



ALICE

BEAUTIFUL GIRL

ADAMS

STORIES

Beautiful Girl

Stories by
ALICE ADAMS

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by Alice Adams

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FOR

WILLIAM ABRAHAMS

AND PETER STANSKY

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Verlie I Say Unto You

Every morning of all the years of the Thirties, at around seven, Verlie Jones begins her long and laborious walk to the Todds' house, two miles uphill. She works for the Todds—their maid. Her own house, where she lives with her four children, is a slatted floorless cabin in a grove of enormous sheltering oaks. It is just down a gravelly road from the bending highway, and that steep small road is the first thing she has to climb, starting out early in the morning. Arrived at the highway she stops and sighs, and looks around and then starts out. Walking steadily but not in any hurry, beside the winding white concrete.

First there are fields of broomstraw on either side of the road, stretching back to the woods, thick, clustered dark pines and cedars, trees whose lower limbs are cluttered with underbrush. Then the land gradually rises until on one side there is a steep red clay bank going up to the woods; on the other side a wide cornfield, rich furrows dotted over in spring with tiny wild flowers, all colors—in the winter dry and rutted, sometimes frosted over, from as shiny as splintered glass.

Then the creek. Before she comes to the small concrete bridge, she can see the heavy growth at the edge of the fields, green, edging the water. On the creek's steep banks, below the bridge, are huge peeling poplars, ghostly, old. She stands there looking down at the water (the bridge is halfway to the Todds'). The water is thick and swollen, rushing, full of twigs and leaf trash and swirling logs in the spring. Trickling and almost dried out when summer over, in the early fall.

Past the bridge is the filling station, where they sell loaves of bread and cookies and soap along with the gas and things for cars. Always there are men sitting around at the station, white men in overalls, dusty and dried out. Sometimes they nod to Verlie. "Morning, Verlie. Going to be any hot day?"

Occasionally, maybe a couple of times a year, a chain gang will be along there, working on the road. The colored men chained together, in their dirty, wide-striped uniforms, working with their picks. And the thin, mean guard (a white man) with his rifle, watching them. Looking quickly, briefly at Verlie as she passes. She looks everywhere but there, as her head falls down to her stomach and turns upside down. All kinds of fears grab at her, all together she is afraid of the guard and of those men (their heavy eyes) and also a chain gang is one of the places where her deserting husband, Horace, might well be, and she never wants to see Horace again. Not anywhere.

After the filling station some houses start. Small box houses, sitting up high on brick stilts. On the other side of the highway red clay roads lead back into the hills, to the woods. To the fields of country with no roads at all, where sometimes Mr. Todd goes to hunt rabbits, and where at other times, in summer, the children, Avery and Devlin Todd, take lunches and stay all day.

From a certain bend in the highway Verlie can see the Todds' house, but she rarely bothers to look anymore. She sighs and shifts her weight before starting up the steep, white, gravelly road, and then the road to the right that swings around to the back of the house, to the back

door that leads into the kitchen.

There on the back porch she has her own small bathroom that Mr. Todd put in for her. There is a mirror and some nails to hang her things on, and a flush toilet, ordered from Montgomery Ward, that still works. No washbasin, but she can wash her hands in the kitchen sink.

She hangs up her cardigan sweater in her bathroom and takes an apron off a nail. She goes into the kitchen to start everyone's breakfast.

They all eat separate. First Avery, who likes oatmeal and then soft-boiled eggs; then Mr. Todd (oatmeal and scrambled eggs and bacon and coffee); Devlin (toast and peanut butter and jam); and Mrs. Todd (tea and toast).

Verlie sighs, and puts the water on.

Verlie has always been with the Todds; that is how they put it to their friends. "Verlie has always been with us." Of course, that is not true. Actually she came to them about ten years before, when Avery was a baby. What they meant was that they did not know much about her life before them, and also (a more important meaning) they cannot imagine their lives without her. They say, "We couldn't get along without Verlie," but it is unlikely that any of them (except possibly Jessica, with her mournful, exacerbated and extreme intelligence) realizes the full truth of the remark. And, laughingly, one of them will add, "No one else could put up with us." Another truth, or perhaps only a partial truth: in those days, there are then, most maids put up with a lot, and possibly Verlie suffers no more than most.

She does get more money than most maids, thirteen dollars a week (most get along on ten or eleven). And she gets to go home before dinner, around six (she first leaves the meal a fixed for them), since they—since Mr. Todd likes to have a lot of drinks and then eat late.

Every third Sunday she gets off to go to church.

None of them is stupid enough to say that she is like a member of the family.

Tom Todd, that handsome, guiltily faithless husband, troubled professor (the 10 percent salary cuts of the Depression; his history of abandoned projects—the book on Shelley, the innumerable articles)—Tom was the one who asked Verlie about her name.

"You know, it's like in the Bible. Verlie I say unto you."

Tom felt that he successfully concealed his amusement at that, and later it makes a marvelous story, especially in academic circles, in those days when funny-maid stories are standard social fare. In fact people (white people) are somewhat competitive as to who has heard or known the most comical colored person, comical meaning outrageously childish and ignorant. Tom's story always goes over well.

In her summer sneakers, shorts and little shirt, Avery comes into the dining room, a small dark-haired girl carrying a big book. Since she has learned to read (her mother taught her when she was no bigger than a minute) she reads all the time, curled up in big chairs in the living room or in her own room, in the bed. At the breakfast table.

"Good morning, Verlie."

"Morning. How you?"

"Fine, thank you. Going to be hot today?"

“Well, I reckon so.”

Avery drinks her orange juice, and then Verlie takes out the glass and brings in her bowl of hot oatmeal. Avery reads the thick book while she eats. Verlie takes out the oatmeal bowl and brings in the soft-boiled eggs and a glass of milk.

“You drink your milk, now, hear?”

Verlie is about four times the size of Avery and more times than that her age. (But Verlie can't read.)

Verlie is an exceptionally handsome woman, big and tall and strong, with big bright eyes and smooth yellow skin over high cheekbones. A wide curving mouth, and strong white teeth.

Once there was a bad time between Avery and Verlie: Avery was playing with some children down the road, and it got to be suppertime. Jessica sent Verlie down to get Avery, who didn't want to come home. “Blah blah blah blah!” she yelled at Verlie—which unaccountably, turned and walked away.

The next person Avery saw was furious Jessica, arms akimbo. “How are you, how could you? Verlie, who's loved you all your life? How could you be so cruel, calling her black?”

“I didn't—I said blah. I never said black. Where is she?”

