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I was pacing back and forth on the creaky wooden floor in the semi-dark of my room with its gaping, bare, off-white walls while I waited for Aunt Charisse to come and open my unbudgeable door so that I could go to the bathroom. Aunt Charisse insisted that all of the doors in the house always be closed, just as they had been when she was a little girl, in spite of the fact that the door to my room was so badly swollen and warped that I, being just five years old, was unable to open it. I listened as the shuf, shuf of her footsteps came swiftly down the short hallway, and then stopped outside my door. There was a brief rattling of the metal knob, and then a thumpsqueak! as she knocked it open with her hip. Aunt Charisse, clutching her lacy black robe about her thin body, stepped quickly into the room, her eyes wide.

"Oh," she said, stopping suddenly as soon as she saw me. She relaxed a bit. "So you're already awake." A nervous smile wiggled across her lips.
"Yah," I replied, studying her yellow-white terry cloth slippers, from which most of the terry had already rubbed off. I had already grown used to her unusual way of greeting me in the mornings.

"Well, go wash up and get dressed," she said, brushing a wisp of blond hair out of her thin, slightly pimple-scarred face. Then she turned and shuffled back down the hall to her room. I followed her as far as the bathroom.

Back in my room, I opened the bottom drawer in my huge, dark brown chest of drawers, which had a tendency to get stuck on one side, and took out a pale yellow sunsuit. After dressing, I went over to the window and pulled the cord, very soiled around the end from many fingers, and opened the olive-colored, dusty-smelling drapes. I blinked and squinted as bars of sunlight streamed in through the panes. Pressing my face up to the glass and grasping the wooden frame of one of the panes, I looked to the left out toward the street, which I couldn't see because of the high picket fence, and decided that today I was going home.

I had been there three weeks, and I was tired of Aunt Charisse's game. One morning after a horrible, noisy dream about a forest fire I had woken up in Aunt Charisse's house. She had told me that my mother and father were gone, and so I would have to live with her since she was now my only relative. I didn't see how what she said could be true, however. My parents hadn't even said good-bye.

I was also getting tired of not going anywhere. Aunt Charisse and I had left her home only about four times since I had been there. Each time, we had gone out of the big white gate and down to the grocery store three blocks away in the evening toward closing when no one except the check-out girl and the manager were around. We always went straight there and back
home again without the least bit of dawdling on the way. As we walked, Aunt Charisse held my wrist so tightly that my entire hand turned pink. We didn't even go to Sunday school and church. When I had asked Aunt about it, she had said that we didn't go because she didn't have anything to give thanks for. She had wrinkled her face in a funny way and had started sniffling. Then she had told me that I was a naughty girl and made me go to my room for half an hour. For most of that time, I had sat on my floor listening to what sounded like someone hitting or kicking the couch in the living room.

I turned from the window and left my room, pulling the door shut behind me as well as I could. I walked down the short, dark hallway, then through the French doors into the living room. I sat down in the threadbare, gray upholstered chair with scratched wooden arms and legs and waited for Aunt. For awhile I just sat there watching the little dust specks swarming in the sunshine streaming through the window onto the gray carpet with faded pink flowers. Then I tried to think of a way out. The first thing I thought of was blowing up the fence. I immediately discarded that idea, though, because I didn't know where to get dynamite. Next, I thought of sending a note in a bottle to my parents, but that was no good because I couldn't read or write yet, and besides, there was no stream or creek to throw the bottle into. Then I thought of asking Aunt Charisse to take me for a walk up River Street. When we went past my house, I would bite her hand, break away from her, and run inside to Mommy and Daddy. I couldn't see any flaws in that plan, so I decided to try it. I put my hands under my knees and swung my legs.

After several more minutes, Aunt Charisse nudged through the French doors. Clad in her usual khaki shorts and brown T-shirt, she plodded
into the room, scattered blond curls still damp from her shower bouncing heavily.

"Aunt Charisse," I blurted, picking at one of the engraved flowers on the wooden arm of the chair with my fingernail, "can we go on a walk up River Street?"

Aunt Charisse shuddered to a standstill and stared at me with her large, amazed, violet-colored eyes. I thought I saw the corners of her lips trembling a bit. "Why do you want to go there?" she asked in a low, shaky voice.

The house was totally silent except for the faint ticking of the huge, black mantle clock in the "studio." I watched a small black bug crawling across the carpet. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Not now. Maybe another time," she answered with unexpected curtness, her face slightly contorted as if she might be about to cry.

"Pl-e-e-a-see?" I begged.

"Well now, what would you like for lunch?" she asked, ignoring my plea and walking into the kitchen, her back to me.

"B'loney and choc'late ice cream," I answered dejectedly.

I sat staring at the reflection of the wooden bars between the panes of the window in the blank television screen wishing I could see the afternoon cartoons. I wasn't allowed to watch T.V. unless Aunt Charisse was watching it too. The only time she did watch it was late at night, and then she virtually forced me to watch it with her. She said she wanted me to stay up and keep her company. So every night until 3:00 a.m. we would sit in the living room; I was on the hard old upholstered chair, and she was stretched out on the couch, the entire house dark except for the twelve-inch black-and-white screen. If I happened to fall asleep,
Aunt Charisse would poke me until I awakened when one of the "good parts" came on. I would open my eyes just in time to see two lovers kissing passionately, something which didn't interest me in the least. In just three weeks I had almost grown to hate watching television, even though that had been my favorite pastime with Mommy and Daddy. Every evening after supper we had sat down on the little orange couch in front of the eighteen-inch color screen. Soft and smelling of perfume, Mommy had sat on one side of me, her curls always drooping a bit at the end of the day. Daddy, tall and muscular, sat on the other side of me, a slight grease smudge from work still on his face or arm. From time to time Daddy would make a joke or tickle me, and sometimes Mommy would kiss me on the top of the head and let me play with her bracelet.

Soon Aunt Charisse called me to lunch. I tore my eyes away from the blank screen and went into the kitchen.

I didn't come up with another idea for a plan of escape until lunch was almost over. While I was washing down the crusts from my sandwich with a glass of water, Aunt Charisse was scooping out the ice cream. I thought it looked almost as if she were digging in brown mud. That reminded me of a show I'd seen in which a man slowly dug himself out of a dungeon with a teaspoon. I decided that if a full-grown man could dig his way out of a dungeon with a spoon, I could surely dig a small hole under the fence.

Aunt Charisse handed me my ice cream in a small china dish, and then sat down and began eating her portion.

As I stirred my ice cream to a mushy consistency, I looked around the kitchen for a place to hide my spoon when Aunt wasn't looking. The refrigerator seemed like a promising place until I remembered I couldn't get it open without making a lot of noise since it was the type that was
unlatched by means of a long handle which had to be pulled downwards. The peeling, yellow cupboards would have been a good place, but they were all above my head or right by the sink where Aunt Charisse would be washing dishes. Feeling rather discouraged, I began eating the melted part of the ice cream from around the edges of the bowl. On the third or fourth drippy spoonful, I dropped some of the chocolate liquid on my sunsuit. I looked down at the spot and attempted to wipe it away with my hand, but instead ground it in over a larger area. Aunt Charisse stopped the rhythmic clicking of her spoon against the bowl for a second and glanced sourly at the spot.

"I swear, I have to do twice as much laundry for you as I do for myself," she complained. Shaking her head slowly, she spooned herself another bite.

I kept looking at the top of my sunsuit. I had noticed for the first time that the way the top seam pouched out from my body a little ways made it look like a gigantic yellow pocket. Just the perfect place to hide my spoon.

Soon Aunt Charisse sat her spoon down in her bowl with a final clatter. Using her feet, she scooted her chair a few inches back from the table with a low squeak, slumped against the back of it, and sat there, apparently preoccupied with the thought of something other than the rickety screen door to the enclosed back porch, where she was staring.

Worried, I started taking half-spoonfuls of ice cream rather than full ones. I glanced at Aunt Charisse anxiously out of the corner of my eye every few seconds and wondered when she was going to get up and do the dishes so that I could hide my spoon. When a long time passed, I had to cut myself down to one-fourth spoonfuls.
Fidgeting anxiously, I began swinging my legs and kicked the chair next to me accidentally on purpose. The chair made a painful squeaking noise and jumped back from the table a fraction of an inch. Aunt Charisse suddenly lifted her head to attention.

"Sorry," I said.

"It's okay," Aunt said. Then she glanced at the cream-colored electric clock on top of the refrigerator.

"Oh, God," she said, standing up quickly and grabbing her dishes at the same time. "I've gotta hurry. Dr. Corelli'll be here in a few hours, and I'm not even done with my last picture." Dr. Corelli came every Wednesday evening to give her art lessons. She whisked over to the sink and began running some water.

I lifted my bowl and drank the rest of my ice cream, which was all melted by now anyway, using my spoon to scrape the last drops from the bottom of the bowl into my mouth.

I licked my spoon and glanced at Aunt. She was busy adjusting the temperature of the water, first turning on a little more hot, a bit more cold, then a little less hot. I quickly dropped the spoon down the front of my sunsuit. Then I hopped down off my chair and carried my bowl, plate, and glass over to Aunt Charisse.

Aunt Charisse glanced down at me and took the dishes. "Thank you," she said, giving me a distracted half-smile. Then a puzzled look came over her face, and she sat the dishes down on the counter instead of easing them into the soapy water. "Where's your spoon?" she asked, looking down at me.

Staring at her knees, I shrugged. I noticed a bit of stubble on the side of the left one that she'd apparently missed when she'd shaved.
"There it is!" she exclaimed suddenly as she doubled herself over and pointed at my stomach.

Guiltily, I looked down. The spoon made a funny, obvious bulge where it had caught between my clothing and my fat little stomach. Aunt Charisse made me fish it out.

She finally had the spoon in her hand. "What did you do that for?" Her forehead was furrowed and her eyebrows were drawn inward toward each other.

"I wanted to play with it," I answered.

"Look, this isn't a toy," she said in an even tone. "This belonged to my Gramma, your Great Gramma! See here?" She pointed to some squiggly engraved lines. "That's 'M,' for Moran, my last name, and your mother's too, before she got married." A dark look passed over her face, and her eyes suddenly became misty.

"Listen," she said with quivering lips, "I can't have you going around swiping things, so I'm going to have to punish you. I want you to sit alone in your room until I come and get you."

Dejectedly, I turned and walked slowly toward my room, dragging my toes. Aunt gave me a little push to hurry me along. She followed me to my room and shut the swollen door by giving it a terrific slam. I sat down on the hardwood floor and stared at the blank wall as I listened to Aunt Charisse's footsteps and little sniffling noises receding down the hallway. Then I heard the shattering of a couple of glasses on the kitchen floor, more sobbing, and then quiet. Awhile later, I heard Aunt go into the room next to mine, the "studio."

Picking at a scab on the back on my hand, I waited for Aunt to return. After awhile, I heard her rattling the metal knob, and then the thumpsqueak!
as she pushed it open.

Once again Aunt stepped quickly into the room, her eyes wide. Seeing me on the floor, she relaxed and said, "Well, c'mon."

I got up and ran out into the hallway, and she shut the door again. I followed her into the "studio," the room where she did all of her art work.

Aunt Charisse pulled the door to behind me and immediately sat down and began working on her charcoal sketch. I wandered over to the window. Slowly I wiped the dust off of the ledge with my fingers. I looked out at the big white picket fence and thought that I could surely find some method of escaping if only I could get outside. I walked over to the bookcase and eyed a big, heavy art book with a white cover, toying with the idea of using it to break out one of the windows. I looked over my shoulder and saw Aunt was engrossed in her work; I started to pull it out by the top, slowly leaning it back out of the bookcase.

"No you don't!"

I jumped, and the book fell back into place as I lost my balance and fell backwards onto the floor.

