Maxine

A Short Story in Two Parts

Submitted for Senior Honors Project

Marilyn Jean Conner

Dr. Harry H. Taylor
Spring 1976
Maxine awoke once during the night. She got up and wandered through the house, looking out the windows in the moonlight. She downed a nerve pill with a swallow of milk as she stood in the sterile, sinister light of the refrigerator and then lay in bed listening. Just before she dozed off, she realized that the birds sang all night long. When she awoke for good just after dawn, it took her a few seconds to figure out where the windows and the door were, remember how old she was, and place the time of day and the season of the year. For a moment of no time, she awoke as no one at all. She might have been a child, or a teenager, or a young mother again. But with the light, the door and the two windows came into focus and she remembered that she was fifty-six and had been a widow for eight years, but that on this day, a Saturday in August, she was getting married again.

She got up and put on the cotton housecoat her son, Jim, had gotten her for Mother's Day three years before. Jim was named after his father and had been their only son. The housecoat was too broad in the shoulders. Even though the sun was only just coming up, she could tell by the heavy stillness of the air and the lazy sound of the birds, that it was going to be a hot, humid day. It would surely get above ninety, so she went around the house shutting out the noise of the birds, closing the venetian blinds, and drawing the drapes so she wouldn't have to turn on the air conditioner until late in the morning.

She made coffee and cracked a fresh egg into a skillet of hot grease. She put a piece of toast in the toaster, and when it was ready, she had to unplug the toaster and dig it out with a knife. She put the egg on a plate and sat down to eat, but the egg looked at her. She decided that if she tried to eat she would vomit. She was fond of the way the word "vomit" sounded, so she looked back at the egg and said, "vomit." Since she had lived alone for so long, she allowed herself some small indulgences. Then she put the toast on an aluminum pie pan, arranged the egg on the toast, and went outside in her robe and bare feet to put the pan on a piece of limestone under the lilac bush by the driveway. After going back inside, she stood looking out the window above the sink with pieces of dewy grass sticking to her feet. She watched for a bit to see if one of the neighborhood dogs would stop by for breakfast, but none of them were out
that early, so she sat down and took a nerve pill, a laxative, and a water pill with half a cup of nearly cold coffee.

Breakfast over, she went to look in the mirror in the bathroom. She tilted her head different ways and held her chin up at an uncomfortable angle to make her neck look less saggy. She leaned across the sink and sorted through the stiff waves of her hair so she could see the roots and wondered what color her hair really was. She hadn't seen her hair for more than ten years. When she was young, until she'd moved away from home and gotten it cut, it had been a rich auburn and long below her waist. Now it was a dull, metallic color which looked artificial in the daylight. She didn't care for it too much, but George said he thought it was very becoming.

She opened a small jar and began massaging her face with wrinkle cream. It had the wrinkles of an eighty-five year old woman. But she consoled herself by looking in the mirror and noting that she had a fine, dark tan, slender legs, and breasts that hadn't sagged too much. She put the lid of the toilet down and rubbed one foot with Pretty Feet. She always had athlete's foot. She got bored with that and left the other foot for later.

While she was making her bed, her sister Ruby's car gently screeched to a halt out on the street in front of the house. She could always tell when Ruby drove up by the sound of the brakes. The car door slammed, and Ruby came in the back door without knocking. Ruby was Maxine's older sister, and they were quite fond of each other. However, Ruby had hinted that she wasn't exactly delighted about the prospect of having George as a brother-in-law, and Maxine was prepared for an argument. So when Ruby came in without knocking, Maxine thought to herself that she always acted as if she owned the place. It was only a little after 8:30 and Ruby was sixty-four.

Ruby called, "good morning" and helped herself to some breakfast.

Maxine called back, "have you had anything to eat yet?"

Ruby's husband had been dead a long time, so the only thing she had to complain about were her two children, both of whom were worth complaining about, and her ailments, some of which were real, but most of which were not. Maxine stayed in her bedroom puttering around as long as possible and then went into the kitchen where Ruby said good morning again. Maxine armed herself with her cigarettes and lighter and sat down at the kitchen table opposite Ruby, who had discovered half of a sack of sweet rolls from three mornings ago. As Maxine drew a long brown cigarette out of a skinny red
pack and lit it, she admired her fingernails. They were about the longest
she'd ever seen. Just then the answer to a decision she'd been puzzling
over came to her. She'd been trying to decide between two shades of pink
for her nails this afternoon — one was a musty rose sort of pink and one
was a more cheerful, light pink. She decided the rose pink was preferable
because it was more stately and so more proper for the occasion than the more
frivolous lighter pink.

"How do you ever get anything done with those damn long fingernails?"
Ruby asked.

Even though Maxine's fingernails were insulted, she tried to be nice
for a while longer. "I don't have anything to do, so it's not hard. How
are you feeling today?"

This was Ruby's favorite subject — how she felt. "Not so good, honey.
Doctor Pearcy examined me yesterday and said Flopsy has another lump."
She motioned toward her single breast. "Tuesday I'm going to the emergency
room and he's going to check and see what it is. I'm cleaning the house so
no one will have to come in and clean while I'm gone. I'll probably be
back the same day, but anyway, the house is clean."

Ruby cast an eye at Maxine's cigarette. "Are you smoking cigars, now,
too?"

"These aren't cigars, Ruby, they're cigarettes. George smokes these
and he got me started on them. I think they're better for me because I
don't smoke so many of them. Do you want to try one?"

"No, thanks, I'm not crazy enough to smoke cigars, yet."

By carelessly making reference to George, Maxine was guilty of intro-
ducing him into the conversation, and this fact gave Ruby a definite advan-
tage as the topic commenced to be discussed. "You're still going to go through
with it?" asked Ruby, innocently enough.

