me like a child.

"Nice walk this morning. Trees are so pretty when the leaves begin to turn colors. Reminds me of when I was a boy. I rode my bike to a grove of trees about two miles from home. If I sat quietly I could watch the squirrels gathering up nuts and seeds, getting ready for winter. I used to dream of being a squirrel.

"My bike was a good one, even though it was rusty and had bad tires. I'm glad my children could each have one. My bike was almost like a dog to me. A good companion. Companion. Happiness. Freedom. Nature. Independence. Bicycle. Companion. Freedom. Bicycle."

The old man drifted into sleep. Fifteen minutes later he awoke suddenly. In his mind was an exciting idea. He was going to get a bike!

He shuffled down to the general store with a new spirit; he even attempted to whistle a tune. The clerk looked at him rather peculiarly when he asked if they had any secondhand bicycles.

"No," she said. "But why don't you try the gas station down the street?"

Fortunately, the station did have some secondhand bikes. They were not in the best condition but that didn't bother him. He paid the station attendant ten dol-

lars and wheeled a rusty, blue bike out onto the sidewalk.

A strange sensation passed through him. It was almost foreign, yet vaguely, he could recall a similar feeling. Adventure, competence, challenge, happiness, security, a mixture of these, plus two or three unknowns were the components of this sensation.

To a passer-by it would have been an interesting sight—a gray-haired, stooped-shouldered old man wheeling a bicycle down the sidewalk. The old man didn't think about it.

As he was wheeling the bike back to the home, a feeling of anxiety started to develop in him. At first he didn't know just what it was. Gradually, it began to take shape in the form of a fear. Soon, even the fear became more clearly differentiated—the white mass. She was sure to disapprove. When the old man reached the home he hid his bike in a shed behind the building. Then he walked up the fire escape to his second floor room. He sat in his room till "It's suppertime," thinking about the brown bicycle he used to have.

The next morning he was awakened by "Time to get up." Somehow it didn't sound quite as mechanical as usual. When the mass came in to make his bed, his feelings of inadequacy didn't even flare up as they did other mornings.

A bird was singing in a nearby tree. He looked out of his window to see it. Although he couldn't find the bird, he noticed a couple of young squirrels running from tree to tree. The multi-colored leaves seemed prettier than usual. Then he noticed that even his plant looked healthy. The withered leaf had almost revived.

After breakfast the old man went to the shed and wheeled out his bike. The same sensation he had felt yesterday reappeared; the brisk morning air activated it.

First he wheeled the bike around the lawn. He needed to gain a little more self-confidence. From the kitchen window he saw the aproned masses nodding their approval. Finally, he felt ready to try it. He put both feet on the pedals and weaved for a short distance before he lost his balance. With the next try he was a little more confident; that sense of balance was slowly coming back. He got off to rest awhile.

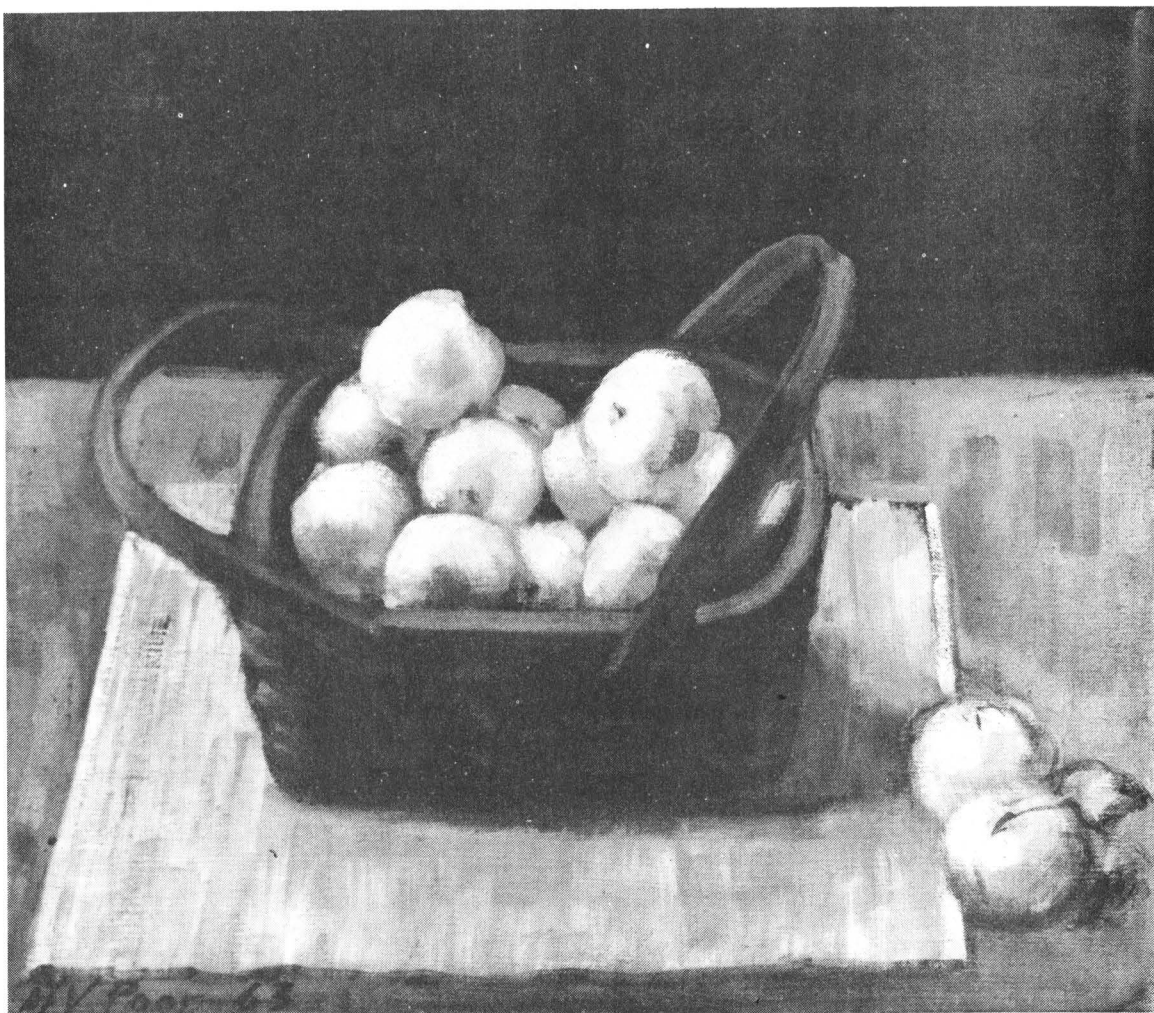
Then behind him he heard some movement. It was the white mass. "What kind of a young chicken do you think you are? Do you realize you could fall down and break your hip? Why don't you give the bike to your grandson? You're too old to be doing things like that."

Then she turned and went away.

His shoulders seemed to be more stooped. That strange sensation had been neutralized. When he got up to wheel the bike away, he had no feelings of confidence or adequacy. His spirited shuffle turned into a dejected drag. After he had returned the bike to the shed, he pulled himself up the fire escape steps and then to his room.

Everything seemed so drab and old. The springs of the old, iron bed creaked painfully as he sank down heavily on it. He said nothing; he thought nothing. He felt like a vacuum.

Still in this state of emptiness, he got up and walked over to the window to look at the nameless plant. One of its leaves had died. He plucked it off and threw it away.



BASKET OF YELLOW APPLES

By HENRY VARNUM POOR



YOUNG LOVERS

By BECKY ANDERSON



SELF-PORTRAIT

By JUNE FRITZ

Oh Henry?

JOHN WHITE

Henry Prichard was an ordinary man except for one small idiosyncrasy. Henry Prichard was a murderer. He had an ordinary job in one of the most ordinary stores in Chicago, but in his long career as a floor walker and part-time salesman he had murdered in cold blood more than 10,000 people. No bodies were ever found, and it was quite harmless really, but in his mind there were corpses carelessly piled in great heaps.

Among his other desirable traits as a human being Henry Prichard was a bachelor and was being stalked by the salesgirl in cosmetics. She was a pretty creature in her own sort of way but those extremely long legs gave her the appearance of wearing stilts. And her sweaters, how they bulged! It was almost indecent, and besides, it made her look as if she were stumbling forward, hardly able to keep up with her torso.

