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John Cadenhead



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The Undergraduate Quarterly of Kenyon College

WINTER

1959

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Cover John Cadenhead

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WE BURY OUR DEAD

"Dear Alex," Heins began to write, "I am one hundred years old today and to celebrate I am going to write you a letter." Heins turned away from his pen and paper for a moment and gazed at his cheap reproduction of Picasso's still life, *An Ancient Head*. After a moment Heins had cleared his mind, leaving his muddled thoughts with Picasso. He again took up his pen. "About my nephew," he continued, "I loved him. He might as well have been my own son. I cannot believe that he is dead; he was only six. I know what to expect when I go home—they will say Johnny is an angel and that God wanted him. Sufficient reason for them, but, God knows, I knew he was an angel before he died. And God wanting him—I wanted him more."

If Heins could only cry. Instead, he crumbled up the paper and threw it into the wastebasket. He stood and, without knowing it, paced the room, waiting. He could not get a train to take him home until early tomorrow morning. And he asked himself how does one spend time, this kind of time—waiting to see a dead child. He smoked and began to write more letters to friends to whom he had written for three of four months. Another letter began like this: "Not so long ago the world was round, not so long ago, but now it's flat, flat, flat . . ."

Heins saw himself in the mirror on the wall opposite the *Ancient Head*. He was getting bald. When he went home the family would rub this into an already tender wound. It reminded him that he was getting old—thirty-four and to his family's disgrace still not married. In the mirror Heins was pleased with what he saw. So I was not born the handsome man I want to be, he told himself. Is anyone? he asked. He shrugged his shoulders and walked into the kitchen of his two room apartment.

Heins set the coffee pot to heat on the stove. Standing before the stove, the phone call he received in the afternoon rang again through his brain:

"Hello . . . Jim? Is anything wrong?" Heins was surprised to hear the voice of his brother-in-law, the child's father. He had never called before.

"Bernerd? I thought you'd want to know . . . Well, there's been a death in the family. Little . . . little Johnny, he was killed."

"What? Oh no-o-o, that can't be. Yes, of course, I'll come home. I don't know when. I'll get a train as soon as I can. Now, Jim try to take it easy. Don't let yourself fall apart."

"I still can't believe it, Bernerd, I won't, I guess, until I see. Would you like to talk to Ma?"

"Is she there? No, I don't want to talk to anyone. I know you don't either, Jim."

Heins drank his coffee black, as he always did. He looked around his small, but tidy apartment. He emptied an ashtray filled with butts from two days of smoking. The hospital gave him a week off for the funeral. In a way he was glad to have a week off because, although he liked his work at the hospital—admitting patients and learning their secrets (they *had* to tell), he grew tired of doing the same thing every day. Heins poured himself another cup of coffee. He heard foot steps in the hallway and knew they were those of the red-haired woman who lived upstairs. She usually came in at this hour. He opened the door. "Lilly?"

"Hello, Bernerd."

"Lilly, I'll be going away—home—for a week. Will you do me a favor and take in my mail and the newspaper. I'll pick them up when I come back."

"Sure, Bernerd. Oh, I'm bushed. It's been a rough day at the hospital. For six hours or more we've been going steady in Emergency. The accidents! You'd think people might be more careful. Say, is anything wrong, you rushing off to home like this?"

"Uh, yes. There's been a death in the family. My little nephew, he was killed."

"Oh Bernerd, I'm so sorry." She grabbed hold of his hands and squeezed sympathy into them. "I *am* sorry, Bernerd."

"Yes. Thanks. Well, you know, things happen."

"Yes, I understand." She turned and ran up the stairs. Heins heard her open her door and then her tired steps above him. She turned on her radio.

Heins walked backed into his rooms and prepared his bed. He owned two clocks and he put them both near his bed. He wanted to be sure to make his train. The two clocks, ticking, answered each other as in a monotonous concerto. Heins fell asleep and he dreamed:

In the funeral parlor he sat in the row in front of the coffin with the others of the family. The others were in black, mourning in silence. Their faces were shaded by a morose green that flooded, softly, the room. But Little Johnny grew uncomfortable in his coffin and wanted to get out. "Heins, I want to play," he cried. He wanted some toys that were piled high in another room. "Heins, I want to play," he cried again. The mourning, green people did not see this. Only Heins did.

"No, no, Johnny. You can't play. These people, what will they think? " Heins rushed up to the coffin. "Lie down, Johnny. You can't play anymore." Heins smiled at him and stroked his hair. But Johnny in his squeaky and frail voice screamed out at Heins, "Heins, Heins! I want to play, play, play. . . ."

Heins woke up on time in the morning. He sat up in bed and recalled his dream. Then he threw himself against his pillow and cried. He carelessly told himself: No, I can't bring him back. I can't. I won't believe it until I see.

II

"Sixteen cars!" said a fat negro whose head was covered with curly, gray wool. "Well, Ah know a train that had sixteen cars and, hell, it didn't be late. 'Matter of fact it was an hour early. Just cause a train has sixteen cars don't mean it has to be late. Just sixteen cars . . . humph! Ah've been on trains that had more cars than that." The colored man directed his discourse to the conductor, but the conductor ignored him.

The train ride lasted for ten hours and any other time Heins would have changed seats several times or sprawled his long legs over the adjacent seat if it were empty or visited the rest room at least five times or sipped coffee in the dining car to pass the time. But this time Heins could not find it in himself to leave his seat, nor even to change his position. It is true that he smoked too many cigarettes, but they did not satisfy him and he trampled many of them out before they were, say, half smoked.

Heins gazed out of the dirt streaked window and he saw nothing but flat country dotted with farmhouses, an obstinate village, or some dirt road leading from the railroad tracks to nowhere, nowhere that he could see. All of this would have ordinarily caught his eye and kept it, but not at this time.

The short train carried Heins swiftly through this barren land. Heins pondered over his little world and was excited to the point of feeling a deep gnawing in the pit of his stomach, for he was going home. The train stopped at many of the villages, each time starting up again with a jerk and a bang, jarring Heins and the other passengers back into the confines of the narrow and long world of fellow travelers, drawing theirs eyes from the melancholy, provincial barrens into another melancholy, but somehow estranged setting, apart and imposed upon the other and rushing through it, laughing at it with a clacking drone.

The train inside was animated with the chatter of what seemed to Heins (when he listened) a hundred voices speaking all at once and in

tongues he did not understand. "Get down from that window, Mary! Look, you dirtied your nose. God, can't you keep still, girl?" Mary sat back into her seat after she had received a smack on her tiny buttocks. Or: "I told her we were coming. I did. Yes, I know. Yes, but I wrote her last week, she should have gotten the letter by now. A long time ago, in fact. Yes, I know, but she *is* expecting us. . . ." Two suave negroes were discussing a magazine article. "You know," said the one with shiny, plastered-down hair, and thick, fleshy lips, "It is this idea of *l'Art pour l'Art*. In other words, don't judge. In Chicago there is a movement toward this *thang* and, Ah, personally. . . ."

The train rolled heavily over the void of provincial land, crushing it under the weight of flashy, streamlined steel, and Heins, from his window observed, unseeing, the country. He saw a small street running along the tracks. They were nearing another village. Heins wondered as he watched a car race the train in this small street. He wondered if the driver of the car knew that he was aboard the train; he remembered that whenever he drove past a train or bus, it was the structure which impressed him and, he, probably like the driver whom he was watching, could never put himself into the place of the other. Aside from his personal grief, Heins also felt an impersonal loneliness.

The train brought itself to a gradual stop and then amidst an expiring hiss and finally, the last thud of the cars slamming against one another, the conductor announced: "Stee-ee-l-ton." Inside of the station Heins heard the stationmaster announce: "Train for Old Town, Newton, Middletown will leave at Gate four in ten minutes." The message was repeated and Heins thought to laugh, "Yes, in ten minutes, and then it will be gone . . . without me and, I, here in Steelton, will have no further thoughts about the train or where it goes. I don't even know where it's going after Middletown."