"Yes, I'm tired of being alone," Maxine said firmly and slowly as if
that were enough reason to justify anything. "We've got an appointment with
the justice of the peace for two o'clock."

Ruby sat quiet for what was for her, quite a long time — at least
forty-five seconds. Then she said, "Frankly, I think you're being a fool.
You met him in a bar. You've only known him for a couple of months. You
don't know anything about him. He drives a cab, God forbid. He doesn't
have any money. You don't know how many times he's been married before.
And on top of that he's a mealy-mouthed son of a bitch."

Maxine had always admired the women in her family, including herself, for the way they came out flat ass and said what they thought, but that was a hell of a thing to say about your husband before you even got a chance to marry him. Most of what Ruby had said was true, except that last, which was a matter of Ruby's opinion.

The kids had forgotten her fifty-fifth birthday. Maxine had driven out to James' grave and sat most of the afternoon crying in the car and only left because a young boy who was mowing around the gravestones kept looking at her. In the week after that she had decided that, come what might, she was going to stop her nonsense and self-pity and get married again. So she started keeping her eye out for some likely man.

For a long time she had been going to Archie's, which was a tavern, but a respectable one, where she would sit for hours playing pinochle for a dollar a hand with one of her friends and her husband and several of their friends. That was the only place she went so that was the only place to look. George had been nice to her and gentlemanly in his own way for more than a year, but Maxine didn't pay too much attention to him because somehow she'd always thought he was married. But then one evening when George bought beers for everyone at the table and say right by Maxine, she discovered that he wasn't married at all. As George became more interested in her, she became more impressed by him. He said exceedingly nice things to her and often brought her surprises when he came over in the evenings to watch TV with her — sometimes even a box of those expensive French mints she liked so much. And one night he brought over groceries and made Irish Stew for supper, which turned out quite well, except for the pepper, which had been partly her fault. And he had looked so homey with his shirt sleeves rolled up padding around in the kitchen in his stocking feet because his shoes hurt. And he had had that one endearing hole in his sock which cinched Maxine's affections. Sometimes they'd go to a show or down to Archie's, but mostly they just stayed at her house watching old movies together. So a week before, George had proposed and she had said yes immediately, not thinking until the next morning that perhaps she should have hesitated a little bit for the sake of form. So Ruby's comments didn't make her think, they only made her mad.

The phone rang, giving her a convenient reason for leaving the room.
George was calling from a phone booth downtown because he didn't have a phone in his hotel room.

"Hi, doll. How's my girl?" George's voice was too loud and he sounded as if he'd been drinking.

"What are you doing up so early? Are you as nervous as I am?"

"Up? I haven't even been to bed yet. The boys have been giving me a bachelor party, and I've never been nervous about anything." Maxine was really very annoyed, but she could hear Ruby sitting quite still in the kitchen so she could hear everything that she said. So she piped up loudly, "I'm glad you're glad," for Ruby's sake, but then she cupped her hand around the receiver and hissed, "you're drunk!"

"Drunk? I'm not drunk. And anyway, I'm a free man until two o'clock. Come on, honey pot, give me a break. I was just enjoying myself for the last time. I'll take a little nap this morning and I'll be just fine. I'll be there by noon, dressed, ready, and fit as a fiddle. I love you, sweet pie."

"I love you, too. Well, you get a good nap and I'll see you later."

Maxine hung up and went back to confront Ruby. But Ruby was leafing through the new Reader's Digest looking for the jokes. She didn't appear to have anything else to say.

Maxine spent the rest of the morning fidgeting and getting ready. She bathed, powdered herself, cleaned her toenails, polished her fingernails, opened a new pair of good panty hose, went through two pots of coffee, took two more nerve pills, and turned on the air conditioner. By noon, she was a wreck and felt giddy and nauseous at the same time.

Ruby had been silent for most of the morning, more in the way of being resigned than hostile.

Young Jim, his box-shaped, unpleasant wife, Elaine, and their four year old daughter, Molly, arrived a little after noon. They all tried to be cheerful but didn't manage very well. They talked about the heat, and Maxine admired little Molly, who was wearing a pink dress with a white pinafore and white socks with black patent leather shoes. She had a pink straw hat to go with the outfit, but, being in her usual mood, she whined and whimpered and said the elastic strap choked her. She threw the hat on the floor and wouldn't pick it up. Each one of them would have enjoyed paddling her, but in turn, each one thought it wasn't the proper occasion. Maxine got out
some chocolate candy for her to try to smooth things over. Of course, Molly slopped the chocolate all over the collar of the dress and the bib of the pinafore, so Elaine got mad and stayed in the bathroom for fifteen minutes.

Maxine asked if they'd had lunch or if they were hungry. They hadn't had lunch, but they all agreed that they weren't hungry because it was too hot. They drank kool-aid and waited. Soon, one of Maxine's other sisters drove in the driveway. She was from a town about forty miles away. Maxine waved to her out the window, but as she got out and locked her door, she looked positively grim. Aola came in with a rum cake, a shoe box, and a bottle of Southern Comfort. She was in a nice summer dress, but wore sneakers until it was time to put on her good shoes. Aola was the youngest of Maxine's five sisters who were still alive. She had been married a long time ago and had two children, and her husband had left her before the second one was born. She divorced him after that, but never saw him again anyway. She didn't know if he knew they weren't married or not.

She looked as if she was prepared to console someone grief-stricken. She gave Maxine a melancholy, motherly hug. "Hi, Max, you smell real nice. How are you feeling?"

"I've drunk coffee and taken pills all morning. I haven't eaten a thing all day."