"You know better than that!" Aunt Charisse said angrily as she rose from her chair and came toward me.

"Why can't I look at it?" I whined.

"That's why," she said, poking her finger into my chest on the location of the ice cream stain as she grabbed my hand and practically pulled me over to my little table and chair.

I stuck my lower lip out in a pout, and I felt my eyes beginning to fill with tears. Aunt Charisse glanced at me, and her face relaxed a bit; A nervous smile flickered across her lips.
"Maybe I'll get you a book of your own when I get my next trust fund check."

She turned to a table on which she piled her recently finished sketches. I hated that table because each leg ended in a scary-looking eagle's claw clutching a ball. She took a pile of sketches from the top and sat them down on my table.

"Here, look at these. I'm done with them. You can have any of them that you like to hang on your walls."

Without sitting down, I started looking through the stack. I looked through the pictures very quickly. They were all charcoal sketches of things around the house and yard. They reminded me of Aunt's television set.

Halfway through the stack I came across a picture of a doorknob. That reminded me of what I had to do.

"Aunt Charisse, can I go outside?" I asked.

"No. Why don't you stay here and keep me company?"

"I wanna go out."

"Look at the rest of your pictures."

"I wanna go out."

She didn't answer me, so reluctantly I went back to looking through the stack of sketches. Disdainfully, I finished looking through the pile.

"Why don't you paint pretty pictures like Mommy does?" I asked.

"God damn it, can't you leave me alone?" she screamed, rising from her chair. She threw her charcoal to the floor, and it broke into three or four black pieces.

I stepped back, but said nothing.

"Go to your room. I'm never going to get anything done otherwise."
She was sniffling and blinking her eyes rapidly.

I just stood there. I couldn’t go to my room. I felt that once I was shut up in there that I would have no chance of escaping.

"Go to your room!" she shouted in a broken voice, pointing toward the door with a trembling finger.

"I WANT TO GO OUT!" I screamed.

"You’re going to your room!" she yelled back. She grabbed me by the arms and started walking toward the door. I promptly sat down on the floor.

"No!" I squalled.

Aunt Charisse started to drag me across the floor, so I started kicking at her legs. She raised a hand to slap my leg, but I kicked so much that she couldn’t do it. Her chin was quivering violently.

"Okay, you can go outside, but just this once," she said gruffly. A couple of drops of water, tears or sweat, I don’t know which, were running down her cheeks.

She released my arm, and I got up and ran to the front door. Aunt Charisse followed me more slowly. She reached up and unhooked the chain latch (which she had installed a week ago after I had let myself out onto the front porch). Then she preceded me out onto the porch. She went down the sidewalk to the gate. After making sure it was locked, she walked quickly back into the house. As I was still on the porch when she went in, I heard her sobbing on the way back to her "studio."

When I was certain that she was gone, I went down the walk to the gate. Then I climbed up on it, sticking my feet sideways through the cracks between the slats. Holding one of the white planks with my left hand, I tried to reach the latch with the index finger of my right hand.
It fell more than six inches short, however. My feet began to hurt, so I jumped down. Wiping the white from the fence off of my hands and onto my sunsuit, I savagely kicked a stick. It was a long, skinny stick, and it reminded me of the one Hansel used to fool the witch with in one of my old picture books. Quickly I grabbed it and climbed back up on the gate. Just as Hansel had, I used the stick in place of a finger. After a couple of tries, I managed to flick the hook out of the little metal ring. I jumped down, eased open the gate, went through, then slowly eased it shut behind me.

I took off running. The Doberman across the street ran to the chain-link fence and started barking at me. The two dacsunds on the other corner heard and ran to the corner of their fence and began yapping. I kept right on going. I turned and ran down the other street, for once glad that the fence was so high that it blocked the view of the street from the house. Halfway down the block, I tripped on a bumpy place in the sidewalk where the roots of a big tree had grown underneath it. Picking myself up, I saw that my knee was scraped and bleeding. I stood still for a moment, pushing on the area around the scrape with both hands so that it would quit hurting. Soon I was running along again with only a slight limp.

At the next corner I crossed the street twice. I was on the side of River Street on which I had always lived.

I first realized something was wrong when I passed the light green one-story house three front yards down from ours and still didn't see my upstairs bedroom window. I had been too intent on my running to notice before then. I slowed my pace a bit, but kept on running.

Then the ugly black scab in the green lawn leapt into sight. I stopped suddenly, and my mouth dropped open.
Stunned and baffled, I walked through the tall grass toward the charred remains of what I used to call home. Somewhere in one of the trees a locust started its ugly, machine-like buzzing. Numb, I just wandered around, looking at the charred chunks and blackened hunks of wood and melted plastic in a detached sort of way until I reached what had been the living room. This room was the least damaged. That wasn't saying much. It was barely recognizable. But then I spotted the television set, burned black and melted, and in front of it the couch, charred to the springs. On either side of the couch was a big black hunk of something. I screamed. Without any real consciousness of what I was doing, I turned and ran to the trees at the back of the yard and hid under the mulberry bush, whose branches hung almost to the ground. Flinging myself down on my back, I began kicking the trunk and pummelling the ground with all of my strength, crying, "NO! NO!" with all of the air in my lungs.

After a time, exhaustion caused me to subside. I lay on my side with my knees drawn up toward my head, whimpering. A sick feeling spread from my stomach throughout my entire body.

Quite awhile later, I heard Dr. Corelli's "beckEE! beckEE!" I didn't answer him. I didn't want to move or say anything ever again. After awhile he went away.

I stayed there, motionless, until just after dark. Just when everything had turned a uniform blackish shade, I heard a rustling in the long grass, and suddenly there was a dog under there beside me, sniffing me. "Okay Grover, c'mon out," a man's voice said. Grover left. A big fat man on his hands and knees stuck his head and shoulders under there with me. I cried out and clung to the trunk with both hands.

"There, there," said the man softly. He took a hold of my arms
with his large, strong hands and easily dragged me out of my hiding place.

"Let's get you home now," he said. I began to kick at his legs and scream. It was then that I noticed the little triangle of white undershirt between the last button of his light brown shirt and his pants, and I recognized him as the sheriff. I suddenly noticed the little silver star pinned to his shirt, too. He didn't seem to be bothered at all by my kicks. He simply picked me up, holding my arms and legs so tightly that I couldn't move, and carried me back to Aunt Charisse's house.

Aunt Charisse must have seen us coming, because she met us at the door. The sheriff came in and sat me down. I noticed a couple of chairs had been knocked over, and books were scattered around the floor. Aunt Charisse thanked him, her lips trembling. I saw that the skin around her eyes was puffy and red. She grasped my wrist tightly. I squirmed in pain.

As soon as he left, Aunt Charisse locked the door. I thought that the click had a sound of finality to it.

Aunt Charisse kneeled down, put her arms around me, and held me against herself with a clutching grasp that pushed the air out of my lungs. I wiggled uncomfortably. Then, placing her hands on my shoulders, she held me about a foot away from her.

"**WHY** did you do that, Becky?" she asked pleadingly.

The tears were beginning to well up in my eyes once more. "They're gone," I wailed.

Aunt Charisse began sniffling, and her eyes became very shiny. She blinked rapidly. Trembling all over, she picked me up and, without saying another word, carried me to my darkened room and plopped me down on my bed. She didn't even let me go to the bathroom or change into my pajamas. As she rushed from the room, a loud sob broke out of her. She slammed my
unbudgable door violently. As I lay there crying alone in the darkness of my room, I heard Aunt Charisse sobbing and throwing magazines at the living room wall.
I was sitting near the back of the bus in a seat by myself, tracing the letters in the gold-colored, bumpy metal on the back of the seat in front of me when someone said, "Well, this is Maynardville." (We were on our way to the Maynardville High School Academic Contest.)

Mark Livingston, a tall but flabby junior, turned around to face Krista Woods, who was sitting in the seat across from mine.

"Well, Kris, are you going to uphold the family tradition?"

A smile spread across Krista's small, delicately carved features.

"I'm certainly going to try," she answered in a tone which intimated that there was no doubt in her mind. She made a motion as if she were brushing her short, slightly curled blond hair out of her eyes. She couldn't have been doing that, though, because she never had a hair out of place.

"I really don't think you've got much to worry about. I'll bet you'll
blow them all away," he said.

Mrs. Sylvan, our Latin teacher, looked up from the book that she was reading. She was a short, skinny woman whose high, squeaky voice, brown-and-gray hair, and strangely lined face always made me think of a mouse. She turned quickly in her seat, which was two in front of mine on the other side, and said, "Well, I'm certain that at least one person will give her good competition, anyway." Her thin lips expanded into a sharp little smile as I looked up and she caught my eye.

Both Mark and Krista looked at Mrs. Sylvan as she spoke, but neither even glanced at me.

"Hey, that was a good game yesterday!" Mark yelled to someone nearer the front.

"Oh, I got my prom dress last night. You should see it!" said Krista to the girl beside her.

I gave Mrs. Sylvan a darting smile. I shifted in my seat and stared out the rain-spotted window at the box-like white houses and gnarled, budding trees lining the streets on the outskirts of Maynardville.

"Just good competition for Krista," I thought to myself bitterly.

Nervously, I began to flip the cover of my Latin book open and closed.

Above where I had written my name was my brother's name, which I had crossed out heavily with black ink. He had used the book last year. After he had flunked two classes, however, he had gone to live with Mom and left this book behind. I had found it a few weeks later when I came to live with Dad. I had looked through it and decided to sign up for Latin when I registered for classes.

As I sat there playing with the cover of my book, I thought of the two occurrences which had made me determined to excel in Latin. First of all,
when I told the guidance counselor that I wanted to take Latin, he made a big deal about what a hard subject it is and asked me several times if I was really sure that I wanted to take it. Second, sometime during the second week of school I made a minor, but very dumb mistake in translating a sentence. After class, Krista and another girl had come up to me, and Krista had asked, "Didn't your brother flunk this class last year?"

"Yes," I had answered.

She and the other girl had made a great show of exchanging glances and smiles before walking away.

From that day on I had spent most of my free time studying Latin on my own, and I was soon a number of chapters ahead of the class. Unfortunately, Krista, who occasionally crammed new concepts before class on the morning of a test, came out a few points better than I about half of the time. It wasn't that I didn't know the material as well; it's just that I have a tendency to think one thing and write another when I'm tense. I do the same thing on English themes, frequently writing "the" instead of "that."

"I've got to show them. I've got to get first place," I thought.

A few minutes later, the bus pulled into the gravel parking lot of Maynardville School. We parked beside the buses of two other schools which had already arrived. We piled out and then picked our way across the mucky parking lot to the grade school entrance of the orange brick building. We entered through the wire-embedded glass doors and walked a short distance down the pale green, dusty hallway to the warped, wooden swinging doors that led into the multipurpose room. Once inside, we went up onto the stage, where two girls were seated at a table, registering contestants. I got in the line for students whose last names started with letters "A" through "H." When my turn came, the girl seated in front of me, who had
short red hair and wore a blue sweat jacket, smiled and asked my name.

"Patricia Addison," I mumbled.

The girl consulted a mimeographed sheet, then took an adhesive name tag and wrote my name, school, and contest subject on it. She put a check mark after my name on the mimeographed sheet. Then she handed me the name tag and smiled. "Good luck," she said.

I went over to a rusty wastebasket at the edge of the stage and started peeling the waxed paper off of the back of my tag.

About that time, Krista reached the front of the "I" through "Z" line. "Name?" asked one of the girls sitting behind the table.

"Krista Woods."

The girl consulted her sheet and looked up. "Not another one!" she exclaimed. "How many are there of you guys, anyway? I've helped with this thing for four years, and there's always been a Woods from North Ames in both Latin contests."