III

Heins got out of the taxi and carried his two pieces of luggage to the porch of his brother-in-law's home. This was his home, too, for all that was left of the family lived here—his sister, Jim's wife, and his mother. Jim greeted Heins at the door, "Bernerd, we didn't know when to expect you. You should have called, I'd have picked you up at the station, instead of you getting a taxi." Heins smiled at him and then shook his hand. "I've got money," Heins grinned, "You didn't know that, did you?"

Heins picked up one suitcase and Jim, the other. "Jim, I just don't know what to say to you . . . I . . . but tell me, what happened?" Jim led Heins into the living room. Heins painfully heard the sobbing of

his sister. She held her hands over her eyes, her head bent over the dining room table. Heins ran to her and embraced her. "Em, Em, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Heins kissed her and she held onto him tightly as if not wanting to let him go. She did not look at him, but with her head lowered she stammered, "It . . . it's not going to be the same around here. Why? Why, Bernerd, has this happened to me? Do you know, Bernerd? My baby . . . he used to sleep with us. Just night before last he stuck his head into our bedroom and asked us if he could sleep with us. Why? Bernerd, I want to know *why*." Heins petted her and then withdrew from her embrace. He sat down at the table beside her. Jim, who was standing, watching, sat opposite them. His eyes were red and it was apparent that he got no sleep last night.

"A policeman came to the door while Emma was cooking. She was waiting for the kids to come home from school." Jim spoke every word carefully, slowly. "When she went to the door, the policeman handed her Johnny's books, blood stained, and before he could say anything she passed out. They called me from work. Our doctor was here, he gave her a few shots." Emma did not hear any of this or did not seem to. Jim walked into the kitchen and Heins followed. "I went to the hospital right away, but they wouldn't let me see Johnny. I got mad and I told the police that he is my son, that I was going to see him. No one stopped me. They let me see him. I don't remember everything, but if ever I wanted to kill, it was then. He was run over by a car. His skull was crushed and an arm and a leg broken. They said his heart beat for half an hour after. I tell you, Bernerd, I wanted to kill, I wanted to tear my heart out. The doctor gave me some pills, I'm trying hard to stand up. I need to take care of Em. She's weak."

Heins shook his head "no" to everything he heard. He wanted to vomit. He placed the palms of his hands flat on the kitchen table. "Where's Ma?" he asked.

"I bet she didn't hear you come in. She's in the cellar washing some clothes."

Heins made his way down the cellar to surprise his mother. At the head of the stairs he watched her rinse some clothes in a tin tub amidst the steady grind of the washing machine. She could not hear too well. He called her. "Ma." Again, "Ma." He walked almost to her before she noticed him. She dropped her clothes into the tub and rushed to him. He kissed her on both cheeks. "I no hear you come, Bernerd," she said in her thick Czech accent. "No-o-o, I don't know you were here." She examined his face and the rest. "You don't look so good, Bernerd. You getting skinny. You don't eat good, you better watch."

Heins looked down at the little, fat lady and chuckled, "Ma, now stop that. I'm taking good care of myself." He walked towards the tub with his mother. He watched her as she talked. She wore a black babuska, covering all of her hair and tied at the nape of her neck in a knot. Her eyes were brown and perceptive, almost naive. They were filled with self-pity, superstition, cunning—an adjustment she had to make. She mentioned Johnny and she cried, pursing her lips, a soft, subtle, experienced cry. "Bernerd, you go. I come upstairs after I finish dis. I got to wash the clothes."

IV

The family sat close to Johnny that evening and friends came. If Heins does not remember any other scene at the funeral parlor, he will remember this: Emma stared into the small coffin with a strange and steady gaze. Not once did she take her eyes off Johnny. Her dark eyes looked at the boy, not with tears but a sensitive pleading from the depths of lethargy and despair. She and Jim sat next to each other and he had placed his arm over her shoulder. He would stroke her as if to comfort her, but his gentle gestures were not felt. And their other children—three of them—managed to sit fairly still, except for some outbursts of tears or a trip to the rest room.

Heins could not sit. He stood at the entrance of the room leaning against the door frame. Friends were reviewing Johnny and the flowers and, they, they extended their hands and "I am so sorry, my sympathy" to the parents. Those that knew Heins offered the same to him.

"Heins, I am sorry, my sympathy." Heins looked around to see his old college pal, Alex.

"Alex, am I glad . . . ! I rather expected you to come." They walked into the smoking room.

"I couldn't believe it when I first heard, Heins. I saw the baby's picture in the paper. It is useless to tell you how sorry I am, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's cruel, Alex. He had much to live for. They're all asking *why* and I wish to God there was an answer. I can't bear to look at my sister's or brother-in-law's faces. They're living in pain, Alex, and it's too much." Alex listened, but after a moment of silence Heins added with a sigh, "Well, we just have to accept it. I can't bring him back."

"Tell me, Heins, what have you been doing with yourself? You haven't written for a long time. I still say you should have finished college."

"Oh, I've thought about that, but I'm just as happy at the hospital as I'd be anywhere. I don't know if I'd like teaching . . . now. I'm away, Alex, from all that. . . ."

"Just what are you trying to say, Heins? You're running from something. Have you ever asked yourself what? Do you remember our English prof in 107—Gabe—who asked us both 'who are you?' I know who I am, Heins. But let me ask you, 'who are you?'"

"No drugstore psychology, Alex, please. You know that question is trite now-a-days."

"Yes, yes, what you're saying is that no one asks themselves this anymore. I think you mean more than you say, Heins."

"If you want to talk over old times, Alex, let's do it this way: Do you remember our *slashing* satire on Gabe, the one we wrote in the Fiesta Coffee House after class? We called it 'Hate-Escape Outlet', if I remember right. We loaded it with remarks that Gabe had made on our papers, 'You have finally arrived at your *metier*—writing savage letters . . .' or 'You are writing in an abandoned styled,' and, best of all, Alex, don't you think, was the big red 'GAD!' that you received on one of your papers? You know how I tried to prove to him that the style I wrote in was not abandoned, simply because I wrote in it. He still argued that it was abandoned. Then I told him I wished to revive it." They both laughed. They talked awhile and then Alex left. Heins promised to write.

Many people just then came in for their wraps. Heins learned that the funeral director had asked everyone to leave. Because the house was too warm, the wax that he used to repair Johnny's face had begun to melt. Johnny was still bleeding internally and small spots of red began to show up on his face. Heins went to his mother and helped her out of the armchair. He escorted her to the coffin and knelt beside her. She was saying a rosary and continued to do so then. Heins, who had not prayed for over fifteen years, began. He did not pray to God especially, but ran the words over in his head, inanely shouting to himself, "Hallowed by thy name, hallowed be thy name, HALLOWED BE THY NAME!"

Heins did not ride home with the family. He told them he would come with a friend. This was an excuse, for he wanted to walk. The chilly air would do him good and more, he wanted to buy what he had forgot to buy earlier in the day. On his way home he stopped at a drug-store that he used to know well. A teen-age girl waited on him.

"May I help you, Sir."

"A package of toilet paper, please."

As the young girl put the purchase into a bag, she could not keep from blushing. She grinned at a tall, lanky boy who was stocking the shelves behind her. "Hee, hee, here you are, Sir."

Heins pushed the thick glass door open and the chill of the February wind caught him.

V

On the third day, after the body had been placed before the altar and all the mourners were seated, the choir made up of Johnny's classmates in the first grade began to sing. These children stood in two straight rows in the aisle, one on either side of the coffin. The coffin was not opened in the church; instead, a red, flickering candle was placed on top of it. The children sang two hymns and, standing as much as they could at military attention, seemed afraid. Heins, because he sat near the aisle, noticed that several of the children did not sing. They stood holding their black songbooks against their chests with their eyes fixed on the bronze coffin.