Henry Prichard was not aware that he was being courted until that one Saturday morning when Miss Hornsby accidentally met him about six blocks from

work. It seemed at the time merely a coincidence until he realized that the coincidence had occurred twice before that week.

But Mr. Prichard, you simply must do something about the top to that counter, why, I'm afraid it will just fall in one of these days and glass will fly all over the place, why somebody might get hurt—Mr. Prichard?

Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Hornsby, I hadn't been listening; I'm afraid that I've got the bad habit of sort of going into a trance when I go to work. What were you saying?

I was saying, I was saying Mr. Prichard, how old are you?

What?

How old are you?

Nearly thirty-four. Why do you ask?

How is it you never got married?

I, uh, guess I just never gave it much thought. I never meet any girls outside and none of the girls I've ever met at the store seemed to be, ah, desirable.

Am I desirable, Mr. Prichard?

You are. Delightfully desirable. Miss

Hornsby. I'm sure you will have no trouble finding a husband.

I have found my husband, Mr. Prichard; it shan't be a long engagement but we do have certain things we should talk about first. I mean marriage isn't at all a thing to rush into and we do want to be sure.

Now Mr. Prichard being the sort of man he was just listened politely with his best floor walker attitude and forgot about this sudden turn of events along with the rest of the outside world when he entered the store.

Oh! You there. Young man! I do wish someone could tell me. Where are those dear, dear little pink doggies, the ones that are really perfume?

Out of nowhere this creature had descended upon him in a flurry of print dress and fox collar. As she half spun, half ran across the room the loose heads on her tattered stole seemed to snap at imaginary enemies, and by the time she had overtaken Mr. Prichard she was heaving deeply and her hair snaked out from under her little red hat to crawl about her head, giving her the appearance of a tornado-stricken haystack. With a casual glance of approval Mr. Prichard noticed what a white neck she had, what a pretty soft white neck with its folds of fat blubbery up between his fingers as he calmly throttled the life from her obnoxious, vulgar throat.

Where? Where are those little dogs, the pink ones with that delightful perfume? They said at the perfume counter that you didn't have any but I simply must have one of those little dogs.

Silently, relentlessly he squeezed, felt his fingers sinking through the soft folds of fat until they held something more

solid. The pummeling hands were like cooked rutabaga flailing in a curtailed arch softened by their own great flabbiness. Her heaving chest and hissing throat created a music that made him joyous in his mastery. One more of those people, one more of those customers would plague him no longer.

Why no, madam, I'm sorry we understood that item and shan't have any more until Wednesday; I'm sorry. And leaving her in her own nervous befuddlement he strode off, quite satisfied with his tactful handling of that particular customer.

Oh Mr. Prichard, Mr. Prichard, it's lunchtime and I thought we could eat lunch together and sort of get to know each other. After all, it wouldn't do at all for us to be married and discover later that we really aren't in love.

No, Miss Hornsby, it wouldn't, not at all.

Through no fault of his own, Henry Prichard was incapable of voicing any opinion whatsoever contrary to someone else's. All his years as a salesman had molded him into a yessir, nosir, yesmam, nomam creature whose prerogative it was to silently, swiftly, and ingeniously do away with the person who superimposed a will on his own. But now he was faced with a creature who kept returning to haunt his life with senseless prattlings. He had successfully dismissed all other employees as ciphers, but this girl had taken it upon herself to master the submissive Mr. Prichard and he could do nothing about it, so he took her to dinner.

Carefully, ever so carefully, he crept up behind the white coat and withdrew his weapon. As the knife glinted in the arti-

ficial light it seemed to reflect some of the malevolent joy that lit up Henry Prichard's face. He raised the knife almost reverently and hesitated for a second as he reveled in the thought that this waiter would no longer plague his life, that one more person would know the ultimate mastery of Henry Prichard. As the knife fell again and again in the taut white cloth of the waiter's uniform, Henry knew that this was his destiny, to see the red spots spread as the soft fluid blood spurted out and stained in a soft caress and crimson wetness of his clothing.

As the squared back of the waiter fled into the confusion of the restaurant Henry Prichard became aware of Miss Hornsby. She had been carrying on a very agitated conversation with herself about Henry Prichard's faults and virtues and now she was shaking his arm, searching for agreement.

Oh yes, Miss Hornsby.

Gail.

Of course. Gail. I agree, marriage is a sacred alliance.

And as I was saying before, you remember, we can't rush these things. But you know about my father, and he does so want to give me away and the doctor says it could happen any day. I mean, you wouldn't want to have him die—without seeing—it may seem selfish to you—but I love my father an—

Of course—

Oh, then you don't mind; Sunday after this my aunt is coming from Lisbon and she would so love to come, do you think that's too sudden?

Well—

Of course, if you don't want my father at the wedding.

Oh no, it's not that. A father should be at his—

Oh good, we don't want a large wedding though, just a few intimates. But we do have to invite the girls to the wedding. They'd just die if they weren't invited. And of course a few relatives. But that won't be hard.

No, it will be easy, what I mean is, are you—?

Oh, yes, I'm quite sure, I can't think of anyone more absolutely charming and handsome, and besides we don't always have full control of our reason when these things happen. Funny, isn't it? Who'd ever think, Mrs. Gail Prichard—Housewife?

Henry Prichard had killed hundreds of impulsive young girls in his life but none of them had ever been anything but a body to be destroyed. He could not remember one of their faces, but Miss Hornsby was different. She was an employee but that wasn't it; somehow she had managed to make herself a face and a name. Never in his life had he known any single person who had a proper name. When he was younger there had been Mom and Pop and a collective set of fellow students who had no faces or names in his mind. It was always that way. There were "Sirs" and there were "boys" but never before a "Miss Hornsby." He wished she would leave him alone, but she was relentless in her pursuit of him, much more motivated than even Henry at the height of one of his crimes of rebellion. Everywhere he turned she was there. Even the wedding itself didn't seem to be a tragedy: it was merely a nuisance. His problem was Gail, and he would solve it eventually. But right now he would wait.

Mr. Prichard, Henry dear, I haven't seen you this morning. I went to meet you at your apartment; what happened?

I left early.

I was there at 7:30.

Very early.

Oh well, I do have the most lovely ring, it's white gold with the most lovely diamond. It has just a touch of blue; it's so beautiful and it only costs \$750.

Something clicked. Henry Prichard was not miserly nor greedy but his money was his; he had never considered spending it, either lavishly or sparingly, on anyone. For the first time he became aware of just how real Miss Hornsby was.

He popped the cord tight three or four times and listened with a practiced ear to the sharp note as the thing twanged into tautness. There she was, in the chair with her back to him. Carefully he crept up behind her and in a deft well-manoeuvred movement he had the rope around her firm young neck. But as the cord tightened she turned around and when he saw her face the cord melted and the chair disappeared and there was only her face.

Bothered and confused, Henry went back to the store and his particular brand of relief. But Miss Hornsby would not leave his mind; she was an angel or a devil who invaded his mind at every second of the day. His mind came up with an answer all its own. Though he could not forget her he could make her more susceptible to rationalization by making a victim of her. For the remainder of the day Henry Prichard contemplated scheme after scheme for permanently eliminating Gail from his life, but each time stopping short because invariably at the moment of triumph her features would

crystallize in perfect clarity and the world would melt back into an organized confusion.

Oh Henry—

Yes, Gail.

You're in a much better mood this morning.

Oh yes, I've been feeling much better. He answered casually, lopping off one of those long offending legs. I've found that happiness is all a point of view. And another slice of his glittering sabre neatly severed her arm, leaving a red badge where her shoulder had been. I find a stimulation in verbal swordsmanship, he added, with the smug irony of a man in possession of a greater knowledge than his companions. It seems almost as if a great cloud has been lifted from me. It's like seeing through new glasses for the first time. Life seems so clear and sharp, he added, with a lightninglike thrust completely through her softly rounded abdomen.

Why Henry, you seem so different. Is something wrong?

No, should it be?

You just act as if you couldn't wait for something. Is it our marriage? Did something else happen?

It's just that you seem to have given me a new life. If it weren't for you I'd still be living in a dream world. He calmly nestled her beautiful head in the padded curve of the guillotine, then jerked the staying cord loose and watched, fascinated, as the huge blade whistled down, squeaking shrilly in its track, louder and louder, until it thudded to a stop and her head leapt from the cushion in a flying arc of blood and noise.