"I'm the last one," she answered with a sweet little smile.

"Thank goodness. Maybe next year someone else will have a chance," said the girl behind Krista. Krista looked over her shoulder and smiled at her, and the girl smiled back, showing her heavy metal braces.

I felt like attaching a wire to her braces and yanking on them so hard that all of her teeth would come out. I quickly left the stage and went down the stairs into the gymnasium part of the multipurpose room. When I got there, I looked around. On the other side of the room, a few guys were playing basketball. Back in one of the corners some others had set up some folding chairs and were playing a game of cards. Other students stood in groups here and there, talking. A tall girl kept swishing her waist-length black hair as she spoke. Then I went over to the wall
nearest the hallway and sat down beneath the clock. I opened my book to the reading section at the back and began rereading the passage titled *The Lotus Eaters*.

While I sat there reading, the room gradually filled up as more schools arrived, then quickly emptied when the time for the beginning of the morning tests approached. Soon there were only three people playing cards in the corner, two boys playing basketball, Krista and a couple of her friends talking near the stage, and me left in the room.

I had just begun the section that told about Polyphemus being blinded when I sensed that someone was standing near me. I looked up. Krista, who stood just in front of me, glanced over at her friends with an impish grin, then said to me in a sticky-sweet voice, "I see you're studying up for the test. I'll help you if you want me to."

"No thanks," I answered, glaring at her.

"Are you sure?" she asked, still smiling as she glanced at her friends. She kneeled down, then smoothed out a minute wrinkle in her blouse with her tiny pink hand.

"I know something I bet you need to review. It starts out 'femina, feminae, feminae, feminam, feminam,'" she said, listing the singular forms of a first declension noun. The first declension was covered on the first page of our book. "Here, let's see if we can find it," she said as she attempted to take my book from me.

I slammed the book shut with all of my strength, hoping to catch her fingers in it and smash them completely, or at least break a few bones. Unfortunately, she pulled her hand back just in time and stood up.

"Well! If you feel that way about it!" she exclaimed with feigned shock, holding the hand I'd tried to demolish up next to her shoulder
with her other hand. Then she turned and ran, giggling, over to her friends, who were convulsed with silent laughter.

With tears burning in my eyes and the back of my neck feeling tight and stiff, I reopened my book. I hunched up my knees and rested my right elbow on them, shading the right side of my face with my hand. I didn't want to look at them. I wished for a laser gun that would make them all disappear.

About an hour later, the room began filling up again as the tests ended. In a little over an hour more, when all of the tests had ended and all of the scores had been calculated, the girl with the red hair and blue sweat jacket came in carrying a typewritten list of the placings. I shut my book and stood up. She walked briskly over to the pale orange poster board, a few feet from where I had been sitting. After each of the subject titles, listed on the poster board, were three blanks for the names of the highest-placing contestants. As she began writing the names of the winners under the first category, everyone crowded around and began craning their necks to see the typewritten list over her shoulder. North Ames had received three first place wins so far. Sam Woods had gotten first in French II, Andrea had gotten first in junior-level English, and Jerry had taken first place in Latin II.

"Well," said Andrea, tossing back her long blond hair, "three down and two to go." She smiled and patted Krista on the shoulder. Krista turned her head and smiled at her sister.

I clenched my Latin book tightly and mentally kicked Andrea in the shin. Then I turned and went through the warped, swinging doors, out of which a few students were already straggling. I followed them down to the high school part of the building, where the cafeteria was located. I went
through the line and picked up a blue plastic tray holding a hamburger, french fries, peas, apple crisp, and milk. Then I walked over to a scarred wooden table with a tackle box on it, behind which sat a woman who had chestnut hair peppered with gray and a much-wrinkled face. I sat down my tray and pulled the dollar Mrs. Sylvan had given me out of my pocket. She had given both Krista and me a dollar each to pay for our lunches. I handed the lady the dollar, and she reached into the tackle box for change.

I walked over to one of the tables, carrying my tray with both hands, my book tucked under my right arm. I put down my tray, then my book, on a chipped Formica table. I sat down on a rickety wooden-and-metal folding chair and picked at my food for awhile. The hamburger must have been at least three-quarters soybeans; the peas were hard, and the apple crisp was much too sweet. I ate the french fries and drank my chocolate milk, then gave up.

When I had finished with the meal, I opened my book and began reading again.

The line grew longer so that it ran along two walls instead of one, and the tables began to fill up. The echoing murmur crescendoed to a roar. Then, after awhile, the line dwindled to a few people, and the roar became a whisper as the crowd in the cafeteria began to thin out.

A pale boy with short black hair and brown eyes who was sitting at the table in front of me got up, accompanied by the metallic clatter of his chair, and headed for the aisle. However, he stopped when he saw my book. He read my name tag.

"Hey, I know a guy in your class. You know Gary Oxford, don't you?"

He didn't wait for me to do so much as nod. He smiled to himself and, resting his tray on the back of one of the chairs across from me, said,
"That guy should give it up. I doubt that he's figured out what a passive verb is yet, much less learned how to use one in a Latin sentence. He said that the teacher has to get some real smart girl named Krista to help him with practically everything. He should give it up." He picked up his tray and walked on down to the aisle, laughing to himself, without waiting for a response from me.

I felt like throwing my book at the back of his head, but I didn't. Instead, I sat and stared glumly at a fly sitting on my apple crisp, rubbing its front legs together.

A few minutes later, I got up and took my tray to the window. Then, as it was getting close to time for my test to start, I went back to the multipurpose room. Once there, I consulted a list Scotch-taped to the grimy green-and-pink wall to find out what room my test would be in. Then I put my Latin book on the stage under the bedraggled green curtain where other students had put down their books. I went out the warped, swinging doors again and back down to the high school. There I found a stairwell and climbed to the second floor. I walked to the end of the hallway, where I finally found room 220, and went inside.

Most of the contestants, including Krista, were already in the room, sitting toward the back, so I went up to the front and sat over to the far left. I wiped my cold, sweaty palms on my jeans, then started biting the fingernails on my right hand. I looked at my watch and saw it was about four minutes before the time scheduled for the test to begin.

Just then two women in their early twenties entered the room. One of them, who was tall, bony, and had short brown hair curled tightly at the ends, walked to the front of the room, put down her purse and a stack of booklets on the teacher's desk, then turned and held up her hand for
silence. The other one, who was short, plump, and had long, silky black hair, paused beside the door for a moment to flip on the lights, then went to the front of the room and sat down in a little desk chair in the right hand corner that was turned facing the classroom.

When everyone was quiet, the tall lady said, "Well, if I'm counting right, we're all here, so I guess that we can get started. My name is Miss Sparks, and I want to personally welcome all of you to the Maynardville High School Academic Contest. As we have no Latin department here, Mrs. Brochee from Lannoville High School will assist me in issuing and grading the test. The test is a multiple choice test divided into three sections. You will have two hours in which to complete the test. However, at certain intervals I will ask you to move on to another part of the test so that none of you will spend too much time on any one section. Please do not go on to another section before I ask you to. If you have extra time, you may return to questions in a previous section. Please write all answers on the answer sheet and make no marks in the test booklet. Anyone caught looking at another person's answers or showing his answers to another person will be automatically disqualified, no exceptions. I want to wish you all the best of luck. Oh, and please spread out."

I was glad to hear that the test was multiple choice. That meant that at least on this test I would not have the problem of thinking one thing and writing another.

Some of the students sitting in the back got up and scattered out further toward the front of the room while Miss Sparks turned and picked up the test booklets. She walked stiffly up and down the rows, tossing, almost carelessly, one of the eighteen test booklets down in front of each of us. She returned to her place in front of the desk. After
glancing at the clock in the back of the room, she said, "You may begin," and sat down primly in her chair. She took a compact out of her purse and checked her make-up.

I opened the cover of my test booklet and took out the answer sheet. There were one hundred blanks on it. I then opened the booklet to the first page. The first section had twenty-five short translation questions. The first nineteen questions seemed easy, but I had trouble with five of the last six. I was still puzzling over them when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Miss Sparks glance at the clock.

"Please begin the second section," she said.

There was a rustling of pages as everyone turned to the next part, which was composed of fifty vocabulary word definitions. I wizzed through the first thirty-five, but when I reached number thirty-six, I was stumped. I didn't know it. I simply didn't know it. I'd never seen it before in my life. I put the end of my blue, medium-point Bic pen into my mouth and began to chew on it. I heard the scratching of seventeen pens and pencils behind me, and I realized that I couldn't just sit there. I had to do something, so I guessed. That was all that I could do. There were seven more that I had to guess on. I put a little dot beside each of them with my pen. I went back to the first section, but still was unable to figure out the answers, so I guessed, just in case I didn't have any time left after the third section, putting a little dot beside each.

Once again Miss Sparks asked us to move on, and there was another mass rustling of pages.

The final section contained five reading passages with five questions over each one. The passages were all unfamiliar to me, so it took me a long time to struggle through each one. Even then I wasn't able to
translate them completely. Therefore, answering the questions was rather difficult. The first time through I was only able to answer ten of the questions. Since I knew that time was probably running short, I guessed on the other fifteen, only two of which I made intelligent responses to based on something from the reading I'd construed. After marking these fifteen with little dots, I went back to the first section to give the five questions I'd guessed on in it another try. Just as I was beginning to figure one of them out, the silence was abruptly broken. Miss Sparks clapped her hands loudly together one time, then scooted back her chair with a squeaky, scraping sound. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Time's up!" she said brightly. "Please lay down your pens."

I quickly counted up the dots. There were twenty-eight. That meant, since I've always been a poor guesser, that I could expect to have no more than seventy-two out of the one hundred questions right. I felt my neck muscles tighten. I slumped in my seat, wishing to disappear.

Mrs. Brochee stood up. Starting on opposite sides of the room, she and Miss Sparks went up and down the rows, collecting the answer sheets and test booklets. Miss Sparks walked stiffly over to my side of the room and, with a tight smile on her face, practically jerked the answer sheet and test booklet out of my hands.

As soon as she had taken my test materials, I got up and followed some of the other students out the door with my shoulders slumped and my head down. I now felt a stinging in my eyes in addition to the tight muscles at the back of my neck.

I walked back down the stairs and down the long hallway, around the corner, and back into the multipurpose room. Since Latin was the longest test, practically everyone was already back, milling around and talking.
or sitting in groups playing cards. I retrieved my Latin book, then sneaked off to a relatively deserted corner of the room and sat down on the floor, which was gritty from the dirty shoes of numerous grade school students. I put my book on the floor, face down, so that both the spine and the front cover were hidden from me. I hunched up my knees, then rested my hands upon them, my left hand grasping my right wrist. Then I lowered my head and rested it upon my crossed hands. I wished that I could die that very minute. I felt certain that I'd done better than Krista, for I knew she was no further in the book than the rest of the class, and in answering some of the test questions, I had been required to make use of rules which were introduced pages beyond the point that the class had reached. However, unless I placed, probably no one would know I did better than she. I didn't feel that I could count on anything with a probable score of seventy-two. I had no idea how far ahead of us or how far behind us classes at other schools might be. I closed my eyes for a few minutes and tried to nap in spite of the chattering going on around me.

About half an hour later, a short, chunky, middle-aged man with a crew cut came into the multipurpose room and began setting up a microphone. The two girls who had helped at registration carried in a folding table similar to the ones in the cafeteria and sat it up beside the microphone, then left. After a minute or two, the girl with the short red hair and blue sweat jacket came in carrying a cardboard box which she sat on the table. She took out the blue, red, and white ribbons and began arranging them in rows. Miss Sharp came in carrying another box. She sat it on the table and jerked out the shiny gold trophy that would go to the winning school.

About ten minutes later, one of the teachers entered and handed the
chunky man a couple of typewritten pages. He went up to the microphone and turned it on.