Two priests served the mass. One gave the sermon and directed it toward the standing children: "You see that we are wearing white today. You know that it is customary to wear black on such a day as this, but, dear children, we are wearing white because there is a new angel in heaven. This angel is Johnny, whom many of you, just a few days ago, played with. But Johnny is not with us today because God called him to Heaven. This is a day of rejoicing because many of us shall work and suffer and never shall find the infinite happiness that Johnny knows today. God has given life to you and you belong to Him. . . ." Heins hoped that his sister and brother-in-law would accept this. It had reason to it and made things easier.

After the mass the coffin was again loaded on to the hearse. Six boys in the ages of about twelve to fifteen acted as pall bearers. A long line of cars followed the hearse through the winding, narrow streets of Steelton, through Main Street and pass the negroes' shanties near the Old Salt River and the steel mills, filthy with ore dust. The interment took place at the cemetery on Oak Hill, overlooking the river and the mills. The family stood around the coffin which was setting over the grave on an iron grill. Those who could not cry, cried then. The priest in white threw a handful of dirt on the coffin saying the words from Genesis in Latin. Heins heard the *thud* on the curved polished bronze. The dirt dispersed over it. A few pieces rolled over the edge and fell into the grave.

The family went home. The friends followed them. They entered a house already filled with neighbors who had brought sandwiches and cakes and cookies. The dining room table, where Emma had cried, was set with food. "Yes, it's noisy, dear," said Caroline, the lady from across the street, "But it's the idea behind it. I think it's this: there's

a terrible vacuum in your lives right now—gosh, I don't have to tell you *that*—and this is the way your friends try to fill it. It's the only way and, even if it is useless, it's a nice gesture."

"You've been so wonderful, Caroline. I can't ever pay you."

In another room Jim spoke to Caroline's husband. "Well, that's what she wants, so tomorrow I'll take her out and then you can come over with the children and pick out Johnny's things. I don't care what you do with them, maybe give them to the parish, but I want to make sure she'll never see them again. You know, Frank, Johnny sure must had something important to tell us to run home from school so fast and. . ."

"Ma, I guess I'll be going back tomorrow, instead of Friday," said Heins over the dining room table and chewing on a sandwich. "I've got a lot to do at the apartment."

"It would be nice if you stay, Bernerd, but. . ."

"Wait a minute, look at it this way," someone said in the kitchen, "If he dragged him for twenty-six feet you know he was speeding. You saw how bad he was hurt. God! I even stop for dogs!"

"But manslaughter! Will it help to prosecute? Will that bring him back?"

"It's an eye for an eye. It's the only measure of justice that we have. Sure he should be. . ."

"Georgie, get your hands off that duck," said the lady from the house next door, "that belongs to Johnny's brother. Did you hear me?" Georgie put the wooden duck back on the floor.

"Tom, I hope we have a baby like Georgie! Heh, heh, we'll have six of them," said a young lady pregnant with her first child. Tom blushed as those around him looked at him with approval.

The house was full.

VI

Heins waited in his apartment. At eleven that night, he walked out on the porch and stood there gazing at the crisp February night. The old streetlamps were lit, each giving off a soft yellow light. The fog clung tightly to the ground and wrapped itself around the posts of the streetlamps. He was waiting for Lilly, but she would not come. He did not think to question why. He took the last drag on his cigarette, then flicked the butt over the banister and on to a sooty crust of ice and hard snow which lay on the lawn near the porch. He might as well go to bed, he figured.

In bed he could not sleep. He began to imagine things, as he might

say, and, as the night passed, and, as he could not sleep, he delved into fantasy:

Scene: a cluttered cellar where Little Johnny's clothes and toys are being removed. Workmen whose faces are not visible remove toys from an old china closet and stuff them into baskets and boxes. There are toy guns and cowboy holsters lying on the floor. The atmosphere is green, and there is no noise. Atop a writing desk sets the ancient head from Heins' painting, and Lilly is sitting in a chair at one side of the desk. Such words as *cruel*, *unjust*, and *pain* are hurled from the mouth of Heins. The words are directed at the ancient head which bears a sign about its neck with one word: *corrupt*. It seems as though Lilly is testifying in a courtroom against Heins. To Heins the fantasy is frightening, and he would wish to escape through sleep, but cannot.

Lilly: "I work with sick people, and I can spot them when I see them. That man is sick (to Heins)." She mumbles something else that is not heard.

Heins: (Since he is in a courtroom, he assumes courtroom manners. He senses, too, that he is the defendant. He must address the ancient head as '*Honor*'. (He thinks he should have addressed it as *Lord-God-Almighty*) " '*Honor*, you cannot blame me for Johnny's death. I didn't kill him. You should at least bring the killer to justice, and not pick on me. The killer's name is McGlauklin. I can tell you how it happened, I can show you where it happened. I'll explain myself if I must."

It must not have been necessary to explain, for Heins did not.

Heins: "I see that justice is not important here. Your law is corrupt. '*Honor*, you are not honest."

Lilly: "'You're as gully as the next man, Bernerd. Don't hand us that stuff."

Heins: "Lilly, you've turned against me. And why? Why not let '*Honor* speak for itself."

The ancient head was silent.

Heins: "I'll just say this: when Johnny was a baby I almost did sit on him, and could have killed him. He was only a tiny baby then, and I carelessly sat on the bed, almost on him."

Lilly: "Now, Bernerd, you're off the track. Stick to the facts."

Heins: "When Johnny was living, and I visited home once, I gave him some money. He spent it all at the grocery store. He bought some shells that opened up when he placed them each in a glass of water. A paper flower sprang out of each shell. The flowers were different colors, and Johnny loved them. Don't you see that Johnny loved life."

Lilly: "Well, now, don't we all? In any case, Bernerd, the sentence is death."

Heins: "I see it does no good to argue. You've already made up your minds."

Lilly: "You can't argue in the face of truth, Bernerd."

Heins rolled over in his bed, sweating, and his heart beating rapidly.

Heins: "Oh, shit! shit that I can't." (Sobbing) "Your truth and your laws are corrupt. Shove them for all I care."

Heins got out of bed and continued to cry. He made himself some black coffee and then took it into the living room. He placed it on his desk. He looked at the *Ancient Head: Still Life*. Would it sound strange to say that he offered this head a drink? Dear World, he said to himself, I have a lot to offer, it's just hard to get.

Heins sat at his desk. He took from his wallet a small picture of Christ on the cross. On the back of it was inscribed:

Johnny

Died February 7

Hoc volo, sic jubeo;

Sit pro ratione voluntas.

Heins turned it over and across the bleeding feet of Christ he wrote angrily "Love."