Oh Henry, I'm so glad. I was beginning to think you weren't happy with

me. Why now I really know what you think.

At the wedding that morning Henry's face was warm and ruddy, a most suitable complexion for a groom. His hair was neatly combed and his tie was tied with just the right touch. As he walked down the aisle, he was not actually conscious of an impending tragedy, for in his mind the wedding was merely an episode in the constant battle with Gail. Although he was attending a wedding his thoughts still centered on gaining his freedom. And at the time, the wedding was the path of least resistance. Gail, too, in her white taffeta gown seemed so full of joy and life that the guests were all very happy and in quite a responsive mood.

As she walked down the aisle Henry thought what a perfectly wonderful corpse she would make. He saw her dress spring into crimson splendor as bullet after bullet ripped into its soft white frills. Her mouth, spread in such a sweet smile, seemed to be the gaping edges of a raw knife wound—yes indeed, Henry would enjoy this day!

Her hair was in such complete disarray that as the meat cleaver came to rest in the top of her head it was amazingly similar to a shovel in a weed patch. But in seconds the spurting block plastered her hair to her head in a damp red mat. And he noticed with a smile of satisfaction that her unusually close-set eyes were at last set apart. As he finished the paper he heard the thud that was her body falling from the chair. Tossing off his coffee in a single daring gulp and throwing his newspaper on the table, he kissed his dear wife and set off for the store.

During the day he began torturing his dear bride in place of the customers who normally plagued his day. Her insistent high-pitched voice was constantly reverberating in his mind. Only a violent murder could quell that piercing squeal that was his new spouse's trademark. For days on end he occupied himself with constant mayhem, bloody attempts to rid his mind of a persistent irritation.

The very mannikins in the windows provided a more physical presence to his imagination. With no conscious thought Henry turned their faces into replicas of Gail's, and automatically the legs lengthened and his resentment deepened.

One of his jobs was dismantling the unneeded mannikins, a job which he now carried out with far more vigor than previously. Ripping limbs from torsos was his specialty, but he also accomplished the decapitation operation admirably. In a way the decapitation was the crowing point of a successful operation, and that obscene sucking noise followed by the smug little pop as the head came free filled him with a sense of security.

At that last wheezing pop Henry left the storeroom to confidently vent his fury on the unsuspecting dolts who inhabited lingerie and cosmetics. As he strolled toward the costume jewelry section he neatly sliced an elderly patron from her shriveled navel to her diminutive spine, noting with an air of aplomb the look of horror on her face as she bent double in a final and ludicrous inverted bow. As the delicate snap of her backbone reached his ears he casually lodged his sabre in a nearby counter.

Dearest, I know you'll just love it; all those months I worked in that store I

have just been in love with it. The most heavenly odor: she finished as the bronzed boot of the harp descended on her skull, crushing it in a muted thud.

That was certainly a heavenly inspiration, he congratulated himself, as he brushed small fragments of bone from the shining instrument. Yes, I'm sure I'll enjoy it. Just consider it a little gift.

Oh, Henry, I'm so happy, I thought you might say it was too expensive. I have the most delicious supper; I found it in a magazine. It's got mushrooms and hamburger and cashew nuts and creamed macaroni. I just know you'll love it.

Yes, dear, I am a little hungry.

And the salad too, it's the prettiest little thing. I saw a picture of it on the cover and it was the cutest thing. Just wait till you see it. I got some candles too. Tall white ones. And remember those gold candelabra my aunt gave us? It's the most beautiful— Don't you just adore it, that tablecloth and the candelabra? Sit down, it'll get cold, and the directions say it must be hot when served. You do like it? Here, I got this sauce from Mrs. Riggins, next door; she says it's just so scrumptious on anything.

Henry imagined as he got up to leave that her lips were still moving behind the pattern that the intricately cast candelabra had imprinted across her face.

Certainly, Miss Oaks, I'll be glad to take those apart and get some male figures for you. Nuisance changing displays all the time, isn't it?

Yes it is; thank you so much. No rush about it, though.

That's all right, I'm not busy, I'll get right after it.

Oh, Sally!

Why Gail, I thought you married girls never worked.

Oh, I'm not working—I'm looking for Henry. He left without his wallet this morning and he simply must have it. Have you seen him?

Why yes, he just took some mannikins into the storeroom. If you hurry you'll catch him before he leaves.

Methodically, one by one, he removed the arms from the mannikins, tossing them in a jumbled pile. First he grabbed an arm or leg from the pile of dummies by the door, hauled it out and then savagely jerked off its arms and tossed it away. There she is. Hiding, he thought, as he saw the long-legged intruder surreptitiously skulking among his dummies. She doesn't see me, he chor-tled, as a huge packing crate flew through the air and caught her at the back of the neck. His fingers sank, unopposed, through the soft yielding flesh of her neck for a time but her arms thrashed wildly about as consciousness slowly returned and she twisted and writhed beneath his fingers. Henry began to consider another method of attack as his victim refused to succumb. As they crashed into a mannikin Henry released his grip and grabbed a packing hammer. Over and over he struck her, the sharp claw on the packing hammer plunging deeper at each stroke. Time after time he struck until blood drenched the two figures and small gray globules of her crushed cranium were spattered in a nightmare of gray and red throughout the store-room.

And then Henry Prichard turned casually, with an air of bravado, to the rest of the dummies.

Seduction II

BOB KIRK

Then, as you bent to lift a drawer
The lamp revealed, not unexpectedly,
No soft intruding line
Across the long tight curve against your jeans,
So as you sprawled with girlish innocence
My eyes brushed often
Where gentle as my glance,
You briefly laid your hands between
In careless modesty
Weaving heated images
Mocking rightness of the words we say.
A-tisket, a-tasket, a straining denim basket
Your gaze direct as mine
And more intense.

And later, sitting
On the arm of my chair
And your leg sought near
As you checked the final work,
Would three worlds crumble
If my arm had for that moment
Cradled your small hips?

I ask because I never knew—
But leaving, only I saw the banshee
Go keening over dark and winter trees.

Summer Stasis

BOB KIRK

Cottonwoods whisper
Sandclouds blowing
by the wide river

Gibberish

JERRY ROSCOE

Alexander was great,
Napoleon was small,
The Hatter was mad,
But then, aren't we all?

Japanese Haiku

PAUL RAWLINGS

A delicate star
Wispy and shallow-hearted
Winter's falling snow

Day and Night

LINDA KAY WOELLHOF

The sun's rays come and
Go by day and night, making
Dark and light patterns.

Walking the Blues

LYN MORGAN

I walk and
 take words from the air
By the sea
 while reasons plummet
For wanting to
 conform and bow to a clock.
Salt air covers
 the land and myself
AS I wonder
 where time will lead me.
It seems odd
 that the machine won't halt
When its gears
 are ground and tread upon
By the masses
 who want their freedom to
Live and die
 as free as the waves
And the wind
 that knock on my door.

No. 26

P. J. R. BOYLE

Her is an orange
 skin and all,
Her is a doe
 young and all,
Her is a yew
 scars and all,
Her is a girl
 and all and all.

When They Were Love

GREG DUNNING

The chill of the morning fisherman's bell
In his oar-boat breeze-bob starting day,
Awakened them in a new dream light
When they were love, when salt was spray

As the fisherman rowed to a lonesome work
Across the dark of a ripple bay.



UNTITLED
By ROLLAND GROTE



MAN ON A PAPER BAG

By PAUL RAWLINGS

Window

ROBERT D. FYFE

I'm on the inside, looking out
On nature and my fellow men.
At leafless trees; at those without
A thought what life is all about.
When once I squint and just begin
To view myself and see again,
The clear glass darkens, filmed throughout
With guilt and sin; with pride and doubt.
It's then I'll likely find I've been
Not here, but outside looking in.

The World Wish

EILEEN ROESLER

It's a whimsical wild wishful world
And man is the wish it makes.
It's a soft sad sighing world
And life is the sigh it takes.

The world has wished both you and me
But look what we have done.
We've put our God on a highway sign
And bottled up the sun.