Aola squatted down to admire Molly, who was sucking her thumb and tugging at her mother's skirt. "How are you, little princess?" Molly began to cry, and Elaine, who'd grown tired of her whining, smacked her. This made everyone ill at ease.

Aola tilted her head forward and squinted at Maxine over her glasses. "Where's George?"

"He was up by eight this morning and called me all excited and planning to get ready. He thought he'd take a nap to relax. He'll be here any minute. Speaking of getting ready, I'd better get into my dress and get my hair pinned on." She went into her room and began to fuss around.

Maxine called for Aola to come and pin on her fall. In a few minutes she came down the hall to make her entrance. She had on a purple dress, black shoes, and was nicely made up, but her fall was about two shades off, and she had a flimsy looking white scarf around her neck. At first they all agreed that she looked nice, but Aola said, "I think you'll look a hundred
per cent better if you don't wear that scarf."

Maxine turned to look into a mirror in the living room. "Well, this
dress needs some dressing up, and I just hate to have my scrawny neck showing.
What do you think, Elaine?" In fact, Elaine thought that her neck looked
bad, but that the scarf looked worse, but since she made it a policy never
to disagree with her mother-in-law, she took the diplomatic route and suggested
that they see how she looked without the scarf. She untied it with some
difficulty, and they all agreed that the scarf should go. Maxine hesitated,
but then laid it on top of the refrigerator.

The front doorbell rang, which meant that there was a stranger at the
door because no one ever came in the front way. Maxine answered it and
came back in a moment carrying a round plastic box with a white orchid in
it. She was very pleased. "Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that the sweetest
thing? George is so thoughtful. I told you he was thoughtful. It's just
perfect. It's just the thing this dress needs. Here, pin it on for me,
Aola."

While Aola pinned on the orchid, she looked over Maxine's shoulder and
shrugged her eyebrows at Ruby. Perhaps this was a point for George. It
was almost one-thirty, though, and they were all aware of the time and the
fact that George had not yet arrived. Just as Aola was about to ask where
he was again, a Beeline cab pulled up under the black walnut on the street.
No one said anything as they all watched him pay the driver, get out of the
car with a big, brown suitcase, and walk up to the house. Maxine could tell
by his gait that he was a little tipsy. He walked in the door and was
undaunted by the front of hostile faces. He whistled when he saw Maxine.

"You look like a million bucks, babe. You like the flowers? You better,
I just about had to hock my watch for them." George had a silver pocket
watch. He took it out and showed it to them. It was a fine watch. The
family looked George over. Jim had met him before, but it was the first
time for the rest. He had black hair, red eyes, and teeth that wanted
cleaning. His fingernails were broad and flat. He was wearing a brown wool
suit with maroon pin stripes and black shoes with white socks. He put his
arm around Maxine while she introduced him to Elaine and her sisters.
Ruby and Aola were not impressed, but George didn't notice. "I've heard so
much about you girls. I'm so glad to finally get to make your acquaintance."

Aola said, "Likewise, I'm sure," through her teeth and Ruby only nodded.
George picked Molly up. "This must be the little Polly I've heard so much about."

Elaine said, "Molly," but George wasn't paying attention. He picked Molly up awkwardly and gave her a hug. Surprisingly, she didn't start screaming, which irritated Aola, but after a few moments of his baby talk and bad breath, she squirmed to get down. George put his suitcase in Maxine's room, and when he came back, he spotted the Southern Comfort on the counter. "Hey, that's a great idea. Get out the glasses, Max, and we'll all get a little courage before we head down there."

Maxine looked at the kitchen clock. "It's really getting pretty late. Do you think we have time?"

George was already getting some eight ounce plastic tumblers out of the corner cupboard. "Come on, babe, believe you me, there's no hurry. The J.P. will wait."

Maxine didn't argue. "Good heavens, George, we can't drink out of those. There are some little glasses on the top shelf behind the blue casserole."

George stood back and peered up into the cupboard. "That round thing with the lid on it? Here, I can get it." He tried to reach it, but couldn't. Then he started to put his knee up on the counter, but decided he'd better have a kitchen chair. Jim said he'd get the glasses and, being about five inches taller, got them without any trouble.

Because Aola was a nurse, she was always aware of dirt and germs. "They'll probably have to be washed first." George blew the dust out of one of the glasses just to please her. She put her tongue in the side of her cheek, looked out the window, and tapped her foot. George poured some for everyone and came out short one glass.

He reached for a tumbler. "That's all right. I'm not proud. I can drink out of anything." He handed a glass to everyone.

Aola looked into her glass and said, "No thanks, I prefer my drinks after six."

George took her glass and said, "No floaties, are there?" As he poured the whisky into his tumbler, he added, "can't waste good booze. Let's go relax in the living room for a minute."

Maxine looked at the clock again, but everyone except Molly and Elaine followed him into the living room, where there was only enough room for four people to sit. George brought along the bottle of Southern Comfort.
Aola looked at the clock on the wall above the green crushed velvet couch. It was black and gold and was supposed to look like a sun with its foot-long gold spikes spreading out from its face. It said ten of eight. Aola disliked things that weren't functional.

"Why don't you get that goddam clock fixed? It's been ten 'til eight for two years."

Maxine didn't care if it worked or not. "All it needs is a new battery. I'll probably get one someday, but it ticks so loud it just about drives me up the wall. I have a clock in here anyway." She nodded to the plastic alarm clock she had moved in from her bedroom that hummed on top of the television.

George refilled everyone's glass without asking.

Aola was irritated about the clock. "Well, this certainly won't be much like the time you and James were married."

