"Age" and Other Stories

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Laura L. Helms

Thesis Director

Ball State University
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Dr. Harry Taylor, teacher and craftsman

Dr. Richard Gianfagna, an excellent mental chessmate

and

Dr. Jon R. Hendrix, friend, confidant, and stalwart believer
in the value of synergy
Age

There are, I suppose, many ways to describe a day: there's daybreak, daylight, daydream, day of discovery, day of reckoning, happy day, soup of the day--there's also laundry day. That's what today is. You see, it's Monday, and every Monday, every single Monday since the Big Bang and trilobites, every godawful, utterly soapy-smelly Monday, my mother has done the laundry. Never mind that she is now nearly seventy-five years old and alone, that on a good Monday she may have all of one basket barely filled with soiled clothes--if it is the second day of the week, it is also the day to do the wash. The two are synonymous, inseparable, like Siamese twins or the sheets of foil on the backs of gum wrappers. And because I am a self-actualized university woman with a disturbing predisposition to guilt complexes, I reschedule my Monday afternoon conferences to Tuesday morning, notify the chairman of the Campus Relations Committee that he will have to ponder alone the solutions to the congested parking problem near the women's lacrosse field, and ask my secretary to place the weekly call to my mother's house. As I sit at my desk picking chipped pieces of nail polish from around my cuticles, the receiver tucked intimately between my shoulder and ear, I mentally check off the number of passing rings and place secret bets with myself that this one time--please, just this once--it won't take eight rings for her to answer. Three...four...the next one, she'll ans...five, six... lucky seven, come on sev...seven...oh no...eight...almost...
"Hello?"

Damn.

"Hello? Who is this?" She always asks that, always, in her quakely elderly-person's voice. For six years--ever since Daddy's funeral--every single Monday I've called to ask if she would like me to drive her to the Laundromat, and every single Monday she asks "Who is this?", as if there were anyone else to call either one of us.

"Hello, Mother, it's Meg. How have you been?"

"Oh... just fine." (I don't think Mother has ever really trusted telephones. "The eyes, Meggie my girl, the eyes--they say more than the mouth," she would say as she brushed the floppy bangs away from my child's eyes.)

"Well, that's good, that's... uhm, do you need to go to the Laundromat today?"

"Well, I could, I suppose..." Her voice trails off, and I can envision her looking at the cranky clock on the mantel, calculating the exact amount of time it will take for her to gather up the clothes and soap and quarters. "But, now, Meggie, if it's going to be a bother..."

"Oh, Mother, you know it's not a bother." I realized about four years ago that the patience was starting to wear out of my voice, leaving it strained and full of put-upon sighs. "I'll pick you up in thirty minutes, okay? Oh, and Mother, make sure you dress warmly; the wind is horrible today."

The receiver lands back in its cradle with an insolent little ring, and I lock my office and leave by the main doors, my briefcase smacking authoritatively against my tweed leg. As I settle myself behind the wheel of my car, I draw in a quick breath of air and massage the cantankerous, complaining joints of my left hand. I cannot remember how I have injured my hand to make it ache so often; it annoys me, and yet the pain is also a nice
distraction, a change from the monotony of another Monday. That is it, I think. That is the main point, the thesis of this day. Because I know exactly what will happen, of course. Because as soon as she gets into the car, we will discuss the weather and her unreliable thermometer and her nosy neighbor, Midge, and if at all possible, the conversation will be artfully turned to Phil Donahue's latest series on divorce and did I happen to see it? That's what I mean by monotony.

With great care, I maneuver the car up to the broken curb next to my mother's house, fully intending to go in and help her—maybe even visit for awhile. But before I can spring myself from my seatbelt, I see her moving down the sidewalk in that peculiar shuffle-step-slide that old people substitute for walking. People tell me that she is amazing—that's always the word they use, amazing—for a woman of her age, but they don't often see her as I do. They don't see the veins, the sags. They don't hear it when her knees crack and creak so loudly, so perfectly loudly that I almost expect to hear a Vincent Price-ish cackle sound each time they bend. And they don't know other things—but then, people usually don't. Still, I am pleased to see that she has taken my advice about the wind and has bundled and braced herself against the cold. ("Stop that fidgetting, Meggie; you must stay warm, or you'll catch your death," she would say, never quite realizing that I turned that faint shade of blue not because of the cold, but because of the layers of wool wrapped around my neck.) I open the door, settle her into the bucket seat as best I can, and squeeze into the driver's seat, competing with the laundry basket for space and attention.

"There, wait, no... there, now. So, I guess we're all ready, aren't we? Whoops... these streets are pretty slippery." I mumble away, more to keep myself company than to make conversation.
She squirms in her seat, pushing wisps of grey hair under her knit hat. "Yes," she gasps as she clutches at a particularly independent lock, "they say it's going to snow more. Hope not; it's so cold as it is."

I pinch the steering wheel and accelerate recklessly through a very yellow light. Here we go again.

"Yes," she continues, "the thermometer say 20°."

Go ahead, I urge silently--I dare you to say it.

"Of course, that thermometer's in the sun; I don't think you can rely on it."

"You're probably right, Mother." Gritted teeth, white knuckles. "So, Mother, how is Midge?" Cruel, cruel.

That does it. For the next ten minutes, I know, I'll hear about Midge's curtain-peering and name-dropping and phone-listening. Mercifully, we reach the municipal parking lot before she can get to Phil Donahue.

Laundromats are revolting places, designed exclusively to punish those of us who don't own the proper real-live-honest-to-God-sold-only-at-Sears appliances. The washing machines are stationed back-to-back so close together that it's impossible to keep your dirty underwear a secret from anyone. A thick layer of lint covers everything and so completely clogs the air that your nose and mouth soon feel as though you have spent a great deal of time sleeping between the cushions of a cheap fuzzy couch. It seems to me a distortion of the American Dream--automation gone beserk. And the people--good God, those odd creatures who seem always to be lurking behind the dryers or between the Rins-o dispensers. Smoky women in haircurlers screech to each other in seagull voices, occasionally swooping down to reprimand a leaking child or to bribe him away from the illicit lure of the popcorn machine. Scattered here and there are ripe, unshaven men, luckless individuals who are attracted
to the warmth and comforting whirr of the dryers. Of course, there are also
the good, decent people, the clumsy bachelors and the wistful secretaries;
but it is difficult to notice them for the lint and the steam and the seagulls.
I find the whole coin-operated mess disturbing, and I am always embarrassed
to be here. But Mother seems to enjoy it. She moves more easily--almost
gracefully--as we work our way to the rear of the building in search of the
machine--The One Machine--that she insists upon using each week. Suddenly,
she stops and stands very still, eyes flared wide in distress.