Monuments

JOSEPH MICHAUD

Wipe the dust
from ancient monuments
and in the harsh
light of day
read words
struck from stone.
To remove
was to leave behind
and in the emptiness
of hollow letters
lies
a petrified shriek
an agony of death-fear
cried
from the dark side of time,
sounds
caught only by the eye
from men who trusted
a memory of life
to the false security
of stone.

Cold Crisp Jazz

LOUIS L. TIJERINA

A witch stirs a heart in the glass,
The flamed grass turns the eye down
And up according to the tradition
Blasted into pink and black pieces
Pitched on the platter of broken love.
What has man done to man?

We are in the shadow of dust,
It is time to watch
The silent black rivers move
Between the living
And the dead or dying.
I now believe in nothing,
But I remember when
She was lovely,
A silver thread weaved through
Her eyes, lips, and hair.
I was full, the nights bled,
And I called her
Beauty, Beauty, Beauty.

Nights are now autumn green,
A man in a white coat sits

On an old summer porch,
He tries to behave himself.
Black songs in his heart
Give his ghost to the dead,
The willow trees sigh
And suffocate the word,
The full moon, and Everything
Called the Times.
I tell you,
He tried to call her
Beauty, Beauty, Beauty.

O hear the black guitar sing
The dying songs down
The rivers, the ash rivers
Blushing in the smoke.
The cords are our heart's strings
Broken and discarded
In the taverns,
Where cold crisp jazz
Hurts the lovers and the lonely
Into human poetry.

We are the dead, we are the dead,
But today, let us call ourselves
Beauty, Beauty, Beauty.

It Is a Season in Hell

LOUIS L. TIJERINA

Sunday evening is here again,
Old men smoke cigarette butts,
Naked children grin at the stars.
Lovers who do not know
How to make love sleep on the porch
And dream the wonderful dream;
Content to look up
At the clouds and smile.
While jets fly overhead and spray
The dark skies with innocent colors.
Nothing happens to youth,
And the end never begins,
(At least not until the spell dies
For the lack of indifference.)

Nothing ever begins,
The ending never takes place.
There is only the constant asking:
A struggle for your world to become

Conscious that it must die . . .
The mind knows the streets repeat
The anguish of life
Through images of broken glass,
Candy apples and toy illusions,
Death is behind the mask?
Poets and women are liars.
It is time to feel bitter?
The forest is cold, wet rain,
Weeds are in full bloom,
Flowers are dead and drying.
A man and a woman embrace,
Feeling a lack of love
In the dull, gray air.

So, there is not love.
Where can the silly heart
Find its solitude?
Abstraction is now the warmth.
Only the emotions do not have
The nerve to find it.

It is a season in Hell . . .
A dead dog lies in my path.

And Then Another Summer . . .

M. M. MARKS

And then another summer draws its blinds,
Again harsh winter winds come trotting nigh.
I sit with Her beneath a wallen sky,
The last eve at the sea. The fish, their rinds,
Are cast back on the shore. Their smell reminds
Me of the time to part, to say good-bye.
The shoreline, even, cannot justify
To me how summer water steals and blinds.

Our seasonal acquaintanceship, though warm
And calm, is pandered by the sunny air—
So soon forgot are frigid morns that form
The nights to arguments ('least they are rare)—
We not again touch hands through winter's storm,
Our treaty signed: the heat guides our affair.

Image

M. M. MARKS

In Portland, I saw myself in a pond of ice,
It was nice, but
In Ogden, I saw myself in a clear, dark sky;
I don't know why
I never see myself at home,
Why do I roam?
In Denver, I saw myself carved in a stone;
I was alone.

Looking Back from the Moon

M. M. MARKS

The world like a field of wild wheat
Blows rapidly in the wind, spreading
Seeds
Soot
Disease.

The world like an old barn
Stands scarred from the rain
Shaking
Rusting
Aging.

The world like billy's bedroom
Is filled with toys
Worthless
Cluttered
Broken.

The world like billy's bedspread
Hangs on in the night, and falls off
As
He
Dreams.

Unless

M. M. MARKS

In bubble bath I reminisce with Ty;
I see my youth in blue reflections cast,
Where in our love, the leader, I, was mast,
And she the vessel under me did lie,
Where she would let me touch, were I to try.
She then was young, and now with knowledge vast
Has nothing to regret, save most her past.
Smooth sailing then to drifting now, but why?

Although I led, we shared our love before;
It was not sacred, just so light, such fun,
And we were true: no tongue, no lip, no war—
'Til my Titanic sank, and we were done.
I have no faith in loving any more
Unless the bath distorts from water spun.

Sunday I

KAREN NICOLAI

We played a game
You and I,
A game of half finished phrases,
Of withholdings and secret meanings.
We both knew
And laughed to see how childlike we were
Playing our silly game.
We might have played forever
If we were younger or the day longer
But I grew impatient
And drawing you toward me
Let your kiss end our game.

The Looters

STEVE MOLLOHAN

There was a scramble.
and the quick snared
well in the looting
for an object; one they spared;
Some had more:
One a chair, another a bike,
and the slow feet carried
lamps for their tryke.
And one skinny youth
found a book,
with words on the front;
and a puzzled look.

I Accepted the Kiss

LOUIS L. TIJERINA

Dry leaves slid like spun-out cars
Over the streets sterilized by vapor
Lights spilling a yellow silk;
The night was excited, drunk with life.
I could feel an awesome force rush
Through the stiff trees sighing,
And a sting bruised my neck.
Its swift blow did not astonish me,
For I had waited, had dreamed,
The day my lover exposed her breasts
Beneath a blistered August sky.
I accepted the warm, harsh kiss.

Where Is My Mother

LOUIS L. TIJERINA

This hot milk that I hold in my hand
tonight,
This restaurant with its glittering whites
and marble,
All this is the image of my mother
in the winter.
She is the lovely snowflake falling
on my lips,
She is the woman that I loved forever . . .
It was then, or perhaps,
it was never.

Leonardo's Eucharist

CHARLES R. KING

Battered, blotched and beaten is thy face
Thy calcified vertebra hath slipped
 under an amoeboid strain
Thy caravan hath stopped by the road:
One hath forgotten thy name
Another hath probed deep in thy blemishes
A third hath been cast with silver.
Even thy Lord hath been etched by the
 acid of time
Thy innocent halo hath been bleached
 by the passion of Adam
And thy ruby liquor hath evolved to amber.

Youth

MIKE McCARTHY

That day, the sea
Wanted to treat
The surf gently.
So—like a lover
She slid her hand
Over the white palm
And was content
To remain awhile
Before withdrawing it.

An old couple mused
Beneath the shade
Of straw hats;
He, feeling heat upon
His gray-haired chest,
She, beholding the journey
Of vanishing seacraft.



UNTITLED

By SONNY PERSCHBACHER

Broken Wings

EARL Q. ADAMS

Jim Cameron drove along the twisted blacktop road that led from the Air Force base to his home a few minutes away. The mist in the air added to the chill of this typical September evening in England. The rhythmic sound of the windshield wipers on a half dry windshield, and the weird shadows playing in the forest on either side of the lonely road, made the misery and uneasiness in his small English sports car unbearably depressing.

It was eight o'clock, much later than Jim usually got away from the squadron, and what Jim had been through today would alter his whole life. Today would mark the beginning of grey in his hair, and the lines of his boyishly handsome face would begin to deepen with one of the burdens that make men old. Today Jim had grappled with the reality, that life is hard and forgiving, and this reality had been implanted in his mind, only to be relived in the future like a bad dream, but never forgotten.

Through the mirk the dim glare of oncoming headlights brought Jim out of his deep thought, but not out of his state of semi-shock. The headlights lit the inside of his car, and Jim's grim face, the muscles in his tight set jaw were contracting and relaxing, and then contracting again, as if he were trying to mash

his own teeth. His eyes were set unblinkingly straight ahead, hardly seeing even the road, but penetrating miles into the distance, and he gripped the steering wheel till it seemed it would snap in two. At the last minute as if by reflex, Jim swung his car out of the path of the oncoming headlights.

His throat felt dry and inflamed, every nerve in him was tense, pulling, trying to tear him apart. His eyes hurt, and he wanted to shut them, and forget the whole damned miserable world.

Suddenly without warning all the tension in him bubbled softly out of his mouth in the form of the inevitable question.