—Donald Smetana

ON CHRISTMAS DAY IN THE MORNING

Mrs. Harte sat by the window, thinking. It was Christmas Eve. Another Christmas Eve. But she wasn't thinking about Christmas. O, of course she was a Christian. She loved Christ. She loved the Christmas story. She had loved it so much when her father had told it, every Christmas Eve, before bedtime. She would read the first two chapters of Matthew and the second chapter of Luke before she went to bed. But now there was so much else to think about. So many years. Whole years had gone by that she couldn't even remember. Dissolved years. Long ago, years before her father had died, before they had left the old family estate. Before, O, before "that" too. It had been a long journey from the big house to the smaller house, then to the little house, then to the apartment and now here. Now here she was at Oakridge. No, she hated to say it. Why did they have to call it that? Why did they

have to label you like just one sardine in a tin. "Oakridge Methodist Home for the Aged." Oakridge was bad enough. Everyone knew what that meant. Home for the Aged . . . that meant the end. She would die here. When? Maybe tomorrow. Maybe in five minutes. Mrs. Henshaw had died yesterday during evening prayers. And Mrs. Perry had said, "What a wonderful way to die. Almost in the Lord." In the arms of the Lord indeed! It was dreadful. That sound! O that horrible inhuman sound in her throat. Only two rows away! That woman had died only two rows in front of Mrs. Harte. Twelve thousand dollars. Mrs. Harte had given them her fortune, her last penny that she had saved for over fifty years. But the contract was signed. She had to stay now or lose forever her twelve thousand dollars saved in a suitcase in the attic for fifty years. Forever. How long would that be? She was eighty-two. But she was still healthy. Except for the eye. If only her eyelid would stop twitching. The doctor said it would stop once she was settled. Just nerves. He said she was just nervous, not used to the home yet. But the eye couldn't kill her. She might live to be a hundred. That would fool them all right. Then she would have her money's worth. She hated Mrs. Perry. Mrs. Perry and her smug, condescending, fast-talking husband. Why they were nearly as old as she was. "It's just like a hotel honey. You can come and go whenever you like," they had said. And she had signed, only a week ago she had signed. How dare they call her "honey" and "dear". Why, they knew what her family was. The Perry's know quite well that they were inferior to her, even if they did own Oakridge now. She could remember when Mr. Perry was just a country circuit preacher with three little tin-shack Methodist churches. Why her family had sent him baskets of food almost every week he was so poor. But he was ambitious, and yes, ungrateful too. And what was worse he, and maybe even Mrs. Perry knew about Frank. Frank. O he had looked so splendid on their wedding day. So dignified, so handsome. He was of such good family too. Well, his father drank, but otherwise it was a splendid family. She had wondered so many times in the long years since what it would have been like if "that" had never happened. They might have been so happy. But no. It was stupid to think about it. She could never have done it. O it made her shudder even now after so many years. And she had never seen one since. Except that dreadful man in the hotel reading room in Louisville that time. O that man! He had waved it at her from across the room. She had fainted though, so she hardly remembered it now. But her wedding. It was so lovely. She could still smell all the spring flowers. Her wedding dress from Paris. But

it all had to be spoiled. Why did men have to be that way? It had been so perfect, so beautiful until that night. Perhaps if someone had told her before what one looked like it would have been better. But her lovely handsome Frank on the night of their beautiful wedding had wanted to . . . O, she couldn't even think about it . . . with that big ugly, O that horrible . . . ! But perhaps if she hadn't screamed so and cried, if she hadn't run out of the room, it might have been all right. But it was his fault. He told her it was her duty, that she had to do it. Why did men have to be so nasty? But O dear, if she hadn't left him like that, that very night, maybe the Perrys wouldn't have her twelve thousand dollars, and maybe she wouldn't be here at Oakridge. But . . .

Supper time. The bell rang. Mrs. Harte had to stop thinking. There would be plenty of time to think now.

O dear, the eye again. She hated to go down to supper when her eye twitched. She would wait a few minutes. Just nervous about seeing people. She was just nervous. The meals were the worst part of it all. Her room wasn't so bad. It was small, but there was a wash basin, a telephone, and an adjoining bath with the Lady next door. But the meals. When they were all together in that one big room. They came in in wheel chairs, on crutches, some blind even. O it was dreadful! And how they ate, some of them! Dropping food, spilling things, and talking with their mouths open and full of food and sometimes no teeth. Deaf ones talking so loud and . . .

II

"Come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, come ye O come ye to Bethlehem." Children singing. Down the marble halls to old deaf ears. Down past the metal doors, each with its own mail slot, each with its own significant number, odd numbers on one side of the hall, even on the other. "Joy to the world" was heard now coming from flat, toneless boy sopranos in the general dining room. And they were right by the door, singing to two hundred gumming, chewing, masticating old faces. Two hundred mouths dumb with Christmas cheer and turkey chewed and smiled at the singing children.

Mrs. Harte was late for dinner. She would have to walk past those children to get to her table. O that nasty little boy! He was laughing at her. Yes he must have seen her twitch. Nasty little boy. "Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the new born king," followed Mrs. Harte to her table. And she sat down with her three table mates (O Joe Barker, Joe Barker was there) to listen to "Jingle Bells" and eat her Christmas dinner. "Dashing through the snow . . ." Mrs. Harte held

her hand over her eye. ". . . in a one horse open sleight." The whole left side of her face twitched now. "We hope you have a Merry Christmas and a Happy Happy New Year" spoke-sang the children as they were applauded out of the dining room by three hundred and ninety eight dry old hands.

"Come on grandma, (Joe Barker called all the women grandma) where's your Christmas spirit? Huh? You'll get old that way quick!" Joe Barker rocked with a hearty ninety-four year old laugh that filled his eyes with tears. Joe Barker's eyes always watered when he laughed. "I wish you would address me properly, Mr. Barker," Mrs. Harte managed to say through a series of hand hidden twitches. "O come on now old girl. It's Christmas Eve, and you're only young once, I always say, so cheer up." Tears streamed down Joe Barker's laughing face. "I'm sorry Mr. Barker, but I don't feel very well this evening." "You just eat hearty and you'll be all right. You're just like my fifth wife, yes just like her. Old Stoneface I used to call her. Yes sir, I remember one day when . . ." Mrs. Harte did not wait for Joe to remember. She left the table with a mumbled "excuse me please I don't seem to be hungry" and walked as fast as her thin old legs and her rubber-tipped aluminum cane could carry her out of the dining room. On her way she passed by one of the blind men who had a table by himself. He called out to her. "I know you. I can tell your walk. You're the new lady. I can tell everyone's walk." But Mrs. Harte did not reply to the blind man. She went to the elevator, up to the third floor, down the long, hollow, marble corridor, and into her room.

Mrs. Harte tried to read her Bible to cool her anger. But Joe Barker was still laughing, still watching her twitch. She did not want to hate. She knew that it was evil to hate. But Joe Barker was just such a dreadful, such an ill-bred old man. Always talking about all his wives. Always saying how young he was. How he did exercises every morning. How he would never grow old. "Never catch me fading away." And that laugh of his. Such a dirty laugh sometimes. "I'll just keep on going 'til someday—pufft that's it. No fading for me. No sir!" And those women at the table. His "sweethearts" indeed! Why she wouldn't be surprised if they were! They laughed at everything he said. And he pinched their cheeks! O what a dreadful old man he was. Mrs. Harte thought, or nearly let herself think that he reminded her of that man in the hotel in Louisville.

Mrs. Harte read the Nativity story in Matthew and began to feel better. Some more voices echoed down the long hallways. "Christ was born on Christmas Day on Christmas day, Christ was born on Christmas

day in the morning." These singers sounded better, forced her to forget Joe Barker. Her twitch was confined now to her eyelid again. "On Christmas Day in the Morning."

At ten o'clock Mrs. Harte took her mind from Joe Barker and the Bible and walked down the hall to the general reading room. The youth of the Epworth League from the local Methodist Church were giving a Christmas program. When Mrs. Harte had sat down and settled herself in a row of aluminum chairs, the woman next to her bent her head toward her and said, "You are the new lady aren't you. I am Mrs. Whitmarsh. Mrs. Conrad Whitmarsh." "I am happy to know you Mrs. Whitmarsh," replied Mrs. Harte.

The lights were turned out and "Silent Night" came piously forth from the slow procession of candle-bearing, black-robed Methodist youth moving towards the little platform in front of the audience. "Round yon virgin, mother and child." The line of candle-lit singing mouths was still now, stretched across the platform. A girl was kneeling now, eyes uplifted, a rose in her hand. A tall boy stepped from the black line and stood next to the girl, looking down at the flower. "Sleep in heavenly peace." Mrs. Harte was thinking that she had seen better Christmas programs when Mrs. Whitmarsh turned to her again and said in a loud clear voice, "You are the new lady aren't you. My name is Mrs. Whitmarsh, Mrs. Conrad Whitmarsh." Mrs. Harte was startled and was about to reply when "Away in a Manger" broke out in solo from the girl with the rose. When the girl stopped singing, three boys knelt down beside the girl and her tall spouse and began to sing "We Three Kings." An electric star shone suddenly out of the darkness above the three kings, flicked and went out.