“Gone home. Very hurt.”

Jessica remained stiff and unforgiving (she had problems of her own); but the next morning Avery ran down into the kitchen at the first sound of Verlie. “Verlie, I said blah blah—I didn't say black.”

And Verlie smiled, and it was all over. For good.

Tom Todd comes into the dining room, carrying the newspaper. “Good morning, Avery. Morning, Verlie. Well, it doesn't look like a day for getting out our umbrellas, does it now?”

That is the way he talks.

“Avery, please put your book away. Who knows, we might have an absolutely fascinating conversation.”

She gives him a small sad smile and closes her book. “Pass the cream?”

“With the greatest of pleasure.”

“Thanks.”

But despite the intense and often painful complications of his character, Tom's relationship with Verlie is perhaps the simplest in that family. Within their rigidly defined roles they are even fond of each other. Verlie thinks he talks funny, but not much more so than most men—white men. He runs around with women (she knows that from his handkerchiefs, the lipstick stains that he couldn't have bothered to hide from her) but not as much as Horace did. He bosses his wife and children but he doesn't hit them. He acts as Verlie expects a man to act and perhaps a little better.

And from Tom's point of view Verlie behaves like a Negro maid. She is somewhat lazy; she does as little cleaning as she can. She laughs at his jokes. She sometimes sneaks drinks from his liquor closet. He does not, of course, think of Verlie as a woman—a woman in the sense of sexual possibility; in fact he once sincerely (astoundingly) remarked that he could not imagine a sexual impulse toward a colored person.

• • •

Devlin comes in next. A small and frightened boy, afraid of Verlie. Once as he stood up in his bath she touched his tiny penis and laughed and said, "This here's going to grow into something nice and big." He was terrified: what would he do with something big, down there?

He mutters good morning to his father and sister and to Verlie.

Then Jessica. Mrs. Todd. "Good morning, everyone. Morning, Verlie. My, doesn't it look like a lovely spring day?"

She sighs, as no one answers.

The end of breakfast. Verlie clears the table, washes up, as those four people separate.

There is a Negro man who also (sometimes) works for the Todds, named Clifton. Yearly work: raking leaves in the fall, building a fence around the garbage cans, and then a dog kennel, then a playhouse for the children.

When Verlie saw Clifton the first time he came into the yard (a man who had walked a long way, looking for work), what she thought was: Lord, I never saw no man so beautiful. Her second thought was: He sick.

Clifton is bronze-colored. Reddish. Shining. Not brown like most colored (or yellow, as Verlie is). His eyes are big and brown, but dragged downward with his inside sickness. And his sadness: he is a lonesome man, almost out of luck.

"Whatever do you suppose they talk about?" Tom Todd says to Jessica, who has come into his study to help him with the index of his book, an hour or so after breakfast. They can hear the slow, quiet sounds of Verlie's voice, with Clifton's, from the kitchen.

"Us, maybe?" Jessica makes this light, attempting a joke, but she really wonders if in fact she and Tom are their subject. Her own communication with Verlie is so mystifyingly nonverbal that she sometimes suspects Verlie of secret (and accurate) appraisals, as though Verlie knows her in ways that no one else does, herself included. At other times she thinks that Verlie is just plain stubborn.

From the window come spring breaths of blossom and grasses and leaves. Of spring earth. Aging plump Jessica deeply sighs.

Tom says, "I very much doubt that, my dear. Incredibly fascinating though we be."

In near total despair Jessica says, "Sometimes I think I just don't have the feeling for a index."

The telephone rings. Tom and Jessica look at each other, and then Verlie's face comes through the study door. "It's for you, Mr. Todd. A long distance."

Clifton has had a bad life; it almost seems cursed. The same sickness one spring down in Mississippi carried off his wife and three poor little children, and after that everything got even worse: every job that he got came apart like a bunch of sticks in his hands. Folks all said that they had no money to pay. He even made deliveries for a bootlegger, knocking on back doors at night, but the man got arrested and sent to jail before Clifton got any money.

He likes working for the Todds, and at the few other jobs around town that Mrs. Todd

finds for him. But he doesn't feel good. Sometimes he thinks he has some kind of sickness.

He looks anxiously at Verlie as he says this last, as though he, like Jessica, believes that she can see inside him.

"You nervous," Verlie says. "You be all right, come summertime." But she can't look at him as she says this.

They are standing in the small apple orchard where Verlie's clotheslines are. She has been hanging out the sheets. They billow, shuddering in the lively restive air of early spring.

Clifton suddenly takes hold of her face, and turns it around to his. He presses his mouth and his body to hers, standing there. Something deep inside Verlie heats up and makes her almost melt.

"Verlie!"

It is Avery, suddenly coming up on them, so that they cumberously step apart.

"Verlie, my father wants you." Avery runs away almost before she has stopped speaking.

Clifton asks, "You reckon we ought to tell her not to tell?"

"No, she's not going to tell."

Verlie is right, but it is a scene that Avery thinks about. Of course, she has seen other grown-ups kissing: her father and Irene McGinnis or someone after a party. But Verlie and Clifton looked different; for one thing they were more absorbed. It took them a long time to hear her voice.

. . .

Tom is desperately questioning Jessica. "How in God's name will I tell her?" he asks.

Verlie's husband, Horace, is dead. He died in a Memphis hospital, after a knife fight, having first told a doctor the name of the people and the town where his wife worked.

"I could tell her," Jessica forces herself to say, and for a few minutes they look at each other, with this suggestion lying between them. But they both know, with some dark and intimate Southern knowledge, that Tom will have to be the one to tell her. And alone: he would not even "do" for Jessica to stay on in the room, although neither of them could have explained these certainties.

Having been clearly (and kindly) told by Tom what has happened in Memphis, Verlie then asks, "You sure? You sure it's Horace, not any other man?"

Why couldn't he have let Jessica tell her, or at least have let her stay in the room? Tom is uncomfortable; it wildly occurs to him to offer Verlie a drink (to offer Verlie a drink?). He mumbles, "Yes, I'm afraid there's no doubt at all." He adds, in his more reasonable professorial voice, "You see, another man wouldn't have said Verlie Jones, who works for the Todd family, in Hilton."

Incredibly, a smile breaks out on Verlie's face. ("For a minute I actually thought she was going to *laugh*," Tom later says to Jessica.)

Verlie says, "I reckon that's right. Couldn't be no other man." And then she says, "Lunch about ready now," and she goes back into the kitchen.