"Why Monk, my God, why did it have to happen to Monk?"

Monk had been twenty-six, a year older than Jim, and they had been together for the duration of their tour in England. When bachelors they had spent much of their time running around together, they had become the best of friends, and had both been married about six months ago. Monk first, and Jim about a month later, each being best man for the other.

Jim had a lot of respect for Monk. He admired Monk's professional attitude toward his flying job; he was very precise and well organized, and never overlooked even the smallest detail of a flight, and

this made him the kind of leader you would let lead you down through a complete overcast, so thick that it was like flying in a bottle of milk, and rely on him to get you safely to the end of the runway for landing.

Finally the courage that had been keeping Jim's composure as a man broke, and his whole body trembled with agony, as a tear, after having fought, and torn its way from his soul, slipped out of the corner of his eye, and slid down his cheek.

Jim cried softly, the lonely heart-rending type of crying that a man cries after having lived through an experience emotionally impossible to contain.

After all, Monk had been his best friend.

It had been early that morning that Jim grabbed the alarm clock, and choked its only reason for being in existence, hardly giving it time to give out with its first harsh cry.

Jumping out of bed, Jim made his way to the small window of their upstairs bedroom to perform the first duty that every pilot must, that of appraising the weather, and making an educated guess as to what would develop as the day progressed.

It looked as if England had been blessed with one of her rare and beautiful days. The world seemed crisp and cool, and as the window faced the east, the rising sun made each small droplet of dew, so delicately positioned on the still green grass, glisten and sparkle. It was one of those mornings that make you feel like taking on the whole world.

For a moment, Jim's mind ran through his five years as an officer and pilot in the Air Force, three of which he had

spent here in England. He was proud of the fact that he was a fighter pilot, and loved the feeling of being the sole occupant of the high performance F-100, high above the bonds of earth, where he could command the aircraft, put it through its paces, and take complete responsibility for its actions. He had always been an independent carefree type of individual, and this flying game suited him to a tee.

Turning from the window Jim called to his wife;

"Look at that beautiful day out there, babe. . . .

"Hey—it's wake-up time."

Realizing that Susan was obviously not as enthused about the lovely day, and what it had to offer as he was, Jim started for the bathroom, hitching up his pants as he went, to begin the daily ritual of making himself presentable.

Sounds began to come from the bathroom that resembled a hog snorting in a hog wallow, as Jim splashed cold water on his face.

Even this sound didn't disturb Susan from her sleep, though she usually raised hell about it, failing to understand why he had to blow and snort during the simple task of washing one's face.

A cup banged down in the bathroom, seemingly as an added attempt to raise Susan from the dead, as Jim finished washing, and rushed back into the bedroom.

"Sue . . . come on, Hun, I've only got an hour."

"Why you nuts have to have such early briefings," was the somewhat less than pleasant reply, as Susan rolled over, pulling her knees up under her chin, and snuggling down in the thick covers, making one last effort to shut out the

world, and the unpleasant reality that soon she would have to give in, and fix bacon and eggs for her husband.

Her dreamy thoughts recalled the squadron commander's briefing to the wives—a well-fed pilot with a happy homelife will be an old pilot.

That thought almost did the trick, but remembering the life Jim used to lead as a bachelor, out partying till the wee hours, then airborne by seven or eight the next morning, she rationalized that he could take care of himself, and let her thoughts settle back to calculating the exact amount of time it would take to meet the requirements of a reasonable breakfast, so she could stay in this nice warm bed till the last second, and still get Jim off on time.

Jumping up from the breakfast table, Jim gave Susan a quick kiss and departed for the car on the run. He had ten minutes to make it to the squadron in time for work call. Barring any difficulties with traffic he would just make it. The squadron had a party fund that the pilots were obliged to contribute to for being late to the morning briefings, on which the rates increased for each minute late, so that it behoved you to be on time.

Jim was eager this morning, because he was scheduled to fly a two ship to southern England with Monk Neilsen, to simulate air to ground attacks on the Royal Army troops, presently on maneuvers there.

This kind of mission was a fighter pilot's dream. To make simulated dive bomb and strafing attacks on the army boys, to give them the experience of having a jet boring down on them in excess of five hundred miles per hour. Jim

couldn't help smiling as he recalled his last mission of this type, when instead of action to protect themselves the army troops were all standing around their tanks and personnel carriers watching the air show.

Jim was so involved in his thoughts that only by the force of habit had he stopped at the security check point on the perimeter of the flight line. He acknowledged the air policeman's clearance to pass with a salute, and drove the remaining quarter of a mile up the flight line to the flight shack.

Hustling into the briefing room, Jim found most of the pilots seated, and the weather forecaster was ready to begin his briefing.

"Hope you don't time it that close when you're pulling out of a dive bomb run, Lt."

The unmistakable drawl was that of the squadron commander from the back of the room. Jim found a seat, and the forecaster began his briefing.

Having completed the general briefing, Monk called Jim into one of the small rooms for their individual briefing. The many charts that lined the walls of the room added to the atmosphere that Monk liked for briefing a flight. Jim and Monk made themselves comfortable around a small table, that had somehow found room between the bookshelves filled with flight manuals, and began the task of a famous Monk Neilsen briefing.

The pilots in the squadron were always ribbing Monk about his lengthy briefings. He very carefully covered everything from the preflight checks to landing, and even parking the airplane after the flight. When finished, Jim and Monk had their flight planned to the smallest detail;

every airspeed, every altitude was clear in each pilot's mind. Monk was to lead the flight and Jim would be the wingman.

"Go ahead and get your 'G' suit on, gather up your flight gear and press on out to your bird," Monk instructed Jim; "I'll file our flight plan with flight operations, and meet you on the radio at start engines time."

"Yes Sir, Captain."

Monk had just pinned on his Captain bars, and Jim gave him trouble about it at every opportunity.

Monk chuckled.

It was hard to bother a man with a nature as jovial as his.

Jim left the squadron and started off across the flight line. Glancing at his small knee clip board on which he had scrawled all the pertinent data for the flight, he rechecked the number of the airplane he was scheduled to fly. He spotted it just across the taxi-way, and started toward it.

The sweeping, clean lines of the F-100 were always a source of pleasure to Jim; it reminded him of a chicken hawk in a dive, with its wings swept back forty-five degrees, and the long nose extending far out ahead to the big air scoop that two men could crawl into. Both of the silvery birds that Jim and Monk were to fly had men crawling all over them like bees around a honeycomb, cleaning the canopy, fueling, checking the systems. Jim was impressed with the team effort it took to get one of these airplanes into the air.

Jim approached the airplane, and the crew chief singled himself out of the group, strode sharply forward, and popped Jim a crisp salute.

"Morning, Lt. Cameron."

Jim returned the salute.

"Morning, Sarge."

Handing his parachute and helmet to the crew chief, Jim grinned broadly,

"Think that bucket of bolts will fly?"

"Yes Sir," was the quick confident reply. "She's the best bird on the line."

The crew chief took his helmet and chute and started up the ladder, which was hooked over the rim of the cockpit. He placed the chute on the seat, spread out the harness for Jim, set his helmet up on the windscreen, then rushed back down to follow Jim around the aircraft while he ran his preflight.

Jim had completed his preflight, climbed into the cockpit, and with the crew chief's assistance was strapping the airplane on his back, when he looked over and noticed that Monk was still making his preflight.

Pointing at Monk's airplane, Jim asked:

"Hey chief, is Captain Neilsen running a preflight, or is he building that airplane?"

The crew chief looked in the direction Jim was pointing, and pondered the question momentarily.

"I don't know, Sir. I can only say that, as a crew chief, if Captain Neilsen is going to fly your airplane, you'd better have every little thing right before he gets there, or you'll be making it right after he gets there."

Jim and Monk finally made it to the end of the runway, and with clearance from the tower pulled onto it and lined up. Jim's plane was slightly back, and a mere six or eight feet to the right of Monk's. They had briefed for a wing

take-off, and Jim wanted to stay right in that position throughout the take-off to make his leader look good.

They locked their brakes, and eased their throttles forward. The big engines gained momentum, and the roar in Jim's ears was deafening, even with his helmet on. Black smoke poured from the tailpipes of both airplanes and billowed upward fast as if in a hurry to get out of the hot jet blast.