"Mother, what's wrong--did you forget something?"

She doesn't answer, but merely sticks her chin out, jaws clenched,
pointing a crooked finger at some distant offending object. Standing that
way, face rigid and finger pointing, she reminds me of a statue of Tecumseh
that I once saw in a town square somewhere, and I want more than anything
to stand right in front of that finger and grunt, "Ugh." But that would
be impertinent. (Meggie, a good girl is never impertinent," she would say
when I would rather saucily question the maternal wisdom in denying me every
thirteen year-old's right to wear Pink Passion lipstick.)

"Mother, will you please tell me what in the..."

Oh-oh.

Now I see, as I follow the path of her stare. There's someone using
our machine. He is; he really is. He's just calmly standing there in his
designer jeans and college sweatshirt, dropping socks one at a time into
the open mouth of our machine, one at a time, as if he doesn't know that
the leader of the entire Shawnee nation is standing beside him and pointing
her death-wielding finger and silently, desperately, imploring me to Do
Something. For a moment, I consider steering Mother to another machine,
but one look at her rigidity tells me that there is absolutely no way she
will allow her clothes and quarters to be placed in an alien washer; so I approach the intruder with a sense of almost desperate embarrassment.

"Excuse me, sir," I begin, amused to see him start with the novelty of being addressed as sir. "Would you mind terribly--now, I know this may sound strange--but you see, you must try to understand. I was wondering, well, could you move your socks to another washer?"

His head snaps back ever so slightly, as people tend to do when told a suggestive joke or when informed by their secretaries that Internal Revenue is on the line. For a moment, for one ridiculous moment, he just stares at me and holds an ugly argyle sock and looks puzzled, and I am sure he is going to fling it in my face. But then he blinks a couple of times, shrugs his terry-lined shoulders, and retrieves his socks to place them in another machine. I am elated with this victory, delighted that Something New has happened on this day, of all the terrible, dull, old days of the week. Elated, that is, until I hear him mutter, "No problem; a guy should do a nice thing for a coupla old ladies." Suddenly, my joints ache even more; the linty breath wheezes hoarsely in my throat.

"Meggie," my newly animated mother says as she begins to place clothes into the bin, "did you see Donahue yesterday?"

"No, Mother, I didn't." My eyes follow the young man and the leaky children and the gulls. "Why don't you tell me about it."
Brothers

A musty-smelling October wind scattered leaves around the circle driveway as Greg Kile's Volkswagon rolled to a stop in front of the sidewalk that zig-zagged up to the house. He sat nervously drumming his fingers on the gear shift knob in time with the chain-spin-whirl of the motor; then he turned off the ignition and stepped out into the chill air. He walked with great care up the sidewalk, forcing his lanky runner's legs to follow every curve in the stone. In his left hand he held the handle of his gym bag, which he dropped carelessly on the kitchen floor as he entered the house. When he walked into the living room, he heard the piano, the bittersweet Chopin melody filling the music room and spilling out into the hallway. Greg edged against the wall through the short hallway and looked around the corner into the room. He caught his breath for a second, as he always did in reflex to seeing a copy of himself at the piano, but then that flush of familiarity stained his face, and he frowned at his twin brother.

"Gary, you'd better get those damp trunks off before Mom catches you and kicks your ass for getting a water spot on the bench. What are you doing home from practice so early, any way?"

Gary hesitated a count or two before beginning a particularly difficult interlude. "The coach had a dentist appointment, so he let us off early. Steve brought me home."

Greg tensed. "Steve?"

"Yea, he's a new guy on the team--sophomore, I think."

"Oh, God, not that wierd little guy from Central--not the one in my biology class."
"That's him. He's really pretty cool."

Greg leaned against the piano and tried to catch a glimpse of his brother's eyes. "Come on, Gary--he's a fag. Everybody knows it."

Gary rolled his eyes. "Oh, get over it, Greg! Anybody you don't know well or don't like or don't hang out with is a fag! I suppose Jesus Christ was a fag because he wore sandals and had long hair. . . ."

"Gar-

". . . and those Roman gladiators--just think of those little skirts. . . ."

"Funny. . . ."

". . . I mean, shit, Greg--our own father wears wingtips. Wingtips, for Christ's sake. Now there's a faggot shoe if I ever saw one. . . ."

"Will you shut the hell up! And get your butt off that bench--you're spotting up the family furniture." Greg flopped down on the plaid couch in the music room and began to play with the ends of his shoestrings.

Gary stopped playing and stood to face his brother. "Whatever you say, Mr. Happy Homemaker. What's your problem? Did you lose your match?"

"Yea, I lost, pinned with ten seconds to go. I hate losing that way; I hate being pinned."

"That's why I stick with swimming: less pain." Gary walked into the bathroom, stripped off his trunks, and began to search through the pile of clothes on the floor in the hope of finding a stray pair of jeans. Greg looked away, then used the tip of his shoe to close the bathroom door so that only a thin crack remained.

"Yea," Gary was saying, "somebody's got to keep this family's reputation in tact; somebody's got to keep the title of "Athlete Extrordinaire" in this house, got to get his picture in the Brookville Democrat, got to put up with the adoration of millions of screaming sports fans. . . ."
"Gary, let's go out this weekend."

Gary came out of the bathroom and sat back on the piano bench. "I'm flattered, Greg, but I'm afraid people would talk." He began to play a Brahms piece, his fingers brushing the keys with remarkable gentleness for their size and strength.

"I mean double-dating. Suzanne's best friend, Staci, just broke up with her boyfriend, and Suzanne said she could really use an evening out. What do you think?"

"I think maybe some other time."

"Do you have other plans?"

"No, none in particular."

"Surely you're not going to do homework on a Friday night."

"Oh, please."

"Gary, you never go out."

"So?"

"So why not?"

"So what difference does it make to you?"

"I just don't understand why you avoid dating girls. Hell, you're seventeen years old—you're at your peak. . . ."

"You've been reading Dear Abby again."

Greg jumped off the couch, paced the length of the room, and stopped suddenly to lean against the frame of the bathroom door. "There you go again! Can't you be serious for just a minute? Jesus, you drive me crazy when I try to talk to you about something important."