Jessica has been hovering in the dining room, pushing at the arrangement of violets and cowslips in a silver bowl. She follows Verlie into the kitchen; she says, "Verlie, I'm terribly sorry. Verlie, wouldn't you like to go on home? Take the afternoon off. I could drive you ..."

“No’m. No, thank you. I’d lieber get on with the ironing.”

And so, with a stiff and unreadable face, opaque darkbrown eyes, Verlie serves their lunch

What could they know, what could any of them know about a man like Horace? Had any of them seen her scars? Knife scars and beating scars, and worse things he had done without leaving any scars. All the times he forced her, when he was so hurting and quick, and she was sick or just plain exhausted. The girls she always knew he had. The mean tricks he played on little kids, his kids. The dollars of hers that he stole to get drunk on.

She had always thought Horace was too mean to die, and as she cleans up the lunch dishes and starts to sprinkle the dry sheets for ironing, she still wonders: *Is Horace dead?*

She tries to imagine an open casket, full of Horace, dead. His finicky little moustache and his long, strong fingers folded together on his chest. But the casket floats off into the recesses of her mind and what she sees is Horace, alive and terrifying.

A familiar dry smell tells her that she has scorched a sheet, and tears begin to roll slowly down her face.

“When I went into the kitchen to see how she was, she was standing there with tears rolling down her face,” Jessica reports to Tom—and then is appalled at what she hears and satisfaction in her own voice.

“I find that hardly surprising,” Tom says, with a questioning raise of his eyebrows.

Aware that she has lost his attention, Jessica goes on. (Where *is* he—with whom?) “I just meant, it seems awful to feel a sort of relief when she cries. As though I thought that’s what she ought to do. Maybe she didn’t really care for Horace. He hasn’t been around for years after all.” (As usual she is making things worse: it is apparent that Tom can barely listen.)

She says, “I think I’ll take the index cards back to my desk,” and she manages not to cry.

Picking up the sheets to take upstairs to the linen closet, Verlie decides that she won’t tell Clifton about Horace; dimly she thinks that if she tells anyone, especially Clifton, it won’t be true: Horace, alive, will be waiting for her at her house, as almost every night she is afraid that he will be.

Sitting at her desk, unseeingly Jessica looks out across the deep valley, where the creeks winds down toward the sea, to the further hills that are bright green with spring. Despair slowly fills her blood so that it seems heavy in her veins, and thick, and there is a heavy pressure in her head.

And she dreams for a moment, as she has sometimes before, of a friend to whom she could say, “I can’t stand anything about my life. My husband either is untrue to me or would like to be—constantly. It comes to the same thing, didn’t St. Paul say that? My daughter’s eyes are beginning to go cold against me, and my son is terrified of everyone. Of me.” But there is no one to whom she could say a word of this; she is known among her friends for dignity and restraint. (Only sometimes her mind explodes, and she breaks out screaming—at Tom, at one of her children, once at Verlie—leaving them all sick and shocked, especially herself sick and shocked, and further apart than ever.)

Now Verlie comes through the room with an armful of fresh, folded sheets, and for a

instant, looking at her, Jessica has the thought that Verlie could be that friend, that listener. That Verlie could understand.

She dismisses the impulse almost as quickly as it came.

Lately she has spent a lot of time remembering college, those distant happy years, among friends. Her successes of that time. The two years when she directed the Greek play, on May Day weekend (really better than being in the May Court). Her senior year, elected president of the secret honor society. (And the springs of wisteria, heavily flowering, scented, lavender and white, the heavy vines everywhere.)

From those college days she still has two friends, to whom she writes, and visits at rare intervals. Elizabeth, who is visibly happily married to handsome and successful Jackson Stuart (although he is, to Jessica, a shocking racial bigot). And Mary John James, who teaches Latin in a girls' school, in Richmond—who has never married. Neither of them could be her imagined friend (any more than Verlie could).

Not wanting to see Jessica's sad eyes again (the sorrow in that woman's face, the mourning!), Verlie puts the sheets in the linen closet and goes down the back stairs. She is halfway down, walking slow, when she feels a sudden coolness in her blood, as though from a breeze. She stops, she listens to nothing and then she is flooded with the certain knowledge that Horace is dead, is at that very moment laid away in Memphis (wherever Memphis is). Standing there alone, by the halfway window that looks out to the giant rhododendron, she begins to smile, peacefully and slowly—an interior, pervasive smile.

Then she goes on down the stairs, through the dining room and into the kitchen. Clifton is there.

Her smile changes; her face becomes brighter and more animated, although she doesn't say anything—not quite trusting herself not to say everything, as she has promised herself.

"You looking perky," Clifton says, by way of a question. He is standing at the sink with a glass of water.

Her smile broadens, and she lies. "Thinking about the social at the church. Just studying or not I ought to go."

"You do right to go," he says. And then, "You be surprise, you find me there?"

(They have never arranged any meeting before, much less in another place, at night; they have always pretended that they were in the same place in the yard or orchard by accident.)

She laughs. "You never find the way."

He grins at her, his face brighter than any face that she has ever seen. "I be there," he says to her.

A long, hot summer, extending into fall. A hot October, and then there is sudden cold. Splinters of frost on the red clay erosions in the fields. Ice in the shallow edges of the creek.

For Verlie it has been the happiest summer of her life, but no one of the Todds has remarked on this, nor been consciously aware of unusual feelings, near at hand. They all have preoccupations of their own.

Clifton has been working for the Macomers, friends and neighbors of the Todds, and it is Irene Macomber who telephones to tell Jessica the sad news that he had a kind of seizure (hemorrhage) and that when they finally got him to the Negro hospital (twelve miles away)

was too late, and he died.

Depressing news, on that dark November day. Jessica supposes that the first thing is to tell Verlie. (After all, she and Clifton were friends, and Verlie might know of relatives.)

She is not prepared for Verlie's reaction.

A wail—"Aieeeee"—that goes on and on, from Verlie's wide mouth, and her wide, wide eyes. "Aieeee—"

Then it stops abruptly, as Verlie claps her hands over her mouth, and bends over and blindly reaches for a chair, her rocker. She pulls herself toward the chair, she falls into it, she bends over double and begins to cough, deep and wrackingly.

Poor shocked Jessica has no notion what to do. To go over to Verlie and embrace her, to press her own sorrowing face to Verlie's face? To creep shyly and sadly from the room?

This last is what she does—is all, perhaps, that she is able to do.

"You know," says Tom Todd (seriously) to Irene McGinnis, in one of their rare lapses from the steady demands of unconsummated love, "I believe those two people had a real affection for each other."