Jim checked his instruments for take-off, and the airplane quivered and shook, as if it couldn't wait to be turned loose. Looking up, Jim threw a confident OK signal with his left hand to Monk, who was watching from his cockpit a few feet away, indicating that he was ready to roll. Monk turned his head to face down the runway, lifted it slowly back, then with a quick nod they both released brakes.

With the release of the brakes the F-100's started to roll slowly as if reluctant to move at all. Monk looked back, checked Jim for position, then nodded his head again. On this signal, both pilots simultaneously moved their respective throttles outboard, sending a gush of raw fuel into the hot tailpipes. The fuel exploded, fire belched out of the tailpipes, and they lurched forward, as if reminded by the engines that it was time to move.

Jim felt the familiar pressure that put him back into his seat, and held him there while the airplane accelerated to 50-75, then 100 knots.

Both pilots pulled back on their sticks, lifting the noses into the air, assuming a high angle of attack that took the weight off the nose gear. 120-140, the air speed was increasing rapidly now, and

Jim saw the 6,000-foot runway marker flash past out of the corner of his eye. Jim concentrated on Monk's aircraft, adjusting his throttle back and forth to keep their formation as nearly perfect as possible. 150-160 knots, and Monk's airplane began to lift into the air. Jim eased further back on his stick, to keep his aircraft on the same plane. Their gear had barely cleared the runway when another nod of Monk's head sent both pilots grabbing for the gear handles. Jim slammed the gear handle to the up position and fought the yaw and wallow for a brief couple of seconds; then he heard and felt the thud as the gear melted into the belly of the airplane.

Monk motioned to Jim to move out and relax, and at the same time squeezed the mic button on the throttle.

"Nice take-off, Jim."

"Smooth lead," was Jim's reply.

They were cruising at 350 knots now, and would be eighty miles south of the base, over target in fifteen minutes.

A few scattered clouds at about seven thousand feet had developed from what promised earlier that morning to be a completely clear day. These puffy little clouds reflected the sun with a magnificent brilliance all their own. The countryside looked warm and sleepy from twenty thousand feet; its alternating patches of wood and crop resembled that of an old hand-sewn quilt. It was hard to believe that life existed down there.

Jim and Monk were circling over the target area now at ten thousand feet. To Jim the tanks below looked like ants between the gently rolling hills.

The radio crackled with the usual calm detached voice.

"Rawhide 23 and 24, this is Ponderosa,

your friendly forward air controller. You are cleared to the check point. Approach from the east. On visual contact I'll give you further instructions."

"Roger Ponderosa, we'll be at the check point in two minutes."

Monk lowered his nose, rolled into a steep diving turn, and the two jets went screaming down like banchies in for the kill.

"Rawhide 23 and 24 check point."

"Roger rawhide, turn ten degrees right."

Jim had dropped back now, and was picking up air speed, straining to pick out the target.

"Rawhide, do you have the sparsely wooded, large hill to your right?"

"Roger, have it spotted."

"OK, Rawhide, your target is two groups of tanks, one in the valley, the other about a hundred yards up the hill."

"Roger Ponderosa, have the target in sight."

Monk's calm made the decision. "Jim, you take the group on the right; I'll take the group on the left."

They were skimming the treetops now. Jim glanced into the cockpit; the air speed indicator read 520 knots. Perfect, Jim thought, that should give them a thrill. The trees and ground below were a blur as he concentrated on the target ahead. He had the target in his gun sight. Beautiful, this was the feeling he lived for. Pow, he thought to himself, and with a fantastic roar he was past the target, and beginning to pull up for another run.

Jim looked up to check his leader's position and saw the nose of Monk's airplane pitch up, so fast and violently that it seemed the airplane would come apart.

The nose continued on over the top until the airplane was on its back, and then with all its flying speed gone began to fall, twisting and turning end over end, and plunged headlong into the ground with a sickening explosion and a huge ball of fire, that billowed into the thick, black cloud of smoke.

In the flick of an eye it was all over, and Jim flashed past the charred spot on the ground that was the only evidence that an airplane had disintegrated there.

Jim was breathing hard, short, spasmodic breaths that only left him breathless; he broke out in a sweat that got in his eyes, blurred his vision.

Jim knew it was hopeless, but as he began to turn his aircraft back around to the scene of the crash he punched the mic button.

"Ponderosa, did you see a chute?"

A calm impersonal voice gave the dreaded answer.

"No chute 24, he didn't have a chance."

A million thoughts had raced through Jim's mind. Did it really happen, or was he dreaming? What would Monk's wife do? What mechanical problem had developed that had caused Monk's airplane to go into a maneuver that couldn't possibly have been initiated by the pilot? Why hadn't he by chance been scheduled for that plane? He seemed so helpless and only the realization that he was still flying, that he had to control his own plane, had brought him back to reality.

Jim had turned his aircraft for home, trying hard to steady his nerves, at least enough to control the aircraft, remembering that he had yet to get himself on the ground safely.



The Visitors

DAVID WILLIAMS

Once 'pon a time, Adam thought, there was a little silver spaceship stitching its way across the universe. The ship, of the Atomic Forces Space Control, had left earth for a patrol, but many things had happened and caused it to be lost among the stars. Now it was riding the blazing column of flame to the surface below.

Corporal Adam Redclay gazed through the viewport at the small, bright asteroid, looming larger and larger, then glanced at his watch. We left earth eighth March last year, he thought; here it is December and almost another year. Hell, I'm not even in the AFSAC any more. My hitch was up over two months ago. Adam scratched the back of his head, trying to remember just how it all happened. He knew he would have to if he expected to get the AFSAC to pay for the extra duty. Let's see, on Asteroid L381944 in

the Alpha galaxy, we put down for the usual; pickup of materials for the ship's food-fuel convertor. The captain left the ship and was rummagin' aroun' some twentieth century crash junk. A day or so later he had red spots on his face. Three days later everyone had them. The doc reported to earth that some strange disease was aboard. Earth said to stay out in space "until you cure it or we diagnose it." The computer broke down when the captain fed it the symptoms of the disease instead of the program for continued flight. And when the doc finally figured out that it was somethin' history calls measles, we were lost. Were lost, hell, are lost. The AFSAC does it again. When a fellow's enlistment is just about up they give him some damn thing he ain't never had, and for a Christmas present they get him lost in space. No Santa Claus for me this year.

He felt the ship lurch. Sure miss computer landings, he thought; ever since it went out we've landed hard. Adam gritted his teeth and waited. KA-THRUMP! Hard and wrong, he concluded, seeing that the ship rested precariously atop a tiny knoll.

"This is your captain," the intercom cooed. "We have just accomplished another perfect landing. We will take on convertor material and then continue our thrust forward. However, since we have strayed into an uncharted galaxy, an atmospheric-like check will have to be made, and we will have to complete the check ourselves, as the computer is non-operative. We will probably not find any life above the lower forms. If you should encounter alien forms, use your stunning weapons; if friendly, the squad leader will determine how friendly and attempt to establish some form of communication. And, if successful, he will call me so I can meet with it. Corporal Redclay's squad report to the unload ramp for duty."

"We," hell, Adam thought as he led the six men from beneath the ship; he ain't put his fat feet on the unload ramp since he got the pox, or whatever the hell it was. Nobody out here 'cept one civilian, who's got no business here at all, and six space rats.

Adam nodded approvingly as he took the atmospheric reading. "OK, you guys," he barked into the space suit microphone, "you can strip off your outers; oxy plus three over normal, temp seventy-six. No poisonous gases, so fan out and begin collectin'. Try and bring back some rocks the convertor can turn into steaks instead of stew."

He stood watching them. The brilliant

red sand clung to their silver undersuits and glittered like minuscule jewels. If I were here as a civvy, he thought, this would be nice for astro-touring. He noticed that Thron and Smythe were already over the horizon line, and the others not far behind. It's not too big and a nice cool breeze is blowin'. Adam squatted and scooped up a handful of sand. Just like the beaches back home, he thought, only ain't no pretty woman's toes been kickin' in it. The sand spilling between his fingers somehow reminded him that it was snowing somewhere on earth.

He looked up to see the men, their arms flailing wildly as they fought to run in the sand. Against the sea of pale green sky they looked like great water-bound birds. Damn, runnin' like crazy. "Hey, you guys, stop that runnin', that little orange in the sky'll have you on your butts." Thron was the first to reach him.