Gary swiveled around again. His features were amused, and yet there was a hint of confusion behind his eyes, as though in looking at his brother he was looking deep into a mirror at himself and not quite recognizing the reflection. "I don't avoid girls, and I don't drive you anything. You know,
we don't have to be exactly the same, Greg. Just because we look the same, just because Mom dressed us the same, just because we were born at the same time from the same place doesn't mean we have to be the same. We can excel in different sports. And we can have different friends." He turned back to the piano.

Greg stared at the stiff, silent back, at the curly blond hair, at the curly blond hair so like his own but stiff from chlorine and the brisk rubbing of a terrycloth towel. He felt a dull thudding pain in his stomach, and he traced the wooden frame of the doorway with his finger as though to occupy his mind and forget the pain. His fingertip traveled easily for a short distance, but then it caught on some rough indentations in the wood. When he stooped down closely, he realized they were cuts, knife-marks that his father had made years ago to chart the boys' growth progress. He saw towards the bottom how the marks were almost an inch apart, and he remembered how his father had told Gary that Greg had only a small height advantage, how some day Gary would catch up. Greg followed the marks up through the years, found the place where his father had been proved correct. Greg shuddered, and his finger jerked roughly against the wood; he examined the tip for a splinter and decided to try one last time. "Please, Gary, come with us. Please."

The music dropped down very, very low, but it didn't stop. "What the hell is wrong with you, Greg? Why do you keep after me like this? You've been acting flakey ever since you got home, and it's starting to bug me."

Greg swallowed hard, a little too hard; he coughed, felt as if he were choking. "Gary, I didn't want to say anything...

"Say anything about what?"

"About what I saw in the locker room today." He saw Gary's shoulders stiffen, but when there was no other response, he hurried on. "I lost my
match, and I was feeling sore and pissed, so I went downstairs before the rest of the guys. I forgot my towel, so I went over to that white cabinet to get one of the school's. Well, you know how people write on that cabinet, scratch stuff in and I...I saw," he wanted to keep the accuser's tone out of his voice, but it kept slipping in uninvited, "Goddammit, Gary, I saw your name. Some asshole had written in black marker something about you, something ugly and rotten; I tried to get it off with water from the sink and a towel, but it must have been permanent ink or something. I couldn't wipe it off, so I took a sharp thing--I don't remember what now--and I scratched the thing off."

Danger was thick in the air now, and Greg's stomach began to throb even more. Gary continued to play, but he was missing notes; the disharmony grated on Greg's ears.

"What did it say?" Gary asked with a great deal of innocence.

"I...I don't remember exactly..."

"Of course you remember exactly--what did it say?"

Greg shut his eyes. "It...it said you're gay."

"Oh." Gary turned to another selection in the anthology, choosing a harsh, violent scherzo. It was a song of hostility, but Greg wasn't sure who it was directed against. He cleared his throat, an uncomfortable, guilty sound. "Are you...are you...gay?" he asked.

"If I said yes, would it matter?"

"That's a stupid question--of course it would matter. I can't say that it wouldn't...Gary...you're my brother."

"Oh." He hunched over the piano, rounding his back in a protective position.

"You're not going to talk about this, are you."
The music began a bizarre, unnatural rhythm, the notes blaring coarsely.

"No, Greg, I'm not."

"I...I have to know for sure, Gary—you know I wouldn't tell anybody..."

The chords continued in staccato-steps, faster and faster...

"...not even Mom and Dad..."

Pound...pound...pound

"Gary!"

The piano lid crashed down with one mutilated note, and sheets of music flew into the air. "Get off my back; just get off me right now!" Gary half-ran, half-stumbled to the doorway of the music room and braced his shoulder against the wall. "You're scared," he said, leaning his forehead against his bent arm, "you are scared to death, Brother. And that's what matters. That's all."

He walked out of the room down through the hallway. Upstairs, far away, it seemed, Greg heard a door close, and the sound of it made his chest tighten. He stooped down on the carpeted floor and began to collect pages of music, placing them face down on top of each other in a neat stack. Behind him, the piano continued to give off a deep rumbling echo. He crawled over beneath the bench, and as he reached out to calm the pedal that would stop the noise, he noticed that his hand was shaking; it didn't stop shaking, even when he placed the music deep in the compartment of the piano bench and softly closed the lid.
Sayonara

I first became wary when I heard the silver-sounding clang of my mother dragging the heavy mop bucket out of our downstairs closet. Now if it had been winter, we three kids would have been safe because in winter the old bucket was used only by my daddy for the sole purpose of steaming off the ice from around the clothes dryer vent outside. But I knew better that morning, for that morning was as bright-orange a spring day as I can remember, and I knew that metal sound on that morning could only mean one discouraging thing--Momma was ready to do her spring cleaning. And she wasn't going to do it alone.

"Come on, you kids!" She called up into the staircase just as I pulled the blankets away from my sleeping sister and over my head. "It's a lovely day outside--you don't want to sleep through it, do you?"

My sister grunted and opened one eye half-way. "Of course I do, Mom, it's Saturday," she muttered. Samantha was thirteen--three years older than me--and the two things she considered most traumatic in her life were being awakened early and sharing a bed with me, both of which were brutally apparent on that particular morning; I pulled the blankets even higher over my head.

"Sam, Katie, roll out! We have a lot to do today, and the sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish. Let's go--and wake your brother, too."

"Oh, Mom!"

"Samantha. . . ."

Oh-oh. That was the warning signal. If things didn't start happening
pretty quick, it would soon change to the red-light "Samantha Marie McKenzie," each syllable commanding an octave all its own and drawing in Daddy like a torpedo to a target. Sam and I quickly dressed, roused my brother, Michael, and made our way down the stairs, through the living room (where that bucket glowered at us menacingly) and into the kitchen. As we sat around the table and munchèd on Sugared Snips or Snaps or Somethings, Momma ran through the list of jobs she had made for each of us.

"Michael, you and your daddy are going to work on that horrible garage today, so as soon as he comes home from the hardware store, make sure to put on your old tennis shoes. Sam, the bookcase and china closet shelves need to be emptied and everything dusted..."

"What difference does it make how dusty the inside of something is?" Sam could never take an order at face value, not since she'd started to act grown-up, anyway.

Momma sighed. "That's the reason for spring cleaning--it's the time of the year when things need to be completely scrubbed, aired out. Please, Sam, don't argue with me." Sam started to say something, but then just rolled her eyes and went to find the furniture polish and a rag.

"Hey," I said as Momma looked after Sam with a frown, "what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, young lady, remember that upstairs attic you promised to straighten up last spring?"

"UH, sort of."

"Well, how about if you "sort of" finish up the job today?"