There was some fiddling with the mike and a loud "screeeeech!," and then the man said, "Could I have your attention please?"

After the murmuring and giggles and whispers died away, he went on.

"Once again I want to welcome you to Maynardville High School. I hope you've all had a nice time. We've certainly enjoyed having you here."

He cleared his throat. "I want you to remember that all of you are truly winners, since only the best two students in each subject from each school are here. And now, we'll present the awards," he said, nervously waving his hands or tapping his fingers constantly.

He announced the winners in the various categories, starting with third place and working up to first. All too soon, he got to the foreign languages. Numbly, I listened to the placings.

"Latin one," he said. "Third place goes to Elsie Connors of Lannoville."

She went up and got her ribbon, accompanied by the clapping and whistling of the other contestants from her school.

"Second place to James Leonard of Brownfield."

I recognized him as the boy who'd spoken to me at lunch. He also went up for his award (still laughing to himself about something), also much lauded by his schoolmates.

"And first place, for the sixth year in a row, goes to a student from North Ames."

I started, sat up a bit straighter, and dug my nails into my palms, and waited, every muscle tense. I heard a few people mention Krista's name. I felt like cutting their tongues out. My heart was beating wildly.
"This year's first place winner of the Latin competition is Patricia Addison!"

I jumped up, giving a slight exclamation of delight. There were a few seconds of silence, then the other students from North Ames began clapping. Krista had stood up as he was announcing the winner, and then, when she realized that it was not her name he was saying, had sat down quickly, her face suddenly flooded with red.

I floated up to the front, and the chunky man handed me my ribbon and pumped my hand nervously.

"Congratulations!" he said, smiling at me.

I returned to my seat, and the awards presentation went on. It was all a blur to me, though. All I remember is just sitting there, smiling and stroking the shiny blue ribbon with gold lettering.

"I showed them all," I thought.

I remember that at one point I looked over at where Krista had been sitting, but she was not there.

Even though our school had five first-place wins, another school won the overall competition because we got only those five ribbons, and no seconds or thirds to add additional points to our score.

At the conclusion of the program, everyone stood up and stretched, then began filing out the doors. I was on my way out when I passed Miss Sparks. She looked at me and at my ribbon and smiled.

"Congratulations. You did really well. You even got more points than some of the second year students."

"Thanks. How many did I get?" I asked quietly.

"Seventy-three. Second place got sixty."

She gave me a jerky pat on the shoulder, then walked stiffly toward
a couple of the other teachers who were standing over by the stage, talking.

Idly, I wondered what the second year test had to do with my score. I didn't worry about it, though. I went outside and across the parking lot to our bus and resumed my seat in the back. As the bus filled up again, several of the less popular people came back to my seat to congratulate me and to see my ribbon. Mrs. Sylvan smiled at me when she got on.

Pretty soon, everyone was on the bus except Krista. Andrea got off to go look for her. A few minutes later, they both got on the bus. Krista's small face was very pink and tear stained. As soon as she sat down in the seat across the aisle and a few rows up from me, she burst into tears again, covering her face with her hands. Strained, embarrassed conversations started all over the bus. Andrea, who had sat down in the seat in front of her, appeared to be trying to console her, all to no avail.

The bus pulled out of the parking lot and went through Maynardville to the highway. When we had gone a couple of miles down the road, Krista was still crying.

In spite of the slightest twinge, I tried to ignore Krista's annoying wails. I studied my ribbon.

Mrs. Sylvan got up, came back and sat down beside Krista. She put her tiny hand lightly on Krista's shoulder blades.

"It's not the end of the world. Just because you got fourth doesn't mean that you're dumb," she said.

"Yes it does!" Krista said, raising her voice a bit. She began a new round of sobs.

"But there'll be other contests."

"No!" Krista wailed, even louder.
Mrs. Sylvan was silent a moment. She waved her tiny, thin, long-fingernailed hand in the air as if searching for something to say. Krista continued to sob.

"Look," she said finally. "That test couldn't have been a terribly accurate judge of who's best in Latin one because they used the same test for the first year students that they did for the second year students in order to save money." I looked at it, and there were lots of things on it that most classes don't get around to studying in first year Latin. So it was probably really more of a guessing contest than anything. So you're not such a good guesser. So what?"

Krista's sobs began to subside.

Feeling my face suddenly flooded with color, I put the ribbon in the middle of my book, closed my eyes, and leaned my head against the rattling window. I felt the tears starting to run down my cheeks.

Silently I cursed my brother for having flunked Latin.
With my arms tightly crossed and my lower lip stuck out in a pout, I sat rocking myself in the Boston rocker in the gold-carpeted living room. "Gee, I wish I could go to the prom. Everybody's going. I'm probably the only junior or senior in the whole darn high school who's gonna be home on Saturday night."

I picked up the white crocheted border of the pale green scarf covering the drum table beside me and, staring at it morosely, began rubbing it between my fingers.

I'll go with you to the prom," Dad said, running the fingers of his right hand along his forehead as if to push his immaculate, black-and-gray-streaked hair out of his pale blue eyes.

Surprised, I scrutinized his face to see if he was just teasing me, even though I wasn't about to take him up on it even if he wasn't. The corners of his mouth were turned up playfully, but his eyes confused me.
They looked serious.

"Oh, Dad, be real. Nobody goes to the prom with their dad!" I said, waving my hand at him peevishly.

"Well," he said, folding his arms and returning his gaze to the television, "Don't complain about not having a date for Saturday because I asked you, and you turned me down." He threw out his lower lip and pretended to pout, even though his eyes were smiling.

I giggled, then picked up a brown corduroy pillow from the floor beside me and threw it at him. It struck him lightly on the side of the face, rebounded, and fell to the floor. Grinning, he threw it back at me.

"Well, I'd better quit moaning and get my homework done," I said as I rose from my chair. On my way out of the living room, I glanced at my mother's picture. She looked exactly the way I would look if I were to dress in the styles of 1947.

I walked out of the room, but then stopped abruptly. I turned around and, resting my hand on the door frame, asked in a quiet and careful voice, "Dad?" He turned his head and raised his eyebrows questioningly at me.

"You didn't really want to go, did you? I mean, I wouldn't want to hurt your feelings or anything."

"Of course not!" he answered, turning his eyes to the television.

"Sure?" I asked.

"I'm sure," he answered, flitting his eyes toward me, and then back to the program he was watching.

While I started my homework, Dad fixed dinner. At about five o'clock, we sat down to our dinner opposite each other at the smooth, shiny maple dining table. Then we began eating our dinner of vegetable protein patties and alfalfa sprout salads with cherry Dannon Yogurt for dessert. I was
on a health food kick at the time, and so was Dad. Or, at least, Dad pretended to be. Even though he didn't know it, I had come across his cache of Twinkies and Ding Dongs and had several times seen potato chip crumbs sprinkled around his chair at night when I came out to the living room after finishing my homework. I also had a sneaking suspicion that he often stopped at MacDonald's when he went for groceries because it wasn't at all a rare occurrence for me to find stray catsup packages and napkins embellished with Ronald MacDonald on the floor of the car.

I put a stringy mass of alfalfa sprouts into my mouth and began chewing them ruminatively as I stared out the window, bordered by long blue curtains, at the green, sloping front yard dotted with bright yellow dandelions and tulip trees which were just beginning to leaf out.

I rested the tines of my fork on my lower lip for a moment, then said, "Dad, I just thought of something. I could see if they still need another girl to serve punch. Then I could at least be at the prom with everyone else. Maybe there'd be some guys there alone too to dance with. Would that be okay?"

He answered in a tone of forced sincerity. "Of course, if that's what you want to do."

"I'd have to get a dress."

"That's okay. We can go pick one out on Saturday." He rested his right cheek on his fist and stared out into space, a dreamy look in his blue eyes and a slight, reminiscent smile curled about his lips.

"Your mother looked just the way you do now when we went to her junior prom. I remember when I went with her to get her dress. We had such a time finding anything because either both of us liked it and the color didn't match my suit, or if the color did match my suit, either she didn't
like it or I didn't like it. We really had a time." As he sat there thinking, the smile and the light in his eyes died out even though the vestige of a smile remained frozen on his thin lips.

Mom was nothing more than a dim memory to me. She had died when I was three-and-a-half. Dad had dated a few women occasionally, but none of those relationships had ever lasted more than three months. He quit dating altogether when I reached high school age. That's when I first really started looking a lot like Mom did when he first met her.

The corners of Dad's lips were beginning to droop downward, and he was starting to look really mournful, so I decided to change the subject.

"What are you going to raise this year, Dad? Have you planted anything yet?"

Dad snapped out of his reverie and sat slowly back up straight again. The light came back into his eyes. "No, I haven't planted anything yet, but I'm planning on tomatoes and radishes."

Years ago, Dad had been a farmer. However, just before I was born, he had had to have a couple of spinal fusions, and he gave up farming. Nevertheless, he loved growing things so much that he refused to give it up entirely. Every spring he planted a few garden vegetables in his two red window boxes with pictures of tractors painted on the sides.

"Tell me when you're going to plant, and I'll help you."

He cut off a piece of the hard little light brown vegetable patty with his fork. I was certain I saw him wince as he put it in his mouth.

"Sure thing."

As soon as I heard Dad's car crunching up the gravel driveway after work the next day, I ran out the front door and to the place beside the garage where he parked his car. Before he could even open the door I was
shouting, "Dad, I can go! I'm going to the prom!"

Smiling, Dad got out of the car and shut the door.

"Good!" he said. "I'm glad you finally decided to accept my offer! We'll go to get your dress tomorrow."

"Dad!" I protested.

"What's wrong? You want to get it tonight?"

"I'm going to be a punch girl!"

"Oh," he said, sticking out his lower lip as he walked slowly to the house. He had a slight limp caused by his back operations.

"Oh, you!" I exclaimed impatiently and went inside, allowing the screen door to slam shut behind me. Dad followed me, laughing.

The next morning we got up very early and drove to Indianapolis. I looked out the window as the fields, barns, and farmhouses alternated with small, ramshackle towns filled with junky antique shops and garbagey cafes, and then both gave way to suburban residential parks filled with ranch and Cape Cod style houses, and then those were replaced by shopping centers and interstates.

After quite a long drive, we arrived at Washington Square Mall in Indianapolis. The stores weren't open yet even though the outside doors of the mall were already unlocked. Unfortunately, we discovered after we entered that most of the shops wouldn't be opened for another forty-five minutes. We wandered along the large, high-ceilinged, branched corridors and through the semi-darkness past the dimly-lit stores with their caged fronts and brightly colored, heavy plastic signs overhead. The only other person we saw was a man in olive-colored work clothes kicking at a nearly dead helium balloon. We stopped beside Stuart's to check out the prom dresses on the mannequins in the window.
Dad pointed to a garment that was a hideous shade of orange, extremely low cut, and sack-like.

"Is that supposed to be a dress?"

"I like it," I said, sticking out my lower lip and folding my arms in a pretended pout.

"That thing?"

"Yes, that dress. I was hoping you'd buy it for me to wear tonight."

Dad grabbed me by the wrist of my left hand and began pulling me away.

"C'mon. If you can't find a better dress than that, you can't go to the prom. Besides, I just remembered I need you for a miniature golf partner tonight," he said, holding his face expressionless, which he always does when he wants to appear to be serious. For a second, strangely enough, I hoped that he was serious. Then I feared that he really might be.

"Dad! Dad! I was just kidding! I don't really want it!" I giggled as he dragged me away from Stuart's.

Dad loosened his grip, turned, smiled, and then clapped me firmly on the back with his large hand.

At about 10:00 a.m., the shops began opening. The regular lights would flip on, and an employee would come and pull the cage-like screen up out of the doorway.