During the rest of the program Mrs. Harte tried to think about the meaning of Christmas, as she had done every year before. She must forget how bad the voices had sounded. She must forget the burnt out star. But when the lights came on again and the Epworth League filed out of the general reading room, Mrs. Whitmarsh turned again and said, "Why you must be the new lady. I am Mrs. Whitmarsh, Mrs. Conrad Whitmarsh." Mrs. Harte could not think what to say. Why the woman must be insane! She had said the same thing three times. Exactly the same thing! Crazy! She didn't think they let insane people into the home. Crazy people and . . .

III

The telephone buzzer? Yes it was the telephone buzzer. The light. Where is the light switch. There. Now, out of bed. Slow. Very

hard to get out of bed at two o'clock in the morning. Two o'clock in the Morning? Who could be calling? Mrs. Harte picked up the receiver. "Yes, this is Mrs. Harte." She listened. She sat down. No. It was impossible. Joe Barker was coming. Yes, to do "that" he said. In ten minutes. He had a pass key. The door, yes the door was chained. He said "that." Should she call the Perrys? No, they would laugh at her. The night nurse? Should she call her? No, she would think . . . she wouldn't believe it. Crazy. She would think she was insane. Ten minutes. A pass key. He had a pass key! Should she wait and then call for help? Yes, wait. The Bible. Read the Bible. In times of trouble, sorrow, need, sickness or any other adversity. No. She couldn't read the Bible. He was coming for "that". Drink. Yes, he must have been drinking. Where could he get it? Drink, crazy people and then "that". Ten minutes, no five now. Drink. Yes, when men drank they got nasty. They had had champagne at the wedding. That was what had done it. Frank was so lovely. He wasn't like that. He was tall and handsome. Such a good family. His father. It must have been his father. He drank. O he will be here now. He said ten minutes. It was fifteen now. He isn't coming. No, it was a dream. Telephone dream? Crazy. She heard him say ten minutes. Pray. "Now I lay me down to sleep." Why that prayer? What prayer? "In sin hath my mother conceived me." No that wasn't a prayer. "Our father who . . ." twenty five minutes. No need to pray. He wasn't coming. Dream. Just down the hall. He lived just down the hall. Her face was twitching again. Stop twitch. He laughed at twitch. A trick. Maybe a trick. Laugh again. To laugh at her again. A half an hour. A trick. She was sure now it was a trick.

She climbed slowly into bed. No. She climbed back out again. Look out! Careful! She nearly fell. Cane on the floor by the bed. Unchain the door. Pass key. Unchain the door. She got back into bed. She was crying now. Tears poured down over waves of twitching skin. She had been sure that he said "that". It couldn't have been a dream. He had said ten minutes. It was a trick. She was sure it wasn't a dream. Laugh at her. To laugh. And he didn't come. No knock on the door. No.

She cried long into the night, long into the morning; she cried on Christmas day long into the morning.

—D. L. Stridsberg

AFTER THE FUNERAL

It was at the funeral that they met again. They came abreast of each other in the aisle at the same time. The three of them had the identical characteristics which set them off from the other mourners—a lack of depression in their aspect; a refusal to bow heads in heavy grief; and, the most contrasting of all, youth, the two men being about thirty, the girl, a few years younger. It was Jasney Zarias, holding his companion's hand, who was quick to intone in the girl's ear the familiar name, "Look, here's Paul . . . Serein." Valery, the girl, lowered her head and, reddened, denied Jasney's information. He nudged her again, quietly commanding her, "All that's over with you, isn't it? He hasn't recognized us yet. Bump him. Hurry up before he gets away." He pressed the girl's arm.

This last statement, with its accompanying pressure, had the compelling effect, and Valery Zarias touched the arm of the man walking on the other side of her, touched with an arm that had become rigid from the first mention of the memory name by her companion, so that she was scarcely able to raise her head, to enunciate "Paul." By this time they were outside the building, walking through a compressed, depressed crowd that seemed out of place in a yellow tinting sun, just as the three had looked displaced in the grey interior.

Serein turned to the girl, paused with his mouth open, stunned to behold the figure, slender and dark, that had said "no more" two years ago, that had, tears crawling mouthward, run away from him, that had, from hands that now dangled, blue veined at her side, wrote back "There can be nothing more between us." He had expected to see these two people, and, yet, knew that he must avoid them, these two who, to him, were so strangely brother and sister; he had felt, walking out of that gloomy building, the relief of not suffering the emptiness of embarrassment, the frightening contact again. But, pausing in the bright sun, he had not recognized Valery; had only identified the scar on her right cheek, the now palely creviced forehead. He closed the ridiculously opened mouth, felt his embarrassment subside and still knew his insides working furiously. Answering the bentover figure whose elasticity, transparency was curved perfect in its modesty, "Valery . . ." And then seeing her brother, "Jasney Zarias . . . I guess we missed each other somewhere along . . ." Stumbling over words, hearing his own inadequate explanations titter at him. "She meant the same to me. I haven't quite re . . . dont know how to say it."

They were silent, impenetrable to the hum of conversation around them. Both the girl and Serein watched the ground as they continued to walk along together: Valery because of her nearness to the old acquaintance; Serein, from his nearness to the girl, because of the apology for not seeking them, really, and he knew it, an apology to the woman in the coffin who was now well on her way to being baked.

Jasney broke the uneasy silence. "Well, don't feel too hard about it all." He produced his tawdry smile, that same indrawing smile that accomplished the impossible, setting all parties at ease, that made Paul feel warm inside and want to be outgoing. Jasney continued, "It is hard to re-establish old contacts. Come on out to the house. The old man'll love to see you . . . and, anyhow, you can relieve the monotony of this whole affair. Everyone old and gloomy 'll be there." Serein, reconsidering, checking the pallid look on the girl's face, returned to the old distrust of this Jasney person; then, he let it pass away as Jasney added, "It's better this way, Paul. She was in a good deal of pain. We never knew, though, until the end. Kept it a secret from everyone. Even the doctors."

They had been five long minutes in a close silence, impounded in the car's confines. And, although the two men had their settled thoughts, were riding passively on, Valery was weakly fighting back thoughts that had sought to fly like dreams before her eyes, to involve her in a past that especially now, in the presence of Paul Serein, imprisoned with these two men, she tried to repress: there was the garden, the two people, herself and Serein, the latter talking softly, incoherently on; and herself, trying, as she was usually able to do, as she loved to do, to immerse herself in his words, to let his touch, for he had a warm hold on her hand, send a thin veil of feeling, of moistness, up and down her figure. But she couldn't. She was able only to get the words out, to feel herself running wildly into the house.

No longer aware of the auto's movement, of the flashing-by scenery, occupied with the flight into memory, with the fast wave upon wave of past scene, she gave herself to closed eyes, to the feeling of nausea that worked up from her stomach: night . . . the room is dark. The door opens again. Turn on the bed lamp. See who it is? But who else. Put on a robe. I thought you were going to bed a minute ago. The two of them laughing and talking. The wine was good. (It warms the stomach and loosens the body twine.) Well, to bed. The old people 'll be back tomorrow. The kiss goodnight. Hardly brotherly. Laugh. The tears, the comforting on the shoulder and the pressing and the feel-

ing of skin and the kissing and the exploring hands that quicken the pulse and the final revulsion . . . but too late, too weak.