I knew it was one of those questions I wasn't supposed to answer, so I took a box of trash bags and a broom and climbed up the stairs to the attic. It wasn't such a bad job, really; if a kid wanted to, she could
make a kind of game of it, a pretend treasure hunt in which all sorts of fascinating, exotic objects were stashed in secret places. I turned the latch and opened the attic door just enough so that I could put my nose to the crack and sniff at the half-cave, half-grave smell, that musty odor of darkness and old things. Once I felt the plain air from the rest of the house mix in with the attic air, I pulled the door completely open and turned on the light. Inside, boxes were pushed into every corner of the small room. Some of them were identified in red marker with titles like "Monica--High School" and "Baby Furniture." Scattered among the boxes were various items that seemed to have been worth saving in leaner days—a rocking chair with a broken leg, a warped coat rack, a lamp with only a naked bulb at the top. I sliced through a cobweb at the bottom of the door and began to work.

I had finished about half of the room and was tugging an unusually heavy box out of the way of my death-wielding broom when its rotting cardboard sides gave way and the contents spilled out onto the floor. I bent down, intrigued; many of the things were unfamiliar to me—oddly shaped cartons and foreign coins. But what I did recognize was the emblem etched onto a large wooden plaque that rested partially hidden beneath a stack of papers. It was a heavy thing, gleaming with gold colored panels and words written in red, white, and blue. And at the top, bold and proud, the words "United States Army" arched over a fierce eagle. Below this was my daddy's name—Corporal Peter McKenzie—and the dates he enlisted and was discharged. I sat on the dusty floor and cradled the plaque on my lap. How strange. It was always a little uncomfortable to hear someone call Daddy by his real man's name, but to see it scratched in metal and with so official a title seemed especially peculiar. Maybe it was because he didn't talk
much about the war; sometimes when the summer evenings were ripe for story-
telling, he would describe the camp he lived in--one time he even taught
me to count to five in Korean--but he never spoke of the people he knew
or the men he killed. After a time, we learned it was best not to ask.

I was just about to set the plaque beside the rocker for safe keeping
when I noticed a small rectangle of gold on the back. It had been badly
damaged by the scraping of a nail or some other sharp object, but if I
squinted very hard, I could still make out the inscription: "For Linda."
Linda? I had never heard Daddy mention any old girlfriend named Linda
like he sometimes did when he wanted to tease Momma. No, I had never heard
him mention that name at all. Still, I decided, Daddy probably had lots
of girlfriends that I didn't know about; one more didn't make much difference.

Chances are I would have let it go at that had I not seen the corner of
a very small piece of paper peeking out from beneath one edge of the name
plate. Chances are I would have buried the plaque under a pile of other
worn-out stuff in a corner, would have gone downstairs and eaten lunch
and played all afternoon in the clear spring warmth, but instead I pulled
on that corner and out slipped a creased photograph of the most perfect
woman I could imagine. Her face was oval, her eyes slanted back toward
the hair that even in the black-and-white picture looked darker than mere
black. But the thing I noticed most was her smile; it was slight, hesitant,
as though she were about to greet you warmly but then felt unsure of her
intentions. Looking back at her just as uncertainly, I knew this was too
much mystery to pass up; I folded the picture carefully in my hand and
went to find my daddy.

"Momma, is Daddy back yet?" I walked into the kitchen semi-sideways
so she wouldn't see my hand.

"Yes, Katie, he got back about an hour ago--he's outside. Did you
fin. . ."
I was out the back door before she could get through her sentence. With excitement and the jet-propulsion of an unanswered question adding speed to my tennis shoes, I hurried through the backyard and into the garage, where Daddy was scraping paint off a sliding door. "Hey, Katie-Q," he said when I bumped against his ladder in my haste, "take it easy or you'll make me fall and mash you flat."

"Daddy," I didn't want any preliminaries--this was something you just had to ask outright, "who was Linda?"

He went on with his scraping. "Linda?"

"Yea, I found this army thing of yours and on the back it said "For Linda." Then when I picked it up, this picture of this pretty lady fell out. Who was she? Was she your girlfriend?"

Daddy jumped down from the ladder so fast that he scared me, and I thought for a minute he might be pretending to mash me, like he said, so I jumped back with a giggle. Then he grabbed my arm a little too hard for pretending; when I looked up, his eyes were red, and I could feel their heat burning through my skin.

"What are you doing messing around in other people's things, Katie? You know better than to go poking your nose in where it shouldn't be."

"But I wasn't poking, Daddy. Momma gave me my job and..."

"I don't want to hear it--you were being nosy, and that's all there is to it. Now go back and..."

I lifted my head when I heard his voice stop, trying hard to keep my bottom lip from quivering. He wasn't looking red at me anymore; he was staring at the picture in my hand, staring with a long-ago look that made my throat squeeze shut. Then he sat down hard on the cold cement floor, took the photograph from my limp hand, and brought it close to his face.
"I'd forgotten I'd saved it," he whispered, tracing the curling edges with a work-toughened finger. "I'd almost forgotten..." And to my horror, a tear spilled down his cheek and splashed onto the girl. "Funny," his voice was so low I could barely hear it, "she never looked like the wrong color in the picture."

"Daddy..." I didn't know what to do, what to say. "Daddy..."

"It's okay, Katie, it's all right now," he was getting his Daddy-voice back again, and I felt the relief swimming all the way down to my toes. "Go on and play now." He tickled my chin. "Go on."

I turned to go, somehow glad to be gone and yet somehow wishing I could stay. It had been the only time I had seen my father cry, and even then it had only been that single tear, so surely it didn't count for anything. But when I walked away from the garage, trying to get back my little-girl skip, I looked back to see him open his hand and release a hundred fragments of torn paper into the warm east wind.
It was hot in the valley, hotter than usual for an Indian summer stretching languidly into October, and every grass blade, every thirsty animal, every nearly-living thing longed for the cool earthiness of fall. Behind a rusting fence that ran the length of a pasture, oddly patterned cattle leaned against the apple trees, their tails swiping at flies, their heads weighted low by the heat and dust of an entire summer. On the greener side of the fence on this lackluster October day sat a small child. With her chin resting precariously in the sweat-slippery groove formed by her bent knees, she was so still, so perfectly insignificant that her body seemed to melt into the bark of the pear tree behind her until at last even the paranoid sparrows stopped their cries and accepted her—along with the cattle and the grass and the trees—as part of their world. Of course, this tolerance didn't matter to the child; nor did the thick air nor the flies nor the healed-over scratches on the backs of her brown legs—for she was waiting for them, waiting as she had daily during the summer, waiting as only a child can, with that peculiar self-absorption that mystifies adults but is quite at home in the plodding pace of nature.