We stopped first at Stuart's, but didn't find anything. Then we went to a dress shop that specializes in the smaller sizes. On the rack labeled with my size, I immediately found a lovely light blue dress decorated with cream-colored ribbons and lace.

"Oh, Dad, look at this!" I exclaimed.

"Gee, that's pretty." He took it off of the rack and held it up to
me. "It'd look nice on you, too. Go try it on."

I whisked it out of his hands and, with a big smile on my face, rushed over to one of the fitting rooms. I threw off my jeans and T-shirt, then pulled the dress over my head. I found that it was heavier than I thought because the skirt had three or four layers of material in it. Then I zipped up the zipper, first pushing it halfway up from underneath, then reaching my hand over my shoulder and pulling it the rest of the way up. I stepped back to look at myself in the mirror. I was surprised to be confronted with the reflection of a young woman who looked very feminine and dignified in the perfectly fitting lacy dress in spite of the red Converse tennis shoes which peeked out from under the hem. Careful not to step on the hem, I walked out to show Dad. He looked up when I came out, but his eyes went right past me. Then they darted back.

"Oh, gee, you look beautiful," he said. "I didn't even recognize you."

"Gee, thanks," I said, folding my arms.

Dad ignored this remark. He got down on his knees and began to search among the numerous little papers hanging from the dress for the price tag.

"Can we get it, Dad?" I asked hopefully.

He looked up and smiled. "Maybe," he replied.

When he found the right tag, he whistled and rolled his eyes.

"How much is it?" I asked, my face falling.

"Fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!" I exclaimed so loudly that one of the sales girls turned around and looked at me.

"S-s-s-h-h-h," said Dad, holding his finger to his lips and grinning
at me.

"Well, I guess this one's out," I said glumly as I turned to go back to the dressing room. I reluctantly took off the dress and put it back on the hanger. I picked up my clothes from amongst the pins and tags on the red-carpeted floor and put them back on.

When I went back out, Dad was leaning with his elbow on top of one of the circular, silver racks. He had a meditative expression on his face.

"Chelley, would you like to have that dress?" he asked.

"Sure, but it's awfully expensive."

Suddenly Dad straightened halfway up, as if taken aback. "That's exactly what your mother said when we found her dress. Boy, did we have a time finding it," he said, beginning to study my features with a sad, reminiscent expression on his face.

I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "Well, I'm still going to need shoes. Can we afford both?"

Dad snapped his head up, as if just awakened. "What was that you asked me?"

"I said can we afford it because I still need shoes."

Dad just stood there a moment, the faraway look still in his eyes.

"Oh, shoes. Sure. We'll get some. Hand me the dress and we'll go pay for it." He reached out one hand to take it from me.

"You mean I can get it?" I asked excitedly.

"Sure thing," he said, smiling at me as he clapped me on the back.

We walked up to the counter. The salesgirl was short and thin and had shiny, slightly curled brown hair. She smiled as she took the dress from Dad.

"Going to the prom?" she asked pleasantly.
I nodded.

"Let me guess," she said, putting her finger to her head and squinting up her eyes as if she were thinking very hard. "The guy who's taking you will wear a blue tux!" She smiled at me again.

"No, he won't," said Dad. "I'm taking her, and I don't have a blue tuxedo. As a matter of fact, I don't even have a blue suit."

The girl gave us a funny, alarmed look, as if we were some kind of weirdos. After all, Dad was in his mid-fifties.

"Oh, Dad, quit teasing," I said, slightly annoyed. "He's my Dad. He's not going. I'm serving punch."

"Oh," she said, glancing at me, then busied herself folding the garment.

Dad wrote out a check, and then the salesgirl put the dress in a sack.

"Thank you," she said as she creased the top and handed it to Dad. Then she turned and rushed off to another part of the store.

Dad and I walked back out into the mall. "Dad, why'd you say that for?"

"Oh, Chelley, I was just teasing. Besides, I am the one driving you to the prom, and I'm not going to wear a blue tuxedo," he answered as he ran his hand through his immaculate black-and-gray hair, as if to brush it out of his eyes.

"Oh, Dad," I said, giving him a slight punch on the arm.

We went around to several shoe stores, and after about an hour and a half, I found a pair of plain white, cloth dress shoes.

"What do you think of these?" I asked, holding them up for Dad to see.

He wrinkled his nose. He glanced over at the rack, searching for another pair.
"What's wrong with these?" he asked, holding his face expressionless as he picked a hideous, heavy pair with thick, stubby heels.

"Oh, ugh. They look like old ladies' shoes. Let's get these." I held up the pair in my hand.

"Hey, wait a minute. Who's buying the shoes, anyway?"

"Who's wearing the shoes? I'll go barefoot before I wear that pair," I said, indicating the ones that he was holding. I stood there biting my lip, trying hard not to giggle.

Dad shook his head and feigned a sigh as he sat the shoes back on the rack. "Well, I don't want you to catch cold." Then he grinned at me.

"Oh, Dad!" I giggled as I handed him the shoes, which he then paid for.

"So, where do you want to eat lunch?" asked Dad as we came out into the mall. He had his eyes trained on the MacDonald's menu.

"Why don't we get some yogurt at the health food store?"

"Okay," said Dad, giving me a thin smile.

After we had our yogurt, we sat down on one of the benches in the middle of the mall and listened to the funny echoes and watched the people walking by as we ate. While we were sitting there, I noticed that girls walking with males seemed to fall into two classes: either they were very young girls walking with their fathers, tripping along in their little tennis shoes and anklets with their fingers in their mouths or they were teenage girls walking along with their boyfriends, clinging to their arms or holding hands.

I watched longingly as a couple about my age walked by, tickling each other and making funny faces. I squirmed as far away from Dad on the bench as I dared. I looked wistfully at the bench across from us where three boys about a year older than I were sitting, one reading, another
looking at a record album, and the other just watching the people go by.

Dad lit a cigarette, and smoke began drifting over into my face.

"Ah-heh, ah-heh, ah-heh," I pretended to choke, glancing at Dad mischievously out of the corner of my eye.

"Okay, okay, I hear you," Dad said, smiling a little and moving his cigarette.

I went back to my yogurt, digging out the strawberries and eating them first.

Finally Dad finished his cigarette, grinding it out in one of the ashtrays at the end of the bench, and I threw our yogurt containers and plastic spoons into a nearby trash can.

"Dad, can we go to the bookstore? I want to get something to read."

Dad nodded, and we walked on down the mall and around some corners to Waldenbooks. We squeezed past people in the narrow aisles between the shelves stacked with paperbacks and tables piled high with full-color hardbacks bearing such titles as *How to Cook with a Wok, Giraffes, and South America*. We went on back to the classics section, where I stood scanning the shelves until I spotted *The Origin of Species*. I picked it up. "I'm going to get this one," I said. "Evolution's really interesting stuff."

"Yes, from what you told me I can see it is. Darwin must have been a very smart man."

I said nothing. A few years before when I had been a fundamentalist, Dad had despised Darwin right along with me.

We drove home, and I sat in my room reading until Dad called me for supper. After eating, I showered and washed my hair and began to get ready. I carefully put on my new blue dress, a pair of hose, and my new
white dress shoes. I brushed my hair until it shone, put on some lipstick (the extent of my make-up), and then went out to the living room.

"What do you think?"

Dad gave me one astonished gaze, then, smiling, said, "I'll be back in a minute."

He soon returned, carefully cradling in his hands my mother's cultured pearls. "Your mother wore them when we went to the prom. Her father had given them to her on her birthday just a few weeks before."

He walked around behind me. "Here, now, hold up your hair," he ordered.

I reached back with both hands and held it up. Dad clumsily fastened the tiny latch with his big, thick fingers.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, and went to the mirror to see how they looked.

I was ready about half an hour early, so I sat down in front of the television and watched some nature program about racoons.

When it was about time for us to leave, the program ended, showing two racoons washing the bread some man was throwing in a bubbling little stream. Dad came out into the living room, all dressed up in his best brown suit.

I looked up from the television set, startled. "Where are you going?" I asked, afraid to hear his answer.

"I'm taking you to the prom."

I was just opening my mouth to protest when he added, "My goodness, you don't want your chauffeur to show up in blue jeans, do you?"

"No, of course not," I answered, a weak smile playing about my lips.

Dad drove me into Greencastle and parked as near as he could to Depauw's Student Union Building. We got out of the car, and as Dad walked
me to the ballroom entrance, we passed several groups of guys and girls from my high school attired very formally in tuxedoes and long dresses. Several of them stared at us quizzically. I felt my face burning with embarrassment. I turned my head and pretended not to see them. Dad squeezed my hand, grinning from ear to ear.

"Did you see all those guys looking at us? I bet they were green with envy that they weren't with as pretty a girl as I'm with."

"Oh, Dad," I said impatiently, attempting to quicken our pace. Dad couldn't go much faster, however, because of his limp.

We went up the steps and through the vestibule, pausing when we reached the door to the ballroom. The lights were already dimmed, and along the walls tables stood covered with white table cloths, on which sat tiny kerosene lamps. Several of the other punch girls were already busy at the other end of the room arranging things on the refreshment table.

"Well, I'll see you, Dad."

"Wait here just a minute," Dad suddenly said as he turned quickly and left.

Puzzled, I waited for a few minutes, then went to help with the punch table. I kept glancing apprehensively toward the door, hoping that Dad wouldn't come back. Then, just before nine o'clock, one of the other punch girls came up to me and said there was someone at the door who wanted to see me. I looked up. There stood Dad in the doorway with a small square box in his hands.

I walked toward his silhouetted figure, curious. "Hi, Dad," I said, my eyebrows drawn together and my forehead wrinkled questioningly.

"Hi Chelley. I've got something for you here," he said. He handed me the box, and I opened it. Inside was a beautiful corsage made of blue-
tipped white carnations. "I saw that all the other girls had them, and I didn't want you to feel left out. I had to call all over the place to find it," he said as he pinned it to my dress.

"Gee Dad, thanks," I said, somewhat unenthusiastically. It was my first corsage.

Just then the band started their first song. "Well, I have to go, Dad," I said, starting to turn away. To my horror, Dad hesitantly took a step forward after me. I instinctively spun around in alarm.

"Dad!" I cried beseeingly.

He stood there for a moment, apparently at a loss for words. He turned red, stared at the floor, and made a few idle gestures with his hands as if he were going to say something. Then he relaxed and smiled weakly and said, "I'll pick you up at twelve." He patted me on the back and turned and started through the vestibule, his shoulders hunched.

"'Bye Dad."

He turned and flashed a brief smile, then went on.

I stood there watching him as he went alone through the dark, empty vestibule. A small lump came into my throat, and I went a few steps after him. But then he went out the door, and I turned and went back into the ballroom, where the couples were beginning to sway about the softly lighted room in tux and formals to the tune of "We've Only Just Begun."

I started back through the sea of couples. I momentarily froze. I was the only solitary person out on the floor. I touched Dad's corsage. Then, taking my hand away from it and trembling a bit, I planted each foot firmly as I walked through the pinkish light away from the door.
SO MUCH LIKE MY MOTHER

I hopped off of the bus, glanced briefly at the big brown-and-yellow Century 21 "For Sale" sign, and then walked on up the dusty gravel driveway past the weed-filled flowerbeds to the front door. Opening the screen door, I braced myself and grimaced apprehensively.

"Hi, Mom," I said as I went in the door.

Mom was in her customary place, curled up in my Dad's recliner in front of the television set. She wore a blouse of a faded daisy print which was buttoned wrong, an old pair of my castoff shorts, and a ragged, grass-stained pair of blue tennis shoes. The ever-increasing bulk of her stomach pouched out the front of her shorts and blouse as if she were pregnant, and her gray-and-dark-brown hair had tight curls on one side and relatively loose ones on the other, as if she'd started to curl her hair and then changed her mind. Dark brown hair covered her white legs. A streak of something she'd had for lunch was to the side of her upper lip. Absent-
mindedly, she was crossing and uncrossing the fingers on her right hand. I realized that I was doing the same thing and stopped abruptly.