She could not stop: and again in the house, waiting to walk with Paul, waiting for him to descend the stairs. Waiting and listening to the voice beside her, Break off with him . . . break off with him or I'll tell all. I'll reveal the whole thing to him . . . to the old woman and to the old man. . . .

And the fear for the man beside her, for Paul Serein, was so numbing that she felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her when they finally turned into the driveway. She was inwardly calm again, except for the knowledge that the fear would return. So they arrived, silent, close moving, joining the same crowd of quietly speaking, hand-shaking people that now walked about the small suburban garden. A garden of begonias and other low, blooming perennials that was enclosed by a brick wall and which, in turn, surrounded the little stucco house. But just as they were entering the garden, they were approached by the old man, draked rimmed eyes, hot hands searching for Paul Serein's, finding, clasping, and a voice saying, "I wish, Paul . . ."

And Serein embracing the old man, "Yes . . . better times. I don't really know what to say. Superlatives. Eulogies. She was so much a mother to me." The four of them walked to the small table at which the old man sat down. The people walking in the garden began to make their way to the table, waiting their turn to shake the sad hot hands of the old man, hands that made them think that they were walking, talking on flowers, crushing them. They waited to say a few comforting words to the old man's run down at the belly figure, waiting to say "Oh we were so sorry to hear about Emily . . . she was a wonderful woman . . ." and the rest, the good wife, the good stepmother—a glance at Valery and Jansney who were standing off to one side, meeting the people as they left the old man, shaking hands, too. But it rolled off the old man who merely clasped each hand lightly in his own sweaty palm, who acquiesced a "yes" to everyone. Until: Paul Serein touched the old man on his shoulder, whispering, "Why don't you come in. You've seen everybody. Rest or talk to me for a moment. They won't go away. There's so much for them to do here. And Jansney'll take care of them . . . see that they do everything right."

"Yes." The old man waved to a few latecomers; then, he gave up his chair and moved through the garden into the house, half supported by Serein. They paused in a brightly prepared breakfast room which, even now in that afternoon, was reflecting the outside light. It was yellow wall paper with red roses and looked as though it were new,

though Serein remembered it from the first time he had visited. A table held the center of the room, while flower pots—some full, others empty—and books cluttered up the window sill and wall shelves. The old man sank into a captain's chair, facing Paul who had already sat down. Serein began talking softly, refusing to let the ever-present sentiment sicken his words, "I didn't know until yesterday afternoon when I saw it in the paper. Why didn't you write that she was ill?"

"She'd been sick for some time. I'd thought that Valery might have said something." The old man paused for a minute, drawing himself up in the chair.

Serein thought back: Valery had stopped writing a year ago. She had asked him to stop, too. Perhaps the old man was never told, never knew; perhaps not even the beginning.

"I didn't want to alarm you. They . . . the doctors . . . had said that she'd be all right. No one, not even they, knew what she was going through. It was as incomprehensible to us . . . Jasney sent you a telegram this morning. We wanted . . . as we knew she would . . . to get it over with. I suppose you left before . . ." He had talked himself out in a mumble and stopped altogether.

In the wall paper flowered silence, Paul Serein, an orphan himself, remembered the tall Emily, the old woman, white hair and white face and white hands, so that Paul Serein overflowed with a searing in which painfully he remembered the happy laugh of the old woman who had treated him as a son, who had for the weeks he had visited, when he and Jasney had been at school together, for the summer, the three months after his own parents death in an accident, had bestowed upon him a laughter that Serein had never known, a dignity that had been lacking in both his home life and in the college he had attended. Even in the end, even after he and Valery had parted, even then, when his feeling of distrust for Jasney had developed, there had remained her, the laughter, the dignity of person, the natural congruity with the old man. And, the naturalness with their foster children—Valery and Jasney—who had arrived early in their childhood, both the rumored products of the old man's younger sister's illicit doings. Paul had heard the story often. He had heard it first when Jasney had come to fetch him from the empty three room apartment after his parents' funeral. Jasney, laughing there in the center of the room, telling the story in such a third person manner, as though he had contrived it before hand, worked it out on paper and was now delivering it.

With the girl and her brother finally traveling to his tongue: "How are they taking it?" Adding for eplanation, though none was needed

for the old man, "Valery and Jasney." And the two names, even while the old man talked, twirled in Serein's mind, spelling together some unintelligible answer to his, Serein's, own hurt, an answer he could not decipher to himself.

"Oh," the old man's shoulders caved, "Valery's strange. She seems terrified. As if she's caught in a maze and really doesn't know which way to go. Yet, for me, for everyone, she keeps a good front. Jansney's bearing up well. He's taken care of most of the arrangements. I guess I've been a little too overcome. She wouldn't have liked that . . . I don't think . . . but it's been hard . . ." And the murmuring so that Paul Serein detected only a word here and there, both because of the old man's incomprehensibility and Serein's own wanderings, wanderings that brought him into a sunlit room of laughter with an erect figure sitting at one end of the breakfast table, the old man, erect too, at the other end and, on one side, opposite Serein's own body, were the brother, talking and laughing with the erect woman at the end, and the girl, slender, erect too, smiling, complementing the tawny center piece of asters and chrysanthemums, fusing herself with the sunlight until she too glinted off Serein's eye.

Then, through it all, broke the old man's words, "Never, never, never . . ." unable to find the sentence making conclusion, ". . . fine . . . happy . . . for the early love . . . is it that I'm badly made and must confess everything. But there's nothing here to confess. Just the togetherness we shared and the dignity of respect . . . more the memory . . ."

Serein sat still, not wishing to be confessed to, nor to interrupt, letting the old man's words flood his own convolutions.

". . . children at first . . . none . . . then Jasney . . . Valery next, so like Emily. And Jasney so different, but always making the attempt. But that's more confession, isn't it?"

And Serein sat still, letting these words roll over the grey matter, turning it inside out and upside down, beginning to set the wheels in motion, yet still not unleashing before his eyes a phrase to alleviate his own hurt.

"Night. And a warmth and happiness . . . a lazy flow for us both. But no longer for me . . ." The old man exhausted, fell asleep.

Paul Serein sat still, wishing neither to wake the old man nor to wake himself. Words were pushing about in him, revealing themselves without grace of sense; he whispered to himself, attempting to cohere the lack of rhythm in his mind into form: after the accident I returned here. It's always been my real home. Jasney brought me from the city.

He had to pause, couldn't go on speaking. Image of a sunny day met his eyes. Old man and old woman and girl walking arm in arm in a yellow, white, red flowered garden. The green grass brushing in a breeze. Brought back, he whispered, like today, bright. The first time I actually recognized Valery as more than the harmony that was here. She was the catharsis after the tragedy . . . the alembic. . . . He stopped again, seeing the old woman in a white dress with the old man in blue between her and the girl, white dress and black hair setting off the not smiling, not frowning face, face that was sweetly welcoming, that had all the charm of that bright day in it.

He saw himself walking about the garden with the girl, standing while she bent to clip a flower. We walked all the time, he whispered, together all the time. The old man and woman, indifferent, perhaps did not know. But Jasney and I were no longer together. He hardly ever spoke to me, then. Valery and I always . . . Then nothing.

Again he remembered: the girl bending, gracefully, to gather a flower or two. Rising again, standing close beside him, her face strangely dark, unhappy, her hand lingering on his arm, saying, brokenly, the words barely audible to his ears, less so to his mind; We have to be in the family, Jasney and I. I can't see you anymore. And she drooped, wilting on his shoulder for a moment. And he saw the figure of the girl run to the house.

He talked on softly to himself. And then Jasney and I were back on old terms for a few more days. The same day she broke with me, he changed so. And I had to leave . . . had to . . ."

The old man was still breathing heavily, but there had been an intrusion, if only a footstep, so that Paul Serein felt the invasion of his thoughts, felt the girl's presence without having to turn to see her.