She sensed them before she saw them, felt them in the way the other animals seemed to shuffle to either side of the field as though to grant special attention to the approaching dignitaries. Then everything sort of
hung there, as it had before, making the air tense and expectant so that even the birds feared flying and the child seemed nearly to burst with pent-up breath. Then, just when the world began to crack with the stiffness of anticipation, a man came over the hill to the field—a rugged man, muscular, with marbled, sinewy features that lent to his face an appearance of raw meat. He walked heavily with the responsibility of leading. The field, the fence, the cattle—all belonged to him, as did the taut ropes wrapped around each of his forearms and the two animals at either ends of the ropes. The black one on the right, shiny-white in places like a well-polished shoe, made an elaborate show of fighting against the restraint of the rope; but his companion, as speckled and brown as a misfit egg, followed his master complacently, content with a shy nibble every now and then.

The man paused near the clump of apple trees, mopped his neck with a moist bandana, and with a sharp snapping sound released his charges from the tight leads. The child leaned forward slightly through this ritual and then froze again. The black one, suddenly realizing his newly-granted freedom, bolted away from the man toward the fence; the child bolted with him, rising up on her marked knees, nearly toppling over. She quickly righted herself and began to bounce ever so slightly on her haunches, breathing in rapid little gasps that made her nostrils flutter and flare. She couldn't move her head—didn't dare to, in fact—but her eyes ran as the animal ran, straining, staring, galloping until before long her mind had made her become him, become him in a fusion of child and beast. She tossed her braids, snorted, closed her eyes and thrilled to the rush of running ground beneath her feet. For a few often-craved moments she had become sleek and invincibly mobile while the blood pounded and mixed and the world stopped so that all time, all experience, was concentrated on that field, in that child. . . . Then, the
man called the animal, conned him once again within reach of the rope, and leading again, tromped through the grass away from the fence. And the child, just a child again, slumped against the tree and watched the hill slowly swallow herself up.

After a time, after the man had led his animals in slow motion down the hill to the comforting dampness of the creek below, the child's eyes began to sting from the lack of something living to look at, and she pulled their lids down to rest in cool blackness which occasionally exploded in spider-webby cracks of light. Way far away, maybe in a cave somewhere, she heard the crunch of a car on gravel. She didn't look up, though, didn't dare because, naturally, she knew who it was and how it would be. Especially after last night. Because it had been last night--late, it had seemed, but before the bullfrogs had given up their songs and retreated to bed--that her daddy had called her out to the porch, sat her pajamaed bottom on his lap, and asked that question of questions, "What do you want for your birthday tomorrow, Skeeter?" Teasing, tickling, eyes twinkling like the stars above his balding head. For a moment her heart had sped along, fueled by a whole year's longings for dolls and games and fuzzy stuffed oddities. But then it had slowed, hovering, like a pinball does before it rolls between the paddles, before it falls in and you've lost your only quarter-bribed chance at lighting up the "Tilt." That's how it had been, because all she wanted, all she thought any kid could ever want, was a horse. And last night, she said so.

"Oh, Laurie Lee, come on," he had said, shaking his head and putting on his parental "let's reason with the kid" mask. "There's just no way we could keep a horse! We don't have a barn, and even if we did, horses cost too much to take care of. It wouldn't be like buyin' batteries for one of your
She had squirmed in frustrated response to the question that lingered in his eyes. How could she have described it? She could never have explained the wind-blown mane, the proud canter, the animal feel of four legs on hard-packed ground. Horses seemed so free; they didn't have chores and bedtimes. They pounded away well into the night, even on Sundays, if they wanted, and defied the world to restrain them. And they ran—Lord, how they ran—moving in complete synchronization. And, yes, at that age, at that clumsy pre-puberty-not-little-girl-age, she wanted so desperately to move in that same way, freely and with no shame. But she could not describe those feelings, not to her daddy, not to her casual analysis, synthesized, dear deductive daddy. He would have required graphs and charts—a bibliography, if possible—and all she could manage to come up with was a soon-to-be-nine-year-old's feeble reply. "Cause I want one Daddy, more than an'thin' else in the whole world. Just b'cause."

She had expected him to laugh at her, or maybe even yell, but instead he'd just tilted his head at a speculative angle and raised his hand very slowly to touch her in that embarrassed, reserved way that fathers touch their growing daughters. Then a strange, magical look had slipped onto his face and, frowning with the mental activity of a partially-developed thought, he'd given her an absent-minded kiss and scooted her off to bed.

That's how it had been last night, and that's why the child had spent most of her day by the tree in the hope that her proximity to the field would somehow grant her that one birthday wish. As she sat, waiting again but this time not knowing for what, the late afternoon sun finally jabbed through the leaves of the apple trees, and the child squinted her eyes against the intrusion, annoyed for an instant. She felt cheated by the sun's descent,
for she knew that its lengthening rays meant that soon her mother would call her in to supper and her birthday presents...toys, games, a new doll, maybe. She stopped the tears before they spilled out of her eyes and began once again the prayer she had said over and over the night before. Please, God, give me a horse. Please, God, give me a...

"Laur-ie!"

Oh, no, it was already time; and she didn't even get to finish her prayer. Please, God, give...

"Laur-ie...come here...where in the world could you be?"

The voice was sounding louder with each word. The child hurried away from her tree before they could find her secret place, and then she began to walk up the drive to the house. She walked stubborn, with her head bent low and eyes hidden, the prayer in her mind repeating only one pleaded word, God...God...God...

That was when she saw the trailer.

It was there, all right, just sitting there in the sunlight, sitting there for the whole world to see. At first the child simply stared, unable to move any closer for fear that she was wrong, that the trailer contained some horrid furniture or practical appliance and not what she knew it must contain. When she heard her daddy call her name again, she began to run, breathless before she started. As she neared the drive, she called out in her impatience.

"What...what is it?"

"Well, now, Skeeter, what do you think it is?" Her daddy was delighted, obviously relishing her stunned surprise. He stepped briskly to the rear of the trailer and amid much banging and clopping, reappeared leading into the daylight a small, white, sleepy-eyed pony.
"There," he said, presenting the reins to his astonished daughter with all the satisfaction of a magician who's completed an intricate hat trick.

"Oh, Daddy, he's perfect." She whispered very, very softly, cautious in case her voice should break the spell and whisk the pony away from her.