Tearing her expressionless face away from Match Game, she gave me a plastic smile and said, "Hello, dear."

I walked on out to the kitchen to hunt for a snack. On the slightly grimy counter between the refrigerator and the stove was a box of chocolate turtles. No one in our family likes chocolate turtles.

"Mom, where did these come from?" I asked, carrying the brown-and-pink-striped, cellophane-covered box into the living room, which was semi-dark since Mom always kept the gold-colored draperies pulled.

She moved her gray eyes from the television screen to my face.

"Oh," she half-sighed, "Mrs. Knetzer from the church was selling them. I told her that none of us like them, but she kept going on and on about the poor little children that the missionaries are trying to help, and then she started acting like I was insulting her personally by not buying any, so I bought a box."

She turned her eyes back to the television set and clumsily drew her hairy knees up nearer to her chest.

I turned and went back toward the kitchen, shaking my head. When someone that Mom even vaguely knew came around selling something, she always ended up buying at least one of whatever it was.

I went back into the kitchen and tossed the box of candy up on top of the refrigerator behind Mom's sea captain clock.

Suddenly remembering something, I walked quickly back into the living room.

"Mom, did we get the house?" I asked.

"No," Mom replied without turning her deadpan face away from the
Mom wanted desperately to move because she hadn't been able to make any friends where we were living. Mom and Dad had gone to look at several houses, and they had found one that was absolutely Mom's dream house. It had a large, carpeted kitchen, an enclosed patio, two-and-a-half bathrooms, and two fireplaces. Mom had suggested that we make an offer on it immediately. However, Dad had yelled at her and asked her how in the world she expected him to be able to pay for a house like that and my college education too. The subject had been dropped until yesterday, when Dad found out that three of his good friends from work lived near there and all belonged to the same country club, which was half a mile from the house they'd looked at. Dad had told Mom to call and see if the house was still on the market. When Mom asked him why he'd changed his mind, he'd mumbled something about how his friends had said that the house was reasonably priced for the area.

"Shoot. Oh well," I said, and went back out to the kitchen to get a glass of milk. I wiped the white scum from the lip of the pitcher with a paper towel, ferreted out a clean glass, and poured some milk into it. Leaning back against the counter, I petted the soft fur of my half-Siamese cat, Chang. He stood with two paws on the counter and two in the steel sink, as he was drinking the milk left in someone's cereal bowl.

Just as I finished drinking, I heard the crunching of Dad's car coming up the gravel driveway. Out of habit, I went outside to get my Dad's black metal lunch box out of the car and carry it into the kitchen. That had been one of my "chores" as a child.

"Hi, Dad," I said as he emerged from our new blue Chevelle.

"Hi, Erin," he said, smiling broadly. Tall and muscular, he towered
"How was your day?" I asked. I'd been trying for several days to get on his good side because I wanted him to sign my permission slip for my senior trip to Chicago. I wasn't sure that he'd do it, even though it was only for one day, and I'd saved my own money for it.

He looked at me. "Do you have to ask? Caroline and Josephine are so stupid. I tell them how to do something, and they go off and do it the wrong way. Then I have to go back and correct it all."

We went in, and I took his lunch box on out to the kitchen.

"So, did we get the house?" I heard Dad ask eagerly as I went through the dining room.

"No. Another couple saw it this morning and made an offer on it."

I sat the lunch box down on the counter beside the sink, which was heaped with dirty glasses, plates, and silverware. I stood there, quietly listening as I stared at the dusty old teapot over the cupboard.

"Why didn't you call her last night like I told you to?" he yelled.

"We would have gotten it!"

"You didn't get home until ten. I didn't want to bother her that late because I was afraid she'd get mad at me," she whined in the tone of a peevish child.

"Then why didn't you call first thing this morning like I told you to?" he shouted.

"I did, but she was out showing the house to the couple who made the offer on it," she answered petulantly.

"God dammit, you're hopeless. You louse up everything," he bellowed.

I started. Anything stronger than "darn" was generally prohibited in our house. In fact, that was the first time I'd heard either of my parents
say anything like that.

I stood still, every muscle tensed, as Dad stomped through the dining room to his bedroom and slammed the door so hard that the teacups on the knickknack shelves in the hall rattled.

I walked quickly and carefully through the kitchen and dining room to my bedroom. I turned the knob slowly and carefully, went in, and shut the door behind me the same way that I'd opened it. I threw my books on the floor, then I lay down on my bed, covered with a bright blue bedspread to match the walls, and sighed. As the years went by, more and more Dad yelled at Mom. And the more yelling he did, the worse Mom got. She never cried, though. I suppose I should have felt some pity for her, but I was too angry with her myself to do so. Because of the way Mom was, I'd had no one that I could really talk to all of the time I was going through adolescence. It's really rather difficult to talk to a forty-seven-or-so-year-old woman about the problems of growing up if she still watches Captain Kangaroo with great interest and plays with Fisher-Price toys delightedly every time she sets foot in a store with a toy section. Naturally, imitating my mother, as I've heard teenage girls generally do, was out of the question.

While lying there, I studied a Xerox copy of a Diane Arbus picture of twin girls, about eight years of age, that a friend of mine had sent me, and I had taped on my wall. After a few minutes, I leaned over and picked up my thin, green economics book from off of the floor. Turning over onto my stomach so that my back was to the picture, I lay there working on my reading assignment until Mom called supper.

When I got to the table, Dad was already sitting down, having changed from his new suit into an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I sat down at
my place, which was across from his, folding my left leg under me. Faintly
reminding me of a zombie I'd seen in a movie one time, Mom came in from
the kitchen carrying two small, green mixing bowls, one containing tomato
sauce, the other spaghetti noodles.

"Not spaghetti again," I complained, wrinkling up my face. This was
the third time we'd had it in the past week and a half. When I had been a
little girl, we'd rarely had the same meal more than twice in one month.

"I have to make something that everyone will like," Mom answered
lamely.

"I don't like it," Dad grumbled, a self-pitying expression on his
face.

Mom said nothing.

The two bowls went around, and we each took a portion and began eat-
ing. Chang sauntered into the dining room and sat down on the floor be-
side me. When he saw me start to eat, he stood up and rested his paws
against my leg, batting at my arm every time I lifted my fork to my mouth.
Dad, towering over us all even though he sat slumped in his chair, ate
slowly, never removing his gaze from the food on his plate. Mom would eat
a few bites, then sit there for a few minutes, just staring out into space,
then take a few more bites, then sit there staring again. I noticed that
when she put a forkful into her mouth, some of the noodles would be hanging
out a bit, and she would have to slurp them in. I was careful to get every
millimeter of my spaghetti into my mouth.

When I had finished off the noodles, I sat the pink Melmac plate,
which was full of little brown scratches, down on the floor so that Chang
could lick up the sauce. I finished my cup of orange Kool-Aid, got up,
pushed my chair in, and went to my bedroom. I picked up Jane Eyre, lay
down on my bed, and began reading the assignment for my British novels class. Chang, who had followed me into my room, jumped up on the bed beside me and began giving himself a bath, first licking his paw, then wiping his ear with it.

Because of the way that the house was built, from my bedroom I could always hear every word that Mom and Dad said when they were in the dining room or living room. I hadn't been reading for ten minutes before I heard Dad ask Mom, "Don't you want Erin to be able to go to college next year?"

"Why of course!" she exclaimed quietly.

"Then why didn't you call Mrs. Miller last night when I told you to? Do you think we can afford to pay for the gas and stuff to take care of this five acres and her college education too?" he asked in a strained, forceful voice.

"But you said that we couldn't afford to pay for her college if we bought that house," Mom wailed.

"Oh, trying to lay the blame on me, are you? Well, it's your fault, all your fault. You're lousing up our lives!" he bellowed.

Dad must have stood up from the table very quickly, because I heard a chair fall over. A few seconds later I heard both front doors slam, even though we usually left the wooden one open and just the screen door shut on warm days like that one.

Assured by my Dad's contradictory statements that there would be enough money for me to go to college either way, I returned to my reading:

Soon I heard the scrape of a chair being righted and the click and clatter of the silverware and plates as Mom cleaned off the table. Evidently she just stacked the dishes on the counter, because I didn't hear any running water. I heard a closet door open, and soon afterwards the
whir of the sweeper in the living room. Mom usually vacuumed the floor in one room every day (that was just about all the housework she did, outside of washing the dishes whenever they piled up too much). The whirring stopped after just a few minutes.

"Either she's just done half the room, or else she's finished in record time," I thought to myself, even though there was no doubt in my mind as to the reason.

Very soon afterwards I heard her turn on the television set and sit back down in Dad's recliner.

My room was getting stuffy, so I opened the window. A warm, gentle breeze drifted in, carrying with it the sounds of children playing and dogs barking and the scent of freshly cut grass. I heard someone opening the garage door, so I assumed that Dad must be working on the mower again.

About half an hour later I heard the screen door between the garage and the utility room rattle open and swing shut again. Dad stomped in.

"What did you do with my adjustable wrench?" he yelled.

"I loaned it to your brother last night. He said he really needed it."

"You know it takes forever to get anything back from him. Why didn't you just tell him no?"

"He's your brother. He needed it, so I gave it to him. Besides, he's so rude when he doesn't get his way. And we have to keep on good terms with our families," she murmured.

"No we don't, God dammit," he yelled. A few seconds later I heard the screen door slam very loudly.

An hour or so later I finished my reading and moved to my desk to work on an essay for my economics class.
I finished writing at about 9:30. I put my essay away in a folder, stacked my books in a little pile, then went out into the living room to watch T.V. Dad, who had come in about half an hour before, was sitting in his recliner, just staring at the television with a brooding expression. Mom sat in a chair on the other side of the room, her face looking troubled in a rather expressionless way. Her hairy legs were clumsily crossed. I pulled out my bright yellow bean bag chair from behind the couch and put it near the middle of the room, but definitely closer to Dad than Mom. I sat down, spreading my legs wide apart. I pulled up the right leg of my pants a little bit to make certain that I'd shaved recently enough. For the next hour and a half the only voices to be heard in the house were those of Barbara and Julie on One Day at a Time and Mike Ahern on the news.

"Well, Erin," Dad said, when the two programs had ended, "I think I'm going to hit the hay."

He got up out of his chair, walked over, and leaned down to kiss me good night.

"'G' night, Dad," I said.

"Good night."

He patted me on the head with his large, muscular hand. Then he left the room without so much as glancing at Mom. She just sat there staring at the television and pulled her knees up closer to her chest.

About five minutes later, I got up too. "'G' night," I mumbled, half-glancing at Mom. Then I caught Chang and put him into the garage, washed my face and brushed my teeth, and got into my pajamas.

It wasn't until after I'd turned out the light and gotten into bed that I realized that I'd forgotten to ask Dad to sign my permission slip.

"Oh well," I thought. "Maybe tonight wasn't really such a good time
I went to sleep before the television was turned off.

The next morning at the breakfast table no one said anything for the first five minutes or so. Mom and I sat kind of nibbling at the bacon and eggs, but Dad didn't touch a thing.

"Erin, could you get me a cup of instant coffee and a bowl of cereal?" he asked in the tone of an order.

"Sure Dad," I replied faintly. I went into the kitchen and heated a small amount of water on the stove. I poured the water into a cup and measured the freeze-dried granules into it. Stirring it up, I carried it into the dining room and placed it beside the cup of perked coffee that Mom had made for him. Then I got the half-full box of Bran Chex and a butter tub bowl out of the cabinet over the stove and took them in and put them down in front of Dad. Sitting down again with my left leg folded under me, I poured myself another glass of milk from the sticky glass pitcher before passing it to Dad.