• • •

Verlie is sick for a week and more after that, with what is called "misery in the chest." (No one mentions her heart.)

Thinking to amuse her children (she is clearly at a loss without Verlie, and she knows this), Jessica takes them for a long walk, on the hard, narrow, white roads that lead up into the hills, the heavy, thick, dark woods of fall, smelling of leaves and earth and woodsmoke. But a melancholy mood settles over them all; it is cold and the children are tired, and Jessica finds that she is thinking of Verlie and Clifton. (Is it possible that they were lovers? She uncomfortably shrugs off this possibility.)

Dark comes early, and there is a raw, red sunset at the black edge of the horizon, as finally they reach home.

Verlie comes back the next day, to everyone's relief. But there is a grayish tinge to the color of her skin that does not go away.

But on that rare spring day months earlier (the day Horace is dead and laid away in Memphis) Verlie walks the miles home with an exceptional lightness of heart, smiling at herself at all the colors of the bright new flowers, and at the smells of spring, the promises.

THE TODDS

Are You in Love?

“But I absolutely can’t understand Mr. Auden,” says Jessica Todd, curiously flirtatious. She is speaking to Linton Wheeler, a much younger man, a student and himself a poet. They are in Jessica’s bookstore, in a small university town: Hilton, in the middle South. She is seated behind her desk. Small and plump, with little shape, sad, not aging well, Jessica usually thinks of herself (she *feels* herself) in terms of defects (pores and sags), but today she is aware only of her eyes, which are large and dark brown. Even Tom, her husband, has said that they are beautiful. She and Linton are communicating through their eyes, hers to his wide-spaced hazel. Eyes and somewhat similar voices—both are from Virginia.

“Or Delmore Schwartz or T. S. Eliot either,” says Jessica, with an exaggerated sigh.

Serious Linton begins to explain. William Empson, Brooks and Warren. He mentions Donne and the Metaphysicals. Jacobean drama. Pound?

“You *know* I can’t read Ezra Pound.”

Linton’s skin is very fair, even now, in midsummer; he dislikes the sun, stays indoors. His hair is a light sandy brown, worn longer than the fashion of that time (middle Thirties). There are Bacchus curls around his face. A wide mouth, with curiously flat lips. Jessica has sometimes imagined that the young Shelley looked like that. She spent her girlhood reading Shelley, and Byron and Keats and Wordsworth, but especially Shelley, and she has wondered if she married Tom Todd because he was—still is, in fact—writing a book on Shelley. (Not true: she married him because of passionate kisses—then.)

“You really should try to read Brooks and Warren,” says gentle Linton, now.

“Oh, Linton, I will, I really will.” And for no reason, but happily, she laughs.

Earlier they have both been laughing at other customers who have been in and out habitués of Jessica’s: Clarissa Noble, who can’t remember which mystery stories she’s already read; old Mrs. Vain, who only reads books on genealogy or gardening; Dr. Willingham, the filthy-minded botanist; Miss Phipps, a blond beautician, who likes love stories with nice endings.

Good friends, Jessica and Linton, despite a gap in age, laughing together in the middle of a Summer afternoon.

The store is a narrow, very high-ceilinged building, with windows up near the roof, through which now slanting downward come bright bars of light, moted with dust, in the otherwise dim and book-crowded room. Next door is the Presbyterian church, red brick, with a formal hedged green yard. Tom is, or was, a Presbyterian, but Jessica is an almost lapsed Episcopalian. (Not quite: those prayers and especially the General Confession linger in her mind and at odd times they surface.) She and Tom have never gone to church, to either church, and it seems an irony to Jessica that his church (of which she faintly disapproves that dismal catechism) should be next door to her store.

Linton smokes too much. He always smells of cigarettes; he leaves in his wake a drift of stale smoke. He blows smoke out, then leans back and inhales it, in a way that Jessica has

never seen anyone inhale. A shy boy, from a very small town—a country crossroads—the way of smoking is perhaps his boldest gesture.

He likes Jessica, or, rather, he does not *not* like her, as he does most older women. C young ones, the coeds, he is simply and absolutely terrified.

“I’ve always loved poetry,” says Jessica. “But these new things—it isn’t fair.” She feels curiously giddy.

One of the things that Linton likes about Jessica is that she doesn’t dye her hair, as his mother does. At that moment he can hardly see her face, in that dim light, but a bar of sunlight has reached her head, turning white to gold. “Ma’am, you do have the prettiest hair,” says Linton shyly.

“Why, Linton—” Tears rush toward her eyes—her heart might break. “Why, Linton, what a very sweet thing to say,” she barely gets out.

Should he not have said that? Sensing strong emotion, which he imagines to be distress, Linton retreats to poetry. “And *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, that’s really something, ma’am,” he says, blushing. “I know you’d enjoy that one.”

“I’ll try it.” Jessica speaks faintly, wishing he would go: she would like to be alone, to savor and to think.

“My goodness, it’s almost five,” says Linton. “I’ve got to get to work.” He is a part-time waiter at the college cafeteria, Swain Hall, which is inevitably called Swine Hall. Linton is what is called a self-help student.

He half smiles, and hurries out, banging the old door and letting in a wave of exhausted late-afternoon summer air. Leaving his stale Camel smell.

Motionless, Jessica sits there smiling. She is almost dazzled by her sudden sharp (if narrow) glimpse of possibilities, a bright glimpse like a slit in the darkness of her usual melancholy. She is a woman not yet forty with beautiful eyes. And beautiful hair. Linton is not a possibility. (Is he?) But older women, especially literary women, sometimes have young men. Young Lovers. A woman desired is a woman not seen as herself, is a woman re-created—she is remembering Tom’s brief blind passion for her.

To be loved by a much younger person is to be forgiven, forgiven for age. Did she read that somewhere? Did she make it up?

Still smiling, she shakes her head, to shake off all of this. But she is aware of a rare mood of indulgence toward herself. She knows that it is silly, this imagining of young lovers, at her age. But on the other hand—why not? Is love restricted to people of a definite age, and to a certain degree of beauty?

(Yes, indeed it is, she is later to decide, and she is to feel, as she has felt before, that her own needs, insofar as they are sexual, are obscene. *But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon these miserable offenders.*)

She puts the money from the cashbox into her purse, \$5.73; she stands up and looks around. She walks determinedly toward the door, which she opens and closes and locks behind her.

Her car, the old Chevy, is parked at the curb. For a wonder, it starts up easily. She drives down Main Street, turns left at the light and heads out of town, toward her own house.