"Yes. Go on. You were talking." She came around in front of him, speaking quietly so as not to disturb the old man. She sat on the floor beside Paul, the light hardly reaching down to sprinkle her hair, "Go on. Pretend sleep and go on. You used to talk like that, so softly, not chaining things together." She commanded him, sensing the desire on Serein's own part to continue.

And Serein, though embarrassed, did want to go on, did want to set it all out. He knew that he had been hurt once by her, yet still craved the solid knowledge, the full pain that the resetting of parts would give when completed. He made himself feel that he did not want to hurt her back, wanted only the picture the puzzle would give, knew that the pieces, singularly scattered about his cortex, had been and now were the stumbling blocks of his waking and sleeping steps. He asked, "We

wrote, didn't we? And you said always the same—stay away. And nothing else. Just a card. Like the last time we were walking in the garden and you told me . . . just a card's inscription."

Her tone revealed the apprehension that she had overstepped herself and would bring out the pain-producing medicine. But she went on, "Talk like before, asleep. Let the words play."

"Isn't it a little unfair?" And he felt the self-pity descend over his being and, at the same time, dislike for the reminiscing that brought it on. "Will you do the same? All pretend for both of us . . . this rambling about." For he spoke what he thought would be true, that between the two of them everything could only be withheld that was essential and that this was decided on both their parts from the minute she had sat down beside him.

But she did not seem to see this, for she only reiterated, pressed for Serein to talk, looking at the up and down chest of the old man, fearing. "No . . . I don't know what you mean. It's for the better that you get it out." And with that last Paul felt as though he were a child addressed for ill behavior by a mother; and it angered him. But, after all, he thought, again seeing the sleeping man, she is the dead woman, if not in actions, in movement, in grace, dignity of figure and speech, lacking now only the laughter. And all his anger was reduced to an overpowering warmth that stole out and allowed his hand to touch the brown hair and travel, unwittingly, dancing lightly over the face.

"I did say everything that I could. I stopped at why . . . we were like two children in a park or playground . . . it's presumptuous of me, but you did care." And the anger came back, "Something stopped you. There was some wall or other that . . . you know it . . . that's why it's not fair." His hand, the only part of his entire being which was loose and free, still lightly strayed over the face, face of the old woman resurrected, face of the young girl tingling, blanched to white, as though struck by moon light or as after emerging from a swim in the sea; but there was only the old man of the troubled breathing, only the memory of the dead woman, white, now completely sea deadened, completely the white ash of burned laughter, that over-powered all smiles, that was a part of the girl where her face was warm to the touch of a non-observant hand, of the girl who was now without skillful utterances to protect the silent noise inside, the noise that so wanted to grasp the exploring hand of the man seated, to guide it bodywards, send it quickly to the secret. "No. No." The girl's voice said, "I can't tell you. There's nothing." And she wanted to believe so. "You ask too much. Am I your mis-

dress or wife that I must reveal all? It was a passing fancy on both our parts . . ." And she wanted to believe this, too.

Into the chair, into the chair, thought Serein, there's nothing here. She's trying to hide. I don't know what to do. I can't find her out, nor she me. And he was right: she was fighting, struggling to find a place to hide. And she found it, discovered it, at the same time Serein found it and, together they submerged themselves into it, immersed themselves in the old man's shirt that rose and fell, that was struggling, too, to keep the breath pumping in and out, fighting to keep the old woman alive. And perhaps this is what they both, the two young people, saw in the chest as a hiding place, saw in the shirt the repository of the white ash.

And into this tangle, into the room, not quietly, calling the girl Valery, blundered Jasney, not with the solemnity that the scene demanded, but rather with the awkwardness of a young boy, "Valery, been looking all over the place." A minute of silence in which he surveyed the room-framed picture of the old man asleep, of the hand connected to the body of Paul Serein wandering over the girl's head, melting in blank eyes, crawling over the lips that were thin and colorless, that belonged likewise to the girl Valery. A minute of silence in which to place the scene that all too well drawn for his, Jasney's, eyes, that blended too well into the fear of his own mind's secrets.

But the girl began the time process again, hurried the picture-scene off the canvas: "Yes Jasney? Don't speak so loud. He's asleep." And Serein did not know by the last whether she was indicating the old man or himself; for, after all, he thought, who is, was or something asleep?

Jasney, almost between Valery and their father, "Well, I've been wondering. So he's asleep. Most everyone's gone, so it's just as well, I suppose. Wasn't it awful. All those people, I mean." To Serein, Jasney stood out in a different light than ever before. Always before, the visitor thought, the garrulous, the ebullient Jasney. Friendly, but always so, never changing, always the bad taste of a hollow tone. Now to the girl, for Serein felt himself naturally excluded, as if he had entered a house in which an argument was taking place between a husband and wife, Jasney is highly serious, his voice evoking the pathos of the woman's death. And even in this, the old distrust seeped through, for Serein received Jasney as though the pseudo-son was accounting the woman's death as an event, stocking it up in his catalogue, reading it for the after-dinner anecdote. Jasney sat down beside Valery on the floor. This, above all, surprised Serein; it was as though it were the first time he had seen them sitting together.

Into his vision he dived: there they are. Sitting like two carved chest players—the king and queen?—but no, that's wrong. The old man's king, the old woman's queen. They're the prize, those two on the floor. Like gargoyles looking on. But the prize, the idea of prize, of playing for them, stopped him, shattering the imagery as he was confused as to his own place until, seeing only one moving white shirt rise and fall, knowing finally the shirt moving, and seeing, running off the old man, out of the shirt, super-imposing herself, sitting erect, smiling, laughing handsomely at herself, at the conversation, the queen. She was fine in the rays of late afternoon sunlight that composed her, that still tried to brighten the room.

Serein would not, could not tolerate the silence, felt that he must force the figure, unharmed, back into the shirt, uttered, "Jasney? We haven't had a chance to talk yet, have we? It's been over a year, two . . ."

The girl, stunned by the instant's confusion, whispered, "No. Don't. Not both." But it was lost in Serein's turn of thoughts and words to his old friend, so lost that Serein only murmured, "Quiet. Just for a moment." Paul Serein, drunk in the confines of the room, the turning away from the white chest going up and down, in the confines that made them all so close, "I was sorry for myself as well as for all of you. Especially him." Indicating the old man. "And her, Valery." And he knew he shouldn't have said the last because of the immediate change of color in Jasney and the realization in himself that he had dealt so impersonally with her, had, perhaps, attempted to hurt her.

But Jasney returned to the public smile, "Oh, he'll be all right. As we all will. But she was wonderful." Reference to the dead woman. "The minute that takes everything real and replaces it with the memory. Nostalgia, I suppose."

All this was said so darkly by Jasney, as though he had drawn it out of himself, that Serein wondered at the three characters before him: the girl, Jasney, and himself. He excluded the old man now, including himself, Paul Serein, with the offerings of the white shirt chest and the rough breathing, a blurr.

Jasney changed, reverted to the smile, "Well, what were you two so earnestly doing when I came in?"

Valery, silent, head drooped over her breast, still feeling the weight of Serein's hand, still knowing the warm fingers that were no longer moving, that were passively sitting on her cheek; and yet fingers which were not quiet, for there was still a pulsing in the fingers of the man, pushing them out and onto her cheek, through until she was caught in the gentle rain of feeling that dropped from finger to cheek, dropped

until the flow was of such magnetic force that it held her there, suspended.

Jasney continued, "But don't think I don't know what you're thinking, Paul." Enunciating sharply, "It's Valery. Too bad. The bell goes ding and whether it's a funeral or not, up you come to see Valery, all full of thoughts of domesticity."