"Where did you get him?"

Her father stopped a little, catching her chin in his rough hand. "Oh, your old dad's got a few secrets to keep, now doesn't he? It doesn't matter where he came from; he's yours. I worked out a deal with Loper down the hill there, and he's gonna put him up with his animals—for a price, of course, but then sometimes... sometimes price doesn't make a whole lot of difference. Now, come on, let's saddle him up, and you can show off for your momma."

Within minutes, a worn leather saddle was retrieved from the truck and placed on the pony, and the child was hefted up into the sky to sit astride the swayed back. She sat unnaturally stiff, feeling foreign up in the air above her parents, but then the pony began to move, and she waited for that rush, that incredible merging which transformed her into something ancient and deep and beastly. She waited for the passing ground, for the blasts of parting air. But the pony just padded along around the yard, around and around in a circle around her mama and daddy, who were waving and laughing and calling out "Happy Birthday, Cowgirl!" The child continued to ride, continued to wait for what she had been feeling all summer as she'd sat at the tree, and when it didn't come, she began to worry. She gave her head an experimental little toss, but all she felt were her own braids and little-girl ribbons scratching her cheeks. There was no metamorphosis—maybe she was moving even slower than before. Moving in that circle around her parents, lumbering sickly-slow, pushing through the heavy air, sometimes winning but mostly losing ground to the grass and the heat and the flies... plodding... tromping...
"Hey..." Her daddy let out a startled cry as the child jumped off of the pony and ran, sobbing, into the house, slamming the screen door behind her. The white pony stood lost-looking for a moment, but then he ambled over to the trailer and began to nibble at the tufts of grass sticking out from beneath the tires. He nibbled away, while in an upstairs window the tear-streaked face of a small child was turned toward the hill where, in the distance, like a speck on the glass, a man was leading two dark shapes into the black void of an empty barn.
To Autumn

The leaves have started to fall today. I am standing here somewhat hidden by the doily patternings of my curtains, and the leaves have started to fall. They have finished with their colorful, terminal transformations and are now floating—tentatively at first, I notice, hesitantly. But suddenly it fairly storms leaves, and the air chokes on dead-brown dust. I remember. Each year I remember, when I see the treachery and desertion, each year I remember in my faltering way, and I wonder again why I couldn't see it then.

To be fair, though, I suppose none of us understood then; perhaps we weren't supposed to, I don't know. Those days seem so garbled now—a few faded strains of "Pomp and Circumstance," a turned tassel, a too-short ride to a campus. Mama crying, waving. Daddy murmuring, "let go. . . let go. . . ."

"Good-bye!"

Noticing the station wagon's license plate number for the first time.

"Goodd-byyyyee. . ." More urgent, full of quavering, forced courage.

Later, I fingered the key to my room, turned to my semi-empty suitcase, and began to place clothes into the dresser. A careful packer, I was also a meticulous arranger, every article aligned so that rows and rows of Sears Best tags peeked uniformly out from the rims of shirts and shorts and slips. And the bras—sturdy, impenetrable, welded with so much underwire; I was proud of that supporting metal—never mind that it poked me sharply whenever I sneezed—and I stacked those bras, folded, like Baskin Robbins sugar cones. As I filled the drawers, stereos blasted against the September breeze,
and outside two fraternity men with letters on their terry-covered backsides threw a frisbee and drank beer out of Pepsi Light cans. How bohemian, how sophisticated, how college.

"Hey, not bad." The girl in the doorway stood in a sort of natural tilt, one hip hitched too high, a knee turned slyly outward. "Your room looks a lot more civilized than ours...Leslie!" She turned her head and yelled down the hallway. "Les-liee, come here and introduce yourself to our new neighbor!"

A chubby blond with huge oval glasses frowned around the doorway. "Jesus, Christa, why don't you just scream? Please excuse my roommate," she addressed me with affected formality. "She usually acts fairly normal."

After I had invited them in and over glasses of warm Shasta, we discovered almost immediately that we liked each other. I was a freshman and they were both juniors, but that didn't seem to matter to anyone but me. They buffeted my first night there with their stories of past classes and friends and roommates. My roommate--Jessica, according to the paper I had been given upon my arrival--had yet to move in, and so I spent the evening with Christa and Leslie, grateful for their company but anxious to meet the person with whom I would spend the next nine months in a room the size of a linen closet.

But Jessica didn't show up the next day, nor the next, nor for the first day of classes, and by the end of the week I was beginning to feel blighted and undesirable. On Saturday, the dorm director, an unfortunate individual who couldn't bear to part with her adolescence, called me into her office to tell me that Jessica was indeed coming to campus, that she had been sick or injured or had suffered some other Joadish catastrophe--the details of which she couldn't reveal, for she was unclear about them herself.
With this scrap of information, I returned to my room, fell onto my bed, and tried to imagine what would happen when Jessica and I finally met. There would be shyness, of course, awkwardness for the first few days. But then we would talk, really talk, about ourselves and our families and majors and classes... Comforted with the thought of impending companionship, I fell asleep.

A few days later, I was doing my homework, struggling with diagrams of sperms and eggs and genotypes and phenotypes, when I heard the knock on the door. I knew it was probably Christa or Leslie, so I just said a hasty "Yeah!" over my shoulder and went back to solving a particularly stubborn, sneaky X. But the door didn't open; at least I didn't think it had, so I scouted my chair and looked across the room.

She was braced stiff-legged, her hands white-knuckling her suitcase, her eyes lowered, but even in that subdued position I could see the nervous rippling of their lids. Shadowed by heavy circles that bled down from her eyes, her cheeks were trimmed by her hair, an odd mixture of yellows and brown usually found on a wild animal of some sort. Most people would have considered her pretty, but not me—not because I thought she was ugly or anything. She just didn't seem, well, real to me. She was more like an illusion, like a murmur you think you hear behind you or a whispy shape you may see in the dark. She was there in the doorway, certainly, yet she wasn't there, and I found her semi-presence disquieting.

"Uhhhh... I guess you're Jessica."

She nodded, her knuckles relaxing slightly from their clenched grip.