Maxine glared at her sister, "I wouldn't want it to be." Maxine had been twenty-nine and pregnant the first time she was married. That was when it wasn't in vogue to be pregnant beforehand, but James had been very good about it; they hadn't told her parents until later, and everything had gone smoothly. They had been married in the big, cool, high-ceilinged living room of her parents' old farmhouse. Most of Maxine's eleven brothers and sisters had been there. They'd had a minister with prayers and everything; they'd all been so happy with some of her nieces and nephews there — fried chicken supper on the long table out on the lawn under the trees. James had been so friendly and everyone had liked him.

George asked her if she was ready to go. As they stood up, Aola said, "George, I wish you all the best, but you'll never be another James Conrad."

Maxine was appalled, but George said, "Aola, I never hoped to match a man like him. I just hope I'm half the man that he was."

They piled into two cars and drove downtown. They parked on the courthouse square and George led the way to the J.P.'s office. It was on Washington Street above the old Woolworth's store. The door had no sign on it, and it was right next to a watch repair shop. They all began to sweat and the orchid began to wilt. They mounted a grey stairway, feeling it get hotter with every step they took. There were three doors at the top of the stairway. The one in the middle was ajar, and they could see a sink and part of a
toilet through it. The toilet was running. The door on the right said, "Justice of the Peace." They went in with George first. There was a little room with a big green metal desk and two chairs. A mean-looking little man scowled up at them. "You're twenty-five minutes late." He frowned in the direction of the door across the hall and said to Young Jim, "you, uh, want to rattle that handle in there for me?" The man looked to be at least seventy-five, and he was wearing a short sleeved white shirt and no tie. He had George and Maxine sit down to sign things and motioned the others into an adjacent room. In the other room, there were a couple of rows of folding chairs, a wooden podium, two arrangements of artificial flowers on metal stands, a two year old calendar with a picture of a covered bridge on it, and two windows. The ledge below the windows was covered with pigeon droppings.

In a few minutes, George and Maxine entered the room and the old man leaned in and said he'd be there directly. Maxine went over to the window and looked down at the street. George sat in a chair and crossed his legs. They could see that green rubber bands were holding up his gym socks. The man came in carrying a Bible and situated himself at the podium. He had put on a black tie and a checked sports coat for the occasion. George got up and he and Maxine walked up to the stand and stood side by side, but not touching. The ceremony didn't have God in it and they had decided, for practicality's sake, not to exchange rings.

The little man wanted to get home out of the heat, so he hurried. "Do you, Lois Maxine Conrad, take this man, George Snyder . . . ?" George didn't have a middle name. When he came to the "I do's," Maxine just came in on cue, but when it was his turn, George flowered it up and said, "Oh, I do," with emphasis on the "do." When it was over, George gave Maxine a great long kiss, while everyone tried to look somewhere else. Then they all said congratulations and rushed downstairs to get back out into the air. On the way home, George told some tasteless jokes and talked loudly to Maxine and her sisters. In the other car, Molly babbled, but no one else said anything.

When they got back to the house, George polished off the Southern Comfort, and everyone sampled the rum cake. George was beginning to feel quite friendly toward the rest of Maxine's family, so he shared one of his favorite jokes with them. He pulled out a cartoon that he'd cut out of a
magazine and had encased in plastic. It was a parody of the Twenty-third Psalm and said, "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil, because I'm the meanest son of a bitch in the valley." The joke was about five years old, but George thought it was a riot. When he passed it around, they all smiled politely, but George thought he could work it for more than a few smiles. He repeated the punch line twice and began to laugh. "The meanest son of a bitch in the valley, get it?"

Aola was embarrassed for her sister. "I'm sorry to break this party up, but I've got to get ready for work tonight."

Jim jumped at the opening. "Yes, Mom, I think we better start back, too."

George was still giggling. They said another round of congratulations and were gone within ten minutes.

George took off his coat and tie and went in to watch television. Maxine threw away the whisky bottle, emptied the ash trays, and put her corsage back in the box in the refrigerator. She washed her face, unpinned her hair, put on a pair of shorts and a shell, and wished George would go away.

She still hadn't eaten anything substantial. "Do you want anything to eat, George?"

"No, Hon, I just want you to come in and snuggle up with me."

Maxine didn't usually start on her nightly beers until around seven. She used them to soothe her nerves, to make her forget her loneliness, and to help her get to sleep. But tonight was a special occasion, so she poured part of a can into a little juice glass, salted it, got another can for George, and went in to sit by him.

George patted her knee. "Geeze, your family is a tight-lipped crew. I'm sure as hell glad we got that over with. They sure vamoosed in a hurry."

They just want to make sure I'm happy. They thought we'd want to be left alone. They'll warm up to you as soon as they get to know you. We'll go to Aola's on Labor Day. She always has the whole clan there and we'll have a grand time."

They spent the rest of the afternoon and a good part of the evening watching situation comedies and Lawrence Welk. George kept trying to put his arm around her, but she kept going to get more beer or to adjust
the air conditioner. When it was fully dark out, George went in to get his slippers out of his suitcase. He sat down again, and they watched a murder mystery. George began to hint that he was tired.

Maxine took two pills and went in and bathed and put on a new gown that George had helped her pick out at a sale at a discount store nearby. She told him good night and brushed off her feet before slipping into her clean bed.

George got up, turned off the TV, cleared his throat several times, got himself a drink of water, and made some other noises she couldn't identify. He came in and lay on the other twin bed in his sleeveless undershirt, his shorts, and his socks. She pretended to be asleep, but pretty soon he sat up, took just his shorts off, and got under the sheet beside her. He tried to put his hand on her breast, but all she could think of were those green rubber bands on his socks. She could smell his breath and his armpits and she felt sick. She rolled away from him and out of the bed.