Paul silent, head looking down at the girl's soft brown one, hand somewhere—but who knows where, he thought—on the girl's cheek, feeling the answering warmth of something coming up into him, knowing the wetness that touched his fingers which were moving somewhere on the face, yet not knowing what. He did not want to hear anything. He wanted everything to be quiet, for the talking bitterness to go away, for only the girl to be sitting there beside him, for only the white blurr, and the apparition which was such a part of it, to move unevenly up and down, to control the secrets, to have everything quiet.

Jasney, smoothing his voice out until it ran along the floor and crept stubbornly into Paul's mind, seeming to descend down into the girl, "Remember that summer, when I brought down here after your parents' accident. Your own tragedy. Right away you seemed to notice Valery. And it went on like that for two months. You and her all the time together, she forgetting everything I had told her. I knew the first week that she had lost herself on you. The old man and woman didn't seem to care. I did. And why not? I knew more than you." He paused out of breath.

"Valery can sit there for all she likes and let it go on."

And she was, she simply sat there letting the hand warmth convey her over Jasney's words, letting the syllables crawl down the arm of Serein, allowing them to keep on going, indifferent to them. But the arm that conveyed them, the arm that belonged to Serein, felt these words with the old distrust, the apprehension of the outcome.

Jasney continued more forcefully than ever, seeming to play his trump card, "See the old man asleep there. Not even he knows the secret. Valery was always too frightened to tell anyone. Weren't you? But no need to answer. You see, my friend, and in this drunken orgy of truth-telling I emphasize that friendship only this one time, for never more will we be friends. She's not my sister, nor are we related. But we might as well have been. And we are now and forever. Oh we didn't find out until later. No one knows but our dear old man's younger sister. You see, Valery is her child, but my derivation is more obscure, a friend of Valery's mother, a friend to whom Valery's mother owed a favor and returned it in this way. Oh yes, yes, isn't it just so

funny." He didn't bother smiling, just continued on, leaving Serein there to collect the words and pile them up into related clauses. "We've known this for the last three years. But that isn't what's so funny . . . You see, while brother and sister, we were . . . or did once, quite by accident, have an unfortunate . . . unnatural relationship to which only mothers and sons, sisters and fathers, and brothers and sisters are susceptible. Oh it was lovely."

The girl's whole frame shook. Serein's hand could not restrain; it moved with the trembling; it was apart of her being, just as the blood was mutual.

"Apocalypse coming up. Or already revealed. We found out too late . . . too late. We were already brother and sister committing, having committed the genetic fallacy. We can never change from brother and sister. Once lived the belief, once committed against it, always under it. Yes I made her break it all off . . . for we have to be always brother and sister . . . always we must . . . They never knew . . . nor will they ever . . . the old man and woman . . . and above all, that's why we must always go on as brother and sister, together until we die. Oh, the desire and all that is over with, all together. Just the have to of living together as old spinsters.

Serein was lost, his hand lost, his face cold asleep, his inside the head activity rumble-tumble up and down; he had lost all direction, the words kept pouring in, even after they had been spoken. He was no longer trembling, no, for that matter, was the girl. She had stopped, she had reached up to touch Serein's hand, to hold it flat against her cheek.

Through the clasped fingers she heard, Break it off. I'll tell him all. Tell the old man and woman. What does it matter that we weren't really brother and sister. What does it matter. We are. We have to be now. Never forget that. We'll grow old together, living together. Only ourselves. You'll hurt him, you'll make him hate you. You know how sensitive he is. Like a drop of water, so easily washed down the drain. And in her memory vision, she saw Paul Serein walking down the stairs towards her, to walk in the garden.

She stopped. Something pushed itself into all these thoughts, throwing them aside, so that she knew that she would speak, that she would destroy all, her false brother, everyone; the dead woman, who was in everything her strength to talk, laughed between the heavy breath of the old man. What mattered now? He knew the worse. Perhaps forgive. But they all knew, even the sleeping old man must, even asleep, even laughing in his chest.

And in this silence there was the broken sound of the old man's breathing and the shirt, which for Serein was defining itself as the outer layer of the chest again as all the words were making sense. He wanted to speak and he felt, too, the encouragement of the girl, encouragement that mounted through fingers intertwined, finally making its way into him, prying open his mouth, sending a dissemblance from between his teeth, "All the sordid, if it were so, is past. Couldn't we say that? There's no sense for the rest. I don't care. Give it all up. If you and she don't love each other, if there's nothing anymore . . ."

Jasney stopped him, "There never really was. It was a mistake on both of our parts. Playing at kissing, at feeling free when they were both away . . . the old ones . . . that did it . . . no never. But that's not the point. We were already brother and sister making it all unnatural, tying ourselves together as brother and sister unnatural . . . and especially because of the old woman and man."

"No . . . no . . ." Serein felt he was up against an insurmountable obstacle in Jasney. Can't climb over it. Can't see around it. A mountain of things so wrong, never to be directed back again. But the girl . . . Nothing can break it, never. The girl . . . we were so happy together. Never. And the last he said, "Never. You see the old woman's dead; she died unknowing. That's the worse. The summer you were here, I did it only to protect you. I told Valery that if she didn't break off, I'd tell you. I'd tell them. The last did it more, I think. Though she feared for you. I knew that you'd get over it. But we'd never get over them . . . and, perhaps, Valery, not even over you."

"So what?" Serein felt again the girl's help. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"No. Don't you see. Above all, she died unknowing. And without her knowing, the old man could never know; and without her knowing, we must preserve the way it was . . ."

And Serein felt something stirring in him, saw the girl move to get up, now knew that she was waking, taking him with her, up out of his chair, standing in front of the old man asleep, though not comfortable, not relaxed old man, rather like one suffering through an ordeal of nightmares. Jasney, too, moved to rise. He stood beside them but, and Serein felt this for the very first time, now it was not Valery and Jasney, brother and sister, now it was he and Valery standing there with the seated old man—and a second party was standing beside them, Jasney. But, perhaps, Serein thought, I'm wrong. Perhaps it's still brother and sister, strangely brother and sister standing here and I'm the intruder.

And then there was the light hand on his arm, the reassuring hand,

the light touch that he felt tensing to speak. And he heard the soft tones of the girl.

"I'm frightened Jasney. I didn't hear you. I couldn't bear it."

The man talking back, "Yes. For the first time you did, you did because I said it in front of another. More emphasis for us all. And there was him . . ." indication of the old man again, "Who had the force of coherence for everything I said, especially to you."

Speaking quietly to Serein more than Jasney, yet to them both, For voice travels into all ears, "It's all true, all except one thing . . . only one . . . she did know. Yes, I told her after you left that summer." And though Jasney turned pallid, though he tried to speak, she continued, "Oh yes, I told her and she said nothing. And when she died I was even more frightened than ever for she was the last hope to reach you. You might have told Paul. I had to break off with you Paul . . . what if he'd told you . . . what if he'd done that . . . now it doesn't matter . . . everything together, her death and this, and the two of us together to hear it. She knew and was a strength. I told her all. She didn't comment, didn't say anything. And I knew that it was all safe with her, knew that she wouldn't even tell Jasney until I was ready, until I needed her . . ." The girl was pressing Paul Serein's arm excitedly, her body close with his, pressing side and side. And Paul Serein knew that she was finished, for after all, what else was there to say? He felt a tremendous searing going through his entire system, but was glad, at the same time, to feel this figure beside him, to sense the fragrance of her being enwrapping him.

Jasney, the smile returned, walked out of the room, as though there was some subtle joke underlying everything the girl had said, something too colored to laugh about in mixed company. Serein stood still, allowing the girl to press in upon him, letting the warmth, her whole self mingle with him, unthinking, like the girl herself, until only shadows and the white shirt remained on his retina. Then, leaving the old man sleeping, they walked out of the room, following Jasney into the garden, passing the little table at which Jasney now reposed, still smiling, leering at the flowers which were already almost hidden by the evening.

—Jonathan Kleinbard

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