"Well, I'm glad you're finally here; I've been waiting, and I'm... I'm just glad. Well, uh, let me help you get your stuff in."
In spite of all my planning and rehearsing, I was caught off guard; but I soon recovered, and after several long moments so did Jessica. She began to talk to me, but only about general things, nothing specific about why she had been detained for two weeks or why she had come alone, without her parents, or why she had brought so few things with her, why there were no knick-knacks from home or memorabilia from high school or other trappings characteristic of college dorm rooms. She did, however, listen with apparent interest as I told her about my family, and I was greatly enjoying such a captive audience after the many days of speaking to silent walls. As I chattered away, Jessica began the same unpacking ritual I had performed before. I watched curiously, as girls tend to do when given the opportunity to see what another girl chooses to place in her wardrobe, while she fastened clothes onto the hangers in her closet. That's when it happened. She was preparing to close the lid of her suitcase when I noticed a gleam of white in one corner.

"Hey, Jessica." I stopped my ramblings and stepped to the side of her bed. "You left something in there."

She turned sharply, frowning, and backed away from my nearness. "No, I didn't." She shook her head from side to side.

"Yea, you did; I see it--right there in the corner, see?"

"NO I DIDN'T" Her voice was harsh, panicked, and her body was crouched like a defensive cat surprised in the corner of an alley. I should have shrugged it off; I really don't know why I didn't. Maybe I just wanted to make a point. And then maybe I wanted to show the silly superiority born from my two-week edge in this new world. Whatever the motivation, I should never have done it, should never have marched to the suitcase, throwing it open with a triumphant "There!", should never have pulled out
the garment—a lovely white dress, pure white with purple flowers embroidered along the yoke. I held the dress up into the light from the open window.

"See, I told..."

I stopped in mid-sentence as Jessica snatched the dress from my hands. It wasn't really a quick movement, nor was it violent; it was deliberate, cold, done with an angry malice so tensely controlled that it was terrifying. I blinked, more startled than angry or hurt, and then moved away, never turning my back. Suddenly Jessica closed her eyes and gave a tired sigh. She dropped the dress on the floor, still clutching the ruffle tightly.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she said as she crumpled on the bed. "I guess I'm just tired...so tired..."

"It's okay; I didn't mean to be so grabby. It really is a beautiful dress."

I was surprised to see the tears pool in her dark eyes. "It was my graduation dress...but I'm not allowed...I, I mean it's white, see, and I can't wear it anymore. I just can't..."

Her voice trailed off, her head lowered itself; I felt a desperate need to leave. Mumbling a few conciliatory words, I found my cosmetic bag and towels and retreated to the relative privacy of the showers, where I tried to sort out what had happened. The water spurting first hot and then cold in typical collegiate fashion helped to clear my thoughts, but nothing could have erased the troubled, puzzled lines in my forehead. After several minutes I left the shower, wrapped myself in comforting terrycloth, and padded back to my room. Jessica was already asleep, the blankets pulled tightly around her chin. She looked so calm, sleeping like that; I felt a great surge of self-gratifying relief and assured myself that the whole episode was caused by frazzled nerves. But then, in the bottom of our
wastebasket, I saw the frayed remains of the dress glinting eerie-white in the moonlight from the window, speckled with the fuzz of ripped purple threads.

The September breezes blew into October winds; the cheering crowds filled and emptied the stadium each week; research papers were completed, projects were presented, and I settled myself so comfortably into my new life that it soon became cozy, familiar, like a well-patched sweater. I felt at ease with everything in my world—everything, that is, except Jessica. Neither of us had mentioned the dress incident since our first night together, but it remained between us, an unspoken, unseen presence. There were other things too, like her peculiar modesty, which wouldn't permit her to wear anything refreshingly brief, like shorts or a halter or even a nightshirt. Throughout the waning heat of early Fall, she wore blouses with long sleeves, high-necked things that made her look prim and Victorian. As the air cooled, she added bulky sweaters, always in dull colors, always pulled low over her jeans as though to ensure complete coverage. Then there were the nights. Each night, almost without exception, I was awakened by muffled sounds that seemed to belong to some wounded creature in a far-away forest, yet upon rumpled, drowsy investigation, I discovered that they were made by Jessica. Twisted hopelessly in damp sheets, she would knot herself around her pillow and make those mewing noises as though she were reliving in her dreams fragments of childhood nightmares. Once I tried to wake her, but when I placed my hand on her shoulder, she hitched her body away and cried louder. So in the morning I pretended as though nothing had happened, pretended as though pretending would somehow stop those noises or at least keep them in the night, where they belonged.

While I could have accepted the sweaters and the nocturnal ramblings
as some of those irritating idiosyncracies within us all, I found it impossible
to deal with her self-imposed isolation from the rest of us. No matter
how often I invited her to go to movies or concerts or restaurants, no matter
how often I invited her to go to movies or concerts or restaurants, no matter
how hard I tried to include her, she would lower her already lowered eyes,
smile an odd half-smile, and refuse. True, she said no politely—she did
everything politely—and yet I soon began to feel rejected, unwanted. When
I voiced my indignation to my cosmopolitan neighbors, they offered sympathy
and the refuge of their room. They also offered advice. "Forget Jessica,"
they said. "Don't invite her anywhere; act like she doesn't even exist."
Outwardly, I nodded my head; inwardly, I hesitated, stumbling over my own
Freshman feelings. Finally, the day before her November birthday, I decided
to try to reach Jessica one last time.

With a great deal of sneaking around, I made a cake, decorated Leslie's
room, and invited a few friends from across the hall—my friends, since
Jessica didn't have any that I knew of. Once everything was in place and
everyone prompted, I went into our room and asked Jessica to come with me.
She looked puzzled for a moment, but I had made my voice sufficiently serious,
so she followed me to the doorway of the other room. I had expected her
to be startled, knew she would feel that belly-jumping sensation when everyone
shouted, "Surprise!"; I was tense with barely controlled excitement. I
was in front of her, opening the darkened door of the room and urging her
inside. Suddenly the lights flashed on, the somewhat reluctant well-wishers
called out, Leslie's camera flashed with perfect timing. And nothing happened.
Not with Jessica. She stood there for several seconds, more wide-eyed than
usual. Then she whirled around, knocking the camera out of Leslie's hands,
and walked stiffly to our room and the security of a slammed door.

"What in the..." Christa knelt to collect the halves of her roommate's
camera. Nobody bothered to answer her question; nobody could. As I tore down the decorations and threw away the unlit candles, I boiled and churned inside with a silent contempt.

"Okay, Jessica, I want you to tell me what's eating you!" I stood defiantly in the doorway, arms crossed. When Jessica ignored my question, I felt the heat building behind my eyes, and I heard the anger leaking into my voice. She was sitting at her desk, her back to me, carefully turning the pages of an open textbook. As I moved towards her, I became irritated by the crackling noise of the crisp pages. "Don't ignore me anymore, don't you dare—not after tonight. What is wrong with you? What makes you like you are? You and your weird clothes and your rude behavior around my friends—they didn't want to throw a party for you, you know; I talked them into it. Now I sure as hell am sorry I did!"