"Please get out of my bed. I'm not ready for this, George. Just let me get used to the idea."

"Oh, hell, Max, what do you think we got married for, anyway? Come on. It'll be all right." He almost sounded tender.

She stood in her nightgown in the glow of the street light ready to cry. "No, George. Please just let me get used to the idea first."

"Oh, hell, all right. Maybe tomorrow night." He got back in his bed. She could just see his pale buttocks in the dark. He fell asleep within five minutes and immediately commenced to snore. Maxine felt so old and ridiculous. She lay awake for hours crying and watching the shadows the walnut tree made on the wall. She got up around three o'clock and turned the light on in the bathroom to take another pill.
Maxine (II)

In the morning, George awoke in a fine mood and stretched his arms thoroughly as he sat on the edge of the bed in his undershirt and one sock. The other sock had come off down under the covers during the night. He sat quiet for a while watching Maxine and leaned over to pat her gently on the rump. She pretended to be asleep, but watched him through her eyelashes when he wasn't looking. He finished undressing and hunted his other sock out from under the bedcovers. Then he gathered up his underwear and stood stark naked in the bright morning sunlight, holding his bundle of dirty underclothes, and wondering what he was supposed to do with them. He walked over and looked behind the bedroom door and then went in and used the bathroom. He came back in a minute still holding his underwear. Finally he pulled his suitcase from under the bed and stuffed them in it.

During that week they played two-handed pinochle for two or three hours almost every morning. Maxine almost always won, and George lost very cheerfully. George went to work in the afternoon right after lunch and stayed away until the middle of the evening. He had a job driving a cab. He was very proud of his job, because, as he said to Maxine, he liked meeting so many classy people. On the first day, Maxine fixed him a sack lunch. He took it, but after that, he said he'd just as soon stop in at the diner and have a hot sandwich — so as not to put her to any trouble.

George had noticed a place on the flooring in the hallway that needed fixing. For years, Maxine had strategically placed a wastebasket over the spot and had considered it taken care of. George said someone was liable to fall through the floor, and he didn't want to be that someone. After breakfast on Wednesday morning, he banged around in the basement searching through James' tools and then came up and rolled up the carpeting in the hall to pry the tacks out of the padding. After quite some time, he also loosened the molding and removed it. As he took it into the bedroom to get it out of his way, he made a small, three-cornered dent in the false ceiling in the bedroom. He tore right into the job and had it all fixed within the morning. He had to cut one section three times before he got it right. Maxine acted as if she wasn't paying attention to what he was doing and resisted the temptation
to give him advice. Maxine also jumped right into everything she did without really thinking out how she was going to do it before she started, so she could sympathize with George.

Now James never did anything without thinking. He would write out plans and get everything ready first. He had been an electrician and worked at everything he did very carefully and slowly. Down in the basement she still had a digital clock he'd made out of a coffee can and a duck decoy that he'd put a remote control gismo into, but it could only go backwards. It was so funny that one morning at the lake when James and Little Jim had the duck ready for a test run, and they called Maxine out of the kitchen to come watch. James squatted down on the dock, and Maxine stood behind him with her hand resting on his shoulder. Her face was warm and her hair was damp from the steam of her cooking in the kitchen, but an indifferent breeze which was making its way across the lake cooled her forehead. As Jim lay down across the wood planking on his stomach and carefully placed the duck on the water, the young bluegills feeding in the shallow water skittered away to safety. The boy stood up and pressed the button on the remote control device, and the decoy swung around in a semi-circle and then industriously hummed off across the small lake, tail foremost, with its beak and glass eyes looking at them as it backed away. James rarely giggled, but as he caught Maxine's dismayed look, he did begin to giggle, which sounded so funny in a big man like him, and then all three of them broke into cascades of laughter. They must have laughed for five minutes. James sat down on the dock and laughed till he was weak, and Maxine leaned against one of the tall pilings until there were tears in her eyes. They turned off the duck's motor, but it kept drifting out into the lake and the three of them had to take the rowboat out to get it. James said that any duck that was fooled by that decoy would have to be drunk and blind in one eye.

By the time they picked it up, it was listing heavily to starboard. Maxine could almost remember how the fresh coat of green paint on the boat smelled in the sun as they sat in the boat, while James and Young Jim examined the workings in the underside of the decoy. They decided they'd have to take it back in and work on it in the boathouse where the tools were spread out. But somehow, some new project got started and they never did get it to work right. They wouldn't have used it to fool
ducks with anyway. It was just for fun.

When George got the floor finished, it worked all right — no one would fall through. The ends of the boards were a little rough and at one place they didn't quite meet, but George said that wouldn't matter a bit when they got the rug back down. He was right: when everything was back in its place, Maxine couldn't tell the difference.

On Thursday, George wanted a pair of work gloves. Maxine went down into the basement to get them and by the time she found them and brought them to George, he was in the midst of looking through the boxes which she had lined up against the back wall of the closet in her bedroom. He said he thought he'd seen some gloves in there. He had several cartons set out in the middle of the room. One had the Christmas decorations in it, and another was filled with fabric scraps to make a quilt. The other boxes were filled with boots and shoes that were out of style. Almost buried in the back corner was a box that was all sealed up with long, neat strips of masking tape. George took some shoe boxes off of it and, as he rested on his heels, scooted it around so that he could read some words that were neatly printed on top with a black grease pencil. It said, "Dad's personal things." George made no comment to Maxine and quickly shoved the container back into the corner, and shuffled around putting everything back in its place. He acted as if he hadn't read the words, or that if he had, he understood.