"Corporal, corporal," he gasped, "there's . . ."

"Damnit, Thron, I tol' you before I ain't no corporal any more. It's plain ol' Adam or mister."

"Cor . . . Adam, we were just over the horizon, picking up material, when me and Smythe sp . . ."

"Man," Smythe broke in excitedly, "there's something over there that ain't one of us. It roared from this hole in the ground that was nearly ten foot square."

"Hold it, hold it," Adam growled. "One man tell the story. What's the matter with you guys, anyway? You get on some small speck in the universe and go to pieces. All right now, Thron, you finish."

"Well, anyway, there was this mound

of rocks, all tan and prettylike, stacked around this hole, only they didn't look stacked until we got right up on them. Then there was this whine which got stronger and then something roared, 'I want to speak with the highest authority among you in an atmosphere of peace.' "

"Any of you see what was on the other end of the voice?"

"Huh uh, by that time we were runnin' like hell."

Adam glanced over Smythe's shoulder and could see the two furrows Smythe and Thron had cut; the others had followed them, making the ruts deeper.

Adam flipped open his direct line to the ship and he knew the captain was listening. "Sir," he said, "we have established contact with a higher form of bein' and await your arrival in accordance with your orders."

Let's see, he thought, ol' cap oughta be sweatin' like hell now. Wonder how he's gonna unload this one. He can't claim he's gotta talk to earth, 'cause earth ain't talked to us in months; figure by now they think the plague ate us up. Can't say he's got to feed the computer a special program 'cause it ain't workin'. Wonder what he'll do? "Heads up, fellows, here comes the good cap." The terrestrial runabout scooted beetlelike across the sand and halted near the men in an umbrella of sand mist.

"Ten-shun!" Adam barked, as the captain stepped from the Tetrab. Adam noticed the little beads of sweat glistening on the captain's forehead.

"All right, Corporal," he said abruptly, "you are in charge of further communication with the creature. I have alerted the ship to stand by in case it's alien instead of friendly. I am returning to the

ship—don't want to spread that disease around the universe if I still have it. Still feel a little weak. Carry on, Corporal."

The captain returned Adam's salute sharply and climbed back into the vehicle. He smiled weakly at Adam and with a grey-gloved hand signaled his driver. The seven stood silently in the swirl of red dust and Adam could still see the captain's smile in the mist of sand.

What a helluva place for a civilian, he thought, one helluva place. "OK, men, let's go a-callin'."

Adam led the way, and as they tramped along in the furrows he noticed that the sun was now just halfway up the sky and paler. Awful short days, he thought. Wouldn't be no good for girl watchin'. Wouldn't be no good for lookin' in some dark hole either, but then again, if the damn thing were really dangerous, we'd been attacked first time we set foot outa the ship . . . I think.

"All right, troops, look sharp, there's the pile of rocks ahead, no laggin'. Smythe, you move up front with Thron and me . . . **put that damn weapon away.**"

They stopped just before a gentle rise covered with soft foliage. The rocks were there just as Thron had said, but the opening was larger than he expected. Adam took a deep breath.

"Hey, in there," he yelled, "I'm a peace-lovin' leader. How 'bout you?"

"Do not be afraid, earthman," rumbled from within.

"Show yourself," Adam bellowed. "Prove to us you're really friendly."

"I need not appear before you to prove my peaceful intentions. By your standards I am ugly, so if you should see me you might judge me unfairly. If you are

patient, you will see that I am friendly. There is something here for you. You will find it on the flat rock to your left." The ground had vibrated so much that Smythe had dropped his weapon.

"Bring it here, Thron."

Thron moved slowly until his fingers closed around the box, then he leaped, thrusting the box into Adam's hands. Adam hefted it several times. The others moved back. "The one who left it for you and taught me the universal language so that I could tell you that he was sorry that he could not wait to deliver it. He said to tell you that he was in a hurry."

Adam turned the small alloy cube with two short wires over and over in his

hand, feeling its warm, pulsating heat. The moment of fear sucked his throat dry. It was a miniature computer so small that a thousand like it could sit where the big one did in the ship. Whatever made this, his thoughts raced wildly, could destroy earth!

"Where was he . . . , where was he going?" he asked huskily.

"They arrived and left while my sun was dark."

"**They, they!**" Adam yelled, "what do you mean **they**? How many were there?"

"There were eight others, but they were not like him. They walked on four legs and could not talk. Two of them he called 'Donder' and 'Blitzen.'"

God Rejected?

NANCY DUKELOW

Andrew hurried down the back steps of the duplex in which he lived. He climbed aboard his bicycle, a dull crusty red one that was the cast-off of his older sister. Andrew was small for his eleven years, with slightly stooped shoulders. His small intense face was sprinkled with freckles and his nose supported an enormous pair of wide, round glasses which seemed much too big for his face. A thatch of mousy brown hair fell forward into his eyes and he flung it aside with a nervous twist of his head.

Above the trees, he could see the spire of the Catholic Church; it was the tallest structure in the tiny town of Miedo and much of life revolved around it. Andrew was heading in this direction. He pedaled down the lazy blocks of houses, enjoying the quiet solitude of the morning. The church came into view, and he wheeled his bike down the sidewalk that ran be-

hind it. After parking his bike by the edge of the huge cemetery there, he unlatched the gate and stepped inside. He had a distinct air of aloneness, half enjoyed and half resented. He began to think of how he was set apart from the other children his age. He desired to learn everything he could about natural science, yet that sort of thing was shunned in the school and replaced with tales of the saints' lives, their miracles and their self-inflicted penance.

But the one overpowering circumstance that made him different from the others was that he belonged to the only Protestant family in town. Every day some event occurred in which he alone did not take part. This early in the morning all the other children had already been in the classroom for half an hour, eating breakfast while the Sisters or Father Klug instructed them in their catechism.

To Andrew this morning, life seemed to consist mainly of these moments that set him apart from the others.

The cemetery he entered was large and beautifully kept. A heavy stillness hung over the place, leaving the silence unbroken as Andrew walked reverently down the center aisle. He began weaving through the close-set gravestones until he came to an open space. From here, he saw the outlines of several small markers placed right up against the back fence. In between himself and the markers was a vast empty space where no had been buried yet. Andrew knew why these stones were far away from the others and crowded against the fence. These were the graves of the non-Catholics who had died in Miedo and had no other place to be buried. There could not have been more than seven or eight of them in all the time the cemetery had been here.

Andrew walked to the center of the cemetery where there was a life-size crucifix. All around the foot of the statue were graves of priests who had died while serving the parish of Miedo. Andrew stepped gingerly between these and knelt beneath the pedestal of the crucifix.

It was in this attitude that Sister Mary Elizabeth saw him as she looked out the window of the eighth grade classroom. There was something about the boy that appealed to her. He was very intelligent and never restless like the other children whom she taught. She knew his Protestant family rarely made it to the Methodist Church in a nearby town because she had heard him talking with the other children about it. Yet, every morning, he could be seen kneeling at the bottom of the crucifix in the cemetery. She was even beginning to have hope for a possi-

ble conversion. Meanwhile there were her other students to take care of—and their attention to catechism was definitely lacking. “Listen, children,” she said, “Andrew is over there praying at the crucifix as he does every morning. I wonder how many of you would be devout enough to go pray every day if you weren’t forced into it.” Indeed, the students did look rather crestfallen after this little speech, for Andrew was a non-Catholic and only in the fifth grade. Sister Mary Elizabeth took heart and began to explain the difference between venial and mortal sins, but not before she rested her eyes for a second on the tiny figure of Andrew in the cemetery.

Andrew looked up at the statue from his kneeling position and shuddered. The crucifix was of cast iron painted a deathly white. Rivulets of red paint ran from the wounds on the cast-iron body. Andrew bowed his head and prayed. “Dear Lord, I know I’m not always such a good boy, but I do wish I could have more friends. Is it true what they tell me, that I can’t go to heaven? They’re all the friends I’ve got, but they don’t really like me. I wish I could be more like them and believe the things they do.

“Forgive me, Lord, for being so frightened at the stories the nuns tell about the saints and their miracles and how they dig them up after they’ve been dead to see if they’re rotten or not. If I ever had a vision like some of the saints did, even if I knew You sent it, I would probably cry. Help me to think of You as a real Father and not the other things. Amen.”