It is a lovely afternoon, and the town just now is at its greenest and loveliest. The lawn is the profuse shrubbery, the heavy green pine boughs against a barely fading pale-blue sky—a

beautiful. Jessica drives down the long white concrete highway, the last hill leading home with an obscure anticipation.

Her own driveway leads to the back of the house, past the old terraced garden, the abandoned tennis court. Roses, just past their prime, climb the fence at the far edge of the garden, and the grape arbor is flowing with green vines. At the moment Jessica is in love with her house, the land, their garden.

Beyond the side yard some woods begin, pines and maples, cedars, elms; through the trees is the path leading down to the swimming pool (Tom's pride, built with his World War II bonus, and partly with his own hands). That is where Tom and the children will be. Probably with some company.

Jessica goes inside the house, and upstairs to her room to change into her bathing suit. Undressing, she does not regard her body in the long mirror or think about it, as she sometimes does (unhappily). Humming something to herself, she puts on her dark wool suit, her flowered beige kimono, slippers, and she picks up her white rubber cap from the top of her chest of drawers, the mahogany chest that matches the broad double bed, which her parents slept in, in Virginia. Tom has moved into what was meant to be the guest room.

She goes downstairs, still humming, through the living room and out the side door, down the lawn. She smiles as she recognizes that the tune is an Easter hymn—"There Is a Green Hill Far Away"—Easter songs, in August? But something in the air that day has more of spring than summer in it, some fragrance, some suggestion.

Should she invite Linton to come over for a swim sometime? Well, why not?

At the edge of the woods, the top of the embedded slate steps that lead down to the pool, she pauses and listens, separating out voices. Tom's—his laugh. The somewhat high-responding laugh of Harry McGinnis, there with his wife, Irene. And at the prospect of Irene watching Irene with Tom, Jessica's breath tightens in a way that is dreadfully familiar to her, but then she thinks a new thought: she thinks, So what?—for her an unfamiliar phrase. So what? Tom has a crush on Irene, and she on him. So what? Today, at this moment, her own heart is light and high. Is indestructible?

She starts down the path, and halfway down, just past the giant maple in which her children have built a tree-house, she calls out, "Here I am! Hello?" She is unaware of sounding not quite like herself. As though she were a guest?

She is answered by silence, a break in whatever they were laughing about, and then Tom's voice: "Well, old dear, so at long last you're home?"

They are all there, as she descends to the clearing: Tom (her Tom), tall and slender, blue-eyed, censorious; Harry, dark and slight, neatly made; and pretty blond Irene, in a ruffled pink bathing suit. And children: her own thin two, dark Avery, and fairer Devlin, on a steamer rug, on the grass; and young Harry McGinnis, who lies tensely on the edge of the pool, in a space of sun. Harry is a golden boy, extremely handsome—almost beautiful looking like neither Irene nor his father.

For something to say, Jessica calls out, "Children, you look cold, you wrap up in your towels. Avery, Devlin." They look at her with blank and patient faces, and then Avery turns toward young Harry, who has begun to do pushups, there beside the pool.

Jessica says, "Why, Irene, what a pretty bathing suit. Can you really wear it into the

water?”

Before Irene can answer Tom breaks in, “That’s what she alleges, but we have yet to see test of her claim, any proof of her alleged bathing suit.” He makes a gesture as though to throw her into the pool.

And Irene turns from Jessica to Tom. “You wouldn’t!” she cries out. “You’re just a mean old tease, Tom Todd. Of course I can swim in this suit, it’s just that I’m feeling so warm, and so lazy.”

“Tom, darling, I’m dying for a drink,” says Jessica. “What a perfect day for gin.” (Again she sounds like someone else, but who? Someone in a book?) “But first I’ll go in for a little dip,” she says. This is herself; it is what she always says, and does.

Dropping her robe, as no one watches, she steps into the shallow end of the rough concrete oval; as the cool sliding water reaches her waist she begins to swim a gentle breaststroke, her legs in a practiced frog kick, to the end of the pool. There she reaches for the edge, and holding on, she looks back at the group in the clearing, in the sun, who are not watching her. Harry (big Harry: this distinction is to become ironic in a few years, when his son grows so much larger than he), big Harry is telling a story; Jessica can catch echoes of his precise and somewhat finicky voice, not quite hearing what he says.

Tom is looking at Irene, so small and blond, preening herself in the sun, in Tom’s gaze. And Jessica wonders how that would be, to be a woman looked at by men, aware of the power of one’s face, one’s small and desirable body. She can’t imagine it, and she lets go of the end of the pool, to swim back slowly, in the cool and concealing water.

She gets out quickly, and in a single gesture she picks up and puts on her robe. Elaborate. Tom hands her the drink that he has made for her. His gestures always seem to mock themselves. (Is Jessica for the first time observing this? She has a sense of heightened powers, of newly and acutely sensing what is around her.)

Harry McGinnis is a Classics professor, which was Jessica’s field of concentration at Randolph-Macon, and he sometimes teases her about what he terms her desertion, her flight to modernity. He also teases her about what he calls her radical ideas; he says that Negroes have smaller brains than white people, making Jessica furious—but does he mean it? No one knows, least of all Jessica.

Today, which is all around an odd day, she decides to tease Harry. Well, why not? (Says what?) “Well, Harry,” she begins, “I’ve just spent the most wonderful morning reading Mrs Virginia Woolf. Of course you couldn’t be persuaded to read any lady after Sappho?”

Pleased—he enjoys a little argument, although he has the Southern male’s generations-deep distrust of intelligence in women—Harry responds with more than usual gallantry: “Well, anyone could persuade me, it would be you, Miss Jessica.”

Staring at the neat brown patch of hair on his chest, Jessica is wondering where to go from there when Tom breaks in: “Speaking of modernity,” he somewhat loudly says (is that what they were talking about?), “have you good people heard the news that Benny Goodman is going to play in Carnegie Hall? Ben-ny Good-man.” His isolation of each syllable is replete with contempt.

Anti-Semitic. This horrifying word, or perception (which is not entirely new: from time to time he has said certain not nice things about his Jewish students), enters Jessica’s mind, and it is in fact so horrifying that she must force it out (Hitler, Jews in Germany—of course Tom

is not like that). Defensively she says, "I really can't see what's so terrible about that."

Lifting his head, for one instant Tom glares as though Jessica were a student (a Jewish student?) and then he turns to Harry and he says, "Jessica really only likes hymns. Episcopal hymns, of course. She's always humming them, although a little off-key." And he laughs, although he had spoken kindly, or even amusingly.

Turning from him (something unbearable has risen in her chest), Jessica looks over toward her children.