That night, Maxine asked George a favor. "George, do you mind if, well you know how much trouble I have sleeping at night, what with my stomach griping me and all. Would it be okay if — you know how you snore — really sometimes I think I'll go up the wall — but I do love you — I thought maybe if you didn't mind, how about if you sleep in Jim's old room for a while, just for a while, probably, until I feel better. I'm sure I'll get used to your snoring after a while."

"Well, Max, it seems kind of weird. I been real patient with you."

"I know, George, I know. You've been wonderful. But I know you understand."

"I understand, Max honey. But we haven't been man and wife yet, so to speak, and it's been almost a week we've been married now. I think I been real patient. Kind of 'above and beyond' you might say, and first thing I know, you're moving me out of your, of our bedroom."
"Well, George, like I say, it's just for a while, and sometimes you can come in and visit, if you want to."

George thought for a minute, and he did try to be good to Maxine. "Well, if you think you'll sleep better, it'll be okay with me."

George didn't really snore that loudly. But Maxine thought she probably would sleep better anyway. The two of them moved the twin bed down the hall and into Jim's old bedroom, which was a little smaller than Maxine's room and not much different from the way it was when he was in high school. There was a mounting of some labeled bird bones hanging above the bed and some black light posters were still thumbtacked to the ceiling. The green bookcase he and his father had made together out of planks and fiberboard stood empty along one wall except for a short stack of Barbra Streisand records, a red book with "Hein Krupf" written on the front in gold, and an amber ash tray with a guitar pick in it. George made himself right at home. Before he went to bed that night, he came in and kissed Maxine good night. After she put her check up to be kissed, she pulled the sheet up to her neck and turned over with an innocent finality. George wasn't in a hurry; they'd be married forever.

After work on Friday, George brought home supper from a carry-out place and a new better. For the electric clock in the living room that had said twenty after eight for two years. George put the better in the clock, and without hesitation, it began its loud, relentless ticking as if it had never stopped. They could hear it ticking when the television was on in the same room. Maxine could hear it at night from the bedroom and even sometimes all the way from the basement when the house was still enough.

Monday was the day of the family reunion. Maxine just barely talked George out of wearing a pair of Bermuda shorts with brown sandals and a pair of pale blue socks. He agreed to change to a pair of slacks, but insisted on the sandals. Maxine wore a pair of white shorts with a navy blue top that made her feel especially young and healthy. A blue and white polka dotted scarf which she tied around her hair made the day seem full of promising possibility. George put his camera and tripod in the car and helped Maxine carry out a covered dish and two plates of fresh vegetables.

They left early and drove with the windows open a little so that the wind blew some Kleenexes out of a box Maxine always kept in the back window.
She leaned over the back of the front seat trying to capture the pink tissues before they blew out and giggled, enjoying her own silliness, thinking what the cars coming the other way might think. George laughed and he was going too fast to turn at the right place so they had to turn around and come back.

They arrived at Aola's in just over an hour. Her house was built in a new division out in the country. Rolling Acres was quite flat. Aola had a mailbox that looked like a barn and a flower stand that looked like a red and white windmill in the front yard. There were three maple saplings all wound up with greying tape from the winter and staked and wired, each from three points. No tree was going to grow crooked in Aola's yard. Jim and Elaine and most of the rest of the family were there so George had to park on the grass. George hurried around to open the door and help Maxine out. He tried to help her carry in the dishes of food as well as open the front door for her and ended up catching the sleeve of his brand new sports shirt on the hook on the door. He ripped it almost to the shoulder and seemed quite dismayed with his white arm and his vaccination scar looking out. Several of the relatives were sitting in the air conditioned front room, coolly looking on. Everyone talked in the confusion of each having to say hello and meet George as well as express condolences for his shirt.

Aola came in crisp and efficient from the kitchen and embraced Maxine as if she hadn't seen her for ages. "Maxie, how's my poor baby sister? You look tired."

Maxine began to feel things change. She didn't actually think it to herself. It was just more like she felt it without really thinking that she felt anything. The furniture seemed to scoot just a tiny bit closer as if to look and see if it thought her eyes were bloodshot. She wondered if she got her fingernails clean. The scarf around her hair seemed to shrivel up and get tight yet grow bigger and gaudier at the same time.

She said, "Lord it's too hot for this scarf now that we're not in the car," and slipped it off her head, half afraid that it might latch onto her hair and not let go.
Aola turned to George and said, "George, so glad you finally made it." George looked to Maxine and scratched at a place behind his ear. She knew he was trying to inquire how it was that they were late when they were there more than an hour before it was time to eat. Maxine moved the corners of her mouth toward a wan smile, trying to send back a message that it was only Aola's way.

Aola said everyone's name. Ruby, Edna, Wanda, and Charlene were there — all that was left of Maxine's sisters. Elaine, Maxine's daughter-in-law, sat at the end of one of the couches and there were several other daughters and daughters-in-law scattered around, all looking at George. The men were somewhere else. When Aola finished with the names, she said, "and this — is George, Maxie's new husband."

Maxine felt as if her bottom began to sag and broaden in her white shorts and wanted to sit down on it so no one could see it.

George said, "Happy to meet you, girls. Pleased to be one of the family." Most of the women nodded or shifted their positions to acknowledge that he'd said something.

Aola took the baked beans from Maxine. The white, oven-proof dish was covered tightly with aluminum foil. Aola said, "Maxie's baked beans. Umm, they sure do look good."

Maxine said, "But you haven't even looked at them and I haven't been able to smell them since I took them out of the oven."

"Oh, but you always make good baked beans."

Maxine felt as if her panty girdle gave way and had released her soft paunch with a sigh. She tried to tighten the muscles in her abdomen but could get no response, so she held her purse in front of her until Aola took it to put it away.