I picked up my fork and scooped up some scrambled eggs. As I raised it to my mouth, I noticed Mom was doing the same thing. I dropped my fork. Even though there was quite a clatter when it hit the plate, no one even glanced in my direction. I didn't touch another bite.

When Dad had drunk the coffee I made for him and eaten a second bowl of Bran Chex, he got up from his chair.

Towering above us, Dad said, "I don't have time to wait for you to make a lunch for me, Erin." His lunch box, containing the sandwich and the thermos of coffee Mom had prepared for him, stood in the middle of the table.

"'Eye Erin," he said, giving me a kiss on the cheek.
"'Bye Dad."

He went out the front door. Mom and I just sat there at the table, neither of us looking at the other, while Dad started his car and left.

Pretty soon it was time for me to walk down to the end of the driveway to meet the bus, so I went to my room and got my books.

"'Bye Mom," I mumbled as I went through the dining room, glancing at her briefly. She didn't answer me, however. She just sat there slumped over her plate, staring at the sugar bowl, the loose, ratty curls on the left side of her head falling into her face. I went on out the front door.

That afternoon as I went up the walk past the weedy flowerbeds, I was surprised not to hear the blaring of the television. I slowly opened the screen door and stepped inside. The room was dark as usual since the draperies were pulled, but the television screen was blank and Dad's recliner was empty. Mom was lying on the couch, her back to me. Her knees were drawn up toward her chest, and her head was bent down toward her knees. She was clasping one of the pillows just the way that I used to hold my Teddy bear.

"Hi, Mom," I said uncomfortably, and went on out to the kitchen for a glass of milk. While I sat there on an old wooden chair drinking it, Chang came up and began to rub my legs. I started to pour a couple of drops of milk onto the tile floor for him, but it was so filthy that I was afraid to let him drink from it. I got him a saucer instead.

At first the house was silent except for Chang's lapping. Then a second noise joined it, so low at first that it was several minutes before I really noticed it. When I finally really heard it, I had to sit there listening for a few seconds before I figured out what it was. Mom was crying.
I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. Setting my glass on the metal tea cart beside the wooden chair in which I was sitting, I got up and, after some hesitation, walked slowly into the living room. I sat down on the arm of the recliner.

"Mom, if Dad really wanted that house, he should have made an offer on it right after you guys saw it. It's his fault we didn't get it. You should tell him so."

Without even looking at me, Mom shook her head.

"Why not?" I asked impatiently. I heard Dad's car roll into the driveway.

"I love him. I don't want him to be mad at me. You'll understand when you're married," she moaned.

"Mom!"

I heard Dad's car door slamming, so I shut up. I began to chew on my lip, but noticed that Mom was biting hers, so I stopped.

"Hi Erin," Dad said as he came in the door. He came over and gave me a hug with his muscular arm and a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi Dad," I answered.

Dad went on to his room to change into his old clothes. Then he came back out to the dining room and sat down at his place (which was still covered with the dishes from breakfast, though some of the food was missing, thanks to Chang). He opened a newspaper and began reading.

Slowly and clumsily, Mom got to her feet. Shoulders slumped, she ambled into the dining room and sat down at her place beside Dad. He towered over her even though they were both sitting down.

"Honey, I'm sorry I messed things up. Please forgive me," she said in a pleading tone, though her face was expressionless.
"Oh, so you're finally admitting it's you're fault, huh?" he thundered. "It's about time. I'm Goddam sick of you messing everything up and trying to blame me. So admit it. It was all your fault, wasn't it?"

He drew himself up to his full height in his chair and glared at Mom, his jaw hard.

"Yes, it was all my fault," she said meekly.

She looked so helpless, just sitting there agreeing with him. I could hardly believe that she was the same woman who'd collected money for the cancer drive annually years ago and single-handedly organized a Camp Fire Girl group. I shook my head, got up and went to my room. I opened my yellow economics folder and took out my work sheet. Underneath it was my permission slip for the senior trip. I suddenly remembered that I would have to turn it in tomorrow in order to be allowed to go. Tonight was Dad's bowling night, so I'd really have to ask him about it before supper. I was afraid I would forget about it if I waited until the next morning. I scrambled up off of my bed, folded the slip, and put that and my pen in my back pocket.

Not finding him in the dining room or living room, I went outside. He was just coming out of the garage, carrying some tool or other toward the mower, which was parked in the middle of the large gravel square at the end of the driveway.

"Having problems with it again?" I asked as I walked up to him.

"Yah. It's not going to last much longer."

"Oh, Dad, guess where my class is going on its senior trip," I said as we met beside the big red Wheelhorse riding mower.

"I don't know, visit the state legislature?" he guessed, looking down at me a bit suspiciously.
"No. Chicago," I answered guardedly.

"Chicago! Good land. Next thing you know they'll be going on a world tour. And you know what will go on. Drugs and drinking and all kinds of wild stuff. I'm glad you aren't going. You aren't going, are you?" he boomed, drawing his muscular body up to its full height and piercing me with a suspicious glare.

"Of course not!" I exclaimed, my voice ringing false in my ears. "Gee, why would I want to do that?" I asked, gesturing nervously, smiling foolishly.

Dad eased down. "I don't know," he said, giving me a slight smile and a pat on the head. Then he turned to work on the mower.

Dejectedly, I turned and went back inside to my room. I threw myself down on my bed and sighed. As I looked at the Arbus picture on the wall opposite me, a cold fear gripped my stomach and legs. I leapt to my feet and began pacing the room. Suddenly, sticking out from under my bed, the leg of one of my pairs of jeans caught my eye. I'd asked Mom to wash them three days ago. She'd told me to remind her, but I'd forgotten. Seizing them, I stomped out to the kitchen, where I found Mom clumsily squatting down by one of the cabinets, hunting for a pan. The loose curls on the left side were falling in her face, and the streak of food from lunch yesterday was still to the side of her upper lip.

"God dammit," I shouted, standing above her, "Why didn't you wash my jeans like I told you to? God dammit!" I yelled, angrily throwing my jeans to the floor beside her ragged, grass-stained tennis shoes.
To be perfectly honest, I didn't even know that my paternal grandmother was still alive until the morning of the one and only day on which I saw her. I had been sitting around the house of my parents' friends, whom we always stay with when we're in Cincinnati, trying to figure out something to do. The Johnsons and my parents (former missionaries who now work for a religious publications company) were at a church convention, and I was all alone with the keys to my dad's car and the permission to make use of them. Finally I got out my mom's new address book and tried to find the telephone number of a friend of mine who lives in a small town near there. Flipping through, I happened to run across my grandmother's name and address. I was taken aback. My dad had never mentioned her (he rarely says anything about his family or his childhood), so I had always assumed that she was dead. I knew that it couldn't be some other Mary Grace McCon because Mom had written "Larry's mother" in parenthesis be-
side her name. Intrigued by the discovery, I decided to pay her a visit. The town she was living in, Wittgenburg, Indiana, is only about an hour and a half drive from Cincinnati. I thought briefly about waiting until the next day to visit her so that I could ask my parents about her first, but I was bored, so I went ahead and got out the road maps. I didn't much want to see my friend, anyway. She's nice and all, but her uncle has a notorious reputation for the number of women he's had affairs with, and her dad, whom her mom divorced when my friend was three, is supposed to be a drunkard. Being the daughter of former missionaries, I just felt a little bit funny about having a friend like that. Anyway, after checking the maps and writing my parents a note telling them that I went to visit a friend, I took off for Indiana.

An hour and a half later I reached Wittgenburg. I drove slowly along Main Street, which is also Highway 63, until I saw the number 1455 above a garage door.

"Well, this is it," I thought, glancing at the overgrown lawn and the peeling white house. I pulled the car into my grandmother's paved, circular driveway, which was badly in need of sealer.

After parking the car, I glanced briefly in the rearview mirror and saw that my hair had become disheveled during the drive. Looking for my comb, I rummaged through Kleenexes, maps, catsup packages, and old make-up containers in the glove compartment, and then through the empty chocolate milk cartons and loose, crumpled pages from six different issues of MAD on the floor of the back seat. Then suddenly I remembered that it was in my back pocket. As I wrenched the comb through my hair, I looked over the house and wondered what Grandmother would be like.

After about fifteen jerks, I gave up on my hair, rolled up the window,
and got out of the car. I slowly went up the well-worn walk, and, hesitating a moment, rapped on the screen door. Through the dusty-smelling wire screen I could see that taking up practically the entire room before me was a round, scarred, wooden dining table, upon which stood a stack of yellowed newspapers and a bowl of the blackest bananas I'd ever seen. Along the window ledge, which was just opposite to where I was standing, I could see a row of dried-up plants, mainly cactuses whose stickers and flesh were both pale brown. Hanging to the left of the window in an ornate gold frame was an oil painting of the assassination of Julius Caesar. Caesar's gore-covered body, which lay at the foot of Pompey's statue, was surrounded by the conspirators, still holding their bloody knives. Between the window and the china cabinet which stood against the right wall hung a gold-wire cage, in which slept a large red, yellow, and blue parrot. However, there wasn't a person in sight, and no one came to answer the door.

I knocked a bit harder. The metallic rattle awakened the bird, who, after ruffling his feathers and shaking his wings a bit, looked toward the door and told me where to go, three or four times in succession. I started a bit, then knocked again, just to make sure I had heard right. I had. The bird repeated its previous speech and, as a bonus, threw in a few phrases of contempt which I don't care to repeat. I walked back to where I could see the number above the garage door, just to make sure I had the right house. Yes, there was the number. 1455. This was it. Puzzled, I looked back toward the screen door.

Since Grandmother didn't seem to be at home, I walked up toward the road and started for the next house, where I intended to leave a note for her. I didn't get far, though. When I could see around the corner of the
house, I noticed a tall, thin woman wearing a red net T-shirt and a pair of red shorts, which could almost have passed for the bottom half of a swimming suit.

She strolled across the grass, which came mid-way up on her shins, toward the hedge, brandishing a pair of hedge clippers. She started in on the bushes, which appeared to be already a bit too closely trimmed.

As I waded through the grass toward her, I noticed that she wasn't a young woman. Her legs were marked with blue lines reminiscent of the rivers in my fourth grade geography book. The skin of her upper arms swung loosely as she hacked the hedge with her clippers. Her short, end-curled red hair had about half an inch of gray down toward the roots.

I stood a few feet behind her, hesitating as I tried to think of what I should say. The woman continued clipping away at the bushes. With each hack she made, she would say something like, "There goes your head, Mr. Johnson," or "There goes your bloody noggin, Jesse Reed," as the bits of wood and leaves fell to the ground. I drew my breath in to speak three or four times before I finally said, "Excuse me, but do you know where I can find Mrs. McCone?"

The woman jumped slightly, then dropped her clippers and whirled around to face me all in one movement.

"Whatcha wanna know fer?" she asked, wrinkling her already much-lined face and staring at me suspiciously with strange, stony-looking eyes that didn't really seem to be seeing me at all, but rather, something behind their own corneas.

"I'm Connie Wilson, her granddaughter. Her son Laurence's daughter," I replied. Feeling uncomfortable under her gaze, I stood with one foot on top of the other and began picking at some dirt under one of my fingernails.
She looked at me piercingly for a moment, then her features relaxed. Lowering her eyelids and turning up the corners of her mouth into a slight grin, she said, "O-o-o-h-h! So yer Larry's girl. I'm yer grandmother. Let's go inside. I was jist about ta have lunch, anyhow. I only do jist a little bit o' clippin' ever' day."

Without even asking me why I happened to be there, she picked up the clippers, gave the hedge a couple of quick clips with them, and then started for the house, motioning me to follow her.