Devlin is still there on the steamer rug, a towel obediently draped around his shoulder but Avery has got up and walked around to the side of the pool, where young Harry is lying in the sun. She squats there beside him, much less beautiful than he; she seems to be saying something, but whatever it is Harry does not answer, nor even turn toward her. *Avery is in love with Harry*. Blindingly, Jessica sees and feels this, as at the same time she tells herself that it is absolutely impossible: Avery is only nine, many years too young for a feeling of the sort. Impossible.

"Ben-ny Good-man," Tom says again. "What do you imagine he'll play—The Flight of the Bumblebee?"

"Silly, you're thinking of Jack Benny." Irene laughs, tinklingly.

"Well, I suppose I should concede that there is some difference between them." Tom draws in his chin, raising his head in a characteristic gesture of defiance. But then, since it was Irene who spoke, he turns aside and allows his stern expression to dissolve into a laugh.

But suddenly, then, there is a tremendous sound, an explosion of water. All the grown-ups turn to see young Harry floundering in the pool—to see Avery, who has evidently just pushed him in, whose face is terrified, appalled.

Everyone screams at once—everyone but Jessica and Avery, who are staring at each other frozen, across the pool.

Young Harry, from the pool to Avery: "You little bitch—"

Tom: "Avery, how dare you, *damn* you—"

Irene: "Harry, honey, your stomach's all scraped—"

Big Harry to his son: "Don't you ever let me hear you use language like that, and to a girl—"

At the sound of that splash something within Jessica has itself exploded, the day has exploded, and for a moment she is immobilized (as Avery is). Jessica hears all those shouts although they were distant voices. But then in a rush she gets up and hurries around to where Avery is, Avery still standing beside the pool, beside the place where Harry was lying. Jessica grasps her daughter's arm. She pulls her around to the other side of the pool and then up the twig- and pebble-strewn slate steps, almost dragging her along, toward the side yard and the house.

Where the lawn begins Jessica stops; she turns to face Avery and to grasp her shoulder. And she begins to shake her daughter, saying loudly, terribly, "What's the matter with you? Are you in love with Harry McGinnis? *Are you in love?*"

Shaking her until they are both weeping.

THE TODDS

Alternatives

It is the summer of 1935, and there are two people sitting at the end of a porch. The house is in Maine, at the edge of a high bluff that overlooks a large and for the moment peaceful lake. Tom Todd and Barbara Rutherford. They have recently met. (She and her husband are houseguests of the Todds.) They laugh a lot, they are terribly excited about each other and they have no idea what to do with what they feel. She is a very blond, bright-eyed girl in her twenties, wearing very short white shorts, swinging long thin legs below the high hammock on which she is perched, looking down at Tom. He is a fair, slender man with sad lines beside his mouth, but not now! Now he is laughing with Babs. Some ten years older than she, he is a professor, writing a book on Shelley (*O wild West Wind*), but the Depression has had unhappy effects on his university (Hilton, in the middle South): 10 percent salary cut, cancellation of sabbaticals. He is unable to finish his book (no promotion); they rely more and more on his wife's small income from her bookstore. And he himself has been depressed—but not now. What a girl, this Babs!

The house itself is old, with weathered shingles that once were green, and its shape peculiar; it used to be the central lodge for a camp for underprivileged girls that Jessica Todd owned and ran before her marriage to Tom. The large, high living room is still full of souvenirs from that era: group pictures of girls in bloomers and middies, who danced or rather, posed in discreet Greek tunics, and wore headbands; and over the fireplace, just below a moldering deer's head, there is a mouse-nibbled triangular felt banner, once dark green, that announced the name of the camp: Wabuwana. Why does Jessica keep all those things around, as though those were her happiest days? No one ever asked. Since there were no bedrooms, Tom and Jessica slept in a curtained-off alcove, with not much privacy; two very small rooms that once were storage closets are bedrooms for their children, Avery and Devlin. Babs and her husband, Wilfred Rutherford, have been put in a tent down the path, on one of a row of gray plank tent floors where all the camper girls used to sleep. Babs said, "How absolutely divine—I've never slept in a tent." "You haven't?" Jessica asked. "I think I sleep best in tents."

A narrow screened-in porch runs the length of the house, and there is a long table out there—too long for just the four Todds, better (less lonely) with even two guests. The porch widens at its end, making a sort of round room, where Tom and Babs now are, not looking at the view.

Around the house there are clumps of hemlocks, tall Norway pines, white pines, and birches that bend out from the high bank. Across the smooth bright lake are the White Mountains, the Presidential Range—sharp blue Mount Adams and farther back, in the exceptionally clear days of early fall, such as this day is, you can see Mount Washington silhouetted. Lesser, gentler slopes take up the foreground: Mount Pleasant, Douglas Hill.

Beside Babs in the hammock lies a ukulele—hers, which Tom wants her to play.

"Oh, but I'm no good at *all*," she protests. "Wilfred can't stand it when I play!"

"I'll be able to stand it, I can promise you that, my dear."

Her accent is very Bostonian, his Southern; both tendencies seem to intensify as they talk together.

She picks up the instrument, plucks the four strings as she sings, "My dog has fleas."

"So does Louise," he sings mockingly, an echo. Tom is fond of simple ridiculous jokes but he feels it necessary always to deliver them as though someone else were talking. In fact, he says almost everything indirectly.

They both laugh, looking at each other.

They are still laughing when Jessica comes out from the living room where she has been reading (every summer she rereads Jane Austen) and walks down the length of the porch where they are, and says, "Oh, a ukulele, how nice, Barbara. Some of our girls used to play."

Chivalrous Tom gets up to offer his chair—"Here you are, old dear." She did not want to sit so close to the hammock but does anyway, a small shapeless woman on the edge of her chair.

Jessica is only a few years older than Tom but she looks considerably more so, with graying hair and sad brown eyes, a tightly compressed mouth. She has strong and definite Anglo-Saxon notions about good behavior. (They all do, this helpless group of American Protestants, Tom and Jessica, Barbara and Wilfred, which they try and almost succeed in passing on to their children.) Jessica wears no makeup and is dressed in what she calls "camp clothes," meaning things that are old and shabby (what she thinks she deserves). "Won't you play something for us?" she asks Babs.

"Perhaps you will succeed in persuasion where I have failed," says Tom. As he sees it, his chief duty toward his wife is to be unfailingly polite, and he always is, although sometimes he comes across a little heavily.