The pages turned faster; the crackling grew louder.

"Damnit, Jessica, LOOK AT ME!"

She closed the book slowly and placed it inside a desk drawer. Then she stood up, slip the chair cautiously beneath the desk, and turned to face me. There was no remorse on her face, no emotion. There was nothing at all. "All I want, all I ever wanted from you, is to be left alone. That's all. I don't care about your friends; I don't care about your plans; I suppose I don't even care about you. I don't hate you, Jan; I don't even hate them. I just wish you'd all stop bothering me."

"Oh, don't worry, Jessica. I wouldn't think of "bothering" you again."

"I'm glad, Jan."

"What a flake," Christa said between handfulls of popcorn. We were sitting in their room two days later, and as we listened to the stereo, we dipped into large yellow Tupperware bowls and talked about Jessica.
"Hand me the salt, will you, Les?"

From her canary's perch on the top bunk, Leslie tossed the shaker in Christa's direction. "You know, guys, at first I felt sort of sorry for her, but now after that stunt the other night, I've had it. What's her problem, anyway?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know; I swear to God, I don't know. She's really getting to me, though, and it's not just the party thing, either. I mean, it's nothing I could easily point out, like stealing from me or using my stuff or anything--but, well, it's there."

"I don't buy that timid little kid crap for one minute. Fact it, she's one of those bizarre people who makes a hobby of being a martyr, like 'Look at me, world, and see how poor and humble and backwards I am.' She just wants us to feel sorry for her, but she can forget it now," Christa set a bowl on the floor and began to clean the oily salt from beneath her fingernails.

"You know what I think?" Leslie dangled her legs over the side of the bunk, a stuffed bear balanced precariously on the toes of her right foot. "I think something should be done."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I think we should...well...loosen her up a bit."

"You mean get even," I said.

She arched her eyebrows high up on her forehead. "Whatever."

"Hey, that could be great, Leslie." Christa drew her knees up, already scheming. "Yea...a joke or something might..."

"I'm not sure," I interrupted. "I mean, we've done everything we could, but she still wants to be alone. And besides, sometimes jokes aren't too funny."
Christa rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Jan, get over it! You're as wishy-washy as she is!"

"We wouldn't do anything to hurt her, for Chrissakes." Leslie jumped down from the bed, landing on the bear and scraping his button eyes harshly against the tile floor. "Jan, you worked hard to get that party together; you even got us in on it. And she just flung it back into your face. You've been bitching all along for a way to change her; a practical joke may just be the way."

"I still don't know; it sounds mean to me."

"Look at it this way," Christa adopted her quantitative-reasoning-deductive-analysis tone of voice. "Maybe...maybe this is the one way you could shake yer loose from herself. Nothing else has worked."

I still looked skeptical.

"Fine," Christa spoke more quickly than necessary. "She's your roommate, and if you don't want to, that's okay."

I was wavering, and they knew it. I felt the heaviness in the room, worried that I might come under suspicion. We'd never let each other down, the three of us, and I didn't want to be the first. Perhaps, I rationalized, some jokig around would help to soothe the tension between us. Maybe the night noises would stop. And maybe it would feel good to get back at her and...I looked up at my two friends and nodded my assent. We began to plan.

Where would it happen? Our room...no, too obvious...class...no, too cruel...the dining hall...no, too risky...the shower? Yea, the shower. But what? Of course...her towels, always on the right hook...naturally...the water would be noise enough. Then? Then she would search...surprise...we would all laught...even Jessica, though
we haven't seen it . . . blinking water from her lashes, shielding herself
with the curtain . . . Are you sure . . . yes, yes . . . it's been done before . . .
Tammy on second floor, remember . . . okay . . . okay.

It really did work beautifully at first. After Jessica had taken her
things to the bathroom, Christa, Leslie, and I slipped through the halls
like conspirators, creeping into the shower room and taking the towels just
as we'd planned. I stifled giggles as I folded first a towel and then a
robe over my arm. Already hidden behind an inner door, Leslie and Christa
whispered for me to hurry so the trick would be flawlessly carried out.
I acknowledged them with an impatient nod of my head and bent to retrieve
the robe's sash, which had cropped onto the floor.

Then the shower stopped running.

I'm not sure what happened; maybe Jessica heard our secret shuffling,
or maybe she sensed something deceptive was taking place. At any rate,
I heard the water stop, and I froze like a kid caught stealing a ten-cent
eraser. I wanted my legs to move and rescue me from the steam and the guilt--
but they wouldn't listen, so I found myself trying to decide how I could
put everything back and still save the joke. Suddenly the shower curtain
opened, and I turned . . .

I guess I had surprised her after all. She stood there, the water
shimmering on her body, wanting to flow freely, naturally--but couldn't.
The drops hesitated, stalled, obstructed in heir watery travels by puckered
ridges of badly healed flesh that ran reddish-pink below her neck, across
her breasts, and down her stomach. My eyes followed the knife's trail,
here swirled, there jagged, then criss-crossed like the fancy carving on
the crust of a pie.
I stood silent, sickened, unable to move.

"Hey, what?.. . ."

"Leslie," my voice came from somewhere else, "go get the director."

"What's wrong, Jan?"

"Shut-up and go!"

I turned back to the wet, shivering girl and stretched my hand towards her, a gesture made out of instinct and importance. But she just stared ahead, seeing another place, a place far from where she was and far from where she had been. Then she wrapped her arms around herself, making those night noises, and began to slide down the slickened wall so that the tiled were polished shiny in her body's wake. Crumpling... .falling... .

Later, after the ambulance went screaming through the tree-lined campus on its way to a hospital, after the curious crowd dissipated, long after, the dorm director came for Jessica's things. She talked nervously, while she folded those sweaters and placed them in a box; she spoke of family violence and breakdowns and mental institutions and... .things. I wasn't really listening. I just watched her pack the sweaters away, one by one.

The day is nearly wasted now; the sun is faded and a silent wind cools the glass beneath my hand. I can no longer see the leaves, yet I know they are there on the ground, underfoot. The chill at my fingertips spreads through me, and I shiver convulsively, tearing a fragile curtain thread snared by my heavy thumb. They say it will snow tomorrow. The weatherman in his broken-record monotone reminds me of it every hour. I hope he is right. I hope something, anything, comes to cover those dead leaves.