"Sit, Maxine. Here, move it over Edna, so Max can squinch in. George, the men are out in the back yard."

But Maxine was afraid to let George go unattended and she had the feeling that if she sat down and forgot to keep her feet on the floor, her shoes might fly off and everyone would gasp when they saw her feet.

"Does anyone have a couple of safety pins so I can fix George's shirt?" she asked. Everyone came alive with the challenge of hunting out two safety pins. Three sets of arms reached for three purses, someone began to rummage in an end table's drawer, and, just to be sociable, Elaine
felt down behind the cushion she was sitting on, though they all knew that no safety pin could be caught roaming around in Aola's household.

Aola brought things to order: "All my safety pins are in the heart-shaped box in the third drawer of the sewing machine cabinet in my bedroom." The hunters reluctantly withdrew their hands from their purses, closed the drawers, and settled back into their seats and boredom. Ruby looked a bit put off, as if she was just ready to feel out two safety pins hooked together in the crumbs in the bottom of her purse.

Maxine found the pins and drew George into the tiny solitude of the front bathroom. She was momentarily relieved to be out of the public eye with something practical to do, but Aola rapped on the door.

"Are you kiddies decent?" she giggled. And she walked straight in without an answer. "Here, let me do that, Max, before you hurt yourself." Maxine sat on the edge of the bathtub while Aola's rough, red fingers deftly pinned the cloth of the sleeve back together over the soft skin of George's upper arm. Maxine was embarrassed for George's smallpox vaccination. When Aola was finished, Maxine could hardly see the tear unless she looked.

Aola ushered George to the patio door, and introduced him to the husbands and sons of the women indoors. She left saying, "Now, you boys can stay out in the breeze while we girls chat inside." She carefully closed the patio door against the heat and led Maxine by the hand back to the living room where she squinched her in between two of her sisters.

Aola called everyone exactly at 12:00. She had borrowed some card tables and had set them up under the carport in case of rain. They were covered by a long table cloth decorated with Santa Clauses and snowmen. Aola said every year how that was the only big table cloth she had. Maxine tried to sit by George but got shuffled off a few spaces away. As George sat down, he bumped the already wobbly table and spilled every glass of milk on it. Aola went scurrying around getting some cloths and more milk and scooping up what was spilled. "Well, can't cry over spilt milk," Aola said, obviously taking the words right out of George's mouth. She continued her consolation. "What's done is done, George. I wouldn't worry about it. A little milk all over the table never worried anybody." "Eesh," she said as she picked up a soggy napkin by the corner.

Some of the older ones who were awake to Aola were beginning to
feel uneasy on George's behalf. Edna intervened: "Jesus, Aola, don't make a federal case."

George took heart then and couldn't help himself from saying it again. "Yes. I always say a person hasn't got time in life to cry over a little spilt milk." He must have hoped the variety would disguise it.

After the meal got under way and George began to feel more at home with everyone, he did what Maxine was afraid he would do, especially when she wasn't close enough to stop him. He hauled out his plasticized Valley of Death joke just before dessert. He read it aloud and then passed it up and down both sides of the table. It was travelling against the tide of two kinds of pie and cake being passed on dessert plates down each side of the table and so put a small hitch in the proceedings, but fortunately, there were so many people and so much else going on that it was easy for almost everyone but Maxine to ignore him.

In fact, with all the confusion, George blended in with the rest of the family pretty well, considering everything. At least he fit in until he announced, in such a loud, good natured voice that everyone had to pay attention, that he was going to take a family portrait.

The women, who were just then collecting the last of the crumpled napkins and soggy paper plates and gently brushing cake crumbs off the table cloth, all experienced a reluctant quickening of the blood pressure as each made a note to confront a mirror before the event. Charlene brushed her fingers through the hair that fell over her forehead with an abstracted look and a coy turn of the wrist in a movement she had perfected when she was sixteen and hadn't changed in the fifty years since then. Elaine tugged the hem of her blouse which perpetually rode up over her hips and fitted itself around the bulge of her midriff when she sat down. Everyone younger than twenty suppressed moans and sent looks to each other about how queer adults were. The men moved their lawn chairs around to another side of the house, saying something about more shade over there in the afternoon. George went around and got his photography equipment out of the trunk. Maxine went to find her purse and get some antacid tablets.

George had a popular kind of thirty-five millimeter camera. He knew, of course, that the camera was never supposed to face into
the sun. George's solution was to find the sun, have everyone else look
at it, and then take the picture. It was handy that Aola's house faced
west and the afternoon sun, and so everyone could be arranged nicely in
front of the house. Maxine sat on the front steps and watched George as
he set up the tripod. He had Maxine stand where everyone would be and
adjusted some silver knobs so he could get the camera tilted at the right
angle. Then he attached a black cord about a foot long to the camera.
It had a little silver button at the end of it and the cord bobbed off
at an angle like a single, knobbed antenna. After George had walked in
front of the camera and peered intently into the lens, he seemed satisfied
with the arrangements and sent Maxine to summon everyone. First the
women came out of the living room through the front door, and then the men
straggled around from beside the house, where they'd been listening to a
baseball game. It took fifteen minutes to assemble the young people.
The little ones had been playing hide and seek and several of the teen-
agers had closeted themselves in the upstairs bathroom hoping to avoid
the ordeal altogether. Then they had to decide how to arrange themselves,
whether by families, age, or height. With little system and much impatience,
they were ready and stood squinting into the sun with fixed faces. George
had to coax two of the children to stop hiding their faces, and one of the
littlest children began to cry with the waiting.