Of course Jessica feels the currents between Babs and Tom but she accepts what she senses with melancholy resignation. There is a woman at home whom Tom likes too, small, blonde Irene McGinnis, and Irene is crazy about Tom—that's clear—but nothing happens. Sometimes they kiss; Jessica has noticed that Verlie always hides Tom's handkerchiefs. Verlie also likes Tom. Nothing more will happen with Babs. It is only mildly depressing for Jessica, a further reminder that she is an aging, not physically attractive woman, and that her excellent mind is not compelling to Tom. But she is used to all that. She sighs, and says, "I think there's going to be a very beautiful sunset," and she looks across the lake to the mountains. "There's Mount Washington," she says.

Then the porch door bangs open and Wilfred walks toward them, a heavy, dark young man with sleeves rolled up over big hairy arms; he has been washing and polishing his new Ford. He is a distant cousin of Jessica's. "Babs, you're not going to play that thing, are you?"

"No, darling, I absolutely promise."

"Well," Tom says, "surely it's time for a drink?"

"It surely is," says Babs, giggling, mocking him.

He gestures as though to slap at the calf of her long leg, but of course he does not; his hand stops some inches away.

Down a wide pine-needled path, some distance from the lodge, there is a decaying birchbark canoe, inside which white Indian pipes grow. They were planted years back by the camper girls. Around the canoe stands a grove of pines with knotted roots, risen up from the ground, in which chipmunks live. Feeding the chipmunks is what Jessica and Tom's children

do when they aren't swimming or playing on the beach. Avery and Devlin in their skimp shorts sit cross-legged on the pine needles, making clucking noises to bring out the chipmunks.

A small chipmunk comes out, bright-eyed, switching his tail back and forth, looking at the children, but then he scurries off.

Devlin asks, "Do you like Babs?" He underlines the name, meaning that he thinks it's silly.

"She's O.K." Avery's voice is tight; she is confused by Babs. She doesn't know whether to think, as her mother probably does, that Bab's white shorts are too short, that she is too dressed up in her pink silk shirt for camp, or to be pleased at the novel sort of attention she gets from Babs, who said last night at dinner, "You know, Avery, when you're a little older you should have an evening dress this color," and pointed to the flame-gold gladioli on the table, in a gray stone crock.

"Her shorts are too short," says Devlin.

"What do you know about clothes? They're supposed to be short—*shorts*." Saying this, for the moment Avery feels that she is Babs, who wears lipstick and anything she wants to, who everyone looks at.

"Mother doesn't wear shorts, ever."

"So what? You think she's well dressed?"

Devlin is appalled; he has no idea what to make of what she has said. "I'll tell!" He is desperate. "I'll tell her what you said."

"Just try, you silly little sissy. Come on, I'll race you to the lodge."

Both children scramble up, Avery first, of course, and run across the slippery pines, the skinny brown legs flashing between the trees, and arrive at the house together and slam open the screen door and tear down the length of the porch to the cluster of grown-ups.

"Mother, do you know what Avery said?"

"No, darling, but please don't tell me unless it was something very amusing." This is out of character for Jessica, and Devlin stares at his mother, who strokes his light hair, and says, "Now, let's all be quiet. Barbara is going to play a song."

Babs picks up her ukulele and looks down at it as she begins her song, which turns out to be a long ballad about a lonely cowboy and a pretty city girl. She has an attractive, controlled alto voice. She becomes more and more sure of herself as she goes along, and sometimes looks up and smiles around at the group—at Tom—as she sings.

Tom has an exceptional ear, as well as a memory for words; somewhere, sometime, he has heard that ballad before, so that by the time she reaches the end he is singing with her, and they reach the last line together, looking into each other's eyes with a great stagy show of exaggeration; they sing together, "And they loved forevermore."

But they are not, that night, lying hotly together on the cold beach, furiously kissing and wildly touching everywhere. That happens only in Tom's mind as he lies next to Jessica and hears her soft sad snores. In her cot, in the tent, Babs sleeps very soundly, as she always does, and she dreams of the first boy she ever kissed, whose name was not Tom.

Some years later, almost the same group gathers for dinner around a large white restaurant table, the Buon Gusto, in San Francisco. There are Tom and Jessica, and Babs, but she is without Wilfred, whom she has just divorced in Reno. Devlin is there. Devlin grown plump and sleek, smug with his new job of supervising widow display at the City of Paris. Avery

there, with her second husband, Stanley.

Tom and Barbara have spent the afternoon in bed together, in her hotel room—that of love finally consummated. They are both violently aware of the afternoon behind them; they are partly still there, together in the tangled sea-smelling sheets. Barbara presses her legs close. Tom wonders if there is any smell of her on him that anyone could notice.

No one notices anything; they all have problems of their own.

In the more than ten years since they were all in Maine, Jessica has sunk further into her own painful and very private despair. She is not fatter, but her body has lost all definition, and her clothes are deliberately middle-aged, as though she were eager to be done with being a sexual woman. Her melancholy eyes are large, terribly dark; below them her cheeks sag, and the corners of her mouth have a small sad downward turn. Tom is always carrying on—the phrase she uses to herself—with someone or other; she has little energy left with which to care. But sometimes, still, a lively rebellious voice within her cries out that it is all cruel and unfair; she has done everything that she was taught a wife is expected to do; she has kept house and cared for children and listened to Tom, laughed at his jokes and never said no when he felt like making love—done all those things, been a faithful and quiet wife who often she didn't want to at all, and there he is, unable to keep his eyes off Babs, laughing at all *her* jokes.

Tom has promised Barbara that he will leave Jessica; this winter they will get a divorce and he will apply for a teaching job at Stanford or U.C., and he and Babs will live in San Francisco; they are both in love with the city.

Avery has recently begun psychoanalysis with a very orthodox Freudian; he says nothing and she becomes more and more hysterical—she is lost! And now this untimely visit from her parents; agonized, she questions them about events of her early childhood, as though to ground her bearings. “Was I nine or ten when I had whooping cough?”

“What?” says Jessica, who had daringly been embarked on an alternate version of her own life in which she did not marry Tom but instead went on to graduate school herself, and took a doctorate in Classics. (But who would have hired a woman professor in the Twenties?) “Tom, I'd love another drink,” she says. “Barbara? You too?” Late in her life Jessica had discovered the numbing effects of drink—you can sleep!

“Oh, yes, divine.”

Sipping what was still his first vermouth, Devlin repeats to himself that most women are disgusting. He excepts his mother. He is sitting next to Babs, and he cannot stand her perfume, which is Joy.