I hesitated, playing with my cross necklace between my fingers. "That's my grandmother?" I asked myself, watching the scantily-clad lady wading through the grass with her hedge clippers. She turned around, and, using her clippers, once again motioned me to follow her. Not knowing what else to do, I started after her.

Once inside, she cast the clippers down onto the tile floor beside the china cabinet. The clatter once again roused the parrot, who told her where to go.

"Ya like my bird? Taught 'im ta talk myself."

"He's a pretty color," I replied.

"Yup. Ol' Nero's a good bird, he is."

Nero told her where to go and called her something that is the equivalent of a female dog so many times in succession that it seemed that he believed that he had to say everything one hundred times before anyone would hear him.

"Only sometimes he jist won't shut up," she said to me, frowning darkly. "Hush, you!" she exclaimed to Nero.

"Now," she said smilingly, "Why don'cha go an' warsh up fer lunch? Ta git ta the bathroom, go straight through the kitchen to the living room,
Then turn right an' go through the door into the hallway. It's the first door on yer left."

Even though I didn't think washing up was necessary since there wasn't any visible dirt on my hands, I decided to comply without comment rather than be rude.

My mother would have died if she had seen that kitchen. She's always after me and practically going into hysterics because my bedroom's a pit, but it was never half as messy as Grandmother's kitchen. Dirty dishes were literally everywhere: on the table, the two chairs, the counter, stacked in the cupboard (from which a couple of doors had come off and been propped between one of the chairs and the counter), and piled beside the wastebasket, from which paper towels, frozen vegetable boxes, and Styro-foam meat trays were effervescing. I carefully stepped around a blob of dried mustard here and a splotch of apple sauce there. I looked around fearfully for mice.

Picking my way across the kitchen floor, I reached the living room. This room wasn't much better. Four or five old purple bedspreads, some of figured material, some plain, some fringed, some unbordered, but all ripped and rented and appearing to be mud-stained, were straggled half on the couches which sat against three of the walls and half on the floor. Large pillows of red, flowered material (obviously handmade since the stitches were each about an inch long) were scattered all around, dripping their shredded foam stuffing over everything like dirty snow. Hanging crookedly on the opposite wall was a reproduction of a Roman mosaic featuring the garbage left from a banquet. It reminded me a lot of Grandmother's kitchen floor. On each of the two end tables conventions were being held by smudged alabaster reproductions of nude Roman and Greek statues. Magazines
were scattered in profusion all about the floor. The one nearest me was opened to the middle and face down on the carpet. Since the cover was missing, I picked it up and turned it over to see what kind of magazine it was. Embarrassed by half a glance (well, maybe actually three or four glances), I dropped it without trying to keep my grandmother's place in it and wiped my hands on my jeans. I had never seen a Playgirl centerfold before.

I turned and went into the short, dark hallway. The red plaid wallpaper was peeling off near the ceiling. I found the first door on the left and went in.

There was no soap in the built-in soap dish set back into the chipped, toothpaste-spattered tile wall, so I turned around and, moving aside the slimy shower curtain with the side of my hand, looked in the soap dish beside the tub. It contained a bar that was a funny brown color, so I decided just to use water. When I had rinsed my hands, I looked around for a towel, but couldn't find any other than the old pink one that served the dual purpose of a rug. Consequently, I just stood there shaking my hands until they were dry.

When I got back to the dining room, Grandmother had lunch on the table. She had also moved the bowl of bananas and the newspapers over to make room for the parrot cage and three picture frames, one standing up and the other two face-down, which she had set in front of our plates. Grandmother was pouring red wine into two spotty glasses. I felt vaguely uncomfortable about being in the same room with a woman who read Playgirl, but I couldn't think of any polite excuses for leaving.

"Sit here, dear," she said, setting a glass of wine in front of my plate. I did as she said, wondering how clean my beet-juice-and-mustard-
stained Melmac plate was. Grandmother sat right down and began eating without even giving thanks. Startled, I stared at her a moment in surprise, but didn't say anything.

After bowing my head briefly to say grace, I took a bite of one of the burnt-looking chunks of cold roast beef and found it to be dry, stringy, and rancid tasting. So I tried a spoonful of the cheese, pineapple, and marshmallow salad. The cheese chunks were so hard that I contemplated asking Grandmother if she had used brick cheese. I sat there for a minute or two just pushing a piece of pineapple around with my fork and watching the salad's juice spread across my plate toward the beef. Grandmother was munching away.

Grandmother reached over and got the Tupperware bowl containing the salad and began dishing out seconds for herself. Suddenly she paused with the spoon in mid-air when she caught sight of my plate. "Why ain't cha eatin'?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm just not very hungry."

"C'mon, eat up. Do ya want me ta think ya don't like my cookin'?"

"No," I answered, wrinkling my face miserably.

Once again I did what I was disinclined to do, partly for the sake of manners and partly because I wasn't sure how she'd react if I refused to do as she said. I didn't like the strange look in her eyes. Slowly I raised the glass to my mouth. I had always imagined that wine would be something like grape juice, only better, so I was surprised and dismayed when my nostrils were assailed by its spoiled, fermented odor. Nevertheless, I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip. Its bitter, vinegary flavor was even worse than the smell had led me to believe it would be. I wrinkled my nose and contorted my face in an expression of disgust.
Grandmother cackled. "It ain't the best, but it ain't that bad!"

I quickly moved the glass away from my lips and sat it back down on the table. Some of the red wine sloshed out of my glass and made a spot on my white blouse. Grandmother sat staring at it with great interest.

"It looks like you been cut or somethin'," she said, almost smiling. Then she resumed her munching.

I went ahead and ate as much of the meal as I could while I watched Nero fasten his talons around the handle of a little tarnished gold bell and lift it to his mouth so that he could worry the clapper with his gray beak and little black tongue. I wondered what my parents were eating for lunch.

I glanced at Grandmother, greedily gulping a glass of wine, careless about spilling it on her red net T-shirt. Grandmother looked up, and I quickly shifted my gaze from her to the three pictures. She followed my eyes.

"Didja ever hear how my first husband died?" she asked, pointing with her left thumb to the picture which was standing upright.

"No. How?"

"Well, we was drinkin' at the tavern one Saturday night back home in Kentucky, an' Bassett, my husband, he got into this fight with this other man over who was a goin' ta go out the door first. Bassett gave 'im a crack on the mouth an' broke out half his teeth, an' the bloody little white pieces flew all over when the man spitted 'em out. Then this man, who, by the way, was bigger'n Bassett, gave 'im a big shove an' tripped 'im backwards at the same time, an' Bassett fell an' busted out 'is brains there on the stone hearth."

She told the story with a peculiar gleam in her eyes that sent shivers
down my spine, and she lingered over the words as if she were relishing them.

Repulsed, I stared at my grandmother, then the photograph of Bassett, then at my grandmother again.

"Anyways, Bassett was a fun-lovin' man. Went to the tavern 'most ever night. That's the only reason I look at 'is picture. I can't stand the other two."

I figeted a bit in my chair and edged as far away from her in it as I could.

Grandmother picked up the first of the two pictures that were face-down.

"This 'ere's Larry's pa. Dull man. Too much of a goody-good. When we got divorced, he took dumb Larry with him, thank goodness," she said, and then she clapped the picture back down on the table.

Feeling uncomfortable, I began to swing my right leg, a bit. It surprised me that she would call Dad "dumb Larry" to my face. Besides, he was her own son, after all, and so I had thought that she would at least be fond enough of him not to call him names.

She picked up the next picture. "This is McCone. Died in 'is sleep of a heart attack. Dull man. The worst goody-good of them all. An' I'm stuck with 'is name," she said, wrinkling her nose. She clapped this picture down just the way she had the previous one.

"Ya can see I don't believe 'de mortum nil nisi bonus,'" she said, fluffing herself up a bit as if she'd just said something brilliant.

I pricked my ears up suddenly in surprise. What she had said was Latin (though grammatically incorrect) for something like "don't say anything but good about the dead."
"Do you know Latin?" I asked.

"Jist a few little bits like that, now. Used ta know more. Took a year of it in school. Ever' one had ta. I woulda taken more, but I dropped out ta marry Bassett. Best subject ever taught. Learnt all about the Romans in it. Even had a Roman banquet. Mother even made me a robe ta wear to it. Wouldja like ta see it?"

Not knowing what else to do, I nodded.

She sat down her third or fourth glass of wine, scooted her chair back as far as she could (which was only a few inches) before it hit the wall, and squeezed out from behind the table. Nero began another speech, so she opened the door to his cage. He flew up and perched on her shoulder.

"I always let him out fer a bit o' exercise after lunch," she explained.

I rose and followed her through the trashy kitchen and messy living room, down the hall, and through the door at the end.

This room, Grandmother's bedroom, was just about as bad as the others. Gaudy costume jewelry and knickknacks were strewn about the dresser. The bed, unmade, was piled high with rumpled clothes. Old letters, scraps of cloth, sewing materials, and snagged pantyhose littered the floor. On one of the splotchy lavender walls she had taped up three Playgirl centerfolds. I carefully averted my eyes from them.

Nero left Grandmother's shoulder and perched on one of the posts at the foot of the bed.

She opened the closet door and began rooting through the pile of clothing at the bottom. I noticed that all of the hangers on the rod above her head were empty.

"Here it is!" she exclaimed, standing up and turning around to dis-
play a sack-like robe which was nothing more than part of a bed sheet seamed together on two sides. There were two small holes in it for the arms and one large hole for the head. Grandmother pulled it on over her head.

"Oh, an' speakin' o' Romans," she said, "take a look at my model."

I followed her over to the dresser, in the middle of which was planted a model on two Roman gladiators fighting to the death. She pushed aside the stuff around it, heedless that much was falling onto the floor, and pulled it forward to the edge for my inspection.

"Now them Romans knew how to live, them with their orgies an' banquets an' gladiators an' their thumbs down; I woulda given 'em thumbs down. Thumbs down ever' time."

Nero flew over from the bedpost and perched on the coliseum part of the model.

"Shew there, Nero. Git off," she shouted angrily, waving her hands wildly around her head.

Telling her where to go, he flapped into the air. In doing so, however, he pushed the model over the edge of the dresser. Grandmother jumped forward to catch it, but she was a bit too slow. Instead of catching the model, she stepped on it and broke it into several pieces.

"My model! Oh, my model!" she wailed. "My very, very fav'rite thing in the whole world!" She was almost crying.

Nero, once again perched on the bedpost, was squawking obscenities.

Grandmother turned around abruptly.

"I've had enough o' you, Nero. Yer gettin' thumbs down!" she shouted angrily as she grabbed him by the legs with her age-spotted hands. He squawked and fluttered wildly and repeatedly told her where to go.
With one hand she pulled up on the little latch and jerked out the window screen. Then she leaned outside the low window and swung Nero toward the cement blocks near the foundation of the house. I heard a sickening thud.

I wanted to run out of the room, but Grandmother stood between me and the door. I fingered my cross necklace and bit my lip anxiously.

Grandmother drew herself back in the window, her right hand still clutching Nero's legs. Nero's talons must have scratched her hand, for it was bleeding profusely, even though the wounds did not appear to be serious.

She stood there in that messy room to the side of her Playgirl centerfolds, attired in her Roman garb, staring at, and yet not quite seeming to see, Nero's smashed, gory head. Then, laughingly, she began to poke at his head so that he swung slightly and to shout at him over and over the obscenities he had squawked at her. Not quite totally dead yet, his nerves would occasionally jerk his muscles and rustle his wings slightly. Nervously, I began to wipe my hands on my pants as I watched the blood from her cuts, the same blood that runs in my veins, flow down Nero's body, mingle with the blood on his head, and drop into little pools of red on the floor.