Andrew lifted his head and looked into the eyes of the statue. It was becoming real to him, and with a rush of dizzying

courage, he stood up. He put his hand on the top of the pedestal and felt the cold, grainy cement beneath his fingers. After a few seconds, he put one knee on the pedestal and pulled himself up. He crouched at the bottom of the crucifix with his eyes closed. If he raised himself to a standing position, he would be looking directly into Jesus' face with his eyes on the very same level. Slowly he breathed in a mouthful of chilly air and stood there trembling. At last he opened his eyes. The face of Jesus was very sad, and His eyes looked as if they were seeing something far in the distance. Andrew stared at the eyes and then at the wounds made by the thorns in His forehead. Then suddenly, the crucifix seemed to be falling on him, falling and falling, as if it were going to crush him with its iron weight. For a few seconds, longer than days, Andrew could not move or scream. Then, without looking up again, he scrambled down from the pedestal and ran down the avenue between the graves. He was sobbing by the time he reached the gate, although no tears would come. One part of his mind knew that he had thought the crucifix was falling only because of the rapid movement of the tiny clouds above the statue's head, but another part of his brain was in abject terror, and it was this part that was making him run.

When Andrew took his seat in the classroom a few minutes later, his hands were still trembling violently. He sat silent during the opening exercises, happy just to be where there were people and warmth. Although he had been inside for only ten minutes, he heard the Sister announce that the children should go put on their wraps. Then he remem-

bered that it was the first Thursday of the month and the rest of the children were going over to confession at the church. Andrew didn't want to be left alone to roam the school on his own, but he didn't want to go back over by the church either. He stood in the hall and watched the classes file past. As Sister Mary Elizabeth passed him, she whispered that he could use her compass to make designs while they were gone, but he made no reply and she pulled back, just a little hurt.

All alone in the four-story building, Andrew began to hear echoes. He merely sat in his desk and watched the hands of the clock move. He tried to compose himself and keep his eyes off the bulletin boards decorated in saints' pictures and off the small crucifix hanging over the Sister's desk. He attempted to read a library book, but every sound made him start and whirl around until he became quite distracted. His face was contorted with fear and his legs were beginning to cramp from being so tense. Luckily, a couple of the classes were straggling back into the schoolhouse and Andrew was amazingly relieved. The remaining class periods of the morning passed slowly, but at least he was not alone with the unbearable emptiness of the deserted school.

In the afternoon, Sister Mary Elizabeth came in to teach them geography. She was still a bit peeved with Andrew and when she asked him a question he fidgeted strangely and did not answer. She was upset at this lack of attention and made a few remarks about people who didn't study their lessons while Andrew cowered miserably under the thirty sets of eyes that turned on him. When the

bell rang for dismissal, the children parroted the Our Father and Andrew didn't add, as he usually did, the part that went "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever." He slipped silently from the room and out the door to the place where his bike was parked. He pedaled swiftly to the white clapboard duplex without noticing, as he usually did, the sunlight filtering between the changing leaves.

Upon opening the door, his mother called out, "Andrew, is that you? Come here."

"Yes, mother."

She was sitting at the sewing machine, completely absorbed in the dress she was making for his sister. The unpleasant whirr of the machine bothered his ears and made him nervous. "Well, Andrew, how was school today? Did you do all right in spelling?"

"Mother, I—I—," Andrew began with great relief as the words prepared to tumble out together.

"Yes, dear, that's fine. I'm always proud of you. Why don't you carry out the trash for mother?" she said, never looking up from the bright material that made its way through the machine.

"But, mother, I—," Andrew began.

"Hurry up now, dear, so you can wash up for dinner."

Andrew resolutely picked up the wastebasket and carried it to the barrel in the back yard. He struck a match and watched the orange flames leap up from the insides of the barrel. Was that really what hell was like? The fire was warm and beautiful. He felt strangely uncomfortable in his own back yard with dusk descending.

At dinner that night Andrew did not

feel like talking. The kitchen suddenly seemed crowded with the four of them at the table. His sister talked loudly of the day she had spent while his mother and father listened attentively. After the meal, his father retired to a favorite chair in front of the television and his mother returned to her sewing. Andrew went to his room and though it was very early, he prepared to go to bed. He crawled beneath the covers and felt that he should pray, but was afraid to do so. The light from the living room, shining halfway into his room, and the indignant crackling from the television comforted him, and he fell asleep. His parents noticed he had gone to bed rather early for an eleven-year-old boy, but Andrew was always doing things that defied explanation and they thought no more about it.

When Andrew woke everything in the room was pitch black. There was no glow coming through the window. The only sound was that of a cricket, probably the last of the season. Andrew stared into the darkness, trying to make out some familiar shape. The atmosphere seemed oppressive, almost smothering. At last Andrew dared to move a little in the bed. His own movements frightened him and he began to perspire heavily. Vainly, he tried to focus his mind on something other than the falling crucifix. Part of his mind rejected the thought that anything supernatural was going to happen, but the other part was terribly frightened that he might see something in the darkness, a vision of a saint half rotten or a reproduction of the crucifix with its bloody wounds. Gathering his courage, he slowly moved to the edge of

the bed and then with a sudden bound ran into his parents' room.

"Mother, mother—" he whispered desperately. She woke with a start.

"Andrew, what are you doing out of bed? What is the matter?"

"I had a bad dream," he stammered. "May I stay in here and sleep on the floor?"

"You know it's too cold for that sort of thing," she said gently. "Go take an aspirin and you'll be able to sleep. Come on now, you're getting to be too big a boy to be afraid of the dark. Just try and go to sleep and if you can't, I'll get up and read for awhile in the living room, but try by yourself first."

Andrew reluctantly made his way back through the shadows to his room and again lay down. He wondered why all this was happening to him. Had he offended God in some way? A sudden image of the falling crucifix forced itself upon his mind and he shuddered. Why, oh why, had God let this happen to him? God must not love him any more. He felt very wicked for thinking this, but he could not figure any other reason. It was God that was making him afraid, God and all his saints and martyrs surrounding him with their bloody faces. He wished he'd never heard of God and then he wouldn't be frightened now. Another twinge of guilt struck him and he turned restlessly in the darkness, pulling the covers up under his nose. A slow suspicion was crawling through his brain. If God did not love him, he could never go to heaven, no matter how hard he tried to be good and please God. He could think of nothing he had done to lose God's love so suddenly. He hadn't

done anything, that was just it, and God decided He didn't want to bother with him any more. Why He should do this, Andrew didn't know, but he was becoming more and more certain that God was being unjust in sending the fear. God was cheating him out of heaven, and there was nothing that he, Andrew, could do about it. He had planned on going to heaven for a long time and now he wasn't going to get the chance. Anger began to fill his body and blot everything else out. The fear was still there, though. The tears began to come to Andrew's eyes and choked his breath. Since God had done these things to him, and all for no reason, he would have nothing to do with God! He would just stay away from God and never think about him again! He was still afraid, and he knew he would always be a little afraid. Andrew began to sob softly. All the anger was gone now, as swiftly as it had come, and he was left alone with the overwhelming emptiness of his loss.

Sister Mary Elizabeth did not notice that Andrew was not at his prayers in the cemetery the next morning. She was too concerned with trying to teach the greatness of God's love, a love so great that she had sacrificed her whole life in its honor, to a class that was busily crunching their toast and sucking their oranges. Later that week, though, she happened to glance out the window at the time Andrew was usually at his devotions, and he was not there. Curiosity made her return to the window the next morning and the morning after that, but Andrew was never there, so Sister Mary Elizabeth quit watching.

PATRONS

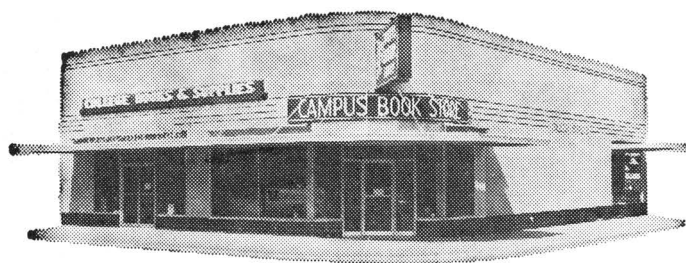
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