Looking at Jessica, whom, curiously, she has always liked, Barbara feels a chill in her heart. Are they doing the right thing, she and Tom? He says they are; he says Jessica has her bookstore and her student poet friends (“Fairies, most of them, from the look of them,” Tom says), and that living with him does not make her happy at all; he has never made her happy. Is he only talking to himself, rationalizing? Barbara doesn't know.

All these people, so many of them Southern, make Avery's husband, Stanley, feel quite lost. In fact, he finds it hard to understand anything they say. Tom is especially opaque: the heavy Southern accent and heavier irony combine to create confusion, which is perhaps what Tom intends. Stanley thinks Tom is a little crazy, and feels great sympathy for Jessica, whom he admires. And he thinks, Poor Avery, growing up in all that—no wonder Devlin's queer and

Avery has to go to a shrink. Stanley feels an awful guilt toward Avery, for not supplying a that Tom and Jessica failed to give her, and for his persistent “premature ejaculations”—and putting the phrase in quotes is not much help.

“I remember your whooping cough very well indeed,” says Tom, pulling in his chin so the back of his head jerks up; it is a characteristic gesture, an odd combination of self-mockery and self-congratulation. “It was the same summer you pushed Harry McGinnis into the swimming pool.” He turns to Stanley, who is as incomprehensible to him as he is to Stanley, but he tries. “Odd gesture, that. Her mother and I thought she had a sort of ‘crush’ on young Harry, and then she went and pushed him into the pool.” He chuckles. “Don’t try to tell me that ladies aren’t creatures of whim, even twelve-year-old girls.”

“I was nine,” says Avery, and does not add, You had a crush on Harry’s mother, you were crazy about Irene that summer.

Jessica thinks the same thing, and she and Avery are both looking at Tom, so that he feels the thought.

“I remember teasing Irene about the bathing suit she wore that day,” he says recklessly, staring about with his clear blue eyes at the unfamiliar room.

“What was it like?” asks Barbara, very interested.

“Oh, some sort of ruffled thing. You know how those Southern gals are,” he says, clearly not meaning either his wife or his daughter.

“I must have thought the whooping cough was a sort of punishment,” Avery says. “For having a crush on Harry, as you put it.”

“Yes, probably,” Jessica agrees, being herself familiar with many varieties of guilt. “You were awful sick—it was terrible. There was nothing we could do.”

“When was the first summer you came to Maine?” Devlin asks Babs, coldly curious, nearly rude. It is plain that he wishes she never had.

“Nineteen thirty-five. In September. In fact September 9th,” she says, and then blushes for the accuracy of her recall, and looks at Tom.

“Verlie took care of me,” says Avery, still involved with her whooping cough.

Jessica sighs deeply. “Yes, I suppose she did.”

Almost ten years later, in the middle Fifties, Tom and Barbara are married. In the chapel of the little church, the Swedenborgian, in San Francisco, both their faces stream with tears as the minister says those words.

In her forties, Barbara is a striking woman still, with her small disdainful nose, her sleek knotted pale hair, and her beautiful way of walking, holding herself forward like a present. She has aged softly, as very fine-skinned, very blond women sometimes do. And Tom is handsome still; they make a handsome couple (they always have).

Avery is there; she reflects that she is now older than Barbara was in 1935, that summer in Maine. She is almost thirty, divorced from Stanley, and disturbingly in love with two men at once. Has Barbara never loved anyone but Tom? (Has she?) Avery sees their tears as highly romantic.

She herself is a nervy, attractive girl with emphatic dark eyebrows, large dark eyes and a friendly soft mouth, heavy breasts on an otherwise slender body. She wishes she had never worn her black silk suit, despite its chic; two friends have assured her that no one thought

about wearing black to weddings anymore, but now it seems a thing not to have done. wore black to my father's wedding—thank God she is not still seeing Dr. Gundersheim, and will use that sentence only as a joke. Mainly, Avery is wondering which of the two men to marry, Charles or Christopher. (The slight similarity of the names seems ominous—what does it mean?) This wondering is a heavy obsessive worry to her; it drags at her mind, pulling her down. Now for the first time, in the small dim chapel, candlelit, it wildly occurs to her that perhaps she should marry neither of them, perhaps she should not marry at all, and she starts about the chapel, terrified.

“I pronounce you man and wife,” says the minister, who is kindly, thin, white-haired. He is very old; in fact he quietly dies the following year.

And then, almost as though nothing had happened, they have all left the chapel: Tom and Barbara, Avery and Devlin, who was Tom's best man. (“I gave my father away” is another of Avery's new post-wedding jokes.) But something has happened: Tom and Barbara are now married. They don't believe it either. He gives her a deep and prolonged kiss (why does it look so awkward?) which embarrasses Devlin terribly, so that he stares up and down the pretty tree-lined street. He is thinking of Jessica, who is dead.

And he passionately wishes that she had not died, savagely blames Tom and Barbara for that death. Trivial, entirely selfish people—so he sees them; he compares the frivolity of their connection with Jessica's heavy suffering. Since Jessica's death Devlin has been in a sort of voluntary retreat. He left his window-display job and most of his friends; he stays at home on the wrong side of Telegraph Hill, without a view. He reads a lot and listens to music and does an occasional watercolor. He rarely sees Avery, and disapproves of what he understands to be her life. (“You don't think it's dykey, the way you sleep around?” was the terrible sentence he spoke to her, on the eve of Jessica's funeral, and it has never been retracted.) Sometimes in his fantasies it is ten years back, and Tom and Jessica get a divorce and she comes out to live in San Francisco. He finds her a pretty apartment on Telegraph Hill and her hair grows beautifully white and she wears nice tweeds and entertains at tea. And Tom and Barbara move to hell—Los Angeles or Mexico or somewhere. Most people who know him assume Devlin to be homosexual; asexual is actually the more accurate description.

They stand there, that quiet striking group, all blinking in a brilliant October sun that instantly dries their tears; for several moments they are all transfixed there, unable to walk to their separate cars, to continue to the friend's house where there is to be the wedding reception. (Why this hesitation? Do none of them believe in the wedding? What is marriage?)

Five years later, in the early Sixties, Avery drives up to Maine from Hilton, for various reasons which do not include a strong desire to see Tom and Barbara. She has been married to Christopher for four years, and she came out from San Francisco to Hilton to see how far away from him. Away from him she fell wildly in love with a man in Hilton named Jason Valentine, and now (for various reasons) she has decided that she needs some time away from Jason.

She drives smoothly, quietly, along the pine-needled road in her Corvair to find no one there. No car.

But the screen door is unlatched, and she goes in, stepping up from the old stone step onto

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