"Say cheese." George had to bend his knees a little to see them
through the lens. "Max, tilt your head back a little. You too, Aola.
Watch the birdie." George wiggled two fingers above his head. Finally
he pushed the button on the end of the antenna and sprinted carefully
over to the group saying, "Don't move a muscle. Don't move a hair. Keep
right on smiling at the camera." George squeezed up beside Maxine at the
end of the back row. "It should be fifteen seconds. Just hold still."
George tapped his finger on the face of his watch to count the seconds.
Maxine could see a drop of perspiration form just in front of George's
ear and travel down to his jaw line. There were two or three black whis-
kers just under George's nose that he had missed shaving that morning.
"Now," George called out, when he had counted thirteen. Everyone froze,
expecting the whir and click that would signal relaxation. A crow called
from the field behind the row of houses. The men had left the baseball
game playing on the radio and the crowd booed in an angry hiss. A family
drove by in a blue car and the woman in the front seat pointed at them and said something so that the driver and the three grown children in the back seat looked out at them too. At least thirty seconds were gone and George walked impatiently back to the camera. He walked straight up to the front of it and touched the end of the black cable to make sure it was connected. The camera immediately took a picture of George's shirt front. The back of George's neck went a shade redder, but he remained as calm as if nothing had happened.

"This new time release cable doesn't work right. I'll just do this the right way here. It'll just take a second." George removed the cable, bent to look at them again and clicked the picture without any more in the way of cheerful patter of directions. "You don't need a picture of me in there. You'll be seeing plenty of me anyway." The children dispersed quickly and the men and women wandered off as Maxine and Aola stayed with George as he packed the camera away to put it back in the trunk.

"Max, have you seen my lens cap? It's a black disc thing about this big around."

"No, George. Did you put it in your pocket? Maybe it's in the back of the car."

The two of them searched for the cap for at least ten minutes until Aola found it on top of the red and white windmill that served as a flower box for petunias.

"Here it is."

"Son of a gun, if that isn't where I put it so I'd be sure and remember where it was," George chuckled.

Since George and Maxine had farther to go than most of the people, they were the first to leave. They gathered up their things and said their good-byes in the house. Aola saw them out to the car. George helped Maxine in and as he walked around to get in his side, Aola asked meaningfully, "Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yes. Yes. We're just fine," Maxine answered, impatient to get away.

George backed carefully off the grass, down the driveway, and onto the road. They were both relieved to be on the way home.

"I know the way back, Sweetie, why don't you just put your head
back and take a snooze and we'll be there in no time." Maxine's hand lay limp in the seat between them and George held it against his thigh as he drove.

Maxine locked her door and put her head back to rest. She remembered the way James had held her hand when they were married. He had squeezed her hand with such warm strength and reassurance as they stood in front of the minister. She had thought then that with the memory of that one touch, she could endure anything even when she was alone. Just the memory of that one touch. Then she remembered when she had picked up his hand just after he was dead. They had been married just seventeen years, but the time seemed so short and flew by in a thought. He had been working outside making a rose trellis for her, and he came in looking pale and said he didn't feel good and he would lay down. In a little bit he called to her that she'd better call an ambulance. She dialed the phone and the man on the phone seemed so stupid and matter-of-fact and he couldn't listen or didn't seem to understand until she shouted at him. Then he hung up and she hurried into the bedroom. James' eyes were closed and she sat beside him on the bed and took his hand to comfort him. His hand was warm, but it was limp and she felt as if she had lost her balance and kept falling back and back until she heard the siren screaming from a long way off. She put his hand down and went into the kitchen where she stood by the refrigerator with her cheek pressed against it. When the ambulance arrived, the horrible red light had filled her kitchen and had gone flashing and bouncing around the walls. She was terrified. She would never forget that red light travelling across her ivory walls and through her flowered curtains.

Maxine slept with the movement of the car and began to awaken as the car slowed coming into their town. She felt her hand being held before she opened her eyes and she basked in the enjoyment of being loved so tenderly by such a fine man. She opened her eyes in a warm dreaminess and cried out as she jerked her hand back when she saw that it was George who held her hand. As she came fully awake, a cold, permanent loneliness wrapped itself around Maxine.

George started. "What's the matter? You scared the poop out of me. You just about made me wreck."

"I was just dreaming. I'm sorry. We're almost home, aren't we?"
When they got home, Maxine went straight in and got ready for bed early. She lay on top of the covers on her back, and her tears ran down both sides of her face and trickled into her ears. She thought that she was for once truly crying without control, but that she didn't care and couldn't enjoy this kind of crying at all. George came in to see if anything was wrong.

"What's the matter, Babe? Don't you feel good?"

"No, George, that's not what's wrong. What's wrong is that I was wrong. We can't do this. It won't work. I shouldn't have done this to you. We can't be married. We'll get a divorce. I have to."

"Whoa. Wait a minute. We've barely been married a week. Don't you think we should give it more of a try? I mean I'm real happy. Happier than ever. Don't you think we should talk about it? What's wrong? What's the matter?" George sat on the edge of the bed and tried to wipe the tears off Maxine's face, but she turned away from him.

"No. Don't be good to me. I mean it and don't want to talk about anything. I don't want to be married to you. I'll take care of everything. You'll just have to sign something. Now get away. Go tonight. You can get your things tomorrow."

George didn't seem to be able to believe she meant it. "Well, just tell me this. What the hell did I do wrong" Just what did I do, for Christ's sake?"

"Nothing. You couldn't have done anything right. Don't you understand anything?"

George tried to understand what he'd done wrong anyway. "Well, what is it that I've done?"

"It's nothing you've done, George, it's nothing you've done."

George banged out of the house and Maxine pulled the covers up over her head like a child.